

**Improving Communication of Students With Autism Through Arts
Integration: A Qualitative Study**

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Abstract

The diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) among elementary-age students is becoming more prevalent in the United States. The problem is the lack of research on how to grow the verbal communication skills of students with ASD through fine arts integration. The qualitative case study investigated instructional staff members' perceptions of the effects of fine arts integration on the verbal communication skills of students with ASD. Three data collection tools were utilized to explore instructional staff members' perceptions of fine arts integration and implementation strategies in the classroom: a teacher questionnaire, virtual interviews, and observational checklists. Data from the study were utilized to answer two research questions regarding instructional staff members' perceptions of verbal communication skills of students with ASD before and after fine arts integration and strategies used in the classroom to integrate fine arts into the curriculum. A situational leadership style, theory of mind, and the stage theory of cognitive development were the study's theoretical framework lens. Purposeful sampling was used to select participants for the qualitative case study. Thirteen participants from a suburban district in Illinois were selected based on their willingness to express beliefs and perceptions about the verbal communication skills of students with ASD. Data analysis was completed using an open coding process and uploaded in MAXQDA for axial coding. Results of the study uncovered (a) staff believed the integration of fine arts positively impacts communication, (b) staff utilized music more than art to elicit communication from students, and (c) effects of fine arts integration linger.

Keywords: fine arts, integration, self-contained, autism, communication, strategies

Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my family. When I first brought up the idea of pursuing my doctoral degree, I sought advice from my husband, Casey. His response without hesitation was, “I don’t see why you wouldn’t go for it.” Throughout the process, he made arrangements that allowed me time to work long, uninterrupted hours on my dissertation. His support and belief in me and the work I was doing gave me confidence and motivation to keep going even when the work felt too difficult. Casey is the reason I kept reaching for the stars. I knew if I fell, I would always be landing on a cloud of support.

My children, Joshua and Emersyn, are my world. They have been patient with me when I needed time to work through this journey. I hope you see me as a role model and will continue to always follow your dreams. You are strong, independent, little people, and I continue to learn from you every day.

I also dedicate this dissertation to my parents, mother-in-law, and siblings. Their support has been unwavering. Part of my drive to complete this journey was the fact my brothers said they would never call me “doctor.” Look at me now, boys! My family is my rock, and I could not have done this without them.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The diagnosis of students with autism in elementary settings has increased by 30% since being tracked in the United States in 2000 (Wright, 2017). Diagnoses of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are becoming more common at the elementary school-age level (Autism Speaks, 2018). In 2018, approximately one in 59 children was diagnosed with ASD, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC; Autism Speaks, 2018). The problem is the limited amount of research showing the effects on the verbal communication skills of students with ASD through fine arts integration. The purpose of the qualitative case study was to understand how the integration of fine arts into the classroom affects the communication skills of students with ASD. Increased placement of students with ASD in elementary school classrooms accelerates the need for strategies to enhance the verbal communication skills of students with ASD.

Many types of therapies, such as art, music, and theater, are offered outside of the school setting to support children with ASD. However, little evidence shows these types of therapies integrated into the school environment. Absent from the literature are the effects of fine arts integration on verbal communication of students with ASD. The qualitative case study explored instructional staff members' perceptions of how the integration of fine arts into the classroom affects the communication skills of students with ASD. The study revealed whether the integration of fine arts is the key to improve verbal communication skills. The study's findings may be beneficial to students with ASD in the school district serving as the research site in Illinois.

This chapter introduces the qualitative study of instructional staff members' perceptions of effects of fine arts integration on verbal communication skills of students with ASD. A section

discussing the background of the problem provides the context for the study. The statement of the problem section proposes how the study may contribute to scholarly literature. Research design is previewed in the purpose of the study section. The significance of the study follows to discuss who may benefit from the study and how. Next, the research questions utilized in the study are identified, followed by an explanation of the conceptual and theoretical frameworks supporting the study.

Definitions of terms provide concise, authoritative definitions for key concepts in the study. Critical assumptions of the study are covered next, followed by the scope and delimitations to provide input on the boundaries of the study and potential effects on the transferability of results. Limitations relating to the study's design, dependability, conditions, and any biases that could impact the outcomes are described. Finally, the chapter summary includes a review of the chapter's content and a preview of the themes of Chapter 2.

Background of the Problem

The diagnosis of ASD is becoming more common at the elementary school-age level (Autism Speaks, 2018). Current prevalence rates of ASD are reported to be between one in 40 and one in 59 children (Baio et al., 2018). In 2016, reports showed over 455,000 students with ASD were served under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1990 (IDEA) in schools (Pas et al., 2016). The gap between theory and practice when teaching students with autism needs to be addressed (Alter-Muri, 2017). With the delay in many skills in students with ASD comes the question of where to place them in the educational setting to ensure they progress and succeed. In whatever location best supports student needs, accommodations should be in place to minimize obstacles to learning or to participating in the educational environment (Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, 2014).

The IDEA was adopted to provide students with disabilities the same opportunity for education as students who do not have disabilities (Cummings et al., 2013). Under the IDEA mandate, public schools are required to create an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) for any student found eligible under state and federal requirements (Cummings et al., 2013). Guaranteed under the IDEA is a student's right to a free appropriate public education (FAPE; Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, 2014). The heterogeneity of ASD causes a wide range of symptoms specifically linked to basic language skills (Crutcher et al., 2018). Children with ASD frequently display delays in social skills and unusual or repetitive behavior (American Psychiatric Association, 2019).

The education system has a wide range of responsibilities and roles to provide a FAPE to students with disabilities. Working to eliminate social skills and communication deficits begins with directly teaching the expected versus unexpected behaviors (Olçay-Gül & Vuran, 2019). Teachers are leaders in the classroom setting. Required of the teacher as a leader is the ability to utilize and develop teaching methods, materials, and norms to improve teaching quality to help students achieve educational goals (Raza & Sikandar, 2018). Each situation in the classroom warrants a response from the teacher. The leader's role is to judge the response needed based on the student's ability and willingness in each situation to complete the expected task (Wright, 2017). Due to the varying skill and functional levels of students with ASD, teachers must understand how to meet various needs. The behaviors and abilities of students with ASD may be regulated one day and not the next. Utilizing this leadership style has the benefit of combining strategies to meet individual and environmental needs (Wall, 2019).

Due to the significant increase in the population of students with ASD, the need for educational settings, instruction, and interventions has increased (Olçay-Gül & Vuran, 2019).

Teacher perspectives of students with ASD play a role in the success and growth of the students. A key to successful academic outcomes, suggested by Bolourian et al. (2019), is student–teacher relationships. However, due to the lack of verbal communication skills of the students, teachers report difficulty, in some cases, developing deep relationships with students with ASD (Bolourian et al., 2019). Rodriguez et al. (2012) reported classroom interventions to meet the needs of students with ASD are necessary. Training of all staff who work with students with ASD in educational settings is imperative. Teaching students with ASD requires strategies and approaches that may not be typical or familiar (Sanahuja-Gavalada et al., 2016). Schools have the responsibility to adequately train staff to work with students at all levels and learning abilities.

Approximately 8%–12% of interventions used in ASD classrooms involve musical activities (Nelson et al., 2017). Students become more social and expressive when music and dance are incorporated into the learning environment (Harrington et al., 2017; Nelson et al., 2017). Educators can learn through the use of fine arts how to best build on the strengths of individual students. A benefit of art integration is allowing unconscious images to develop, displaying a view of a student’s otherwise hidden thoughts and feelings (Schweizer et al., 2017). Abstract thinking and verbal and nonverbal communication skills in students with ASD can be improved by integrating art in the classroom (Martin, 2009). Sensory regulation, communication, self-expression, and social collaboration are areas that can be improved by participating in art. Individuals with autism tend to experience anxiety and frustration; art allows them to express themselves and relax in a safe form. The performing arts, such as dance, music, and theater, can help develop higher order thinking skills and encourage collaboration in the classroom (Harrington et al., 2017).

A gap remains in research determining teachers' perceptions of the effects of fine arts integration on the verbal communication skills of students with ASD. The lack of literature and research represents a gap between theory and practice when teaching students with ASD (Alter-Muri, 2017). Studies have found students with ASD benefit from exposure to music, art, theater, and other forms of fine arts instruction. The district's self-contained autism classrooms are lacking fine arts instruction. In conjunction with stage theory of cognitive development, theory of mind clearly shows the developmental gap between general education students and students with ASD in a self-contained classroom because of disability and developmental delays. The findings from the study may benefit students with ASD in the district.

Statement of the Problem

The problem is limited research on growing verbal communication skills of students with ASD through fine arts integration. The number of students with ASD has increased in the school setting (Wright, 2017). Between one in 40 and one in 59 children have been reported as the current prevalence rates of ASD in the United States (Baio et al., 2018). In 2016, over 455,000 students with ASD were reported to be receiving services in schools under the IDEA (Pas et al., 2016). The gap between theory and practice when teaching students with autism needs to be addressed (Alter-Muri, 2017). Autism is not an isolated disorder as it affects all ethnic and socioeconomic groups and is currently estimated to affect between 1% and 2% of children in the United States (Schieve et al., 2015).

Schools across the United States are beginning to create classrooms specifically dedicated to the education of students with ASD (Chen, 2018). Increased placement of students with ASD in elementary school classrooms accelerates the need for strategies to enhance the verbal communication skills of students with ASD. Students with ASD present unique

challenges to school systems. Despite the challenges, federal law states students with disabilities must receive a FAPE despite deficits in communication skills or social relationships (Koegel et al., 2012). Persons and groups currently impacted by the problem are students with ASD and staff members who interact with them daily in the school environment. Limited research is available documenting the effects of fine arts integration on verbal communication of students with ASD.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the qualitative case study was to learn how classroom integration of fine arts affects the communication skills of students with ASD. The research was needed to understand teachers' perceptions of student verbal communication before and after fine arts, such as music, art, and theater, are integrated into the specialized setting. The qualitative case study explored whether the communication skills of students with ASD increased and improved due to integrating fine arts into their curriculum. A case study was most appropriate as it uses multiple data sources. Due to the unique population of students as the focus of the questionnaire, through instructional staff members' perceptions, a case study format allowed for in-depth interviews with staff members rather than the students themselves. Observational field notes, teacher questionnaires, and virtual interviews of teachers allowed for triangulation of the data collected.

The setting was an elementary school in Illinois. The district has a moderate population of students with ASD: 2,529 students with IEPs in the district of about 16,000 students. According to the district IEP system, 252 students have a primary diagnosis of autism, accounting for approximately 10% of the district's IEPs. Four classrooms in the building are designated as ASD to meet these students' needs. The intent for the study was to include five special education teachers, five fine arts specialists, and five general education teachers as

participants. However, based on a sample selection modification made due the COVID-19 pandemic and school closures, four special education teachers, three general education teachers, three fine arts specialists, and three special education paraprofessionals were selected to participate in the final study.

Significance of the Study

The significance of the study is represented by the gap filled in the literature for information concerning how fine arts integration affects the verbal communication skills of students with ASD. The connection between fine arts and improvement of the developmental skills of students with ASD has been explored in previous literature (Alter-Muri, 2017; Bennie, 2019; Lacour, 2017; Lesser, 2018; Martin, 2009). Music, art, and theater therapy have been used in isolation to improve delayed skills in students with ASD. Still, data regarding integration and application within the classroom setting and the effects are missing. This research study was intended to fill the school environment gap, so teachers may know and use effective strategies to improve the delayed skills and outcomes for elementary-age students with ASD.

A majority of students in the self-contained ASD program at the research site struggle with verbal communication. Without ways to support and increase verbal communication of the population of students with ASD, their progress may stagnate. The study determined whether teachers perceive fine arts integration positively as growing the verbal communication skills of students with ASD. The findings from the study may benefits students with ASD in the district.

Research Questions

Diagnoses of students with autism are increasing. Absent from the literature are the effects of fine arts integration on students with ASD. The problem is the limited research on how to grow the verbal communication skills of students with ASD through fine arts integration. The

purpose of the qualitative study was to learn how the integration of fine arts into the classroom affects the communication skills of students with ASD. With the increased need for educational placement for students with ASD comes an increased need for strategies to help grow the verbal communication skills of students with ASD. The following research questions were addressed:

Research Question 1: What are instructional staff members' perceptions of verbal communication skills of students with autism before fine arts integration versus after fine arts integration in the classroom?

Research Question 2: What strategies are staff members using to integrate fine arts into their daily curriculum in the classroom?

Creswell (2014) noted a researcher's interest in a specific practice leads to creating researchable questions, some of which are best approached through a qualitative research design. Each question in the study included an open-ended format and guided the creation of the study's data collection instruments. Observational field notes, teacher questionnaires, and virtual interviews of teachers allowed for triangulation of the data collected. Multiple sources allowed the findings to be compared and contrasted, verifying consistency (Ellis, 2019). New instruments were developed by the researcher to align with the study purpose, research questions, and mandates established by the National Institutes of Health.

Conceptual and Theoretical Frameworks

The study leans toward a situational leadership style and theory of mind and stage theory of cognitive development. The theoretical framework is the foundation that structures the content and knowledge for a research study (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). Combining these theories contributed to the data collected for the study and the interpretation of the data. Having a balance

between the leadership theory and practical theories lends itself to the application at the students' varied levels in the self-contained ASD setting.

The situational leadership model has been around since the late 1960s. Developed by Dr. Paul Hersey and Dr. Ken Blanchard, the situational leadership model is often referred to as *organized common sense* (Center for Leadership Studies, 2016). At its core, when using the situational leadership model, leaders begin with the task and the person who will complete it. The leader then asks how much skill, knowledge, or experience the person has and whether the individual is confident, motivated, and committed to complete the task (Hersey et al., 1996).

Applications of the stage theory of cognitive development, compared to the developmental levels of students with autism, support the need for concepts and strategies to assist in social communication and academic learning. In conjunction with stage theory of cognitive development, theory of mind clearly shows the developmental gap between general education students and students with ASD in a self-contained classroom. Theory of mind involves understanding one's own and another's beliefs, knowledge, emotions, and intentions to work through social situations (Thompson, 2017). The typical child begins to develop theory of mind around age 4; however, for children with developmental delays, such as those with ASD, theory of mind takes longer to develop, and some skills may never be attained (Thompson, 2017). Jean Piaget developed the stage theory of cognitive development (Huitt & Hummel, 2003). Piaget suggested children move through different stages of mental development when acquiring knowledge (Huitt & Hummel, 2003). Situational leadership and stage theory of cognitive development work concurrently in a classroom of students with disabilities.

Definitions of Terms

The following definitions are intended to define the key concepts used throughout the study. To better understand the content of this dissertation, the definitions provide support. Although many terms are familiar to educators, some words have multiple meanings, which could create confusion.

Communication Skills. The abilities one uses when giving and receiving information are defined as communication skills and involve listening, speaking, observing, and empathizing (Fletcher-Watson et al., 2015).

Development. The fundamental parts of human development, with an emphasis on the concept of brain architecture, are developed in the first years through the interaction of genetic inheritances and influences of the surrounding environment (Martins de Souza & Verissimo, 2015).

Fine Arts. Fine arts in the school setting are the curricular areas of visual arts, music, theater, dance, and media arts (Alter-Muri, 2017).

Integration. Integration is the concept of teaching foundational skills in a specific content area and then weaving the subjects together to make connections in the learning process (Branstetter, 2016).

Self-Contained Classroom. A self-contained classroom is a classroom in which a special education teacher is directly responsible for the instruction of all subjects. The classroom is separated from general education classrooms but housed within the same school building. Some classrooms are for specific disabilities and have a smaller student-to-teacher ratio than general education classrooms (Spencer, 2019).

Strategies. Strategies are thoughtful planning and techniques used in the classroom to teach specific concepts to students, so they will grasp the skill and apply it independently (Bayu, n.d.).

Teaching Methods. Similar in definition to strategies, teaching methods are the principles and methods utilized by the teacher to enable student learning and are determined based partly on the subject matter being taught (Gill, 2013).

Assumptions

This section clarifies critical study assumptions, the truth of which cannot be demonstrated, and the necessity or unavailability of the assumptions. The first assumption is all staff employed at the elementary school are trained to work with students with ASD because the school has multiple self-contained ASD classrooms. Another assumption is the teachers at the school know the communication levels of students with ASD as listed in their IEPs. These assumptions are unavoidable due to the nature of teachers working with all student populations in the building.

The following are assumptions that may be understood but not validated. During the data collection process, staff, as voluntary participants, will willingly share information about their perceptions about fine arts integration and the effect on the verbal communication skills of their students with ASD through online research collection tools. As participants will not be identified or linked to the online responses, the research will not influence the participants. Teachers have no professional obligation to participate. Their involvement is voluntary, and no compensation is provided. These assumptions are necessary because the study incorporated voluntary participants through purposeful sampling. Teachers were assumed to be willing to express their beliefs and perceptions about the verbal communication skills of students with ASD.

Scope and Delimitations

The scope of the study was limited to teachers and students at the specific elementary school where the study was conducted who have daily contact with students with ASD. The perspectives studied were those of the special education and fine arts teachers regarding fine arts integration and communication of students with ASD. Even though participant selection was modified due to the COVID-19 pandemic and school closures to include paraprofessionals, the data collection instruments as originally designed were appropriate to all participants. Utilizing a questionnaire allowed participants to express their perceptions and experiences on working to increase the verbal communication skills of students with ASD. A questionnaire was selected because of the ability to offer an objective means of collecting data about beliefs, attitudes, and knowledge about a subject (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017).

The study's delimitations include staff members from a specific elementary school who teach students with ASD and fine arts teachers from the same building who teach the students with ASD. The public school is one of only three of 15 elementary schools in the district with self-contained ASD classrooms allowing for a smaller student-to-teacher ratio (Spencer, 2019). In the study, the focus was the strategies used by the teachers and paraprofessionals in the self-contained setting to integrate fine arts into classroom practices (Bayu, n.d.; Branstetter, 2016; Spencer, 2019). Although students may prefer one type of fine art over another, the boundary of delimitation for the study included a focus on instructional staff members' perceptions only.

The study's findings may be applicable in other educational settings and classrooms serving students with ASD. Including staff from multiple grade levels and content areas enhances the possibility of transferability. Strategies utilized in each setting have the potential to enhance the verbal communication skills of students with autism.

Limitations

A description of the design-related limitations to the transferability and dependability of the results are included in this section. Establishing trust in qualitative research is crucial, but it can be challenging to obtain (Brickmann, n.d.; Hancock & Algozzine, 2017; Merriam, 2009).

The study's setting is unique as only two other schools in the district provide similar programming for students with ASD. Most teachers in the building who have direct contact with students with ASD are familiar with the students' emotional and academic needs. Transferability of study results will be possible through rich, thick descriptions of the findings (Creswell, 2014).

An unanticipated limitation on the study was the closure of the school in suburban Illinois serving as the research site due to the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result of the limitation imposed on in-person contact, interviews were conducted virtually rather than face to face. Increased workloads due to the school's transition to remote learning caused some teachers of students with ASD not to participate. To ensure an appropriate number of participants, the participant pool was opened to paraprofessionals working with teachers of students with ASD.

The credibility and dependability of the study were established through triangulation and member checking. Using three data collection tools allows for triangulation of data (Creswell, 2014). Themes should be evident from the questionnaires, teacher interviews, and observations to show the study's validity. Including staff from multiple grade levels and content areas enhances the possibility of transferability. Strategies utilized in each setting have the potential to increase the verbal communication skills of students with autism. The self-contained classrooms and instructional staff members in the study are in the same building and are currently under the researcher's supervision. Had any biases emerged during the research process, the investigator would have made every effort to minimize the bias by providing a rationale for the study's

decisions. Due to the many decisions a researcher must make when conducting a study, there is a need to demonstrate what decisions are made and why (Ellis, 2019).

Chapter Summary

Students with ASD often struggle in many developmental areas with verbal communication being the most prevalent. The integration of fine arts into the self-contained setting may increase the verbal communication skills of students with ASD. Teachers utilizing the integration strategies may provide unique perceptions of the efficacy of the strategies and additional best practices for supporting verbal communication in students with ASD.

The study allowed instructional staff members' perspectives and experiences to emerge through sharing personal perceptions of the effect of fine arts integration on the verbal communication skills of their students with ASD. Throughout the study, data were collected to answer the research questions. The findings from the study may be beneficial to students with ASD in the district in suburban Illinois.

The next chapter includes a review of the scholarly literature related to ASD and the verbal communication skills of students with ASD. Literature about fine arts therapies utilizing music, visual arts, and theater for persons with autism and other communication disorders and teachers' perceptions regarding the verbal communication skills of students with ASD are discussed. Strategies utilized to search for relevant literature, the conceptual and theoretical frameworks for the study, and a summary and review of how the study fit within and broadened the body of knowledge are discussed in Chapter 2.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The number of diagnoses of students with autism in the elementary setting is on the rise. The problem is limited research on improving the verbal communication skills of students with ASD through fine arts integration. The purpose of the qualitative study was to learn how the integration of fine arts into the classroom affects the communication skills of students with ASD. Increased placement of students with ASD accelerates the need for strategies to enhance the verbal communication skills of students with ASD. Absent from the literature is research on the effects of fine arts integration on verbal communication of students with ASD.

Diagnoses of ASD are becoming more common at the elementary school-age level (Autism Speaks, 2018). In 2018, approximately 1 in 59 children was diagnosed with ASD, according to the CDC (Autism Speaks, 2018). The problem is understanding how to increase the verbal communication skills of students with ASD through fine arts integration. The qualitative case study explored instructional staff members' perceptions of how the integration of fine arts into the classroom affects the communication skills of students with ASD. The study determined whether the integration of fine arts is the key to increasing verbal communication. The findings from the study may be beneficial to all students with ASD in the district.

Situational leadership, theory of mind, and stage theory of cognitive development supported the study. The literature review highlights the need for integrating fine arts into the ASD curriculum to improve the verbal communication skills of students with ASD. Theoretical frameworks as well as current literature are discussed.

The chapter includes a review of the scholarly literature relating to ASD and the verbal communication skills of students with ASD. Included is literature about fine arts therapies utilizing music, visual arts, and theater for persons with autism and other communication

disorders and teachers' perceptions regarding the verbal communication skills of students with ASD. Strategies utilized to search for relevant literature are detailed first, followed by the conceptual and theoretical frameworks for the study. An extensive review of the literature follows a description and analysis of current approaches, both cooperating and opposing views, studies, and concepts. The chapter concludes with a summary and review of how the study fit within and broadened the body of knowledge.

Literature Search Strategy

Provided in this section are the strategies and tools used to search for, locate, and document articles relevant to the study of instructional staff members' perceptions of fine arts integration effects on verbal communication of students with ASD. Search engines and databases used in the study are identified. A list of the keywords and terms employed in the literature search is also included.

American College of Education's MyAthens access to the EBSCO Discovery Service Database was the primary tool used to search for literature. The EBSCO*host* search platform houses more than 3 billion references, including empirical and theoretical articles (Collins, 2015). Resources were found using ProQuest, Google, SAGE Publications, and ERIC for additional articles or when full-text articles were not available through EBSCO. EBSCO Discovery Service was utilized as the primary search tool for the study. Research tools provide the means for finding informational sources, but the terms entered steer the study. Literature searches allow researchers to evaluate the available literature while seeing gaps still susceptible to future researchers (Grewal et al., 2016).

The keyword searches utilized for the study were specific to the conceptual and theoretical frameworks and research literature review. The theoretical framework portion

required searches using the following terms: *Theory of Mind* and *Stage Theory of Cognitive Development*. These specifically broad concepts were combined with the following terms to make the searches more specific: *developmental levels, communication levels, developmental milestones, expressive language, receptive language, and spoken language*. For the research literature review section, a plethora of search terms and combination of phrases included *autism spectrum disorder, self-contained classroom, general education, special education, strategies and interventions, communication, qualitative research, fine arts integration, art therapy, music therapy, performing arts, and verbal communication*.

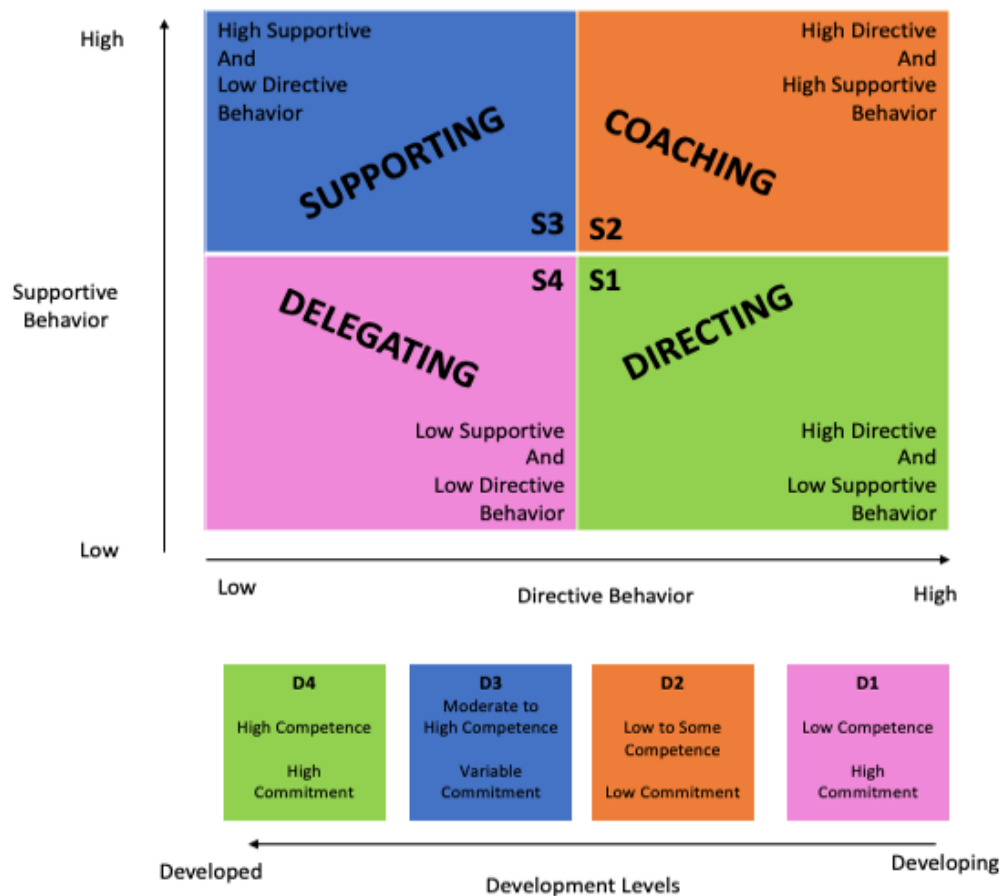
Conceptual Framework

The study leans toward a situational leadership style and theory of mind school of thought and stage theory of cognitive development. Details of the conceptual framework through the lens of the approach to the study are discussed in this section. The conceptual framework is the foundation that structures all content and knowledge for a research study (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). The viewpoint of the investigator was identified to focus and guide the research questions. The combination of these theories contributed to the data collected during the study as well as the interpretation of the data. A balance between the leadership theory and practical theories lends to the application at the students' varied levels in the self-contained ASD setting.

Situational leadership was an appropriate fit for the study because it is an adaptable and flexible approach to management that focuses on determining and utilizing the most appropriate approaches for changing conditions or circumstances (Meier, 2016). Teachers are leaders in the classroom setting. Required of the teacher as a leader is the ability to utilize and develop teaching methods, materials, and norms to improve teaching quality to help students achieve educational goals (Raza & Sikandar, 2018). Hersey and Blanchard argued there is no right or

wrong leadership style, and the leader's attitudes are what make the difference (Hersey et al., 1996). Each situation in the classroom warrants a response from the teacher. The leader's role is to judge the response needed based on the student's ability and willingness in a given situation to complete the expected task (Wright, 2017). However, situational leadership is not a one-size-fits-all solution to effective leadership in the classroom (Omillon-Hodges & Weiland, 2016). The level of competence and readiness of students are overlooked at times, which may play a role in the situational leadership style's effectiveness. The flexibility and ability to adapt leadership skills to meet the individual needs of the student population were essential for the context of the study.

The situational leadership model has been around since the 1960s. Developed by Hersey and Blanchard, the leadership model is often referred to as *organized common sense* (Center for Leadership Studies, 2016). At its core, when using the situational leadership model (see Figure 1), leaders begin with the task and the person who will complete it. The leader then asks how much skill, knowledge, or experience the person has and whether the individual is confident, motivated, and committed to complete the task (Center for Leadership Studies, 2016). Each answer produces four combinations of ability and willingness, which the leader can use to determine the leadership style needed to assist the individual in completing the expectation. The effectiveness of the leader is determined by the ability to assess the performance readiness of the individual and match the appropriate leadership style for the situation.

Figure 1*Situational Leadership Model*

Directing is the initial or most basic level of the situational model. At this level, the leader uses a more directive approach and pays great attention to the task at hand rather than building a relationship with the follower (Whitehead, 2016). Leading at the directing stage requires the leader to be clear with instructions and offer regular follow-up. Motivation and encouragement are used to motivate the follower to rise to the next level of ability. Throughout the coaching stage, the leader still needs to focus on the assigned tasks but can begin to develop a relationship with the follower (Whitehead, 2016). The leader needs to spend time building trust while encouraging, listening, and offering advice to motivate the follower to progress even

further (Whitehead, 2016). The leader participates and supports the follower in the supporting stage. Detailed instructions and following up frequently are no longer required at this stage of the model. At this stage, the follower still lacks confidence in the ability to excel (Whitehead, 2016).

The supporting stage focuses more on relationship building with the follower than task completion. Delegating is the goal of situational leadership. Creating a follower who feels fully empowered and competent enough to initiate and complete tasks with minimal supervision is what the leader strives toward (Whitehead, 2016). Leaders can delegate to followers, and a lower focus is on the task or relationship due to this stage being highly follower driven (Whitehead, 2016).

Situational leaders develop goals that are clear and measurable for those they lead. A situational leader diagnoses the developmental levels of the followers or teach and match leadership styles to the needs of the individuals in the group (Smith et al., 2017). Students with ASD have deficits in communication and independent work skills (Hu et al., 2019). Due to the varying skill and functional levels of students with ASD, teachers must understand how to meet various needs. The behaviors and abilities of students with ASD may be regulated one day and not the next. According to situational leadership theory, a leader's ability to adapt managerial methods and styles to the varied goals and needs of a given situation determines the leader's quality and effectiveness (McCleskey, 2014). Working with students with disabilities requires the teacher leader to be flexible in terms of expectations and requirements of students in the classroom. Utilizing this leadership style has the benefit of combining strategies to meet individual needs as well as environmental needs (Wall, 2019). Situational leadership theory was a natural fit for this study of instructional staff members' perceptions of the effects of fine arts integration on verbal communication skills of students with ASD.

Theoretical Framework

Theoretical frameworks aligning with the study are theory of mind and stage theory of cognitive development. Both theories contributed to understanding the development levels of students with ASD. Applications of the stage theory of cognitive development in comparison to the developmental levels of students with autism support the need for concepts and strategies to assist in the areas of social communication and academic learning. In conjunction with stage theory of cognitive development, theory of mind clearly shows the developmental gap between general education students and students with ASD in a self-contained classroom.

Theory of Mind School of Thought

Theory of mind involves understanding one's own and another's beliefs, knowledge, emotions, and intentions to work through social situations (Thompson, 2017). The typical child begins to develop theory of mind around age 4; however, for children with developmental delays, such as those with ASD, theory of mind takes longer to develop, and some skills may never be attained (Thompson, 2017) as children with ASD are unable to understand the emotions and beliefs of others at the same level as typical peers. Classroom teachers must keep this lack of development in mind when working with students with disabilities. Adapting tasks and activities to the theory of mind level of the students with ASD in the classroom meshes with the situational leadership conceptual framework.

Relating theory of mind and a student with ASD can be compared to a person living in a foreign country where everyone speaks a foreign language one cannot comprehend, and it is difficult and uncomfortable to interact with others (Fader, 2019). In this situation, there is not only a cultural barrier but a communication barrier as well. Persons with ASD commonly

struggle to understand when others do not do something they are expecting them to do. Having difficulty verbally expressing their feelings often leads to frustration and, at times, meltdowns.

Theory of mind is not a single mental process but a toolbox of components that assist with functioning in the world. In human development, straightforward and automatic tasks come first in early developmental stages, while more complex and challenging tasks come later (see Figure 2). Many individuals with disabilities are unable to reach the top of the pyramid due to barriers in communication and other developmental skills. Agent, goals, and intentionality are simple and automatic tasks and are found at the theory of mind base level.

Figure 2

Theory of Mind Toolbox



Features even young children take to be indicators of being an agent include moving automatically, having eyes, following gaze, or imitating a partner's behavior (Malle, 2019).

Recognizing goals builds on the agent category in which children seek out, track, and often try to physically touch an object (Malle, 2019). Intentionality is the most complex at this level as it requires skill to perform what is intended to be achieved (Malle, 2019). Imitation and empathy are considered basic capacities in the theory of mind toolbox. Mimicry is a subtle form of imitation and is automatic. It is human tendency to observe the behavior of others and do as they do (Malle, 2019). Empathy develops and builds on imitation. As one begins to imitate another's feelings or behaviors, one begins to subconsciously empathize with others.

Humans are capable of actively engaging with the mental states of others, which is beyond the automatic (Malle, 2019). Joint attention and visual perspective taking both fall in this category. Joint attention, for example, is the concept of two people looking at the same object and both being aware of their looking at the same thing (Malle, 2019). Visual perspective taking is the need to consider what another person can see from a different viewpoint (Malle, 2019). When one looks past oneself and one's view, one can adopt the other person's viewpoint and how the world looks from the other's perspective (Russo et al., 2018).

Projection and simulation are near the top of the complexity list. Simulation uses one's own mental state as a model for another's and asks what it would feel like to be in the other's position (Malle, 2019). Projection refers to the positive correlation between similarities in a person and how a group views the person (Malle, 2019). The most complex category in the theory of mind toolbox is mental state inference. There is no automaticity in this category due to having to truly separate what one wants, feels, and knows from what another person likely wants, feels, or knows (Malle, 2019). Theory of mind combines the levels of behavior people observe with the mental states people infer (Malle, 2019).

Stage Theory of Cognitive Development

Situational leadership blends with the stage theory of cognitive development. Piaget developed the stage theory of cognitive development (Huitt & Hummel, 2003), suggesting children move through different stages of mental development when acquiring knowledge (Huitt & Hummel, 2003; see Figure 3). The sensorimotor stage takes place from birth to 2 years of age. Within this period of a child's life, learning occurs through sensory and motor interactions within the physical environment (Huitt & Hummel, 2003). The preoperational stage is age 2–7. During this stage, children begin to engage in symbolic play, and their language use becomes more mature (Huitt & Hummel, 2003). Children begin to engage in make-believe play during the preoperational stage.

Figure 3

Piaget's Stages of Cognitive Development



The concrete operational stage is the third stage in Piaget's theory of cognitive development and lasts from age 7 to 11 (Huitt & Hummel, 2003). Concepts attached to concrete situations such as time, space, and quantity begin to be understood and applied during the concrete operational stage (Huitt & Hummel, 2003). The final stage is formal operational, which takes place from age 12 and up (Huitt & Hummel, 2003). Thinking becomes more sophisticated and advanced during this stage of development. Children develop skills such as logical thought, deductive reasoning, and systematic planning (Huitt & Hummel, 2003).

While Piaget's stages may be the typical developmental pattern in children without disabilities, it does not hold true in children with disabilities (Paulais et al., 2019). The developmental rate is much slower in children with ASD. The timing and rates of infant and child development show unevenness in terms of functional dysregulation, communication, and sensory-motor abilities (Paulais et al., 2019). Situational leadership and stage theory of cognitive development go hand-in-hand when working in a classroom of students with disabilities. Teacher leaders must recognize the flexibility required to meet students' needs at various levels and the strategies needed to support them adequately.

Research Literature Review

The literature in the field of education in the area of ASD and verbal communication suggests elementary-age students with ASD require additional strategies and interventions in the classroom to improve delayed skill areas (Nowell et al., 2019). With an increase in ASD populations in elementary schools, teachers must understand how to support students struggling in the school setting. While no confirmed known cause of ASD exists, areas of delayed skills have shown improvement with supports (Nowell et al., 2019). This review discusses studies connecting the topics of ASD, ASD in the school environment, fine arts integration in self-contained classrooms, verbal communication skills in students with ASD, and how teachers can support the needs of students with ASD in the classroom. The literature review covers concepts of how fine arts integration may help improve verbal communication skills in students with ASD.

Autism Described

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a developmental disability defined by criteria showing delayed skills in social communication, social interactions, repetitive patterns of

behavior, a restricted repertoire of interests, and persistent interest in activities or parts of objects (Baio et al., 2018). Along with delayed skills in multiple areas, sensory abnormalities are associated with ASD (Posar & Visconti, 2018). The symptomology of sensory abnormalities is defined as an increase or decrease in reactivity to sensory input or an unusual interest in sensory aspects within an environment (Posar & Visconti, 2018). Sensory modalities associated with ASD are visual, auditory, somatosensory, kinesthetic, taste, and smell. Behaviors linked to auditory sensory abnormalities are among the most common in children with ASD (Stewart et al., 2016).

One of the most pronounced deficits in vision is the ability of a person with autism to recognize emotions in faces (Haigh, 2018). While vision is a struggle, individuals with autism show superior auditory processing under certain conditions (Haigh, 2018). For example, high-pitched or loud sounds may cause sensory sensitivity in a person with ASD (Haigh, 2018). Persons with autism have also been known to have an oversensitivity to touch and may pull away or flinch if an unfamiliar person comes in physical contact (Haigh, 2018).

Previously, ASD was separated into diagnostic categories of Asperger's disorder, autistic disorder, pervasive developmental disorder, and childhood disintegrative disorder (Dombrowski, 2019). Due to the difficulty clinicians had distinguishing among the diagnosis categories, research was insufficient to support keeping them as separate categories (Dombrowski, 2019). While a definitive cause of ASD is unknown, certain factors increase the likelihood of its development. Being born very prematurely, oxygen deprivation during the delivery process, or being exposed to infections in utero increases the likelihood of ASD development (Dombrowski, 2019). Approximately 50% of children diagnosed with ASD are sensitive to sounds and noise (Li et al., 2018). Children with ASD cannot tolerate certain sounds or loud noises and have a varying

degree of hypersensitivity. What autism looks like and the definition have changed since it became prevalent in the 1940s (Crane, 2015). The disorder is now an encompassing spectrum from mild to severe social, communication, cognitive, and behavioral functioning levels.

Diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder

ASD is typically diagnosed in children around age 3 or 4 (Dombrowski, 2019). The assessment of ASD can be completed in a private setting or the public school system. However, to obtain an IEP and services in the school setting, students must receive an educational diagnosis of autism through the school assessment. Signs of developmental issues may show in some children throughout their infant and toddler years, while others develop appropriately and then show signs of slowing down or regressing. Symptoms of autism tend to show in two distinct areas. Deficits in communication and social abilities are the first area. Individuals with ASD have difficulty understanding body language and tone and take everything said literally (Posar & Visconti, 2018). The second area of symptoms is restrictive, repetitive behaviors, interests, and activities (Dombrowski, 2019). Some people with ASD may display repetitive behaviors such as rocking back and forth or flapping their hands. Single words or phrases may be repeated over and over, or repetitive nonverbal noises may be made by a person with ASD.

Diagnosing ASD can be difficult due to there being no medical test to diagnose the disorder. Autism spectrum disorder is diagnosed through a two-step developmental screening and comprehensive diagnostic evaluation (Lord et al., 2006). Developmental screenings test if children are learning basic skills when they should be or if they might have delays. A comprehensive diagnostic evaluation is thorough and includes reviewing a child's behavior and development, as well as interviewing the parents (Lord et al., 2006). Comprehensive evaluations may include hearing and vision screening, medical testing, and genetic testing. In an educational

setting, a diagnostic instrument combined with checklists, rating scales, cognitive assessments, and observations is used to give an educational diagnosis of ASD.

To receive the classification of autism as a student with a disability under the IDEA, four of seven criteria must be met. Eligibility criteria as required to qualify determined by IDEA are as follows:

- The student exhibits impairments in communication.
- The student exhibits difficulties in forming appropriate relationships.
- The student exhibits unusual responses to sensory information.
- The student exhibits impairments in cognitive development.
- The student exhibits an abnormal range of activities.
- The student has been previously diagnosed with autism by a qualified professional.
- The disability (autism) is adversely affecting the student's educational performance

(National Association of Special Education Teachers, n.d.).

Delays in Verbal Communication and Social Skills of Students With Autism Spectrum Disorder

The heterogeneity of ASD causes a wide range of symptoms seen in the disorder specifically linked to basic language skills (Crutcher et al., 2018). Children with ASD frequently display delays in social skills and unusual or repetitive behavior (American Psychiatric Association, 2019). Language abilities of children with ASD vary greatly, from 25% to 50% being minimally verbal or nonverbal, to others having typical language for their age (Yau et al., 2016). According to Woynaroski et al. (2016), acquiring and retaining useful speech by age 5 is a predictor of occupational and social outcomes of individuals with ASD. Due to the lack of or limited social and communication skills, children with ASD struggle to initiate, respond to, or

maintain conversations and peer relationships (Berman, 2018). Typical school-age children have met the developmental milestones of social communication and friendships (Pang et al., 2016; Yau et al., 2016).

Data indicate over 60% of children with ASD in the United States use or have used speech–language services (Pang et al., 2016). Students with ASD are delayed in these areas, causing them to be multiple grade levels below developmentally than their same-age peers. Working to eliminate social skills and communication deficits begins with directly teaching the expected versus unexpected behaviors (Olcay-Gul & Vuran, 2019). Reduced verbal and nonverbal communication skills, differences in social skills, and restricted and repetitive behaviors present the main features of ASD (Franchini et al., 2018).

According to Paul and Fahim (2014), communication deficits are a core symptom of ASD. Communication patterns of people with ASD are atypical. Echolalia, pronoun errors, and significant weaknesses in pragmatics and receptive language are among the atypical patterns (Paul & Fahim, 2014). *Echolalia* is prevalent in children with ASD and is defined as a meaningless repetition of what another person says as a symptom of a psychiatric disorder (Paul & Fahim, 2014). While children with ASD may repeat another person’s spoken words, they are unable to connect the function of meaning to what is being said (Paul & Fahim, 2014).

How Schools Support Autism

Research indicates, in the United States alone, prevalence rates of ASD are reported to be between one in 40 and one in 59 children (Baio et al., 2018). The earliest studies of ASD found a significant consistency in sex differences among boys and girls with boys being 3–4 times more likely than girls to have autism (Boat & Wu, 2015). This statistic is still true with a male-to-

female ratio of 3:1 (Loomes et al., 2017). In 2016, over 455,000 students with ASD were served under the IDEA in schools (Pas et al., 2016).

In 1990, the IDEA was adopted to provide students with disabilities the same opportunity for education as students who do not have a disability (Cummings et al., 2013). The IDEA requires public schools to create an IEP for any student found eligible under state and federal requirements (Cummings et al., 2013). Guaranteed under the IDEA is a student's right to a FAPE (Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, 2014). To provide a FAPE, schools must provide students with the services listed in the IEP, which have been designed to meet educational needs and prepare individuals for employment and independent living (Cummings et al., 2013).

The need to support teachers and work to find strategies to meet the needs of students with ASD in the educational setting is more prevalent than ever. The gap between theory and practice when teaching students with autism needs to be addressed (Alter-Muri, 2017). Teaching students with disabilities is not the same as learning about teaching students with disabilities. The teacher's perceptions toward students with ASD in the classroom may adversely affect the teacher's performance and quality of teaching (Alter-Muri, 2017). With the delay in many skills in students with ASD comes the question of where to place them in the educational setting to ensure they progress and succeed. In whatever setting best supports the student's needs, accommodations need to be in place to minimize obstacles to learning or participating in the educational environment (Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, 2014). With the increase in students with ASD entering the school setting faster than ever, accommodations and class supports are key.

When students with ASD enter school, educational teams must determine the appropriate manner and placement to meet educational needs (Kurth et al., 2016). Placement decisions

require other decisions to be made about which setting, individual goals, and service minutes will best meet the student's individual needs. Making decisions about placement for a student with ASD takes cognitive ability, social skills, and communication skills (Kurth et al., 2016). The IDEA requires students be placed in the least restrictive environment that can meet their educational needs.

A placement is considered least restrictive when students have more access to the general education curriculum and setting (Kurth et al., 2016). Schools are tasked with ensuring the environment provides the least amount of anxiety for students with ASD as possible. High levels of anxiety can be associated with students with ASD (Preece & Howley, 2018). Due to a relationship between attendance and academic achievement, schools need to consider environmental factors when determining placement (Kurth et al., 2016; Preece & Howley, 2018).

In providing supports in schools for students with ASD, classroom paraprofessionals are assigned to assist in the educational setting (Page & Ferrett, 2018). Paraprofessionals are utilized to support student needs in self-contained classrooms as well as during specials such as art, music, and physical education. Paraprofessionals in self-contained settings are trained to support students' needs as listed in their IEPs while supporting the teacher's instructional strategies (Page & Ferrett, 2018; Preece & Howley, 2018). Teachers are responsible for establishing clear roles for paraprofessionals to adequately facilitate students' learning and social outcomes in the classroom (Page & Ferrett, 2018). The work of paraprofessionals in self-contained classrooms mirrors strategies utilized by the teacher, speech pathologist, social worker, and occupational therapist to increase the skills of students with ASD (Page & Ferrett, 2018).

Training of all staff who work with students with ASD in educational settings is imperative. The teaching of students with ASD requires the use of strategies and approaches that

may not be typical or familiar (Sanahuja-Gavalada et al., 2016). Schools have the responsibility to adequately train staff to work with students at all levels and learning abilities. The main goal for students with ASD in a self-contained setting is to improve skills and work toward mainstreaming into general education classrooms (Sanahuja-Gavalada et al., 2016). The functional and academic needs of higher functioning students may be met through inclusion. Inclusion is the concept of students with disabilities participating in the same academic and nonacademic classes as general education peers (Sanahuja-Gavalada et al., 2016). Both general education and special education staff need to be trained in working with students with ASD to best meet academic and functional needs in school.

Teacher Perspectives of Students With Autism Spectrum Disorder

Absent from the research literature are the perspectives of teachers on the verbal communication skills of students with ASD. Due to the significant rise in the population of students with ASD, the need for educational settings, instruction, and interventions has increased (Olcay-Gul & Vuran, 2019). A key to successful academic outcomes, suggested by Bolourian et al. (2019), is the student–teacher relationship. Teachers reported seeing more growth in social skills and communication among students with whom they had a close, supportive relationship in the classroom (Bolourian et al., 2019). However, teachers reported it being difficult, in some cases, to develop deep relationships with students with ASD due to the students’ lack of verbal communication skills (Bolourian et al., 2019). Along with a close student–teacher relationship, positive teacher attitudes are an important predictor of the successful education of students with disabilities, including children with ASD (Bolourian et al., 2019; Rodriguez et al., 2012). Rodriguez et al. (2012) reported the importance of interventions in the classroom setting to assist in meeting the needs of students with ASD.

A cross-sectional study by Abduekarem et al. (2019) provided information on teachers' opinions regarding task performance, poor eye contact, uncooperativeness, and affectations of students with autism. The effects of the disability of autism were discussed in the study and confirmed that students with ASD take longer to process what is being requested of them. Abduekarem et al. (2019) also discussed the lack of communication skills of students with ASD and stated teachers may be misreading lack of verbalization as uncooperativeness. The study found considerable research indicating students with autism communicate through physical behaviors and sounds. Still, the findings did not cover strategies to increase verbal communication skills in students with ASD.

Fine Arts and Autism Spectrum Disorder

Fine arts in educational systems include music, art, drama, visual arts, dance, literature, film, and photography (Bennie, 2019). Utilizing fine arts to foster happiness and add a sense of well-being to the daily life of an individual with ASD allows for the feeling of familiarity and adds to the quality of life (Bennie, 2019). Fine arts are an outlet for self-expression, exploration, and creativity.

Benefits and Advantages of Art Integration

While fine arts may be incorporated throughout the school day for students with ASD, the amount of integration time and effect on verbal communication skills of students with ASD have not been clarified. Research and literature show fine arts therapies positively impact verbal communication and social skills of students with ASD. Still, many of the therapies are taught in isolation and not in the school setting.

For students with ASD, art can be the ideal way to express themselves because they think in pictures (Lesser, 2018). For students with ASD, the process of creating art is more important

than the final product (Alter-Muri, 2017). Educators can learn through the art process how to best build on the strengths of individual students. Art therapists focus less on the techniques in artmaking and more on understanding the behaviors, challenges, treatment, and educational plan creation during therapy sessions (Alter-Muri, 2017). Incorporating art integration as a classroom tool can increase cooperation, peer interaction, and body awareness of students with ASD (Alter-Muri, 2017; Lesser, 2018). A benefit to art integration is allowing unconscious images to develop, displaying a view of a student's otherwise hidden thoughts and feelings (Alter-Muri, 2017; Martin, 2009). Abstract thinking and verbal and nonverbal communication skills in students with ASD can be improved by integrating art in the classroom (Martin, 2009). The thought is art therapy can move children with ASD beyond the typical behaviors through the encouragement of perceptual, sensory, and cognitive development (Martin, 2009; Schweizer et al., 2017).

Lacour (2017) suggested the idea of art representing an alternative form of communication. Because individuals with ASD often have difficulty communicating and expressing themselves, art can be a form of expression. Painting, cutting, gluing, and other art activities allow people with autism to communicate through a creative outlet. Art therapy has shown an increase in attention to the directions of an adult and prediction of the sequence of directions in the classroom (Kuo & Belland, 2016). Lequia (2011) analyzed the perception of how people with autism learn.

Motivation, interest, and attention play a role in the learning of students with ASD. Lequia (2011) presented how to provide supports in educational settings to meet the needs of students with ASD. While in school, it is beneficial to focus on students' interests to encourage their learning process (Kuo & Belland, 2016; Lacour, 2017). However, how engagement through

interest will play a role in the learning outside of the school setting once in the community is unknown.

Martin (2009) examined the advantages of using art with individuals with autism. One of the advantages mentioned is exposure to art addressing several goal areas, which are to be worked on with students with ASD (Martin, 2009). Sensory regulation, communication, self-expression, and social collaboration are areas that can be improved by participating in art. Individuals with ASD tend to experience anxiety and frustration. Art allows them to express themselves and relax in a safe form.

A qualitative study conducted by Round et al. (2017) noted the importance of incorporating visual arts into the daily life of a person with autism. The study confirmed the difficulties a person with ASD may have identifying emotions as well as challenges with verbal communication. Purposeful sampling was used to recruit participants for the study, and interviews were utilized to collect information. The study indicated the importance of incorporating fine arts into the school setting and not only in isolated therapy sessions.

Effect of Performing Arts on Students on the Autism Spectrum

Visual and performing arts in the classroom can have an impact on students with ASD. Harrington et al. (2017) examined the impact different forms of fine arts integration can have on students with ASD in the classroom. The performing arts, such as dance, music, and theater, can help develop higher order thinking skills and encourage collaboration in the classroom (Harrington et al., 2017). Teachers must work with students with ASD to develop social skills as this deficit significantly impacts a child's learning. Students with ASD struggle with communicating with adults and same-age peers (Harrington et al., 2017; Nelson et al., 2017).

Teaching social and verbal communication skills to students with ASD can present instructional challenges for classroom teachers (Mpella et al., 2019). Teachers must learn to interpret, identify, and increase positive social interactions among students in the self-contained ASD setting. Allowing students to express themselves in less structured ways, such as art and music, can motivate these students.

Children with ASD often have difficulty socializing or playing with same-age peers (Nelson et al., 2017). Play skills and communication skills are often delayed in children with ASD (Nelson et al., 2017). Nelson et al. (2017) examined the effects of preferred play materials and creative dance activities on the socialization skills of students with autism. While social skills, communication skills, and play skills increased, results showed the increase was limited. Positive effects are seen when fine arts are integrated in a motivating and developmentally appropriate manner (Nelson et al., 2017). Creative dramatics include activities such as puppetry, storytelling, imaginative play, interpretive movements to sounds, and improvisation. Utilizing multiple forms of drama can assist in expanding language skills (Van Volkenburg, 2015).

A study was completed in 2015 by Corbett et al. to analyze the effects of theater intervention on the social competence of student participants with ASD. Students with ASD ranging in age from 8 to 14 were randomly selected to participate in the study. Over 2 months, the size of the effect was kept after theater treatment on social ability, communication, and group play. The results of the trial proved theater intervention has a positive impact on the skills of students with ASD (Corbett et al., 2015).

When developing opportunities for children with ASD to interact with peers and adults, it is essential to model and teach them how to do so appropriately. One strategy that has proven effective in supporting social skill improvement in children with ASD is using scripts (Barnett,

2018). Scripts, such as theater productions, are written skits, scenarios, or examples used to facilitate social interaction and verbal communication (Barnett, 2018). The scripts should be developed and aligned with the children's verbal skills and needs and reflective of their interests (Barnett, 2018).

Using Music Therapy to Meet the Needs of Children with ASD

Approximately 8%–12% of interventions used in ASD classrooms involve musical activities (Nelson et al., 2017). Evidence shows music interventions can improve ASD symptoms and social interactions, emotions, and communication (Lakes et al., 2019). Students become more social and expressive when music and dance are incorporated into the learning environment. Crane (2015) examined the effects of music therapy and the treatment of children with ASD. The study noted music therapy can be used to meet the needs of children throughout the spectrum. Communication and language deficits are followed to explore how music therapy affects the communication skills of children with ASD. Music can act as a catalyst for change and growth by providing needed neurological stimulation (Preis et al., 2016).

Music can produce many different emotions in people. Crane (2015) suggested individuals with ASD respond differently to different types of music. Emotional reactions evoked in individuals with autism due to music were summarized (Crane, 2015). Musical stimuli were used to record participants' emotional recognition (Stephenson et al., 2016). People of different ages responded differently to the music, although they all had the same disorder of ASD. DeVries et al. (2015) concluded music produces beneficial outcomes when utilized with multiple diagnostic groups. Benefits documented in research literature include improvement in cognitive, social, physical, and emotional domains as well as stimulating the brain in multiple areas (DeVries et al., 2015). The impact of music on students with ASD is no different. When

music is utilized as a therapeutic intervention, reported benefits for individuals with ASD include increased communication and social skills, increased verbalizations and vocabulary comprehension, reduced anxiety, and increased appropriate social behaviors (Cornhill, 2013; Simpson & Keen, 2011).

A qualitative case study by Geretsegger et al. (2014) found using music therapy as an intervention for persons with ASD had multiple benefits. Some of the study's primary outcomes were positive social interactions, verbal and nonverbal communicative skills, initiating behavior, and social-emotional reciprocity (Geretsegger et al., 2014). Data sources in the study included nonstandardized instruments such as observations, parent and teacher reports and interviews, and school records. Participants in the study were identified to range from mildly to severely autistic. The study's overall results reported positive effects on the communication and social-emotional skills of persons with ASD (Geretsegger et al., 2014).

Counterargument

Some may believe students with disabilities, such as ASD, are unable to grow in an educational setting due to the severity of symptoms and lack of skills. Teachers may report students continue to lack verbal communication skills despite attempting interventions in the classroom. Educators may report students with ASD are not affected by fine arts integration in the classroom setting. Teachers may believe therapies and programs for individuals with ASD work only for high-functioning individuals. The functional level of autism is determined per individual and suggests the level of supports needed, not the effect therapy will have on an individual (Dombrowski, 2019).

Another argument against fine arts integration having a positive effect on verbal communication skills of students with ASD relates to how teachers can expect persons with a

mental age level of an infant or toddler to develop skills and expectations based on chronological age (Happe, 1999). The concept of regression deters the positive perspective of some teachers as well. *Regression* is defined as a stall or loss of communication skills in students with ASD (Deweerd, 2016). Loss of language is the most widely reported aspect of regression in students with ASD (Backer & Backer, 2015). While regression does not occur in all students with ASD, it has been reported in one in every five cases (Deweerd, 2016).

Chapter Summary

According to researchers, the diagnosis of ASD is becoming more common at the elementary school-age level (Autism Speaks, 2018). Current prevalence rates of ASD are reported to be between one in 40 and one in 59 children (Baio et al., 2018). In 2016, over 455,000 students with ASD were served under the IDEA in schools (Pas et al., 2016). The gap between theory and practice when teaching students with autism needs to be addressed (Alter-Muri, 2017).

With the delay in many skills in students with ASD comes the question of where to place them in the educational setting to ensure they progress and succeed. In whatever setting best supports the student's needs, accommodations need to be in place to minimize obstacles to learning or participating in the educational environment (Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, 2014). The IDEA was adopted to provide students with disabilities the same opportunity for education as students who do not have a disability (Cummings et al., 2013). Under the IDEA public schools are required to create an IEP for any student found eligible under state and federal requirements (Cummings et al., 2013). Guaranteed under the IDEA is a student's right to a FAPE (Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, 2014).

The heterogeneity of ASD causes a wide range of symptoms seen in the disorder specifically linked to basic language skills (Crutcher et al., 2018). Children with ASD frequently display delays in social skills and unusual or repetitive behavior (American Psychiatric Association, 2019). The education system has a wide range of responsibilities and roles to play in providing appropriate and effective education to students with disabilities. Working to eliminate social skills and communication deficits begins with directly teaching the expected versus unexpected behaviors (Olcay-Gul & Vuran, 2019). Teachers are leaders in the classroom setting. Required of the teacher as a leader is the ability to utilize and develop teaching methods, materials, and norms to improve teaching quality to help students achieve educational goals (Raza & Sikandar, 2018).

Each situation in the classroom warrants a response from the teacher. The leader's role is to judge the response needed based on the student's ability and willingness to complete the task (Wright, 2017). Due to the varying skills and functional levels of students with ASD, teachers must understand how to meet various needs. The behaviors and abilities of students with ASD may be regulated one day and not the next. Utilizing this leadership style has the benefit of combining strategies to meet individual as well as environmental needs (Wall, 2019).

Due to the significant rise in the population of students with ASD, the need for educational settings, instruction, and interventions has increased (Olcay-Gul & Vuran, 2019). Teacher perspectives of students with ASD play a role in the success and growth of the student. A key to successful academic outcomes, suggested by Bolourian et al. (2019), is the student-teacher relationship. However, due to the lack of verbal communication skills of the students, teachers reported it being difficult, in some cases, to develop deep relationships with students with ASD (Bolourian et al., 2019).

Interventions in the classroom setting assist in meeting the needs of students with ASD (Rodriguez et al., 2012). Training of all staff who work with students with ASD in educational settings is imperative. The teaching of students with ASD requires the use of strategies and approaches that may not be typical or familiar (Sanahuja-Gavalada et al., 2016). Schools have the responsibility to adequately train staff to work with students at all levels and learning abilities.

Approximately 8%–12% of interventions used in ASD classrooms involve musical activities (Nelson et al., 2017). Students become more social and expressive when music and dance are incorporated into the learning environment. Educators can learn through the use of fine arts how to best build on the strengths of individual students. A benefit to art integration is allowing unconscious images to develop, displaying a student's otherwise hidden thoughts and feelings. Abstract thinking, as well as verbal and nonverbal communication skills in students with ASD, can be improved through the integration of art in the classroom (Martin, 2009). Sensory regulation, communication, self-expression, and social collaboration are areas that can be improved by participating in art. Individuals with autism tend to experience anxiety and frustration. Art allows them to express themselves and relax in a safe form. The performing arts, such as dance, music, and theater, can help develop higher order thinking skills and encourage collaboration in the classroom (Harrington et al., 2017).

A gap remains in research regarding teachers' perceptions of the effects of fine arts integration on the verbal communication skills of students with ASD. The gap between theory and practice when teaching students with ASD is evident (Alter-Muri, 2017). Students with ASD benefit from exposure to music, art, theater, and other forms of fine arts instruction, which is

lacking in classrooms specifically identified as self-contained for students with autism in the district studied.

In conjunction with stage theory of cognitive development, theory of mind clearly shows the developmental gap between general education students and students with ASD in a self-contained classroom. The findings from the study may benefit students with ASD in the district.

This chapter provided an overview of the scholarly literature about how fine arts integration may impact the verbal communication skills of students with ASD. The strategies and tools for finding relevant literature were detailed. Situational leadership, theory of mind, and stage theory of cognitive development were explained and connected to form the study's conceptual and theoretical frameworks. The review of the research literature provided statistics and background information and described the approaches of other studies, showing the building blocks for the content and methodology of this study.

The following Chapter 3 covers the specific methodological approach used to understand instructional staff members' perceptions of the effects of fine arts integration on verbal communication skills of students with ASD. The rationale for the selection and utilization of a qualitative case study approach is discussed as well. The role of the researcher, details concerning the population and sample selection, instrumentation, data collection, and data analysis procedures are included in the next chapter. Strategies for addressing reliability and validity and ethical procedures also are described.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The purpose of the qualitative case was to learn how the integration of fine arts into the classroom affects the communication skills of students with ASD. With the increased need for educational placement for students with ASD, the need for strategies to help enhance the verbal communication skills of students with ASD also increases. The following research questions guided the study:

Research Question 1: What are instructional staff members' perceptions of verbal communication skills of students with autism before fine arts integration versus after fine arts integration in the classroom?

Research Question 2: What strategies are staff members using to integrate fine arts into their daily curriculum in the classroom?

The research design and rationale for selecting a qualitative case study approach are outlined. The role of the researcher, details concerning the population and sample selection, instrumentation, data collection, and data analysis procedures are included. Strategies for addressing reliability and validity as well as ethical procedures are described. A summary of the chapter and a transition to Chapter 4 are provided.

Research Design and Rationale

Quantitative research is utilized when inquiring into a human or social problem based on testing a theory, measuring numbers, and analyzing using a statistical procedure, while qualitative research utilizes an inquiry process to understand a human or social problem by building a holistic picture formed with words based on detailed views of a topic gathered in a natural setting (Sogunro, 2002). For the study, researching and collecting information in the natural setting of the participants were essential. A qualitative case study was selected not only

because of the ability to develop an in-depth analysis of the self-contained program at the elementary school but because it allowed for the opportunity to question, observe, and interview teachers of this vulnerable population (Creswell, 2014). The qualitative case study explored whether communication skills in students with autism were improved due to integrating fine arts into their curriculum. The study allowed for interviewing staff, collecting and analyzing the perceptions, and reporting the results over a period of time (Zainal, 2007).

Qualitative research can be conducted utilizing different study designs such as phenomenology or case study. Phenomenology is designed to better understand the lived experiences and perspectives of participants through interviews dependent on the skills of the interviewer (Hasa, 2017). A case study design approach is used to conduct a detailed investigation into the development of an event, situation, or individuals over a period of time through observations, questionnaires, and interviews and cannot be used to form generalizations (Hasa, 2017). Creswell (2014) noted case study allows the researcher freedom to focus intensely on a particular issue, such as understanding in a classroom or a specific group of students.

A qualitative case study was appropriate for this study because of the naturalistic inquiry process based on the views of individuals being studied and their perceptions and interpretations of lived experiences (Merriam, 2009). The design was suitable for researching the participants' perceptions because it yields no single or clear-cut outcome. The design fit the research context as students with ASD are a vulnerable population. Developing an understanding of teachers' perceptions of the effect of fine arts integration on verbal communication of students with ASD removes the constraints of working directly with students in the specialized self-contained setting.

Role of the Researcher

I am a school administrator at an elementary school in suburban Illinois. The self-contained classrooms and teachers utilized in the study are located in the same building and are currently under my supervision. Permission was sought to conduct the study in the district and site location (see Appendix A). A researcher's knowledge and contribution to the research setting should not be damaging to the study but, rather, positive and useful (Creswell, 2014). For the case study, my role was observer, interviewer, data collector, and data analyst. Although the study was conducted using teachers from my building, participation was voluntary, and no incentives were offered to persuade participants. Participants were reaffirmed they could feel safe talking with me and that results of the study would have no impact on their annual evaluation as an educator. A component of qualitative research is the idea of relationships and power between the researcher and study participants. The willingness to participate in a research study is based on a participant's eagerness to share life experiences (Orb et al., 2001).

Researchers have ethical obligations to uphold to the participants in the study (Brickmann, n.d.). Procedures for conducting qualitative research, such as ensuring privacy and confidentiality, receiving informed consent, and following federal research regulations, were strictly adhered to and followed from the online training I participated in through the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative. To prevent employees from being uncomfortable throughout the recruitment process, I avoided face-to-face invitations. Utilizing a qualitative approach allowed for exploring possible answers to the research questions through teacher questionnaires, observations, and interviews. Using the observational field notes, teacher questionnaires, and virtual interviews of teachers allowed for triangulation of the data.

Research Procedures

In qualitative studies, researchers collect multiple forms of data and spend time in the participants' settings gathering information (Creswell, 2014). Interview questions and questionnaires created by the researcher were sent by email to five subject matter experts (SMEs) to be reviewed and checked for content validity (see Appendix B). The five SMEs were an autism behavioral specialist, autism classroom teacher, low incidence district coordinator, speech–language coordinator, and chair of the researcher's dissertation committee. Three subject matter experts provide feedback and input on specific topics of expertise (Diezmann & Watters, 2015). The feedback received from the SMEs was utilized to revise the instrumentation as necessary (see Appendix C). The intent for the study was to include five special education teachers, five fine arts specialists, and five general education teachers as participants. Questionnaires were collected through a Google Form format (see Appendix D). Staff received the link to the questionnaire to be completed and returned to the researcher. The returned questionnaires represented the pool from which staff were recruited to participate based on a willingness to express beliefs and perceptions about the verbal communication skills of students with ASD. Based on the questionnaire responses, four special education teachers, three general education teachers, three fine arts specialists, and three special education paraprofessionals were selected as study participants.

Population and Sample Selection

The setting was an elementary school in suburban Illinois. The district has a moderate population of students with ASD: 2,529 students with IEPs in the district of about 16,000 students. According to the district IEP system, 252 students have a primary diagnosis of autism, which is approximately 10% of the district's IEPs. Four classrooms are specifically designated

ASD classrooms to work with these students and meet their needs. Many students in the program struggle with verbal communication.

Purposeful sampling was used to select teachers and other instructional staff members for the qualitative case study. The method of participant selection was most appropriate because of the participants' knowledge about the phenomenon of interest (Palinkas et al., 2016). A total of 21 certified staff members were targeted when recruiting for the study, 13 of whom were selected to participate in the case study. Self-contained teachers, general education teachers, paraprofessionals, and music, arts, and theater staff in the elementary school completed questionnaires to determine if they fit the participation criteria. The purpose of the study and informed consent were emailed to the staff by the researcher. A Google Forms link was included in the email to collect information about qualifications and interest in participating in the study. The research questions, approach, and design methodology were considered when making the final selection participants to recruit (Baskarada, 2014). Instructional staff members were recruited to participate based on their willingness to express their beliefs and perceptions about the verbal communication skills of students with ASD. To safeguard the rights of participants, informed consent was provided. A written explanation of the research and rights as a research participant was included in the agreement. Before beginning data collection and interviews, a signed consent form was completed and collected from the participants.

Instrumentation

The study explored instructional staff members' perceptions of the effects of fine arts integration on verbal communication skills of students with autism. Using a qualitative approach allowed for the exploration of possible answers to the research questions through teacher questionnaires, observations, and interviews. Using the observational field notes, teacher

questionnaires, and virtual interviews of teachers allowed for triangulation of the data. Multiple sources enable the findings to be compared and contrasted, verifying consistency (Ellis, 2019). For the study, it was appropriate to develop new instruments that were more closely aligned with the research questions as well as mandates established by the National Institutes of Health.

Researcher-developed teacher questionnaire questions were based on Tschannen-Moran's (n.d.) Teacher Efficacy Scales. The most common type of qualitative research questions start with how, why, or what in order to gain extensive knowledge on the topic of study (Baskarada, 2014). These qualitative questions drove the development of the five interview questions modeled after inclusion criteria by Oltmann (2016). An observation checklist was created to align directly with the research questions. Due to the vulnerable population of students in the classrooms of the teachers being observed, items on the checklist had to involve the least amount of disruption possible. All three tools were emailed to five SMEs for feedback and ensured content validity (see Appendix B). The feedback received from the SMEs was utilized to revise the instrumentation as necessary (see Appendix C). For example, the original observation checklist stated, "Teachers use appropriate verbal communication methods." The speech-language pathologist serving as an SME suggested using the term "model appropriate verbal communication methods" to ensure students were being prompted or corrected on verbal tasks. The data collection instruments are provided in Appendices D–F.

Data Collection and Preparation

The data required for the study derived from three sources: teacher questionnaires, observations of the teachers, and interviews. Twenty-one staff members in the building received the link to complete the questionnaire. Questionnaires were sent and collected through a Google Form format. Staff completed and returned the questionnaire to the researcher. Fifteen of twenty-

one staff members completed and returned the questionnaire to the researcher. The returned questionnaires represented the pool from which staff were recruited to participate based on their willingness to express their beliefs and perceptions about the verbal communication skills of students with ASD. A questionnaire was chosen because of the ability to offer an objective means of collecting data about beliefs, attitudes, and knowledge about a subject (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017).

Once selected to participate in the case study, participants began the process of fine arts integration immediately. During November 2020 and January 2021, data were collected through interviews and classroom observations. After 2 months of fine arts integration, participants received the questionnaire link for the second time. Completing the questionnaire after fine arts integration allowed for the inclusion of opinions and experiences (Eckerdal & Hagstrom, 2016).

As instructional staff members' perceptions of a specific population of students were sought, semi-structured interviews were conducted. This approach was chosen because of the opportunity for dialogue to emerge from open-ended questions between the interviewer and interviewees (Oplatka, 2018). Each interview lasted approximately 15 minutes. Individual semi-structured interviews allowed for the researcher to collect data in a manner providing the opportunity to maintain control over the directional follow-up questions when needed (Creswell, 2014). Locations and times for each interview were mutually agreed on between the interviewer and interviewees. Interviews were conducted via Google Meet. Transcription of interviews was completed using the Temi.com program. Until transcription, the audio recording was stored in a locked cabinet in the researcher's office. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and stored on the researcher's password-protected computer. To protect participant identity during the transcription process, participants were referred to by a number rather than name.

Observations of the teacher participants were conducted virtually in the classroom setting. Using a third source of data collection helped establish greater validity and reliability of the data and support the integrity of the study. Qualitative observations allowed for field notes to be collected on the behaviors and strategies of individuals at the research site (Creswell, 2014). A semi-structured observation approach using a checklist was used to observe the strategies and ask general questions of the teacher participants. An advantage to collecting data in this manner is the investigator has a firsthand, on-site experience with the participant (Creswell, 2014).

Before conducting any form of data collection, participants were briefed on the semi-structured approaches being used. Participants were made aware the goal of collecting data was to understand how the population functions and to understand teachers' perceptions and thought processes (Ponelis, 2015). All forms of completed data were stored and secured on the researcher's password-protected computer. An additional password was needed to log in to Google Drive to access the completed interviews, questionnaires, and observation checklists. Only the researcher was able to access the data. Google questionnaires, observation checklists, and transcribed interviews were transferred into spreadsheet form. Numerical pseudonyms were used to identify the participants, and data were uploaded and coded through MAXQDA software. Data will be stored in a secure and locked location or device for 3 years after completing the study (Creswell, 2014). After 5 years, data will be destroyed to prevent any misuse or duplication of results. Once the study concluded, participants were debriefed on the information collected and thanked for participating. There are currently no plans to conduct a follow-up with participants once exited from the study; however, they received a summary of the findings.

Data Analysis

When beginning the data analysis phase in a case study, it is recommended all information about the study be brought together (Merriam, 2009). Google questionnaires, observation checklists, and transcribed interviews were transferred into spreadsheet form. Pseudonyms were used to identify participants, and data were uploaded and coded through MAXQDA software. Axial coding was completed through MAXQDA. This process of grouping open codes comes from interpretation and reflection on the data's meaning (Merriam, 2009). While other interviews and observations were taking place, the transcripts completed through MAXQDA were read to begin noting repeated trends in participant responses. The open coding conducted in the qualitative process of collecting data while simultaneously collecting additional data is unlike the quantitative data analysis process (Creswell, 2014). Utilizing three data collection sources allowed for triangulation and a deeper understanding of common themes and trends in the data.

Reliability and Validity

The credibility and dependability of the study were established through triangulation and member checking. Due to a large number of decisions researchers must make when conducting a study, there is a need to demonstrate what decisions were made and why (Ellis, 2019). Themes were evident from the questionnaires, teacher interviews, and observations to show the validity of the study. Participants received a copy of the respective transcripts to review for accuracy and trends that emerged. Member checking helped increase data analysis credibility (Varpio et al., 2017). Participant involvement and their perspectives on the phenomenon of interest increased through member checking (Merriam, 2009).

Transferability of study results was possible through rich, thick descriptions of the findings (Creswell, 2014). Detailed presentation of the findings from the study, as well as careful attention to the selection of the study sample, enhanced the range of application by other researchers (Merriam, 2009). The findings from the study may be applicable in other educational settings and classrooms containing students with ASD. Including staff from multiple grade levels and content areas in the building enhances the possibility of transferability. Strategies utilized in each setting have the potential to improve the verbal communication skills of students with autism.

Establishing confirmability will allow for the data to reflect the outcomes of the intended study. The perspective of the researcher shapes all research (Darawsheh & Stanley, 2014). Reflexivity was used to confirm the findings from the study. Allowing time to approach the study and findings from an unbiased angle is crucial in creating confirmability (Varpio et al., 2017). Notes identifying and explaining the researcher's values, perceptions, and beliefs were included in the findings to explain the possible impact on the study results.

Ethical Procedures

The Belmont Report was written in 1974 by the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research (The Commission) to protect the rights of human subjects participating in research. Three basic principles were established due to relevancy to the ethics of research involving human subjects. Respect for persons is the first principle, which incorporates the idea that individuals should be treated as autonomous agents as well as being entitled to protection (The Commission, 1974). The principle of beneficence was developed to respect the decisions and well-being of participants (The Commission, 1974). The final principle, justice, is the concept that equals should be treated equally (The Commission,

1974). These basic ethical principles were at the forefront of the study to protect the participants' rights.

Potential participants were contacted through email to ensure no feeling of coercion.. Due to the investigator's being the supervisor of the recruited participants, contact was made electronically to alleviate any awkwardness or pressure to participate. To ensure no conflict of interest throughout the research, the study's primary interest remained front and center (Romain, 2015).

Prior to conducting the research involving human subjects, informed consent was obtained (The Commission, 1974). Explanation of the intent of the study and participation criteria were given to participants in written form to receive consent (see Appendix G). Consent includes the three main principles that govern research ethics: respect, kindness, and fairness. To ensure participant privacy, pseudonyms were used when collecting questionnaire data and observational notes. All forms of completed data were stored and secured on the researcher's password-protected computer. An additional password was needed to log in to Google Drive to access the completed interviews, questionnaires, and observation checklists. Only the researcher can access the data. Data will be stored in a secure and locked location or device for 3 years after completing the study (Creswell, 2014). After 3 years, data will be destroyed to prevent any misuse or duplication of results. If a participant became uncomfortable at any point during the research study, the participant had the right to opt out, following the principles of the opt-out clause.

Prior to conducting any research, the Institutional Review Board of American College of Education approved the protocol and purpose of the study involving human subjects. Although the study was conducted using teachers and other instructional staff members from the

researcher's building, participation was voluntary, and no incentives were offered to persuade participants. To establish self-awareness and a subjective experience, critical consciousness on behalf of the researcher was at the forefront during the study (Aluwihare-Samaranayake, 2012). A subjectivity statement was utilized to recognize any preconceived ideas and perceptions of the researcher pertaining to students with ASD and the concept of fine arts integration.

Chapter Summary

With the increased need for educational placement for students with ASD, a need arises for strategies to enhance the verbal communication skills of students with ASD. The purpose of the qualitative case study was to learn how the integration of fine arts into the classroom affects the communication skills of students with ASD. Using a qualitative case study approach, teacher questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and teacher observations were used to collect data.

The role of the researcher, research procedures, and participant criteria were established for the study. Triangulation of data and member checking were utilized to increase the reliability and validity of the study. Data analysis and ethical procedures were explored to ensure the confidentiality of participants. The following Chapter 4 further explains the study's results and provides additional details on the data collection, data analysis, and reliability and validity of the research. The research questions are answered based on the data collected.

Chapter 4: Research Findings and Data Analysis Results

The diagnosis of students with autism in the elementary setting has increased by 30% since tracking began in the United States in 2000 (Wright, 2017). Diagnoses of ASD are becoming more common at the elementary school-age level (Autism Speaks, 2018). In 2018, approximately one in 59 children was diagnosed with ASD, according to the CDC (Autism Speaks, 2018). The problem is the limited amount of research showing the effects of fine arts integration on the verbal communication skills of students with ASD. The purpose of the qualitative case study was to explore instructional staff members' perceptions regarding classroom integration of fine arts and the effects on communication skills of students with ASD. Increased placement of students with ASD accelerates the need for strategies to enhance the verbal communication skills of students with ASD.

The limited amount of research showing the effects on the verbal communication skills of students with ASD through the integration of fine arts creates a problem. There has been an increase of students with ASD in the school setting (Wright, 2017). The prevalence rates of students with ASD in the United States are between one and 40 and one in 59 (Baio et al., 2018). The qualitative case study explored instructional staff members' regarding classroom integration of fine arts and the effects on communication skills of students with ASD. The research was needed to understand instructional staff members' of students' verbal communication before and after fine arts, such as music, art, and theater, are integrated into the specialized setting. The researcher sought to understand if communication skills of students with ASD increase and improve due to the integration of fine arts into their curriculum.

Findings from data collection are explored and outlined. Any deviations from the original data collection plan are described. Data analysis and results are explained. Reliability and validity of results are discussed.

Data Collection

Participants were recruited via email (see Appendix H) and selected using purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling was the most appropriate method for participant selection as the process involves identifying and selecting people who are knowledgeable and experienced in the topic of interest (Palinkas et al., 2016). Informed consent forms (see Appendix G) were sent to the 15 staff members that completed the questionnaire via email. All informed consent forms were signed and collected in November 2020, prior to any data collection. All 13 participants completed the Teacher Perception Questionnaire (see Appendix D) between November and December 2020. Between November 2020 and January 2021, instructional staff member observations were conducted virtually, and results recorded using the Teacher Observation Checklist form (see Appendix F). Each of the 13 participants was observed twice by the researcher. Virtual interviews were conducted with all participants in January 2021.

The Teacher Perception Questionnaire included eight open-ended questions. Participants received the questionnaire via Google Forms. The questionnaire took no longer than 15 minutes to complete. Responses were automatically recorded via Google Forms, allowing access to the researcher. Participant email addresses were not collected on the form to protect the identity of the respondents. Questionnaires were emailed to participants in four categories: classroom teachers, fine arts specialists, related service staff, and paraprofessionals. The demographics of participants are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1*Participant Demographics*

Demographic variable	<i>n</i>	%
Job category		
Special education teacher	4	31
Fine arts teacher	3	23
General education teacher	3	23
Special education paraprofessional	3	23
Grade level		
K–2	1	8
3–5	3	23
K–5	9	69

Instructional staff members observations were completed virtually using the Google Meet platform. Each observation lasted approximately 20 minutes. Participants were observed twice during which the observation checklist was completed. Numbers were utilized instead of names to protect the anonymity of study participants.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted virtually using the Google Meet platform, allowing for recording and transcription. Each interview lasted between 15 and 30 minutes depending on the amount of information shared by the participant. Pseudonyms in the form of numbers were used to protect participant anonymity. Interview transcripts were cleaned to remove repeated words and filler words, such as “like,” “um,” and “uh.” Data from all three collection tools were collected and stored on a password-protected device.

Recruitment for the study was originally intended to include 21 classroom teachers. Due to the district moving to 100% remote instruction, some teachers did not feel comfortable participating or completing the questionnaire. The offer to participate in the study was extended to paraprofessionals who work directly with students with autism. A limitation of including paraprofessionals was they are credentialed educators, but not certified teachers. Strategies and activities implemented by paraprofessionals came from the directive of the classroom teachers. Locations for interviews were mutually agreed on between the interviewer and interviewees. As the district was not allowing in-person instruction, all interviews were conducted virtually using Google Meet. Observations were also intended to be done in person in the classroom setting. Due to the non-in-person instruction, observations were conducted by the investigator joining the virtual classrooms of participants.

Data Analysis and Results

Three tools were utilized to collect data for the study. Observational checklists, teacher questionnaires, and virtual interviews of instructional staff members allowed for triangulation of the data collected. Due to the unique population of students as the focus of the study through instructional staff members perceptions, a case study format allowed for in-depth interviews to be conducted with staff members rather than students themselves.

Questionnaire

Teacher Perception Questionnaires were sent to participants via Google Forms. Utilizing a questionnaire allowed participants to express their perceptions and experiences of working to increase the verbal communication skills of students with ASD. The questionnaire was implemented to capture perceptions prior to fine arts integration in the classroom. Email addresses were not collected to protect the identity of participants. Prior to sending the

questionnaire to participants, 15 participants signed and returned the informed consent document. The informed consent also explained the purpose of the study. Participants were also given the opportunity to ask questions and reminded they could opt out of the study at any time for any reason. Thirteen questionnaires were returned via email, and all eight questions were completed on each. As evidenced by the results, two participants chose to opt out for unknown reasons.

Observation Checklist

The teacher observation checklist was utilized as a data collection tool throughout the study. Once participants consented to take part in the study, integration of fine arts into the classroom began immediately. Participants were made aware of the look-for items on the checklist. The checklist collected look-for data regarding the integration of fine arts into classroom lessons. Data on the opportunities staff provided during lessons to allow students to use verbal communication were also collected. Twenty-six observations were conducted, two for each participant. The teacher observation checklist was implemented to ensure fine arts integration was ongoing throughout the study.

Interviews

Interviews were conducted via Google Meet. Recording and transcription of interviews were completed using the platform. The transcript was sent to the respective participant for verification within 48 hours after the interview. Each participant was referred to by a number during the transcription process to protect participant identity. Interviews were stored on a password-protected computer. Three tools were used to collect data with the intent to answer the two research questions in the study:

Research Question 1: What are instructional staff members' perceptions of verbal communication skills of students with autism before fine arts integration versus after fine arts integration in the classroom?

Research Question 2: What strategies are staff members using to integrate fine arts into their daily curriculum in the classroom?

Data Preparation and Coding

Responses from questionnaires, observation checklists, and interviews were entered into MAXQDA software for coding. Initial codes were created based on individual responses to eight open-ended questions in teacher questionnaires. The coded data from the questionnaires were then printed and analyzed. Subcodes were created to group common responses regarding staff perceptions prior to fine arts integration. The subcodes were added into MAXQDA. Common codes in the data were highlighted to show patterns and themes within responses.

Data collected using the teacher observation checklist were tallied by hand and entered into an Excel spreadsheet by observation look-for. The tally process was completed three times to ensure accuracy of the data. The Excel spreadsheet was uploaded into MAXQDA. Data were coded using the initial coding categories. Again, common codes were highlighted to show patterns and themes within the observation checklist data.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed using the Google Meet platform. Once the transcripts were cleaned by removing fillers, they were uploaded into MAXQDA. Interview transcripts were coded utilizing the common codes created. The coded data from interviews were printed and analyzed. Subcodes were created to represent common responses regarding staff perceptions after fine arts integration. The subcodes were added into MAXQDA, and common codes within the data were highlighted to show patterns and themes. Throughout the coding of

teacher questionnaires, observation checklists, and semi-structured interviews, several key themes emerged.

Results

The goal for each data collection tool was to seek answers to the two research questions addressed in the study. Themes emerging during data analysis and coding aligned to findings in the literature review (see Table 2). Additionally, the conceptual and theoretical frameworks of situational leadership style, theory of mind, and stage theory of cognitive development contributed to data collection and interpretation. Participant perceptions were based on knowledge of working with students with ASD and the understanding that children with developmental delays, such as those with ASD, may take longer to develop and some skills may never be attained (Thompson, 2017). The key themes were explored and studied from the lens of the research questions.

Table 2

Themes That Emerged During Data Analysis

Theme	No. times theme found in data analysis
Believe fine arts integration will have a positive impact	11
Noted challenges to implementation due to remote learning	6
Music integration	13
Art integration	4
Effects of integration linger	5
Lack of consistency of strategy implementation	4

Research Question 1 asked, What are instructional staff members' perceptions of verbal communication skills of students with autism before fine arts integration versus after fine arts integration in the classroom? Participants completed the teacher questionnaire prior to officially integrating fine arts into daily lessons. The questionnaire was intended to gauge perceptions of verbal communication skills. A semi-structured interview was conducted with 13 participants after fine arts integration had been implemented for multiple weeks. Several themes emerged regarding staff perceptions of verbal communication and fine arts integration and the amount of fine arts integration into daily lessons.

Theme 1: Believe Fine Arts Integration Will Have a Positive Impact

In examining the data from the 13 completed teacher questionnaires, 11 responses indicated fine arts integration will have a positive impact on communication skills of students with ASD. Two participants responded as being unsure of the impact fine arts integration will have on verbal communication skills of students.

The questionnaire sought staff perceptions prior to regularly implementing fine arts in the classroom. One participant responded,

I think many nonverbal students respond very well to music and art so I think it would be beneficial in many ways. I think it could increase communication attempts and make students more interested in social interactions. Also, music could add to the student's enjoyment of the lessons.

Another participant responded, "I strongly believe and have seen the benefit of using music/song to enhance verbal output and retain skills/concepts."

The data revealed the majority of participants believed integrating fine arts in classroom lessons would have a positive impact on verbal communication skills of students with ASD. The

positive perceptions of participants were encouraging as verbal communication is a skill often delayed in most students with ASD. Participants believed integrating fine arts, such as music, visual arts, or theater, would have a positive influence on verbal communication of students with ASD.

Theme 2: Noted Challenges to Implementation Due to Remote Learning

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and school closures, the site used for research delivered 100% remote instruction to students. Twelve of the 13 participants mentioned being fully remote during the interview process as being a barrier in improving communication skills of students with ASD (see Table 3). Participants stated, during in-person learning, staff had more control over the lesson. At times, students became easily distracted by other occurrences in the home, taking away from the lesson. Participants stated adjusting the environment and lesson was much more feasible during in-person instruction. Integrating fine arts into daily lessons with fidelity proved to be a challenge during remote instruction.

Table 3

Participants' Noted Challenges Due to Remote Learning

Noted Challenges	Pseudonym of Participant with Response	No. times theme found in data analysis
Spoken Home Language	3, 4, 7, 11	4
Consistency	1, 2, 3, 5, 11	5
Overstimulation	6, 10, 13	3

The challenge that emerged most often, according to interview responses, was consistency. An interviewee stated, “A barrier occurs when not everyone on a student’s team does the same thing that we do in individual lessons. We’re not really helping the students to understand due to inconsistencies in accommodations and strategies.” Another participant said,

I think the challenge is you’re going to different classes and not everybody is using the same thing, so they’re trying to communicate and I think it can be confusing for the kids because there is not one set way. This has been very difficult during remote learning.

Theme 2 revealed some challenges teachers faced when working with students virtually. Consistency of implementation across groups, spoken home language differing from the teacher’s language, and overstimulation causing distractions were among the most commonly noted challenges in participant responses. Participants found it difficult to make necessary adjustments to lessons remotely.

Research Question 2 asked, What strategies are staff members using in the classroom to integrate fine arts into their daily curriculum? The classroom observation checklist and participant interviews captured strategies being utilized to integrate fine arts in the classroom. The researcher completed two observations in each participant’s learning environment. The teacher observation checklist was completed during the observation. Interviews conducted with each participant took place after the integration of fine arts in the classroom. The themes aligned to Research Question 2 were utilization of music integration, art integration lacking verbal communication opportunities, and effects of integration linger.

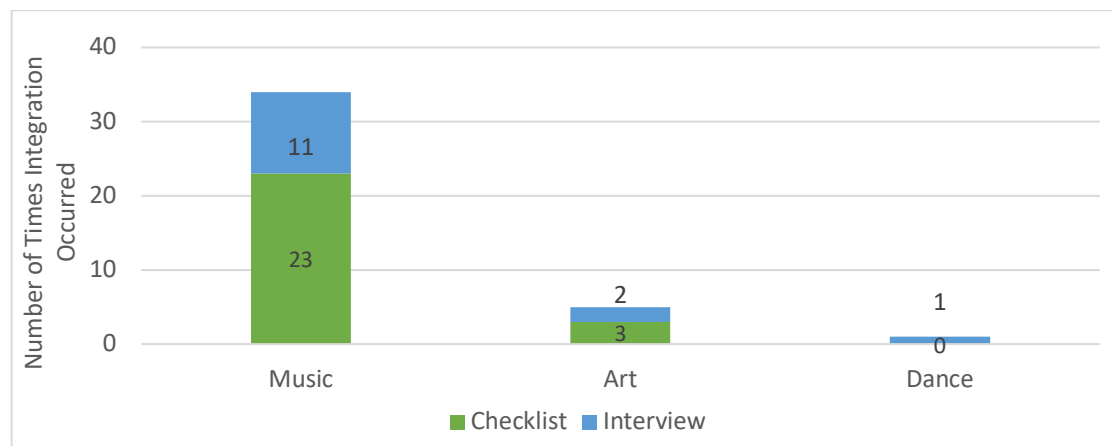
Theme 3: Music Integration

Of the 26 instructional staff members observations conducted, 23 aligned with integrating fine arts strategies in the lessons. Evident from the semi-structured interviews and teacher

observations, the most prevalent theme was utilizing music in the classroom (see Figure 4). For example, music was played for students to help them learn the months of the year. Another example was a music video being projected to engage student language about colors.

Figure 4

Instructional Strategies Integrating Fine Arts



Teacher observations captured the use of music integration as a strategy to elicit verbal responses from students. During an interview, a participant stated, “I find that using music allows the functioning verbal students to create their discussions into a rap because it works for them.” Another participant stated,

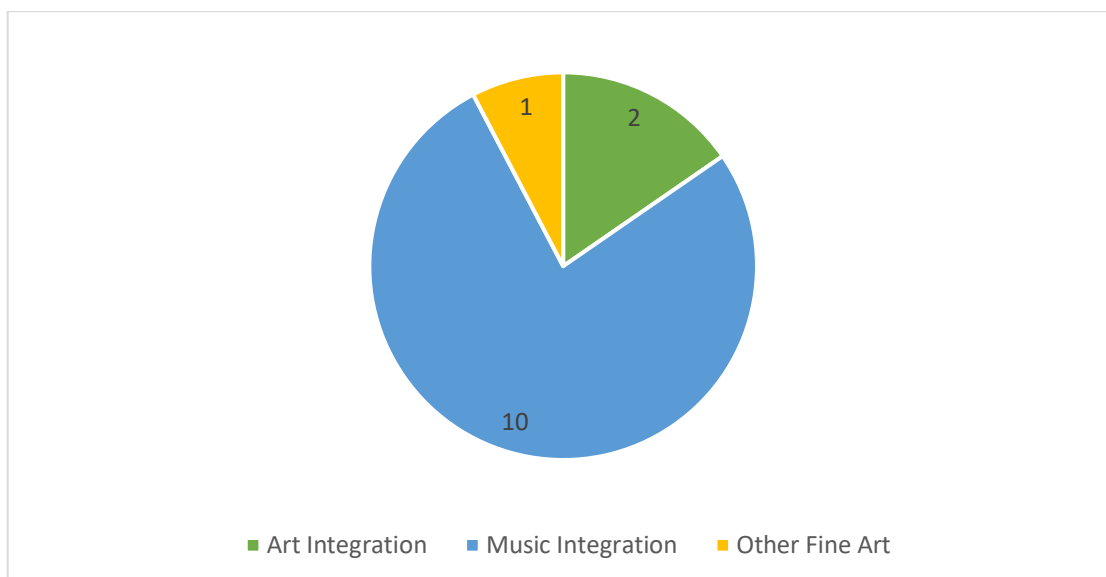
When teaching students with lower verbal abilities, we find music to incorporate based on the topic students are learning. For example, if we are learning about bears, if you find a song about bears, they are more interested than when we just talk about bears.

Participants reported the use of music evokes visible positive emotions in students. For this reason, participants used music as a catalyst to enhance instruction of classroom lessons. Allowing students to hear another form of verbally spoken language models word usage for them and increases the chance of replication.

Theme 4: Art Integration Does Not Elicit Many Verbal Responses

Theme 4 suggested integration of art does not elicit many verbal responses from nonverbal and slightly verbal students with ASD. One participant stated, “I guess I don’t really use art integration as often because the kids are quiet while working on their projects.” Another participant mentioned, “I use very little art in my class. The students respond more verbally to music.” Of the 13 participants observed and interviewed, only two integrated art into lessons (see Figure 5).

Staff were not given a specific curriculum to use for fine arts integration. While art was integrated into lessons, the intent was not to improve the verbal communication skills of students with ASD. Participants perceived music to elicit more verbal responses than visual art. One participant stated, “Using art in my classroom calms my students and allows them to draw how they feel. Nonverbal students use the art to communicate without being able to verbally respond.”

Figure 5*Use of Art Integration*

Theme 5: Effects of Integration Linger

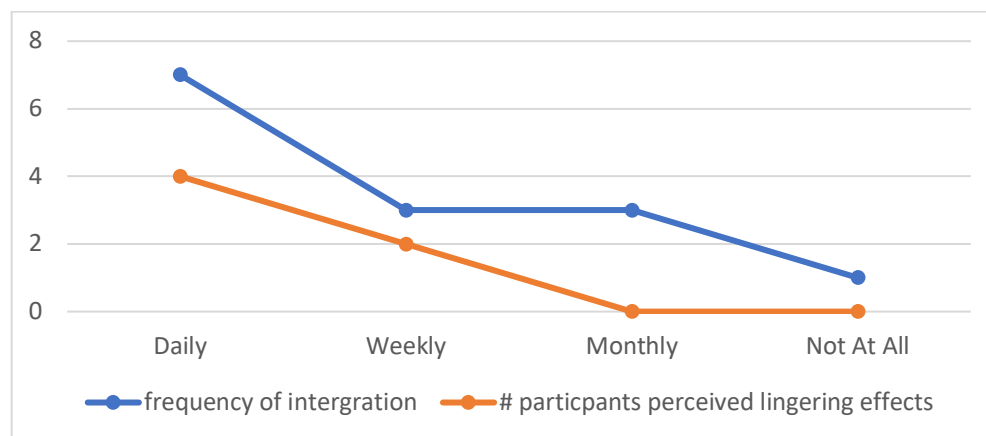
Apparent during data analysis was the theme of effects of integration linger. During the interviews, multiple participants spoke to the point of hearing students singing songs from earlier lessons. One participant stated,

Students communicate more verbally during and after music being played. I think students, our students, they learn better when there's music to a book or music to a learning theme because later you hear them trying to sing the song.

Questionnaire and interview responses showed staff perceive the more frequently music is integrated, the more students tend to mimic verbal responses from the songs (see Figure 6). Further analysis of data showed staff reported to believe the more fine arts are integrated into daily classroom lessons, the stronger the chance effects will linger and assist in verbal communication skills of students.

Figure 6

Staff Perceptions of Frequency of Integration Versus Lingering Effects

**Summary of Findings**

Due to the significant rise in the population of students with ASD, the need for educational settings, instruction, and interventions has also increased (Olcay-Gul & Vuran,

2019). Teacher perspectives of students with ASD play a role in the success and growth of the students. Approximately 8%–12% of interventions used in ASD classrooms involve musical activities (Nelson et al., 2017). Students become more social and expressive when music and dance are incorporated into the learning environment. Supported by the literature review, findings from the study showed frequency of fine arts integration influences verbal communication skills of students with ASD. The more frequently integration occurs, the more likely the effects will linger and become prevalent in verbal communication levels of students with ASD.

The overall findings from the study showed perceptions of participants to be positive and in favor of fine arts integration in the classroom. Twenty-three of the 26 instructional staff member observations recorded the use of fine arts integration. Ten of 13 participants integrated music daily in their classrooms. Findings aligned to research in the literature review. When music is utilized as a therapeutic intervention, reported benefits for individuals with ASD include increased communication and social skills, increased verbalizations and vocabulary comprehension, reduced anxiety, and increased appropriate social behaviors (Cornhill, 2013; Simpson & Keen, 2011).

Reliability and Validity

Credibility and dependability of the study were established through triangulation and member checking. Themes became evident from the questionnaires, teacher interviews, and observations to show the validity of the study. Member checking occurred within 48 hours of each interview. Each participant received a copy of the respective transcript to review for accuracy. Participant involvement and perspectives on the phenomenon of interest increased through the use of member checking (Merriam, 2009).

The findings from the study may be applicable in other educational settings and classrooms serving students with ASD. Including staff from multiple grade levels and content areas in the building enhanced the possibility of transferability. Rich, thick descriptions of the findings allow for transferability of the study results (Creswell, 2014). Data saturation was achieved when further coding was no longer feasible. The concept of data saturation is essential as failure to reach the level of data saturation can negatively impact the validity of research (Fusch & Ness, 2015).

Establishing confirmability allowed for the data to reflect the outcomes of the intended study. Reflexivity was used to confirm the findings from the study. Allowing time to approach the study and findings from an unbiased angle is crucial in creating confirmability (Varpio et al., 2017). Reflexivity not only increases the credibility of the findings but also helps readers deepen their understanding of the work (Dodgson, 2019).

Chapter Summary

The chapter presented the data and findings gathered through questionnaires, observation checklists, and semi-structured interviews. The research tools were intended to gather data to answer the two research questions. The purpose of the qualitative case study was to understand how the integration of fine arts into the classroom affects the communication skills of students with ASD. Increased placement of students with ASD accelerates the need for strategies to enhance the verbal communication skills of students with ASD.

The first research question addressed instructional staff members' perceptions of verbal communication skills of students with autism prior to fine arts integration versus after fine arts integration in the classroom. Prior to participation in the study, only six of the 13 participants noted integration of fine arts into daily classroom lessons. At the conclusion of the study, 100%

of participants were using fine arts integration in the classroom. Perceptions at the beginning of the study showed 11 of the 13 participants believed fine arts integration would have a positive impact on verbal communication skills of students with ASD. Participants noted challenges to implementation fidelity due to remote learning.

The second research question addressed strategies staff members use in the classroom to integrate fine arts into their daily curriculum. Ten of the 13 participants integrated music daily in their classrooms. The more frequently integration occurs, the more likely the effects will linger and become prevalent in verbal communication levels of students with ASD. Perceptions of teachers in the study leaned toward music being the better strategy to elicit verbal communication from students with ASD.

Discussion and conclusions are included in Chapter 5. Findings and interpretations are addressed. The limitations of the study are included along with the implications for leadership. The conclusion of the overall study is included in the final chapter.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

The number of students with ASD in the elementary school setting continues to increase. As a result, schools should implement strategies to support the academic and social–emotional needs of students with ASD. With the delay in many skills in students with ASD comes the question of where to place them in the educational setting to ensure they progress and succeed. Many types of therapies, such as art, music, and theater, are offered outside of the school setting to support children with ASD. Little evidence exists to show these types of therapies are integrated into the school environment. The problem is the lack of research on enhancing the verbal communication skills of students with ASD through fine arts integration. The qualitative case study explored how the integration of fine arts into the classroom affects the communication skills of students with ASD. Increased placement of students with ASD accelerates the need for strategies to enhance the verbal communication skills of students with ASD.

The study examined the perceptions of teachers on the effects of fine arts integration on the verbal communication skills of students with ASD. The study contributed to the underresearched field of instructional staff members' perceptions of fine arts integration in the school setting and its effect on the communication skills of students with autism. The significance of the study was the void filled in the lack of literature concerning how fine arts integration affects the verbal communication skills of students with ASD. The study advanced knowledge about the research problem through detailed staff perceptions before and after integrating fine arts into the curriculum and strategies used by staff to impact the communication of students with ASD. Through a qualitative case study approach, research questions were posed and answered. Thirteen staff members with varying job responsibilities and in varying grade levels participated in the study (see Table 1). The goals of the study were accomplished through

teacher questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and observational checklists, allowing for triangulation of data.

Once collected, data were coded for themes and patterns through the lens of the research questions. Themes emerged during data analysis, and coding aligned with findings in the literature review (see Table 2). The conceptual and theoretical frameworks of situational leadership style, theory of mind, and stage theory of cognitive development contributed to data collection and interpretation. The first research question examined instructional staff members' perceptions of verbal communication skills of students with autism before fine arts integration versus after fine arts integration in the classroom. Findings uncovered an overwhelming number of participants noted fine arts having a positive impact on verbal communication of students with ASD. Staff also noted challenges in implementing fine arts integration due to remote learning (see Table 3).

The second research question examined the strategies staff used to integrate fine arts into daily curriculum. The themes that naturally emerged from the second research question are the utilization of music in the classroom (see Figure 4), the lack of verbal responses art integration elicits from students (see Figure 5), and the frequency of integration and lingering effects on communication skills of students with ASD (see Figure 6). The findings, interpretations, and conclusions of the research are provided. Limitations of the study are addressed. Suggestions for future research as well as implications for leadership are identified.

Findings, Interpretations, Conclusions

Schools across the United States are beginning to create classrooms specifically dedicated to the education of students with ASD (Chen, 2018). The increased placement of students with ASD accelerates the need for support to adequately educate these students in the

school setting. Students with ASD present unique challenges to school systems. Despite the challenges, federal law states students with disabilities must receive appropriate and effective instruction despite deficits in communication skills or social relationships (Koegel et al., 2012). The purpose of the qualitative case study was to learn how classroom integration of fine arts affects the communication skills of students with ASD. The qualitative case study explored whether the communication skills of students with ASD increased and improved due to the integration of fine arts into their curriculum. Themes emerged during data analysis. These themes are examined and compared to the literature reviewed in Chapter 2. The findings are also explored in the context of the conceptual and theoretical frameworks.

Findings in Comparison to the Literature

The study's findings validate and further the knowledge when comparing results described in the literature reviewed in Chapter 2. Examined against the literature reviewed are themes that emerged from the study. Confirmations of concepts defined in the literature and the identification of findings that extend the knowledge beyond information revealed in the literature are provided.

Teacher Perspectives of Students With ASD

The literature reviewed in Chapter 2 detailed the absence of teachers' perspectives on verbal communication skills of students with ASD. Due to the significant rise in the population of students with ASD, the need for educational settings, instruction, and interventions has increased (Olcay-Gul & Vuran, 2019). While teachers reported seeing more growth in social skills and communication among students with whom they had a close, supportive relationship in the classroom (Bolourian et al., 2019), there was no mention of the impact on the verbal communication skills of students with ASD. Also reported was the importance of interventions

in the classroom setting to assist in meeting the needs of students with ASD (Rodriguez et al., 2012). The findings from the study revealed most teachers perceived fine arts integration to have a positive impact on the communication skills of students with ASD.

After completing the data analysis, the results revealed the staff perceived the verbal communication skills of students with ASD to be low. Staff responses to questionnaires implied optimism in improving verbal communication skills of students with ASD through the integration of fine arts. Several staff members desired professional development on how to integrate fine arts into the daily curriculum with fidelity. Over three quarters of participants reported believing fine arts integration will have a positive impact on the verbal communication skills of their students.

Abduelkarem et al. (2019) discussed the lack of communication skills of students with ASD and how teachers may confuse lack of verbalization with lack of cooperation. In relation to the study, teachers reported challenges aligning with the studies described in the literature review. Teachers reported difficulties, in some cases, to develop deep relationships with students with ASD due to a lack of verbal communication skills of the students (Bolourian et al., 2019). Responses to teacher questionnaires and the observation checklists showed the challenge between identifying a lack of verbalization and uncooperativeness.

Data analysis also showed the perceptions of teachers regarding the challenges due to remote learning. The literature review in Chapter 2 discussed the importance of interventions in the classroom setting to assist in meeting the needs of students with ASD (Rodriguez et al., 2012). Participants noted the consistency of implementation being a challenge via remote learning (see Table 3).

Using Music Integration to Meet the Needs of Children With ASD

Evidence shows music interventions can improve ASD symptoms as well as social interactions, emotions, and communication (Lakes et al., 2019). Music can act as a catalyst for change and growth by providing needed neurological stimulation (Preis et al., 2016). The study's findings revealed the use of music integration is favored over art integration to elicit verbal communication from students with ASD (see Figure 4). Analysis of data collected through the observation checklist and semi-structured interviews concluded music integration took place more often than art integration to elicit verbal communication. The use of music allowed students to repeat, mimic, or talk about the concept being taught.

Effect of Art Integration on Verbal Communication Skills

Discussed in the Chapter 2 literature review was the idea that incorporating art integration as a classroom tool can increase cooperation, peer interaction, and body awareness of students with ASD (Alter-Muri, 2017; Lesser, 2018). For students with ASD, art can be the ideal way to express themselves because they think in pictures (Lesser, 2018). Absent from the literature was the impact art integration has on the verbal communication skills of students with ASD.

The findings from the study indicated instructional staff members perceived art integration did not elicit many verbal responses from students (see Figure 5). Semi-structured interviews and observational checklists showed the integration of art into lessons, but not to improve the verbal communication skills of students with ASD. In the interviews, multiple staff mentioned art is used, but students often work quietly during art projects.

Effects of Integration Linger

When music is utilized as a therapeutic intervention, reported benefits for individuals with ASD include increased communication and social skills, increased verbalizations and vocabulary comprehension, reduced anxiety, and increased appropriate social behaviors (Cornhill, 2013; Simpson & Keen, 2011). Evident during data analysis was the theme of effects of integration linger. Analysis of data showed staff reported to believe the more fine arts are integrated into daily classroom lessons, the stronger the chance effects will linger and assist in verbal communication skills of students. When more fine arts integration is included in daily classroom lessons, the effects will linger and assist students in using verbal communication skills (see Figure 6).

Findings in the Context of the Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

The study contributed to the underresearched field of instructional staff members' perceptions of fine arts integration in the school setting and its effect on the communication skills of students with autism. Situational leadership theory was used to inform the design of the study. Teachers are leaders in the classroom setting. Required of the teacher as a leader is the ability to utilize and develop teaching methods, materials, and norms to improve teaching quality to help students achieve educational goals (Raza & Sikandar, 2018).

Applying the study's findings in the context of the conceptual and theoretical framework, the investigator discovered teachers, as leaders in the classroom, have the right to decide what kind of fine arts integration is the most effective in developing communication skills in students with ASD. Each situation in the classroom warrants a response from the teacher. The leader's role is to be able to judge the response needed based on the ability and willingness of the students in each situation to complete the task (Wright, 2017). The analysis of data revealed not

all participants chose to integrate art into the classroom because visual art did not elicit verbal responses from students. Also apparent through analysis of the data using the conceptual and theoretical framework lens was integrating fine arts into daily lessons depended on the job category of the participant. Not all participant roles allowed for frequent fine arts integration into lessons. The type of fine arts integration was also determined based on the student or group of students receiving the lesson.

Limitations

After completing data collection and analysis, the limitations of the study remained as previously stated. The scope of the study was limited to staff and students at a specific elementary school. The perspectives studied were those of the special education and fine arts staff regarding fine arts and communication of students with ASD. The study's setting was unique as only two other schools in the district have similar programming for students with ASD. The transferability of study results is possible due to rich, thick descriptions of the findings (Creswell, 2014) at the school study site and in other district schools serving students with ASD. Credibility and dependability were established through triangulation and member checking. Three data collection tools allowed for triangulation of data. Including staff from multiple grade levels and content areas in the building enhanced the possibility of transferability.

An additional limitation, not mentioned in Chapter 1, is recruiting participants and collecting data virtually. The COVID-19 pandemic began just as the recruitment process was intended to start. The pandemic affected recruitment and location of the study because the district shut down all in-person work and instruction. Participants had to be recruited via email. Once informed consent was received, all three data collection tools were completed virtually. The potential limitation of teaching students virtually may have altered observation checklist

results as they were developed for in-class observations. The staff has more control over student work and participation when learning takes place in person as opposed to virtually. Students in the sensitive population depend on adult support to complete basic tasks and attend to education. Parents may have been present during the collection of observational data, causing the results to be slightly skewed.

Recommendations

Grounded in the themes that naturally emerged are recommendations made for future research. The recommendations are given with the intent of being practical and easily applicable. Future research is recommended at other schools throughout the district and county with high populations of students with autism. Training staff to integrate fine arts into daily curriculum is also recommended.

The study results revealed some participants were unsure of exactly how to integrate fine arts into daily lessons. Staff should receive training to ensure they understand how and when to incorporate fine arts. Training should provide look-fors the staff can utilize to self-assess implementation of integration. Fine arts integration needs to become part of the classroom culture. To occur, school leadership and staff should buy into the concept and trust that with integration comes positive effects on student communication.

Additional research is recommended to extend the study's findings. The sample population was a small group of educators from the same school site. Further research should include participant populations from multiple sites. The population should be expanded to include staff from middle and high schools to further the collection of data. Expanding data collection across a larger geographic area allows for more perceptions to be analyzed regarding fine arts integration and the effects on verbal communication of students with ASD.

At the administrative level, staff need to be trained in working specifically with students with ASD. Training is especially imperative for fine arts specialists. The study's findings revealed inconsistencies in the implementation of strategies during classes led by specialists. Staff are typically trained to work with special education students. Students with autism possess a unique set of educational needs, making teacher training for the unique population of students essential (Morrier et al., 2011). For the lingering effects of fine arts integration, the frequency of integration is vital, as revealed by data from the study.

Another recommendation is a change in staff working policies and practices with students with autism to include providing additional funding for classrooms to purchase items needed to integrate fine arts regularly in the curriculum. Funding should be used to buy sensory-friendly materials to support fine arts integration. Equity in the appropriation of funds in schools should be at the forefront. Due to the unique needs and learning styles of students with ASD, teachers should receive funding and supports to meet the needs of their students.

Implications for Leadership

A goal in conducting the study was to contribute to the underresearched field of instructional staff members' perceptions of fine arts integration in the school setting and its effect on verbal communication skills of students with autism. An intention of research implementation was to determine if instructional staff members perceive the integration of fine arts as having a positive impact on increasing verbal communication skills of students with ASD. Research indicates an increase in the number of children diagnosed with ASD. Current prevalence rates of ASD are reported to be between one in 40 and one in 59 children (Baio et al., 2018). A need to address the gap between theory and practice when teaching students with autism led to the research project (Alter-Muri, 2017).

Results from the study could benefit educators as well as students with ASD. The gap in literature may be filled with information concerning how fine arts integration affects verbal communication skills of students with ASD. The theoretical premise of the study could apply to classrooms with students with ASD in any district. When examining verbal communication improvement, future researchers should consider targeting the population of students with autism, considering this study's findings.

Leaders could utilize findings from the study to contribute to and provide further understanding of the larger body of research on fine arts integration and effects on students with autism. The existing research states abstract thinking and verbal and nonverbal communication skills in students with ASD can be improved through the integration of arts in the classroom (Martin, 2009). The literature in the field of education in the area of ASD and verbal communication suggests elementary-age students with ASD require additional strategies and interventions in the classroom to improve delayed skill areas (Nowell et al., 2019). As a limited amount of research has explored enhancing verbal communication skills of students with ASD through fine arts integration, this study's findings function to provide suggested strategies for educational leaders serving the unique population of students.

The study contributes to a narrative reporting on instructional staff members' perceptions of the effects of fine arts integration on verbal communication skills of students with ASD. The results and findings from the study should be shared with schools in Illinois and other districts serving students with autism. The intent is to assist leaders and teachers of these schools in becoming better informed on fine arts integration and the positive effects the integration can have on the verbal communication skills of students with autism.

Conclusion

The purpose of the study was to learn how the integration of fine arts into the classroom effects the communication skills of students with ASD. The qualitative study examined instructional staff members' perceptions of the effect of fine arts integration on improving the verbal communication skills of students with ASD. The research participants' perceptions of the effects of fine arts integration lay the foundation for future research in strategies used to improve verbal communication skills of students with autism.

The study results revealed five significant themes: the belief fine arts integration will positively impact the verbal communication skills of students with ASD, noted challenges to implementation due to remote learning, music integration, art integration does not elicit many verbal responses, and effects of integration linger. The themes of believing fine arts integration will have a positive impact and noted challenges to implementation due to remote learning addressed Research Question 1: What are instructional staff members' perceptions of verbal communication skills of students with autism before fine arts integration versus after fine arts integration in the classroom? The themes of music integration, art integration does not elicit many verbal responses, and effects of integration linger emerged and addressed Research Question 2: What strategies are staff members using in the classroom to integrate fine arts into their daily curriculum? The emerging themes aligned with some of the studies examined in the literature review.

Limitations of the study include the small group of participants from one setting in a suburban Illinois school. Other schools in the same district have similar populations of students. Even with limitations, the study examined participant perceptions from a diverse group of educators spanning various job categories. The study added to the underresearched field of

instructional staff members' perceptions of fine arts integration in the school setting and its effect on the communication skills of students with autism.

Leaders should be compelled to provide professional development for staff who work with students with autism. The data showed using fine arts integration frequently in instruction directly affects the verbal communication skills of students with autism. Consistency in strategy implementation is critical for integrating fine arts to affect the verbal communication skills of students with ASD.

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Appendix A

Site Permission

3/26/2020

- Letter

Letter

1 message

Wed, Mar 11, 2020 at 6:44 AM

Dear Mrs. Jensen,

This email serves as permission granted for you to interview staff members for your dissertation research. I understand that I am granting permission for you to post or distribute recruitment material at the school. Additionally permission will be granted to allow you one hour to train staff participants over two (2) thirty (30) minute sessions. I do understand that participants will choose the location for interview meetings and they may choose to complete the interview on school grounds. I will require that on- or off-site interviews do not take place during instructional time.

You are granted permission to recruit, train, interview, collect data and to perform all steps in the data collection process at [REDACTED] Illinois.

If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

Appendix B**Subject Matter Expert Email**

Dear _____,

I am currently working on my doctorate through the American College of Education. At this time, I am in the dissertation proposal phase. The title of my proposed dissertation is:

Teacher Perceptions on the Effects of Fine Arts Integration on Verbal Communication Skills of Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Qualitative Case Study.

The purpose of my study is: The purpose of this qualitative study is to learn how the integration of fine arts into the classroom effects the communication skills of a student with ASD. The qualitative case study seeks to understand if communication skills in students with autism increase and improve due to the integration of fine arts into their curriculum.

The study will focus on teacher perceptions of communication skills due to the effects of fine arts integration.

As a Subject Matter Expert, I would like you to review and give feedback on the instrumentation tools I have created to use in my study. Please provide any feedback or suggestions you have!

Thank you so much!

Stephanie Jensen

Appendix C

Subject Matter Expert Responses

From: [REDACTED]
 Subject: Re: Instrumentation Feedback
 To: Stephanie Jensen sjensen@wps60.org

Hi Steph!

I sent you a word doc of the teacher questionnaire ---this is where I added in comments.

As for the Teacher Perception Survey-- I like this tool! it gives a nice perspective on what the teacher knows, does not know and what they believe in....

Questions 4 and 5 are identical (unless my eyes are playing tricks on me)
 Can we add in a training question? Do you feel well trained on how to work with non-verbal students?

Also, not sure if you want to be this specific, but you could ask "Do you feel comfortable or confident in implementing alternative communication strategies such as low or high tech devices into your daily schedule for each student?"

I also like the Classroom Observation Tool. It is clean and concrete. Have you thought about adding in the use of AT according to the IEP or the accommodations listed on the IEP....making sure they are present in the schedule and daily routine?

I am hoping this is the type of feedback you were looking for....If not please let me know. I am happy to look through another lense =)

From: [REDACTED]
 Subject: Re: Instrumentation Feedback
 To: Stephanie Jensen sjensen@wps60.org

Only piece of feedback I have is changing the first question on the teacher perception survey to "How much control do you have over your students verbal communication skills".

You are a rockstar and I appreciate you more than you'll ever know!!!

Re: Instrumentation Feedback

1 message

To: sjensen <sjensen@wps60.org>

Hi. Please see my feedback on each tool below:

For the questionnaire:

1. Question 1 may be hard to gauge. How would you define "help"? This may need to be worded differently.
2. On question 7, is "effectively" communicate based on their IEP? Is it word level communication?

For the Observation Checklist:

It may be an idea to collect all of the data during a fine arts activity in order to see how much verbal communication is used by the students and teacher. Or do a check before the activity starts and then again during so there is a comparison.

Good luck with your study!

Appendix D

Teacher Perception Questionnaire

10/1/2019

Teacher Perception Questionnaire

Teacher Perception Questionnaire

Directions: Please indicate your perceptions in regards to the questions below.

Please respond to each of the questions by considering the combination of your current ability, resources, and opportunity to do each of the following in your present position.

* Required

1. How much can you do to help your students improve their verbal communication skills? *

2. How well can you respond to needs of non-verbal students in class? *

3. How much do you currently integrate fine arts into daily lessons in class? *

4. How well can you implement alternative strategies in your classroom that address verbal communication skills? *

10/1/2019

Teacher Perception Questionnaire

5. How well can you implement alternative strategies in your classroom that address verbal communication skills? *

6. How often do you directly teach verbal communication skills in the classroom? *

7. To what extent are your students effectively communicating verbally to non-classroom staff in the building? *

8. What impact do you believe integrating music and art into classroom lessons will have on verbal communication skills of your students? *

Appendix E**Teacher Interview Questions**

1. What strategies are implemented in the classroom to assist ASD students in utilizing verbal communication skills throughout the school day?
2. Briefly describe the varying verbal communication abilities of students in your classroom. (mostly nonverbal; limited single-word responses; or verbal, functional speech)
3. How is Fine Arts such as music and art integrated in to your classroom on a daily basis?
4. Which educational programs and teaching methods have you found to be most effective in developing verbal communication skills in your students?
5. What are some of the barriers and challenges you have faced in improving verbal communication skills in your students with autism?

Appendix F

Teacher Observation Checklist

Room #: _____ Grade Level: _____			
Date of Observation	Length of Observation	Instructional Content Area Observed (Ex.) ELA, Math, etc.	Number of students present

	Look For	Yes	No	Observation Notes
1	Observed instruction included: Opportunities for initiating communication	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
2	Observed instruction included: Opportunities for responding to communication	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
3	Direct Instruction included strategies that integrate Fine Arts	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
4	Activities included integration of Fine Arts	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
5	Opportunity provided for peer to peer verbal communication	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
6	Teacher models appropriate verbal communication throughout the lesson	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
7	Visual supports are present to assist with understanding of verbal communication expectations.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	

Appendix G

Informed Consent Form

Prospective Research Participant: Read this consent form carefully and ask as many questions as you like before you decide whether you want to participate in this research study. You are free to ask questions at any time before, during, or after your participation in this research.

Project Information

Project Title: Fine Arts Integration Effects on Communication of Students with ASD: A Qualitative Study

Researcher: Stephanie Jensen

Organization: American College of Education

Email: stephaniejensen29@gmail.com **Telephone:** 847-921-9571

Researcher's Faculty Member: Dr. Richard Herring

Organization and Position: American College of Education/ Adjunct Faculty

Email: richard.herring@ace.edu

Introduction

I am Stephanie Jensen, and I am a doctoral candidate student at American College of Education. I am doing research under the guidance and supervision of my Chair, Dr. Richard Herring. I will give you some information about the project and invite you to be part of this research. Before you decide, you can talk to anyone you feel comfortable with about the research. This consent form may contain words you do not understand. Please ask me to stop as we go through the information, and I will explain. If you have questions later, you can ask them then.

Purpose of the Research

You are being asked to participate in a research study which will assist with understanding beliefs and perceptions on Fine Arts Integration Effects on Communication of Students with ASD. This qualitative study will examine how beliefs and classroom instructional practices of integrating fine arts impact verbal communication skills of students with Autism.

Research Design and Procedures

The study will use a case study methodology and qualitative research design. The study will comprise of 15 participants, randomly selected, who will participate in teacher questionnaires, virtual interviews, and classroom observation checklists. The study will involve virtual interviews to be conducted at a time most convenient for participants.

Participant selection

You are being invited to take part in this research because of your experience as an elementary school staff member who can contribute much to the work with the ASD population, which meets the criteria for this study.

Voluntary Participation

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. It is your choice whether to participate. If you choose not to participate, there will be no punitive repercussions and you do not have to participate. If you select to participate in this study, you may change your mind later and stop participating even if you agreed earlier.

Procedures

We are inviting you to participate in this research study. If you agree, you will be asked to take part in virtual interviews, classroom observations, and complete a teacher questionnaire. The type of questions asked will be based on your perceptions and beliefs.

Duration

The interview portion of the research study will require approximately two 15 minute sessions to complete. If you are selected to participate, the teacher questionnaire, will take about 20 minutes to complete. If you are chosen to be observed, the time allotted for classroom observations will be 10 minutes per time, at a mutually agreed upon time.

Risks

The researcher will ask you to share personal and confidential information, and you may feel uncomfortable talking about some of the topics. You do not have to answer any question or take part in the discussion if you don't wish to do so. You do not have to give any reason for not responding to any question.

Benefits

While there will be no direct financial benefit to you, your participation is likely to help us find out more about fine arts integration and the effects on verbal communication skills of students with Autism. If findings of this study are successful there may be benefits to ASD students in the district.

Confidentiality

I will not share information about you or anything you say to anyone outside of the researcher. During the defense of the doctoral dissertation, data collected will be presented to the dissertation committee. The data collected will be kept in a locked file cabinet or encrypted computer file. Any information about you will be coded and will not have a direct correlation, which directly identifies you as the participant. Only I will know what your number is, and I will secure your information.

Sharing the Results

At the end of the research study, the results will be available for each participant. It is anticipated to publish the results so other interested people may learn from the research.

Right to Refuse or Withdraw

Participation is voluntary. At any time, you wish to end your participation in the research study, you may do so without repercussions.

Questions About the Study

If you have any questions, you can ask them now or later. If you wish to ask questions later, you may contact Stephanie Jensen at stephaniejensen29@gmail.com. This research plan has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board of American College of Education. This is a committee whose role is to make sure research participants are protected from harm. If you wish to ask questions of this group, email IRB@ace.edu.

Certificate of Consent

I have read the information about this study, or it has been read to me. I acknowledge why I have been asked to be a participant in the research study. I have been provided the opportunity to ask questions about the study, and any questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I certify I am at least 18 years of age. I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study.

Print or Type Name of Participant: _____

Signature of Participant: _____

Date: _____

I confirm that the participant was given an opportunity to ask questions about the study, and all the questions asked by the participant have been answered to the best of my ability. I confirm that the individual has not been coerced into giving consent, and the consent has been given freely and voluntarily. A copy of this Consent Form has been provided to the participant.

Print or type name of lead researcher: _Stephanie Jensen

Signature of lead researcher: _____

I have accurately read or witnessed the accurate reading of the assent form to the potential participant, and the individual has had the opportunity to ask questions. I confirm the individual has freely given assent.

Print or type name of lead researcher: Stephanie Jensen

Signature of lead researcher: _____

Date: _____

Signature of faculty member: _____ Date: _____

PLEASE KEEP THIS INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR YOUR RECORDS.

Appendix H**Participant Recruitment Email**

Dear _____,

I am completing my dissertation to get my doctoral degree through the American College of Education. I am in need of staff participants that would be willing to let me conduct virtual interviews with them, classroom observations of strategies, and complete a questionnaire.

My dissertation topic is: Fine Arts Integration Effects on Communication of Students with ASD: A Qualitative Study

I am looking for a total of 15 participants. All names and information will be anonymous in the dissertation data and paper. My goal is to work with paras, classroom teachers, ENCORE staff, related service staff, and gen ed teachers that currently service our ASD population.

Please let me know if you are interested in participating. Interviews will take no longer than 15 minutes (2x), your questionnaire can be completed virtually, and we will agree upon a mutual time to for classroom observations.

Please respond to this email if you are willing to help me out! Include your personal email in the response and all communication will go to that email address.

Sincerely,

Stephanie