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# Including Exceptional Children in a Christian Learning Community: New Narratives in Special Education

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The University of San Francisco

INCLUDING EXCEPTIONAL CHILDREN IN A  
CHRISTIAN LEARNING COMMUNITY:  
NEW NARRATIVES IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

A Dissertation Presented  
to  
The Faculty of the School of Education  
Department of Leadership Studies

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Education

by  
Jennifer Tangunan Camota Contreras  
San Francisco  
May 2013

THE UNIVERSITY OF SAN FRANCISCO

Dissertation Abstract

Including Exceptional Children in a Christian Learning Community:  
New Narratives in Special Education

**Research Topic**

The majority of Christian schools in the United States exclude children who have disabilities from their learning communities. This study examines the practices of 11 Christian schools throughout the United States, through conversations with a top leader in each school, that provide access to and/or inclusion in their schools.

**Theory and Protocol**

This research is grounded in critical hermeneutic theory and follows an interpretive approach to field research and data analysis (Herda 1999; 2010). Research conversations are conducted with the participants, which are then transcribed into a written text, which serves as the data to be analyzed.

**Research Categories**

The three research categories drawn from critical hermeneutic theory that served as the directives for this study are: (1) Ethical Aim, the aspiration for a fulfilled life, defined in this study in the Christian context as a life pleasing to God, (2) Praxis, which is the practical application of a moral judgment in alignment with the Ethical Aim, and (3) Imagination, which looks into the future of possibilities and opportunities using innovation and creativity, aligned with the Christian concepts of faith and heart. Praxis is acting in an ethical manner using imagination as an inspiration for acting.

## **Findings**

This study revealed the following three research findings: (1) the definition of Christianity shapes the understanding of inclusivity, (2) schools with high levels of inclusivity were found to follow specific tenets of the Christian faith that resulted in appropriate curriculum development for all levels of learners, and (3) the present challenge of Christian schools providing services for students with disabilities resides in the tension between commodity versus community, and between individualism versus family.

This dissertation, written under the direction of the candidate's dissertation committee and approved by the members of the committee, has been presented to and accepted by the Faculty of the School of Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education. The content and research methodologies presented in this work represent the work of the candidate alone.

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## DEDICATION

*This dissertation is lovingly dedicated to my son, Antonio Emmanuel Contreras.*

*This work is also dedicated to all parents of exceptional children who desire a Christian private school education for their child. I pray that this research inspires hope and that it serves to influence a transformation of Christian schools around the world to become inclusive schools that represent the body of Christ.*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation came to be not because of my doing, but because of God's divine plan and purpose for my life.

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To all of my family, friends, cohort, and colleagues, too numerous to mention each by name, who cheered me on as I studied, researched, wrote, edited, edited, and edited...

To all the participants in my research study, who welcomed me into their schools and churches, who prayed and continue to pray for my family, and who hope for the good that this research will bring. I owe all of you my sincere gratitude.

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## **CHAPTER ONE: FOCUS OF THE RESEARCH**

### **Introduction**

In 1975, the United States Congress passed Public Law (PL) 94-142, also known as the Education of All Handicapped Children Act, and later renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (Turnbull et al. 2007). IDEA requires public schools that receive federal funds to provide a free appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE) for all children with disabilities (Conrad and Whitaker 1997; Turnbull et al. 2007). The law also makes a provision to serve children with disabilities who are voluntarily enrolled by their parents in private schools. However, since the vast majority of private schools are faith-based, and because the Establishment Clause of the United States Constitution requires a separation of government-provided services and religious activities, the practical logistics of implementing this provision can be complex, depending on how the law is interpreted and implemented. Therefore, children with disabilities who are enrolled in faith-based private schools are not always able to take full advantage of all of the special education services to which they are entitled (Katsiyannis and Maag 1998; Osborne et al. 2000; Russo et al. 2009).

Faith-based schools include, but are not limited to, Catholic parochial schools, Jewish day schools, and schools associated with the various denominations of Protestant Christianity, such as Evangelical, Baptist, and Lutheran schools. For this research study, I refer to the collective denominations of the Protestant Christian faith when I use the term “Christian.”

While public schools have progressed over the last four decades in educating children with disabilities, Christian schools, primarily funded through tuition revenue and sometimes with church subsidies and private donations, do not receive federal funding and are therefore not required by law to educate children with disabilities. As Christian school enrollment continues to increase nationwide, and as more parents advocate for their children with disabilities, many Christian schools have recently begun to respond by making some resources and accommodations available for children with mild learning disabilities (Sutton 1992, 1996; Eigenbrood 2004; Pudlas 2004; Zehr 2004; Taylor 2005; Anderson 2011).

### **Statement of the Research Topic**

Parents who desire a Christian education for their child with disabilities have four choices: 1) enroll their child in a Christian school that may not have the means or expertise to address their child's special educational needs, 2) homeschool their child, 3) place their child in a private nonreligious school that specializes in educating children who have a specific disability or who can be categorized within a group of disabilities that require similar interventions, or 4) enroll their child in a public school where special educational services are provided because they are mandated by IDEA. Unfortunately, none of these four options provides the combination of a Christian education in a community of their peers where their special educational needs can be adequately addressed. The primary reason Christian education administrative leaders cite for not admitting children with disabilities is the lack of financial resources to fund special education programs, teachers, and specialists (McCormick 2000; Anderson 2002; Eigenbrood 2004, 2005; Taylor 2005; Ramirez 2011). Therefore, access to a Christian

education for children with disabilities has been limited to children who have normal to high cognitive intelligence, yet also have mild learning disabilities, mild neurobehavioral disorders, difficulties in social interaction, and/or certain physical disabilities. These children, considered mildly disabled, receive accommodations and perhaps extra academic support services, and are usually still able to achieve academic success in a traditional classroom environment, with minimal adjustments and disruption to the general classroom setting (Sutton 1996; Eigenbrood 2004; Taylor 2005).

Because there are very few Christian schools in the United States that currently educate children with disabilities, this study investigated those Christian schools that are providing resources for children with learning disabilities, and/or special education for children who have mild to severe disabilities. This inquiry focused on conversations with selected head administrative leaders and principals of Christian schools across the United States who have implemented formal programs that serve the needs of children with disabilities.

The research categories listed below served as the research directives on this critical hermeneutic interpretive research study (Herda 1999).

1. Ethical Aim: How do Christian values inform a Christian education? Why should Christian school leaders aspire to include children with disabilities in their schools? How can an inclusive community of children of all abilities encourage an understanding of “self” in relation to “other?”
2. Language: How does the language used to describe children that span the spectrum of abilities influence how we view them?
3. Imagination: How can creativity and innovation be encouraged and used to include children with disabilities in a Christian school environment? How can the inclusion of such children influence administrators, teachers, parents, and students in the Christian school community?

The following section discusses the background of children with disabilities in public and private schools, the educational model of inclusion, and the language used to describe children with disabilities.

### **Background of the Research Topic**

Parents who hold beliefs rooted in a particular religious faith can choose to enroll their children in a private school that teaches the principles of their faith. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES 2001), approximately 13 percent of all kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> (K-12) grade students are enrolled in private schools. The Center for American Private Education (CAPE 2012) states that 86 percent of children who attended private schools in 2010 are enrolled in faith-based schools, of which 26 percent, or an estimated 1.5 million students, are enrolled in Christian schools.

According to a study conducted by The White House Domestic Policy Council (WHDPC) in 2008, the reasons parents choose to send their children to a faith-based school are the moral grounding the children receive, the higher academic rigor compared to public schools, the sense of community, and the safe and structured learning environment. Additionally, many families choose a faith-based education as part of a tradition that has cultural and religious significance (Osborne et al. 1998; Eigenbrood 2004; Green 2006; Zehr 2005).

NCES states that approximately 14 percent of all K-12 grade students in both public and private schools have been identified as having special educational needs (NCES 2001). Children who require a special education are defined as children who have disabilities that affect a person's hearing, vision, movement, thinking, remembering,

learning, communicating, mental health, and/or social relationships (Turnbull et al. 2007). The level of disabilities can range from very mild to extremely severe.

IDEA champions an educational model of inclusion, described as educating children with disabilities alongside typically abled children in the general educational classroom, to the maximum extent possible (Fuchs and Fuchs 1998; Burstein et al. 2004; Abell et al. 2005; Bouck 2007; Wehmeyer 2006; Siperstein et al. 2007; Turnbull et al. 2007; Russo et al. 2009). The rationale is that children with disabilities should be included as a part of the educational community because they eventually grow up to be adults who are part of the greater living community (Turnbull et al. 2007; Russo et al. 2009). Some children have disabilities that are considered so severe that a segregated environment is necessary for them to receive a quality education and to not be overly disruptive to the general education classroom (Turnbull et al. 2007; Russo et al. 2009). The majority of children with disabilities in public schools are currently being educated either wholly or partially in a general education classroom with appropriate supports and services (Turnbull et al. 2007).

Parents who have children with disabilities who want to enroll them in a faith-based school are usually able to do so if the child has normal to high cognitive skills, and the disability is limited to a physical challenge that can be met through architectural adjustments for accessibility as mandated by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), if they have a learning disability such as a mild level of dyslexia, if they have a neurobehavioral disorder such as mild attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), or if they have some difficulties with social interaction such as a child who has Asperger's syndrome (Katsiyannis and Maag 1998; Bello 2006; Turnbull et al. 2007;

Freytag 2008). Private schools are not required by law to provide the same standard of special education services and inclusion as public schools (Turnbull et al. 2007; Russo et al. 2009). Therefore, parents of children with disabilities usually do not have the option of choosing a faith-based education.

Words such as “special needs,” “handicapped,” “retarded,” “disability,” “impairment,” and “accommodations” are used in public education law literature. These terms assume a deficit model highlighting how children with differences in ability are somehow weaker or less than children who are considered typically abled. The language used influences how others relate and interact with them (Anzul et al. 2001; Anderson 2002; Berry 2010). Alternative terms that have been used by professionals in the field of special education to describe such children with differences in ability are “children with exceptionalities,” “learning differences,” “differently-abled,” and “temporarily-abled.” According to Hans-Georg Gadamer (2004), language is critical in how we view, understand, and interpret situations. Martin Heidegger (1971:71) states that “language alone brings what is, as something that is, into the open for the first time. Where there is no language...there is also no openness of what is, and consequently no openness either of that which is not and of the empty.” Careful thought and consideration should be taken as we choose words to describe children with different abilities. Each child has different strengths, talents, abilities, and intelligences, which should be considered over their weaknesses when discussing them in the context of education. For clarity and consistency, I use the public law terms in this research inquiry when referring to children who are differently-abled.

### **Significance of the Study**

In this study, I investigated what selected leaders of Christian schools across the United States are currently doing to educate children with disabilities in their schools. I also investigated Christian values, traditions, and practices, and how these can inform the expansion of access to a Christian education, as well as inclusion in a Christian school for children with disabilities. This study will contribute to the scarce body of research about the current state of educating children with disabilities in Christian schools. On a level of personal significance, as a person of the Christian faith, and as the mother of a teenager born with intellectual disability and sensory integration dysfunction, I was personally inspired to conduct this research on behalf of the many Christian parents of children with disabilities who, like me, desire to enroll their child in a Christian school where they will feel welcomed and valued by their peers and educators in an inclusive learning community, and where they can receive an education that addresses their special educational needs.

### **Summary**

Parents of children with disabilities, who are of the Christian faith and desire a Christian education for their child, have to make the difficult choice of enrolling their child in a private Christian school where their educational needs may not be addressed, placing them in a public school where their children can access appropriate educational services, placing them in a private, nonreligious school specializing in a particular disability or set of disabilities, or homeschooling their child without sufficient expertise to educate their child. Leaders in Christian schools in general have not prioritized the inclusion of children with disabilities in their schools, citing the lack of funding and/or



expertise. I sought an increased understanding about the current state of those few private Christian schools across the United States that are educating children with disabilities, in order to consider new ways of appropriating biblical values in Christian schools.

In Chapter Two I provide a review of literature in terms of anthropological theories, the laws related to children with disabilities in both public and private schools, Christian school values and how they relate to children with disabilities, and how school leaders' attitudes towards inclusion influences the implementation of IDEA.

## **CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

### **Introduction**

There is a dearth of literature of the education of children with disabilities in Christian schools, because so few Christian schools include non-typical children in their learning communities. This Review of Literature includes in Section One the Anthropological Theory that informed this study, including Lewis H. Morgan's theory of social evolution translates to a Christian community, Edward B. Tylor's theory of modern religion and the application in Christian schools today, and George and Louise Spindler's cultural therapy theory which discusses ethnic diversity in the classroom, which can also be applied to diversity of ability. Section Two focuses on The Law and Educating Children with Disabilities in both public and private schools. Section Three is a discussion of Christian Values and Educating Children with Disabilities. Finally, Section Four studies the role of School Leaders in Implementing Inclusion in public schools, which provides a practical guide for leaders of any type of school, public or private, religious or non-religious, who want to influence a culture of inclusion in their school.

### **Section One: Anthropological Theory**

Early anthropologists studied and documented the traits, behaviors, traditions, and customs of other cultures to better understand different groups of people. The anthropologists referenced in the next section—Lewis H. Morgan, Edward B. Tylor, and the husband and wife team of George and Louise Spindler—studied the practices of various cultures, and their theories can be applied to the Christian educational community. The next section describes how the theory of social evolution is applicable in educational communities.

### **Lewis H. Morgan: Social Relations in Educational Communities**

Lewis H. Morgan (1818-1881) was an American anthropologist and social theorist and was best known for his work on kinship, social structures, and theories of social evolution. According to Morgan (1970), the theory of social evolution is based on relationship terms similar to those he saw in family relationships. Morgan viewed family relations as a basic part of society and posited that such kinship relationships provide a window into understanding larger social dynamics in broader communities. These kinship and social theories are applicable to this study in that the relationships that are formed in an educational community are reflective of the people and their roles in that community. Learning in an educational community happens in the context of relationships among all people within a community. If a group of people is segregated from or absent in a particular community, there is a missed opportunity to relate to and learn from that group. Such is the case with children with disabilities who are largely absent from the Christian school community. Since children with a wide range of disabilities are not present in Christian schools, the people currently in that community are not exposed to a part of the “family.” The next section explores the significance of religious customs and beliefs.

### **Edward B. Tylor: Religious Customs and Beliefs**

Edward Burnett Tylor (1832-1917), an English anthropologist, was recognized for his contributions to anthropology through his studies of religion. Tylor (1958) wrote that culture includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man. Tylor’s (1958) concept of survivals explains the characteristics of a culture that are linked to prior generations. These customs have been

carried forward by habit into future generations but are no longer necessary in the newer, evolved society.

Tylor (1958) argued that modern religion was an example of a survival. He argued that religion was used by people to explain things that occurred in the world that they could not understand. For example, God was credited with giving us warmth and light through the sun each day. Subsequent science discoveries explained that the earth revolves around the sun and the earth rotates on its axis so that the sun shines on earth during certain times. Therefore, Tylor (1958) argued that the contemporary belief in God was a “survival” of primitive ignorance because science could explain the phenomena previously justified by religion.

In another example of survivals related to the research topic, prior to 1960, educational administrators segregated children with noticeable handicaps from their typical peers, without consideration of the level of mildness or severity of the disability (Turnbull et al. 2007; Russo et al. 2009). They believed that separating children with disabilities from children with typical abilities would help retain their self-esteem. Later research proved that an inclusion model actually helped increase the self-esteem of children with disabilities (Turnbull et al. 2007; Russo et al. 2009). Therefore, continuing to segregate children with disabilities from their peers is considered a “survival” custom. Christian schools today continue to operate with a segregation model when it comes to children with most types and severity levels of disabilities, while public schools have evolved in providing an inclusive model of education (Pudlas 2004; Eigenbrood 2005; Taylor 2005; Anderson 2011). The next section explores diversity in a classroom setting.

## **George and Louise Spindler: Cultural Therapy and Education**

George and Louise Spindler are modern anthropologists who focused their anthropological inquiry on education. They studied several classrooms in North America and looked into socioeconomic and ethnic diversity and its influence on education. The Spindlers (1994:3) wrote about the process of cultural therapy, which is “a process of bringing one’s own culture, in its manifold forms—assumptions, goals, values, beliefs, and communicative modes—to a level of awareness that permits one to perceive it as a potential bias in social interaction and in the acquisition or transmission of skills and knowledge.” They describe that one’s own culture is brought into a level of awareness and is perceived in relation to the other culture so that potential conflicts and misunderstandings can be anticipated.

Cultural therapy is related to the research topic because many Christian school administrators have biases about children with disabilities that may prevent them from imagining and implementing a more inclusive educational model (Anderson 2002, 2011; LaBarbera 2011; Pudlas 2011). It is important for these school administrators to be aware of their prejudices and assumptions so that they can be aware of current customs in Christian education that perpetuate their resistance to including children with disabilities alongside typically developing children in the general education classroom. In the next section, I explain the law as it relates to educating children with disabilities in both public and private schools.

### **Section Two: The Law and Educating Children with Disabilities**

The Supreme Court ruled in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, 347 U.S. 483 [1954] that racial segregation was unconstitutional. Black children were not allowed

to attend public school because of the color of their skin. The courts eventually granted Black children, as well as children of other minority races, equal access to a public education. This case served as the basis for future federal antidiscrimination laws that “prohibit state and local governments and private-sector entities from discriminating against people with disabilities, solely on the basis of their disability” if they are both able and willing to otherwise participate in an activity in the community, such as education (Turnbull et al. 2007:21). Specific laws that abolished the discrimination of children with disabilities in public education soon followed.

PL 94-142, as indicated above, also known as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, was renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) in 1990, and reauthorized in 1997 and again in 2004. This law requires that all school-aged children receive a free and appropriate education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE). IDEA endorses and promotes the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom to the maximum extent possible (Turnbull et al. 2007). The foundation for the argument of inclusion is based on the right that people with disabilities have to achieve equal opportunity, full participation, economic self-sufficiency, and independent living in a non-segregated world (Turnbull et al. 2007). Therefore, inclusion opportunities in an educational environment help prepare children to live as adults in a non-segregated community. Inclusion is not only about educating students with disabilities in an academic context; inclusion is also about educating students who are considered typically abled in the social acceptance of non-typical peers (Turnbull et al. 2007). Inclusion enriches all members of a community.

While the LRE mandate endorses inclusion to the maximum extent possible, it does not require full inclusion in the general classroom. When an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) team of parents, special education teachers, resource providers, and public school administrators make a placement decision about a student with disabilities, they must focus on the severity of the disability rather than the type of disability, and on the individual and unique needs of the child, rather than what is most convenient for the school's administrators and faculty (Fuchs and Fuchs 1998; Turnbull et al. 2007; Russo et al. 2009). The starting placement for children with disabilities is full inclusion in the general education classroom, with appropriate supports and services. Segregation into a separate classroom on a part-time or full-time basis should only be made when it is necessary for the student with a disability to receive an appropriate education (Turnbull et al. 2007; Russo et al. 2009).

The laws in public schools that concern children with disabilities has raised topics for discussion for public school administrators because of the wide reach of influence such laws have in the public school system. Herda (1981:215) states:

In efforts to implement PL 94-142...administrators of both general and exceptional education face several challenges, including the re-examination of administrative and organizational structures, curriculum and pupil personnel services, and administrator and teacher staff development programs. Traditionally, general and exceptional education administrative and teaching responsibilities were carried out in separatist fashion. Where dual administrative systems between general and exceptional education still exist, PL 94-142 implementation necessitates an eventual breaking down, to some degree, of that dualistic system. One must recognize that not just exceptional educators are responsible for implementing PL 94-142 and Section 504 but that implementation rests upon the responsible acts of *all* educators.

Herda (1981:216) suggests a "total school system approach" as opposed to a "dualist approach" where special educators, general educators, and administrators work

collaboratively within the school system to find solutions to educate all children, not just children that have special needs. Such a collaborative approach, while having improved over the years, remains an elusive goal by many public and private school administrators alike.

Since the passage of the laws requiring public schools to educate children with disabilities, the population of children in public schools in need of special education and related services has grown dramatically (Turnbull et al. 2007). There has been a parallel increase in the number of children with special needs whose parents want to have them educated in a private school (Russo et al. 2009). Private schools are not required by law to educate children with disabilities. However, the law does allow the provision of some special education services for children in private schools, such as identification of children eligible for special education and related services, proportional spending for special education services dedicated for private schools, delivery of special education services, and transportation for the purpose of delivering special education services (Eigenbrood 2004; Taylor 2005; Russo et al. 2009). The delivery of services can be logistically difficult for private schools that are faith-based schools because of the Establishment Clause in the First Amendment of the United States Constitution, which prevents the advancement of particular religious beliefs for institutions using public funds (Turnbull et al. 2007; Russo et al. 2009). The actual utilization of special education services for children in private schools is minimal for many school districts because of the limitations in funding and the logistical issues that cannot always be satisfactorily resolved with transportation. In spite of these barriers, private and public schools have



collaborated to fulfill the obligations of the law as much as is reasonably possible (Conrad and Whitaker 1997; Dieker 2001; Burstein et al. 2004).

Faith-based school administrators have collaborated with local public school district administrators to identify and assess children with disabilities, and to determine if they are able to implement some or all of the educational recommendations (Katsiyannis and Maag 1998; Eigenbrood 2004; Bello 2006). Due to the evolution in society at large towards children with disabilities, initiated by the advocacy of parents as well as special education and service professionals, a number of faith-based schools have recently responded by making accommodations for some children who have mild learning disabilities. Such accommodations include one-on-one tutoring after school, intensive reading and math workshops outside of the regular classroom, and separately proctored tests from the general education classroom to allow the student additional test-taking time. Accommodations have also been made for children with average to above average intelligence quotients (IQ's) combined with a mild level of social disability, such as children with Asperger's syndrome, students with neurobehavioral disorders such as ADHD, and children with certain physical disabilities (Sutton 1992; Taylor 2005).

Catholic schools, which make up 43 percent of private school enrollment nationwide (CAPE 2012), have made the most progress of all faith-based schools in their awareness at the leadership level of including children with disabilities in their schools, and in collaborating with public educational agencies in providing special educational services for children with disabilities (Katsiyannis and Maag 1998; Osborne et al. 1998; Bello 2006). In 1982, the National Catholic Office of Persons with Disabilities was established and special education programs for students with disabilities began to emerge

(Bello 2006). At the National Conference of Bishops in 1990, a commitment was made to provide access to a Catholic education for all baptized children in the Catholic faith. However, while this moral imperative brought awareness of providing Catholic education to children with disabilities, there has been no established framework to implement special education programs on a broader level in Catholic schools (Bello 2006).

In April 2010, the University of Notre Dame's Alliance for Catholic Education (ACE) Consulting Group and the Mid-Atlantic Catholic Schools Consortium (MACSC) collaborated on a study to determine the level and quality of participation of IDEA for students attending Catholic schools in the six archdioceses of MACSC. The participants included Catholic schools in Baltimore, Washington D.C., Arlington, Richmond, Wheeling-Charleston, and Wilmington, which had more than 111,000 enrolled students in 320 Catholic schools. The results of the survey state that while Catholic schools and local educational agencies (LEA's) were collaborating to implement IDEA, there were still difficulties in coordinating such services so that they are provided in a timely and high-quality fashion.

While faith-based schools have been trying to serve children with disabilities, they have not attained the public school standard of including children with greater levels of severity of disabilities, such as autism or intellectual disability (Sutton 1992; Taylor 2005). The next section describes the values of the Christian faith and how they inform educating children with disabilities in a Christian school community.

### **Section Three: Christian Values and Educating Children with Disabilities**

Protestant Christians believe that the Bible is the inspired Word of God, and it is the guide by which they live. One key foundational concept of the Christian faith is that

because God loved all people and demonstrated His love by sacrificing His Son to die in place of all people for their sins, Christians, in turn, are to demonstrate love, which can be described as care, concern, and sacrifice for other people (Sider 2005; Tada et. al 2011). Biblical Scripture also indicates that non-Christians will be able to recognize Christians by the love they have for one another (John 13:34-35; Sider 2005). Scripture further admonishes Christians to not simply be hearers of God's Word, but to also be doers of God's Word (James 1:22), and to treat all people equally and without favoritism (1 Timothy 5:21). Another key value that follows love for each other and the rejection of favoritism is inclusion in the body of Christian believers, as referenced in Scripture below (1 Corinthians 12:12-13a, 14, 21-27):

Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body...Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many...The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I don't need you!' On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.

Hand-in-hand with inclusion is the value of hospitality. Old Testament narratives in the Bible demonstrate the practice of hospitality in Genesis 18 and 19 where strangers are received and welcomed by Abraham and Lot. In 1 Kings 17, the widow of Zarephath hosts Elijah, a stranger to her. The practice of hospitality in these passages includes providing housing, shelter, meals, and safety for strangers. Two New Testament parables emphasize hospitality. Matthew (25:31-46) describes people who provided food for the hungry, drink for the thirsty, shelter and clothes for those who needed protection, and

visitation for those that were sick or in prison. Luke (14:16-23) chronicles the parable of the great banquet to which invited guests refused to come, and so their place is given to people with whom the host does not normally associate—the poor, crippled, blind, and lame. While the form of hospitality in these scriptures is focused on providing food, clothing, and shelter to strangers, it describes the distinctive posture of Christian hospitality, which is to be welcoming and inviting, not just to people that you know or that can reciprocate the act of hospitality, but also to people who are strangers and may be unlike you, without expectation of reciprocity.

In applying the aforementioned Biblical scriptures to children with disabilities in an educational community, the values of love, inclusion, and hospitality can be put forth as a goal for all Christian schools (Pudlas 2004; Buursma 2010; Anderson 2011). Unfortunately, inclusion of students with mild learning disabilities in the Christian school classroom has often resulted in physical access, but this does not necessarily mean that students with disabilities have been welcomed by Christian school educators and their peers. The reality is that while there have been great advancements in the last four decades with educating and including children with disabilities in public schools, and while Catholic school leaders have called attention to educating children with disabilities and are making progress in collaborating with LEA's to implement IDEA (Katsiyannis and Maag 1998; Osborne et al. 1998; Bello 2006; ACE Consulting 2010), Christian school leaders have not historically made educating children with disabilities a high priority on their educational agendas (Sutton 1996; Ramanathan and Zollers 1999; Pudlas 2004; Eigenbrood 2005; Taylor 2005; Bacon et. al 2010; Anderson 2011).

To describe a Christian school education, it is important to consider how such schools define themselves and to examine the religious principles in which they believe and how such principles are integrated into practice. In a study of private schools in Tennessee, the majority of which are Christian schools, a review of mission statements of 19 schools was conducted. Four distinct themes emerged: Christian or spiritual development, academic excellence, meeting individual student needs, and diversity (Taylor 2005). The vast majority of faith-based schools mentioned God, Christ, or Christian education in the mission statements, in addition to phrases such as “moral development,” “teaching students to act ethically,” and “living a life modeled after Christ.” Academic excellence or academic rigor was explicitly mentioned in nearly all mission statements. Diversity and meeting individual student needs was also mentioned in nearly all of the mission statements, with diversity defined as race, religion, or cultural diversity within the school community. Language pertaining to disabilities or learning differences was not included in the definitions of diversity and in the nondiscriminatory policies of the schools.

According to accounts of two large, well-established, and well-funded Christian schools—Valley Christian School (VCS) in San Jose, California and Cincinnati Christian Hills Christian Academy (CHCA) in Cincinnati, Ohio—both schools have themes in their mission statements that are aligned with those found in the study of schools in Tennessee: Christ-centered, academically excellent, and diverse (Daugherty 2006; Green 2006). Both schools are proposed as models for Christian education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Characteristics of both schools include strong enrollment numbers of approximately 2,000 students enrolled in grades K-12, a racially diverse student population, numerous

academic distinctions, high rates of high school graduates enrolling in four-year colleges, and a rich set of extracurricular activities in athletics, the performing arts, and the sciences. Both schools also have a philosophy of inter-denominationalism, which does not bind them to a specific Protestant church (the majority of Christian schools are launched by a specific denominational church). They have specific courses, as well as various activities, that reinforce what is learned in class, such as a weekly chapel gathering that teaches students about Jesus and the Bible. The instructors who teach these courses and activities vow to demonstrate Christ-like behaviors. The narratives do not go in depth about implementing the demonstration Christian principles within or outside of the school community. Any mention of including of students with disabilities is not discussed.

Another study of two public schools and two Christian schools in Canada suggested that students in the Christian schools did not experience any greater sense of community and inclusion than their counterparts in public schools, despite the assertion that Christian schools have built a strong community bound by core values that reflect Christian principles (Pudlas 2004). Additionally, the perceived level of acceptance of children with special needs in the Christian schools did not differ significantly from the perceived level of acceptance of children with special needs in the public schools (Pudlas 2004). Therefore, it seems that a sense of community, which is one key reason that parents send their children to Christian schools (WHDPC 2008), has not been achieved to the extent that the parents expect, which is a sense of community greater than what is found in public schools. These findings beg the question about the definition of the word “Christian” in the context of a Christian school.

In another case study, the board of directors of Zeeland Christian School in Michigan decided to create one of the first inclusive Christian school campuses in the country, with the help of the Christian Learning Center (CLC), an organization that provides the expertise to implement inclusion in Christian schools and churches (Stegink 2010; Van Dyk 2010). By doing so, the leaders at Zeeland decided to put into action the Christian principles of love and hospitality, and proactively created a culture where typical American educational cultural values of individualism and academic achievement were deprioritized and the Biblical values of inclusion in a community and educational excellence of the whole person were highlighted (Anderson 2010; Van Dyk 2010). The next section describes how a school leaders' attitude towards educating children with disabilities influences school communities.

#### **Section Four: School Leaders and Implementing Inclusion**

Research has shown that the attitude of leaders of schools towards educating children with disabilities and including them as part of the school community has a great influence on how teachers and administrators in their schools view inclusion, and how well special education programs are implemented (Conrad and Whitaker 1997; Attfield and Williams 2003; Crockett 2002, 2007; Billingsly 2007). A superintendent's or principal's responsiveness toward inclusion can influence how creative their school can be in developing and implementing an environment where children of all abilities are educated (Crockett 2002, 2007). The IDEA mandate of inclusion has influenced how teachers are trained and prepared for the modern-day classroom (Sindelar 1995; Berry 2010). Inclusion has changed the way teachers view their roles. Rather than an "us versus them" stance of the general education teacher versus the special education teacher,

inclusion has inspired models of co-teaching, where the special education teacher and the general education teacher collaborate to teach all students of all abilities in an inclusive classroom (Dieker 2001; Billingsly 2007). Herda (1981:220-221) describes a leadership style that encourages teamwork:

The art of participatory team leadership calls for the leader to stand back and let others share the role while he or she still assumes major responsibility to justify the actions of the team, if necessary, to advocates of various interest groups, clients (teachers, students, parents, etc.), school boards, and other teams. The leader has to establish a code that appeals to the members and meets needs for participation, individualism, and equity. Assembling a team can be accomplished in a relatively short period, but a certain amount of time is needed to establish principles that allow for trust, cooperation, and negotiation to become integral parts of a working team. The significance of the individual's role in a team or an organization cannot be overestimated.

Christians have a Scriptural and moral imperative to include children with disabilities in their school communities. Anderson (2010:18) posits that the attitudes toward children with disabilities, starting with leaders of Christian schools, must change if the classrooms are to change:

For the classroom to be truly an inclusive community, any negative attitude toward disabilities and persons with disabilities needs to be removed, whether that attitude is the result of ignorance, stereotype, prejudice, or the unintended outcome of past efforts at special education. For this to occur, a biblical attitude toward disabilities and those with disabilities is needed, one which involves a re-envisioning of people with handicapping conditions. We must be clear on what it means to be human from a biblical perspective. We need to acknowledge that every human being is created in the image of God, irrespective of the ability or achievement of the individual.

Thus far, the call for a change related to educating children with disabilities in Christian schools has been largely rhetorical. Pudlas (2011) writes that in order for change to happen, a “head—heart—hands” transformation in leaders of Christian schools must take place. Leaders must first intellectually become aware and educated about the Scriptural imperative and apply it to children with disabilities, and they should also



become more informed on what public schools are doing to implement the inclusion model. Secondly, leaders must internalize the Scriptural imperative in their hearts. The term “heart” is used more than 800 times in Scripture and refers to the condition or attitude of the heart, which is used synonymously with self-discipline (Pudlas 2011). Once there is an internalized propensity to do things in a certain way, a transfer to the hands, or practical action, must take place to complete the “head—heart—hands” approach. This path complements interpretive research in a critical hermeneutic tradition in that it invokes language, understanding, and a moral obligation to take action (Herda 1999).

### **Summary**

The literature indicates a gap between the culture of public schools and the culture of Christian schools and how they educate children with disabilities. A chasm also exists between the Christian faith values of love, inclusion, and hospitality, and the application of such values to children with disabilities in Christian schools. Therefore, it is important to research this phenomenon to gain a new understanding of the current state of children with disabilities in Christian schools, and how children with a wider range of disabilities can access a Christian education. In Chapter Three, the research process for this inquiry is outlined, and a brief biography of each of the leaders of Christian schools who participated in this study is provided.

## **CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH THEORY AND PROTOCOL**

### **Introduction**

My research was carried out through an interpretive inquiry using critical hermeneutic theory as a framework for the study. I conducted collaborative conversations with leaders of Christian schools to inquire about the Christian values that each school embodies and how such values relate to a Christian education for children of all abilities. Herda (1999:2) writes “the work of participatory (interpretive) research is a text created by the researcher and the research participants that opens up the possibility of movement from text to action.”

When I created the research proposal, I selected the theoretical concepts of Ethical Aim, Language, and Imagination as foundational research categories from which to derive guiding questions that would be asked of the participants of the study. As I reviewed the collected data, it became clear that the concept of Praxis would be more appropriate for analysis than the concept of Language. In light of this category change, Praxis is discussed in the next section, rather than Language. I will outline the Research Protocol I used, and I will also describe the Research Pilot Project, which I conducted in the fall 2011 semester in preparation for conducting this study. Lastly, I will provide the Background of the Researcher, which explains my interest in carrying out this study.

### **Ethical Aim**

Paul Ricoeur (1992:172) defines “ethical intention as aiming at the ‘good life’ with and for others, in just institutions.” Ethics encompasses morality, while morality carries out the intentions of the ethical aim. Ethics is the aim for an accomplished life, while morality is subject to the responsibility to respect the norm. Ricoeur (1992:171,

203) writes that it is important to establish ethics as “having primacy over morality.”

While moral norms are indeed legitimate, such cultural norms that can change from one cultural group to another cannot overstep the boundaries of the ethical imperative.

Ethical aim transcends morality.

Ethical aim requires both self-esteem and self-respect. In order for one to be able to esteem others and hold them in high regard, one must be able to esteem oneself. In order for one to be able to respect others, one must be able to respect oneself. Ricoeur (1992:203-204) writes:

self-respect, which on a moral plane answers to self-esteem on the ethical plane, will reach its full meaning...when respect for the norm will have blossomed into respect for others...and when respect will be extended to anyone who has the right to expect his or her just share in an equitable distribution.

When both self-esteem and self-respect are put into action in relationship with others, it becomes the launching pad for the ethical imperative. The aim of what is good and just becomes clear, and the practice of solicitude becomes apparent.

As opposed to mechanically carrying out a moral obligation out of duty, Ricoeur (1992:90) describes solicitude as “benevolent spontaneity, intimately related to self-esteem within the framework of the ‘good life.’” Jurgen Habermas (1998:9) describes solicitude for people of the Christian faith as “a privileged status within creation [which] endows them with a ‘calling.’” Solicitude can be described as excessive attentiveness, concern, and care for the other, and that which promotes a sense of justice. A more just institution is formed when each person in a community reciprocates ethical actions in an act of solidarity and goodwill.

The concept of ethical aim is important to my research topic because of the parallels that can be drawn from the actions of ethical aim and the actions that are key

identifiers of a person of the Christian faith. In critical hermeneutic theory, the action is demonstrated through solicitude; in Christian teachings, the action of love is demonstrated by showing compassion, hospitality, generosity, care, and concern for another. Habermas (1998:10) writes:

As a member of the universal community of believers, I am bound by solidarity to the other as my fellow, as “one of us,” as an unsubstitutable individual; by contrast, I owe the other equal respect as “one among all” persons who, as unique individuals, expect to be treated justly. The “solidarity” grounded in membership recalls the social bond that unites all persons: one person stands in for the other.

While the concept of ethical aim looks at the aspiration of doing what is right, good, and just, the concept of praxis examines how ethical intention is practically applied through action.

### **Praxis**

To understand Praxis, it is important to first understand the concept of phronesis, which can be described as a moral judgment that is made after a time of reflection about a given situation and a consideration of the consequences of our actions or inactions. In other words, it demands that we make a critical judgment that has consequences and implications for ourselves and for others within our community. The influences of our decisions are not contained within ourselves; rather, each decision we make influences others in our community and in turn still others more (Herda 1999). Such decisions often reach further than we expect or can anticipate, like the ripples and waves in the ocean. Therefore, phronesis is the moral judgment that is made and praxis is the application of the moral decision. Bernstein (1983:160) asserts “Praxis requires choice, deliberation, and decision about what is to be done in concrete situations. Informed action requires us to try to understand and explain the salient characteristics of the situation we confront.”

Herda (1999:5) states “In all aspects of our lives, we are by implication obliged to use moral knowledge and apply it in particular situations.” Because each situation is different, we cannot simply utilize a standard formula by which to act in all situations. Phronesis requires us to consider each situation independently, interpret the situation, and make a judgment that mediates between a universal standard and the specific context of a situation. Praxis is ultimately what action we take.

The leaders of the schools in my research study are all taking varying levels of action to include children with disabilities in their learning communities. The practical actions of each leader in each Christian school to educate children with learning disabilities and/or special educational needs, described in detail by the participants of the study, inspired the use of Praxis as a critical hermeneutic category in which to analyze the data. The next section will describe the research category of imagination and how a vision of the future, combined with an ethical aim, can inspire praxis.

### **Imagination**

Imagination is an important concept in critical hermeneutic theory, and serves as a mediator between the present and the future. Richard Kearney (1988:17) writes “We cannot know exactly what imagination is until we first narrate the genealogical tales of its becoming, the stories of its genesis. We need to recall what imagination was then in order to understand imagination now.” This idea leads into the concept of mimesis as described by Paul Ricoeur (1984) in his book *Time and Narrative Volume I*. In mimesis<sub>1</sub>, we look back at history and a world that is already prefigured. Mimesis<sub>3</sub> is the future, a refigured action, or, as Herda (1999:78) writes, “an imaginary world we might inhabit” or “different ways of acting and being.” Mimesis<sub>2</sub> is the present, a configured narrative, and

how we make sense of the actions we take now, taking into consideration our past and our imagined future.

The participants in my research study described how they or their predecessor had to imagine a different future in order to implement the programs currently in place for children with learning disabilities and other special needs, a rare action taken when one looks at the greater population of Christian schools. If mimesis is an ongoing spiral which joins a prefigured past and an imagined, refigured future to configure a present day action, then the ability to perpetually imagine a deeper and broader application of Christian values in a Christian learning community can help change the future world of inclusion in Christian education.

Ethical imagination can be described as how we view the other and how it informs the actions we take. Kearney (1998:232) writes “the receptive power of imagination lies at the very root of our moral capacity to respect the otherness of the other person, to treat the other as an end rather than a means, to empathize.” This research study examines the views of the leaders of Christian schools and how they view children with disabilities in the context of their ability to access and to be included in a Christian learning community, which is predicated on their capacity to imagine such a world that is described through scripture.

As imagination relates to action, Kearney (1998:227) posits: “It is the imaginative capacity to see unity-in-difference and difference-in-unity which opens up the possibility of a genuine utopian horizon of shared aspirations mobilizing human beings to action.” Imagination is powerful when it fuels a shared vision of action among an engaged community. The ethical intention to aim for the ‘good life,’ joined with a shared

imagination of a different world in which to live, leads to action which is manifested in Praxis. The next section describes the protocol for my research study.

### **Research Protocol**

In collecting and analyzing data through my research directives, I provide an overview of the Research Protocol. In this process, the researcher and the participants engage in conversation, which allows for data to emerge through dialogue and understanding. Herda (1999:93) describes this research protocol as “learning about language, listening, and understanding.” Interpretive inquiry invites the researcher and the participants to discuss prejudgments during the research conversation, and to contemplate the text in the reflection period that follows as the participant reads his/her transcribed words. Herda (1999:93) suggests that in the hermeneutic interpretive research process “we acquire a familiarity and acquaintance with the world itself...and how such a world confronts us.”

### **Research Categories and Guiding Questions**

The data collected in this research were revealed through conversations with leaders of established Christian schools throughout the United States, and that unfolded using guiding questions informed by critical hermeneutic theory and the original research categories that I selected. The research questions that guided the conversations with the participants are listed below.

#### **Category: Ethical Aim**

1. How do Christian values relate to providing a Christian education for all children?
2. How do Christian values relate to providing a Christian education for children with disabilities and special educational needs?
3. What prompted your school to begin providing resources and support for the children that you educate who have disabilities and special educational needs?

Category: Language

1. How would you describe children who learn in a non-traditional way?
2. What word or metaphor would you use to describe children who may learn in a non-traditional way?

Category: Imagination

1. What would it take for Christian schools to provide greater access to its education for children with disabilities and special educational needs?
2. How would a school environment that was more inclusive of children with greater disabilities than the ones you currently serve change the school community?

The above questions were used to guide the conversations, and an exchange of ideas allowed for a flowing and engaging discussion between the researcher and the participant. Additional questions were asked to gain a better understanding of the participant's view on a particular topic. Critical hermeneutic inquiry required the researcher to be an active participant in the conversations, which promoted collaboration in the data collection process (Herda 1999).

### **Data Collection**

The data for this research were collected through conversations. I identified leaders of Christian schools across the United States that are currently providing some level of support and accommodation for children with learning disabilities and/or other disabilities in their schools. I approached each leader through either an emailed invitation (See Appendix A), or by phone, depending on how I learned about or how I was referred to that leader. Once an appointment date and time were confirmed, I sent the participant a Research Participant Confirmation Letter (see Appendix B). I met with each conversation partner for approximately 40 to 75 minutes, and I recorded the conversation through two digital audio devices. I then transcribed each of the conversations, and those transcriptions became the text, which Herda (1999:97) describes as “the fixation of our conversation in writing.” I obtained permission from each conversation partner to record,



transcribe, and analyze the data as part of this study. After each conversation was transcribed, I sent each participant a Thank You/Follow-Up Letter (see Appendix C), along with a copy of the transcribed text to give them an opportunity for review and reflection. Each participant was encouraged to make any changes they wished to the transcript before providing their approval for the text to be used in the data analysis. All such changes were honored and reflected in the final transcript. I also kept a research journal with my recorded observations about the research and data collection process. Herda (1999:98) describes such a journal as “the life-source of the data collection process for in it goes the hopes, fears, questions, ideas, humor, observations, and comments of the researcher.” A well-documented journal helped me reflect on the changes in understanding and in the process of the research project.

### **Data Analysis**

The creation of a transcribed text from the conversations is a step in the process of distanciation. This allows the researcher to step back from the data and reflect on it, then analyze it through hermeneutic theory. Ricoeur (1992:53) notes that the “text must be unfolded, no longer towards its author but towards its imminent sense and towards the world which it opens up and discloses.” Herda (1999:98-99) explains that data analysis happens in the following stages:

- The conversation is fixed by transcription, preferably by the researcher herself, allowing reflection;
- As the researcher reflects on the material, themes are identified, color coded, and placed within the research categories. If necessary, categories are adjusted to more accurately reflect the data;
- Themes are substantiated with quotes from the conversations;

- Themes are examined in light of the theoretical framework of hermeneutics. Outside documents and the research journal are considered;
- The researcher remains open to the possibility of continued dialogue with conversation partners to gain clarity on the data;
- A context for a written discussion is developed;
- Themes and sub themes are developed, grouped and discussed in light of theory and the problem at hand;
- The researcher seeks out new insight offered by the research and discovers new direction for the issue or problem being investigated;
- Aspects of the research that warrant more study are identified.

Through this process, the researcher analyzes and interprets the text to gain a new understanding of the research issue, which may challenge the researcher's prejudgments and create what Gadamer (2004:305) describes as a "fusion of horizons."

### **Research Sites**

All conversations were conducted with the selected leaders of Christian schools on the respective schools sites in seven states: California, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Texas. I scheduled conversation appointments immediately before, during, or after regular school hours in an attempt to engage with the living community of the school and with the participant leader of the school in their natural work environment. My research visits took place in the late spring and summer of 2012. Some of the schools were in regular session and some were in the middle of their summer school program. One school was closed for the summer. A complete list of participants is included in Appendix D.

## **Research Conversation Participants**

The research participants for this study were selected leaders who occupied top-level administrator positions in their respective schools such as headmaster, president, principal, or executive director for a Christian primary and/or secondary school in the United States. I sought leaders of schools who have either already implemented or were in the process of implementing resources and/or special education programs for children with a wide spectrum of disabilities, including mild learning disabilities to more moderate to severe special needs. The leaders came from a list of all Christian schools in the United States that are members of the Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI), a member education and accrediting organization. The leaders selected for this study came from a wide variety of Christian schools—from small schools that specialized in a particular learning disability, to medium-sized schools with established programs for children with disabilities, to large schools that had resource rooms for children with learning disabilities and/or formal special education programs.

The Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRBPHS) at the University of San Francisco (USF) approved my proposal on March 29, 2012. My IRBPHS approval number is #12-045 (See Appendix E).

### Mr. Bill Lodewyk

Mr. Bill Lodewyk is the Head of School at Elim Christian School in Palos Heights, Illinois, 20 miles south of Chicago. Elim is a residential, segregated school specifically for children with moderate to severe disabilities who require residential housing. Elim also provides non-residential resources for children with mild learning

disabilities, as well as educator training for general education teachers, special education teachers, and special education service providers.

Mr. Larry Evans

Mr. Larry Evans is the outgoing (retired) Headmaster for Hillier School, a specialized Christian school for children with dyslexia located in Dallas, Texas. Hillier is an outreach ministry of Highland Park Presbyterian Church, and is located on the same campus as a regular Christian day school. Hillier's students are all located on the second floor of the same building as the day school, but are separated from the students at the day school for all subjects. Hillier has 30 students in kindergarten through eighth grade.

Mrs. Elderine Wyrick

Mrs. Elderine Wyrick is the Founder and Principal of The Master's Academy in Duncanville, Texas, about 15 miles southwest of Dallas. Like Hillier, The Master's Academy is a small, specialized school that focuses on educating children that have dyslexia and other processing disorders. They rent their school's space from a church, but they are an independent school with no direct denominational affiliation. They have 30 students in kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade.

Mr. Jeff Woodcock

Mr. Jeff Woodcock is the Headmaster for Oaks Christian School in Westlake Village, California, about 40 miles west of Los Angeles. Oaks is a nondenominational, academic, independent, Christian school with a mission focused on academic excellence, artistic expression, and athletic distinction. They have 1,500 students in the 6<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grades, and they provide resources and tutoring for children who have mild learning disabilities, and they also have programs for gifted students.

Dr. David Tilley

Dr. David Tilley is the Headmaster of Mount Paran Christian School in Kennesaw, Georgia, located about 30 miles northwest of Atlanta. Like Oaks Christian, Mount Paran is an independent, nondenominational school. Mount Paran has 1,500 students in kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade. They provide resources for children with mild learning disabilities, and they also have programs for gifted students. On a case-by-case basis, they have admitted students with various disabilities as long as they were able to be academically successful.

Mrs. Dana Epperson

Mrs. Dana Epperson is the Assistant Head of School for Academics at Prestonwood Christian Academy, located in Plano, Texas, 20 miles north of Dallas. Prestonwood has 1,400 students in kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade. They provide a learning lab and other services such as speech therapy for children with mild learning disabilities, and they also have programs for gifted students. In early 2012, Prestonwood formed a committee to look into expanding services for children who have special needs. Their goal is to submit recommendations for expansion by the beginning of the 2013-2014 academic school year. Like Mount Paran, they have admitted students who have various disabilities as long as they were able to achieve academically given the rigor of the curriculum.

Mrs. Liz Caddow

Mrs. Liz Caddow is the Founder and Head of School for Trinity Classical Academy in Santa Clarita, California, 30 miles north of Los Angeles. Trinity is an independent Christian school that has over 700 students in kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup>

grade, and they currently provide resources for children with mild learning disabilities and children who are gifted. At the beginning of the 2012-2013 academic school year, Trinity began a school-within-a-school called the Imago Dei School (which is Latin for “in the image of God”), a segregated classroom located on the Trinity school campus that provides special education for children with mild to moderate developmental disabilities.

Mrs. Sheryl Duerksen

Mrs. Sheryl Duerksen is the Principal for Quakertown Christian School in Quakertown, Pennsylvania, located 50 miles north of Philadelphia. Quakertown is an independent Mennonite school, although they admit students from all Christian denominations as well as other faiths or of no faith. They educate 200 students in kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Quakertown Christian has resources for children with learning disabilities, and they also have a separate special education classroom with a maximum of eight spaces that educates children with moderate disabilities.

Pastor Mark Davis

Pastor Mark Davis is the Executive Pastor and Head of School for Calvary Christian Academy in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, which is located 35 miles north of Miami. Calvary is an outreach ministry of Calvary Christian Church, a mega-church that has 25,000 members. The school itself has over 1,700 students in pre-kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade. They provide resources through their Exceptional Student Education (ESE) program for children with mild learning disabilities. They also have a Varying Exceptionalities (VE) program, which is a separate special education classroom that serves children with moderate special needs, such as autism and cerebral palsy. Additionally, they have programs for gifted students. Calvary’s strategic plan includes

expansion of their programs to include a broader range of children with special needs over the next three to five years.

Mr. Jack Postma

Mr. Jack Postma is the outgoing (retired) Principal of Unity Christian High School in Hudsonville, Michigan, about 15 miles west of Grand Rapids in western Michigan. Unity has 700 students in 9<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grade, and they have been educating students of all abilities in a full-inclusion environment for 30 years. They have only had to turn away two students who had severe behavioral disorders.

Dr. Paula Flint

Dr. Paula Flint is the Founder and Head of School of The Flint Academy located in Arlington, Texas, 20 miles west of Dallas. Flint is a relatively new school, just six years old, and they have 90 students in kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade. They educate children of all abilities in an full inclusion environment. Dr. Flint has not turned anyone with a disability away from her school, and in fact, said that they have had great success with children that have emotional and behavioral disorders.

**Pilot Study**

**Introduction**

In the tradition of critical hermeneutic protocol (Herda 1999), I conducted a pilot study (See Appendix F) in fall 2011 that served as a field-testing project and where I became familiar with engaging in conversations (See Appendix G). I had conversations with leaders of two different local Christian schools who both matched the profile I sought of a top-ranking administrator of an established primary and/or secondary Christian school and who had begun to serve children with mild learning disabilities in

their schools, Clifford E. Daugherty, Ed.D., President of Valley Christian Schools (VCS) in San Jose, and Frances Leonor, Ed.D., Principal of Highlands Christian Schools (HCS) in San Bruno.

Dr. Daugherty's professional experience includes teaching at the 4<sup>th</sup> grade level in both public and Christian schools. He was the founding principal of Los Altos Christian Schools, which still operates today. Dr. Daugherty came to VCS in the fall of 1986 and led the transformation from a financially struggling Christian school with no permanent building facility to one of the best and largest Christian schools in the United States in terms of resources, facilities, and reputation in academics, athletics, and the arts. Dr. Daugherty received his doctorate degree in Education with an emphasis in private school administration and special education from the University of San Francisco (USF).

Dr. Leonor taught science and math in the Philippines in Christian primary schools and college universities for many years before immigrating to the United States in 1985. She taught science at HCS and before becoming Principal for kindergarten through eighth (K-8<sup>th</sup>) grade. Dr. Leonor received her doctorate degree in education specializing in Christian School Leadership from Columbia International University.

### **Reflections on Pilot Project**

The research topic of inclusion in Christian schools for children with disabilities is personal to me, since I have lived through the experience of my own child not being able to attend a Christian school because of his intellectual disability and sensory issues. Critical hermeneutics acknowledges that we all have prejudices, and Gadamer (2004:273) writes that "prejudice certainly does not necessarily mean a false judgment, but part of the idea is that it can have either a positive or a negative value." Herda (1999:77)



challenges us to “move from pre-understandings to new understandings” by “reflect[ing] and distanc[ing] ourselves from our prejudices and pre-understandings.” By doing so, new understandings can lead to future possibilities and as Gadamer (2004:304) writes, “one learns to look beyond what is close at hand—not in order to look away from it but to see it better, within a larger whole and in truer proportions.”

My conversations with Dr. Daugherty and Dr. Leonor, as well as my reflections and interpretation that followed, helped me to understand this phenomenon differently. I am more aware of the challenges that leaders of Christian schools face in attempting to move from the phronesis of the knowledge of Christian values to the practical application, or praxis, in Christian schools, beyond what was found in the literature regarding financial and expertise constraints. My conversation with Dr. Daugherty was especially enlightening as our conversation began to move towards an imagining of what it would take to provide children with disabilities with an education that is appropriate for their unique needs in Christian schools, specifically the idea of collaboration with parents of children of all abilities who want to have their children educated in a Christian school. This quote by Herda (1999:2) bears repeating: “the work of participatory (interpretive) research is a text created by the researcher and the research participants that opens the possibility of movement from text to action.”

The research categories of Ethical Aim and Imagination and the related guiding questions have proven appropriate for this study. They will be critical in uncovering the pre-understandings of other Christian school leaders and in moving towards innovative and creative ideas for the future of an inclusive Christian education. As I reviewed the collected data, it became clear to use the category of Praxis to replace Language. I feel

that the pilot study helped me acquire a new horizon and encouraged me to “remain open to the meaning of the other person or text” (Gadamer 2004:271).

### **Background of the Researcher**

My son, Antonio, age 14 and my only child, was diagnosed with developmental delays and sensory integration dysfunction when he was four years old. When he was 10 years old, his condition was determined to be permanent (no longer a delay in development) and his diagnosis changed to mental retardation, or what is now referred to as intellectual disability. He received both diagnoses from professional psychologists in the public school district. After each diagnosis by the public school professionals, my husband and I paid thousands of dollars out of our own pockets for private examinations and assessments from the best doctors and therapists in the Bay Area, and both times the diagnosis was confirmed. I have spent a considerable time and resources researching Antonio’s condition and obtaining the best possible treatments and therapies for him.

In the past, my primary motivation for working hard was to make money to pay for Antonio’s treatments. I worked for 15 years in corporate America. My last corporate role was as a director of accounting operations, followed by five years in academia as Associate Dean for a two different business schools. My husband and I decided that we would both work so that we could pay for the best private education, therapies, and other treatments for Antonio that money could buy, rather than live on his salary alone while I fought with the public school agencies and insurance companies for appropriate services and reimbursements for treatments, as is the case with many families with children with disabilities. Our combined income and benefits allowed us to pay for a private, non-religious school with small classroom sizes of 12 students or less, taught by a teacher and

a para-educator, in a full-inclusion environment. We also paid for one-on-one intensive therapies that were above and beyond what the public schools could provide—speech therapy, occupational therapy, physical therapy, experimental music therapy, and private tutoring. We also enrolled Antonio in all of the activities that his doctors and therapists recommended such as karate lessons and swimming lessons to help Antonio with his bilateral coordination, and piano lessons to help him with his fine motor skills and his understanding of math. When Antonio showed an interest in singing and drama, we enrolled him in theater camp where he built the skills and confidence to audition for our annual church Easter musical production. I meticulously scheduled our family's life around Antonio's activities.

In addition to all of the therapies and activities, I took Antonio to church every Sunday and to Bible camp on Wednesday nights where I was able to find patient teachers to give him extra assistance so that Antonio would be exposed to and trained in the Christian faith. I read the Bible to Antonio every night and I worked on explaining the scriptures to him in ways that he would be able to understand. I wanted to enroll Antonio in a Christian school, which is the type of education that I received as a child, but I could not find a Christian school within 40 miles of our home that had the expertise or resources to provide an education that would meet his needs.

The intensive early interventions with Antonio were successful in getting him on the right path, and he is now able to have the majority of his special educational needs met through public school, although we still pay for some private tutoring and speech therapy services to supplement what the public schools provide, none of which is reimbursable by the school district or our health insurance.

As I considered what my research topic would be for my dissertation, I initially thought I would write about women leaders of color in corporate America or academia—something with which I was well acquainted and that might be able to help advance my career. However, when I stopped to think about what mattered the most to me in my life, I thought about my Christian faith and my family. Therefore, I decided to research this topic with which I am intimately familiar and passionate. I am optimistic that my research will not only help others who are going through similar experiences as mine, but that it can open up a world of possibilities for a change in Christian school education that embraces inclusion. This dissertation process has become more than just a research project for me—it is a labor of love inspired by my beautiful son.

### **Summary**

In the past five decades, schools in the United States have seen a shift from completely excluding children with disabilities from public schools to gradually providing access to an appropriate education and greater inclusion in the general education classroom. Later, leaders of Catholic schools encouraged more awareness and collaboration with public school agencies to provide a Catholic education for children with mild levels of disabilities, although a more formal framework for implementation has not yet been created. Some Christian schools have only recently begun to provide resources and accommodations for children with mild learning disabilities.

Parents of the Christian faith who want their children with disabilities to be educated in a Christian school rarely have that choice. Given the biblical imperative of inclusion in the Christian faith, leaders of Christian schools have struggled with moving from an intellectual knowledge of Christian values to taking practical action to educate

children with disabilities in their schools. In this research study, I investigated the thoughts of top school leaders of Christian values and the relationship to educating all children, the action that Christian schools have already taken to educate exceptional children, and the contemplation of the future of an accessible and inclusive Christian education. This investigation will also examine the obvious limiting factors of financial and space constraints and the lack of special education expertise, as well as hurdles that are not as obvious, such as the leaders' and learning communities' prejudgments of children with disabilities, in order to gain a new understanding, and to move toward new possibilities for the future of special education in an inclusive Christian learning community.

The data gathered during the research process are presented in Chapter Four, as told by the research participants and presented by the researcher. The data provide a narrative of each of the Christian school leaders who participated in this study about their views and actions regarding educating children with disabilities. The data were viewed and rendered through the lens of critical hermeneutic theory in order to derive meaning from the text and to come to a new understanding.

## CHAPTER FOUR: DATA PRESENTATION

### Introduction

Herda (1999:93) writes that conducting a hermeneutic interpretive research study “entails an awareness of the critical difference between research that uses tools and techniques and research that lives in language.” I held conversations with the top leaders of Christian schools in seven states across the United States in the spring and summer of 2012. These leaders were asked to describe the level of accessibility to their school for children with special needs, and the level of inclusion of students with disabilities with their typical peers.

The norm for Christian schools in the United States is to either exclude children with disabilities, or to include children with mild learning disabilities without proactively providing support and resources (Sutton 1996; Eigenbrood 2004; Taylor 2005). Through my conversations with the leaders of the Christian schools that participated in my research study, I was able to categorize each of the schools into four groups, based on the level of access to a Christian education and the level inclusion in the general education environment. Please refer to figure 1 which plots each school based on access to a Christian school and inclusion with typical peers.

The first group consists of schools that educate children with a specific educational need. By definition, they are segregated from the greater educational community. They have high access to a Christian education, but no inclusion with typical peers. This model makes it administratively efficient to provide a special education for the students.

The second group encompasses Christian schools that, in addition to admitting typical and gifted students, also enroll children with mild special needs as long as they possess normal to high cognitive intelligence. Students that have been accommodated in such schools include children with learning disabilities such as mild dyslexia, children with physical disabilities that may require wheelchair access, children with neurobehavioral disorders such as ADHD, and children with difficulties with social interaction, such as children with Asperger's syndrome. These children, because of their cognitive skills, which are on par with their typical peers, are able to achieve academic success in a traditional classroom environment with the help of resources such as tutoring programs, reading labs, speech therapy, and minimal adjustments in the classroom and in the administration of giving tests. The curriculum does not need to be changed to accommodate these students. Some schools have also been able to admit children who are blind or deaf, yet have the requisite cognitive ability. These schools provide low access to a Christian education, in that they limit the children who have special needs based on the criteria of comparable cognitive ability with the typical student population, and disabilities that are managed with minimal disruption to the regular academic program. At the same time, they provide high inclusion for the students that they do admit, in that all children are educated in the general education classroom.

Like the schools in the second group, the third group includes schools that admit children with equivalent cognitive abilities with their typical peers and have a range of mild disabilities. This group of schools also has separate classrooms located on the school premises for children with mild to moderate disabilities who may require a different academic curriculum to meet their needs, such as children with Down's

syndrome, cerebral palsy, intellectual disability, emotional behavioral disorder, or autism. Children in these classrooms are provided a specialized curriculum and a low student to teacher ratio in order to meet their educational needs. Such schools provide a medium level of access to a Christian education for children with disabilities, in that they have a maximum number of students they allow in their program, usually limited to the number of seats available in the specialized classroom. They provide a medium level of inclusion in that some students in the special education classroom may have the opportunity, based on their disability, to be included alongside their typical peers in some non-academic classes, such as physical education and music class. They may also participate in school activities such as weekly chapel gatherings and clubs. However, the majority of time in school is spent segregated from their typical peers.

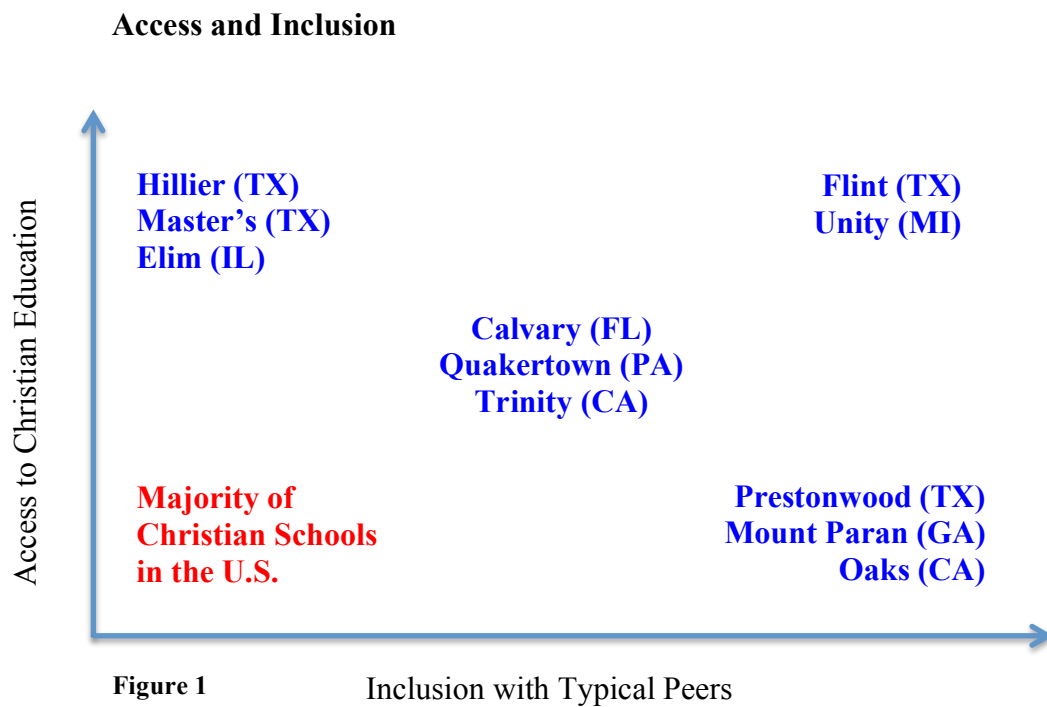
The fourth group includes schools that provide full inclusion for children with all levels of abilities. Children with mild learning or neurobehavioral disabilities are supported through various support services, therapies, and workshops. Children with all levels of physical, intellectual, and developmental disabilities are supported with classroom aides when needed, and may occasionally be pulled out of the general education class to receive more intensive, one-on-one learning support. These types of schools offer high accessibility to a Christian education in that they do not turn away any child that has disabilities. These schools also practice full inclusion so that children with a variety of abilities are educated together in the general education classroom.

#### **Christian Schools Exclusively for Children with Specific Educational Needs**

Three of the Christian schools in my research study provide high access to a Christian education, but no inclusion with their peers in the greater learning community.



These schools limit admission to children with a specific type of disability or disorder. Elim Christian School, located in the outskirts of Chicago, Illinois, is a segregated, residential school for children that have moderate to severe special needs and who require around-the-clock care. Both Hillier Christian School and The Master’s Academy are located in the greater Dallas/Ft. Worth area of Texas, specializing in educating children who have dyslexia, dysgraphia, and/or other learning processing disorders.



Mr. Bill Lodewyk, Elim Christian School

Elim Christian School is located 20 miles south of Chicago. The surrounding area has middle-class homes, stores, and chain restaurants. I drove to the school and I found a large parking lot next to a large one-story school building spread out on a wide expanse of land.

When I sat down for my conversation with Mr. Lodewyk, I quickly noticed that he was very eloquent and thoughtful. Mr. Lodewyk has been principal of Elim Christian

School for 12 years. Prior to Elim, he had been an administrator for another local Christian school that educated typical children and also had resources for children with mild learning disabilities. According to Mr. Lodewyk, he did not have a background in special education prior to coming to Elim, and he was hired for the leadership role based on his ability to “mobilize a group of folks who did have the expertise and the commitment” to work at a challenging school. He felt that God could use his visionary inclinations to help the organization. I asked Mr. Lodewyk what his thoughts were on Christian values and how they relate to educating children of all abilities. He stated:

[Christian values] are the foundation upon which any meaningful education would take place. There’s a purpose beyond just education with facts or knowledge. There’s a worldview that you’re trying to promote. And that finds its roots, its motivation, its basis, in a Christian worldview.

I spoke with Mr. Lodewyk about how they were funded and how they acquired their student population. I was surprised to find out that 85 percent of their funding comes from the public sector, especially since I learned from my research that the Establishment Clause of the United States Constitution has been interpreted to prohibit public funds from being used on institutions that furthered the cause of a particular religion. There is a high demand for the services that Elim provides, and so when there is a child in the public school system that needs to be placed in a residential facility, Elim has been a private school option for public schools. The public funds that would have otherwise been routed to a public school are re-routed to Elim. Mr. Lodewyk admitted that because they are an “overtly Christian” school, that they are violating the separation of church and state. Mr. Lodewyk stated, “I think that if somebody took us to court, we would lose, but as long as God keeps this door open for us, we’re going to (keep) doing it.” Mr. Lodewyk said that they began enrolling children with public school funding one

student at a time, and that so far, local legislators have been friendly towards them and other Christian schools. He admitted that the current situation is a risk to their organization in terms of their ongoing survival. Mr. Lodewyk explained:

We find that God being at the core of what we do is universally appealing, because the folks with children with moderate to severe needs live closer to that 'God zone.' It's their only way to make sense out of something that doesn't make sense. So even Muslim students live in that 'God zone.' Their view of God and how He's defined is different from ours, but even [so] there's a risk. If we provide excellent services, we meet needs, and we work well with [school] districts, [so] I think our risk is still relatively low.

I asked Mr. Lodewyk about his thoughts on the segregated school model, and he responded by saying that even though the trend in public schools has gone from segregated schools to mainstreamed schools to inclusion, he feels that there is still room for a place like Elim. He admitted that "most states would not tolerate it (a segregated school) pedagogically or philosophically." However, he said that Elim is just one option out of a spectrum of options for children with special needs, and he believes that it's his job to "lay out legitimate options for parents...and to provide as many options as possible" without illegitimizing or invalidating other paths to educate children.

He also went on to say that inclusion is relative. He knew many children who attended public schools because the law champions inclusion, but some of those children did not feel welcome by their peers in social activities. Within the structure of Elim, everyone is included in a variety of activities within the student population, although they are separated from the greater Christian learning community. Mr. Lodewyk states, "It's not either/or; it's both/and."

When I asked Mr. Lodewyk what he thought it would take to create inclusive Christian school communities, he replied, "You have to have a collective will within a

Christian community to really engage this area.” He said that many Christian schools are distracted in just trying to focus on survival, so they have not considered changing their school models to include children with disabilities. As for Elim’s future, Mr. Lodewyk said that it would be impossible to replicate Elim in other parts of the country given the current funding model and the educational philosophy of greater inclusive environments. He stated that he would like Elim to be a “laboratory where we can wrestle with best practices and then help other schools” implement programs for children with special needs.

At the end of our conversation, Mr. Lodewyk prayed for my research and for safety in my travels. He commented that the work that I was doing was very interesting and relevant, and he asked that I stay in touch with him regarding the research findings.

#### Mr. Larry Evans, Hillier Christian School

When I drove to Hillier Christian School, I noticed the surrounding residential area of manicured lawns, white-picket fences, and churches on many of the street corners. The school building was located next to Highland Park Presbyterian Church in Dallas. The first floor of the building was designated for the lower grades of an elementary day school consisting of 325 typical children. The second floor of the building is exclusively for Hillier Christian School, set aside for the 30 students in kindergarten through eighth grade who have dyslexia and other processing disorders. I was directed by the security guard to walk up the stairs to the second floor to wait for Mr. Larry Evans, the outgoing principal of Hillier Christian who retired just a few days after our conversation.

Mr. Evans was a tall and broad-shouldered man, who confirmed what my idea was of an ex-football player from Texas. Following behind Mr. Evans was a woman

named Ms. Ginger Gustovich, the incoming principal for Hillier. Mr. Evans was soft-spoken and had a mild Texas twang. He opened the door for both Ms. Gustovich and me like a true Southern gentleman. We gathered in his modest office to begin our conversation about Hillier. Mr. Evans began by describing the origin of Hillier, which opened its doors in 1952, by saying:

It started with Texas Scottish Rite Hospital. The man who organized the first symposium on dyslexia was Dr. Luke Waites, a member of this church. The Orton-Gillingham method... was brought to Scottish Rite and funded by a member of this church in the sixties, and Dr. Waites developed a program with Orton and Gillingham on alphabetic phonics. That's how the school started.

Hillier has a maximum of six children in each classroom, and all of the teachers are trained in specialized reading and phonics methods that have been proven successful with children with dyslexia. The children rotate to different classrooms for each subject, so that the teachers teach the same subjects at different grade levels. Hillier is considered an outreach ministry of the Highland Park Presbyterian Church. Students at Hillier have very little interaction with the students in the regular day school, although they may interact with them on combined field trips. Mr. Evans stated, "We really focus on this one segment, and we try to create a learning environment that meets their specific needs."

When I asked Mr. Evans about Christian values and how they relate to educating children, he echoed many of the same sentiments as Mr. Lodewyk at Elim by saying:

[Christian values are] fundamental. As Christians, reading the Bible and learning about God is where it starts. If children don't have the ability to read, it's paramount to enable them to do so. That's where we feel the knowledge starts. All children need to learn to read. They need to read Christian values through Bible stories as a foundation [for their Christian faith].

In our discussion of how the majority of Christian schools do not accept children that have disabilities, Mr. Evans reflected on the history of the United States as a country

founded on Christian values, which informed the actions and choices that we made as a society. However, he felt that in the modern society, our cultural values, such as individualism and competitiveness, have influenced Christians in the church and in Christian schools, and that it should be the other way around in that Christians need to influence society. He pondered, “It seems they [the church] are more influenced with what society is saying.” Mr. Evans feels that Christians need to be “willing to step out and be a leader” and do the right thing, in the context of serving children with special needs. He said, “I hope society would realize [that] education is more than just scores...[there] has to be a re-thinking and the church needs to set the tone.” Mr. Evans went on to describe a key Christian value by saying:

Christian schools need to have compassion. There’s a balance and I’ve wrestled with that my entire career. Of course, you want to strive for excellence in grades. But without compassion woven in to help others and bring them along with you, what do you have? We’ve gotten into specialization so much in this country, which breeds a lot of feeling like you have to be the best. You might have the big job and everything, but you look around and you might not have the best relationships.

Mr. Evans concluded our conversation by describing the community at the church and how they provided “care teams” that take care of a child with special needs so that the parents can worship in the church. He also talked about the advantages of a smaller school rather than a large school in terms of being able to respond quickly to make adjustments in order to meet the unique needs of each child.

Mrs. Elderine Wyrick, The Master’s Academy

When I drove out to the suburbs of Dallas/Fort Worth and into Duncanville, Texas, I passed along what seemed to be acres of land and grass across the expanse of Texas, and large churches at every major intersection. I drove to the address of the

school, but instead of finding a standalone school building, I found a relatively small church building. I later learned that The Master's Academy had been renting space from the church since its inception in 1988, although there was no direct affiliation with the church.

Mrs. Wyrick had eyes filled with compassion and an earnest and purposeful look on her face. She first described her personal story about why she started The Master's Academy, another small school similar to Hillier Christian School that specialized in educating children with dyslexia. She told me about her two sons who, though both had high intelligence, seemed to struggle at school, one more so than the other. She took her younger son to the Scottish Rite Child Development Center, the same place of which Mr. Evans from Hillier Christian School spoke, where he was evaluated and diagnosed with dyslexia, dysgraphia, attention deficit disorder, and dyscalculia. Mrs. Wyrick described the heartbreaking story of her son's experience at typical Christian schools, where teachers refused to make adjustments in teaching her children because they wanted to be fair to the other students. Mrs. Wyrick stated:

I run into teachers like that [who] take pride in failing a certain number of students. So a lot of what I learned was watching what shouldn't be done...because I saw the cruelty and I saw the non-Christian attitude within the Christian school. And I'm not saying it is every teacher across the board. There were many wonderful teachers that worked with the struggling students at those schools, but those that didn't were so cruel. It was very difficult to deal with it emotionally on my part, because I feel that a Christian school needs to reflect [the love of] Christ.

Mrs. Wyrick spent one year home schooling her sons, and then she received what she described as "a calling from God" to start her own school when her sons were in the eighth and 10<sup>th</sup> grades, respectively. I asked her why she decided to start a specialized school rather than an inclusive school, and she described the need to preserve the self-

esteem of children who learned differently. She stated, “You need to set kids apart so they won’t continually be rejected.” She described how other children bullied her sons at Christian schools. Forming a separate school was a way to protect them from their typical peers who did not understand that there are children who learn differently. Mrs. Wyrick said:

I find the kids to be more empathetic to kids where the disability is visible. You would never ask a child in a wheelchair to stand up for the pledge [of allegiance]. But you would expect another child [to say the pledge of allegiance] who has an inability to remember it, and they’d be punished because they don’t know, and they’re as handicapped as the one in the [wheel]chair.

Mrs. Wyrick and I talked about the Christian values that guide her school. She emphasized that The Master’s Academy is a Christian school first, and a remedial school second. She explained the purpose of her school is to help children discover the gifts that God bestowed on them. Convinced that God has a special plan for each child, Mrs. Wyrick believes her job is to find out how God made children, and to help develop their character to be like Christ. She described the children at her school as “a basket of unopened gifts” that are just waiting to be opened, if teachers would just take the time necessary for each student to discover those gifts. She stated, “We need to appreciate the different intelligences” that each child has been given.

Lastly, when I discussed with Mrs. Wyrick what she thought it would take to have Christian schools that provide access to a Christian education and inclusion in a Christian learning community, she declared:

Flexibility, creativity, and heart. That’s all it takes. I can take any classroom, and I can teach any teacher how to meet the needs of kids with special needs. But if you don’t have the heart to walk that second mile...it’s not going to work. If you could have that in Christian education of teachers, it can be developed and it would change Christian education. I don’t have to have special ed[ucation]



teachers. I just need teachers who have the heart. I can give them the keys to show them how to do it.

Mrs. Wyrick prayed for me, walked me to my car and wished me well in my travels. She asked me to keep in touch with her and to keep her posted on the dissertation.

### **Including Children with Mild Learning Disabilities**

In my research, I found many large Christian schools that provide formal programs and resources for children who are considered gifted, children with mild learning disabilities such as dyslexia, children with mild neurobehavioral disorders such as ADHD, children with social challenges such as Asperger's syndrome, children with physical disabilities that are able to navigate throughout the school with the use of a wheelchair, and occasionally, children who are blind or deaf. With hard work and additional resources, these children are usually able to progress in the regular classroom and achieve in a rigorous academic environment alongside their typical peers, given their average to higher-than-average level of cognitive intelligence. I spoke with leaders of three such schools including Oaks Christian School located in Southern California, Mount Paran Christian Academy located outside of Atlanta, Georgia, and Prestonwood Christian Academy located in Plano, Texas.

#### Mr. Jeff Woodcock, Oaks Christian School

While I had previously visited the Los Angeles area many times, it was my first time in the area of Westlake Village, which is where Oaks Christian School was located. The surrounding area seemed to be a well-to-do neighborhood by the appearance of the local shops, the beautiful grounds of the nearby golf course, the local Four Seasons Hotel located just down the road from the school, and the many expensive cars that surrounded

me on the road leading to the Oaks campus. As I drove my modest rental car into the parking lot, I noticed the signs in front of several of the parking spaces closest to the building that indicated they were reserved for the families of students in the school who had donated money for their own premier parking space. As I walked through the halls of the school, the modern paintings on the walls as well as the sculptures throughout the building caught my attention. I remembered in researching the Oaks website that the founder of the school was a philanthropist who happened to be a Christian woman, and who was also a patron of modern art.

I walked into the main office and waited to speak with Mr. Jeff Woodcock. Oaks Christian is one of the larger Christian schools with approximately 1,500 students from sixth through 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Mr. Woodcock cordially greeted me and led me to sit at a table in his office. Mr. Woodcock explained that the mission of the school is very clear—“dedicated to Christ in the pursuit of academic excellence, artistic expression, and an athletic distinction, while growing in the knowledge and wisdom of God’s abundant grace.” Mr. Woodcock described their recruiting approach in attracting students who can help fulfill Oak’s three-tiered mission. In doing so, they realized the need to provide extra support and resources for students who they determined to be excellent in athletics or the arts, and who may also struggle with academics and be considered “at-risk” students. Of the 1,500 students, 120 are enrolled in the tutoring program, and another 40 students are enrolled in the Academic Success Program (ASP), which teaches students strategies for study, organization, and advocating skills. Many of these students have diagnosed mild learning disabilities, and Oaks implements the recommendations on their IEP. Because Oaks is a college preparatory school, all their students must be able to

withstand the accelerated academic pace of the school. Therefore, the addition of resources for children with mild learning disabilities was a direct response to the growing need for these resources as Oaks recruited students who could add to the mission of the school.

I asked Mr. Woodcock about how Christian values are taught to the students at Oaks. He stated:

My major characteristic for inculcating a Christian worldview into everything we do is you've got to hire Christian teachers, because if you don't have Christian teachers, they don't get it. One of my roles as head of school is that I'm the gatekeeper in terms of hiring, so one of the things I want to hear is their personal faith story so I know there's that commonality of faith.

Mr. Woodcock described how biblical principals are woven into the curriculum, and how they encourage critical thinking and the questioning and defense of the scriptures, also known as apologetics, so that their students will be ready to defend their Christian beliefs when they leave Oaks. I asked Mr. Woodcock if he had any plans to expand access to Oaks for children that have special needs and who may not be able to keep up with the academic curriculum. Without hesitation, he said they would not consider admitting such students because such a proposal did not align with the mission of the school. He did concede that the exposing Oaks' students to children with special needs would be an advantage. He stated, "Exposing the rest of the students to a [student with] a disability would give new insights and a new way of viewing life...from a different perspective." He described how the students at Oaks have opportunities for exposure to people who are different from them by volunteering at the Special Olympics, and through missions trips to third-world countries. At the end of our conversation, I

thanked Mr. Woodcock for his time, and another administrator gave me a tour of the beautiful campus.

Dr. David Tilley, Mount Paran Christian Academy

Mount Paran Christian Academy's campus was the most aesthetically pleasing school that I visited during my research travels. The cluster of brick buildings were nestled on the gently rolling hills of perfectly trimmed lawns—65 acres of land, according to Dr. Tilley, to be exact. The architecture looked decidedly Southern, with beautiful iron gates surrounding the school and intuitively well-placed signs posted throughout campus. I easily found the administration building and I looked forward to my conversation with Dr. David Tilley, the Headmaster for Mount Paran.

Dr. Tilley had a welcoming smile and a booming voice. He greeted me with a firm handshake and a warm welcome, and invited me into his large office where he had traditional leather furniture, a heavy wooden desk, beautifully bound books that lined the bookcases, and framed diplomas for each of his degrees hung on a section of the wall. Dr. Tilley had a doctorate in Education, the same degree that I aspired to achieve, and though he said he was very busy in our initial communications, I believe he empathized with my situation as a doctoral student and made the time in his schedule to participate in my study. From my research, I knew that Mount Paran, like Oaks Christian, was a large independent Christian school with over 1,500 students in kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade. They admitted primarily typical and gifted children, and they also had resources for children with mild learning disabilities.

I asked Dr. Tilley about his thoughts on how the students at Mount Paran learned about Christian values. Dr. Tilley stated:

Everything that's done here, every program that's begun, every concept that's promoted, every process and policy we create, is all vetted through a biblical worldview. We look at everything we do in the context of this mission statement to say, how does Christ's mission and message inform this policy, this program, our students, staffing, the way we hire, the way we admit, the way we create programs? So it is more than a devotion in the morning, a chapel every Wednesday, or a Bible class required of every student. [Mount Paran] has the intention of creating a place for academic excellence with a strong, unapologetic, unashamed, unabashed Christian worldview and perspective.

Dr. Tilley talked about Mount Paran's dedication towards educating diverse learners that started the first day the school was open in 1976. He said, "It's our responsibility to identify students with diverse learning needs and to teach them in an approach that works for them." He told me about his own personal experience with his youngest child, a son, who unlike his two older sisters, had challenges grasping the academics in school. Dr. Paran had tried to squeeze his son into a square box by trying to force him to conform to the way most children learn, rather than trying to understand his son's learning style and finding a way to teach his son in the way that he learned. "It really taught me as a father and as an educator that I have a responsibility to those who learn differently, who think differently, who respond differently, who are gifted differently."

As far as the practicalities of funding for the resources for children with learning disabilities, he described two programs that have helped Mount Paran and the students they teach. The first one is Senate Bill 10 (SB10) that was passed by the state of Georgia. This bill allows the funds that would otherwise be used to educate a child with learning disabilities in public schools to be used in private independent schools, including those such as Mount Paran that have a religious affiliation. These funds do not cover the full tuition amount, but it does subsidize the tuition and the extra cost to support special needs

resources. He said that this bill has helped promote the recent influx of identified, diagnosed students with special needs into Mount Paran. Another Georgia-specific program is the creation of student scholarship organizations (SSO's). This program states that any Georgia taxpayer can contribute up to \$2,500 that they owe to the state, and instead of the state receiving it, they can redirect that amount to an independent school for scholarships. So far, Mount Paran has raised about \$400,000 per year, which has helped families who cannot afford the tuition to receive scholarships so that their children can attend the school. These scholarships have helped Mount Paran increase the ethnic diversity of their students. Again, as I was with Elim, I was surprised at the amount of public funding that was able to be channeled to a religious school. I learned from Dr. Tilley that Georgia's lawmakers were extremely magnanimous to the Christian majority in that state.

I asked Dr. Tilley if he had any plans to increase the diversity of Mount Paran in terms of children with greater special needs. He admitted that doing so was aligned with scripture by saying:

You can't read scripture and not see Christ's affection for the disadvantaged. He even put his apostles and disciples into situations that were unfamiliar to them to teach them that they have to love people that are diverse, whether they were tax collectors, women, lepers, demon possessed folks. Christ emphasized diversity in his ministry. If we're a Christian school, we have to accept that as a Biblical principal.

Dr. Tilley felt that the inclusion of children with special needs would change the dynamic of the school in a "profoundly positive way" and that it would "change the culture." He described a few students that had special needs who were blind, deaf, selectively mute, or in wheelchairs (all of whom had normal intelligence and could keep up with the regular academic curriculum with some assistance). He felt that other children would benefit

from the exposure to more children with special needs and that it would be “enhancing to their educational experience.” He expressed his concern about resistance from the staff and the teachers of the school, and discussed some of the limiting factors, including facilities and finances. In theory, Dr. Tilley felt that expanding access to their school would be advantageous, and that it would take a large donation to implement such a program.

After our conversation, Dr. Tilley said a short prayer for me, asking God for wisdom and for perseverance as I continued on my travels and in my journey in the doctoral program. He then insisted that I enjoy a hosted lunch at a local restaurant with two of Mount Paran’s school administrators. I was grateful for his generosity of time and for his Southern hospitality.

Mrs. Dana Epperson, Prestonwood Christian Academy

I had been warned ahead of time that the Prestonwood campus was rather large, and I was given specific directions on how to find my way to the right building where I would first meet the Director of Learning Lab, Mrs. Cheryl Burns. Even so, when I drove to the large combined church/school campus, I immediately lost my way, became confused, and had to stop to ask for directions twice. The parking lot was enormous, and there were several different buildings on the premises. I later learned that the church had over 14,000 members, and that Prestonwood was one of the largest Christian schools in Texas. Once I found Mrs. Burns, we got into her car where she proceeded to drive me across campus to a different building where I would meet Mrs. Epperson, the Assistant Head of School, who was representing the Head of School, Dr. Larry Taylor, who was traveling at the time and unable to meet with me during my research trip to Texas.

Mrs. Epperson's office was located in a beautifully decorated building. I was told she only had about 30 minutes, and I was glad that she seemed genuinely happy to meet with me and that she spoke at a fast rate of speed. Like Oaks and Mount Paran, Prestonwood was a large school with over 1,400 students in kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade that primarily accepted typical and gifted children, and provided an extensive learning lab program for children with mild learning disabilities. She described how the learning lab program was created because a mother of a student who had dyslexia gave what Mrs. Epperson described as "a hefty donation, a sizable gift" to obtain resources to help students like her son. The initial investment enabled the beginning of the learning lab program, which grew over time to include the addition of speech and language pathologists and reading specialists to help children with mild learning disabilities achieve in the traditional classroom.

I asked Mrs. Epperson to tell me more about her views on Christian values and how they relate to children that have special needs in the context of Christian education.

Mrs. Epperson stated:

[Christian values] need to permeate everything you do. The biblical worldview and Christ-centered focus is knowledge that is rooted in Christ. Everything you do should be threaded through that knowledge. God has a specific plan and a specific purpose for those kids [as stated in] Jeremiah 29:11. God has uniquely and perfectly created each human being, and He has given them gifts and talents that only that person can do. It's up to us to draw those out, and to help that person be everything that God intended them to be, in alignment with His perfect plan.

Mrs. Epperson shared that while Prestonwood admits children with mild learning disabilities, they recently formed a committee to explore how they could expand their programs so that they could accept students with a wider range of disabilities. She stated, "If God is calling us to expand and enlarge that focus, the committee is looking at what



our options are, and then charting a phased-in approach [to implement the resources].” She said that they were looking at the budget implications, the availability of facilities, and the staffing requirements.

I asked Mrs. Epperson what she thought it would take for other leaders of Christian schools to expand access to a Christian education and inclusion in a Christian learning community. She proclaimed that school administrators had to approach expansion with an “open heart” and a “can-do spirit.” She acknowledged that finances would always be a limiting factor. However, she explained that a vision for educating children with special needs was required to move forward. She promulgated, “If people do not have a vision, then they’re always going to find factors that are going to prevent them from implementing something.” She also acknowledged that some of the teachers were not trained, nor were they necessarily open, to learning how to educate a child with special needs. However, she felt that if someone who had a vision and a passion led the charge, then the other members of the Christian learning community would follow suit.

Mrs. Epperson concluded the conversation by praying for my family, my travels, and my research. After praying, she wished me success and asked me to touch base with her once my dissertation was finalized.

### **Schools with Special Education Classrooms**

In addition to educating children who are typically developing and gifted, as well as providing programs for children who have mild learning disabilities, three participants in my research study have special education classrooms in their schools. These classrooms serve students with mild to moderate disabilities, such as intellectual disability, autism, and certain physical disabilities combined with intellectual disabilities.

These “school-within-a-school” programs provide students with a customized and targeted curriculum, separate and different from the general curriculum, that is based on their specific learning needs. Teachers with special education credentials and expertise, para-educators, student aides, and parent volunteers work together to provide students with individualized attention. These schools include Trinity Classical Academy in Southern California, Quakertown Christian School in Pennsylvania, and Calvary Christian Academy in Florida.

Mrs. Liz Caddow, Trinity Classical Academy

Trinity Classical Academy is located north of Los Angeles in an emerging suburb full of newer houses and business parks in the rolling, brown hills of Santa Clarita. From the school campus, one can see the Six Flags Magic Mountain theme park in the distance. The school building was located in a shared facility with a church in an area with several office parks, although there is no direct church affiliation. The building was new and modern, and when I walked into the building, there was an abundance of frenzied activity as school administrators, teachers, and students were preparing the campus for the first day of school.

Mrs. Salazar, Mrs. Caddow’s assistant, greeted me warmly when I arrived. After several minutes, she was able to track down Mrs. Caddow, who was extremely busy readying the campus. Mrs. Salazar apologetically asked me if I would mind conducting my conversation as I walked throughout the campus with Mrs. Caddow so that she could multi-task. As an assiduous mother with a full plate myself, I was happy to speak with Mrs. Caddow in any form that would make it convenient for her. We also agreed to speak by phone at a later date so that I could ask a few follow up questions. When I met

Mrs. Cadow, I quickly followed her as she actively went about the campus checking on arrangements, encouraging the staff, and communicating decisions. I was impressed with her deep knowledge of classical education concepts and her ability to carry on two or three conversations simultaneously and seamlessly and without missing a beat. She was full of energy and passion for the topic that I came to discuss.

Trinity educates typical and gifted children, and has also made resources available for children with mild learning disabilities. Their school has grown to more than 700 students in kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade, and I was excited to learn that they were days away from expanding access to their school by starting the Imago Dei School (Latin for “in the image of God”), which is a school-within-a-school located on the Trinity campus, housed in a separate classroom, for children with mild to moderate developmental disabilities. I asked Mrs. Cadow what compelled her to start Imago Dei, and she replied:

We wanted our school to represent the body of Christ. We have all types of people with differences and different learning styles in the body of Christ, so we have intentionally wanted to be diverse in our school, not just with ethnicity, but also different learners, and including children with special needs.

Mrs. Cadow described children who learn differently as “a garden of different plants that all need different things [in proportion] to help them grow.” She described that from the inception of the school 10 years ago, she and her husband had always wanted to have a broad range of students in their school. With the successful growth of their enrollment numbers over the years, they were able to begin expanding access to their school for children with special needs.

I asked Mrs. Cadow about her views on how Christian values relate to a Christian education. She replied:

The values in our faith transcend every person, every generation. [In] modern education, you can't even have the conversation as to why [we should] have good character...why we should be trustworthy, why we should care for one another and be kind and generous, why [we should be] cloaked in good character. They'd have to go back to the beginning of time and God's laying out a foundation for man, but they don't go there.

Similar to her counterparts at other Christian schools, Mrs. Caddow proclaimed the need to "impart a Christian worldview." She elaborated:

Hopefully our students who the Lord brings to us are being touched by the people around them, and living a life in a manner that would be pleasing to our God. We have formal Bible teaching and memorization of scripture...but it's more about what kind of person are you going to be? What are you going to value? Modern education has made everything relative, and has said everything is value neutral. They're teaching a secular humanism in the [public] schools.

When we discussed the future of Christian schools in terms of accessibility to their education by children with special needs, Mrs. Caddow explained that the first steps are saying "yes" to God, having faith, and trusting that God will provide the resources. She emphasized the need to have both creativity and faith to educate children with special needs. Echoing Mr. Lodewyk, she surmised that for most Christian schools, it seems too difficult to implement special education programs because such children are harder to educate. However, she felt that "if we are doing God's will, we need to educate all children." I left our walking tour and conversation feeling energized about Mrs. Caddow's plans for her school's future.

#### Mrs. Sheryl Duerksen, Quakertown Christian School

The town of Quakertown, Pennsylvania just north of Philadelphia, is a quaint town with many small shops, modest residences, and rolling hills. I stayed overnight at a local hotel prior to the morning of my appointment with Mrs. Duerksen, and I could already feel the small-town warmth and hospitality of the hotel staff. I drove to

Quakertown Christian, a relatively small school of 200 students in kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade, which was located on a large good-sized piece of land with an expanse of green grass surrounding the building. When I walked into the front lobby, it felt very similar to the Christian elementary school I had attended as a child. The furniture was seasoned yet well maintained. Signs with bible verses, pictures, and awards lined the walls of the school hallways.

Mrs. Duerksen greeted me warmly and I followed her to her office where we would have our conversation. She appeared to be a thoughtful and humble woman who spoke with intentionality. In my research prior to my visit, I noticed that Quakertown's website was only one of two schools in my research where the details of their special education program were prominently displayed on one of the key landing pages. When I asked Mrs. Duerksen how the special education program began at Quakertown, she mentioned that the previous principal was connected with Joni & Friends, a Christian organization whose mission is to bring disability awareness to Christian churches. They had already begun to provide services for children with mild learning disabilities when several parents of typical children who were enrolled at Quakertown asked about enrolling their children who had more moderate disabilities. Many of the parents had children with autism, and they dropped off their typical child(ren) at Quakertown, while their child with autism attended a local public school. The biggest factor that allowed Quakertown to start a special education program was their deeply rooted beliefs in accordance with the Mennonite denomination. They placed high value on family and community, and that commitment extended to educating all children within their community. She said:

I guess when I think [of] all children, that has to be everyone. It can't be that if you fit in a particular mold [according to] your grades or academics...it has to include all children. It doesn't [exclude children who] struggle academically, or [those with] a physical handicap or a mental handicap.

Mrs. Duerksen said that they “moved on faith” and that they didn't have “all their i's dotted and their t's crossed” when they started the program. She admitted that they approached the special education program without knowing exactly what they were doing, and that they made a lot of mistakes over the years and learned from them. They hired a special education teacher who, along with student aides and parent volunteers, runs a highly individualized program that serves the educational needs of children with a variety of mild to moderate disabilities in a contained classroom. She also mentioned that the parents of the students pay a premium tuition amount for the more individualized attention.

The word “mosaic” is a metaphor that Mrs. Duerksen used to describe the children that attend Quakertown, because “you need all the [different] pieces to form the perfect picture, just like we need every child and their gifts, talents, and abilities.” When I asked Mrs. Duerksen about the future of Quakertown and how they could continue to expand access to their school, she said that they would need a larger overall student population so that they would have the financial base to hire more faculty members. “If our whole school was larger, we would expand all programs, including special education, in proportion.” When I asked her what it would take for other Christian schools to start special education programs, she hesitated when answering the question. She explained that in her mind, there is no question about whether or not to provide an education for children of all abilities. As I was leaving, Mrs. Duerksen said a prayer for me and gave me a hug. She asked that I keep her posted on my dissertation.

Pastor Mark Davis, Calvary Christian Academy

I took a redeye flight to Fort Lauderdale, Florida, just north of Miami, to meet with Pastor Mark Davis of Calvary Christian Academy. I was not prepared for the heat and humidity of Florida, but luckily the cab driver blasted the air conditioning on the way from the airport to the school. Once he dropped me off at the school office of the very large combined church/school campus, I quickly darted into the lobby so that I could enjoy the coolness of the school's air conditioning system. Like both Hillier and Prestonwood in Texas, Calvary began as an outreach ministry of a church. In Calvary's case, they are associated with a mega-church of over 25,000 members, which was an advantage to the school in that they were able to be subsidized heavily by the church in the early years of their growth. Calvary has over 1,700 students in pre-kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade, one of the largest enrollments of all Christian schools in the country.

I was led by an assistant to a large conference room where I first spoke with several other school administrators and teachers. I then met with Pastor Davis who was very welcoming, personable, thoughtful, and eloquent. I learned that before becoming a pastor, he was an accountant and also had an MBA degree, which was similar to my own educational background. We began our conversation by discussing the mission of the school and how Christian values were taught to their students. Pastor Davis explained that they "exist to make disciples of Jesus Christ." He also acknowledged that they had been blessed with financial resources of the church, and he quoted scripture by saying, "to whom much is given, much is required." With those two foundational statements in mind, Pastor Davis explained what parents were looking for in a Christian school and the student population they were aiming to serve:

[The parents] want a curriculum that has biblical principles and a biblical worldview. [They] want the spiritual discipleship, the retreats, the chapels, the bible study experiences, and [they] want a high quality education. The parent that seems to be concerned with all of those spiritual things also wants their child to achieve. [We said], if we're going to birth a school, it needs to have a strong, definite connection to the mission and vision of the church, which is making disciples. It needs to have excellence, and it needs to serve the body of Christ. The body of Christ is diverse—academically, socially, spiritually, physically, and mentally. Most Christian schools are going for [a particular] band of behavioral and academic standards, [as well as] the higher end [of the band]. God was calling us to raise our standard for the gifted kid, but also change the standard, and we didn't call it lowering the standard, we call it broadening the band of students that we could reach.

With the calling to serve the diverse needs of the body of Christ, Calvary not only accepted typical students, but they also admitted gifted students, students that had mild learning disabilities, students with mild neurological disorders, and students that had a variety of disabilities in the mild to moderate range. Students with mild learning disabilities or neurological disorders, which consist of approximately 10 percent of the students at Calvary, were fully included in the general education population and served through a resource program called Exceptional Student Education (ESE). Students that had moderate special needs were placed in a separate classroom in a program called Varying Exceptionalities (VE), which had a maximum capacity of eight students. Many parents who wanted to send their children to the school were able to not only enroll their typical child, but also their child who had a learning disability or a moderately severe disability, such as autism.

Pastor Davis noted that children in both the ESE and the VE programs pay a premium tuition amount for the additional services. Like Georgia, the state of Florida has programs that allow children who were previously enrolled in public schools and who also have an IEP to choose to attend a private school and have the funding for their



education in a public school follow them, which helps the parents pay for the special education resources at Calvary. The ESE and VE programs ran at a deficit for several years, and because they were committed to educating as many children as possible, regardless of their physical, developmental, or intellectual abilities, the church decided to invest in these programs. Pastor Davis stated, “If you think that God is a God of scarcity rather than of abundance, then you will never do it (start special education programs) because you can’t afford it, so we don’t think that way.” He said that while cost can be a limiting factor, it is not the sole, driving factor on whether or not they run the ESE and VE programs. Finding like-minded parents with whom to partner and co-labor was also a critical factor in the success of the ESE and VE programs. As they built and refined the programs, they made mistakes, learned from their mistakes, and made course-corrections to their programs.

The leadership structure of Calvary has been important in how they run the school and make strategic decisions. Pastor Davis explained that there are three ways you can run a school—from a spiritual perspective, from an academic perspective, or from a business perspective. While all three parts are needed to run a school, he said that one of the three elements tends to be the driving force. He argued that schools that have academics as their driving force will never “broaden the band” to include children with special needs, because their primary focus is their academic reputation and the test scores of their students. He posited that schools with business as their driving force will always look at ways to cut what they feel are unnecessary costs, or they will not begin programs that will not provide a return on profit, such as a special education program. Schools that allow the spiritual perspective to be the driving force of their school will prioritize the

spiritual mission of the school, and what they believe God is calling them to do. Pastor Davis said that Calvary has a pastor as the leader of the school because they run the school with a spiritual focus. He elaborated:

There's one term that we use regularly around here. It's 'ROI' but we put an 'S' in front of it—'SROI' or 'spiritual return on investment.' That's how we measure things. Because there are ministries where we evaluate whether or not they are breaking even or contributing to the cash flow of the church. But we also evaluate them on the spiritual return on investment. I was able to run a deficit budget, and by doing so, build a stronger program than what the tuition could afford because the church was willing to invest in staffing because of the spiritual return on investment of the school. This [way of thinking] changes the culture. Eventually, we were able to break even and generate a financial surplus, which is where we are today.

Calvary educates students with a wide variety of abilities, yet there are still some children that they have to turn away because they do not fit into one of their current programs. We spoke about my son, Antonio, who has intellectual disability and high social skills, and how if he were to apply to the school, we would require further discussion because the ESE program would not be able to meet his needs, and the VE program was too restricting for him. I was excited to learn that Calvary had intentionally included an initiative to further expand their services for children with disabilities in their strategic plan over the next five years. They have already taken some steps to enable expansion, including creating a role for a principal to specifically lead the ESE and VE programs, and other programs that they plan to develop over the next several years. By creating this leadership role, they established upper level resources so that they can begin building the infrastructure. Pastor Davis discussed future growth plans by saying:

How can we continue to keep stretching? It's a process over a period of time rather than [thinking] that we've suddenly arrived. We'll never arrive, because there will always be that child that's right on the borderline like your son Antonio, and can we create a pocket and a special niche for him? If we can, we'll try to.

When our conversation concluded, Pastor Davis asked me to keep him informed of my research, as he was interested in sharing best practices with other Christian schools who are also developing special education programs. He also prayed for me and wished me safety in my travels.

### **Full Inclusion in a Christian Learning Community**

I identified leaders of two Christian schools that have full inclusion programs, which can be described as educating children of all ranges of abilities within the general education classroom. They accept all children into their school, regardless of their level of ability, and they work to meet the individual needs of each child. Children who are considered typical are educated alongside children who are gifted as well as children that have a range of disabilities. These unique schools are Unity Christian School located in Hudsonville, Michigan, and The Flint Academy located in Arlington, Texas.

#### Mr. Jack Postma, Unity Christian High School

The town of Hudsonville is located 15 miles west of Grand Rapids in western Michigan, and it is the home of Unity Christian High School. I drove my rental car to the school that was surrounded by a modest, Mid-western neighborhood, where I met with Mr. Jack Postma, the retiring principal. Mr. Postma was friendly, welcoming, and spoke with the deliberateness and calming voice of a narrating storyteller.

I was excited to discover Unity through my research for participants for my study. After calling several Christian schools on my list that did not have resources for children with special needs, I contacted Unity Christian and found that they had a full inclusion program. I spoke with Mr. Postma over the phone and I learned that his own personal experience with his family of origin profoundly influenced the way he viewed children

with disabilities. He explained that his brother Bill had Down's syndrome, and so he knew first hand what it was like to live with someone with a disability. As a result, he and his other siblings naturally became advocates for children who learn differently and who have special educational needs.

When we met in person, Mr. Postma gave me a brief history lesson of the Dutch Christian Reformed Church (CRC), one of the many denominations of Protestant Christianity, and how their core beliefs inform inclusive communities. I grew up in nondenominational churches, and so I was quite ignorant of the differences of the beliefs of the various Protestant denominations. He explained that Dutch CRC's traditional theme is the "Sola Scriptura," which is the practice of being reformed and always reforming. He explained how it is a fluid application for living as followers of Jesus in all cultures, differing from a static interpretation of the bible as, for example, the Amish, who are known for simple living and are reluctant to adopt the conveniences of modern technology. He stated that the CRC tradition of Christianity frames the belief that there is not a square inch in the world or a person in the world that God does not claim. With such a vision, the CRC started educational programs that included everyone, which started with embracing diversity in the 1970's and inclusion in the 1980's.

Along with the "Sola Scriptura" foundation, the mission of Unity Christian is developing followers of Jesus to be leaders. Their motto is "educational excellence in a Christian community," which Mr. Postma characterized as different from "academic excellence" in that academic excellence compares each child against an academic standard, whereas educational excellence meets each child where he/she is, and helps that child be the best that they can be. Mr. Postma articulated that each child is a person

created by God who has unique gifts and abilities, although they may have a learning, physical, or intellectual disability or behavioral disorder. He stated emphatically that “The kingdom of God is inclusive!”

Mr. Postma also defined a Christian educational community as viewed by the CRC through using two important terms: hospitality and generosity. He defined hospitality as defining who is invited in and made to feel comfortable, with a focus on identifying and using ones gifts to give back to the community. He described generosity as the ability to give without expecting anything in return. Therefore, Unity seeks educational excellence for each student in an environment where he/she belongs, identifies his/her gifts, and seeks to give to God and to others without expecting anything in return.

Mr. Postma eloquently summarized what he believes to be a Christian education at Unity by saying, “Christian education is a community, not a commodity.” He explained that most Christian schools in the United States today have a commodity mentality, in that parents of students will pay a certain price for educational services, and they expect to receive something in return that equals the value of the price they paid. In a community model, each child’s tuition is the same. Some children require more services than others, or are involved in more activities than others, and they will be covered, whereas other children do not use as many services or are not involved in as many activities, and so they use less resources than their peers. They are all in the community together, and each student is charged the same price, regardless of the resources they utilize. This community belief is what helped Mr. Postma initially convince the board and the parents to raise each student’s tuition by \$100 each across the

board, so that they could begin providing resources for children with special needs.

While some parents decided not to pay the increased fees and left the school, they were able to attract many more students and ultimately had a net increase in enrollment.

Families that had multiple children, including those with special needs as well as typical children, had previously decided to enroll all of their children in public school because one sibling, because of their disability, was not able to attend the Christian school. The cost of having an educational support program was spread throughout the tuition structure.

On a practical level, Mr. Postma described Unity's resources in more detail:

127 of the more than 700 students at Unity receive support for mild learning disabilities through our educational support services. These students have normal intelligence and will go on to earn a high school diploma. There are a few students who do not have the ability to earn a high school diploma, and so being at Unity is an acculturation to living in a community and being part of a community. These are students who learn what is socially acceptable and who can join their peers in the classroom. They will also be supported by the educational support services room where they will work on specific skills described in their IEP's.

I later learned that Unity was just one of several Christian schools in western Michigan that had full inclusion programs. All of these schools received consulting services from the CLC, which is an educational consulting firm that provides expertise in educating gifted students, students with learning disabilities, and students with a broad range of special needs. The CLC Network has been working with Christian schools in western Michigan and a few surrounding states for the last 30 years to implement programs for exceptional children.

Dr. Paula Flint, The Flint Academy

I had originally scheduled an appointment with Dr. Flint for 9:00 AM, but I received a phone call from her the previous day asking if we could reschedule to 6:00 AM because she realized she had double booked our meeting with a guest speaking appointment at a conference. I was already jet lagged by two hours going from pacific standard time to central standard time, but I was highly motivated to meet Dr. Flint at any time she wanted because her school was only one of two schools that I found that practiced full inclusion. I was also impressed that she was willing to meet very early in the morning rather than cancel our meeting.

I drove from my hotel in Dallas to Arlington, Texas. There was no traffic on the highway that early in the morning, and I arrived at the modest school building at 5:45 AM. There were no other cars in the small parking lot, and because the building did not seem to be open, so I waited in my rental car for Dr. Flint to arrive. The school was located in what seemed to be a middle-class neighborhood where there were several clusters of homes and stores, and also open land. Shortly after I arrived, another car pulled into the driveway next to me. A man got out of the car and waved to me as I rolled down my window. He identified himself as the school janitor and said that Dr. Flint would be arriving shortly. I later learned that this man was actually Mr. Flint, Dr. Flint's devoted husband and someone who apparently had a dry and self-deprecating sense of humor.

Finally, Dr. Flint arrived and I followed her inside the school where she gave me a tour of the small school. She founded The Flint Academy six years ago and they have 90 enrolled students in kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade, with two-thirds of the students

who are typical, and one-third who are exceptional and categorized as gifted, learning disabled, or having a variety of moderate to severe disabilities. I noticed that each classroom looked like it could have been a family room in a house, with painted color walls, pictures, and furniture such as couches, tables, chairs, and throw rugs, in addition to individual desks and chairs that were arranged in small clusters throughout the rooms. There was a kitchen in the school that looked like it was often used, and a garden through the back entrance of the building.

We sat down in her office to begin our conversation. I found that even with her extraordinary educational and professional background, which included a masters degree in special education and a Ph.D. in emotional behavioral disorders, along with a long history of teaching in Christian schools and masters level courses at the university level, she was like her husband in that she was unassuming, humble, and at times somewhat self-deprecating. Dr. Flint certainly held many strong opinions about inclusive Christian education, and I was captivated by what she had to say.

Dr. Flint stated, “I’m a Christian first, and that permeates everything I do.” She explained that all of the classrooms are intentionally organized to represent a familial setting. She stated, “If you have children with special needs and children that were more advanced in the same family, you don’t get rid of some of your children; you educate them together.” She went on to describe her Christian beliefs and how those values informed how she thought about inclusion in her school:

If Jesus was standing on the porch and if the kids came up and said ‘Jesus, who can come to your school?’ we think He would welcome everyone. We don’t think He would say, ‘Only those who are reading on grade level can come unto me.’ So we felt we needed to be a model for Christianity. If we believe that God created everyone and that God loves everyone, do you think God loves the child with a behavior problem? Or the child with autism? So as educators, we should



have the attitude of loving each child and thinking they're valuable. If you're a medical doctor, you treat everyone. If you're a policeman, you make sure everyone obeys the laws. If you're an educator, then your job is to educate. If we're picking and choosing who our students are going to be, it doesn't seem what God would do. As educators, we have the responsibility to educate everyone.

On a more practical level, I asked Dr. Flint how an inclusive education worked at her school. She explained that all types of students attend Flint, and because they have many families with siblings that have a variety of abilities, they offer the ability for all siblings to attend the same school so that the family can stay together as a unit. For many Christian families that have multiple children, if one of them has a special need, then they have to attend public school where the law mandates special education services, while their siblings attend Christian school. She explained that there are no special education classrooms at Flint, and that all of the children are educated together in the same classroom, according to their age and associated grade level. She commented on the categories of disabilities:

I just want to teach children. They come to you and you get to know them and you have to figure out what their needs are. A long time ago we had no labels. The labels have been around for a short time in human history, and yet these kids have been cared for by mothers without any labels. Humans just need names for things and once we've bought the books and taken the class, then we don't need the labels anymore.

Because Flint has a high success rate working with children with emotional and behavioral disorders, many of the other local public and private schools recommend Flint to parents with children who have such disorders. Dr. Flint said that she has never had to turn anyone away in the six years of operation. She mused:

I was fascinated with dyslexia and behavior disorders, how to get someone to like school and love to learn when they didn't [like to learn]. You can really make a big change with someone with a behavior disorder. You can completely turn them around so that they have a really positive life.

I commented to Dr. Flint that this inclusive model was quite remarkable and I asked her how she found teachers that could teach at such a variety of levels in the same classroom. She explained to me that she hired teachers who are retired, are fed up with the school where they taught for many years, who have a heart for children with special needs, and who are motivated to teach differently. She recruited young teachers from her university classroom where she is a professor, because they are coachable in her philosophy and teaching methods. At Flint, she utilized research-based approaches and models to teaching, and she designed the program based on the students and their needs. She admitted that it is difficult for educators to teach each child and treat them individually. She said that all of the techniques on how to teach children with a variety of learning disabilities and special needs can be taught, but that it is much more difficult to change the hearts of educators to want to teach children who they feel are difficult to teach. She said, “You can’t take a class on it or just read a book about it; it (the heart and willingness to teach children with a variety of abilities) has to come from inside you.”

I asked Dr. Flint what it would take to have more Christian schools with inclusive education like hers. She said that school administrators would have to have a change in their attitudes and their hearts. Dr. Flint posited:

If teachers had a positive response to full inclusion and were excited about working with all types of kids, and didn’t consider it a burden, but considered it interesting and exciting, it would change the whole atmosphere of the school. The children quickly respond and are kind to everyone if you model that and require that of them. So the whole atmosphere becomes more loving, more like a family, more accepting, and it carries over into our society, so they become citizens that are more open to working with all types of people, more accepting of all types of people. They can help people, realizing that if they met someone with a difference, that difference is not contagious. You don’t have to worry about it affecting them in a negative way, because they learned that when they were younger. In our classrooms, the academics are done individually, and if you are

sitting next to someone who is struggling with reading, that does not hinder you from reading at an advanced level. So to learn that while you are young is an amazing change in your character and [it] would affect your entire life [in terms of] being more accepting and more loving towards all people.

Dr. Flint's vision is to open several schools with a maximum of 200 students per school throughout the Dallas/Fort Worth area. The reason for the maximum number is because, according to her research, schools begin losing their family atmosphere and their ability to respond in a nimble fashion if the school is too large. Towards the end of our conversation, Dr. Flint revealed that she was currently getting treatment for cancer, and that she hoped that her vision of an inclusive Christian education would continue even after she was gone. I was sad to hear about her health condition, and I made a silent appeal to God that He would spare her for several more years so that she could continue her work.

### Summary

In my research, I found several Christian schools that offered different levels of access to a Christian education, as well as varying levels of inclusion. Each of the leaders of the schools agreed on the basic Christian beliefs and values that informed their actions in how they operated their schools.

Mr. Lodewyk, Mr. Evans, and Mrs. Wyrick all believe that a Christian school exclusively for children with specific disabilities is a model that helps students gain self-esteem and where they can feel included within their segregated communities. Mr. Woodcock, Dr. Tilley, and Mrs. Epperson are leaders in comparatively large Christian schools that have made resources available so that children with normal to high intelligence and who have mild learning disabilities, neurobehavioral disabilities, social difficulties, and certain physical disabilities, can attend and be successful in their schools.

Each school has a different view of an imagined future of including children with special needs in their school. Mrs. Caddow, Mrs. Duerksen, and Pastor Davis all lead schools that have, in addition to meeting the needs of children with mild learning disabilities, developed special education classrooms in their schools to serve children with more moderate disabilities. These leaders have acknowledged that they have had to turn students away based on the limited number of spaces for children with special needs in their schools. Finally, Mr. Postma and Dr. Flint both described highly accessible, full inclusion Christian educational environments in their schools. The root of their approach to a Christian education stems from the models of “community” as opposed to “commodity,” and “family” as opposed to “individual.”

The conversations in this Chapter revealed each leader’s set of prejudgments, as well as their interpretation of biblical principles, which determined the course of action that they took in applying the scriptures to a Christian-based education. The text also disclosed the different lenses, such as the lenses of disability or financial limitations or scriptural influence, that each leader used when viewing the education of children. In Chapter Five, the data collected from the conversation partners are analyzed through the critical hermeneutic theories of ethical aim, praxis, and imagination.

## CHAPTER FIVE: DATA ANALYSIS

### Introduction

Chapter Four is a compilation of the expressed experiences of my research conversation partners about the schools they lead and how they provide access and inclusion for children with varying types and levels of disabilities. These narratives serve as the text or data, and they reveal five categories of Christian schools based on two elements: the ability for children with special needs to have access to a Christian school, and the level of inclusion with typical peers. The five categories are: (1) schools that exclude children with disabilities (no access, no inclusion), (2) schools exclusively for children with a specific type of disability (high access, no inclusion), (3) schools that accommodate the needs of children with normal to high intelligence who have may have mild learning disabilities, neurobehavioral disorders, physical disabilities, or low social interaction skills (low access, high inclusion), (4) schools that provide resources for children with mild disabilities and also have a separate classroom for children who have varying levels cognitive, developmental, and/or physical disabilities (medium access, medium inclusion), and (5) schools that educate all children together, regardless of their ability level (high access, high inclusion).

Chapter Five is an analysis of the data through the lens of critical hermeneutic theories. This interpretive approach through conversations leads the researcher to new understandings, which in turn, can influence our future actions. Herda (1999:135) writes:

Actual learning occurs when we change and fuse our horizons with something different and in the process become different. We do change, and consequently how we act can change. Risking our prejudgments is different than learning a new behavior. The act of learning does not happen in isolation; it only happens in a relationship with another, yet remains one's own responsibility.

The overall topic of discourse is the practical application of the ethics of inclusion in a Christian school for children of all abilities. The following themes unfolded from the data analysis, which align with my research categories: (1) an ethical aim in the context of the Christian faith, (2) praxis: children with special needs in Christian schools, and (3) imagining the future of access and inclusion in Christian schools. The next section examines how an ethical aim is shaped for a person who practices Christianity.

### **Ethical Aim in the Context of the Christian Faith**

Ricoeur's (1992:172) claim that ethical aim is an aspiration to live "the 'good life' with and for others, in just institutions" is relevant in the context of the Christian faith. In viewing each component of Ricoeur's definition of ethical aim separately, we can look at the relationship of critical hermeneutic theory to Christian values, as described by the participants of the research study in the context of the Christian faith. Ricoeur's theory of ethical aim is then used to analyze the ethical aspirations to educate children with diverse abilities in a Christian learning community.

Aristotle (2011) described the "good life" as whatever each individual believes the constitution of a full and well-lived life should be, which is manifested in the actions that we take. For those of the Christian faith, such a "good life" has its roots in what God's view is of a life that is pleasing to Him. The participants of the study expressed their beliefs that teaching this view to the students in their respective schools is of critical importance, using common verbiage such as teaching "a Christian worldview," "a biblical worldview," and "a Christ-centered focus." The common thread among leaders of Christian schools is that the life to be led, that will provide the most fulfillment, is a

life that is carried out according to Christian values, which are derived and interpreted from the bible.

The second part of Ricoeur's (1992:172) claim, "with and for others," translates in the Christian faith as each person is valued, esteemed, and respected, while living in a community of believers, with each life intertwining with the life of the other, and a focus on loving and serving others. Dr. Tilley quoted Matthew 25:40 by saying, "The scripture says 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.' If we only seek to serve the students who are only the high achievers...then you deny...a Christ-centered environment." Mrs. Caddow imbued, "I think that if we are doing God's will, we need to educate all children." Mrs. Duerksen said, "We treat all children with love and we take them into community." Habermas (1998:10) describes such a community by writing:

As a member of the universal community of believers, I am bound by solidarity to the other as my fellow, as 'one of us,' as an unsubstitutable individual; by contrast, I owe the other equal respect as 'one among all' persons who, as unique individuals, expect to be treated justly. The 'solidarity' grounded in membership recalls the social bond that unites all persons: one person stands in for the other. The uncompromising egalitarianism of 'justice,' by contrast, calls for sensitivity to the differences that set each individual apart from others: each person demands that others respect him in his otherness. The Judeo-Christian tradition regards solidarity and justice as two sides of the same coin: they provide two different perspectives on the same communication structure.

In this quote, Habermas eloquently describes inclusion from a Christian viewpoint, describing a community, and how each person's differences are to be respected by the others within that community. Many of the participants spoke about the value of each person as defined by God, and of the community they aspire to create in their schools. Dr. Flint described her classrooms as being presented as a "family." She described the Christian belief that "God created everyone" and "God loves everyone," and so with this

belief as the foundation, she feels that her school should not exclude any child, regardless of their ability, echoing Habermas' call for a "sensitivity of differences." Mr. Postma echoed this view of a familial community when he stated, "everyone belongs, everyone has equal worth, everyone has gifts, everyone is responsible to help develop each others' gifts, and everyone gives generously in loving and serving God and others."

Ricoeur (1992:190) describes solicitude as "benevolent spontaneity" and expands the definition to describe "receiving...on an equal footing with the summons to responsibility." Mr. Lodewyk described the movement away from solicitude in the United States, as he described the analogy of the retirement savings trend away from defined benefit plans, such as pension plans that involve contributions by a community (responsibility) for the community (receiving), toward defined contribution plans, such as individualized 401k plans—the money that one puts in is the amount that one is able to take out, which describes a transactional state. A Christian community is one where each person is valued and respected, and where individual differences are accepted and needs are met. Such interaction is paramount in the demonstration of solicitude.

Lastly, Ricoeur's description of "living well" extends not just to interpersonal relationships, but also to "just institutions," which in the case of this research study, can be defined as the Christian school community. Ricoeur (1992:194) states "what fundamentally characterizes the idea of institution is the bond of common mores and not that of constraining rules." The common moral views of a group are what distinguishes an organization that is guided by justice, rather than a list of rules and regulations that leave out reasoning and purpose. The problem for some Christian schools is that parents view the school, as Mr. Postma described, "a commodity" rather than "a community."



Rather than Christian schools binding together in solidarity because of common beliefs and morals rooted in Christianity, parents and Christian school administrators alike view the payment of tuition as payment for a commodity, or a set of services that are worth a certain amount and can be purchased for a certain price. The schools in my research study that educate typical children and have separate special education classrooms and/or resources for children with learning disabilities all charge a premium over and above the tuition cost, anywhere from an extra flat fee of \$2,500 for extra tutoring and resources, up to double the tuition amount for children with autism or Down's syndrome. Elim, Hillier, and Master's Academy are exclusive schools for children with specific disabilities, and so those children's parents all pay the same tuition, although it is generally higher than the tuition for a regular Christian school that educates only typical children.

Only Unity and Flint, both of which educate students of all abilities in a full inclusion setting, do not charge different tuition prices for children based on their ability or disability, in accordance with the "community" aspect. The Unity and Flint communities, which include students and extends to parents, teachers, school administrators, and alumni, have joined together in solidarity to promote an inclusive educational environment, which they believe aligns with biblical values. As Habermas describes solidarity and justice being two sides of the same coin, this theory is embedded in the values of the school and carried out in practice at Unity and Flint. The community and family aspects at Unity and Flint are so ingrained in the culture of the schools, that the flat tuition model is an obvious action informed by the values in which they believe.

It is more difficult for the leaders in the other schools in the research study to buy into the tuition equality model, because the values that promote a full inclusion are not a part of the fabric of the school's community. Habermas (2002:97) writes:

The shared fate of exposure to the infinitude of an indifferent universe may awaken a feeling of solidarity in human beings, but among the community of the forsaken, the hope of solidarity and pity for one's neighbor must not undermine equal respect for everyone. Moral feelings imbued with a sense of justice are not just spontaneous impulses; they are more intuitions than impulses.

Many of the leaders in the Christian schools in the study view the resources that are required to educate children with disabilities, which require financial support, as outweighing the benefit to the school community as a whole. Students with disabilities have specific needs and are viewed in terms of what resources they will use and what the schools are able to provide. However, inclusiveness is a community of people reciprocating in giving and receiving by each person being present and being who they are. The very presence of the other teaches each other, in relationship and in an ontological way. In the current model for most Christian schools, the orientation towards educating children with special needs stems more from an obligation or duty. Habermas warns about how this type of attitude can undermine equal respect for everyone. Ricoeur (1992:190-191) eloquently attests to the transformation of this thought process, what he calls an "equalization" that can only be fully understood if it is experienced first-hand:

Suffering is not defined solely by physical pain, nor even by mental pain, but by the reduction, even the destruction, of the capacity for acting...experienced as a violation of self-integrity...initiative...in terms of being-able-to-act, seems to belong exclusively to the self who gives his sympathy, his compassion. Confronting this charity, this benevolence, the other appears to be reduced to...receiving. In a sense, this is actually the case. And it is in this manner that suffering-with gives itself, in a first approximation, as the opposite of the assignment of responsibility by the voice of the other...a sort of equalizing occurs, originating in the suffering other, thanks to which sympathy is kept distinct from simply pity, in which the self is secretly pleased to know it has been

spared. In true sympathy, the self, whose power of acting is at the start greater than that of its other, finds itself affected by all that the suffering other offers to it in return. For from the suffering other there comes a giving that is no longer drawn from the power of acting and existing but precisely from the weakness itself. This is perhaps the supreme test of solicitude, when unequal power finds compensation in an authentic reciprocity in exchange.

The scripture in Acts 20:35 that states “It is more blessed to give than to receive” is a simplistic way of describing this “unequal power” that “finds compensation in an authentic reciprocity in exchange.”

For Christians, ethical aim is related to the alignment of biblical scripture, from which Christian values are derived, with the compelling internal motivation to act in an ethical manner, as opposed to reacting from the external motivation commanded by a supreme authority. Habermas (1998:8) writes:

The bible grounds moral commands in the revealed word of God. These commands are to be obeyed unconditionally because they are backed by the authority of an omnipotent God. But if that were the only source of their authority, their validity would merely have the character of a “must,” as a reflection of the unlimited power of a sovereign: God can compel obedience. But this voluntaristic interpretation does not yet endow normative validity with any cognitive significance. It first acquires a cognitive meaning when moral commands are interpreted as an expression of the will of an all-knowing and completely just and loving God. Moral commands do not spring from the free choice of an Almighty but are the expressions of the will of an all-wise Creator and an all-just and loving Redeemer.

Herda (1999:133) posits “making appropriate judgments is the critical key to learning. Moreover, we need to recognize that the judgments we make have moral implications.”

The data that I collected indicated that there is room for many of the schools in this study to act in an increased ethical manner, which is to move towards an inclusive community.

In most Christian schools, a reactive choice is made to not act, since the capacity, academic and otherwise, to educate children with special needs is not readily in place.

Ricoeur (1992:198) commented:

The sense of injustice is not simply more poignant but more perspicacious than the sense of justice, for justice more often is lacking and injustice prevails. And people have a clearer vision of what is missing in human relations than of the right way to organize them.

Christian school leaders are aware that public schools have the resources to educate children with learning disabilities and special needs (Eigenbrood 2005). It is less difficult for them to direct students with disabilities to a public school, rather than to go through the reflective exercise of phronesis, that is, deliberating about a moral choice, and then determining what actions will be taken once a moral choice has been made. Public schools have no affiliation with religion because of the Establishment Clause and the separation of church and state (Turnbull et al. 2007), yet they have established a moral norm that no child should be discriminated from receiving an education because of a disability. Ricoeur's (1992:171, 203) assertion that ethics has primacy over morality necessitates Christian school leaders to wrestle with the ethics of including children with disabilities in their Christian schools, and by doing so, demonstrate the aim towards solicitude, which parallels Christian values. Praxis is the manifestation of such a deliberation and decision that is embedded in ethical intention.

### **Praxis: Children with Special Needs in Christian Schools**

Praxis is the practical action that we take once we have made the moral judgment as to what action needs to be taken, given the aim to live a fulfilled life. Praxis is ethical aim carried out through action. My research entailed the study of the leaders of Christian schools who are acting on their ethical values, derived from biblical scriptures that discuss the values of hospitality, generosity, love for others, and inclusion. Herda (1999:20) states "Actions express intentions that cannot be comprehended independently

of language.” In my study, I had conversations with leaders of Christian schools who, through language, revealed the actions they have taken to fulfill the ethical imperative.

Jervolino (1996:68) states, “Praxis takes its bearings from practical knowledge, the Aristotelian virtue of *phronesis*... which signifies a capacity for discernment in a concrete situation and determines a specific level of philosophical reflection—practical philosophy.” The actions of each leader are not the same, nor are they equal. Each action was taken for their school independently, in accordance with *phronesis*, in terms of each leader’s deliberation of the will of God as they understand it from the scriptures, their interpretation of the situation, and the judgment they made on what they would do to educate children with a range of disabilities. This process of deliberation is not limited to a one-time static choice that is made; it is an ongoing spiral of choices that mediate between past and present, and future and present.

Ricoeur (2007) describes four major features that describe the reason for acting, which are motivation, explanation, disposition, and practical reasoning. Of motivation, Ricoeur (2007:190) writes “whenever an action is perceived by the agent as not performed under constraints, a motive is a reason for acting.” Ricoeur describes the internal stirring, or desire that comes from within, as a call to act. The second feature is explaining, where Ricoeur (2007:191) states “a reason for acting allows us to explain action, in a sense of the word explain that signifies placing—or asking to place—a singular action in the light of a class of dispositions presenting a character of generality.” Explanation describes a justification, or a reasonable explanation, of an action that one has taken. The third feature, disposition, which is defined as a state of mind or an inclination, “arises, in its turn, out of the development of the concept of disposition

implied in the notion of a class of motives” (Ricoeur 2007:191). Finally, motivation, explanation, and disposition serve as the basis for the fourth feature called practical reasoning, which states that we act by doing something to obtain a desired result. Ricoeur (2007:192) describes this by writing “there are reasons for acting that concern more the intention with which we do something than the retrospectively intentional character of a completed action that we want to explain, justify, or excuse.” Each of the leaders of the school had different motivations for taking action, different explanations that justified their set of decisions, varied dispositions in terms of describing their explanations, and offered their own logic or reasoning for taking certain actions.

For some leaders of schools who saw that there was a significant population of students that were not being educated in Christian schools because of their disability, they decided to respond to start and/or lead schools to serve this forgotten population. Schools exclusively for children with specific disabilities such as Elim, Master’s, and Hillier were all started more than 20 years ago, when communities in general were not as aware of why some children learn differently, or how children with disabilities could be included in a practical way in regular Christian schools. Segregated schools were implemented as a way to protect children and preserve their self-esteem.

Some Christian schools, such as the ones that Mrs. Epperson, Dr. Tilley, and Mr. Woodcock lead, have larger populations of children. Because of the recent trend in the last 10 to 15 years of greater awareness of learning disabilities such as dyslexia and more parent advocacy, these schools have been faced with how to educate a significant population of children with normal intelligence in their schools who have struggled in academic areas. In the past, these types of students might have failed out of a Christian

school because of a lack of understanding, as well as a lack of resources and support programs, which is the primary reason why disability-specific schools like Hillier Christian School and The Master's Academy were created. Mrs. Epperson of Prestonwood Christian Academy received an infusion of private funding from the mother of a child with dyslexia, which enabled them to act to acquire resources to build a program for children with reading and language disorders.

Mrs. Caddow, Mrs. Duerksen, and Pastor Davis all run schools that have made the decision to serve not just children with mild learning disabilities, but also children with more moderate to severe needs. They all have the resources including learning labs and resources, like the previous set of schools. They also have separate classrooms for children that need more intensive one-on-one support, including children with autism or intellectual disability, in order to meet their educational needs. Jervolino (1996:68) states "Praxis is to dwell and act in solidarity. Solidarity is hence the determining condition and basis of all social reason." All of these leaders mentioned the scriptures related to inclusion as in the body of Christ, community in terms of needing each person to make up the whole, and family in terms of keeping siblings together so that parents would not have to drop off their child with special needs at a public school while their other typical siblings attended Christian school.

Both Mr. Postma and Dr. Flint lead full-inclusion schools such that children of all abilities, whether categorized by society as children who are typical, children who are gifted, or children who have disabilities, are included in the general education classroom. They have taken action on the concept of solidarity to its highest level. Mr. Postma declared:

Unity is a Christian community. As a community, we will educate all children, so the cost for having an educational support program was spread throughout the tuition structure. We believe that if we're going to sustain Christian education, it's under the concept of educational excellence in a Christian community. Community versus commodity.

Dr. Flint, the founder and principal of The Flint Academy, spoke about her school's inclusive community by stating:

All types of students come here...those considered advanced academically, socio-typical, academically typical on grade level, as well as children with a special need or learning difference. We have families with sibling groups. One child will have a disability and their brothers and sisters don't. We offer the ability for all to come to the same school so that family stays together in a family unit. If the parents feel they can benefit from the educational environment that we have, then we accept them. And when I say benefit, I don't mean work up to the standard that we have. It's their personal benefit. For example in the classroom, we have the typical student and the advanced student and the student with special needs altogether in the same room all day long. We don't have (separate) special ed classrooms. They're taught together, all inclusive.

Bernstein (1983:195) attests:

[Interpretations] can orient our collective praxis in which we seek to approximate the ideal of reciprocal dialogue and discourse, and in which the respect, autonomy, solidarity, and opportunity required for the discursive redemption of universal normative validity claims are not mere abstract 'oughts' but are to be embodied in our social practices and institutions.

For Mr. Postma and Dr. Flint, the inclusion of children with disabilities in their school is deeply embedded in their entire learning community. Mr. Postma declared:

We recognize and accept that every child that is born into a Christian community is to be nurtured by that Christian community. It is a trust extended to us by God. We don't handpick some and reject others. From these core beliefs, we have developed Christian day schools from pre-kindergarten to 12<sup>th</sup> grade.

For Dr. Flint and Mr. Postma, educating children with disabilities alongside their typical peers is just something they do; it is the antithesis of a mere duty or moral obligation.

Herda (1999:33) posits:



Although the disabled in our culture do not fit the traditional description of a culture, they have become separate from the rest of our culture in many ways because we have given them a label, disabled, that distinguishes them. We need to consider shifting our own perspective to view them from the standpoint of being. By doing so, we can change the way we polarize disability and ability into two separate categories, based on a condition of either being perfect or normal (not disabled) or not perfect and not normal (disabled), to a condition of temporariness of being. From this perspective, we are all temporarily disabled...if we work out a system of being based on responding to what the temporarily disabled need and want, we are recognizing that the disabled are a part of all of us, not a separate category of being, and all of us can pass in and out of this category at any time. This way we respond based on the disabled being part of the human family to which we all belong, rather than out of feelings of moral obligation or guilt.

Both Mr. Postma and Dr. Flint recognize that every child is a being, a person who is a member of a community and a part of a family, first and foremost. The fact that a child has a condition which general society considers a disability is a consideration in how they deliver an education to that student, but not a driver of whether or not that child is allowed in their school.

Although the majority of leaders in the Christian school community at large intellectually understand the same Christian principles, the actual application of such scriptures in the context of educating and including children with disabilities is rare. Kearney (1996:184) writes, "Narrative can bring us to the door of ethical action but it cannot lead us through." Even with most of the leaders of Christian schools in my research population, there are limits to the accessibility and inclusion that are put into practice in their school, deterred by the practical realities of constrained finances and/or the lack of expertise in special education practices. It is important to recognize that, according to Ricoeur (1992:157), "not acting is still acting: neglecting, forgetting to do something, is also letting things be done by someone else." Biblical scripture agrees in

James (4:17) where it states, “If anyone, then, knows the good they ought to do and doesn’t do it, it is sin for them.”

In the context of the decisions made by the majority of Christian school leaders and communities to not take part in educating children with disabilities, while they may not be intentionally excluding children with disabilities from their schools, they have not taken action, and instead have let the public schools act in accordance with societal moral norms. Herda (1999:131) states:

To change our lives and our understanding is more a responsibility than our right. When people demand their rights to gain a better life, they are relying on others to do it for them. The bottom line is that we do it for ourselves or it is not done. This is not to say that we do not have an obligation to help others see new possibilities and to help create the context in which such change takes place. In the end, it is our responsibility to think differently, to learn, and to act differently. Field-based research in a hermeneutic tradition can help bring forth community motifs that engender conversation, reflection, and a new bases for action.

Hence, praxis is the intersecting apex of an ethical aim and a vision of an undefined future, which is inspired by imagination.

### **Imagining the Future of Access and Inclusion in Christian Schools**

Imagination is the world of future possibilities, of a world that does not yet exist except for in the conscious mind of a person. Kearney (1998:53) posits:

Imagination is the foundationless foundation of our ‘knowledge of all things.’ It is the blind spot of truth which enables us to see things as identifiable objects without itself being seen. It is the invisible source of our vision: that which makes a world possible.

Imagination is an important critical hermeneutic theory related to a Christian education for children with disabilities, because so few Christian schools are currently providing access and inclusion. Kearney (1998:50) writes, “...is it not conceivable that imagination was created by God as an invitation to join Him in the completion of His creation?”

Kearney (1988:369) also eloquently articulates how imagination relates to inclusion of children with disabilities who have traditionally be rejected by Christian schools because of their inability to understand how to educate them by saying:

The poetical imagination equally empowers us to identify with the forgotten or discarded persons of history. It invites excluded middles back into the fold, opens the door to prodigal sons and daughters, and refuses the condescending intolerance of the elite towards the preterite, the saved towards the damned.

As such, the connection of Christian values and critical hermeneutic theory as it relates to access and inclusion in Christian schools is evident. The research participants are in the minority in that each of the schools that they lead do educate some level of population of children with disabilities, in accordance with their interpretation of the values and principles found in biblical scripture, as well as their perceived practical ability to do so.

Many of my conversation partners thought that their school dynamic would be enhanced by the inclusion of children with a wider range of abilities in their schools. Kearney (2002:139) writes, “[The] power of empathy with living things other than ourselves—the stranger the better—is a major test not just of poetic imagination but of ethical sensitivity.” When one is projecting a future world, one is looking at what could be and what is possible.

The power of imagination was justified through the language used by several of my conversation partners. Ricoeur (1981:181) asks, “Are we not ready to recognize in the power of imagination, no longer the faculty of deriving ‘images’ from our sensory experience, but the capacity for letting new worlds shape our understanding of ourselves?” Mrs. Wyrick used the words “flexibility, creativity, and heart” to describe what is needed for more Christian schools to provide access and inclusion in a Christian learning community. Mrs. Epperson said that “an open heart” and “a can do spirit” are

required. She added, “You have to have a vision. It’s scriptural. ‘Where there is no vision, the people perish.’ Proverbs 29:18. They have to have someone who leads with a vision, and then a passion.” Mrs. Cadow stated, “You need creativity and faith.” Dr. Flint talked about “having an attitudinal change—a heart attitude towards children with different learning needs.” Mr. Evans talked about the need for a “rethinking in our country” that needs to be led by the church influencing society rather than the other way around.

A shared optimism of hope amongst the community is also a critical factor in moving forward towards an imagined future. Mr. Postma said “it takes a group of people to champion that vision.” Mr. Lodewyk explained that “you have to have a collective will within the Christian community to really engage” a Christian learning community for children of all abilities. All of these leaders, through the language they used, described mimesis<sub>3</sub>, a refigured view of the future and a different way of being. A state of being that is open, combined with the freedom to imagine, are both crucial to the process of envisioning future possibilities, and to opening “the kingdom of the as if” as Ricoeur (1984:64) so elegantly describes the current state of the present in mimesis<sub>2</sub>.

The conversations with Christian school leaders who are educating children with disabilities revealed a wide range of models and approaches in taking action in accordance with their ethical aim. For some leaders in my study, the conversations inspired conversation and contemplation about how their vision for the future, about how they might continue to change and adapt their current models to increase access and inclusion. Pastor Davis stated:

How can we continue to keep stretching? It’s a process over a period of time rather than [saying], “we’ve suddenly arrived.” We’ll never arrive, because there

will always be that child that's right on the borderline, and can we create a pocket and a special niche for that child?

For other leaders, the conversations led to imagining how their models could be shared with other Christian schools, both from a best practice perspective with other schools aspiring to serve students of all abilities well, as well as with schools that do not currently serve students with special educational needs, but may want to take such action in the future. Mr. Lodewyk stated:

The vision for Elim is that we want this to be a laboratory, a place where we can wrestle with best practices, work to apply best practices in sort of a unique setting but then utilize what we learn here to help others wherever they might be. Those environments could be inclusive environments, maybe international environments where very little is done, so we look at ourselves and our future as a multiplication, where we multiply, not by growing on this campus, but by utilizing this campus and making it available all around the world.

According to Kearney (1998:42), "Man's ability to project imaginatively into the future opens up an infinite horizon of possibilities. He no longer lives in the immediacy of the actual moment."

Many of the leaders, while talking about future possibilities, seemed to simultaneously be drawn into the realities of the present. In my research study, leaders talked about impediments that hindered them from thinking about future possibilities, specifically additional costs, hesitancy of acceptance by general education teachers and typical peers, and lack of facilities. Kearney (1998:228) writes, "the status quo reigns supreme for as long as we refuse our utopian capacity to imagine things being other than they are." Spending time on imagining a future state allows us to be transported into a world of possibilities. The potential for acting differently in the present is enhanced when one invests time in a vision for the future, and shares that vision with others within a community with similar values and mores. Herda (2010:135) writes:

When personal and community change is required...with this sense of self one ends up counting numbers of people saying yes or no in surveys, or simply responding to choices...It is believed that if enough people agree on what to do, then development will take place...but agreements only have staying power if a group of people change who they believe they are and hold on to what they believe they can do, both on a personal and communal level. The self, for Ricoeur, is 'I am' and includes 'I can.' Each person needs to hold to the belief that he or she can inhabit a proposed world.

In order to imagine a future of new possibilities and to learn new understandings, one must be able to break free from the ruminating thoughts of constrained practicalities and subdued realism, and embrace the idea of innovative thought and creativity to imagine a different way of being and acting.

### Summary

The analysis in Chapter Five of the data in Chapter Four reveals the potential of inclusive Christian schools and the possibility of children of all abilities learning together in community. The traditional education context of academics, athletics, and arts could be further enhanced to include learning in the context of the whole person, with each child equally esteemed and valued, in relationship with others. A review of critical Christian values and the appropriate application of such values in an educational environment, and a re-imagining of Christian schools in the context of inclusion, could inspire the practice of educating children of all abilities together in a learning community of faith.

Praxis for inclusive Christian school education requires an understanding of ethical aim underscored by biblical principles and a re-imagining of the future. Chapter Six provides a summary of the research findings, implications, and recommendations for future research. The next chapter concludes with a personal reflection of this research.

## **CHAPTER SIX: RESEARCH FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of my study was to investigate Christian schools in the United States that provided educational resources for children with disabilities. I accomplished this research by having conversations with the top leaders of 11 Christian schools across the United States. In this final Chapter of my dissertation, I summarize the research, discuss the research findings, explain the implications for practice, and propose possibilities for future research. Chapter Six concludes with my personal reflections which summarize my new understandings as an interpretive researcher.

### **Summary of the Research**

This study was carried out through a critical hermeneutic interpretive lens, examining what selected leaders of Christian schools are currently doing to educate children with disabilities through the research categories of ethical aim, praxis, and imagination. This research led to insight and a new understanding of the research topic. Gadamer (2004:304) describes understanding as a “fusion of horizons” by writing:

The concept of “horizon” suggests itself because it expresses the superior breadth of vision that the person who is trying to understand must have. To acquire a horizon means that one learns to look beyond what is close at hand—not in order to look away from it but to see it better, within a larger whole and in truer proportion.

Further, Herda (1999:63) writes “understanding consists of a fusion of horizons in language that is the universal character of understanding...allowing us to live in a finite but open and changing horizon.” This ontological approach of interpreting the text derived from conversations with school leaders led to a new understanding of how Christian schools apply their faith in their admissions policies and in the administration

of educating children, and how such schools can evolve and transform to include children of all abilities.

I selected this topic of educating children with disabilities in Christian schools because of my own futile attempts in the last 10 years of finding an inclusive Christian school in the San Francisco Bay Area for my son who has mild intellectual disability and sensory integration dysfunction. By searching for, finding, and visiting leaders of Christian schools that do educate children with various disabilities in other geographic areas of the United States, it allowed me to uncover the following themes within my research findings: (1) the definition of Christianity shapes the understanding of inclusivity, (2) schools with high levels of inclusivity were found to follow specific tenets of the Christian faith that resulted in appropriate curriculum development for all levels of learners, and (3) the present challenge of Christian schools providing services for students with disabilities resides in the tension between commodity versus community, and between individualism versus family.

### **Research Findings**

#### **Finding One: The Definition of Christianity Shapes the Understanding of Inclusivity**

A school's definition of Christianity shapes the understanding of inclusivity and subsequent actions. All of the leaders of the Christian schools in my research study used biblical scripture as the foundation in which to guide the curriculum and operations. There were differences in denominational beliefs, the scriptures that were highlighted, how the scriptures were interpreted, and the depth to which the scriptures were carried out, that informed each of the school's practices. Though each school holds to the



Christian faith, which informs their view of an ethical aim, many variations exist in how Christianity is appropriated and practiced in educating children with disabilities.

**Finding Two: Highly Inclusive Schools Educate Children of All Abilities**

Schools with high levels of inclusivity were found to follow specific tenets of the Christian faith that resulted in appropriate curriculum development for all levels of learners. The primary influences for schools that educate children with disabilities are the denominational tradition and/or the scriptures that encourage including all people in the body of Christ. The two schools in this study that practiced full inclusion, which means that all children, regardless of ability levels, are welcomed and educated together with their peers, both have similar approaches to education in terms of prioritizing inclusive communities in their schools and provide an education for children of all abilities.

**Finding Three: The Challenge of Educating Children with Disabilities Resides in the Tension Between Commodity Versus Community, and Individualism Versus Family**

The present challenge of Christian schools providing services for students with disabilities resides in the tension between commodity versus community, and between individualism versus family. Most Christian schools today have a commodity model in that parents will pay the tuition for a Christian school expecting that dollar amount worth of services. In a community model, which is practiced by both Unity and Flint, each child's tuition is equal. The utilization of resources is not commoditized. Each child is an equal part of the community and everyone is responsible to and for each other.

A similar view is held at Flint, where they have a family relational model. The thought process is that if parents have five children, and one of them has a disability, the parents do not choose to only include the four children that are typical and exclude the

child with a disability from family activities. Each family member is equal, and everyone is included in everything, because they are a part of the family. The option to not educate or include a child with a disability does not exist. This philosophy is put into practice in the Flint approach, which views each classroom in a familial setting, with all children taking care of each other in an inclusive environment.

### **Implications for Practice**

This research inquiry revealed implications for practice in modern Christian schools in the United States. These implications include how Christianity is redefined from an ethical perspective and put into practice in Christian schools, the concept of inclusion in Christian schools, and engaging the collective will of the Christian community to imagine the possibilities of inclusion.

### **The Practice of Christianity in Christian Schools**

The research findings reveal differences in how Christian schools practice Christianity. These variations demonstrate the epistemological view of acquiring knowledge of the Christian faith, and the ontological view of being, as in being a Christian. While all schools practice some form of epistemological learning of the scriptures and Christianity, each school is located in a different place on the ontological spectrum in terms of how students learn to become a Christian. Most Christian schools in the United States have homogenous populations of ability levels that do not include students who have a range of developmental disabilities. Herda (1999:33) states:

Our beliefs affect what we do. For example, if we believe that we can change ourselves and help set up the conditions whereby others can change with us, we act differently than if we are interested solely in producing facts or knowledge without considering the applications or implication of our actions. When we do not address implications, we have made a choice too. Then we only think abstractly about society and use our knowledge solely for academic ends.

The implication for practice is to consider the being of Christianity in addition to the knowledge of Christianity. Being implies experiential learning that teaches students how to be more like Jesus. Therefore, the knowledge of Christianity that is gained and experienced through activities such as scripture memorization and apologetics, service to the marginalized through missions trips to third-world countries or local inner-city areas, and worship during chapel gatherings, could be expanded and enhanced through living in daily community with children who have a wide range of differing abilities. How would a student best learn the Christian principles of love, hospitality, and generosity? Each of these principles implies giving to the other without expectation of reciprocity, and it is in this very experience where students can gain the being of Christianity.

### **Implementing Inclusion in Christian Schools**

The Christian schools in my research inquiry all provided some level of access to a Christian education and inclusion with typically abled peers. Some schools expressed a desire to expand access to include more students with disabilities on an incremental basis or a phased approach. My research revealed that inclusive Christian schools are possible, and the models that these schools use could be implemented in all Christian schools that understood the benefits of inclusion for the entire community.

The research also revealed many different models of educating segments of populations of children with special needs. Therefore, this study could serve as the basis for an overall movement towards including more children with special needs in Christian schools, thereby being in alignment with many biblical scriptures that emphasize including all parts of the body of Christ in the Christian community. Such a movement would allow Christian schools to close the gap to what our society has already deemed a

moral right, which is the elimination of discrimination of children with disabilities from public schools.

### **Engaging the Collective Will of the Christian Community**

The two schools in my study that practiced the full inclusion model had one element that the other nine schools did not have, which is the solidarity of the community. For Unity Christian, their CRC denomination believed that there was not a square inch or a person on earth that God does not claim, which served as the foundation for inclusive schools. The community bought into the philosophy of tuition equity. As a covenantal community, they view each child as equal and they feel the responsibility for educating all children that are a part of their Christian communities. For Flint, the family approach instills the practice of leaving no child, or part of the family, behind.

The implication is finding a way to engage the collective will of the Christian community in other Christian schools to view children with disabilities differently, and to view inclusion as mandatory rather than optional. While all Christian school leaders would agree in theory that each child is of equal worth in the eyes of God, that equality standing does not necessarily carry over into the Christian educational community. Most Christians are unaware and/or unskilled and/or uninterested in how to interact with people with disabilities. Christian schools that perpetuate groups of children of homogenous abilities continue the cycle of ignorance and/or indifference.

A movement towards inclusion would require the collective interest and will of the entire Christian community. Inclusion in the Christian education context is not only about serving children with disabilities; it is also an opportunity to compel those who

identify with the Christian faith to be practitioners of Christianity, or the practice of being a Christian.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

This research study focused on identifying Christian schools in the United States that educated children with learning disabilities and special needs, and having conversations with the top leader of each of the schools to better understand their views of access and inclusion. Future research opportunities may provide even greater understanding of how full inclusion is practically implemented, and how inclusion influences Christian communities—churches, schools, or other Christian organizations.

#### **A Case Study: Inclusive Christian Schools in Western Michigan**

As I previously stated, I discovered towards the end of my research travels to collect data that western Michigan had over 40 Christian schools that practice inclusion. The movement towards full inclusion started over 30 years ago when the CLC in the Grand Rapids area began working with Christian schools by providing outsourced special education expertise and resources for Christian schools. Over time, the Christian schools in the area began to hire internal special education teachers and service providers as they began to take greater ownership of inclusion. An in-depth study of inclusive Christian schools may provide more insight into the practical application of inclusion and the influence on the community in the short term and the long term. How did the general education teachers shift their views on inclusion? How is a typical child educated alongside a child with a disability, and how are the academic needs of both students adequately met? What changes and adjustments to the learning environment were made? What did typical children learn by being in community with non-typical children?

### **A Case Study: Inclusion at The Flint Academy**

The Flint Academy in Texas, like the Christian schools in western Michigan, also practices inclusion. I learned from Dr. Flint that her school has been successful in working with children with emotional behavioral disorders, who are usually the most difficult with whom to work. Her view is to keep the student population to fewer than 200 students and to grow the school, not by increasing the student population in a single location, but by duplicating like schools throughout the Dallas/Fort Worth area. Flint is a nondenominational Christian school, unlike Unity, which follows in the CRC denominational tradition. An in-depth study of Flint may provide another view of the practical application of inclusion, which can serve as another model for inclusive Christian schools.

### **The Influence of Inclusion in the Christian Community**

Research that aims to understand the influence of inclusion in the Christian community can provide insight on the concepts of solidarity and authentic reciprocity. While many studies have concentrated on how children with disabilities have been positively influenced academically and socially by being included with their neurotypical peers inside and out of the classroom, this research would examine the other side of the coin. How does the inclusion of people who are considered disabled influence people with typical abilities? What types of intelligences are developed in children who learn in an inclusive educational community? How are children who live in community with their peers who have disabilities different from children who have little to no exposure with peers who have disabilities? This study may also provide insights on how to engage the collective will of the Christian community.

### **Personal Reflections from the Researcher**

The inspiration for this dissertation was influenced by my own personal experience of my futile attempts to find a Christian school within 40 miles of our home in the San Francisco Bay Area for my son, Antonio, who has intellectual disability and sensory integration dysfunction. When I began my investigation to find Christian schools in the United States that provided access to children with disabilities, I had no idea what I would find. My fear was that my search would be in vain, and that it would lead to more personal frustration and cause me to question how school leaders who are of the Christian faith could operate schools that excluded children with disabilities like my son.

Instead, as I sifted through the hundreds of Christian schools that did not admit children with disabilities, I found a few schools that had varying levels of resources and support for children with special needs. Each school leader I visited gave me increasing hope that there were Christian school leaders and communities that valued all children, including those with disabilities.

Throughout this dissertation process, I was also simultaneously experiencing challenges with the church that my family attended for the last six years, a large non-denominational Christian church in Mountain View, California with a membership of several thousand people. While Antonio attended regular Sunday school classes with his peers, he was not proactively included nor was he actively welcomed in extracurricular church activities, such as weekly bible studies, youth retreats, and missions trips. To the church's credit, they had a defined program for children with special needs through 6<sup>th</sup> grade. They had segregated classrooms staffed with loving and well-trained volunteers for children with more severe disabilities, and they included children with mild to

moderate special needs in the general classroom, with support. Once children matriculated into the middle school grades and began to have opportunities for participation in activities outside of Sunday classes, support for children with special needs like Antonio was not provided.

I attempted for over one year to collaborate with the appropriate church leaders and staff to partner on an inclusion solution for my son, which would have also benefitted other children with special needs, and which my husband and I were willing to personally fund. However, there was a lack of follow through and action by several staff members and church leaders over the period of thirteen months. Antonio, who has a mild level of disability, ended up falling through the cracks. While my multiple inquiries were ignored, dismissed, listened to and quickly forgotten, passed around, and deflected, what broke my heart was that Antonio began to feel isolated, dejected, and left out from the very church where we had spent many years contributing and participating as a family. In a presentation to an education class at Calvin College, John Tuitel (2011), a person with a physical disability, stated “disabilities don’t restrict; environments do.” Antonio was not restricted to join his typical peers in church activities because of his intellectual disability; rather, the unwelcoming environment in the church imposed a restriction on Antonio’s ability to participate with his peers. The church’s default was the lack of action to make the inclusion of children of different ability levels a priority.

I realized that a transformation could only happen if the church pastors, staff, and volunteers changed their disposition in the way they viewed children with different abilities, shifted their posture and attitude to align with the Christian view of inclusion in the body of Christ, and made a pivot in their actions to prioritize the inclusion of children



with disabilities to all church activities, rather than showing favoritism towards children who were considered typical. Such a transformation would not be solely for the benefit of children with disabilities; it would also pave the way for “authentic reciprocity” in that the presence of children like my son in the church community could provide an opportunity for his peers, teachers, and pastors to learn about and embody love, hospitality, and generosity, as described in 1 Corinthians 12. While this situation was emotionally draining for our family, it also continued to fuel my desire and passion to pursue the aim of inclusion for all Christian communities and organizations. I believe Romans 8:28 “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose.” This experience has persuaded my family to search for a new church with both a willing heart followed up by action for inclusion in all church events and activities, rather than remain in a church with leaders and staff who prioritized children of typical abilities over children with non-typical abilities.

In the course of my research travels, I came into contact with the CLC in Michigan. My conversations with the executive director and other staff members led to a request for my expertise in marketing consulting services for their organization. Over the years, the schools for which they provided outsourced special education expertise and services began to hire special educators, therapists, and other specialists on their own internal payrolls, signifying ownership and a permanent commitment to educating children of all abilities. While this change was positive for the Christian school community, the effect to the CLC was a change in their business model. The CLC went from having the majority of their business comprised of outsourced special education and

related services, to primarily offering consulting services by way of initial student assessments and providing recommendations for current and new clients. Expansion outside western Michigan came largely from word of mouth referrals. The CLC hired me to advise them on marketing their organization outside of their geographic location.

In October 2012, I attended a CLC board meeting, presented a high-level summary of my research, and proposed two primary recommendations to help them expand their business. The first recommendation was to conduct a comprehensive study of Christian schools and churches throughout the United States to discover the current state at large of educating children with disabilities. This data could provide more insight into the geographical areas that the CLC may want to target. The second recommendation was to create a documentary film of the Christian schools in western Michigan that would serve as a visual tool to compel other schools and churches to imagine what inclusion looks like.

Less than one month later, the CLC asked me to come up with a project plan so that they could get started on the first recommendation. They planned to hire a research intern from a local college and they asked for my thoughts on what and how the intern would communicate. A few weeks later, I received an email from the executive director informing me of a potential donor to fund the documentary, the second recommendation. He asked that I put a proposal together by early December since the donor was interested in making a year-end contribution. I was excited that the CLC had acted so quickly and positively to my recommendations, and at the same time, I was petrified because I had a dissertation to finish in the same timeframe. By the grace of God and with my husband's

support, I found the strength and the time to complete both the film proposal and my dissertation.

My original goal when I started my dissertation was to open a Christian school in the San Francisco Bay Area that includes children of all abilities. I believe that this research has contributed to my new understanding, and that it will engage others who are equally passionate about inclusion in the Christian community. The critical hermeneutic approach encouraged me to articulate an ethical aim, grounded in Christianity, and combine it with an imagination of a possible future, which compels praxis in the present. I have experienced a fusion of horizons, and after going through this process, I now see a world of new possibilities of not only inclusive Christian schools, but also ways to influence a paradigm shift in the way Christians actualize inclusion in communities around the world.

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## Appendix A: Letter of Invitation and Research Questions

Date:

Participant's Name  
Participant's Address

Dear (Name of Participant),

My name is Jennifer Camota Contreras. I am a doctoral student at the University of San Francisco working towards a degree in Education with an emphasis in Leadership Studies. I am conducting my dissertation research on Christian education for children with special needs.

My research is grounded in interpretive theory and has a participatory (interpretive) orientation. In place of formal interviews or surveys, I engage participants in conversations for approximately 45 to 60 minutes using guiding questions directed toward their experiences with implementing changes and programs for children with special needs. Upon your approval, the conversations are audio and/or video recorded and then transcribed. You may request the recording device be turned off at any time during the conversation. I will send you a copy of the transcript for your review. At that time, you may add, delete or change any of the transcribed text. Upon receipt of your approval, I will analyze the data. Please note that participation in this research, including all data collected, the names of individuals, and any affiliations is not confidential. Before participating in the research you will be required to sign a consent form.

I am primarily interested in discussing your understanding of a Christian education and how it relates to typically abled children as well as children with learning disabilities and/or special needs. Since Christian school enrollment is growing in the United States, more children may enroll in Christian schools that may have learning disabilities and/or special needs. I would like to explore how these children are and can be served in Christian schools. The following questions may be used to guide the conversation:

1. How do Christian values relate to providing a Christian education for all children?
2. How do Christian values relate to providing a Christian education for children with special needs?
3. How would you describe children who learn in a non-traditional way?
4. What word or metaphor would you use to describe children who may learn in a non-traditional way?
5. What prompted your school to begin providing resources and support for the children that you educate who have special needs?
6. What would it take for Christian schools to provide greater access to its education for children with special needs?

7. How would a school environment that was more inclusive of children with greater special needs than the ones you currently serve change the school community?

If you are willing to participate in this research, or if you have questions about this study, please feel free to contact me. I can be reached at [jennifer.camota.contreras@gmail.com](mailto:jennifer.camota.contreras@gmail.com).

Thank you for considering this request.

Sincerely in Christ,

Jennifer Camota Contreras  
Research Doctoral Student  
University of San Francisco  
School of Education  
Leadership Studies Program  
[jennifer.camota.contreras@gmail.com](mailto:jennifer.camota.contreras@gmail.com)

## Appendix B: Research Participant Confirmation Letter

Date:

Participant's Name  
Participant's Address

Dear (Participant's Name),

Thank you for agreeing to meet with me on *Day, Month ##* at *Time* at the following location:

(Insert address here)

I am looking forward to meeting you and I thank you in advance for your participation in this important research study.

Sincerely in Christ,

Jennifer Camota Contreras  
Research Doctoral Student  
University of San Francisco  
School of Education  
Leadership Studies Program  
[jennifer.camota.contreras@gmail.com](mailto:jennifer.camota.contreras@gmail.com)

## Appendix C: Thank You/Follow-Up Letter

Date:

Participant's Name  
Participant's Address

Dear (Participant's Name),

Thank you for meeting with me on ***Day, Month ##*** at ***Time***. Your insights and experiences have been invaluable to my dissertation research and I appreciate your willingness to participate in this project.

I have enclosed a copy of our transcribed conversation for your review. Please take a moment to read through the transcript and make any additions, changes or deletions to clarify any points as you see fit. I will contact you in two weeks to see if you have any questions and to discuss any changes you might have made.

After this is complete, I will use the edited version of our conversation to analyze along with other conversations and sources of data.

Thank you again, for your participation. I have enjoyed our conversation and I hope that this process has provided you with new understandings about your experience as well.

Sincerely in Christ,

Jennifer Camota Contreras  
Research Doctoral Student  
University of San Francisco  
School of Education  
Leadership Studies Program  
[jennifer.camota.contreras@gmail.com](mailto:jennifer.camota.contreras@gmail.com)

**Appendix D: List of Participants**

<b>NAME</b>	<b>TITLE</b>	<b>SCHOOL (STATE)</b>
Mr. Bill Lodewyk	Head of School	Elim Christian School (IL)
Mr. Larry Evans	Headmaster (retired)	Hillier Christian School (TX)
Mrs. Elderine Wyrick	Founder and Principal	The Master's Academy (TX)
Mr. Jeff Woodcock	Headmaster	Oaks Christian School (CA)
Dr. David Tilley	Headmaster	Mount Paran Christian School (GA)
Mrs. Dana Epperson	Assistant Head of School – Academics	Prestonwood Christian Academy (TX)
Mrs. Liz Cadow	Founder and Head of School	Trinity Classical Academy (CA)
Mrs. Sheryl Duerksen	Principal	Quakertown Christian School (PA)
Pastor Mark Davis	Head of School and Executive Pastor	Calvary Christian Academy (FL)
Mr. Jack Postma	Principal (retired)	Unity Christian High School (MI)
Dr. Paula Flint	Founder and Head of School	The Flint Academy (TX)

**Appendix E: Copy of IRBPHS Letter**

March 29, 2012

Dear Ms. Contreras:

The Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRBPHS) at the University of San Francisco (USF) has reviewed your request for human subjects approval regarding your study.

Your application has been approved by the committee (IRBPHS #12-045). Please note the following:

1. Approval expires twelve (12) months from the dated noted above. At that time, if you are still in collecting data from human subjects, you must file a renewal application.
2. Any modifications to the research protocol or changes in instrumentation (including wording of items) must be communicated to the IRBPHS. Re-submission of an application may be required at that time.
3. Any adverse reactions or complications on the part of participants must be reported (in writing) to the IRBPHS within ten (10) working days.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRBPHS at [\(415\) 422-6091](tel:4154226091).

On behalf of the IRBPHS committee, I wish you much success in your research.

Sincerely,

Terence Patterson, EdD, ABPP  
Chair, Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects

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IRBPHS – University of San Francisco  
Counseling Psychology Department  
Education Building – Room 017  
2130 Fulton Street  
San Francisco, CA 94117-1080  
(415) 422-6091 (Message)  
(415) 422-5528 (Fax)  
[irbphs@usfca.edu](mailto:irbphs@usfca.edu)

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<http://www.usfca.edu/soe/students/irbphs/>

## Appendix F: Pilot Study

### **Background of Conversation Partners**

#### **Participant 1: Dr. Clifford E. Daugherty**

Dr. Clifford E. Daugherty, Ed.D. is the President of Valley Christian Schools in San Jose. He has teaching experience primarily teaching the 4<sup>th</sup> grade in both public and Christian private schools, and was the founding principal of Los Altos Christian Schools. Dr. Daugherty came to VCS in the fall of 1986 as the President of the then-struggling school. Through his faith in God, his visionary leadership, and the support of the board of trustees and the parent, teacher, and student community of the school, Dr. Daugherty is credited with leading the transformation of VCS from a financially struggling Christian school with no permanent home to one of the largest and best Christian schools in the United States from the perspective of reputation, academics, athletics, resources, and facilities. Dr. Daugherty received his doctorate degree in Education with an emphasis in private school administration and special education from the University of San Francisco (USF).

I selected Dr. Daugherty as one of my two conversation partners because of the prominence of VCS, Dr. Daugherty's leadership and influential role in the Christian community as well as the local Bay Area community, his affiliation with USF, and his stated degree concentration in special education. A letter of invitation to Dr. Daugherty to request his participation in this research can be found in Appendix A.

#### **Participant 2: Dr. Frances Leonor**

Dr. Frances Leonor, Ed.D. is the Principal for HCS. Dr. Leonor taught high school and college-level science and math in Philippine Christian primary schools and



universities for many years before immigrating to the United States. Because of her devout Christian faith, she continued her teaching career by teaching science at HCS beginning in 1985. Eventually, Dr. Leonor became the Principal for HCS and she still occasionally teaches classes as a substitute teacher. Dr. Leonor received her doctorate degree in education specializing in Christian School Leadership from Columbia International University.

I selected Dr. Leonor as the second of my two conversation partners because from our initial phone conversation, she seemed to show an interest and openness in my research topic. Dr. Leonor is also very influential in the HCS school community. She is one of the few non-Caucasian school administrators, which matches the ethnic background of most of the students. A letter of invitation to Dr. Leonor to request her participation in this research can be found in Appendix A.

## **Data Presentation**

### **Introduction**

Both Dr. Daugherty and Dr. Leonor were very welcoming and responsive to my letter of invitation to participate in my pilot research conversation, and they both seemed genuinely interested in my research topic. In our conversations, I identified several themes, as well as my observations of similarities and differences, which I describe below. In the next part, I will describe environments of both conversations, the identity of a Christian child as explained by both participants, their schools' experiences with children with special needs, and their views on expanding access to a Christian education for children with special needs. The full conversation transcripts are included in

Appendix C. The next section will describe the details of the environment in which both conversations took place.

### **Background Environment**

The school environments of VCS and HCS could not be more different. As described earlier in part four, VCS's school site was contemporary and modern, while HCS's school site was older and traditional. The environment of each organization could be felt by a view of the schools' websites. VCS's site was rich with information that included their current strategic plan, faculty biographies, current events, pictures, and videos. HCS's website contains standard information that is largely text-based.

I spoke with Dr. Daugherty in a large conference room called the "Board Room." The room was lined with pictures, awards, and books. Dr. Daugherty greeted me enthusiastically and gave me a quick tour of the school before we settled down to talk. As we walked from the football field to the performing arts center to the science classrooms to the cafeteria, he also made sure to greet students by name and took time for quick informal surveys, such as asking a student in the lunch line what their favorite class was that semester and why. He also took the time to have quick conversations with other teachers and administrators, even providing immediate feedback to one teacher saying that he just spoke with a student who said that they loved the teacher's class. This is a man that was on the move and highly engaged. In the course of our conversation, he asked his administrative assistant to join us in the conference room because he felt that our conversation would be interesting for her to hear, since her child Andrew had Down's syndrome. He also expanded on many of my guiding questions to provide his understanding and context of the question, and by doing so, demonstrated that the

consideration of the question was at least of equal importance to the answer. Dr. Daugherty appeared to be a visionary who had the characteristics of a leader of a fast-paced company rather than the President of a traditional Christian school.

Dr. Leonor gave me a big hug when I arrived in the office of HCS and welcomed me back “home.” She led me to her office for our conversation, which had wood paneling and was dimly lit with no windows, adjacent to the main office. Since I graduated from 8<sup>th</sup> grade in 1984 and she came to the HCS in 1985, we spent the first several minutes reminiscing about teachers and students that we both knew. She said that she knew my brother since he played in the church band for many years. As other school administrators ducked their heads into Dr. Leonor’s office to ask questions, she introduced me to them saying I was a graduate of HCS many years ago and that I was there to interview her for research to get my doctorate degree. I felt like a kid going to my grandmother’s house and she was boasting about me to her neighbors.

Both Dr. Daugherty and Dr. Leonor were very generous with their time. Both gave me more time than the amount I initially requested, and they also introduced me to faculty, administration, and students in the school while I was there. Both environments, though different in many aspects, were very inviting and welcoming. I was very comfortable in having the discussions with them about my research topic, and since both of them had received their doctorate degrees in education, they were both sympathetic to my request for their participation in my research conversation.

### **The Identity of a Christian Child**

Both Dr. Daugherty and Dr. Leonor described that their schools teach each child that they were created by God and that they are special in God’s eyes. Dr. Daugherty

stated that God “made each one sovereign beings” and that “each one of them are of equal value in the eyes of God.” Dr. Leonor stated that “children feel valued because God values them and created us [to be] unique, because it would just be so boring if we were all the same.” Their rooted beliefs in God as the ultimate Creator help tell a story to the children related to their identity.

Dr. Leonor had a traditional explanation of a Christian education. She described it as “well balanced” and that the number one goal was to educate children spiritually and that they should “aim for them to have [a] personal relationships with the Lord.” The next priority is to educate children intellectually by having a strong academic curriculum. Educating children physically through physical education classes and serving them nutritious meals was also an important aspect of education because they teach that the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, so children are encouraged to take care of their bodies and their health. Lastly, Dr. Leonor stated that emotional and social education is important because the ability to form relationships with others is a skill that everyone needs to have. Dr. Leonor summarized a Christian education by saying that HCS educates the “whole person” and that their education is Christ-centered, Bible-centered, and character building.

Dr. Leonor further emphasized on a strong character as the result of a good Christian education “because if we just develop, raise children who are so, so smart without a heart, we are raising monsters.” She stated that children who attend HCS develop “depth in their character...depth in their morality...strong convictions [that] won’t be swayed...like in the workplace...if they are asked to do something that is diametrical[ly] [opposed] to what they’ve learned from here and from [God’s] Word,

they will say ‘No’ even if it will cost them their job [or a] promotion.” She said that the way they teach Christian principles is by having a required daily Bible class in the first period of the day for all students, teaching the children how to pray, assigning Bible verses for the children to memorize, and having the older children journal their thoughts about specific verses and how they will apply the teachings to their daily lives. Dr. Leonor quoted the scripture “train up a child in the way he should go” and said that HCS does not shelter them from other faiths by putting the children in a bubble, but they admittedly drilled Christian principles into the children, or what she calls “the absolute truth.” Dr. Leonor explained an analogy of teaching Christian principles by sharing a story about real money and counterfeit money. She said if you want to teach someone about what real money looks like, they should be shown what real money looks like every day. That way when they are shown counterfeit money, they will be able to recognize that it is fake. HCS’s approach seems to be aligned with Aristotle’s description of techne knowledge.

Dr. Daugherty described a different approach in teaching children about the Christian faith. First, he expanded on the meaning of Christian faith when describing VCS. He said that Jesus demonstrated compassion for others, and therefore Christians should in turn “[have] a compassionate approach to every day living with a personal sense of accountability for loving and caring for others in a sacrificial way.” He emphasized that compassion, love, and concern for people is the foundation of a Christian education. His comments tie in with Ricoeur’s ideas about self and other. He went on to say that Christian values have been misrepresented by way of traditions and organizational patterns that have developed over time. This observation is interesting to

note as the anthropologist Tylor theorized about religion as a “survival” and how traditions are carried forward that serve no purpose in an evolved society.

Dr. Daugherty also brought up the point that Jesus did not come into the world to condemn people, and so Dr. Daugherty emphasized that expressing harsh, unfavorable judgment on others is not Christ-like. He felt that a Christian school should have a positive environment that is “contagious in terms of kindness and goodness...[and having] qualities like patience and long-suffering.” Dr. Daugherty explained that a Christian school that has a positive environment should also have a culture where Biblical principles are taught, but that the children should feel free to question and challenge Biblical principles and have an open forum for debate without fear of condemnation. Otherwise, a child’s faith “is artificial.” Dr. Daugherty explained that they do not discriminate in their admissions policy on the basis of religion, so there are many families who are of other faiths, including Roman Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, and of no faith that have enrolled their children at VCS. VCS only requires that families are open to hearing about Christianity. The goal for students at VCS is to have them internalize the Christian faith. However, keeping an open environment to challenge the faith leaves room for students to make a choice to believe or not believe in the Christian faith. He said “I think both the Catholic tradition and the Protestant [Christian] tradition recognize[s] that there needs to be a thoughtful response...where there is a time of reflection in deciding the path that you want to take.” Dr. Daugherty’s description of VCS’s approach is interesting in that it is line with critical hermeneutics in putting the emphasis on the question, or the contemplation of faith, rather than teaching children the answer to the question.

In the course of our conversation, Dr. Daugherty handed me a brochure that explained the VCS educational philosophy. He emphasized that what makes a Christian school Christian is not whether or not each person at the school is a Christian. He said that VCS “decided that what makes a Christian school Christian is whether or not there is an atmosphere led by the faculty and staff that is Christ-like.” The next section describes the conversations I had with Dr. Daugherty and Dr. Leonor about children with special needs.

### **Experiences with Children with Special Needs**

When I asked both Dr. Daugherty and Dr. Leonor about their thoughts on children with special needs, they both recognized that every child is different and that there are different types of learning styles and intelligences. Dr. Leonor said that HCS tries to train their teachers on “differentiated learning” because some students learn visually, and others kinesthetically. She says that she reminds the faculty to address the various learning styles in a lesson so that “each child would be reached on a daily basis in each classroom.” Dr. Daugherty alluded to the same theory of differentiated learning by referencing multiple intelligence theory.

Both HCS and VCS enroll children that have very mild learning disabilities. VCS’s program has a formal structure in that they have two full-time staff dedicated to supporting the high school students that have IEP’s through the public school system. HCS also enrolls students with very mild learning disabilities, the most common being ADHD. HCS does not have a formal program or specific special education staff members. However, Dr. Leonor works with the students, parents, and teachers to implement accommodations such as allowing students more time to take tests or making

assignments shorter for students with ADHD. Dr. Leonor said that they have one student with a physical impairment that makes it hard for him to walk. HCS set up a buddy system for this student to carry his books from class to class. They also have a chair lift that goes between floors so that the student does not have to struggle up the stairs. However, Dr. Leonor admits that they do “not [have] a full blown special ed[ucation] program, but we do our best.”

Dr. Daugherty expanded the category of special needs by saying “I would say that all children have special needs...there are students who are extraordinarily gifted, and they have special needs [too].” He stated that gifted children are also challenged to reach their potential just like children with deficits in learning ability are challenged.

Dr. Daugherty told me a story about Andrew, the son of his administrative assistant. Andrew has Down’s syndrome and although he was not an active student in the academic programs at VCS, he was allowed to participate on the football team by becoming the encouragement and morale leader. Dr. Daugherty said that Andrew had the gift of compassion, and that “he has a huge contribution to the success of the football team, even though he doesn’t play football...this isn’t just superficial...it’s not that, well, everybody has to be nice to him because he has Down’s syndrome...we don’t get the same kind of contribution from anyone else.” Dr. Daugherty said that each child has a God-given talent, and that it is the school’s job to uncover and develop that talent for a God-intended purpose.

Both Dr. Daugherty and Dr. Leonor recognized that Christians have an obligation to care for children with special needs. Dr. Daugherty said “first, as Christians we should have a heart to do as much as we can to serve the full range of special needs.” Dr.



Leonor said “we want to open our doors to everybody.” She went on to say that providing education services for children with special needs “has my heart’s passion because when a new student comes and tests and I already see that there is a need...[it] has been hard turning them away...but I always say there’s the public school...you could bring your child here for our [church] youth group.” Dr. Leonor offers the Bible curriculum to parents and tells them that perhaps they can review it with their children on their own. In the next part, I will discuss the conversations of consideration of including children with a wider spectrum of special needs in a Christian school environment.

### **Expanding the Range of Children With Special Needs in Christian Schools**

I asked both Dr. Daugherty and Dr. Leonor what it would take to have their schools expand the range of children with special needs being served by their schools. Both admitted that their schools have a moral obligation to educate children with special needs in their schools, but they do not currently have the expertise or resources to start (in the case of HCS) or expand (in the case of VCS) a formal special education program. Dr. Leonor stated “if I had all the funding...I would hire special education teachers...[and] train all the regular classroom teachers on how to teach special needs students.” She said that several teachers had the heart to educate special needs students, but that since the teachers make such a low salary at HCS, they don’t (on their own) have the resources to go back to school to get trained in special education. Dr. Daugherty also stated that “Valley has always been a school since before I came in 1986 that had a heart of students with special needs.”

Dr. Daugherty also expressed concern about where to draw the line in terms of what kinds of children could be educated in the VCS environment. Dr. Daugherty stated

“our heart should tell us to serve everyone, but our mind should tell us what our limitations are because not to serve well would be a denial of the students’ best interests, and so resources and capacity are an important factor. And we constantly...say ‘how much can we do?’ How much do we want to do? And [the answer is] it should be everyone. But on the other hand, we should say reasonably, we’re not able to care for people who are in and out of consciousness, right? I mean, there are limits. And so we have to ask ourselves what are the limits, and how far can we stretch it and do a great job. Part of what our heart tells us, our faith tells us, and then what does our mind tell us in terms of what could be done well. And so that has to do with resources and creativity.”

Dr. Daugherty stated that the “range of inclusion should be determined through the insights of parents as well as the schools’ willingness to cooperate with inclusion.” He also expressed concern about maintaining a quality education by stating “quality education means understanding...how God made them and so that they would learn at a pace that’s appropriate for their abilities.” He reiterated that the idea of “creativity and being able to think of varied options...is probably more important than money.”

Dr. Leonor said that her boss, the founder and former Superintendent of HCS, Mrs. Vernita Sheley, has grandchildren that have special needs that are more severe than what HCS can support at the school. Mrs. Sheley hired a private caretaker for her grandchildren who homeschools them, because HCS does not have the expertise and resources to educate them.

Dr. Daugherty also highlighted a main point that public law recognized through IDEA, which is that the presence of children with special needs within an educational community also teaches students who are considered typical, or without disabilities, to

socially accept their peers with differences. Dr. Daugherty said “I think that one of the dangers of being a high-performing school is to not have an appreciation for differences...and that people have real feelings. You can have a friend that isn’t quite as intellectually capable when it comes or math, or writing, or things like that, but that has a legitimate being...and that they can be happy or sad as much as anyone else.” Dr. Leonor echoed these sentiments by saying that the presence of children with special needs influences typical children in that it “grow[s] their character and their caring and their concern...and that everyone is not like them.” These comments support the need for the “other” in the formation of identity, and the ipse part of the self that continually changes when exposed to new experiences and relationships.

VCS is more advanced than HCS in serving children with very mild special needs. Dr. Daugherty pointed out that in addition to having two full-time administrators in their high school on staff to support children with special needs, all elementary school teachers at VCS have been trained in the Slingerland method, which is a multi-sensory approach to teaching language to children with dyslexia. But he also admitted that not all teachers at VCS knows how to meet the needs of an individual student, and that is why there is a full-time administrator who helps interpret and explain to teachers what children with identifiable special needs are so that the teachers can “develop a culture of accommodation.” He said that some teachers feel that they are failures if they are not able to teach a child with special needs the curriculum.

### **Conclusion**

Both VCS and HCS have made efforts over the years to expand their capacity to serve children with very mild special needs, based on parent demand. Both schools still

turn away many children that would otherwise be able to be educated in the general public school environment, such as children with moderate learning disorders, autism, Down's syndrome, mental retardation, and moderate emotional and behavioral disabilities. Both school administrators admit that they do not have the expertise and resources to begin or expand programs for children with special needs, but that they are aware of their moral obligation to do so, in accordance with the principles of their Christian faith. They both struggle with this moral dilemma that has not yet found its way from phronesis to praxis. In the next part, I will analyze the research conversations I had with both Dr. Daugherty and Dr. Leonor through a critical hermeneutic lens.

## **Data Analysis**

### **Introduction**

In this part, I will analyze the data I collected in the two research conversations through the critical hermeneutic theories that I presented in part six: Narrative Identity, Ethical Aim, and Phronesis and Praxis. I will also provide my own interpretation of the data.

### **Narrative Identity and Children in Christian Schools**

Ricoeur (1992:147-148) states, "The narrative constructs the identity of the character, what can be called his or her narrative identity, in constructing that of the story told. It is the identity of the story that makes the identity of the character." Both Dr. Daugherty and Dr. Leonor spoke about the unique identity of all children in that God made each child with a combination of different learning styles, intelligences, and strengths. They teach the children in their schools that they are valued because God values each one of them equally. This belief that God created each person helps create a

story for each child that connects them with the foundation of their identities. Their origins are a part of their idem identity, the part of oneself that stays the same. This is important also as it relates to children with all types of abilities in that there is a sense of intention that there is a reason for their existence, and they can find comfort and value in their identity in Christ.

Ricoeur (1992:152) states “character gives us qualities, but it is in our actions” that determines our happiness or unhappiness. Dr. Leonor specifically emphasized that the result of a good Christian education is the depth of character of a child that is formed and developed because of the daily teaching of Biblical principles. She spoke about how when children grow up and go out into the workplace, will do the right thing if their character is built and formed in childhood. The development of Christian character is a part of the ipse identity that continues to be formed through relationships with others.

Ricoeur (1992) states that selfhood implies otherness to such an extent that selfhood and otherness cannot be separated. Ricoeur (1992:152) also discusses the action taken by one who has “the capacity to act and its imputation to an agent who has the obligation to act” which is parallel to the obligation and accountability that Christians should have in relation to others. Dr. Daugherty spoke about the Christian faith and what it means in the context of others. He talked about having compassion for others and a sense of accountability to love and care for others. Other words he used were kindness, goodness, patience, and long-suffering – all words that imply the presence of another in existence. Dr. Daugherty stated that compassion, love, and concern for people serve as the foundation of a Christian education. In other words, we exist in relation to others, and selfhood is applicable in the Christian faith because it identifies who a Christian is by

their relationships with others. Selfhood and otherness cannot be separated in the Christian identity because it is defined in the context of relationship with others.

Both Dr. Daugherty and Dr. Leonor referenced how the presence of children with special needs influences their typical peers. Dr. Daugherty's example was about Andrew, the son of his administrative assistant with Down's syndrome who was a part of the VCS football team. Andrew's gift was compassion, and he became the morale leader of the team and was credited with contributing to the success of the team. It was the presence of Andrew and his relationship with the other team members that created a change in the team members. The ipse identities of various members of the football team as well as the coaches were refigured in their relationship with Andrew. The child enrolled at HCS that has a physical disability that makes it difficult to walk creates a presence for children who have no problems walking to develop and demonstrate compassion. HCS asked another child to serve as a buddy for this child by helping him carry their books. These situations support one of the intentions of IDEA in that it is not only the child who has special needs that can be influenced by being with their typical peers, but it is also the children without special needs that can be influenced to accept others on a social level in a community of otherness. The experience of relating to Andrew helped form the identities of the other football team members; likewise the experience of relating to and showing compassion for someone who has difficulty walking provides a relationship that influences a reconfiguration of the ipse in others.

In the context of narrative identity theory as well as the theory of ethical aim in the following section, the inclusion of children with special needs in Christian environments begs the rhetorical question as to why they would be included in public

schools but not in Christian private schools. Children in Christian schools are missing an opportunity to develop their ipse identities as it relates to their peers that have different abilities.

### **Ethical Aim and Children With Special Needs in Christian Schools**

Ricoeur (1992:172) defines ethical intention as “aiming at the ‘good life’ with and for others, in just institutions.” Both HCS and VCS currently enroll children with very mild learning disabilities. However, they currently do not have the technical expertise in their schools to expand their programs to include children with special needs that would otherwise be educated in a public school. Both schools also either do not or have not made financial resources available to begin or expand a special education program. However, in both conversations, both Dr. Daugherty and Dr. Leonor mentioned that they had the “heart” to be inclusive and that they are obligated as Christians to demonstrate love for others.

Both VCS and HCS as organizations seem to be struggling with “the assertion that ethics has primacy over morality” (Ricoeur 1992:203). In the public school system in the United States, a moral judgment has been made in our society that has been reflected in public law to not discriminate against children with disabilities, specifically in the participation of education. Both VCS and HCS have not been able to admit students with special needs from their schools, yet these students can be educated in public schools. It seems that in Christian schools that are run by administrators and faculty who are called to demonstrate “Christ-like” behaviors, there exists a tension of actually applying the Christian faith when it comes to children with special needs. If “morality is held to constitute only a limited, although legitimate and even indispensable,

actualization of the ethical aim, and ethics in this sense would then encompass morality” (Ricouer 1992:170), it seems to be the reverse when it comes to children with special needs in public schools and Christian schools. If Christian schools were to concede to the ethical imperative of practicing solicitude, they would be on their way to creating a more just institution, and would therefore be on the path of ethical aim. The next section will discuss the teaching approaches in both schools, as well as the practical application of the Christian faith in Christian schools.

### **Phronesis and Praxis: The Future of Expanding Access to a Christian Education**

As explained in part six, phronesis is more clearly understood in the context of its relationship to techne. According to Aristotle (2011) techne is the type of knowledge that can be both learned and forgotten. Techne is prevalent in the educational systems in the United States. At HCS, there is an emphasis on teaching the Christian faith in a positivistic way by having Bible class every day, teaching children to memorize verses, and a constant drill of Christian principles, as in the analogy of constantly showing real money rather than fake money. While there is some encouragement of reflection and consideration by the students of Biblical principles through journaling application of Scripture, HCS primarily utilizes a techne approach.

VCS’s approach to teaching the Christian faith has some elements of techne, but children are encouraged to consider other faiths and beliefs as they make a decision about their faith. Alternative faiths and positions, including the possibility of rejection of the Christian faith, are debated, and children are encouraged to bring their inquiry in an open forum. Dr. Daugherty said that without this critical step or reflection, consideration, and



moral judgment, their faith is artificial. In other words, phronesis, or ethical know-how, is applicable in this situation.

Praxis is the practical action that results from making an informed ethical choice (Berstein 1983). Both Dr. Daugherty and Dr. Leonor spoke about the practical considerations and implications of beginning or expanding access to their schools for children outside of the “very mild learning disabilities” category. Both schools are contemplating the moral dilemma of expanding inclusiveness of children with special needs in their educational communities. Further contemplation, understanding, and re-imagining must take place before phronesis and praxis can be considered.

### **Conclusion**

Critical hermeneutic inquiry encourages a deliberation of the moral and ethical issues and implications of the choices we make. Herda (1999:62) states that “hermeneutics and praxis are inextricably united in application,” thereby requiring that the contemplation and consideration of an issue demands that we must make a deliberate choice about what we are contemplating and take some sort of action. The analysis of the data shows that there is indeed a moral and ethical tension in Christian schools as it relates to serving children with varying abilities, where moral judgments by society have advanced to first order over the ethical imperative of Christian principles. The next part will discuss the implications of the issue of expanding access for children with varying abilities to a Christian education.

### **Summary**

This pilot study was conducted as a test case of research conversations with two top Christian school administrators about Christian principles and how they are related to

children with varying abilities and their level of inclusion in a Christian educational community. A review of literature of the topic revealed that public schools are required by law to educate all children, including those with special needs, and that many Christian schools are currently providing some resources and accommodations for children with very mild special needs. However, the majority of parents of children with varying abilities are currently not able to be included in the Christian school community.

This pilot study was conducted using critical hermeneutic theory as a framework for developing guiding questions for the conversation participants to gather data that was then analyzed using a critical hermeneutic lens. This test case confirmed the need for this research to be conducted. It also revealed that different critical hermeneutic theories could be used in the actual study to better frame the conversation, which can aid in obtaining additional data that can be analyzed to gain new understandings about the issue and help imagine subsequent implications.

## **Implications**

### **Introduction**

In this part, I will outline my reflections and the implications for my research, including further considerations for Christian schools related to children with varying abilities, as well as the possible contribution to literature. Herda (1999:5) states “in all aspects of our lives, we are by implication obliged to use moral knowledge and apply it in particular situations.” This is applicable to the issue of expanding access to a Christian education for children with varying abilities.

### **Considerations for Christian Schools**

From the data that I collected in my research conversations, Christian schools have been lagging behind public schools in recognizing that society has a moral obligation to provide access to a quality education for children with a range of varying abilities. While there are Christian schools like VCS who have instituted a formal program for children with very mild special needs, most Christian schools like HCS do not have a formal program, but they are doing what they can to make adjustments to their curriculum and to their teaching approaches to educate these students. While Christian schools do have the heart to serve a greater range of students with special needs, they do not have the practical expertise nor the financial resources to support special education programs to the level provided by public schools. However, upon reflection of the literature, theory, and data, I think that the root problem lies in the lack of fulfilling the ethical obligation as Christians to provide special education programs, as well as the lack of special education expertise by the leadership at these schools to imagine and implement such programs. Dr. Daugherty said that creativity, more than money, is the most important aspect needed to find a solution to this problem, and I agree with that statement.

It is clear from the data that Christian school administrators are knowledgeable of Christian principles. However, there is a disparity in ethical know-how (phronesis) and informed ethical action (praxis). The concerns that Dr. Daugherty raised about the range of inclusion and the parents of the children that currently attend VCS understanding and endorsing an inclusive community are legitimate. It is important to continue the research in this area so that all children who would otherwise be served in public schools will eventually have an opportunity to access a Christian education.

## **Contribution to Literature**

The current literature regarding children with special needs in Christian schools is sparse. So few Christian schools provide adequate services for children with special needs, and when they do, it is mainly limited to those children who have very mild disabilities. This research can help contribute to the literature by examining barriers to providing access such as the lack of financial resources, knowledgeable teachers and staff, and special education expertise. Another contribution to literature is an examination of Christian principles and the relationship to practical application in the context of this research topic. Lastly, critical hermeneutic inquiry is important in this type of research because it promotes new understandings, which can launch praxis.

In the course of developing the theoretical framework for my research topic, it seemed that two of the three critical hermeneutic theories were not should change. Narrative Identity should only be used with adults because children are developing at a rapid pace and their identities have not yet been fully formed. It was difficult to gather data for Phronesis and Praxis when more time is needed to consider the issue. Therefore, in moving forward with this research, I will use the theories of Language and Imagination to replace the above theories. The current language used in public law, as I noted in part two, places the emphasis on the deficits of children rather than on their abilities. Language and the ability to imagine new possibilities are powerful in creating a world of new understandings, and can move us from information to understanding (Gadamer 2004).

## **Conclusion**

Christian schools have an obligation to serve a wider range of children with varying abilities. However, these schools lack the knowledge, resources, and creative imagination to develop the special education programs that our own society at large has determined through our public laws to be morally just. It is important to continue to research this topic so that the Christian school community at large can gain a greater understanding and be empowered to make the changes in their school systems that reflect ethical action in accordance with the principles and values of their faith.

## Appendix G: Pilot Conversation Transcriptions

### Conversation with Dr. Clifford E. Daugherty, President, Valley Christian School

*Well, thank you for making the time. This is Jennifer Contreras and I'm here with Dr. Daugherty and his assistant Pam Watson. Um, so here are some of the questions, the guiding questions. So the first one is, what is the value of a Christian-based education for a child growing up in today's world?*

00:00:27        So if you're thinking of Christian in a broad context, there are a lot of cultural problems associated with some of the perceived Christian values. And so if – to better define Christian values, I think it would be good to take a look at the historically held values of the Christian church relating to, um, the – let's think of the Torah, the Old Testament Law, and then the teachings of Christ. So if we were to look at that – and the teachings of Christ dramatically, kind of amended the Torah to be more compassionate and less, you know harmful in interpersonal relationships. So that there's the woman caught in adultery. And Jesus ends up saying neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more. There's the example of Jesus being the friend of sinners. A compassionate approach to everyday living with a personal sense of accountability for loving and caring for others in a sacrificial way. So if we were to identify those core values as being the foundation for Christian education rather than what has oftentimes been misrepresented Christian values in the form of various traditions. Or organizational patterns that have developed over time, then I think that we can be a little bit more clear as to what we're, you know, what influences education ideally. And so, with that understanding, I would say that compassion and love and concern for all people around, really needs to be viewed as being one of the most vital and that's the reason we.

*That's the foundation.*

00:02:14        That is Christian education. You know, in fact New Testament John the Apostle says – boils it all down to God is love. So then taking the-the Greek word Agape, which means a selfless, non-condemning. Jesus says I didn't come into the world

to condemn the world. And so anything that's condemning is not Christlike. Anything that values people, and helps them discover their potential in an excited, um, caring way, is a part, and is based on Christian values. So that should influence – if we can have an environment that is encouraging. That is strongly, like contagious in terms of kindness and goodness. Take the fruit of the Spirit, for example. And it says love, joy, and peace is the very beginning of that. Along with added qualities like patience and long-suffering. Those are equalities that when they're truly integrated within, the-the educational environment, just are dramatically positive. So that's just a quick synopsis.

*Right. With love and compassion and concern for others, and with all of that integrated in the teaching – of teaching the children here at Valley Christian what would you consider then, a successful student who goes out into the world after they graduate from Valley Christian?*

00:03:48 Well you know, the idea of educating children can take a wrong turn easily if it's viewed as the idea that we should be teaching students to accept the teachings of Christ without thought. So that that actually becomes indoctrination, and it denies the very foundation that, in the sovereignty of God, He made each one sovereign beings. And so choice is an important element in Christian faith. And the first and most important thing is not to deny the individual sovereignty of each individual. That each individual is really functioning well when they recognize that they truly are in control of what they should consider. And what they do end up believing. But that means that there needs to be an environment of, you know, you could say the thesis, the antithesis, and the synthesis of thought. And that we should have an open forum on the truth. Given a level playing field, I-I believe that Christian faith, or the truth, will win if all ideas are on the playing field. And, of course, the maturity of the student is a big factor. You don't want to have the same discussions in kindergarten that you do in 12th grade. But the goal of effective Christian education is internalization of personal values and faith. That is, um, with an option of not believing. Otherwise, it's artificial.

*Right, so God gives us, you know, a choice.*

00:05:32 Yes. And-and so I think one of the dangers of so-called, quote, Christian school education, which I think is a more-more likely called it in this instance, miss – you know, non-Christian education would be to say, you know, God is God and don't question Him. Who are you to question God? Well, God's plenty big enough to take on all oncomers. And who come ask questions. And so, I like to have an environment where students are put into situations where they are questioned. Where they question. And where the obvious answer is not so obvious anymore. And that results, we hope – and it does often – in internalized Christian faith. And it could be that by the time that a student leaves the school, it might be like C.S. Lewis who, you know, hasn't arrived at that point of faith yet. Doesn't arrive at that point of faith until he's at Oxford. When he's the chair of the ancient literature department, where he is forced to read the Bible and think about it more deeply. And then is converted. And so, I think that we have to recognize that it's okay, and it's not our preference, but it's okay. And it's to be expected that not every student's gonna be an immediate cookie cutter, quote, Christian. You know, that we need students. So, the answer to the question as to what are students like, and what are the outcome of Christian education is that some kids are gonna be very thoughtfully Christians. And others are gonna say I'm still checking it out. And I'm, you know, I'm trying to figure this out. And I think if you have that outcome, you're likely to have had real Christians that are more thoughtful. And can, you know, do mind to mind or heart to heart combat, whatever you would like if – because they are more informed.

*Right. And - and that seems very - that's a really great comment to even my situation, for example. I grew up in a Christian home, went to Christian school. And when I went to college, you know, fell off the path for a couple of years. And when I graduated from college and got my first job, very quickly realized that, you know, my life was going the wrong direction. And I think I had understood God from an intellectual basis, but hadn't really, in my heart, internalized it fully. But, you know, they say, you know, parents train your children in the way they should go. When they grow up, they will not depart from it. And so I feel like that's what my parents did. And they were very worried for a couple of years [laughs].*



00:08:06        So let me comment about that. That could be a result of, you know, problems within our own school. If, for example, you had been sheltered from opposing views, and as a result you hadn't been able to think about them in-depth. Then you could've been forced to think about them without much guidance. Or without the Christian view within – as part of the conversation in a secular setting, University situation. Well, on the other hand, it may not be the cause of your difficulties. It could be that it was all presented. You had all the discussions. It's just that you were so busy getting your work done, you did – you responded. You did what was necessary. And you had the opportunity. But you just didn't take it seriously because you had other things to do. You were very active socially, and probably trying to get straight A's and everything. And so it could be that you first started thinking about it seriously when you were in college, or after a couple of years. And so I think that students face all kinds of paths. And it's – you know, I don't think there's a time clock for each individual to say by commencement, you have to be committed or else we failed. Otherwise Jesus was a failure because his disciples all took off except for John at the Cross. And then Judas even committed suicide. So I don't think we should, you know, the school should necessarily be judged by the outcome of the student's response.

*Right. So here, would you say that you have that discourse? Those debates, if you will.*

00:09:40        It's part of Christian education. It's an essential element. And if we're not having it, then I would be very concerned because I would think that that's what causes a Jim Jones situation. Or any kind of other - that's really a form of abuse. And it's not Christian to have inculcation defined as, this is what you should believe, and that's that. Or either believe or else.

*Right. Do you talk about current events in the school setting that*

00:10:10        We write about current events. You could read about it in the school newspaper. Those are important elements. Otherwise you're not very well educated.

*Right, right. And I think you bring up a good point about the whole sheltering situation. Because I definitely felt that I was more sheltered from – you know, when I did try to question things it was, you just need to have faith. And I think – I think I really started exploring more when I was in college. And then right after college...*

00:10:32      Like I said, some students do that volitionally. Other students may be doing that because they've been sheltered from a broader, you know, kind of thinking and exposure. I hope that in our school, and I – we really make a point of trying to avoid the sheltering of what you'd consider to be a world, kind of consensus or point of view. And so I think the ultimate is not be sheltered from anything. But like I said, have a level playing field. And let it be all weighed and considered, and discussed. And so, I like things like having debates between maybe someone like oh – I'm trying to think of a perhaps a, perhaps an atheist like - I'm just trying to think of who might---

*Madalyn Murray O'Hair.*

00:11:30      Well, that would be actually, that would be a great debate. Madalyn Murray O'Hair and say Martin Luther [laugh] try to take it out of periods and have a translator in the, in the meantime. And try it that way. That'd be a cross between the contemporary and, you know, something out of the Reformation.

*Right, right.*

00:11:53      Another one would be like the Frenchman Voltaire, you know, and Martin Luther. They would be closer to being contemporaries, and that would be fun. But to have students play one role, and then switch.

*Yeah, like really know what they believe or...*

00:12:09        They're discovering what they believe. At least they're exposed to different thoughts. And if a person has a heart for the truth that will work out for them. But if they really have an agenda which is, whether they're a party mindset. Or whether it's to try to, you know, use education for a career development exclusively. Or to get into the right university. Those are the highest priorities, then of course it may – some of these more important values may have to be coming to view later.

*Right, right. My next topic – question here is the identity of the child who is trained in the Christian tradition. I think you addressed some of that in your previous comments. But what would you say that the children here – and it could be different for the varying grades – what would you say that identifies them, you know, as a Christian if they, you know, have children profess their faith, you know, at a certain, do you know what the statistics are in terms of how many children have professed Christian faith, or have gotten baptized?*

00:13:14        Well, it's easy to have all fourth graders profess their faith.

*Sure [laughs].*

00:13:18        Okay, because I was a fourth grade teacher. And of course, they all want to please. But they're professing a faith at the level of their understanding. It's a little bit more complex after puberty. And after peer pressure, say it. And junior high, or high school. Those are – and then later, when you become a businessman, or a professional, when you have to fill out your taxes you've got another issue to deal with. So I think the concept of growing at – in your values. And not to see it as a stagnant, one-once in a moment, I think of it a Christian journey. However whether you're Catholic, and there's a Confirmation. You know, or whether we're more Protestant with the idea of having a point in time when you accept Christ as your personal Savior. I think both the Catholic tradition, and the Protestant tradition recognize that there needs to be a thoughtful response. Where there is a time of reflection in deciding what is the path that you wanna

take. So in our schools a wide range, because we have 300 Catholic families. Some families will say that they're looking for that Catholic school. And I was surprised, 00:14:33 sometimes they come to our school if they're not admitted to a Catholic school. And other times they come to our school because they prefer it, based upon discussions with other Catholic families who are here. And one of the phrases that I heard was Valley Christian is more Catholic than the Catholic schools. And so I said, well, what does that mean? And, well, they said, well, you know, like Jesus. So Catholic to them, is to be more like Christ. So these – this nomenclature, this-this vocabulary, it's important to understand that Christians from different traditions have differing vocabulary that, in a sense, mean the same thing. And so it's, it's been an interesting journey for us to be more inclusive. And less, we – our school has really changed. We used to require that a student be a Christian to come into high school. Or that one of their parents was Christian. The idea that assumption is based on the idea that it's more of a Christian school if it's an extension of a Christian home. Well, there seems to be some logic in that. But, and you know, you can 00:15:44 read my philosophy statement I'll give you is pretty short. And you can, rather than hear me recite the whole thing again. But just as a summary---

*I took many things off the website.*

00:15:52 Just as here you'll see what makes a Christian school Christian. And it's not whether or not people are Christians. Otherwise, Christ would've not had a Christian – the Master's Christian school because his disciples weren't Christian when they first came. And so we've decided that what makes a Christian school Christian is whether or not there is an atmosphere led by the faculty and staff that is Christ-like.

*Right, right. Now transitioning to my topic over - how do you think Christian values and traditions relate to educating children with special needs? What relationship do you see with kindness, compassion, and concern for others that you mentioned earlier in children that have varying special needs. And I know there's all different types. There's learning*

*disabilities. There's physical disabilities. There's intellectual disabilities. There's combinations of the three. And so, tell me your thoughts on that.*

00:16:49      Okay, so I'd like to expand the thought of what are children with special needs. And I would say that all children have special needs.

*Of some sort, or some kind.*

00:16:58      Exactly. And so it's interesting that there are students who are extraordinarily gifted, and they have special needs. There are students that are extraordinarily gifted in – as musicians, or vocalists. Or some students seem to be little human calculators. You know, there are all these varied differences in God-given talent. And opportunities, you know. So, I think that Andrew's gifts, that's speaking of Andrew Watson who has Down syndrome. His gifts had to do with compassion. And with – somehow, he's the rallying point for the entire football team. When he wears a jersey number one, and his only advantage is that he has never graduated from Valley Christian. So he's still on the team.

00:17:49      And he has a job. And he has responsibilities. And I think he has a huge contribution to the success of the football team, even though he doesn't play football. He has a major role that's real. This isn't just superficial. It's not that, well, everybody has to be nice to him because he has Down syndrome. It's that, you know, we don't get the same kind of contribution from anyone else. And that's an important concept to understand, that everyone – in our core educational values, we start with the first idea that everyone has God-given talent. And the second is that it's our job

00:18:26      to help uncover it. The third is to develop it. And then for a God-intended purpose. Actually, the first core is – that was the second, third, fourth, and fifth. The first is that the parents are the primary educators. But having to do with students, that's the first. And so, um, getting back to your question, specifically as it relates to students with special needs, I know you're really honing it down so that those student who may have special needs that are having struggles with academic performance. So having made that context, I think is very important to narrow it down here. So there are two

factors to consider. First, as Christians we should have a heart to do as much as we can to serve the full range of special needs. All the way from those that struggle with learning. Academic standards. And those that are challenged to reach their potential because they're so gifted. So that should be – you know, our heart should say, every one of those students has a human – I mean, a God-given soul. And each one of them are of equal value in the eyes of God. These are getting back to Christian values. And that, you know, if you wanna take it from a theological point of view, it would be that Christ died for everyone as individuals. And that He would be as willing to give of himself for the student that struggles the most, to the student who needs to be challenged the most. And there's no difference. And they're each of infinite value in the eyes of God because he was willing to give Himself. And if we think about it, God must – if anyone, is of infinite value.

*Going back to Andrew who's on the football team. And-and has that gift of – you mentioned, gift of compassion. And that's a major role.*

00:20:18      And excitement. He knows how to rally the troops.

*Right. And in just thinking about my son, you know, with his intellectual disabilities, he has the gift of relating with people, and having that empathy. So ever since I can remember, whenever a kid got hurt, or if I was crying about something, or what have you. My son would be the first person to run up – and I think you might notice – to say, are you okay? What's wrong? There's something wrong with this person. Let's help this person. And he also has a really uncanny way of knowing – he remembers people's faces and names. Not just immediately, but also recall. So-he could meet somebody. And then two years later, see them again. And he will remember their name. It's a very, very interesting thing. And it's the reason people like him.*

00:21:04      He might be more intelligent than the rest of us [laughter].

*I know, yeah. When he was little, he knew how to match children with their coats, their lunch box, and the parent. So one time one of the children was gonna go with another parent because the parent was gonna pick up the friend for a sleepover, or whatever. And he got very concerned and said that's not your parent [laughs]. And ran over to the teacher and said that's not the parent [laughter]. So it's very interesting. You know, he's in seventh grade now, and he does second grade math. And, you know, he does probably you know, high second grade to low third grade reading. But he has that relational way about him. And he's always asking people about their families, you know, do you have brothers, do you have sisters. So I think that they say that there are all different types of intelligence. You know, and it's not just limited to academic intelligence.*

00:21:57        Some of them are body smart. That's an aesthetic. Some of them are people smart. That's social. And that's what your son seems to have.

*Yeah definitely social.*

00:22:05        There was a gal who made kind of a nice little summary of the different types of smarts. And I thought that was interesting.

*Right, yeah, and I read in an article about that. I think there's seven different types, etcetera. Yeah, just – it's wonderful.*

00:22:18        It's called Multiple Intelligence Theory. And I think it's by William Gardner, if I remember correctly.

*Yeah, it's very familiar. How would a child with special needs, now that we've broadened the range of special needs to the very gifted, to those with academic struggles. How would they access a Christian-based education, and be educated spiritually?*

00:22:42        So the first – you know, what I mentioned is that we should think of it globally. And that we should do as-much as we can – our heart should tell us to serve everyone, but our mind should tell us what our limitations are because not to serve well would be a denial of the students’ best interests. And so resources and capacity are an important factor. And we have to constantly, you know, say how much can we do? How much do we want to do? And it should be everyone. But on the other hand, we should say reasonably, we’re not able to care for people who are in and out of consciousness, right? I mean, there are limits. And so we have to ask ourselves what are the limits, and how far can we stretch it and do a great job. So that’s the second factor. Part of what our heart tells us, our faith tells us, and then what does our mind tell us in terms of what could be done well. And so that has to do with resources and creativity. I just felt like I needed to fill that in. Now, if you would take it to the next level, of what you’d like to discuss after that?

*What do you think is needed to provide access to a Christian-based education to children with, special needs. When I define special needs, really talking about those that - there’s different ranges. So there’s folks with learning disabilities, which I believe that you mentioned on the phone. You have about 138 students, you said, that have---*

00:24:11        In high school.

*In high school.*

00:24:12        Diagnosed learning disabilities.

Diagnosed disabilities. ADHD, perhaps. Maybe dyslexia.

00:24:17        Dyslexia, and just all, um, a variety of challenges.

*When did that start? I mean, how did that start here at Valley Christian?*



00:24:25 You know, Valley has always been a school since before that I came in nineteen-eighty-six that had a heart for students with special needs. And so, at that time there was what's called the Discovery Center. And that was a program called National Institute for Learning Disabilities.

00:24:48 And it's based on some learning theory that I don't completely agree with. It doesn't set too well with my-my training. But there's some truth to it. The research was involving stroke victims going back into the '30s. And the idea of doing retraining the mind with therapy. And so the idea was that some children – and that so I think where some of this can go wrong, even though there is some truth to this. So they would think about perhaps congenital you know, damage. And, you know, maybe birth trauma or other issues. Could be something that was caused through medication where some of the mind or the brain is damaged. And so the idea of what could we do for this child. Well, let's give him therapy. If it works for stroke victims, it can work for children. So that kind – was the theory and the focus behind all of that. Well, the trouble any kind of treatment, if it's thought of as the silver bullet, ends up working for some, more likely a few. And then there's the bigger picture though of the need for a more eclectic kind of

00:26:10 thinking. Which is much broader in terms of what are the strategies that can be employed for a varied number of kinds of special needs. And so we've kept that strand because there are specific needs relating to that kind of therapy that is needed. But it is fairly expensive because it's one on one. And it's

00:26:30 intense. And the other disadvantage is you pull them out of their academic environment to do it, which creates its own detriment. And so I believe instead of – so that is a remediation approach. As to, we're gonna fix this by retraining your mind. Well, most of literature shows that you need compensatory approach where students who just recognize the weakness. Find out your strengths. And let's build a strategy that works for you. So I believe in that. So since I came, I've been very strong on developing that kind of a developmental you know, that-that type of a response based on that philosophy. So with – because of that, we have Slingerland in all of the primary, for all teachers trained in the elementary school. And we have the idea being that we don't know for certain, you know, when they're starting to learn, we – start to write, start language development in kindergarten right on through. Let's just teach them all with a

pedagogically sound approach that's multi-century. That really does – if there is a disability, you might not

00:27:39 know it because they're learning whatever modality that is working for them, or a combination of modalities. And so that's been our strategy. And so if we were just allowing teachers to teach the way they learn best themselves, then we would have these kids that were succeeding. Then we'd have to do the IEP,

00:27:59 I mean, the whole, you know, diagnosis. They'd have an IEP. Then we'd have to be forced to start teaching them the way that they learn. By that time it may be late. They may be taking on all kinds of emotional issues, and everything else. So I think the preventative approach is best. Then, in spite of that though, there are students that still struggle beyond those needs. And so when we try to, you know, we encourage diagnosis as soon as there seems to be lags. And we do it outside of our school through a variety of resources, including public schools and private providers of, you know, psychologists and other groups. And so then we make it our goal, and we keep a long list of modifications. And accommodations that we can do for students. And it really comes down to what is best for that child. And what package can we put together. And if they can

00:29:01 succeed, given what we are able to do, then we rejoice. And if they're not able to succeed with what we're able to do, then they need to look for alternative placements.

*When you say succeed, tell me a little more about that.*

00:29:16 Okay, so we have a definition and I don't know if I put it in there or not. I can't remember. It's just a definition of what is it – yeah, quality education [papers ruffling] here's a definition in there. It means understanding that where quality education is kind of taking the student where – how God made them. And so that they would learn at a pace that's appropriate for their abilities. And that they would learn and kind of – I don't know. I'm just gonna put it in a vernacular. Bite-sized chunks that they can digest and move forward. And there's nothing more that can be done than that. And so if a student is learning at a level, and they're able to interact social – socially, with students.

And they're growing at a pace that's appropriate for their abilities. And we're not failing to challenge them. And we're smart enough not to give them things that they can't do. Then I call that quality education. And so, that's success. And, now when there gets to be challenges relating to a demand in a course. Like you're not gonna put a student that's

00:30:42      like your child. He's probably not gonna be doing calculus. He's not gonna be doing trig. He's not gonna be doing physics, or AP courses, most likely. So we wouldn't be too smart to – we'd have to be smart enough to say what is the God-given pace? What is – where is he at his learning, and can we take it to the next steps. So it's diagnosis, prescription, and then kind of celebration. And then what's – y'know, just have progressive experience. So if we can do that for a child, we'll do it.

00:31:22      What happened is that Andrew he was able to succeed through junior high because we could – he could fit into that learning environment. But when it came time to get into the college prep courses, it was at that time, we weren't as good as integrating. I think – and I don't know what – they felt that it was necessary for them to go out and find accommodations that were appropriate for his needs. And his goal was learning how to do a bus route. Figuring how to get from one point of town to the next. Learning how to make change for shopping. Learning independent skills.

*Independent living skills, self care.*

00:32:03      Yes, and so those kinds of things aren't taught in our school. And so they needed to get him into a program so that he could become an independent adult.

*Do you think that the children here have been influenced by his being here as part of the community? Do you think that they're – that has – it's probably a leading question, but increased the compassion for...*

00:32:34      To answer your question, has he influenced the amount of compassion here at the school. You gotta remember, his exposure to the school is pretty much limited to the football team, the baseball. And that's quite a few kids. Quite a few, quite a few people. But the answer's absolutely. If somebody – people really like him. And I think

that one of the dangers of being in a high-performing school is to, um, not have an appreciation for differences. And that people have real feelings. And you can have a friend that isn't quite as intellectually capable when it comes to math, or writing, or things like that. But that has a legitimate being that they have - they can be happy or sad as much as anyone else.

00:33:38       And so, just imagine. If he's happy, that's a pretty contagious form of happiness. And it affects people around him. And then when he's sad, people can see that he's sad. And I think that that's when they can be of help to him. And then there's a mutual benefit.

*How many Andrews, if you will, or children like him are part of the community?*

00:33:59       Not very – well, I think he's the only one for right now. But there are 130-some odd performers that if they were not given accommodations they would be failing. In fact, that's probably one of the reasons they're here because they can succeed.

*Accommodations, do you have special people trained with for students, let's say with dyslexia, perhaps. Or is that type of accommodation, or---*

00:34:24       Well, I think – so, we have to have, not every teacher understands how to meet the needs of an individual student. But when you have assessments, and you have a counselor that's a specialist in that area. And they help interpret, help explain what the child's needs are. And to guide the learning environment so that it is kind of modified to meet the needs of the student. And then, you can deal with the question that comes from teachers. And you develop a culture of accommodation. And so instead of having arguments as to whether or not it's ethical to allow a student to abide by different standard in the same classroom. You crossed that bridge a long time ago what you're doing. And you're just saying what do we need to do for this child. And based upon the professional insights that come with the – and then there's the – we have informal – we have IEPs, but they are less – you know, we don't always have a psychologist there, but we will have the insights there, and the plan. And so, when you have a lot of compassion

in a school setting, and teachers are given permission. They don't feel like they're failures if they don't teach them the full

00:35:45 curriculum. Then they're given permission to allow the student to succeed at the level. So that's what we're doing. But we do have to, out of integrity, modify the transcripts to reflect what they are learning. So that there's not some confusion as to who's really prepared for Harvard and who's not [laughs].

*Of course, of course. You know, and – you know, I think the question that came to my mind in terms of searching for a school for my son, is that, you know, public schools, they have to educate, you know, a child with special needs. So they're required by law to, you know, free and appropriate education, a least restrictive environment, etcetera, etcetera. Yet with, you know, any private school, any private school, regardless if it's a religious private school, or a non-religious private school. And then, of course, then you look at the Christian values that we talked about when we first discussed about compassion. And I think for me, I was not exposed to any children with any sort of special needs. I think there were a couple at my church, maybe. But they weren't really mainstreamed or integrated. And so I think that, in a public school, I think they're more exposed to that. And so I think that when – then you look at Christian schools, or any type of private school, what is the value of really exposing typical children, or gifted children, or what have you, to children, you know, with these types of needs. And so I think about that. And that doesn't necessarily run the academic route, if you will. But I think the compassion, as you talked about. I think that there's something there. And so, you know, it's just a collection of thoughts that I have about how do you, how do you do this...*

00:37:28 I agree. You can with integrity as to what the needs of the students are. I think, these truths are true having to do with international students in your school. And having different cultures represented. It's the same kind of idea. And our school has gone from what you might consider truly Anglo-Saxon, you know, Protestant, you know, enrollment. All now we have – as long as they will be willing to commit to give Christ a fair hearing, and be respectful understand they're not gonna change a value or faith. But then – we admit students coming from different backgrounds. As long as the parents

support the idea that if they were to make the choice to become Christians, they would support that. And so that gives us a much greater exposure to people with different thoughts.

*Yeah, and I think that's great. I mean, I think that's really good. And I looked at the, you know, ethnicity background in all of that. And you have a pretty diverse population.*

00:38:28      It's pretty diverse. It's changing a lot too. This was done almost two years ago. And it seems to be – we seem to be growing in our diversity.

*Right, right. Well any just final thoughts about as I continue to explore this topic. I know you've got a twelve o'clock stop. So I think we have a couple more minutes. Final thoughts about accessing a Christian education for a student who, a child who might have, you know, more severe special needs. You know, someone who has, you know, intellectual.... I'm assuming that you have facilities for, you know, children that may be in a wheelchair. Do you have handicapped facilities?*

00:39:05      Well, we are a relatively new school, so all of that's required, yeah. You probably saw that boy with - he was taking an elevator because he had crutches, you know. So we have elevators and all of that. So that's just part of our building code. But I think it's you know the idea of what is a range of inclusion. And the range of inclusion should be, specifically determined through the insights of parents as well as the schools' willingness to cooperate with inclusion. And we need to look for the giftedness. We talk about connecting God-given talent with extraordinary opportunities. And so regardless of whether the student exceptionally gifted, or having special needs in a different sort of way. Even if – we have home school. We serve home school parents. So you could have part of the needs met with learning life skills on how to, you know, make a schedule, take a bus, make change. And then another part could be being a part of a choir, they might know how to sing. Might be beautifully – and some kids, interestingly, that struggle in academics are sometimes just, part of their brain works well for music. I mean, you never know what they might be able to do. You know, and so you just have to

say as a parent, can I pick and choose, you know, based on what you offer? And try to make a good match? Those area things that I would – and then with online opportunities, I don't know whether or not that can provide some solutions, you know, as we get more sophisticated, kind of a blended learning opportunities, you know, hybrid sorts of things.

*My son right now, yeah, he has seven classes. And I think three of them are – he has science, PE, and music, where he is, you know, with all the other children. And then the four periods where he's doing, you know, reading and math. He's with the special education group. So it's sort of a hybrid model where he's at right now, which is working out pretty well.*

00:41:18      And I think that's what, you know, my thought is that we can't pretend to have all the answers. I think that thing that you – we should do is, I think, like I said earlier, the idea of creativity. And being willing to think of varied options is probably one of the greatest assets, probably more important than money.

*Right, the willingness to actually look...*

00:41:42      And creative thinking.

*Yeah, the possibilities of what could be done.*

00:46:17      [End of recording]

## Conversation with Dr. Frances Leonor, K-8 Principal, Highlands Christian School

*Okay, this is Jennifer Contreras, it is October 25, 2011 and I'm here with Dr. Frances Leonor of Highlands Christian School, she's the K through eight principal, hello Dr. Leonor.*

00:00:22 Hi, nice to see you back, welcome home [laughs].

*[Laughs] Thank you. So today I just went briefly through my research topic, and I have some questions that will help guide this conversation and wanted to get your perspective, so would really love to hear your thoughts on some of the topics. So my first question is, what do you think – or what do you feel is the value of a Christian based education for a child growing up in today's world?*

00:00:57 Very good question, it's a well-balanced education, actually we educate the child, if it's – of course number one would be spiritually, that we aim for them to have this personal relationship with the Lord and then intellectually a well-balanced, strong, excellent academics, and then physically that we hope that they are physically fit, they have good nutrition, just physically healthy and of course your social – emotional and social where they could relate to their friends, to their peers, to their teachers, to adults, because that's a very good skill for – we know that you know, relationships are very important, both in our personal lives and in the workplace and family life and everywhere else, so that's the area that just summarizes into ABC of Christian education, academically strong, it's a Christ-centered education and of course it's Biblical and Christ-centered in character building and of course biblically based, biblical world view. So we address the whole person.

*Right oh that's a really good point, you know when I was working in corporate and even now they said that there's so many people out there who are smart but their biggest problem, their biggest problem they're finding is that they're having a hard time you know relating to other people, you know getting along with their coworkers working with others, and so that relational is very important, and then of course I think with all of the*



*scandals you know, the Bernie Madoff scandal and all of the stuff that I feel like you know, if the children are at a young age educated spiritually and if they're educated you know with character – you know, character building, concepts, hopefully you know it won't be any kind of highlands alumni's up there [laughs] someday, you know you just always cringe, like where did they go to school, you know?*

00:03:23 I know and I'm bothered every time I hear leaders that say that you know my personal life is – is – its not-not – you know, does not affect my public life. How is that, you bring yourself to work. But you know you hope – you bring your whole person to work, to your office if you're you know, a public officer. But anyway I always tell the-the new family that come and they want to enroll their children and I said, you know that character building is one of our strengths because I said because if we just develop, raise children who are so, so smart without a heart, we are raising monsters actually, I said I'm sorry, I'm sorry to put it this way but...

*No, no it's true, it's absolutely true, I mean if you look at the scandals of-of you know the-the business world, you look at the schools that they went to, they went to very good schools, they went to Ivy League schools, you know, so – but with all of that smartness, what-what did it get them, you know, what are they doing to help anybody else. So no, I completely agree, I have just a couple follow up questions with spiritually, how do you here at Highlands train the children spiritually, how is that integrated into their you know because it's a school, so of course they're taking subjects like English and math, etc., how do you integrate the spiritual aspect and teach them about God through all of the subjects.*

00:05:11 Another good question [laughs] yes we try our best to teach every subject through the Christian world view, like math, the foundation will say that you know, God created the order, that's math, and science, science, God created everything that you see, you're just like you know so we in a physical – even PE, you know God – our body's a temple of the holy spirit, so we have to take care of it. You know so every like history-history's really His story, like you know God wrote history, the past, present and future.

So that's-that's how we do it, integrate biblical world view and Christian values into all of our subjects, and then of course we start the day with the kids with devotions, we pray together, and then every day they-they have their bible-bible classes, they memorize verses, not only memorize but they journal about it, they discuss it, how they will apply those bible verses into their lives and their own situations, we have weekly chapels, we have spiritual emphasis week, we have you know, we invite speakers, we have retreats, we bring them because sometimes they are more open to teaching and to-to God when they're out there in nature, so...

*Without the distractions of telephones [laughs]*

00:06:53        Yeah we have seen lives transformed after those long field trips, our fifth grade go to outdoor education, sixth grade go to Gold Country, seventh grade go to Mission Springs, eco adventure, eighth grade go to Washington DC.

*At this age is there any form of you know, apologetics or any sort of other views that are sort of taught you know that oppose Christian views so that they get some exposure to that.*

00:07:32        Yes that's why they were – some people say you're a Christian school but are you – why are you like using secular publishers or secular curriculum, something like that but we believe that it's a balanced education, we have to expose them to other isms or other philosophies out there b-this is not a bubble they're-they're in because the-the moment they step out of our doors they will be bombarded or even here, when they're here with us they go home you know, they're bombarded with these other isms, so what we're doing here is to build a strong-a strong foundation with-with God so that our aim and our goal and our dream, our desire would be like when they – as-as the bible says, train up a child in the way he should go, so this is the training ground here, but we are not a bubble to protect them, but when they have this strong, strong convictions they will naturally say, Oh but that's not true, like you know, so we just like bombard them and teach them and train them the absolute truth and then when other truths come in and seek

through their minds and their hearts they would recognize it. It's kind of like being trained to detect the fake

00:09:03 money, they don't—they don't show them the fake money, they show them the-the true, authentic money so that you just like ground them and train them and just like you know focus on the real thing, the truth, so that when false comes they will be...

*You can recognize it.*

00:09:23 You could recognize this right away because you have been trained and you have, you know, about truth. So that's—that's our philosophy here... We don't—we don't protect them from all the isms out there and philosophies.

*No this is great, thank you, thank you, what is the identity of the child who is trained in the Christian tradition, what-what do you think you know their-their – how do they define their identity would you say, a-a child who's been trained in-in Christian – and has been brought up in Christian knowledge, Christian surroundings.*

00:10:29 Of course they would always say their identity is in Christ because this is a Christ centered school, so their identity is in Christ primarily and of course their identity would be how their character has been built, and that's again our prayer, that when people hire them or see them or talk to them, they will see the difference, there's depth in their character, there's depth in their morality, and there's strong convictions and they won't be swayed with any – like in the workplace, like if we're talking about the workplace, if they are asked to do something that is contrary, but is diametrical to what they've learned from here and from-from the word from the teachers then they will say, No, even though it will cost them their job, even though it would cost them promotion or anything they'll say, No, this is my conviction and standing no matter what.

*That's how I felt, you know, when I was talking about how it was very difficult for me in the corporate world to really stand my ground ethically, you know, very you know similar, there was a-there was a mistake that happened in my department, and the person*

*that admitted to the mistake, and unfortunately the CFO of the company, the controller who I reported to said, It should be fine Jennifer, mistakes happen, we just need to make sure that we identify why it happened, make sure it doesn't happen again, and but the CFO at the time had been labeled by the board as being too soft, and so he was out to get – at least in my view, he was out to basically show that he was tougher and-and wanted to have a person on my team fired, so the person who made the mistake was a low level clerk, and then that person was being supervised by an accounting supervisor, and then there was an accounting manager and then there was me, the director, so the – the VP of finance wanted a higher level person canned and so they wanted me to fire the manager, the accounting manager for allowing that mistake to happen and I felt – I-I just felt that was wrong because I didn't feel that the punishment fit the crime, I felt it wasn't just, so I actually went to the VP of finance and I just said, I feel that the f- you know the punishment doesn't fit the crime, I-I think that we are overreacting here, but I understand that you want someone to pay for this, so let me do this, I said both the manager and myself will not take any bonus or stock options this year, and no raise, I'll even sacrifice my own raise and my bonus if you spare the job of this person, you know, and he said to me, Jennifer, if you're not tough enough to go fire this person then I will go do it. So he wanted me to fire someone for something that quite frankly, it could have happened to anybody, you know it wasn't right, and so – but I stood up to him, it ended up that when I went to the manager's office because I told her I was going to go, she said don't-don't follow the sword, don't you know – don't sacrifice your bonus for me, and I said, No I'm going to do it because it-it's the right thing to do. I went to her office, she could see in my face and she said, Jennifer, I have so much respect for you, I-I'm just going to go ahead and resign, that way it doesn't cause you any problems, and I just said, It's not right, and she went ahead and resigned anyway. But that-that was the starting point of just I see how the politics are being played and it's – you know, I just felt very sad that you know these-these high level people felt that they had to you know do this you know.*

00:14:39      And sacrificing a person's life.

*Yeah, I mean their livelihood, this woman had-this woman had six children, she had two children in college.*

00:14:49      Oh my goodness, so how is she doing now?

*She's doing fine, you know she's actually doing fine, she found a great job at UCSF and she's doing wonderful but I think you know if you don't have – there are so many people who would have said, Oh yeah just you know okay I'll just fire them, right.*

00:15:05      So that's your identity there, they know you're good and people respect-respect it and people respect you though you don't preach any sermon, your life is a sermon, so that-that's our desire for our graduates. Have you seen the Courageous?

*Yes I did, I saw it on opening weekend, every time that those brothers put out a movie I always go opening weekend and then I'll go a little bit later because Opening weekend will determine if it goes to more theaters, so I did see that movie, I loved it and I saw Fireproof, did you see Fireproof?*

00:15:41      Yeah.

*Yeah, I love their movies, I really wish that they would you know, get a bigger film company and –and put out like a movie a year because that's the only movie you-I can really take my son to that is so...*

00:15:54      So clean.

*Yes*

00:15:57      Even there were like gang elements, but there was no bad words or cussing or anything, it's so beautiful.

*Well and you can get your point across without having to do all of that gratuitous stuff, right?*

00:16:11        It was sad because when I went it's just like ten – there were like ten people in the whole theater.

*Yeah, well did you see it nearby or did you see it...*

00:16:20        I saw it here in Tanforan.

*I drove all the way down to Santa Clara to see it there because when-whenever those types of movies open in the Bay Area, they-they only open in the outskirts, like Emeryville, Marin and San Jose, Santa Clara, they don't open in San Francisco here so I always go to the beginning ones so that then they'll start playing, they'll start expanding the theaters. So anyway...*

00:16:47        Everybody has to see that.

*Well we have to support it, I feel like you know the church is-the churches should really tell everyone to go see it, that way we can go support it because you know we're spending all our money on all these other movies anyway, you might as well...*

00:17:04        But there's the identity there, being on-on that-that Hispanic...

*Right where his boss asked him to lie, and it was just-it was a-it was sort of a trick question.*

00:17:15        That's how this Courageous came into this conversation. Anyway sorry.

*So what happened in that movie is just so common you know, bosses and people at work are always telling you to do the wrong thing, you know. So my other question here is*

*how are Christian values and morals learned in conjunction with academics, I think we a-you answered part of this question already so that each child is influenced differently than if they attended an non-Christian school, so maybe the perspective here could be what do the children gain here that they cannot possibly gain if they went to public school?*

00:17:53        Oh yeah, the value of character development, character building, it's just a spiritual strength and of course every teacher, smother them with love, like-like a teacher here won't be here for any other motivation done their passion to teach, to train, to discipline, to mentor these-these kids and develop lasting eternal values in their lives. Even our discipline program here, we-we don't call it like detention or anything, they call it character building session, we want the kids to know that when they make wrong choices they're not being punished for who they are but they are being mentored into the right choices, so we don't call them suspension, detention, we call them character building sessions. Yeah and then two years ago I thought of like reversing this, that I spent a lot of time or the teachers on the negative, but now we turn this around and the teachers now

00:19:20        are watching and more sensitive on the positive things like if somebody did a wonderful – they went out of their way to have – to you know, more positive – or give them like yeah a behavior exemplary behavior certificate, and I make it a big thing, I call the parents if I get those certificates I call them from their classroom and announce it like, “Mrs. Meyers, will you send Diana to my office, because she got an exemplary behavior,” so she marches out of the classroom, marches in to my office, congratulate her call mom and the dad and say, “Congratulations for raising a wonderful young girl like Diana or wonderful boy like Jose, and here she/he-she's/he's sitting here with me and I am congratulating her/him for doing a great job and here she/he is, she'll/he'll tell you what she/he did.

*Some more positive reinforcement because you know even when I – when you asked me, did you-did you come here to the principal's office, I mean when I was younger it was*

*about, you don't want to be in the principal's office, right, you – you want to avoid this because if you were the principal's office it meant you were in trouble right, so...*

00:20:36 Yes, I'm trying to turn around when I said – can you see – can you come to my office, you're not in trouble, like you know, but now they are already like did I get a character exemplary behavior today... I say, Yeah come-come in, and then I – sometimes I-I see parents in the shopping mall, something and they say, “You know what Mrs. Leonor, that meant – they still call me Mrs. Leonor because I've been Mrs. Leonor for 20 something years, they say, that that was such a good news and I told my office mates that this is the principal calling me to congratulate me as my child got an exemplary behavior award today. That's a good marketing tool too, as their office mates will ask what school is this, that the principal calls you and...

*For something good, right?*

00:21:22 I called, I said, “Hi, this is Mrs. Leonor of Highlands Christian Schools, I'm calling to congratulate you got an exemplary behavior, etc. etc. and then there was like a long silence and said, Hello Ms. <deleted>, are you there, this is – yeah do you know where I am at Mrs. Leonor, I said, No I have no idea, I am waiting for my term to go in for my first chemo session, and outside, I-I'm in a waiting room for a doctor's appointment, my breast chemo, and they say, Didn't you know that this call meant a lot, now I have strength to go in there to face-to face my-my treatment because of this call. Another child has been a frequent visitor to my office and then we were – I was – we were almost to that point where, Do we keep him, do we – that's the hardest thing is the decision of an administrator. When do we say, Okay. What if he's just turning the bend, you know, and then we just – so this-this ministry here, it's really like I – we need a-a lot of wisdom from God, a lot of wisdom, but I'm sorry that it was again a-a a long answer, but my goodness. So that's how we do it here.

*That's a great story.*



00:23:22 Not only are we ministering to these children here, back to our students but we're ministering to the whole family.

*It's a whole community that you're ministering to.*

00:23:34 As I always say, this – we are not a perfect school in any way but all we're doing is – doing what God wants us to do, at this place at this point in time.

*Right. My next question is, how do you think – this is now going into the child that might have some special needs, so when I talk about special needs, the definition, I mean there are many different types, there's a range of special needs, so you have children who have learning disabilities, so there's ADHD, there's dyslexia, there's you know, some behavioral or emotional issues, but they have normal or above average intelligence, right, so there's-there's learning disabilities, then there's a section of people who have physical disabilities, you know they might be in a wheelchair or they might be deaf or they might have some sort of physical ailment that prevents them from full participation, right, and then you also have students that or children that have intellectual disability, so sometimes children who have down syndrome might have some also some mental retardation, also as part of it, or like my son who has mild intellectual disabilities, and he also has some sensory issues, so for instance my son was on a swim team and he was on one swim team and then he moved to a different swim team and the different one had an outdoor pool. Well luckily you know I've been taking him swimming ever since he was a baby so he was swimming in the pool and then all of a sudden it started to rain, so you know he's swimming very happily and practicing, and then I said, Okay it's time to get out now, you know, it's time to go home, and he said, Oh I can't get out because it's raining, I'm going to get wet, and I'm looking at him going, You're already wet, you're in the – but with him he needs to be immersed in water or he needs the shower like to be on top of his head, but he cannot have like drops of water or he goes crazy, goes nuts. He can't – like if he's brushing his teeth – very hypersensitive, if he brushes his teeth and he spills some water on his shirt, he has to change his shirt, it's – he can't handle it. So that's why it was really funny because of course all of the parents, the coach was like*

*he's – what do you mean he's going to get wet, he's already wet, he's in the pool, but because he's very sensitive, so there's-there's sensory, right, issues, so there's many different special needs and then when I was actually speaking with Dr. Daugherty he actually expanded the definition to say you know, Really everybody has-has needs, right, they're special, but he also wanted to include those who are very gifted, so there are lots of people who are very intelligent, geniuses almost, they're very intelligent but could possibly even be autistic, might not have you know relational right, or they could just be very, very, very smart and that is you know, being gifted is also a need because if they're bored of the classroom, right then you know. So you have like where everybody is, the bell curve and then you have these people in the outlying tails. So my question is-is how do you think the Christian values and traditions relate to educating children with special needs, what's the relationship or what do you think, or what's your opinion or thought or even if you have more questions relating to children with special needs?*

00:27:06        Yeah for those kids I think the most important for them is that they feel valued, they feel valued and they feel special in that they're unique, we always like to tell them that God created us unique because it would just be so boring if we're all the same, you know, our learning styles and so we-we just keep reminding them and make them feel that only with our words but with how we interact with them, that they really feel valued. So we are – we are trying our best to train our teachers into differentiated learning, and we are – I believe we're getting better...

*What do you mean by differentiated learning?*

00:28:05        Like we-we – that they're aware of the different learning styles like some of our students learn kinesthetic and visual and so in planning the curriculum and the daily lesson plans, I always would remind them, and they-they know, they are all experienced teachers, that they need to address all of these learning styles in a lesson, like maybe they're lecturing while they're-they're flashing a picture, and then they're taking notes while you're lecturing, like you know, all those areas of learning that each child would be reached on a daily basis in a – each classroom should be like reaching its child,

so that because the-the most demotivating feeling for a child is like to be lost, when you're like saying, Oh my goodness, why are they understanding it, why are they getting it, and-and I'm not, I'm not getting it. So the teachers are sensitive to those feelings and again the m—the other side of the coin the – a very strong motivating factor is when like if you feel successful, if a child feels successful like we-we have those children that are – been identified and diagnosed and we had them in their files and I share that files, very confidential, but only to the teacher so that the teacher would be sensitive and we make accommodations and we like we start the with baby steps so that every time they accomplish this, they feel – Oh I can do this, then I'm ready for  
00:29:55 the next step. Then again the teacher would coach and would – and then they feel successful, Oh I can do this, like so that is a very strong motivating factor.

*So you already have some children who already have some children that have some identified special needs, can you share with me the types of special needs that the children have, I mean I don't need to have their you know, the specific child but maybe the like do you have some children with maybe ADHD or...*

00:30:23 That is the-the most common.

*The biggest, really?*

00:30:27 The biggest, yeah, so we make accommodations like sit them in front or call them aside or you know give them like another kind of test, I know it's a lot of work for the teachers, but they try their best and then accommodating like if a math problem, if they have homework for 30 problems we are known for homework, heavy homework, then.

*[Laughs] I know.*

00:31:00 And so maybe the teacher would pick just the-the problems that would strengthen the basic concepts that they-they need to learn before they do the next because you know, that's our foundational concepts, so I said.

*So they'll adjust the homework?*

00:31:20 Yeah, I said, Cut the busy work because this students are special students with ADHD and all that, I-I know they can't sit for extended hours to be doing 30 math problems and writing an essay for English and you know all of those work, and then the teachers are very sensitive to conferencing with the parents and giving them pointers, like maybe set an alarm every ten minutes, every ten minutes and have them walk around and then come for the next assignment. We communicate with the parents very well.

*Do you have any children that you know of with maybe dyslexia or any physical impairments?*

00:32:11 We have one that has a physical impairment, I think short muscles and like the hip joint – something, but he and the-the parents want him to be in a normal class and-and they are very supportive and teachers are very supportive, so he's here...

*Does he have to use any crutches or he's just – it's just hard for him to walk?*

00:32:39 Yeah walk and then the – we have like a buddy for him to like carry some books and-and we have this lift, we have this chair lift from the first floor to the second chair lift, so when he's not feeling well. So we have some accommodations, but not like a full blown special ed program but we do our best and we have a special – not this year, we had the special teacher – she wasn't really professional special ed teacher but we called her like teacher resource, where if a student needs more reading to do, more math time or something we you know, we – they send the student to maybe half an hour a day, or an hour a day, depends.

*To get some extra intensive help?*

00:33:41      Yeah intensive help.

*Have you ever had any children here you know with I don't know downs syndrome or autism or something a little bit more severe or has it been...*

00:33:55      Not severe autism.

*Or like functional autism, like there's some children who are autistic but they have normal intelligence but they still – you know, you can just tell, yeah you can just tell that there's something a little off with them.*

00:34:10      We had the one from middle school to high school, he did very well Asperger...

*Asperger's, oh yeah, Asperger's is where they're extremely intelligent but...*

00:34:22      But socially – social skills is very, you know, that was a challenge. But he's now in college, he was even in the – I think in the drama group and he did so well, and-and he was very patient, like you know in—as I said, it's not a perfect school, we don't have perfect students, they would make fun of him but the school is zero tolerance to bullying or making fun and we're really like hard on them, but we're not with them you know – 24...

*Yeah, 24/7 right?*

00:34:58      But he was so patient, and graduated. He is now in college, I think it's doing something on – animation and... I had-I had him several of my classes, and my science classes. But we do not have the more advanced, but we have this, the whole gambit of ADHD, dyslexic.

*Learning disabilities?*

00:35:35        So when the teacher detects... There's something special with a student, they talk to us and then I conference with the teachers and/or with the parents and recommend them to go and see the student's pediatrician and at one time we had a lady, a psychologist that-that was testing our-our students here, so we refer them and then of course I call San Bruno district and they come, they-they observe them, they come because.

*Right because they're required by law to come – the public school right to come and do observation.*

00:36:18        Yeah so we have some of those, we...

*Do they have IEP's?*

00:36:22        Yeah, we send them to the district and they're being tested, and whoever's testing them, evaluating them, they come and they sit in the classroom and then they write us a-a report, and then whatever are the recommendations, I conference with the teacher and inform him/her regarding the diagnosis and what we needed to do for this child. That has been good, we have a good working relationship with our district.

*Yeah, sounds like, that's great. Yeah they know that you're trying to make the – you know, the adjustments, the accommodations as much as possible so the students can be successful here.*

00:36:59        Yeah because we-we want to open our doors to everybody, especially to- to this because my philosophy is they need to have more than the ones that are functioning okay, as you said, there are no perfect situations, but we try-we try our very best to look out for them, to look for resources, to mentor and to assist our parents and to

encourage them because they need encouragement. Because some parents are at a loss on what to do, so I assure the parents that that's what we are here for, and if they don't tell us, then we won't know.

*Right, right. So if a child had more severe special needs, so how – you know, how would a child like that access a Christian based education and be educated spiritually, you know, if let's say you know, they had you know, more-something a little bit more severe, like maybe autism or something like that, I guess the question that I have here, it's not really a you know, how would they do it here necessarily, but how would a child who has some more serious problems what is their best bet for you know besides of course their parents being raised in a Christian home, you know, what are your thoughts on them h-and accessing a Christian education, what are your thoughts?*

00:38:32 That has my heart's passion because when-when a new student comes and tests and I already like see that there is a need– and of course the file that comes in like you know so that has been hard turning them away.

*That's hard right, to turn them away?*

00:38:55 That is very, very hard, but you know I always say, there's the public school, you could bring your child here for our youth group, there's...

*Like AWANA my son was involved with AWANA.*

00:39:09 Yeah, and then if – anything I could do, maybe I give you some materials there was one who I turned away, I said, "I am so sorry, as much as we would want him here, this is not the best fit for him right now, but I said, if you want our bible curriculum I could maybe supply you with this and maybe you can do it at home, like homeschooling at night.

*Yeah exactly.*

00:39:48        Yeah I've-I've done that to some families.

*We did that with Antonio, like every night I read him a chapter you know of the Bible and pray with him, and he actually – he goes to regular you know Sunday school, he made the decision last May to get baptized, but I was a little bit worried because I thought, does he really understand what's going on here, you know, I mean it's hard for him to understand concepts like well Jesus died and then he raised from the dead because he's sort of like, How does that happen, you know, because when you're dead you're dead right, or you know for instance the concept of-of sin, like he knows when he does something wrong, you know, but does he understand that he – that's – you know, he needs to be forgiven for let's say lying to me about something, right, so I talked with our pastor and she said you know because there was a pa-there's a woman pastor for the children you know the ministry, and she said you know that if he said to you, I want to be baptized, God's already taken care of the level of understanding that he need-that he needs, so she said, Just have faith that God has made it for him so that he understands to the level that he needs, you know, that he doesn't have to understand everything intellectually, his heart understands, you know, so. Because I was-I was a little bit concerned, I said, Well does he really know what he's doing or what he's saying, or you know, all of that stuff so...*

00:41:10        And just to encourage you, and you know this, God made him.

*Right, absolutely.*

00:41:14        God knows every cell tissue, every thought, everything about your-your son, that is very encouraging.

*Yes definitely. So my last couple of questions...*

00:41:27        Did I answer that one, that was a hard question to answer, but we do not just like drive them away and forget them, like you know.



*Right, right of course. Yeah, but what my last couple questions are related to, you know, What do you think is needed because there are so many Christian schools, right, lots of Christian schools in the Bay Area, what do you think is needed to provide access to a Christian based education to children with special needs and then my second follow-up question really is, how can children with special needs be educated in a Christian school environment like their non-disabled peers, how-how – this is more of a possibility now, or imagination, right, what if-if you – if you had access to all the resources in the world, what-what is needed, what would be needed for let’s say Highlands or let’s say Valley Christian, or any Christian school, Alma Heights, you know, that has – that is established, we’re not talking about the small schools that only have, you know, 30 or 40 people, but Highlands, you know, is established, it’s been around for many, many years, I mean I graduated so it’s been around for a long time – yeah what would-what do you think would be required in-in order to – because the basis for this question is, you know, in public school they can’t turn anybody away, they-they have to educate, so the ones that are very severe are-are put in a-in a separate special school, then there are the children that are mild to moderate, you know, that can function somewhat within you know a normal environment, and the public school there’s laws that basically say you must educate these children, but yet in any private school, regardless of whether it’s Christian or Catholic or just a separate private school or a private conservatory, there you know, it’s not required because it’s a private school, to educate these children, yet you know of course we have all of our-our Christian values right, and-and trying – you know, understanding that God made all of these children and what-what would be needed. You know, so it’s a really open – very open-ended question.*

00:43:45        Yeah if I had all the funding and all that first of all, I would hire special education teachers, by the way we have some here that are professional, we had someone has a master’s degree in special ed, but she’s a third grade teacher, so when the teachers have some kind of challenge and they would come to her and consult on what do, like – so we have like an in-house kind of consultant even though the position is not consultant, and so...

*It's more informal?*

00:44:19        Yeah informal, so we have that resource. If I have all the funding that we need like hire, special ed, special ed teachers and then if I have more money I will train all the teachers, all the regular classroom teachers on how to teach special needs students, – so maybe during the interview or the ones that are already here, I would like send them back to school to have like a special education certificate, something like that, like a credential and-and for the future when I interview – when we interview teachers that come in, that would be one of the requirement, that they have a special education certificate, if I have the funding, the power.

*Do you think the funding is probably the main barrier to this?*

00:45:23        Because I heard several teachers here, because their heart is all for this special student – we are – they are all special of course but you know, and they would want to, they would want to like educate themselves, they would want you know but with a teacher's salary and you know that, they-they can't afford to go back to school, like you know, they're raising their families but if there's a special fund or special something they would, they really would, I-I know their hearts. So that would be my dream, that every teacher in the regular classroom have a special education certificate.

[Some text deleted per the participant's request]

00:48:35        Train the-the teachers in this Linds Mood Bell program, because it really worked, it worked with-with them. So...

*And it's so good that they have the resources to do this, and then you look at the parents who have just regular jobs, how do they do that, you know.*

00:48:52 That's why Mrs. Sheley's—Mrs. Sheley's heart is in special ed, she goes to all of those seminars, she goes to all the brain seminars—by the way next we go to that thing, the brain seminar.

*Oh really?*

00:49:05 So we are really in touch with-with this – our-our heart beats for this.

*I think that really, you know, and you know answers my questions, I also got some very similar responses when I was at Valley Christian, so it's not that there isn't a heart to do it, it's the resources, the funding, the amount of training it would take, do you – one last question, do you think that there is benefit to the students who are already here, the non-disabled students, the ones who are considered quote unquote typical, is there benefit to them being around students that may have m-very mild – it could be as mild as ADHD or maybe a little bit more severe, like-like even my son, right, my son is – has intellectual disability, he's socially interactive but when it comes to academics he lags behind, he's in seventh grade but he does second grade math and reading, or even someone who is – has Asperger's or is autistic who maybe lack social skills, but they're very bright, is there – do you think there's a benefit, an influence for the children that are here?*

00:50:34 Definitely, definitely. That's why we have them here. Because it helps them to relate to them and to be more caring and to be more careful under – you know, what they say, what they do, you know there are exceptions of course, they you know – oh I can't get it, like you know, but thank God our students you know, they have peer tutoring, they have big sister and small sister, big brother and eighth grade “adopts” like a sixth grade and they will help – they-they eat together and they help them with their work you know and it really grows them, it-it grows their character and their caring and their concern and-and this is life, and that-that not everyone is like them, that's why I'm so thankful I'm here and Highlands is so diverse, not only in the intellectual but in color, race, and all that, and we're – and we're just so blessed to be-to be here. And the world

sees us like an elite school, that we only cater to the A B students, but it's not true, and I just hope that I can change that image because we're not.

00:52:26 [End of recording]