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Victoria Marie Starr Soria
Dominican University of California

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Parent and Educator Perspectives of ASD Learning Environments in Public Charter Schools: A
Qualitative Study

Victoria Marie Starr Soria

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Science in Education

Department of Education

Dominican University of California

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This thesis, written under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor and approved by the Chair of the Master's program, has been presented to and accepted by the Faculty of the Education department in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of M. The content and research methodologies presented in this work represent the work of the candidate alone.

Victoria Marie Starr Soria, Candidate

Date 12/15/2012

Lisa Ray Kelly, Chair

Date 12/15/2012

Debra Polak, Thesis Advisor

Date 12/15/2012

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to reveal parent and educator perceptions of the inclusion setting for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) at the public charter school of study. Due to the limited research available on parent and educator perceptions and the learning environments for students with ASD within public charter schools, a wide range of literature has been reviewed. This includes what public charter schools provide Students with Disabilities (SWD), how lawmakers and public perception play a role in parent and educator perspectives of learning environments for students with ASD, what experts deem best for students with ASD, and what parent and educator perspectives on learning environments for students with ASD have been found in previous research. The researcher conducted a qualitative study utilizing 10 in-depth interviews with parents and educators at one public charter school in California, which uses the inclusion model for SWD, to analyze their perspectives on the learning environments their children and students with ASD have at the school site of study.

Introduction

This qualitative study expands on an earlier study conducted by a previous Masters of Science candidate at Dominican University of California on parent perceptions of the services their children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) were receiving within a regular public school system. Utilizing the same methodology, this study seeks parent and educator perceptions of the services their children and students with ASD receive within a public charter school. These findings will be compared and contrasted with previous research to find generalities that may offer insight into the educational experiences of students with ASD within any given school setting.

Background and Need

As public charter schools increase the number of students they serve, including students with ASD, there is a need to examine exactly what services students are receiving. The U.S. Department of Education conducted an in-depth study of 32 public charter schools across 15 states to look at how charter school developers use the opportunities their charters provide to serve students with disabilities (SWD). The study concluded that there is a wide “range of practice in charter schools with regard to serving students with disabilities” (Fiore, Harwell, Blackorby, & Finnigan, 2000, p. 42).

Downing, Spencer, and Cavallaro (2004) cite that most charter schools offer an “inclusive” setting for SWD; however, the actual services range in quality and degree of differentiation. Inclusion is the current recommended practice by lawmakers via the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and each reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) for SWD. Additionally, charter schools use the umbrella term of

inclusion to describe the services they provide for SWD. It is important that services for students in public charter school settings be examined on both quantitative and qualitative levels. This study looks at a specific group of SWD who have been diagnosed with ASD. By focusing on this particular group of students and examining services from the perspective of parents and educators, it may be possible to see what the public charter school of study provides for students with ASD within an inclusion learning environment.

Statement of Problem

It is important to closely examine the parent and educator perceptions of students with ASD within public charter schools as the number of students they serve with ASD increases. There are numerous debates and studies around what public charter schools provide SWD, including students with ASD. These debates are theoretical (Estes, 2009; Howe & Welner, 2002; Lange, Rhim, & AheaUn, 2008). Also these issues are debated from a legal standpoint (Estes, 2009; Lange et al., 2008). Some of the theoretical debates are around the actual practice of what public charter schools provide SWD, including student with ASD (Downing et al., 2004; Estes, 2009; Fiore et al., 2000; Lange, & Lehr, 2000). There are mixed results on what type of educational setting is most beneficial for students with ASD (Humphrey, 2008; Marks, 2007; Whitaker, 2007). The ongoing controversies speak to a greater need for qualitative studies such as this one to look at individual parent and educator perceptions on the educational programs being provided to students with ASD in both traditional public and public charter schools.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study is to reveal parent and educator perceptions of the inclusion setting for students with ASD at the public charter school of study. Inclusion is an ideology

related to mainstreaming and is defined in terms of the educational setting being within the regular classroom and can be used in partnership with other special education services such as speech therapy, instructional aide assistance, occupational therapy and physical therapy services. If parents and educators perceive that being in the public charter school of study benefits students with ASD, what are the stipulations that comprise those opinions?

Research Questions

This study addresses the following research questions:

1. In in-depth interviews with parents and educators of students with ASD, what themes emerge regarding services for these students in a public charter school setting?
2. What does inclusion look like from the perspective of parents and educators of students with ASD in the public charter school of study?

Theoretical Rationale

The number of charter schools in the U.S continues to grow and yet there are conflicts between federal disability laws and public charter school missions (Estes, 2009). Some studies state that there are very few charter schools that are fully inclusive for all students. (Downing et al., 2004; Lange et al., 2008). Also, “the type of services offered to students with disabilities at charter schools is usually represented as ‘inclusive’ and yet, it is clear that the quality and range of services offered to students under this umbrella are highly diverse, and that the term is sometimes used to represent a decision to provide no special services at all” (Downing et al., 2004, p.11). It is therefore critical to study what “inclusion” within a public charter school with a

distinct mission looks like for students with ASD. Seeking parent perspectives on the services their children with ASD receive is a viable methodology.

Parent and educator perceptions of services for students with ASD have been the center of a variety of studies, particularly at the preschool age (Bitterman, Carlson, Daley, Markowitz, & Misra, 2008). Looking at parent and educator satisfaction as an indicator of quality of services is legitimate as both are active members of a child's IEP (Individualized Education Program). Educators are often the primary personnel responsible for implementing and monitoring student services and parents are the ultimate decision makers for their child's education. The satisfaction of both groups can often be tied to their own perceptions of what educational setting is best, from special day classes to full inclusion models.

Parents have a unique perspective on their own children and are often their most passionate advocates. It is the school's job to ensure that the IDEA regulations are being followed with fidelity, including the agreement and active participation of parents. Often parents find dissatisfaction with the educational setting their child with ASD receives in relation to what is considered the least restrictive environment (LRE). It is therefore vital to examine parent perceptions of their child's IEP and educational setting, particularly within the context of schools of choice. Educators are also an important source as they experience first-hand the challenges and successes their students experience within school. Parents and educators interviewed are assumed to be honest during the interview process as participation is voluntary and confidential (Pyles, 2011).

Review of the Literature

The literature reviewed here examines parents' and educators' perceptions of the services students with ASD receive in public charter schools. There is very little research that addresses this specific query outright. In fact there were only two studies found that sought parent and educator perspectives on services allocated to the larger group of students with disabilities (SWD) that encompasses students with ASD, within public charter schools (Downing et al., 2004; Fiore et al., 2000). Estes (2009) sought the perspectives of educational administrators and Lange & Lehr (2000) sought the perspectives of parents on the services provided to SWD within public charter schools. Howe and Welner (2002) examined empirical evidence around the theoretical conflict between public charter schools' basis on school choice and movement toward inclusion as an ideal model for educating SWD. Lange et al. (2008) sought the perspectives of state lawmakers on what challenges public charter schools in serving SWD.

There are notable studies conducted within traditional public preschools that sought parent perspectives on the services provided for their children with ASD (Bitterman et al., 2008; Ellen Seery, 2000; Stuart, Flis, & Rinaldi, 2006) and studies that sought such perspectives of parents with children with ASD who were also members of ASD family support groups (Spann, Kohler, & Soenksen, 2003). Perspectives were also sought from parents and educators of students with ASD around what educational setting is best for such students on the specialist to mainstream continuum (Bitterman et al., 2008; Downing et al., 2004; Ellen Seery, 2000; Jindal-Snape, Douglas, Topping, Kerr, & Smith, 2005; Spann et al., 2003; Stuart et al., 2006; Whitaker, 2007; White, Scahill, Klin, Koenig, & Volkmar, 2007). Studies were also conducted on what services students with ASD were receiving in regular public schools (Stuart et al., 2006; Whitaker, 2007; White et al., 2007). Humphrey (2008) summarized evidence based strategies for

inclusion as an ideal design for students with ASD and Marks (2007) advocates for inclusion as the ideal model for students with ASD as mirrored in the legislation of NCLB and IDEA.

Review of the Previous Research

Given the limited research available on parent and educator perceptions of the learning environments for students with ASD within public charter school settings, the research questions warrant review. Analysis of the controversial complexity surrounding public charter schools and their ability to address the needs of SWD cannot be overlooked when litigation and public opinion play a direct role in parent and educator perspectives on what any given public charter school provides students with ASD as a subgroup of SWD. The additional background debate on what educational setting is “best” for students with ASD along the specialist to mainstream continuum (Jindal-Snape et al., 2005) will be explored in order to give context to the perspectives parents and educators allocate learning environments in any educational setting regardless of school affiliation. Lastly, these parent and educator perspectives as found in previous research will be reviewed thematically.

A Call for School Choice and Inclusion. The essence of charter schools and school choice is based on market economy competition (Howe & Welner, 2002, p. 212). As such, SWD and the subgroup of students with ASD should be receiving competitive services (Lange et al., 2008, p.19). Theoretically, school choice and inclusion are at odds with each other as public charters are faced with high accountability in that they must meet or exceed regular public school state assessment levels or face closure (Lange, et al. 2008, p. 17). This inadvertently encourages exclusion of SWD (Howe & Welner, 2002, p. 220). Ironically, school choice is in part designed

to create new approaches within education, yet they rely heavily on existing practices for serving SWD (Lange & Lehr, 2000, p. 19).

While school choice and inclusion create unclear expectations for public charter schools, it would be reasonable to assume that the legislation around charter schools and SWD would provide clarity (Welner & Howe, 2005, p. 96). Unfortunately, the state laws surrounding charter legislation and the charter certification process are at odds with the IDEA, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, and the Americans with Disabilities Act (Estes, 2009; Howe & Welner, 2002; Rhim & McLaughlin, 1999; State Board of Education, 2004). These conflicts with legislation occur when charter schools adopt a specific mission that may exclude SWD based on a “poor fit” such as a mission centered on high academic achievement (Estes, 2004; Estes, 2009; Fierros & Blomberg, 2005; Grant, 2005; Welner & Howe, 2005).

Lange et al. propose that the “challenge for the charter school sector and special education policy makers is to design or employ current accountability systems that allow the spirit of innovation and deregulation inherent in charter school law to be embedded in the accountability measures for all students” (2008, p. 18). This will only happen when state-level policy makers ensure the proper allocation of resources for public charter schools to have sufficient options for SWD (Lange et al., 2008). Currently, they receive fewer local funds than local school districts under the standard state formulas (Estes, 2001; Estes, 2006; Estes, 2009; Honawar, 2004; Jacobowitz & Gyurko, 2004; Rhim, Ahearn & Lange, 2007; Rhim, Ahearn, Lange, & McLaughlin, 2006; Rudebusch, 2003; Shields, 2005;). Whether students with ASD are enrolled in public charter schools or traditional public schools, the IDEA provisions assert that they are entitled to placement within the least restrictive environment, and that they will be taught by personnel who are sufficiently trained and meet high state standards (Howe & Welner,

2002). Inclusion, as emphasized in the IDEA, encourages SWD to be within a mainstream learning environment. This placement creates difficulty for all schools to provide educators who are “appropriately and adequately prepared and trained” as defined by the IDEA standards (White et al., 2007).

Services for Students with ASD. Students with ASD, as well as all SWD, may receive a variety of services within the educational system. Within the political realm, inclusion seems to be what national lawmakers are presenting as the ideal; however, there is still fervent ideological and practical debate over inclusion amongst parents, educators and researchers (Jindal-Snape et al., 2005, p. 170; Marks, 2007, p. 265). Before discussing what parents and educators perceive public charter schools provide students with ASD, there is a need to examine what research says is optimal regarding in-school services. There is a historical pattern within special education when any new diagnosis affects a significant population (Marks, 2007, p. 266). Initially, the educational system tends to create multiple services targeted for the disability that are provided outside of the mainstream classroom in a special setting that is synonymous with separate (Marks, 2007, p. 266). Then, as time continues students with the new diagnosis begin to be placed into more inclusive environments (Marks, 2007, p. 265).

Research is showing that barely more than 50% of students with ASD are educated in the general education classroom or considered to be in an inclusion setting based on their physical location (Barnard, Prior & Potter, 2000; Humphrey, 2008; Keen & Ward, 2004). If inclusion is defined in compliance with the national laws discussed in the previous section, it must include the support of all students’ presence, participation, acceptance and achievement in the general education classroom (Booth & Ainscow, 2000). Under this stricter definition, 21% of students

with ASD are excluded from school in some way (Barnard et al., 2000; National Autistic Society, 2003).

In order for students with ASD to be successfully included in a mainstream setting, some accommodations are recommended as being necessary to address their individual needs. Students with ASD demonstrate comfort with consistent patterns of behavior (Humphrey, 2008, p. 43). This can be contrary to the daily school environment full of unpredictable individuals (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Moore, 2007; Wing, 2007). Creating a daily schedule for the individual student may remedy this difficulty (Humphrey, 2008, p. 44). Incorporating social stories that describe expected social interactions is beneficial (Gray, 2007). Curriculums such as Circles of Friends activities for the class as a whole can increase the positive interactions between students with ASD and their typically developing classmates (Humphrey, 2008, p. 44; Whitaker, Barratt, Joy, Potter & Thomas, 1998).

Students with ASD, like all students, need differentiated instruction to meet their zone of proximal development (Downing et al., 2004, p.22; Humphrey, 2008, p. 45). Students with ASD are generally challenged by interpersonal communication and social cues (Jordan & Powell, 1995). They fare better with literal and logical language (Welton, 2004). Teachers need to provide them explicit directions which can be difficult to provide in a sensory demanding environment such as the mainstream classroom (Whitaker, 2007, p. 170). The ideological and national political perspectives place responsibility on the schools to adapt to those needs (Howe & Welner, 2002, p. 213). Howe and Welner (2002) argue that there is a “burden on schools” to justify the least restrictive environment within a free public education setting (p. 213). This can result in students with ASD being placed in an environment where they continue to fail as the school increases the restrictiveness of the learning environment one step at a time. If general

classroom teachers are too overwhelmed and undertrained to provide the social, behavioral and educational accommodations students with ASD may require, the entire class may suffer (Fisher & Meyer, 2002; Mesibov & Shea, 1996).

Social exclusion may result when students with ASD are in an inclusion setting (Robertson, Chamberlain, & Kasari, 2003; Ochs, Kremer-Sadlik, Solomon, & Sirota, 2001). Extra adult assistance is often required to help students with ASD in the mainstream classroom and may result in decreased peer interactions (Orsmond, Krauss, & Seltzer, 2004), peer rejection (Chamberlain, 2002; Ochs et al., 2001) and increased adult dependence (Mesibov & Shea, 1996). Social development is one of the benefits students with ASD may receive from inclusion (Dahle, 2003). White et al. cites that there is little research on inclusion as a benefit for students with ASD (2007; p. 1404). Downing et al. cites that many researchers have found the benefits for students with ASD and their classroom same-aged peers in an inclusion setting along the social to academic continuum of skills required for all students in school (2004, p. 11). It appears that the academic world is as divided on what learning environment is most beneficial for students with ASD as the political world is. One conclusion that may appease all sides of the inclusion debate is that students with ASD are unique individuals who are a part of a special population with similar but not equivalent needs (Humphrey, 2008) and deserve the opportunity to receive the level of services that best fit their individual needs (White et al, 2007, p. 1411).

Parent and educator perceptions of services for students with ASD. The majority of studies available on the services students with ASD receive, as well as services SWD receive, seek the perspectives of parents and educators alike. In light of the most recent legislation, parents and educators are the most involved in the day-to-day decisions for students with ASD and what services they receive as outlined by the team comprised of each individual student's

parents and educators (Leyser & Kirk, 2004, p. 272; Whitaker, 2007, p. 170-171). Most parents (Leyser & Kirk, 2004, p. 275 & 281) and educators (Jindal-Snape et al., 2005, p. 170) support inclusion in theory and as the legal right for students with ASD and all SWD. To-date most of the debate amongst parents and educators around inclusion has been done at a philosophical and theoretical level (Jindal-Snape et al., 2005, p. 77), just as with researchers and policy makers as noted in the previous sections. Parents and educators are currently caught in a debate around whether inclusion can meet the needs of students with ASD (Jindal-Snape et al., 2005, p. 170; Marks, 2007, p. 266; White, 2007, p. 1404). Starr, Foy, & Cramer (2001) have found that parents and educators believe that students with ASD will get the greatest benefit out of an inclusion setting; while Leyser & Kirk (2004) found that parents and educators believe that students with ASD will not have social and educational needs met in an inclusion setting. The reality may be that parents and educators are choosing between academic needs in specialized settings or social needs in an inclusion setting (Garrick, Duhaney, & Salend, 2000; Marks, 2007).

Inclusion concerns. Parents and educators alike are concerned about various challenges inclusion may present students with ASD. They agree that the ideal behind inclusion is far from the reality (Croll & Moses, 2000; Grove & Fisher, 1999; Jenkinson, 1998). Parents and educators are concerned that students with ASD may have negative social experiences in an inclusion setting (Whitaker, 2007, p. 175), face social rejection (Ellen Seery, 2000, p. 268), social isolation (McDonnel, 1987), that the attitudes of the other students toward an individual with ASD may be negative (Hanline & Halvorsen, 1989), and that peers may even be verbally or physically abusive (McDonnel, 1987). Parents and educators are concerned that students with ASD may not have their individual needs met (Leyser & Kirk, 2004, p. 279). They cite worry over access to services (Ellen Seery, 2000, p. 268; Leyser & Kirk, 2004, p. 278; McDonnel, 1987), that academic

progress may be stifled (Fox & Ysseldyke, 1997; Leyser & Kirk, 2004, p. 272), and that the student's safety would be jeopardized (Hanline & Halvorsen, 1989) in the inclusion environment.

Parents are also worried about the classroom teacher's ability to adapt the learning environment for students with ASD (Jindal-Snape et al., 2005, p. 77; Leyser & Kirk, 2004, p. 278; Stuart et al., 2006, p. 48; Whitaker, 2007, p.175). They are worried about the classroom teacher's ability to give enough attention to their child with ASD, as well as the other students in the class (Ellen Seery, 2000, p. 276). Parents and educators believe special education teachers are better at instructing students with ASD (Leyser & Kirk, 2004, p. 278). Some parents worry that having a student with ASD in a general education classroom may overwhelm and disrupt the class as a whole and overload general education teachers (Jenkinson, 1998; Leyser & Kirk, 2004, p. 272; Palmer, Fuller, Arora & Nelson, 2001). General education teachers have expressed discomfort in providing services for SWD, having never been trained on what an inclusion setting should be (Ellen Seery, 2000, p. 268). Parents feel that general education teachers will need more training on teaching students with ASD (Barnard, et al., 2000; Ellen Seery, 2000, p. 276; Jindal-Snape et al., 2005, p. 77; Stuart et al., 2006, p. 49; Hanline & Halvorsen, 1989; Jindal-Snape et al., 2005, p. 86). They also desire that teachers empathize with their child's specific ASD needs to a greater degree (Whitaker, 2007, p. 174). Parents want specialized instruction for students with ASD and interaction with typically developing peers (Bitterman et al., 2008, p. 1516). Educators want more support and training for providing services for students with ASD (Ellen Seery, 2000, p. 268; Fox & Ysseldyke, 1997; Leyser & Kirk, 2004, p. 272).

Inclusion benefits. Parents and educators have noted numerous benefits that inclusion provides for students with ASD (Gallagher et al., 2000; Hanline & Halvorsen, 1989; Leyser &

Kirk, 2004; McDonnell, 1987; Palmer, Borthwick-Duffy, & Widaman, 1998; Ryndak, Downing, Jacqueline, & Morrison, 1995). Students with ASD are surrounded by model peers (Bitterman et al., 2008, p. 1513; Leyser & Kirk, 2004, p. 271) and improve greatly in their own social skills (Bitterman, 2008; Goldstein, Kaczmarek, Pennington & Shafer, 1992; Hurth, Shaw, Izeman, Whaley & Rogers, 1999; Laushey & Heflin, 2000; Prendeville, Prelock & Unwin, 2006). Parents and educators note that general education students (Leyser & Kirk, 2004, p. 281) and teachers (Ellen Seery, 2000, p. 276) benefit from having a student with ASD in their class by teaching them empathy for others and understanding for disabilities. Parents and educators feel that the concept of inclusion gives students with ASD the same access and opportunities as other students (Spann et al., 2003, p. 234). Parents and educators in one particular school study noted that the home to school connection was strong and that all parties were invested and willing to accommodate the learning environment to meet the social and academic needs of the students with ASD, as well as all students (Spann et al., 2003). Whitaker cited that parents support inclusion strongly when they report that their child with ASD's teacher sympathizes with the student's particular needs and are willing to be flexible (Whitaker, 2007, p. 170).

Summary of Major Themes

Public charter schools face the same challenges traditional public schools face with serving students with ASD, coupled with the complexity of school choice and inclusion as conflicting ideologies and even more limited funding. Researchers are as divided on the inclusion debate, as politicians and law makers are. There are multiple studies that cite pros as well as cons to inclusion within the theoretical debate and reality of what students with ASD are actually receiving. Parents want students with ASD to have the social models provided in an inclusion setting as well as instruction specific to Autism that special education teachers are

versed in. General education teachers want more support and training in order to create inclusive environments which are successful for all their students. Parents and educators of student's with ASD are the most successful when all parties work together to meet the needs of each child.

How Present Study Will Extend Literature

Previous research on parents' perceptions of services for students with ASD in preschool has been conducted within the public school setting (Bitterman et al., 2008; Ellen Seery, 2000; Stuart et al., 2006). There are many studies that add to the debate on what educational setting and services are most appropriate for students with ASD as evaluated by parents and professionals, and how students with ASD are placed within the continuum of specialized programs to mainstreaming and/or inclusion, in both traditional public school and public charter school settings (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Jindal-Snape et al., 2005; Lange & Lehr, 2000; Leyser & Kirk, 2004; Marks, 2007; Spann et al., 2003; Whitaker, 2007; White et al., 2007). Within the public charter school context, many studies have looked at what charter schools are providing, if anything at all, for students with ASD and SWD from the perspectives of parents, professionals in education, charter school developers and state educational agencies (Estes, 2009; Fiore et al., 2000; Howe & Welner, 2002; Lange & Lehr, 2000; Lange et al., 2008). This is especially important within the context of state charter laws and the provisions in the IDEA. Downing et al. studied the development of a public charter school that was designed with inclusion as a model and charter mission (2004) and Humphrey outlined "evidence-based strategies to facilitate the presence, participation, acceptance, and achievement of pupils with ASD in mainstream settings" (2008, p. 41). This qualitative study will extend the previous research by specifically examining parent and educator perspectives at a public charter school on the services provided to students with ASD.

Method

This study was conducted to review the perceptions of parents and educators in regards to the learning environments provided for students with ASD in a public charter school setting. In-depth interviews with three parents and seven educators (four of whom were specialist educators and three whom were classroom teachers), were conducted by the researcher using questions aimed specifically at what parents and educators believe matter most in the education of a child with ASD and their perspectives on the services individual students were receiving. The interview content was reviewed to find major themes amongst parents and educators within this study and compared to previous research. It is important to note that the general methodology used in this study duplicated, in part, a study by another master's student conducting a thesis on parent perceptions of ASD learning environments within a public school district (Pyles, 2011). The current study goes further to analyze the perspectives of both parents and educators of students with ASD. Conversely, the current study is narrower in that only one school site is in the sample and is a public charter school.

Sample and Site

The school sampled in this study was chosen because it is a public charter school that provides services for students with ASD in an inclusive setting. The school serves approximately 344 students in grades K-5, with 73% of the students receiving free or reduced lunch. The student demographics are 42% Hispanic, 29% African American, 20% Caucasian, and 6% Multi-Racial. The school site of study serves 4 students with ASD in grades K-5.

(<http://www.████████████████████>, 2012). All students with ASD are educated within the general education setting between 80 and 100 percent of the time, which is designated

as inclusion. All students with ASD who enroll in the school site of study are placed in an inclusive classroom with typically developing peers.

All students, with or without ASD, are provided services through the Response to Intervention (RtI) educators who are in partnership with the school site's special education and general education departments. The RtI team works with all educators at the school site of study to ensure student needs are being met. Based on academic data students are proactively assigned intervention groups to target their specific academic needs and RtI teachers push in to classrooms to provide academic support as needed. Students are provided with services to meet their individual needs regardless of classification. All students with disabilities, including students with ASD receive the IEP protocols. Within these IEPs, learning environment and services are reviewed and adapted by agreement with the child's parents and educators. Services that are often provided to students with ASD at the school site of study include (but are not limited to) occupational therapy, speech therapy, instructional aides, behavior support plans, differentiated curriculum, visual communication boards and sensory needs adaptations within the classroom's physical learning environment.

Access and Permissions

Permission was granted from the principal at the school site of study to recruit parents and educators of students with ASD to participate in this investigation. The inclusion specialist at the school site of study contacted all the parents of students with ASD and asked them if they would like to participate in a study about ASD learning environments within public charter schools. The researcher then contacted all the educators of students with ASD whose parents agreed to participate from the school site and asked if they would like to participate in a study

about ASD learning environments within public charter schools. Each parent and educator was provided an informed consent form, which had been approved by the university's institutional research review board. The form explained what the study was for, that parents did not have to participate and could withdraw from the interview at any time without consequence. Three parents and all related educators signed the form and participated in the interviews fully.

Data Gathering Strategies

The researcher asked all parents and mainstream educators of students with ASD at the school site of study to participate in the interviews. The researcher utilized a qualitative methodology to gain insight into what parents and educators think about the learning environments students with ASD receive in public charter schools and asked all parents and mainstream educators of students with ASD within one public charter school. The sampling procedure included only parents and educators of students with ASD as being asked to participate. This resulted in a convenience sample of three parents, three mainstream educators, and four specialist service providers (including the inclusion specialist) who agreed to participate.

Interviews were done one-on-one in mutually agreed upon locations by the researcher and the individual participants. Each interview was conducted for approximately thirty minutes. The interviews were recorded using voice recognition technology and a digital voice recorder. The voice recognition technology automatically transcribes voice to text. The produced text was compared to the digital recordings by the researcher to ensure validity. Before each interview the researcher defined the term "learning environment" as the physical organization, peers and teaching techniques used, school setting, classroom, educators and specialist that work with the

student, classmates and additional services. The questions used during the interview were adapted from original interview questions created by another master's student conducting a thesis on parent perceptions of ASD learning environments within a public school district (Pyles, 2011, p. 63). The questions were changed to include the perspectives of educators by changing the word "child" to "student" for the interviews conducted with educators. Additional questions were added to the end of the interview to solicit direct information regarding parent and educator perspectives on public charter schools and an open ended question designed to give participants the option of sharing anything else not covered in the previous questions. The interview question guide is provided in Appendix A and B.

Data Analysis Approach

The researcher transcribed and then qualitatively reviewed the contents of each individual interview by reviewing each voice recording and transcription. The researcher looked for themes among the participants as a whole and within the subgroups of parents and educators. The themes presented in the review of previous research served as a guideline for themes to collect from participants. However, these themes were not all-inclusive to allow for additional insight which may be gained by the research upon examination of the interview transcriptions. Once themes were identified through the initial analysis of the interview transcriptions, tables were comprised to collect representative quotations from the interviews that supported the major themes. This information was then compared and contrast with the information found in previous research.

Ethical Standards

This study adheres to Ethical Standards in Human Subjects Research of the American Psychological Association (Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, 2009). Additionally, the project was reviewed and approved by the Dominican University of California Institutional Review Board under application #10008.

Findings

After completing the interview and transcription process with participants, a more detailed account of the site and individuals interviewed can be provided. All participants were parents or educators of students with ASD who attended the public charter school of study. All students were taught in an inclusion setting with various additional services provided according to their needs as determined by the IEP team. The interview data provides answers to the research questions at the public charter school site of study.

Description of Site, Individuals, Data

The researcher interviewed parents and educators of students with ASD at the public charter school of study. All interviews were conducted within the last month of the academic year in a location most convenient for the participants. This group of parents and educators were able to provide a snapshot perspective of what the inclusion setting was like for students with ASD at one public charter school. The researcher was also able to gain an in-depth analysis of the inclusion setting for each child since at least one parent, service provider and classroom teacher was interviewed for each of the three students represented

Individuals. Three parents, five specialist providers with various roles in special education, and four classroom teachers were interviewed. The parents were all mothers of sons with ASD. Two of the students were enrolled in kindergarten and one was enrolled in 5th grade. The specialist providers consisted of a speech pathologist, an occupational therapist, two student aides and an inclusion specialist. Teacher 1 taught kindergarten. Teacher 2A co-taught kindergarten with teacher 2B all year as a part of a mentor credential program. Teacher 3 taught fifth grade.

Parent 1, Specialist 1, and Teacher 1 all work with Student 1 who is in kindergarten. Parent 1 is his mother. She found the public charter school of study through a recommendation from family friends who had children at her daughter's preschool and sent Student 1's older sibling to the school first. She chose to send Student 1 to this school because her neighborhood school was not high-rated or high-performing, and she had difficulty securing services for her son in the local school district. Parent 1 reported that the public charter school of study had her son's best interest at heart and not their own financial bottom line when they agreed that mainstreaming would be in his best interest and that he needed more speech and occupational therapy (O.T.) instead of less, like the district was recommending. Student 1 has ASD and receives speech and occupational services in addition to an inclusive classroom setting with regular-developing same-age peers. Specialist 1 is the occupational therapist that works with Student 1 as both a push-in and pull-out service provider. She heard about the public charter school of study through a colleague's reference and enjoys the collaboration there. Specialist 1 has extensive experience working with students with ASD specifically for their occupational therapy needs. Teacher 1 is the classroom teacher for Student 1 and works closely with the family and other educators to ensure his comfort and success. She felt that the school's mission and vision were very much aligned to her teaching philosophy and had experience with tutoring students on the autism spectrum in high school and college before having student 1 in her kindergarten class.

Parent 2, Specialist 2A, Specialist 2B, Teacher 2A and Teacher 2B all work with Student 2 who is in kindergarten. Parent 2 is his mother and heard about the public charter school of study through Parent 1, who is also their neighbor. Parent 2 reported working with her local school district for two years and having to fight for full-inclusion. The district offered a special

day preschool and wanted him placed in an all autism class when he was ready for kindergarten. Parent 2 opted to enroll Student 2 in a private preschool with an ABA aide and enroll him in the public charter school of study once he was kindergarten age. Student 2 has ASD and receives speech, occupational services and a full-time one-on-one aide in addition to an inclusive classroom setting with regular-developing same-age peers. Specialist 2A is the instructional aide who works with Student 2 in the classroom during the mornings. Specialist 2A heard about the public charter school of study through former coworkers who now work at the school. He reports identifying with the school's mission and its commitment to include ASD students. Specialist 2A has extensive experience working with students of all ages with ASD in schools designed for ASD. Specialist 2B is the instructional aide who works with Student 2 in the classroom during the afternoons. She heard about the public charter school of study from Parent 2 and has worked with Student 2 for much of his life. Specialist 2B reports that she likes that the school believes that every child that walks through the door is capable of getting into college and that the school provides the children with the learning tools to do so successfully. She notes that working for another company as a behavioral therapist showed her many classroom settings in the city for students with ASD. Specialist 2B stated that those settings had supervisors that would come and observe the child in class once every two to three months where at the public charter school of study her supervisor, and case manager to the students, tries to observe each student at least once per day. Teacher 2A is the classroom teacher for Student 2. She heard about the public charter school of study through a friend in her teacher credential program and appreciates the collaboration, freedom with curriculum, integrity of the mission, and the focus on serving underserved populations. Teaching Student 2 has been the only experience Teacher 2A has had with students with ASD. Teacher 2B is the co-teacher for Student 2. She found the school when

she became interested in teaching and has worked in various roles at the site prior to this classroom. Teaching Student 2 is also her first experience working with students with ASD.

Parent 3, Specialist 3 and Teacher 3 work with Student 3 who is in fifth grade. Parent 3 is his mother. She heard about the public charter school of study by researching on the Internet and was impressed by the school's parent reviews and test scores. Parent 3 reported liking the school's mission and how talented and accountable the staff is. Student 3 has ASD and receives speech in addition to an inclusive classroom setting with regular-developing same-age peers. He needs no additional accommodations outside of speech which focuses on social cues and social interactions. Specialist 3 is the speech pathologist that works with Student 3 as both a push-in and pull-out service provider. She heard about the public charter school of study through Ed Join and a job posting. Specialist 3 reports that the staff is welcoming and that the parents receive a lot of help meeting their student's needs. Working at the public charter school of study is the first experience Specialist 3 has had working with students with ASD. Teacher 3 is the classroom teacher for Student 3. She chooses to work at the public charter school of study and send her own child there because she loves and believes in the school's mission. Teacher 3 worked with one other student with ASD prior to Student 3, when she worked for a preschool and a boy was diagnosed while she was employed there.

The intervention specialist is an active member and educator for the special education students at the school of study and works with students with ASD, their teachers and families on a daily basis. She was interviewed to gain a wider perspective on what the public charter school of study provides for students with ASD.

Data. Parents and educators were first asked to rate their overall satisfaction of their student's learning environment on a one to ten scale. Parents 1-3 rated their overall satisfaction

as follows: 9, 10 and 8. Specialists 1, 2A, 2B, 3 and the intervention specialist rated their overall satisfaction as follows: 8, 10, 7, 10 and 8. Teachers 1, 2A, 2B and 3 rated their overall satisfaction as follows: 10, 8.5, 7 and 8. Overall satisfaction is high amongst all groups with parents having the highest average at 9, specialists having the median average at 8.6 and teachers having the lowest average at 8.375. Participants who worked with Student 1 had an average overall satisfaction score of 9. Participants who worked with Student 2 had an overall satisfaction score of 8.5. Participants who worked with Student 3 had an overall satisfaction score of 8.6. With a group average of 8.625, it is fair to say that all participants were satisfied in most areas, but were not without concerns.

The participants' interviews revealed the poignant themes of communication between school and home, social development of students with ASD, teacher understanding of students with ASD, educational program and learning environment, school community, public charter school significance for students with ASD, and hopes, dreams and goals for students with ASD. The tables displayed below present example quotations from the interviews that fit each theme. The tables are arranged to show parent, educator, specialist and student-centered participant perspectives separately. The quotes in each theme show the furthest stances taken on the topic found by each group so that the range of opinions is represented. Table 1 below shows quotes from parents on each theme representative of the most polar opinions.

Theme	Parents
Communication between school and home.	<p>“Excellent. We have a daily communication log that keeps me current and I feel like there is an open door policy with his intervention specialist and his teachers” (Parent 2, Appendix F).</p> <p>“Some instances I would have liked to be contacted earlier. Also the fliers being sent home with him are a challenge. He will forget them entirely unless it’s something he likes” (Parent 3, Appendix I).</p>
Social development of students with ASD.	<p>“He’s doing a great job socially. He has lots of friends, he’s included at recess and he’s involved with his class at school” (Parent 1,</p>

	<p>Appendix C).</p> <p>“I don’t know if this is actually the school’s responsibility; but, I know they work hard to support him in this area. His is younger on the spectrum emotionally and he’s not 11 yet. He is kind of naïve where others are not. He doesn’t get the difference between jokes, bullying and teasing. The boys his age joke around a lot and he doesn’t get that sense of humor so his feelings get hurt easily” (Parent 3, Appendix I).</p>
Teacher understanding of students with ASD.	<p>“His afternoon aide and his classroom teacher are always getting on his level, giving him eye contact and getting his attention and maintaining that attention without disrupting the class. His two aides are quick to know how to handle the situation in the moment and are even more helpful at explaining things to others than I am sometimes” (Parent 2, Appendix F).</p> <p>“The only thing is, I feel that maybe his teacher hasn’t dealt with many students on the autism spectrum. She may just need more experience” (Parent 3, Appendix I).</p>
Management of behaviors related to ASD.	<p>“Times where he was having a behavior or melt down and instead of being removed they tried to problem solve in the classroom. This becomes a fine line for the whole class. Is it better for everyone for him to stay and solve that problem but disrupt the class? Is it worth it?” (Parent 2, Appendix F).</p> <p>“Talking was difficult for him and the teacher has given him time to talk and gives him questions that she will ask ahead of time so he doesn’t feel too much pressure. And if he’s upset about something she lets him have space to feel his emotions; but, she’ll bring it up the next day so they can work through a resolution” (Parent 3, Appendix I).</p>
Educational program and learning environment.	<p>“He has school full day, five days a week. He has speech and O.T. at school. He is starting a socialization group soon. He also has ABA therapy at home daily” (Parent 2, Appendix F).</p> <p>“I don’t know if it has been very effective. His only service that he needs now is speech. He doesn’t like being different or singled out. Besides speech, he doesn’t have many accommodations more than another child and that’s how we prefer it” (Parent 3, Appendix I).</p>
School community.	<p>“A lot of support and the great thing about this charter is that we have a great community in the classroom and at the school. If he doesn’t have the words he needs his confidence can be low; but, his class family supports him and they really all support each other” (Parent 1, Appendix C).</p> <p>“His peers are much more challenging. If he had been here since Kindergarten I think it would be different” (Parent 3, Appendix I).</p>
Public charter school significance for students with ASD.	<p>“Just coming from a preschool environment in a typical district, things were always a battle getting him services that he needs. I came here ready to fight for him and it took a while to get use to the fact that I didn’t have to fight anymore. His needs are met and</p>

	<p>everyone here wants to make that happen” (Parent 1, Appendix C). “I would like to see more extra-curricular options. We’re growing and a fairly new school so maybe this will come with time. Right now the programs for early engineers with the lego thing is wonderful and it would be great if it was available for more than just afterschool kids” (Parent 2, Appendix F).</p>
<p>Hopes, dreams and goals for students with ASD.</p>	<p>“The skills to be independent and for me socialization and friends. I believe he can make college for certain in the right environment and that was something I didn’t think was in his future until we came here” (Parent 2, Appendix F). “I want him to have college as an option if he desires and or job options or something vocational. I also want him to be ready as an adult to deal with different people all over the work environment” (Parent 3, Appendix I).</p>

Table 2 below shows quotes from specialists on each theme representative of the most polar opinions.

Table 2	
Theme	Specialists
<p>Communication between school and home.</p>	<p>“For this student yes, one hundred percent satisfied. His teachers, his mom and the program specialist and his aide communicate well” (Specialist 1, Appendix D). “It is more difficult to get myself and the school on the same page because my supervisor has such a heavy case load. So issues are not remedied as quickly. I consider myself as myself and not part of the school. I have great home to school communication. The school also has great school to home communication and his mom is very involved, positive and supportive” (Specialist 2B, Appendix G).</p>
<p>Social development of students with ASD.</p>	<p>“That’s tough because he does like being around peers in the classroom and interact with them in his way. On the playground he would rather play with one student or just one game instead of switching from activity to activity like most of the students do” (Specialist 2A, Appendix G). “I saw him at two other schools and here they grasp his differences and they don’t make fun of him. They interact with him” (Specialist 2B, Appendix G).</p>
<p>Teacher understanding of students with ASD.</p>	<p>“When I first started, one of the classroom teachers had him in the back of the room with no sensory support and that shows that they didn’t understand his Autism; but, they have come around” (Specialist 1, Appendix D). “The teaching techniques by both teachers. One teacher is very effective at teaching difficult material for him to grasp and the other is very effective at holding him to a high standard behavior-wise”</p>

	(Specialist 2A, Appendix G).
Management of behaviors related to ASD.	<p>“He is managed in a fully inclusive environment by his teachers and program specialist. They are very open and that really benefits him” (Specialist 1, Appendix D).</p> <p>“With the services and classroom he doesn’t... He’s pretty typical. Well included in the classroom so he doesn’t need much more support for his behavior” (Specialist 3, Appendix J).</p>
Educational program and learning environment.	<p>“Recess. He does not have access to the playground every recess since they are on the blacktop at lunch recess. His OT environment is not as beneficial as it could be. He needs more climbing and swinging equipment” (Specialist 1, Appendix D).</p> <p>“Definitely satisfied with the amount. (of specialized instruction) This happens on an hourly if not moment to moment basis that it helps him” (Specialist 1, Appendix D).</p>
School community.	<p>“The people here are great. I suggested we let the student try gum on the carpet and the teacher, program specialist and the principal were fine with trying that and it really helped him focus on the carpet more. They are willing to try what will be best for the students. This might just be the people here and not necessarily public charter schools though” (Specialist 1, Appendix D).</p> <p>“I know he can continue to grow and it is so refreshing to be somewhere where everyone expects him to” (Specialist 2A, Appendix G).</p>
Public charter school significance for students with ASD.	<p>“The special education department and the RtI team. That’s what distinguishes this place is the department organization. It lends itself to help someone with Autism in a controlled, organized environment” (Specialist 2A, Appendix G).</p> <p>“I believe he was pulled out for social groups at his last school with other students with ASD and they mostly interacted with only each other. He was not happy with this and that is part of why they choose to come to our school” (Specialist 3, Appendix J).</p>
Hopes, dreams and goals for students with ASD.	<p>“If he has all the academic skills he needs he will be more successful in life. He might gain greater independence as well” (Specialist 1, Appendix D).</p> <p>“A sense of knowing he is not alone” (Specialist 3, Appendix J).</p>

Table 3 below shows quotes from teachers on each theme representative of the most polar opinions.

Table 3	
Theme	Teachers
Communication between school and home.	“I can’t really pin point one specific time because I feel like every time there’s a problem, somebody addresses and somebody does something about it. Whether it’s something he’s working on at home

	<p>or something I'm noticing in class that the family should know about somebody will come up with a strategy. I definitely don't feel like we're lacking in communication" (Teacher 1, Appendix E).</p> <p>"It's up and down. There are two different aides and his speech provider and his O.T. specialist and his other teacher. That's a lot of people to keep on the same page" (Teacher 2B, Appendix H).</p>
Social development of students with ASD.	<p>"Yeah, so this was in the beginning. All the negative stuff happened in the beginning of the year. When we told the class about his autism and we kind of read a book trying to explain, and we hadn't said who in our class had it. But I'm sure the class figured it out because the aide was there. So when we were reading the book he was very self-conscious. He sat very close to his aide and didn't look up. But, I don't regret that I feel it was necessary for the kids to know that about him and to know that earlier. And I guess like in any other circumstance you kind of have to read the kid. He was uncomfortable; but, he got over it. That's about all that was negative" (Teacher 1, Appendix E).</p> <p>"I'm not totally sure what he's capable of but there's been a ton of growth. Now he notices when someone is missing, he cares when someone is hurt. Before he didn't care to learn his classmates' names" (Teacher 2A, Appendix H).</p>
Teacher understanding of students with ASD.	<p>"No because he's one kid. I can learn as I go along and if I get somebody else, chances are they are going to be way different on the spectrum and I'm going to have to learn their learning techniques and their learning methods. But I definitely feel like I have the patience and the love for it. But you have to learn as you go along" (Teacher 1, Appendix E).</p> <p>"I think it would be nice if there was a little more education for me about students with Autism. There are resources out there. We are getting more students and getting more understanding; but, more school wide training would be helpful" (Teacher 2A, Appendix H).</p>
Management of behaviors related to ASD.	<p>"Um, so a lot of it I think is just acceptance. With a lot of it he's just really showing what he needs. If he's over stimulated he'll stem, if he's board he'll stem. So it really is my job to keep him from getting board but if he's excited it's okay. He has a little lap pad where he can use sometimes. It's kept in a special spot and if he stems sometimes the kids will just get it for him. The students won't skip a beat. But the students understand how he works so he's the only one in guided reading who can read out loud. Sometimes at the top of his lungs. He can't whisper really" (Teacher 1, Appendix E).</p> <p>"He has a lot of stemming, self-talk, biting his hand. It took us a long time to find things that would help him with this and it's still not perfect. We tried freeze-dried grapes to help him with his hand biting. We do brushing to help with all his stemming. We have a special seat for him on the carpet that helps sometimes. He does have to be pulled out to calm down when his stemming gets to be</p>

	too much for him and his peers. It happens more often when our schedule is different. So we try and front load the schedule with him as much as possible; but, we also want him to learn flexibility” (Teacher 2A, Appendix H).
Educational program and learning environment.	<p>“He’s just so adaptable so he does everything the way that everyone else does. His routines are exactly the same so it just, it feels like he is just another student in my class at this point in the year” (Teacher 1, Appendix E).</p> <p>“Eight point five. I feel like for the most part this student gets his needs met more than other students because he has so many people invested in him. He has seven adults that look out for him at school, and six of them are there only to focus on him. The rest of the class has me which is a one-to-twenty three ratio” (Teacher 2A, Appendix H).</p>
School community.	<p>“The community in the classroom. The level of respect in here. The social aspect that he gets because the class is so caring. The aide situation is also really great right now. It is well balanced” (Teacher 2A, Appendix H).</p> <p>“The teachers and how they use each other as a team and their rigor and belief that all these kids are going to do something. They hold them to high levels; but with love and don’t allow excuses” (Teacher 2B, Appendix H).</p>
Public charter school significance for students with ASD.	<p>“I think it’s nice that we have so much flexibility around how we teach. Since there’s not set curriculum, we can tie into his needs. Sometimes it changes year to year based on the kids and that really helps me to help my students get what they want and stay engaged” (Teacher 1, Appendix E).</p> <p>“The lack of money and resources. Any public charter would have similar issues since we get less funding for special education than regular schools. It’s just a challenge we have to deal with” (Teacher 2B, Appendix H).</p>
Hopes, dreams and goals for students with ASD.	<p>“Oh I want him to be at grade level just as everyone else is. I want for him to be happy and feel proud. And feel loved. And I want him to grow up to be a contributing citizen” (Teacher 1, Appendix E).</p> <p>“As an individual, whole learning. For someone like student 3, for any student really, to feel confident and to show their strengths is important. For them to learn that they can make mistakes and grow from it. Also to master all the standards” (Teacher 3, Appendix K).</p>

Table 4 below shows a representative quote from a parent, classroom teacher and specialist who work with student 1 on each theme presenting the general opinion.

Table 4	
Theme	Parents and Educators who work with Student 1

Communication between school and home.	<p>“For this student yes, one hundred percent satisfied. His teachers, his mom and the program specialist and his aide communicate well” (Specialist 1, Appendix D).</p> <p>“I like that the school was open to having my home coordinator come in and work with the team. The school is open to collaborating with everyone and it feels like we are all here for my son and his success is always in mind” (Parent 1, Appendix C).</p> <p>“I can’t really pin point one specific time because I feel like every time there’s a problem, somebody addresses and somebody does something about it. Whether it’s something he’s working on at home or something I’m noticing in class that the family should know about somebody will come up with a strategy. I definitely don’t feel like we’re lacking in communication” (Teacher 1, Appendix E).</p>
Social development of students with ASD.	<p>“He’s doing a great job socially. He has lots of friends, he’s included at recess and he’s involved with his class at school” (Parent 1, Appendix C).</p> <p>“I don’t see much social development. I am not sure if that is because I am not in the classroom all the time or if it is not happening. He really enjoys being in the cooperative group for O.T.” (Specialist 1, Appendix D).</p> <p>“Um, yeah I think his peers, they impact him the most. Even his parents have said his speech as gotten better. The way he talks, his sense of humor. A lot of that comes from his dialogue with his friends, his team members” (Teacher 1, Appendix E).</p>
Teacher understanding of students with ASD.	<p>“His intervention specialist has a great understanding of him and his learning style. She can get him to refocus in our OT sessions even when I can’t” (Specialist 1, Appendix D).</p> <p>“Honestly I don’t think there is any right now. I mean I can think back to the beginning of the year when I feel we were all still kind of learning about how he reacts to things and his need to fit in, you know but at that point in time I had an aide so she was very good about helping me show him and calm him down and meet his needs” (Teacher 1, Appendix E).</p> <p>“She understands how he feels and reads his emotional state very well. She gives him room to express himself and he wants to do his best for her and himself” (Parent 1, Appendix C).</p>
Management of behaviors related to ASD.	<p>“It’s more of a personal issue where there’s not someone specific he can go to on the playground if he has trouble. There are tons of adults out there; but, he only voices concerns if it’s someone he knows very well” (Parent 1, Appendix C).</p> <p>“He is managed in a fully inclusive environment by his teachers and program specialist. They are very open and that really benefits him” (Specialist 1, Appendix D).</p> <p>“Um, yeah I think when he started to get really comfortable with me and he started to test, just like every other kid would. But with him you can’t be too firm and you can’t not be firm enough. So the first</p>

	<p>time where I had to look him in the eye and I had to tell him in a firm voice that what he did was not okay and I was very sad about his choice he was crushed and silently cried. But he hasn't done anything like that since" (Teacher 1, Appendix E).</p>
Educational program and learning environment.	<p>"I think it's a good balance now. He is pulled out to get speech and OT pushes in. Things that are needed are also differentiated in the class for him" (Parent 1, Appendix C).</p> <p>"Definitely satisfied with the amount. (of specialized instruction) This happens on an hourly if not moment to moment basis that it helps him" (Specialist 1, Appendix D).</p> <p>"So that whole environment, oh my gosh, so that's a lot. Okay so he is in a class with me and um, and his peers like I said before are very supportive. His speech and his O.T. and his case study person. They are all very involved. He is pulled out of the class three times a week but someone pushes in three times a week to help with writing. His math centers and language arts centers are exactly the same. The rest of his peers are working at his level" (Teacher 1, Appendix E).</p>
School community.	<p>"A lot of support and the great thing about this charter is that we have a great community in the classroom and at the school. If he doesn't have the words he needs his confidence can be low; but, his class family supports him and they really all support each other" (Parent 1, Appendix C).</p> <p>"The people here are great. I suggested we let the student try gum on the carpet and the teacher, program specialist and the principal were fine with trying that and it really helped him focus on the carpet more. They are willing to try what will be best for the students. This might just be the people here and not necessarily public charter schools though" (Specialist 1, Appendix D).</p> <p>"I just feel like I'm really satisfied with his progress and the way the team has really rallied around him" (Teacher 1, Appendix E).</p>
Public charter school significance for students with ASD.	<p>"I don't know. The flexibility is nice" (Specialist 1, Appendix D).</p> <p>"I think it's nice that we have so much flexibility around how we teach. Since there's not set curriculum, we can tie into his needs. Sometimes it changes year to year based on the kids and that really helps me to help my students get what they want and stay engaged" (Teacher 1, Appendix E).</p> <p>"Yes. In the past there were certain things that teachers would say about Autism and assume my son would have all of those issues instead of letting him show what he could do and encouraging him to grow. That's why we knew he should come here like his sister" (Parent 1, Appendix C).</p>
Hopes, dreams and goals for students with ASD.	<p>"To reach all of his learning goals and reach his own level that he is capable of. To find his strengths. To succeed and to excel" (Parent 1, Appendix C).</p> <p>"So he can be successful in life" (Specialist 1, Appendix D).</p> <p>"Oh I want him to be at grade level just as everyone else is. I want</p>

	for him to be happy and feel proud. And feel loved. And I want him to grow up to be a contributing citizen” (Teacher 1, Appendix E).
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Table 5 below shows a representative quote from a parent, classroom teacher and specialist who work with student 2 on each theme presenting the general opinion.

Table 5	
Theme	Parents and Educators who work with Student 2
Communication between school and home.	<p>“Excellent. We have a daily communication log that keeps me current and I feel like there is an open door policy with his intervention specialist and his teachers” (Parent 2, Appendix F).</p> <p>“His parents have been really involved. They listen to feedback and both of his teachers are really responsive and accommodating” (Specialist 2A, Appendix G).</p> <p>“Since there are so many people working for student 2, it is difficult sometimes to make sure everyone knows every new aspect of the plan he has” (Teacher 2B, Appendix H).</p>
Social development of students with ASD.	<p>“I wish he had more social interaction time outside of recess. There is such a strong academic focus here which he needs; but, he also needs social focus as well” (Parent 2, Appendix F).</p> <p>“The community in the classroom. The level of respect in here. The social aspect that he gets because the class is so caring. The aide situation is also really great right now. It is well balanced” (Teacher 2A, Appendix H).</p> <p>“His friends, the kids really like him. He gets along really well with them. He has pretty typical interactions with them. This motivates him to participate with his peers and enjoy their company. He can have challenges when he pinches or crashes into people. This happened more frequently at the beginning of the school year. When his sensory needs are met these behaviors rarely surface” (Specialist 2A, Appendix G).</p>
Teacher understanding of students with ASD.	<p>“I’d say good. Each child with Autism is different. Maybe having some ABA background will help. It’s a good way to know how to do it. That would be helpful. It shows how important it is to reward with the positive” (Parent 2, Appendix F).</p> <p>“That happens all the time. I’m just remembering how often when he’s in a group and the teachers ask a general question and they take the time to explain it a little differently to help him understand” (Specialist 2A, Appendix G).</p> <p>“It was all of us at the beginning of the school year not knowing how to react to his yelling or hitting. Without our intervention specialist, we may not have solved the issue or had his behavior plan so quickly. She helped us all help student 2” (Teacher 2B, Appendix H).</p>

Management of behaviors related to ASD.	<p>“Brushing has helped at school and even at home to help him refocus when he’s stemming. We changed one of his reward systems from an x system to a positive system where he could move up or down” (Parent 2, Appendix F).</p> <p>“He is managed by a reward system where he can move his clip up or down. My style of behavior management is included in things intrinsic rewards vs. extrinsic. Student 2 is great at responding to positive feedback and is really proud of the quality work he produces” (Specialist 2A, Appendix G).</p> <p>“The routine piece is very important. He has a check list with Velcro checks for him. His morning aide doesn’t start until later and that system keeps getting better. His behavior modification system is different than the rest of the class and that system is adjusted as needed” (Teacher 2A, Appendix H).</p>
Educational program and learning environment.	<p>“Excellent. I’m so impressed. I’m so happy with the group. They’re trying to find ways to determine if he needs an aide faded out. They are trying to find ways to help him be independent. But they’re not taking services away if he needs them either” (Parent 2, Appendix F).</p> <p>“No. I think it is just the right balance. He has an instructional aide that pushes into the classroom and there are times that speech and O.T. push in too” (Specialist 2B, Appendix G).</p> <p>“It is inclusive, he has aides for more challenging parts of the day. He has his morning routine on his own and the end of his day on his own” (Teacher 2B, Appendix H).</p>
School community.	<p>“The community in the classroom. The level of respect in here. The social aspect that he gets because the class is so caring. The aide situation is also really great right now. It is well balanced” (Teacher 2A, Appendix H).</p> <p>“His entire class community helps him” (Specialist 2A, Appendix G).</p> <p>“I feel super lucky and blessed to be here. It’s the perfect fit. I just love the sense of community” (Parent 2, Appendix F).</p>
Public charter school significance for students with ASD.	<p>“The special education department and the RtI team. That’s what distinguishes this place is the department organization. It lends itself to help someone with Autism in a controlled, organized environment” (Specialist 2A, Appendix G).</p> <p>“The student to teacher ratio was smaller. He was taught differently as well. Here we teach more explicit skills and have a lot more structure” (Teacher 2B, Appendix H).</p> <p>“My experience with public charter schools is here but; teachers for two years and academic focus is something that highlights his strengths” (Parent 2, Appendix F).</p>
Hopes, dreams and goals for students with ASD.	<p>“That he keeps reaching the next level. I’ve seen cases in the field where students aren’t expected to keep going and reaching new phases” (Specialist 2A, Appendix G).</p>

	<p>“The education itself. The knowledge and standards needed to go to college. The accountability and responsibility” (Teacher 2A, Appendix H).</p> <p>“He will need the academics and social skills to be independent and choose the life path that is most important to him. I want him to have those choices in his future” (Parent 2, Appendix F).</p>
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Table 6 below shows a representative quote from a parent, classroom teacher and specialist who work with student 3 on each theme presenting the general opinion.

Table 6	
Theme	Parents and Educators who work with Student 3
Communication between school and home.	<p>“I am satisfied with communication. Especially with the teacher” (Parent 3, Appendix I).</p> <p>“Yes. My involvement with his mother is great and she wants to know what we can work on at home. It’s nice compared to most others. With school I’ve been working with his classroom teacher and she’s been very helpful and did observations for me in the beginning since he wouldn’t act the same when I came in” (Specialist 3, Appendix J).</p> <p>“Great. His mom is really active and helpful. She was nervous at the beginning of last year and so we got to meet before school started. We emailed often. She is very supportive” (Teacher 3, Appendix K).</p>
Social development of students with ASD.	<p>“When he feels isolated and lonely. Recess has been a hard part of the day for him. It can impact his whole day. He’s at a difficult age where fitting in matters in a way it never has before” (Parent 3, Appendix I).</p> <p>“Going to the other school with more components available, like the arts, what will help highlight his skills will hopefully motivate him to increase his social interaction” (Specialist 3, Appendix J).</p> <p>“I saw the positive at the end of the year when we had a dance party and he got on stage and his whole class was cheering for him. ‘Go student 3, go student 3.’ In the beginning that would have been hard. His peers didn’t know why he was different and he didn’t know how to show empathy to them yet. When he went with fifth grade to shadow the junior high classes, some of the middle school students started to make fun of him because they didn’t understand. My class stood up for him and that was important for him to see that his friends had his back” (Teacher 3, Appendix K).</p>
Teacher understanding of students with ASD.	<p>“I noticed that he didn’t feel good being singled out or pulled out and we considered that in his IEP” (Specialist 3, Appendix J).</p> <p>“Anywhere he could present or perform. He is really artistic. Anywhere I could showcase him as an artist or actor. And anytime I sought feedback from him. It boosts his confidence and helps him be</p>

	<p>successful” (Teacher 3, Appendix K)</p> <p>“I don’t think she has a lot of experience with that. She tries wholeheartedly though” (Parent 3, Appendix I).</p>
Management of behaviors related to ASD.	<p>“That we came up with that sometimes he just needs a time out or a bathroom break to clear his head” (Parent 3, Appendix I).</p> <p>“His classroom teacher makes time to front load the questions and makes sure he participates in discussions” (Specialist 3, Appendix J).</p> <p>“For student 3, he had a little sensory ball. Before he would tear apart erasers and paper and I gave him the sensory ball and that helped a lot. He also didn’t want to be pulled out and when he had a speech buddy that made a huge difference. He tried harder to work with the speech therapist and his speech buddy ended up being a great friend for him” (Teacher 3, Appendix K).</p>
Educational program and learning environment.	<p>“I love the curriculum, the teaching style and how his teacher gets the students’ attentions. His teachers are very helpful” (Parent 3, Appendix I).</p> <p>“The biggest difference for him is small group or co-operative learning with a partner” (Teacher 3, Appendix K).</p> <p>“I think he’s doing good. Just looking at his last CSTs to now, the growth is phenomenal. He has been able to succeed. A lot of his needs are just built into the classroom which helps him succeed” (Specialist 3, Appendix J).</p>
School community.	<p>“Eight. Because just from feedback from his mom and grandma, that I as his teacher and the school did a lot to help him. Everyone at the school works hard to support him. I do a lot to help him socially so that he can interact positively with his peers” (Teacher 3, Appendix K).</p> <p>“The teachers are so enthusiastic and caring. The care about their students in a personal and loving way. I also love the curriculum and the C.A.R.E.S. program that teaches good values, and town hall and morning meeting. It builds a strong community” (Parent 3, Appendix I).</p> <p>“I think that the investments they feel from the teachers and support teachers give is felt more than what they see in a public school. I think all schools can do this; but, the quality of the teachers is very high. They are sending them to school and being cared for and advocated for by the teachers so parents don’t have to demand so much because their requests are heard” (Specialist 3, Appendix J).</p>
Public charter school significance for students with ASD.	<p>“The teacher ratio per student is better here. The teacher gets his attention and I think she expects more of him. He has peer buddies that help him get on the same page. He gets to sit in the middle, up front instead of the back where teachers at his other school always put him” (Parent 3, Appendix I).</p> <p>“We have an excellent special ed. program and there are lots of people we can go to. Our RtI team is there all the time. The staff we</p>

	<p>have is amazing” (Teacher 3, Appendix K).</p> <p>“I believe he was pulled out for social groups at his last school with other students with ASD and they mostly interacted with only each other. He was not happy with this and that is part of why they choose to come to our school” (Specialist 3, Appendix J).</p>
Hopes, dreams and goals for students with ASD.	<p>“Learning his core basic subjects is important for me. I don’t need him to be an over the top GATE student but to feel solid in the basics. I also want him to have good peer relationships” (Parent 3, Appendix I).</p> <p>“A sense of knowing he is not alone” (Specialist 3, Appendix J).</p> <p>“As an individual, whole learning. For someone like student 3, for any student really, to feel confident and to show their strengths is important. For them to learn that they can make mistakes and grow from it. Also to master all the standards” (Teacher 3, Appendix K).</p>

Analysis of Themes

After an in-depth analysis of the interviews, the research questions can begin to be addressed. The first question asks what themes emerge from interviews with parents and educators of students with ASD regarding services for these students in a public charter school setting. The interviews revealed the themes of communication between school and home, social development of students with ASD, teacher understanding of students with ASD, educational program and learning environment, school community, public charter school significance for students with ASD, and hopes, dreams and goals for students with ASD. The second research question asks what inclusion looks like from the perspective of parents and educators of students with ASD in the public charter school of study. Each interview highlighted individual perspectives. While there were commonalities amongst participants, parents and educators had varying views on what inclusion looks like even when working with the same student, in the same role.

Communication between school and home. During the interviews it became apparent that there were many people working with the students with ASD, as a part of the support

provided in this inclusion setting. Communication became an important component of satisfaction ratings for parents and educators given the number of people involved in each student's education.

Parents were generally satisfied if not extremely happy with the school's communication. Parent 1 stated, "It's been great. I talk to his teacher all the time and the sped. coordinator" (Appendix C). Parent 3 said, "I am satisfied with communication. Especially with the teacher" (Appendix I). Parent 2 rated communication as "excellent. We have a daily communication log that keeps me current and I feel like there is an open door policy with his intervention specialist and his teachers" (Parent 2, Appendix F). Parent 1 was very happy with the school's openness to hearing her ideas and recommendations from others that work with her son. She said, "I like that the school was open to having my home coordinator come in and work with the team. The school is open to collaborating with everyone and it feels like we are all here for my son and his success is always in mind...My opinions and ideas are so welcomed. I never felt challenged or discouraged to get him what he needs. We are all working together" (Parent 1, Appendix C). She also voiced specific satisfaction with communication from her son's classroom teacher. Parent 1 said, "She will tell me his progress and how he is doing" (Parent 1, Appendix C). All three parents liked communication between the school and home. They noted satisfaction with the frequency and quality of communication about their children's progress and the ability of the school to listen to their input. Parent 2 noted that there was one instance when a change was made to her son's behavior plan and she found out after it had been implemented. She said that in this instance communication was "never super poor, but maybe when there was a change in his reward system and I didn't know. That only happened one time and the team has always been good about changing the system as he shows there is a need to. And the change they made was

one I would have approved anyway. I just found out about it after the fact” (Parent 2, Appendix F). She voiced satisfaction with the change itself, but expected to hear about it before. Parent 3 also voiced desire to have earlier communication about school events when she said, “Some instances I would have liked to be contacted earlier. Also the fliers being sent home with him are a challenge. He will forget them entirely unless it’s something he likes” (Parent 3, Appendix I). Communication could have come in a timelier manner, but was remedied. All three parents gave examples of a time when their children were facing a challenge and communication became key. Parent 2 said communication was beneficial “when he was exhibiting more behaviors than normal. His intervention specialist emailed to check in for changes at home and have recommendations for what we could do to support him” (Appendix F). Parent 1 said, “Whenever something doesn’t work out I’d hear it from the teachers and the principal and we would work with my son on how to work through things” (Appendix C). Parent 3 said, “His intervention specialist contacted me right away when she noticed he was having a few classroom issues that needed to be addressed. It was something he didn’t bring up with me and it was nice knowing there were others advocating for him” (Appendix I). Frequent communication generated satisfaction from parents. Two parents found communication lacking in a specific scenario; however, all three parents noted communication was helpful when there was an issue to resolve.

Specialist providers were generally satisfied with communication as well. Specialist 1 said she was satisfied with communication, “for this student yes, one hundred percent satisfied. His teachers, his mom and the program specialist and his aide communicate well” (Appendix D). Specialist 2A said, “His parents have been really involved. They listen to feedback and both of his teachers are really responsive and accommodating” (Appendix G). Specialist 2A also stated, “What helps me is when the intervention specialist checks in when I come in an hour after

student 2 starts the school day. We want him to have that time in the morning now to increase his independence, but it is important for me to know how his day is going so far...I can't think of a lack of communication" (Appendix G). Specialist 3 voiced satisfaction with communication when she said, "My involvement with his mother is great and she wants to know what we can work on at home...With school I've been working with his classroom teacher and she's been very helpful and did observations for me in the beginning since he wouldn't act the same when I came in" (Appendix J). Specialist 1, Specialist 2A and Specialist 3 all found communication between everyone who works with their students satisfying and valuable at the school site of study. Specialist 2B highlighted one area of concern. "It is more difficult to get myself and the school on the same page because my supervisor has such a heavy case load. So issues are not remedied as quickly... I have great home to school communication. The school also has great school to home communication and his mom is very involved, positive and supportive" (Specialist 2B, Appendix G). Specialist 2B agrees that home to school communication is excellent; however, communication between school personnel is affected by the demands of the various roles. The specialist providers noted that communication was satisfying and helpful, but could be improved if school personnel could find more time.

Teachers were generally satisfied with communication between school and home. Teacher 1 said, "I don't feel like there's ever really been a problem. I mean me and the student's mom, we text each other... I feel like every time there's a problem, somebody addresses and somebody does something about it. Whether it's something he's working on at home or something I'm noticing in class that the family should know about somebody will come up with a strategy. I definitely don't feel like we're lacking in communication" (Appendix E). Teacher 2A said communication is "very responsive" between home and school, but that communication

between personnel at school can be lacking. She said, “I’m very, fairly satisfied. To some extent I don’t even know what’s going on in speech or O.T. Also, when he’s working with the aide in math I don’t always know exactly what’s going on. In reading it’s very different, he doesn’t need much differentiation” (Teacher 2A, Appendix H). The classroom teacher has experience working with students all day, but adding additional support personnel can produce a unique communication challenge for inclusion. Teacher 2A noted this issue with “his instructional aides. His afternoon aide explains when he does this, this is what I do to help him. We just need to figure out what the right timing is for these conversations” (Teacher 2A, Appendix H). This shows that while communication is not necessarily poor, there is an issue with the timing of communication. Teacher 2B said, “I would be satisfied with what he’s getting if everyone had more information on a daily basis” and felt challenged with “not having enough time to talk to the aides” (Appendix H). Specialist 2B found working with so many people makes communication go “up and down. There are two different aides and his speech provider and his O.T. specialist and his other teacher. That’s a lot of people to keep on the same page”, but “RtI and us having a weekly meeting is great” (Appendix H). Teacher 3 finds communication to be “great. His mom is really active and helpful. She was nervous at the beginning of last year and so we got to meet before school started. We emailed often. She is very supportive” (Appendix K). She also found being “able to meet him [Student 3] before school started and having that open dialogue” to be very helpful (Appendix K). Generally, the teachers were very happy with communication between home and school. Teacher 2A and 2B voiced challenges with making sure all school personnel were able to communicate with each other despite the weekly meetings they had. This challenge seems to be attributed to the number of people who work with Student 2, not a lack of effort on the part of anyone.

The parents and educators at the public charter school of study found communication between school and home to be important. There were instances where earlier communication was desired by parents and instances where the educators were challenged by finding appropriate time to keep many people at the school informed. All participants voiced satisfaction with the effort of communication by everyone involved.

Social development of students with ASD. A key aspect of success for students with ASD is measured by social development. Parents and educators at the charter school of study found that social development was very important and gave specific examples of how each child was doing in this regard.

Parents often cited friendships as examples of social success for their children. Parent 1 said, “He’s doing a great job socially. He has lots of friends. He’s included at recess and he’s involved with his class at school” (Appendix C). She noted social growth when saying “I have been asking him forever, ‘What did you do at school?’ and ‘Who did you play with?’. Now he can tell me details and give me names. He has a best friend he talks about and his best friend says the same thing about him at home” (Appendix C). Her only social concern was that “he did get into a little fight on the playground at the beginning of the year over a lack of communication, but that’s also part of growing up” and attributed it to something that is typical of all children (Appendix C). Parent 2 stated, “I genuinely feel like he has friends. He greets them and says good-bye” (Appendix F). Parent 3 said, “He has a friend that they do comics together and gave him his phone number to hang out on weekends. He also has his speech buddy who is always kind to him and his friends in the after school program” (Appendix I). All three parents cited that their child had friendships, which shows social development that can be particularly challenging for students with ASD. Parent 2 and 3 did voice some concerns. Parent 2

noted a change that happened for her son during the school year. She said, “He made a great friend that he would play with all the time. This little boy wanted to play with him too. They became best of friends. When his friend moved that was hard. He has tried to find another best friend but in Kindergarten a lot of the students just like to play in groups. So he plays along-side them” (Appendix F). She attributed that “I don’t think he’s consciously aware enough. He has a tendency to latch on to one person” (Appendix F). Having a friend leave was hard and finding a replacement friend was challenging because it was a change. Parent 2 also said “I wish he had more social interaction time outside of recess. There is such a strong academic focus here which he needs; but, he also needs social focus as well” (Appendix F). She did note his social success is frequent when answering the question about a time social interactions are successful. She said, “This happens every day all the time. His speech has improved so much and his peer interactions have gotten stronger too” and credited the school by saying “here they did an incredible job of explaining to others about him and how they can help him. It creates a great learning environment for him and his peers” (Appendix F). Parent 3 noted difficulty “when he feels isolated and lonely. Recess has been a hard part of the day for him. It can impact his whole day. He’s at a difficult age where fitting in matters in a way it never has before” (Appendix I). She said, “I don’t know if this is actually the school’s responsibility, but I know they work hard to support him in this area. His is younger on the spectrum emotionally and he’s not 11 yet. He is kind of naïve where others are not. He doesn’t get the difference between jokes, bullying and teasing. The boys his age joke around a lot and he doesn’t get that sense of humor so his feelings get hurt easily” (Appendix I). She noted that he takes most things literally and that can cause confusion for her son and also said this could be improved with “a coach all day. Especially at recess that could explain his peers and their interactions. This would make him feel singled out

though and he wouldn't go for it" (Appendix I). The parents noted general social progress for their children and some challenges as well.

The specialists had varied responses. Specialist 1 had only a few examples of social development. She said, "I don't see much social development. I am not sure if that is because I am not in the classroom all the time or if it is not happening. He really enjoys being in the cooperative group for O.T." (Specialist 1, Appendix D). She stated, "I recently saw him with another student in my OT group and had them play a game together. He did very well interacting when prompted. He responds to prompting to engage with others and will do it on his own with the right peer" (Specialist 1, Appendix D). She feels he needs "more practice...His peers are very empathetic of him, which helps" (Specialist 1, Appendix D). These are examples of a positive social environment. Specialist 2A said, "That's tough because he does like being around peers in the classroom and interact with them in his way. On the playground he would rather play with one student or just one game instead of switching from activity to activity like most of the students do" (Specialist 2A, Appendix G). He also noted, "His friends, the kids really like him. He gets along really well with them. He has pretty typical interactions with them. This motivates him to participate with his peers and enjoy their company. He can have challenges when he pinches or crashes into people. This happened more frequently at the beginning of the school year. When his sensory needs are met these behaviors rarely surface" (Specialist 2A, Appendix G). Specialist 2A noted areas of growth in that "he needs a little better communication to express himself and process others' cues. He needs to touch others appropriately; the difference between a soft touch on the face or a squeeze. He keeps growing in this area" (Specialist 2A, Appendix G). Specialist 2B noted the same friendship that Parent 2 cited. She said, "He started the school year without showing interest in interacting with his peers and as the year has gone on he has

bonded with a few students. One little boy in particular befriended him and they spent every recess together. Then his friend moved away and he has not shown interest in finding a replacement friend until recently. He has learned how to go up to others at recess and ask them to play a particular game. The students in his class love to play with him and there are times still where he will not respond to their invitations to play. This is an area of growth for him” (Specialist 2B, Appendix G). She cited the public charter school of study as an asset to his social development when saying, “I saw him at two other schools and here they grasp his differences and they don’t make fun of him. They interact with him...Before this school I’ve never seen him say hi to a peer, let alone saying hi to a peer along with their name” (Specialist 2B, Appendix G). She feels “structured recess along with the other kids at this school and a longer recess” will benefit his social development (Specialist 2B, Appendix G). These examples demonstrate positive social development and a positive social environment for the students at the public charter school site of study.

Specialist 3 had the greatest concerns about social development. She voiced concern by saying, “I’ve observed him in his interactions with others and he doesn’t have a lot of friends and voices that at home to mom” (Specialist 3, Appendix J). She found it challenging to offer more supports for his social development when saying, “I think he had all the supports and tools to develop socially. I just don’t know if the motivation is always there for him. His inclusion specialist showed up for him and he struggled and didn’t want to go and here he’s still a little alone and not having friends but since we started the group speech I’ve seen him start to interact with those peers at recess and that’s a step toward forming those relationships” (Specialist 3, Appendix J). If anything she feels “having the peer groups for specialized instruction has helped him engage a lot more” (Specialist 3, Appendix J). All the specialists looked at how students

were forming friendships with same-age peers as a sign of social development and gave examples of how the school was providing all the supports it could to help them in this area.

The teachers spoke most often of the classroom community as an asset to their students' social development. Teacher 1 said, "I think for him, it's me, the people in the class. The teacher in the class and then his peers because he has a very strong drive to want to fit in. So he looks to us for the appropriate behavior and looks to his peers for that...I think his peers, they impact him the most. Even his parents have said his speech has gotten better. The way he talks, his sense of humor. A lot of that comes from his dialogue with his friends, his team members" (Teacher 1, Appendix E). These are examples of a positive social environment. Teacher 2A cited the following as social benefits for her student: "The community in the classroom. The level of respect in here. The social aspect that he gets because the class is so caring...It wasn't a huge focus for him before and now he has the social piece he needed" (Teacher 2A, Appendix H). She also said, "I'm not totally sure what he's capable of but there's been a ton of growth. Now he notices when someone is missing, he cares when someone is hurt (Teacher 2A, Appendix H). Teacher 2B agreed that he has social success "all the time, even him saying hi to friends and them saying hi back. His class is really supportive and understanding" (Teacher 2B, Appendix H). Teacher 3 said, "I saw the positive at the end of the year when we had a dance party and he got on stage and his whole class was cheering for him" (Teacher 3, Appendix K). All the teachers noted class community support as an asset to their students' social development.

The classroom teachers also noted a level of acceptance from peers for the differences their students with ASD have. Teacher 1 said, "A lot of it I think is just acceptance. With a lot of it he's just really showing what he needs. If he's over stimulated he'll stem, if he's bored he'll stem. So it really is my job to keep him from getting bored but if he's excited it's okay. He has a

little lap pad that he can use sometimes. It's kept in a special spot and if he stems sometimes the kids will just get it for him. The students won't skip a beat. But the students understand how he works so he's the only one in guided reading who can read out loud. Sometimes at the top of his lungs. He can't whisper really" (Teacher 1, Appendix E). When a student is stemming they are focused on one thing and can exhibit rocking, hand flapping or repeat sounds. She also said, "His peers love him...For the first time, he asked me to go to the bathroom. He stood up and said Mrs.____, I have to go to the bathroom. I said okay get the pass and show me the bathroom signal. And he showed it to me and he kind of skipped out he was so proud and when he came back he put the pass down, stopped and looked around like did everyone notice I did this by myself" (Teacher 1, Appendix E). These examples highlight that although some things may be different for Student 1 in the classroom than others his peers accept and support his different needs. Teacher 1 also noted, "Sometimes I forget he's quote-un-quote different because he's just one of the boys in our class" which is indicative of an even deeper acceptance. (Teacher 1, Appendix E). Teacher 3 said, "I am satisfied. Looking back to the beginning of the school year and the time we spent teaching him social norms has helped him come a long way. He has gained friends and a lot of confidence. It's great" (Teacher 3, Appendix K). The level of acceptance and understanding for each student's differences is high.

Most teachers noted social concerns when the students felt self-conscious or peers showed a lack of understanding. Teacher 1 said, "The very beginning of the year when his aide was here you could tell that he was kind of self-conscious because nobody else had an aide. But when we included the aide as a part of our class he realized okay I'm not that different...When we told the class about his autism and we kind of read a book trying to explain, and we hadn't said who in our class had it. But I'm sure the class figured it out because the aide was there. So

when we were reading the book he was very self-conscious. He sat very close to his aide and didn't look up...and I guess like in any other circumstance you kind of have to read the kid. He was uncomfortable, but he got over it. That's about all that was negative" (Teacher 1, Appendix E). Teacher 2A said, "I don't know if he thought it was negative. Two-thirds through the year he got much louder and his friends were laughing like he was trying to be goofy or different. He wasn't trying to be goofy or funny and he didn't pick up on them laughing but we had to talk about it as a class" (Teacher 2A, Appendix H). Teacher 2B said, "I'm not sure. Maybe in the beginning the kids would stare, but they didn't understand. I don't know that he was aware of this at all" (Teacher 2B, Appendix H). Teacher 3 said, "The most challenging was that social aspect. There were times where I would have to teach him, or the class, what to do. He has a hard time understanding personal space and so when students would tell him they don't like it when he stands so close he wouldn't understand why. This is the area he grew in the most too" (Teacher 3, Appendix K). The teachers noted social challenges when the students with ASD felt uncomfortable or when the other students misunderstood the actions of the student with ASD.

The teachers also noted speech services when talking about social development. Teacher 1 said he will need "his speech" for future success (Teacher 1, Appendix E). Teacher 3 said, "Speech was very helpful, especially when they focused on social teaching instead of just actual speech. Having his partner helped him grow so much and he learned a lot about how to interact with peers. He was hindered during the time that we lost our speech provider and we were looking to hire a new one. Once we hired the speech therapist we have now, it was nothing but positive for him" (Teacher 3, Appendix K). Speech is an important component of supporting social development for students with ASD and all three students received speech services.

Teachers noted the social needs of their students with ASD as well. Teacher 2A said, “He needs peers around him a lot. He needs to be literally taught about social cues as they come up naturally. The next level would be for him to initiate conversations. Right now he doesn’t seem to be interested in that, but he will respond when others ask to play with him or ask him questions about what he is familiar with like Thomas the Train” (Teacher 2A, Appendix H). Teacher 2 B said “When he is one-on-one with a teacher he has a great deal of focus and he learns quickly. Working with his peers helps him improve his communication skills and social cues...He needs to intake more from conversations. He doesn’t always respond to others, he can learn these things with time” (Teacher 2B, Appendix H). Teacher 3 said her student is “learning to read cues from people. Raise his hand, instead of shout out. To understand when it is okay to laugh and when it is not. Know about personal space and that some people want more personal space. Being empathetic is really hard for him...Explaining to peers why he does things differently sometimes. Before any major changes happened I needed to talk to him. Keeping his schedule consistent” (Teacher 3, Appendix K). The teachers were very explicit about the social needs, growth and acceptance of their students with ASD. The parents and educators at the public charter school of study found the social development of the students with ASD to be important. They noted a desire for more recess to aide in social interaction. They cited friendships, speech, school support and social acceptance to be assets for the students.

Teacher understanding of students with ASD. When working with any child, understanding is key. Students with ASD can have unique needs that require unique understanding. The parents and educators at the public charter school of study noted numerous examples of how understanding of students with ASD and their needs is vital.

Concerns were voiced from one parent, two specialists and one classroom teacher. Parent 3 said, “The only thing is, I feel that maybe his teacher hasn’t dealt with many students on the autism spectrum. She may just need more experience” (Parent 3, Appendix I). Specialist 2B said, “One teacher rarely modifies for him and the other modifies very well. Since they team teach it is difficult for him to engage when one of the teachers is teaching” (Appendix G). She cited a specific example when “they were doing a new center in class. It was a listening center. They were supposed to listen to the story and recall the main idea. He started to say, ‘no, no, no’ and she didn’t stay to help him and she only checked in once and told him don’t say no to me. This was negative vs. positive. He was trying to say he didn’t understand. He ended up being prompted through the whole lesson by his aide later instead of learning the center with his class” (Specialist 2B, Appendix G). Specialist 3 evaluated her own understanding and said “I think I’m working on it. I have the basics down but diving into the details is more difficult. In my teaching program I got the first class on Autism, but then there is still a lot more to learn” (Specialist 3, Appendix J). Teacher 1 gave an example from “another class, the aide was with him at the time, but the teacher knew he had autism and she just kind of talked to him really loud and slow. He did not respond to that at all. He kind of just shut down like, hey lady you don’t know me at all. We had a talk with her. He wouldn’t even look at her. They’ve come a long way though with this teacher. She has since learned the ways” (Teacher 1, Appendix E). Parent 3 noted, “In the first part of the school year I don’t think they realized that he was socially and emotionally a little behind since his academics are so strong” (Parent 3, Appendix I). Specialist 1 said, “When I first started, one of the classroom teachers had him in the back of the room with no sensory support and that shows that they didn’t understand his Autism, but they have come around” (Specialist 1,

Appendix D). All the concerns were connected to a deep desire to increase teacher understanding of students with ASD and often noted improvement thereafter.

Parents and teachers at the public charter school of study gave numerous examples of teachers trying to increase their understanding of students with ASD. Parent 1 said, “My daughter had his teacher for the past two years and she told me she wanted to have my son in her class. She asked for resources and took time to get to know him” (Parent 1, Appendix C). Parent 2 said the staff had “not no understanding. The teachers here are trying hard to understand. Some places people are afraid or hesitant to try. They treat him like a typical kid, but also understand that he’s not typical. It’s a hard balance to walk” (Parent 2, Appendix F). Parent 3 said of her son’s teacher’s understanding of ASD, “I don’t think she has a lot of experience with that. She tries whole-heartedly though” (Parent 3, Appendix I). Teacher 1 said she does not understand Autism entirely, “because he’s one kid. I can learn as I go along and if I get somebody else, chances are they are going to be way different on the spectrum and I’m going to have to learn their learning techniques and their learning methods. But I definitely feel like I have the patience and the love for it. But you have to learn as you go along” (Teacher 1, Appendix E). Teacher 2A said, “I think it would be nice if there was a little more education for me about students with Autism. There are resources out there. We are getting more students and getting more understanding, but more school wide training would be helpful” (Teacher 2A, Appendix H). Teacher 2B said “I am a new teacher getting my teaching credential. I am new to ASD and since it is a spectrum I don’t assume I can use what I have learned for student 2 and just apply it to any student with ASD” (Teacher 2B, Appendix H). Noting that they cannot generalize everything that they do with the student they have to other students with ASD shows insight. Teacher 3 said, “This is probably teaching you a lot. I would love to know what sources you

found that are the most helpful” (Teacher 3, Appendix K). The teachers also asked for a copy of the thesis when completed so they can learn more. The educators and parents noted that teachers were working hard to increase their understanding of ASD and that they cannot generalize anything to all students.

Specialists voiced the most confidence about understanding students with ASD, aside from Specialist 3. Specialist 3 did say, “I noticed that he didn’t feel good being singled out or pulled out and we considered that in his IEP” (Specialist 3, Appendix J). This does demonstrate understanding. The other specialists also have the most training and experience. Specialist 1 said, “His intervention specialist has a great understanding of him and his learning style. She can get him to refocus in our OT sessions even when I can’t” (Specialist 1, Appendix D). Specialist 2A noted having “a pretty good understanding. I have been working in this field for years” (Specialist 2A, Appendix G). Specialist 2B said, “I’ve been working with kids who have Autism on every level of the spectrum for six and a half years” (Specialist 2B, Appendix G). This experience is valued by the classroom teachers as noted by the communication section and a desire to have more time to meet. Teacher I said, “I had an aide so she was very good about helping me show him and calm him down and meet his needs...So when the aide was fading out and he was doing more in our classroom without her, the intervention specialist she showed me different ways to calm him down and lot of the things I didn’t realize where you kind of have to feed them the words. So they can hear you say it and they repeat it. I didn’t really realize at that point that he didn’t have the bank of vocabulary that needed to ask for what he needed” (Appendix E). Teacher 2A felt her student needed “his instructional aides. His afternoon aide explains when he does this, this is what I do to help him. We just need to figure out what the

right timing is for these conversations” (Teacher 2A, Appendix H). The teachers look to the specialists for support and added insight.

Teachers cited the knowledge of the specialists often. Teacher 2B said the intervention specialist, “is very calm and changes the language of assessments so that he understands and can show us the most of what he can do” (Appendix H). She said, “It was all of us at the beginning of the school year not knowing how to react to his yelling or hitting. Without our intervention specialist, we may not have solved the issue or had his behavior plan so quickly. She helped us all help Student 2” (Teacher 2B, Appendix H). Teacher 3 also noted, “The intervention specialist came and worked with him on occasion and they seemed to have a good working relationship” (Appendix K). The classroom teachers respect and seek the specialists’ input and support for their students.

Numerous examples were cited of educator understanding from participants. Parent 1 said she appreciates “the contribution of a wonderful teacher that sees him as a unique individual and the program we have set in place. The teacher gets support when she needs it and he has flourished...She understands how he feels and reads his emotional state very well. She gives him room to express himself and he wants to do his best for her and himself” (Parent 1, Appendix C). Parent 2 noted, “His afternoon aide and his classroom teacher are always getting on his level, giving him eye contact and getting his attention and maintaining that attention without disrupting the class. His two aides are quick to know how to handle the situation in the moment and are even more helpful at explaining things to others than I am sometimes” (Parent 2, Appendix F). Specialist 2A said, “The environment is great. There are only a few things I would change, but I say ten because he gets clear instructions from talented teachers...One teacher is very effective at teaching difficult material for him to grasp and the other is very effective at holding him to a

high standard behavior-wise” (Specialist 2A, Appendix G). Specialist 2A also cited understanding “happens all the time. I’m just remembering how often when he’s in a group and the teachers ask a general question and they take the time to explain it a little differently to help him understand” (Specialist 2A, Appendix G). Specialist 2B said, “When he is in guided reading with the student teacher he does very well. She learned his token economy system, that he uses in a home setting and a school setting, and uses it to support him. She gives him positive feedback before the negative” (Specialist 2B, Appendix G). Specialist 3 said, “Even at lunch the lunch lady will have him stay and help for a little while because he wants to and then send him out so that he can also interact with his peers” (Specialist 3, Appendix J). Teacher 3 said her student shines “anywhere he could present or perform. He is really artistic. Anywhere I could showcase him as an artist or actor. And anytime I sought feedback from him. It boosts his confidence and helps him be successful” (Teacher 3, Appendix K). This demonstrates her own understanding of his needs. The parents and educators noted how understanding the educators were through specific examples unique to each student.

Participants also recommended various ways to increase understanding of students with ASD. Parent 2 said, “Each child with Autism is different. Maybe having some ABA background will help. It’s a good way to know how to do it. That would be helpful. It shows how important it is to reward with the positive” (Parent 2, Appendix F). Specialist 2B said, “I hope next year his teacher is as understanding as his student teacher was this year. He needs a teacher that is as interactive as she was this year and who focuses on the positive instead of the negative first” (Specialist 2B, Appendix G). Teacher 2A noted how important it is to remember each student is a unique individual. She said, “I feel like I look at my student and his needs are so different from student 1 and student 3. Autism is so broad” (Teacher 2A, Appendix H). Teacher 3 agreed when

saying, “Having a student with the label autistic doesn’t really mean anything as the spectrum is so wide” (Teacher 3, Appendix K).

The parents and educators at the public charter school of study found the teachers to have understanding of their students with ASD. This is in part attributed to the desire and effort put out by the staff to understand, accommodate and support their students. Even when participants noted teachers lacking in education on ASD, they also noted the willingness to learn on the part of the teachers. Most poignant are the numerous examples of educators highlighting the unique needs and individual scenarios for each child.

Management of behaviors related to ASD. Participants cited various behavior needs for the students at the public charter school of study. They also cited various behavior plans to address those needs. Student 1 and Student 3 have sensory supports in place in the classroom and follow the school-wide behavior plan that meets their needs. In this way they have very little that is different for them than their same-age peers. Student 2 has sensory supports as well, in addition to an individualized behavior plan that is revised whenever needed.

Student 1 “is managed in a fully inclusive environment by his teachers and program specialist. They are very open and that really benefits him” (Specialist 1, Appendix D). His parent said, “A lot of his needs are sensory related. He has stemming and vocalization. We use a lot of strategies to help him. He has a weighted lap rest that soothes him and helps him to have the same release or outlet that the stemming and vocalization give him; but, it’s not disruptive to others” (Parent 1, Appendix C). His teacher notes that with behavior “a lot of it I think is just acceptance. With a lot of it he’s just really showing what he needs. If he’s over stimulated he’ll stem, if he’s bored he’ll stem. So it really is my job to keep him from getting bored but if he’s excited it’s okay” (Teacher 1, Appendix E). Parent 1 said her son “needs someone to give

direction and then show him what to do and then check for understanding. An environment that adapts to his sensory needs” (Parent 1, Appendix C). She also mentioned that he may be testing when “he will say inappropriate things to get a reaction, but as soon as the teacher says no in a firm voice he stops immediately and the issue won’t arise again for months. It’s like he has this test he needs to try out on people every once in a while” (Parent 1, Appendix C). His teacher cites that same behavior by saying “I think when he started to get really comfortable with me and he started to test, just like every other kid would. But with him you can’t be too firm and you can’t not be firm enough. So the first time where I had to look him in the eye and I had to tell him in a firm voice that what he did was not okay and I was very sad about his choice he was crushed and silently cried. But he hasn’t done anything like that since” (Teacher 1, Appendix E). She attributes his behavior success to her understanding. Teacher 1 said, “I can tell what kind of a person he is though, so I know how to be just firm enough to have him respond. If someone is too firm he may shut down or escalate where as if I wasn’t firm enough he wouldn’t see how important it is to do the right thing. I make sure never to be too firm because it will break his little heart. Even if I correct his behavior I have to go and check with him afterwards so that he knows I’m not mad and he can make the right decisions” (Teacher 1, Appendix E). Based on the interviews, it appears that Student 1’s behavior management is successful and supported by everyone that works with him.

Student 2 has a more complex behavior management system that changes based on his needs. He also has the largest group of educators working with him. Parent 2 said that “reward based systems are in place and he has additional services in place to meet his needs. He has speech and O.T. He also has classroom accommodations where he needs” (Parent 2, Appendix F). Specialist 2A said, “He is managed by a reward system where he can move his clip up or

down. My style of behavior management is included in things intrinsic rewards vs. extrinsic. Student 2 is great at responding to positive feedback and is really proud of the quality work he produces” (Specialist 2A, Appendix G). Teacher 2A notes “There are lots of systems in place. We have many sensory outlets that help with general behaviors. He has different systems for showing him how he is doing using a clip system that moves up and down...In guided reading the token system where he would choose what to work for and then need to get eight tokens. This helped him focus during reading. Without it, he didn’t really care about even trying” (Teacher 2A, Appendix H). She also said, “When he was meeting in guided reading with one other peer and I learned to use a separate incentive to help him focus. It worked wonders. Before he wasn’t interested in trying to comprehend the text, which is challenging for him. He was a strong decoder from the start. Using the other system helped motivate him” (Teacher 2A, Appendix H). Having this many systems and educators working with one child can present challenges. Teacher 2A said she felt challenged by, “knowing amongst all of us what constitutes a clip up or a clip down on his behavior chart. Also having to manage one system for one student in a classroom with twenty-three other students who have a class-wide system is hard to track all the time” (Teacher 2A, Appendix H). Each system serves a specific purpose and is adapted based on his changing needs within the classroom.

Parent 2 was the only person who voiced the idea of having Student 2 leave the class due to behaviors that may affect his classmates. She stated it was challenging, “where he was having a behavior or melt down and instead of being removed they tried to problem solve in the classroom. This becomes a fine line for the whole class. Is it better for everyone for him to stay and solve that problem, but disrupt the class? Is it worth it?” (Parent 2, Appendix F). Specialist 2B conversely notes, “His behaviors are very minimal. His peers don’t really notice them. He

used to shout out, crash into peers and now it's only hand biting. We found a z-vibe pen with knobbies on the end that he can put in his mouth that vibrate. We also use a weighted blanket he can use at the carpet. Usually his needs are sensory related instead of academically related. If an issue comes up like the hand biting, we work as a team to solve it as quickly as possible”

(Specialist 2B, Appendix G). Similar to the z-vibe pen (a pen that has bumps on it and vibrates to give sensory input) there are other supports that help Student 2 with his sensory needs. Parent 2 commented that “brushing [a soft sensory input brush to help students be aware of their physical location] has helped at school and even at home to help him refocus when he's stemming...He has a lot of stemming, self-talk, biting his hand. It took us a long time to find things that would help him with this and it's still not perfect. We tried freeze-dried grapes to help him with his hand biting. We do brushing to help with all his stemming. We have a special seat for him on the carpet that helps sometimes. He does have to be pulled out to calm down when his stemming gets to be too much for him and his peers. It happens more often when our schedule is different. So we try and front load the schedule with him as much as possible, but we also want him to learn flexibility” (Teacher 2A, Appendix H). In addition to the behavior systems and sensory input there are supports in place to address that “any break in routine throws him off even if he has forewarning sometimes” (Parent 2, Appendix F). Teacher 2A notes, “The routine piece is very important. He has a check list with Velcro checks for him. His morning aide doesn't start until later and that system keeps getting better. His behavior modification system is different than the rest of the class and that system is adjusted as needed” (Teacher 2A, Appendix H). Based on the interviews, it is apparent that numerous supports are in place to assure the success of student 2 and his ASD related behavior needs. It also appears that his behavior plan is adjusted whenever a need arises.

Student 3 has the least ASD behavior related supports as noted by Specialist 3 when she stated, “He’s pretty typical, well included in the classroom so he doesn’t need much more support for his behavior” (Specialist 3, Appendix J). Parent 3 noted, “Sometimes he just needs a time out or a bathroom break to clear his head... Talking was difficult for him and the teacher has given him time to talk and gives him questions that she will ask ahead of time so he doesn’t feel too much pressure. And if he’s upset about something she lets him have space to feel his emotions, but she’ll bring it up the next day so they can work through a resolution” (Parent 3, Appendix I). Specialist 3 similarly notes, “His classroom teacher makes time to front load the questions and makes sure he participates in discussions” (Specialist 3, Appendix J). Teacher 3 named the sensory ball as the most beneficial support. She said, “Before he would tear apart erasers and paper and I gave him the sensory ball and that helped a lot. He also didn’t want to be pulled out and when he had a speech buddy that made a huge difference. He tried harder to work with the speech therapist and his speech buddy ended up being a great friend for him” (Teacher 3, Appendix K). Based on interviews it seems that Student 3’s ASD related behaviors are well managed at school.

Educational program and learning environment. Participants had the most to say about the educational program and learning environment compared to any of the other themes. Their individual examples of what is included in each child’s learning environment are extremely specific. These ideas can be summed up by what the inclusion specialist noted as an inclusion setting with additional services based on the needs of the Individual Child. (Appendix L) Each participant additionally expressed satisfaction with the amount of special services each child was receiving and noted the strength of the academic program, behavior program and overall success of each child as the evidence.

Parents all voiced satisfaction with the amount of specialized instruction their child was receiving. Parent 1 said, “I think it’s a good balance now. He is pulled out to get speech and OT pushes in. Things that are needed are also differentiated in the class for him” (Appendix C). She did not see a need for more because “he is growing by leaps and bounds with what he has. He is staying up with his peers” (Parent 1, Appendix C). She did voice that one improvement would be “having more O.T. because he struggles with sitting still. Integrating O.T. into the classroom a little more. Having cross-motor activities too” (Parent 1, Appendix C). Parent 2 said “Learning academically is very easy for him” in reference to her child. She said, “Here the one-on-one attention he gets has become less frequent as his independence has increased. It’s been good” (Parent 2, Appendix F). She feels specialized instruction is “excellent. I’m so impressed. I’m so happy with the group. They’re trying to find ways to determine if he needs an aide faded out. They are trying to find ways to help him be independent. But they’re not taking services away if he needs them either...It’s perfect how it is” (Parent 2, Appendix F). Parent 3 noted that “The academic focus is wonderful...I love the curriculum, the teaching style and how his teacher gets the students’ attentions. His teachers are very helpful” (Parent 3, Appendix I). She is particularly happy with “his teacher’s techniques. His teacher’s personality draws the students in...She does things methodically and repeats often. This helps everything become ingrained in their brains. Like in math she uses jingles for them to remember” (Parent 3, Appendix I). Parent 3 did say about specialized instruction, “I don’t know if it has been very effective. His only service that he needs now is speech. He doesn’t like being different or singled out. Besides speech, he doesn’t have many accommodations more than another child and that’s how we prefer it...I think it’s fine the way it is. His current IEP was changed so we could have a consultative speech session so it’s a check-in instead of pull-out or push-in and a peer buddy” (Parent 3, Appendix I). Her only

request for improvement came when saying “This is the smallest teacher to student ratio I have ever seen, but even smaller would be ideal” (Parent 3, Appendix I). It is easy to conclude that all of the parents think the educational program and learning environment are important for their child at the public charter school of study.

Specialists voiced satisfaction with the educational program and learning environment their student was in. They also noted academic and social growth as evidence of the effectiveness. Specialist 1 said she was, “definitely satisfied with the amount [of specialized instruction]. This happens on an hourly if not moment to moment basis that it helps him” (Specialist 1, Appendix D). Specialist 2A stated, “He is included in a typical classroom. He has an awesome full-time aide in the mornings. No, seriously his afternoon aide is amazing too. He has an O.T. specialist that integrates O.T. in the class like a seat pad for his chair and a weighted blanket...I am extremely happy with the level [of specialized instruction]” (Specialist 2A, Appendix G). Specialist 2A did mention that “if he didn’t go to speech so much, he wouldn’t be able to communicate as much. If he was pulled out more he would miss out on class instruction. I think we have the right balance” (Appendix G). He wants Student 2 to “continue to learn to be more social. I would like his desk to be different since it’s within eyesight of the computers and he gets distracted by them sometimes. I would like to see him fade off some of the tangible reinforcers and have more intrinsic reinforcers” (Specialist 2A, Appendix G). Specialist 2B said, “I am very satisfied with the amount he gets. He gets speech, O.T., and my supervisor comes as soon as she can if something comes up. There are a lot of kids on her case load, but she works hard to guide me through any issues that come up...I think it is just the right balance [of specialized instruction]. He has an instructional aide that pushes into the classroom and there are times that speech and O.T. push in too” (Specialist 2B, Appendix G). She did note a desire for a

“more appropriate recess setting. Not the blacktop since it’s limited in resources” (Specialist 2B, Appendix G). One challenge is that “since the school has a workshop model the teacher teaches a lesson, gives students time to practice and then assesses them and re-teaches the lesson to the students who don’t get it/understand. It can be hard to group him. He understands and succeeds at all/most all the academic tasks, but when he doesn’t it is usually because of an understanding that he doesn’t get and his peers do. He gets all the stuff that challenges his peers and the stuff that challenges him his peers get. This makes it hard to group him” (Specialist 2B, Appendix G). Specialist 3 says the amount of specialized instruction “is good. I think it is an appropriate amount of time...I think he’s doing good. Just looking at his last CSTs to now, the growth is phenomenal. He has been able to succeed. A lot of his needs are just built into the classroom which helps him succeed” (Specialist 3, Appendix J). Based on the interview responses it can be concluded that the Specialists find the amount of specialized instruction each child is receiving and the educational program to be important. Also, student grouping and playground resources can be challenging.

Teachers generally noted satisfaction with the educational program and learning environment for their students with ASD. Teacher 1 said, “He’s just so adaptable so he does everything the way that everyone else does. His routines are exactly the same so it just, it feels like he is just another student in my class at this point in the year...I feel like what he has right now is perfect for him” (Teacher 1, Appendix E). She notes that the learning environment has a lot of components to it when saying, “So that whole environment, oh my gosh, so that’s a lot. Okay so he is in a class with me and um, and his peers like I said before are very supportive. His speech and his O.T. and his case study person. They are all very involved. He is pulled out of the class three times a week but someone pushes in three times a week to help with writing. His

math centers and language arts centers are exactly the same. The rest of his peers are working at his level” (Teacher 1, Appendix E). She is satisfied with what he has for his needs when saying “I think he has the amount he needs. The hardest for him is writing independently. That’s when a teacher pushes in for that. Other than that he pretty much catches on and he learns quickly” (Teacher 1, Appendix E). She also notes success in this challenge area by saying, “Yeah, just the other day when we were working on our end of the year Kindergarten writing reflection. It was just really nice, because I could teach the rest of the class and his educator could take time with him to guide him through and even his handwriting was just amazing that day” (Teacher, Appendix E). Teacher 1 attributes the success of his learning environment to the school personnel as a whole when saying, “I just feel like I’m really satisfied with his progress and the way the team has really rallied around him” (Teacher 1, Appendix E). Teacher 2A says, “I feel like for the most part this student gets his needs met more than other students because he has so many people invested in him. He has seven adults that look out for him at school, and six of them are there only to focus on him. The rest of the class has me which is a one-to-twenty three ratio” (Teacher 2A, Appendix H). She describes his learning environment as follows: “He is in class all day, every day. He has an intervention specialist that comes in each morning for the first 25 minutes to help him with his morning routine. He has a morning aide and switches to an afternoon aide after lunch and then spends the last 35 minutes of the school day without extra services. He also gets pulled out for speech and O.T. each week. His services really depend on his needs. We have worked hard this year to change his services as he needs them to be changed. The group is very open and flexible to meeting his needs” (Teacher 2A, Appendix H). Teacher 2A thinks specialized instruction “need-wise, it’s what it should be. I think my goal is to fade the aide eventually” (Teacher 2A, Appendix H). Teacher 2B describes his learning environment as

“inclusive, he has aides for more challenging parts of the day. He has his morning routine on his own and the end of his day on his own” (Appendix H). She wishes to have “more one-on-one time with him. I am realistic though. It’s not possible to meet with him one-on-one every day, but it would make a huge impact. Having one-on-one would impact any student. I would also like to experiment with manipulatives with him more” (Teacher 2B, Appendix H). Teacher 3 notes “Student 3 only has speech outside of my classroom. He is in my classroom 99% of the time. I did incorporate a lot of cooperative learning for him in class...The IEP he came with has him for speech only, but talking with his mom he was pushed-in and pulled-out a lot more for speech there. He didn’t like it and when they came here it was a goal for us to have him incorporate speech in a much more co-operative way” (Teacher 3, Appendix K). She said, “I wouldn’t want him to be pulled out any more than he already is because he wouldn’t be invested in it and it would become more detrimental than productive...What he has now including social training and social groups” is ideal (Teacher 3, Appendix K). Based on interviews it can be concluded that the classroom teachers, just like the parents and educators, value the educational program and learning environments of their students.

School community. The interviews revealed a strong sense of school community among parents and teachers. Parent 1 feels “a lot of support and the great thing about this charter is that we have a great community in the classroom and at the school. If he doesn’t have the words he needs his confidence can be low, but his class family supports him and they really all support each other” (Parent 1, Appendix C). She also said, “We’ve been so happy. He has grown so much in the year. It really has to do with the people working together here. That we have the same goals as the school” (Parent 1, Appendix C). Parent 2 said, “I feel super lucky and blessed to be here. It’s the perfect fit. I just love the sense of community” (Parent 2, Appendix F). Parent

3 said “The teachers are so enthusiastic and caring. They care about their students in a personal and loving way. I also love the curriculum and the C.A.R.E.S. program that teaches good values, and town hall and morning meeting. It builds a strong community” (Parent 3, Appendix I). The teachers share this sentiment. Teacher 1 said, “Our class family has been very great to him so he is a part of our team...I just feel like I’m really satisfied with his progress and the way the team has really rallied around him” (Teacher 1, Appendix E). She also said, “I think it’s beneficial for him to stay with our school all the way though. Just because when you are in the same environment and with the same people are looking after your best interests then the only way for him to go is up” (Teacher 1, Appendix E). Teacher 2A likes “the community in the classroom. The level of respect in here. The social aspect that he gets because the class is so caring. The aide situation is also really great right now. It is well balanced” (Teacher 2A, Appendix H). Teacher 2B likes “the teachers and how they use each other as a team and their rigor and belief that all these kids are going to do something. They hold them to high levels; but with love and don’t allow excuses” (Teacher 2B, Appendix H). Teacher 3 said, “Just from feedback from his mom and grandma, that I as his teacher and the school did a lot to help him. Everyone at the school works hard to support him. I do a lot to help him socially so that he can interact positively with his peers” (Teacher 3, Appendix K). She also noted that “the RtI [Response to Intervention] team is so on top of it and organized. They are so proactive and work together as a team and have a common vision” (Teacher 3, Appendix K). The specialists did not note school community in their interviews. Based on this, it cannot be concluded that all participants feel the strong sense of community at the public charter school of study is important. It also cannot be concluded that the specialists are dissatisfied with the amount of school community since they did not comment

directly on it. All participants spoke enthusiastically about their roles at the school and in working with the students there.

Public charter school significance for students with ASD. Participants chose the public charter school of study for either a place of employment, a school in which to enroll their child, or both. The difference, if any, they perceive with other schools and the public charter school of study is highlighted.

Parents voiced excitement at how easy it was to advocate for their children and how happy they were with the school's vision for their children. Parent 1 said, "Just coming from a preschool environment in a typical district, things were always a battle getting him services that he needs. I came here ready to fight for him and it took a while to get use to the fact that I didn't have to fight anymore. His needs are met and everyone here wants to make that happen" (Parent 1, Appendix C). She noted, "It took me two months and a lot of paperwork to convince the school district to put him in a regular preschool with a full time aide. They wanted him in a special day preschool because he wasn't talking yet, but I knew he could do more. The aide was helpful to have in preschool because it wasn't very structured, but fading out the aide here was very helpful for him to grow" (Parent 1, Appendix C). She said, "At my old school I felt like I was always forcing communication...In the past there were certain things that teachers would say about Autism and assume my son would have all of those issues instead of letting him show what he could do and encouraging him to grow. That's why we knew he should come here like his sister" (Parent 1, Appendix C). Parent 1 felt excited at "being able to put him fully in the mainstream class instead of something else. At the last school they wanted to put him in a special day class with two kids. I had to push. We talked to our neighborhood school and it seemed like the bar minimum. We had to come here" (Parent 1, Appendix C). At the school site of study she

stated “He can show what he knows though and gets the support he needs without taking the learning away from him” (Parent 1, Appendix C). The biggest difference for Parent 1 is summed up by the following: “The one thing that really blew me away was when the team said our goal for your son is for him to go to college and the plan and his progress are working toward that goal” (Parent 1, Appendix C). Parent 2 said, “My experience with public charter schools is here, but teachers for two years and academic focus is something that highlights his strengths” (Parent 2, Appendix F). She also said, “We’ve only been to preschool with my child. He was always in a typical setting. Here he is asked to do a lot more and he rises to the occasion. In preschool it was really a lot more focused on play” (Parent 2, Appendix F). Parent 2 did say, “I would like to see more extra-curricular options. We’re growing and a fairly new school so maybe this will come with time. Right now the programs for early engineers with the lego thing is wonderful and it would be great if it was available for more than just afterschool kids” (Parent 2, Appendix F). Parent 2 also said, “This is a wonderful learning community” (Parent 2, Appendix F). She also stated, “And just the icing on the cake for me is that he will be able to transition next year with his same peers and his same teacher” (Parent 2, Appendix F). Similar to Parent 1 she expressed satisfaction with the school’s vision for her son when saying, “I believe he can make college for certain in the right environment and that was something I didn’t think was in his future until we came here” (Parent 2 Appendix F). Parent 3 said, “I have only had experience in public school from pre-K through fourth grade. The teachers here are more evolved and I like their teaching methods. At the last class they taught a lesson and didn’t re-teach or review it ever again. Here the students are held accountable. The teaching methods are effective. I am not exactly sure what it is. I haven’t had to re-teach him at all. There is a lot of structure, routines and the teachers work wonderfully with the parents” (Parent 3, Appendix I). She noted, “The teacher ratio per

student is better here. The teacher gets his attention and I think she expects more of him. He has peer buddies that help him get on the same page. He gets to sit in the middle, up front instead of the back where teachers at his other school always put him” (Parent 3, Appendix I). Parent 3 also voiced satisfaction with teacher “accountability. I feel like the teachers hold themselves to high standards and are expected to maintain those high standards” (Parent 3, Appendix I). Based on the interviews, it can be concluded that the parents of students with ASD are satisfied with the difference they perceive the public charter school of study provides their child.

The specialists noted that the public charter school of study provided supports for students with ASD that are beneficial. Specialist 1 said, “The flexibility is nice” (Specialist 1, Appendix D). Specialist 2A said, “The special education department and the RtI team. That’s what distinguishes this place is the department organization. It lends itself to help someone with Autism in a controlled, organized environment” (Specialist 2A, Appendix G). Specialist 2B said the public charter school of study has strength because “their academic expectations are really high and he meets or exceeds his peers in most academic areas. And the structure” (Specialist 2B, Appendix G). Specialist 3 said, “I believe he was pulled out for social groups at his last school with other students with ASD and they mostly interacted with only each other. He was not happy with this and that is part of why they choose to come to our school” (Specialist 3, Appendix J). Based on the interviews and their employment there, it can be concluded that the Specialists are satisfied with the public charter school’s ability to support students with ASD.

Teachers expressed satisfaction with the public charter school of study and what it provides students with ASD, and all students. Some teachers expressed that they did not know of too many differences because they had not been in many other schools. Teacher 1 said, “I think it’s nice that we have so much flexibility around how we teach. Since there’s not set curriculum,

we can tie into his needs. Sometimes it changes year to year based on the kids and that really helps me to help my students get what they want and stay engaged...Just that. The flexibility. I don't feel like I'm bogged down by this curriculum that doesn't apply to him or any of my kids" (Teacher 1, Appendix E). Teacher 2A said the learning environment for Student 1 "has changed a lot from what I've heard. He was in a preschool with more freedom and more geared to his needs and learning. There was not a push to succeed academically or any idea that he could one day go to college" (Teacher 2A, Appendix H). When asked what makes public charter schools different she said, "I don't know. In some ways every aspect is relevant and every public charter school is different" (Teacher 2A, Appendix H). Teacher 2B said "The student to teacher ratio was smaller. He was taught differently as well. Here we teach more explicit skills and have a lot more structure...I don't know. I don't know anything besides this school. I guess smaller class size" (Teacher 2B, Appendix H). Teacher 2B did voice a challenge with "the lack of money and resources. Any public charter would have similar issues since we get less funding for special education than regular schools. It's just a challenge we have to deal with" (Teacher 2B, Appendix H). Teacher 3 said, "We have an excellent special ed. program and there are lots of people we can go to. Our RtI team is there all the time. The staff we have is amazing" (Teacher 3, Appendix K). Teacher 3 also has a daughter that attends the public charter school of study. Based on interviews and the fact that they work there and send their children there if they have them, it can be concluded that the teachers are satisfied with the public charter school of study and only find the lack of funding to be difficult.

Hopes, dreams and goals for students with ASD. During the interview process it became apparent that all participants had great hopes, dreams and goals for the children with

ASD. It is worthy to note that the Parents, Specialists and Teachers shared a common vision for each child as an individual and believed in the child's capability to reach those goals.

Many of the parents interviewed voiced that the public charter school of study was the first site where they heard high future expectations of their children, as noted in the previous sections. Parent 1 hopes for her son "to reach all of his learning goals and reach his own level that he is capable of. To find his strengths. To succeed and to excel" (Parent 1, Appendix C). Parent 2 hopes her son gains "the skills to be independent, and for me, socialization and friends. I believe he can make college for certain in the right environment and that was something I didn't think was in his future until we came here...He will need the academics and social skills to be independent and choose the life path that is most important to him. I want him to have those choices in his future" (Parent 2, Appendix F). Parent 3 shares that, "Learning his core basic subjects is important for me. I don't need him to be an over the top GATE student but to feel solid in the basics. I also want him to have good peer relationships...I want him to have college as an option if he desires and or job options or something vocational. I also want him to be ready as an adult to deal with different people all over the work environment" (Parent 3, Appendix I). All three parents want their children to have the choice of what future they will make for themselves.

Specialist providers focused on hope. Specialist 1 wants to see Student 1 "learning the basic areas of academics; reading, writing, and math through hands on experience" (Specialist 1, Appendix D). Specialist 1 also stated that, "If he has all the academic skills he needs he will be more successful in life. He might gain greater independence as well" (Specialist 1, Appendix D). Specialist 2A hopes that Student 2 "keeps reaching the next level. I've seen cases in the field where students aren't expected to keep going and reaching new phases" (Specialist 2A,

Appendix G). Specialist 2B wants “a typical education vs. a modified education” for Student 2 (Specialist 2B, Appendix G). Specialist 3 wants Student 3 to have “a sense of knowing he is not alone” (Specialist 3, Appendix J). All four specialists want their students to grow in all areas.

Teachers expressed high expectations and hopes for their students with ASD that reached far into their futures. Teacher 1 said, “Oh I want him to be at grade level just as everyone else is. I want for him to be happy and feel proud. And feel loved. And I want him to grow up to be a contributing citizen...I feel like he needs all that stuff in order to be successful” (Teacher 1, Appendix E). She also expressed that he will need “all of his academics and social skills in order to be prepared for adulthood” (Teacher 1, Appendix E). Teacher 2A said Student 2 needed “the education itself. The knowledge and standards needed to go to college. The accountability and responsibility” so that “he can succeed in life to his full potential” (Teacher 2A, Appendix H). Teacher 2B said Student 2 should have “the basic skills needed to function in this world and the social skills. A safe place to learn” which will “help him later on in life” (Teacher 2B, Appendix H). She also stated that “with these skills he can hopefully live an independent and productive life” (Teacher 2B, Appendix H). Teacher 3 said that Student 3 needs, “as an individual, whole learning. For someone like student 3, for any student really, to feel confident and to show their strengths is important. For them to learn that they can make mistakes and grow from it. Also to master all the standards” (Teacher 3, Appendix K). Based on the interviews it can be concluded that the Teachers, along with Specialists and Parents, are vested in the hopes, dreams and futures of the children with ASD at this public charter school of study.

Parent and Educator Perspectives of Inclusion for Students with ASD. By taking the perceptions of parents, service providers and teachers centered around three individual students at the public charter school of study, it is possible to gain specific insight into what ASD learning

environments are like at the public charter school of study. As the data on satisfaction reveals, everyone who participated in the study is satisfied with what students with ASD receive at the public charter school of study. Since the parents, specialists and teachers who work with students with ASD at the public charter school of study participated, it is possible to gain a glimpse of what school is like for each child through the eyes of those who work closest to them. This helps answer the second research question of what inclusion looks like from the perspective of parents and educators of students with ASD in the public charter school of study.

Student 1 comes from a home where his parents actively advocate for his education and placement (Appendix C). His mother believes in having him in an inclusion setting and is extremely happy with the public charter school of study for what they provide her son (Appendix C). Student 1 comes to a Kindergarten classroom with a teacher who knows him well on a personal level and seeks to support him in all that she can (Appendix E). She differentiates to meet his individual needs and maintains him as an equal contributor with his peers in her classroom community (Appendix E). Student 1 receives support from a caring speech therapist who has helped him gain the words he needs to interact socially and excel academically with his same-age-peers (Appendix D). Student 1 is succeeding in all areas at the public charter school of study on a daily basis.

Student 2 comes from a home where his parents actively advocate for his educational placement and specialized supports (Appendix F). His mother believes the strong school community and staff support help her son succeed in the public charter school of study (Appendix F). Student 1 comes to a Kindergarten classroom with teachers that refine systems to support him in the classroom and seek expertise knowledge from colleagues to help him excel (Appendix H). Student 2 receives support from numerous specialist providers who implement

supports and adapt environments to help him succeed (Appendix G). Student 2 is succeeding and growing both academically and socially at the public charter school of study.

Student 3 comes from a home where his mother works closely with him and his school to assure he is in the least restrictive environment that balances the supports he needs with the desire to be the same as his peers (Appendix I). She believes the high quality teachers and flexible RtI team contribute to her son's academic growth and hopes a school with more artistic focus will help him shine socially (Appendix I). Student 3 comes to a Fifth grade classroom with a teacher who frontloads content and explains social situations explicitly for him (Appendix K). Student 3 receives speech support in a group of peers and social support from the intervention specialist (Appendix J). Student 3 is succeeding academically and growing socially at the public charter school of study. It is hoped by all who work with him that his next school placement will give him further success.

Based on the interviews of all participants, it is possible to conclude that the students with ASD at the public charter school of study are in an inclusion setting where the individual students' needs are a priority. At this school site, inclusion means learning with same-age-peers with supports unique to each child. The school has a high academic focus which helps all the students there excel academically. The school has a strong sense of community and respect which helps all the students there excel socially. Participants hope to gain more recess time for students so they can have more unstructured social time, more funding to help support the school and more understanding of how to best support each student there, with ASD or otherwise.

Discussion

The previous literature rarely touched on the parent and educator perspectives of ASD learning environments within public charter schools outright. Because of this, there was a need to examine the broader issues of the controversial complexity surrounding public charter schools, including the public perception of their ability to address the needs of SWD; in addition, there was a need to explore what is perceived as the “best” setting for students with ASD along the specialist to mainstream continuum in any school (Jindal-Snape et al., 2005). Once this background information was presented, it was then possible to focus in on parent and educator perceptions of the concerns and benefits that an inclusion setting creates for students with ASD.

Unfortunately, there is little research available on what other public charter schools provide under inclusion for students with ASD. This creates difficult for comparing findings with previous research. The revealed interview themes of communication, social development, teacher understanding, behavior management, learning environment, school community, public charter school difference, and the hopes, dreams and goals for students with ASD made it possible to highlight what most greatly impacted education for students with ASD in the public charter school of study. These findings can be viewed in comparison to the previous research on what parents and educators view as concerns and benefits of inclusion for students with ASD. An in-depth analysis of the perspectives of parents and educators at one public charter school sheds light on the experiences of students with ASD; it also highlights the need for further research in other public charter schools on this topic as the findings cannot be generalized elsewhere or even adequately compared. Using the information found in the interviews from this study, general conclusions addressing the research questions can be given.

Comparison of Findings with Existing Studies

The existing literature found that public charter schools face similar challenges as traditional public schools when serving students with ASD, with the additional burdens of less funding and the conflicting ideologies of school choice with inclusion. The previous literature also cited numerous concerns and benefits associated with inclusion as a learning model for students with ASD. The findings from this study presented the themes of communication, social development, teacher understanding, behavior management, learning environment, school community, public charter school difference, and the hopes, dreams and goals for students with ASD. It is possible to compare these findings with the concerns and benefits of inclusion from the previous research.

Inclusion concerns. Previous research finds that parents and educators like the idea of inclusion, but are concerned about what it looks like in actual practice (Croll & Moses, 2000; Grove & Fisher, 1999; Jenkinson, 1998). In previous research parents and educators alike are concerned about various challenges inclusion may present students with ASD. They agree that the ideal behind inclusion is far from the reality (Croll & Moses, 2000; Grove & Fisher, 1999; Jenkinson, 1998). This study takes an in-depth look at what inclusion is in practice for one public charter school.

Parents and educators in previous research are concerned that students with ASD may have negative social experiences in an inclusion setting (Whitaker, 2007, p. 175), face social rejection (Ellen Seery, 2000, p. 268), social isolation (McDonnel, 1987), that the attitudes of the other students toward an individual with ASD may be negative (Hanline & Halvorsen, 1989), and that peers may even be verbally or physically abusive (McDonnel, 1987). Parent 2 found that with such a strong academic focus there is not enough time to practice social interactions

(Appendix F). Specialist 3 found it difficult to help Student 3 with social development when he did not want adult help (Appendix J). Teacher 1, Teacher 2A and Teacher 3 all noted instances when their students felt socially uncomfortable or misunderstood (Appendix E, Appendix H, Appendix K). It appears that the previous research and the participants in this study agree that students can have negative social experiences, but the participants did not highlight any other negative social experiences the previous research cited.

Parents and educators from previous research are concerned that students with ASD may not have their individual needs met (Leyser & Kirk, 2004, p. 279). They cite worry over access to services (Ellen Seery, 2000, p. 268; Leyser & Kirk, 2004, p. 278; McDonnel, 1987), that academic progress may be stifled (Fox & Ysseldyke, 1997; Leyser & Kirk, 2004, p. 272), and that the student's safety would be jeopardized (Hanline & Halvorsen, 1989) in the inclusion environment. Specialist 2B was the only participant to note difficulty meeting the individual needs of their student, specifically when grouping for instruction (Appendix G). All participants voiced numerous benefits and examples where the students with ASD were having their individual needs met socially, academically, behaviorally and sensory-wise. It appears that the participants in this study do not agree with the concern of students with ASD having their individual needs met outside of the instructional grouping challenge Specialist 2B noted.

Parents from the previous research are also worried about the classroom teacher's ability to adapt the learning environment for students with ASD (Jindal-Snape et al., 2005, p. 77; Leyser & Kirk, 2004, p. 278; Stuart et al., 2006, p. 48; Whitaker, 2007, p.175). They are worried about the classroom teacher's ability to give enough attention to their child with ASD, as well as the other students in the class (Ellen Seery, 2000, p. 276). Parents and educators believe special education teachers are better at instructing students with ASD (Leyser & Kirk, 2004, p. 278).

Some parents worry that having a student with ASD in a general education classroom, may overwhelm and disrupt the class as a whole and overload general education teachers (Jenkinson, 1998; Leyser & Kirk, 2004, p. 272; Palmer et al., 2001). General education teachers have expressed discomfort in providing services for SWD, having never been trained on what an inclusion setting should be (Ellen Seery, 2000, p. 268). Parents feel that general education teachers will need more training on teaching students with ASD (Barnard, et al., 2000; Ellen Seery, 2000, p. 276; Jindal-Snape et al., 2005, p. 77; Stuart et al., 2006, p. 49; Hanline & Halvorsen, 1989; Jindal-Snape et al., 2005, p. 86). Educators want more support and training for providing services for students with ASD (Ellen Seery, 2000, p. 268; Fox & Ysseldyke, 1997; Leyser & Kirk, 2004, p. 272). Teacher 1, Teacher 2A and Teacher 3 all noted wanting more training and education on providing for students with ASD (Appendix E, Appendix H, Appendix K). Parent 3, Specialist 1, Specialist 2B and Specialist 3 all mentioned there were times that the teachers could have more training, experience or awareness in working with students with ASD (Appendix I, Appendix D, Appendix G, Appendix J). It appears that the previous research and participants in this study agree that the teachers could need more training in working with students with ASD.

Parents in previous research desire that teachers empathize with their child's specific ASD needs to a greater degree (Whitaker, 2007, p. 174). Parents want specialized instruction for students with ASD and interaction with typically developing peers (Bitterman et al., 2008, p. 1516). All the participants in this study noted great teacher understanding, flexibility and specialized instruction for students with ASD while maintaining interaction with same-age-peers. In this regard the participants in this study appear not to hold the same concerns about inclusion at the public charter school of study as the previous research found. This is the case with all

major concerns except teachers needing more training and the instructional grouping difficulty mentioned above.

Inclusion benefits. Parents and educators in the previous research have noted numerous benefits that inclusion provides for students with ASD (Gallagher et al., 2000; Hanline & Halvorsen, 1989; Leyser & Kirk, 2004; McDonnell, 1987; Palmer, Borthwick-Duffy, & Widaman, 1998; Ryndak, Downing, Jacqueline, & Morrison, 1995). The participants in this study found the same benefits of inclusion at the public charter school of study.

Previous research finds benefits when students with ASD are surrounded by model peers (Bitterman et al., 2008, p. 1513; Leyser & Kirk, 2004, p. 271) and improve greatly in their own social skills in this educational setting (Bitterman, 2008; Goldstein et al., 1992; Hurth et al., 1999; Laushey & Heflin, 2000; Prendeville, Prelock & Unwin, 2006). Parents and educators from previous research note that general education students (Leyser & Kirk, 2004, p. 281) and teachers (Ellen Seery, 2000, p. 276) benefit from having a student with ASD in their class by teaching them empathy for others and understanding for disabilities. All the teachers and all the parents in this study spoke of the benefits all their students gain from the classroom community of peers they have. All the specialists mentioned the empathy the students with ASD feel from their peers and how the social interactions help them increase their skills. All of the parents gave specific examples of good friendships their children experience at the public charter school of study. It appears that the previous research and participants in this study agree that students with ASD, and their peers and teachers, have the benefits of improving social skills and feeling empathy and understanding in an inclusion setting.

Parents and educators in the previous research feel that the concept of inclusion gives students with ASD the same access and opportunities as other students (Spann et al., 2003, p.

234). Parent 2, Specialist 2B, Teacher 2A and Teacher 3 all spoke of the students with ASD as unique individuals who get the same opportunities as their peers in a way that supports their success (Appendix F, Appendix G, Appendix H, Appendix K). All participants in this study spoke highly of the educational program for students with ASD and all students at the public charter school of study. It appears the previous research and the participants in this study agree with the benefits of access and opportunities in an inclusion setting for students with ASD.

Parents and educators in one particular school study noted that the home to school connection was strong and that all parties were invested and willing to accommodate the learning environment to meet the social and academic needs of the students with ASD, as well as all students (Spann et al., 2003). The participants in this study cite numerous examples of these benefits. Parent 1 noted the understanding she felt from her son's teacher (Appendix E). Parent 2 noted the understanding of her son's teacher and the specialists that work with him (Appendix F). Specialists cited their own experience in working with students with ASD and how they support the classroom environment. The teachers cited seeking the expertise of the specialists in order to best meet the needs of all their students. The previous study conducted by Spann and this study demonstrate examples of willingness to accommodate to meet all the students' needs. Whitaker cited that parents support inclusion strongly when they report that their child with ASD's teacher sympathizes with the student's particular needs and are willing to be flexible (Whitaker, 2007, p. 170). All the parents in the current study note the teachers try wholeheartedly to understand their children and are flexible in meeting their needs.

It appears that the previous research and the participants in this study agree that inclusion can benefit students with ASD, and all students, in the areas of social skills, school empathy,

access, opportunities, willingness to accommodate to meet all students' needs, teacher sympathy and teacher flexibility.

Limitations of the Study

Given that there is limited research addressing what parent and educator perceptions are of an inclusion setting for students with ASD in public charter schools, the study is limited by the lack of comparison to previous research. This makes the study limited in its ability to generalize findings to any other public charter school. Given limited time and funding, this study could not be done at multiple public charter school sites. The sample size is also small, making it difficult to generalize the findings.

Implications for Future Research

In order to address the larger question of what inclusion looks like for students with ASD in public charter schools, this study should be conducted in other public charter schools using a similar methodology. Continued research on the services public charter schools provide for students with ASD, what the obstacles are, and what the benefits are is possible. There is also the potential for further research at the public charter school of study by interviewing the parents and educators of students with ASD using the same methodology at the end of each academic school year. This could produce qualitative studies centered on individual students with ASD and their inclusion settings. This could additionally produce a longitudinal study of a public charter school and address how the school is providing services for students with ASD given the conflicting ideologies of inclusion and school choice.

Overall Significance of the Study

This study is significant in that it is one of the first studies to seek parent and educator perspectives at a public charter school focusing on an inclusion environment for students with ASD. This study holds additional significance in that three children with ASD at the public charter school of study were focused on in interviews of the parents, service providers and classroom teachers, that together advocate and work with them on a daily basis throughout the school year. The school site of study and participants can use the insight gained to better serve their students with ASD. Educators and parents of students with ASD can also use the information from this study to help them better support and advocate for their students and children. Hopefully policy makers can also use this study to better serve students with ASD, and all students.

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Appendix A

Parent Interview Guide

Question	Follow up	Follow up
On a scale of 1 to 10, how satisfied are you with your child's learning environment? Why do you say that?	Which parts of your child's current learning environment are you most satisfied with?	Which parts of your child's learning environment are you most dissatisfied with?
What is most important for your child to get out of his or her education?	Why is this important for your child?	Can you give an example?
Please describe your child's current learning environment(s).	How does your child's current learning environment differ from his or her previous learning environment?	Can you give an example?
Which components of the learning environment have the greatest impact on your child? For example, the physical organization, peers, and teaching techniques used are components of the learning environment.	Can you give an example of the most positive impact on your child?	Can you give an example of the most negative impact on your child?
Describe your satisfaction with communication between the school/home and yourself. For example, is the school/home responsive when you communicate about your child?	Can you give an example of when communication was excellent? How did it affect your child's education?	Can you give an example of when communication was poor? How did it affect your child's education?
Do you think your child's teachers have a good understanding of kids with ASD and how to educate them?	Can you remember a time when a teacher showed great understanding of your child? How did it affect your child's education?	Can you remember a time when a teacher showed little or no understanding of your child? How did it affect your child's education?
Describe how your child's ASD-	Can you give an example of	Can you give an example of

related behaviors are managed at school. Describe your satisfaction with the management of your child's ASD-related behaviors.	a time when behavior management was particularly successful? How did it affect your child's education?	a time when behavior management was particularly unsuccessful? How did it affect your child's education?
Specialized instruction includes instruction delivered by an education specialist, instruction received in a special education classroom, and services received in a general education classroom that are specific to your child. Describe your satisfaction with the amount and level of specialized instruction your child receives.	Do you wish your child had more or less specialized instruction? How would more (or less) specialized instruction benefit your child?	Can you remember a time specialized instruction helped your child succeed at school? Can you remember a time specialized instruction hindered your child's success at school?
Describe your satisfaction with your child's social development in his or her current learning environment.	Can you give an example of a time your child had a positive social experience? How did it affect his or her education? Can you give an example of a time your child had a negative social experience? How did it affect his or her education?	What does your child need to be successful socially?
What changes or improvements would you like to see in your child's learning environment?	Which components must be included for your child to be successful?	Which components must be excluded, or controlled, for your child to be successful?
What components of a public charter school are relevant to your child's education?	What makes this public charter school beneficial for your child's education?	What makes this public charter school challenging for your child's education?
Are there any other thoughts you wish to share regarding your child's education?		

Appendix B

Educator Interview Guide for Specialists and Teachers

Question	Follow up	Follow up
On a scale of 1 to 10, how satisfied are you with your student's learning environment? Why do you say that?	Which parts of your student's current learning environment are you most satisfied with?	Which parts of your student's learning environment are you most dissatisfied with?
What is most important for your student to get out of his or her education?	Why is this important for your student?	Can you give an example?
Please describe your student's current learning environment(s).	How does your student's current learning environment differ from his or her previous learning environment?	Can you give an example?
Which components of the learning environment have the greatest impact on your student? For example, the physical organization, peers, and teaching techniques used are components of the learning environment.	Can you give an example of the most positive impact on your student?	Can you give an example of the most negative impact on your student?
Describe your satisfaction with communication between the school/home and yourself. For example, is the school/home responsive when you communicate about your student?	Can you give an example of when communication was excellent? How did it affect your student's education?	Can you give an example of when communication was poor? How did it affect your student's education?
Do you think you have a good understanding of kids with ASD and how to educate them?	Can you remember a time when a teacher showed great understanding of your student? How did it affect your student's education?	Can you remember a time when a teacher showed little or no understanding of your student? How did it affect your student's education?
Describe how your student's ASD-	Can you give an example of	Can you give an example of

related behaviors are managed at school. Describe your satisfaction with the management of your student's ASD-related behaviors.	a time when behavior management was particularly successful? How did it affect your student's education?	a time when behavior management was particularly unsuccessful? How did it affect your student's education?
Specialized instruction includes instruction delivered by an education specialist, instruction received in a special education classroom, and services received in a general education classroom that are specific to your student. Describe your satisfaction with the amount and level of specialized instruction your student receives.	Do you wish your student had more or less specialized instruction? How would more (or less) specialized instruction benefit your student?	Can you remember a time specialized instruction helped your student succeed at school? Can you remember a time specialized instruction hindered your student's success at school?
Describe your satisfaction with your student's social development in his or her current learning environment.	Can you give an example of a time your student had a positive social experience? How did it affect his or her education? Can you give an example of a time your student had a negative social experience? How did it affect his or her education?	What does your student need to be successful socially?
What changes or improvements would you like to see in your student's learning environment?	Which components must be included for your student to be successful?	Which components must be excluded, or controlled, for your student to be successful?
What components of a public charter school are relevant to your student's education?	What makes this public charter school beneficial for your student's education?	What makes this public charter school challenging for your student's education?
Are there any other thoughts you wish to share regarding your student's education?		

Appendix C

Interview with Parent 1

Parent 1 is the mother of student 1 who is in Kindergarten. R = researcher; P1 = Parent 1.

R: On a scale of 1 to 10, how satisfied are you with your child's learning environment and why do you say that?

P1: A nine because just coming from a preschool environment in a typical district, things were always a battle getting him services that he needs. I came here ready to fight for him and it took a while to get use to the fact that I didn't have to fight anymore. His needs are met and everyone here wants to make that happen. This year has been amazing. I felt that he's young, he could repeat if he needs to but he has succeeded here. This is because of the dedicated staff and the amazing program here.

R: Which parts of your child's current learning environment are you most satisfied with?

P1: His teacher, the plan we have for him, and him. The contribution of a wonderful teacher that sees him as a unique individual and the program we have set in place. The teacher gets support when she needs it and he has flourished.

R: Which parts of your child's learning environment are you most dissatisfied with?

P1: I wouldn't say dissatisfied. It's more of a personal issue where there's not someone specific he can go to on the playground if he has trouble. There are tons of adults out there; but, he only voices concerns if it's someone he knows very well.

R: What is most important for your child to get out of his education?

P1: To reach all of his learning goals and reach his own level that he is capable of. To find his strengths. To succeed and to excel.

R: Why is this most important for your child?

P1: For him not having a lot of communication skills, it's important that he grows in his own way. With Autism that's what happens, he focuses on one thing only at a time. He is starting to balance multiple tasks at once and interact with others with confidence. He will need this in the real world.

R: Can you give me an example?

P1: If he doesn't know how to talk to people and let them know what he can do or what he wants then he won't be independent.

R: Please describe your child's current learning environment(s).

P1: He has school. He also has a home program with ABA therapy. He also has a speech group and a social group. Every day at home we are always working on something.

R: How does your child's current learning environment differ from his previous learning environment?

P1: It took me two months and a lot of paperwork to convince the school district to put him in a regular preschool with a full time aide. They wanted him in a special day preschool because he wasn't talking yet; but, I knew he could do more. The aide was helpful to have in preschool because it wasn't very structured; but, fading out the aide here was very helpful for him to grow.

R: Can you give me an example?

P1: When he had an aide he would sit there and wait for them to do something before he would engage. Now he engages on his own. There are sometimes delays in his response; but he is always looking to his peers and his teacher and he catches on and catches up quickly.

R: Which components of the learning environment have the greatest impact on your child? For example, the physical organization, peers, and teaching techniques used are components of the learning environment.

P1: His teacher, his peers, his friends in that order.

R: Can you give an example of the most positive impact on your child?

P1: All three of those pieces have given him so much confidence in himself. He is so happy to go to school and come home to tell about his day. He feels pride in what he does and isn't afraid to make mistakes or learn something new.

R: Can you give an example of the most negative impact on your child?

P1: Holding his pencil is still challenging for him and OT was too different from his peers at first. He has gotten so much better at explaining how he feels so having a cooperative group has made a world of difference.

R: Describe your satisfaction with communication between the school, home and yourself. For example, is the school responsive when you communicate about your child?

P1: It's been great. I talk to his teacher all the time and the sp. ed. coordinator.

R: Can you give an example of when communication was excellent? How did it affect your child's education?

P1: I like that the school was open to having my home coordinator come in and work with the team. The school is open to collaborating with everyone and it feels like we are all here for my son and his success is always in mind.

R: Can you give an example of when communication was poor? How did it affect your child's education?

P1: Not here. Whenever something doesn't work out I'd hear it from the teachers and the principal and we would work with my son on how to work through things. At my old school I felt like I was always forcing communication.

R: Do you think your child's teachers have a good understanding of kids with ASD and how to educate them?

P1: I think so. My daughter had his teacher for the past two years and she told me she wanted to have my son in her class. She asked for resources and took time to get to know him.

R: Can you remember a time when a teacher showed great understanding of your child? How did it affect your child's education?

P1: His teacher does a great job all the time. She will tell me his progress and how he is doing. She understands how he feels and reads his emotional state very well. She gives him room to express himself and he wants to do his best for her and himself.

R: Can you remember a time when a teacher showed little or no understanding of your child? How did it affect your child's education?

P1: Yes. In the past there were certain things that teachers would say about Autism and assume my son would have all of those issues instead of letting him show what he could do and encouraging him to grow. That's why we knew he should come here like his sister.

R: Describe how your child's ASD-related behaviors are managed at school. Describe your satisfaction with the management of your child's ASD-related behaviors.

P1: A lot of his needs are sensory related. He has stemming and vocalization. We use a lot of strategies to help him. He has a weighted lap rest that soothes him and helps him to have the same release or outlet that the stemming and vocalization give him; but, it's not disruptive to others.

R: Can you give an example of a time when behavior management was particularly successful? How did it affect your child's education?

P1: The weighted lap belt has helped the most.

R: Can you give an example of a time when behavior management was particularly unsuccessful? How did it affect your child's education?

P1: The only thing is certain times when he will say inappropriate things to get a reaction; but, as soon as the teacher says no in a firm voice he stops immediately and the issue won't arise again for months. It's like he has this test he needs to try out on people every once in a while.

R: Specialized instruction includes instruction delivered by an education specialist, instruction received in a special education classroom, and services received in a general education

classroom that are specific to your student. Describe your satisfaction with the amount and level of specialized instruction your child receives.

P1: I think it's a good balance now. He is pulled out to get speech and OT pushes in. Things that are needed are also differentiated in the class for him.

R: Do you wish your child had more or less specialized instruction? How would more (or less) specialized instruction benefit your child?

P1: No. He is growing by leaps and bounds with what he has. He is staying up with his peers.

R: Can you remember a time specialized instruction helped your child succeed at school?

P1: I think it's everything, his class, his teacher, his peers and his speech therapist that have helped him have such a huge increase in his speech. His pronunciation has gotten so strong and he uses complete sentences.

R: Can you remember a time specialized instruction hindered your child's success at school?

P1: I don't think that has ever happened.

R: Describe your satisfaction with your child's social development in his current learning environment.

P1: He's doing a great job socially. He has lots of friends, he's included at recess and he's involved with his class at school.

R: Can you give an example of a time your child had a positive social experience? How did it affect his or her education?

P1: I have been asking him forever, “what did you do at school?” and “who did you play with?”.

Now he can tell me details and give me names. He has a best friend he talks about and his best friend says the same thing about him at home.

R: Can you give an example of a time your child had a negative social experience? How did it affect his or her education?

P1: He did get into a little fight on the playground at the beginning of the year over a lack of communication; but, that’s also part of growing up.

R: What does your child need to be successful socially?

P1: A lot of support and the great thing about this charter is that we have a great community in the classroom and at the school. If he doesn’t have the words he needs his confidence can be low; but, his class family supports him and they really all support each other.

R: What changes or improvements would you like to see in your child’s learning environment?

P1: Having more O.T. because he struggles with sitting still. Integrating O.T. into the classroom a little more. Having cross-motor activities too.

R: Which components must be included for your child to be successful?

P1: He needs someone to give direction and then show him what to do and then check for understanding. An environment that adapts to his sensory needs.

R: Which components must be excluded, or controlled, for your child to be successful?

P1: The things that are difficult for him are lots of background noise and he can get very distracted. So sensory wise the volume needs to be low and he can't do bright lights very well. He wears sunglasses to recess.

R: What components of a public charter school are relevant to your child's education?

P1: Being able to put him fully in the mainstream class instead of something else. At the last school they wanted to put him in a special day class with two kids. I had to push. We talked to our neighborhood school and it seemed like the bar minimum. We had to come here.

R: What makes this public charter school beneficial for your child's education?

P1: The one thing that really blew me away was when the team said our goal for your son is for him to go to college and the plan and his progress are working toward that goal.

R: What makes this public charter school challenging for your child's education?

P1: His challenge personally is writing and reading. The physical part of writing is hard. He can type very well. Reading is challenging because of the communication aspect. He can show what he knows though and gets the support he needs without taking the learning away from him.

R: Are there any other thoughts you wish to share regarding your child's education?

P1: We've been so happy. He has grown so much in the year. It really has to do with the people working together here. That we have the same goals as the school. My opinions and ideas are so welcomed. I never felt challenged or discouraged to get him what he needs. We are all working together.

R: Thank you for participating in this study and taking the time to interview with me. This was very informative.

P1: Thank you for studying something people should know about.

Appendix D

Interview with Specialist 1

Specialist 1 is the occupation therapist that works with student 1 as both a push-in and pull-out service provider. R = researcher; S1 = Specialist 1.

R: How satisfied are you with your student's learning environment on a scale of one to ten?

S1: Eight. He would benefit from more interactive and movement experiences in his classroom.

R: Which parts of your student's current learning environment are you most satisfied with?

S1: Art is extremely beneficial for him. The classroom environment is neat and not too busy which is also helpful.

R: Which parts of your student's learning environment are you most dissatisfied with?

S1: Recess. He does not have access to the playground every recess since they are on the blacktop at lunch recess. His OT environment is not as beneficial as it could be. He needs more climbing and swinging equipment.

R: What is most important for your student to get out of his or her education?

S1: Learning the basic areas of academics; reading, writing, and math through hands on experience.

R: Why is this most important for your student?

S1: So he can be successful in life.

R: Can you give me an example?

S1: If he has all the academic skills he needs he will be more successful in life. He might gain greater independence as well.

R: Please describe your student's current learning environment(s).

S1: The classroom is organized, clean and neat. The OT area is small and has minimal variety of sensory experiences and is restricting in that way.

R: How does your student's current learning environment differ from his or her previous learning environment?

S1: I don't know what his previous placement looked like.

R: Which components of the learning environment have the greatest impact on your student? For example, the physical organization, peers, and teaching techniques used are components of the learning environment.

S1: All of the above. The learning style with some of the ADA style his aide uses is helpful. The way the class is set up and how desks are set up away from the carpet and the space is beneficial for all of them.

R: Can you give an example of the most positive impact on your student?

S1: He transitions from the desk work to the carpet very easily and since the classroom is so large he is able to navigate well.

R: Can you give an example of the most negative impact on your student?

S1: The recess process of lining up. It is orderly and helps students learn respect but takes so much time. While respectful, it is time consuming and they have short recesses to begin

with when they need more movement experiences. This is particularly true of this student's needs.

R: Describe your satisfaction with communication between the school, home and yourself. For example, is the home responsive when you communicate about your student?

S1: For this student yes, one hundred percent satisfied. His teachers, his mom and the program specialist and his aide communicate well.

R: Do you think you have a good understanding of kids with ASD and how to educate them?

S1: Yes.

R: Can you remember a time when a teacher showed great understanding of your student? How did it affect your student's education?

S1: His intervention specialist has a great understanding of him and his learning style. She can get him to refocus in our OT sessions even when I can't.

R: Can you remember a time when a teacher showed little or no understanding of your student? How did it affect your student's education?

S1: When I first started, one of the classroom teachers had him in the back of the room with no sensory support and that shows that they didn't understand his Autism; but, they have come around.

R: Describe how your student's ASD-related behaviors are managed at school. Describe your satisfaction with the management of your student's ASD-related behaviors.

S1: He is managed in a fully inclusive environment by his teachers and program specialist. They are very open and that really benefits him.

R: Specialized instruction includes instruction delivered by an education specialist, instruction received in a special education classroom, and services received in a general education classroom that are specific to your student. Describe your satisfaction with the amount and level of specialized instruction your student receives.

S1: Definitely satisfied with the amount.

R: Do you wish your student had more or less specialized instruction? How would more (or less) specialized instruction benefit your student?

S1: No.

R: Can you remember a time specialized instruction helped your student succeed at school? Can you remember a time specialized instruction hindered your student's success at school?

S1: This happens on an hourly if not moment to moment basis that it helps him.

R: Describe your satisfaction with your student's social development in his current learning environment.

S1: I don't see much social development. I am not sure if that is because I am not in the classroom all the time or if it is not happening. He really enjoys being in the cooperative group for O.T.

R: Can you give an example of a time your student had a positive social experience? How did it affect his or her education? Can you give an example of a time your student had a negative social experience? How did it affect his or her education?

S1: I recently saw him with another student in my OT group and had them play a game together. He did very well interacting when prompted. He responds to prompting to engage with others and will do it on his own with the right peer.

R: What does your student need to be successful socially?

S1: More practice. His peers are very empathetic of him which helps.

R: What changes or improvements would you like to see in your student's learning environment?

S1: I want recess to be less structured and for the students to have access to the swings and playground. I want the classroom to have more social time and in OT for him to have more time with swings and sensory needs.

R: Which components must be included for your student to be successful?

S1: The swinging motion helps the vestibular system, like the inner ear that helps you walk upright and swinging helps ground you. The ladder climbing dictates our core muscular system the proprioception which helps our joints and muscles build control. This is good for all kids and it would help him control his body.

R: Which components must be excluded, or controlled, for your student to be successful?

S1: Nothing I can think of.

R: What components of a public charter school are relevant to your student's education?

S1: I don't know. The flexibility is nice.

R: What makes this public charter school beneficial for your student's education?

S1: The people here are great. I suggested we let the student try gum on the carpet and the teacher, program specialist and the principal were fine with trying that and it really helped him focus on the carpet more. They are willing to try what will be best for the students. This might just be the people here and not necessarily public charter schools though.

R: What makes this public charter school challenging for your student's education?

S1: I don't know.

R: Are there any other thoughts you wish to share regarding your student's education?

S1: Nope. If you want to know more about sensory needs you should read Raising a Sensory Smart Child by Beil and Pesky. There is also another great book about sensory integration called The Out of Sync Child that is a little more academic but very informative.

R: Thank you for participating in this study and taking the time to interview with me. This was very informative.

S1: You're welcome.

Appendix E

Interview with Teacher 1

Teacher 1 is the classroom teacher for student 1. R = researcher; T1 = Teacher 1.

R: On a scale of 1 to 10, how satisfied are you with your student's learning environment?

T1: Ten

R: Why do you say that?

T1: Because I feel like we have put a lot of the things he needs in place that he needs in order to feel successful. When he feels successful I don't feel bad or pressured. Our class family has been very great to him so he is a part of our team.

R: Which parts of your student's current learning environment are you most satisfied with?

T1: He's just so adaptable so he does everything the way that everyone else does. His routines are exactly the same so it just, it feels like he is just another student in my class at this point in the year.

R: Which parts of your student's learning environment are you most dissatisfied with?

T1: Honestly I don't think there is any right now. I mean I can think back to the beginning of the year when I feel we were all still kind of learning about how he reacts to things and his need to fit in, you know but at that point in time I had an aide so she was very good about helping me show him and calm him down and meet his needs.

R: What is most important for your student to get out of his or her education?

T1: Oh I want him to be at grade level just as everyone else is. I want for him to be happy and feel proud. And feel loved. And I want him to grow up to be a contributing citizen.

R: Why is this most important for your student?

T1: Because I feel like he needs all that stuff in order to be successful.

R: Can you give me an example?

T1: Knowing all of his academics and social skills in order to be prepared for adulthood.

R: Please describe your student's current learning environment(s).

T1: Like how he is in here?

R: Yes.

T1: That's kind of a weird question, so like what I have around him?

R: Um, so learning environment is defined as the teaching techniques used, school setting, classroom, educators and specialists that work with the student, classmates and additional services.

T1: So that whole environment, oh my gosh, so that's a lot. Okay so he is in a class with me and um, and his peers like I said before are very supportive. His speech and his O.T. and his case study person. They are all very involved. He is pulled out of the class three times a week but someone pushes in three times a week to help with writing. His math centers and language arts centers are exactly the same. The rest of his peers are working at his level. Do you need more information?

R: I think that's good.

T1: Okay.

R: How does your student's current learning environment differ from his previous learning environment?

T1: Um, I think when he was in preschool he had a way smaller class. And I believe he had an aide with him all the time. But that is how it was here in the beginning and then she faded out pretty quickly.

R: Which components of the learning environment have the greatest impact for your student? For example, the physical organization, peers, and teaching techniques used are components of the learning environment.

T1: I think for him, it's me, the people in the class. The teacher in the class and then his peers because he has a very strong drive to want to fit in. So he looks to us for the appropriate behavior and looks to his peers for that.

R: Can you give an example of the most positive impact on your student?

T1: Um, yeah I think his peers, they impact him the most. Even his parents have said his speech as gotten better. The way he talks, his sense of humor. A lot of that comes from his dialogue with his friends, his team members.

R: Can you give an example of the most negative impact on your student?

T1: No, I mean that he is really hard on himself. If he can't do something he internalizes it. I think he negatively impacts himself, you know? But he's done a lot better at being able to calm down. Realizing that it's not that big of a deal to make a mistake.

R: Describe your satisfaction with communication between the school, home and yourself. For example, is the home responsive when you communicate about your student?

T1: Absolutely. I don't feel like there's ever really been a problem. I mean me and the student's mom, we text each other.

R: Can you give an example of when communication was excellent? How did it affect your student's education?

T1: I can't really pin point one specific time because I feel like every time there's a problem, somebody addresses and somebody does something about it. Whether it's something he's working on at home or something I'm noticing in class that the family should know about somebody will come up with a strategy. I definitely don't feel like we're lacking in communication.

R: Do you think you have a good understanding of kids with ASD and how to educate them?

T1: No because he's one kid. I can learn as I go along and if I get somebody else, chances are they are going to be way different on the spectrum and I'm going to have to learn their learning techniques and their learning methods. But I definitely feel like I have the patience and the love for it. But you have to learn as you go along.

R: Can you remember a time when a teacher showed great understanding of your student? How did it affect your student's education?

T1: Sure. Like could his intervention specialist be somebody?

R: Yes, anybody at the school.

T1: So when the aide was fading out and he was doing more in our classroom without her, the intervention specialist she showed me different ways to calm him down and lot of the things I didn't realize where you kind of have to feed them the words. So they can hear you say it and they repeat it. I didn't really realize at that point that he didn't have the bank of vocabulary that needed to ask for what he needed.

R: Can you remember a time when a teacher showed little or no understanding of your student? How did it affect your student's education?

T1: Yes. In another class, the aide was with him at the time, but; the teacher knew he had autism and she just kind of talked to him really loud and slow. He did not respond to that at all. He kind of just shut down like, hey lady you don't know me at all. We had a talk with her. He wouldn't even look at her. They've come a long way though with this teacher. She has since learned the ways.

R: Describe how your student's ASD-related behaviors are managed at school. Describe your satisfaction with the management of your student's ASD-related behaviors.

T1: Um, so a lot of it I think is just acceptance. With a lot of it he's just really showing what he needs. If he's over stimulated he'll stem, if he's board he'll stem. So it really is my job to keep him from getting board but if he's excited it's okay. He has a little lap pad where he can use sometimes. It's kept in a special spot and if he stems sometimes the kids will just get it for him. The students won't skip a beat. But the students understand how he works

so he's the only one in guided reading who can read out loud. Sometimes at the top of his lungs. He can't whisper really.

R: Can you give an example of a time when behavior management was particularly successful? How did it affect your student's education?

T1: Um, yeah I think when he started to get really comfortable with me and he started to test, just like every other kid would. But with him you can't be too firm and you can't not be firm enough. So the first time where I had to look him in the eye and I had to tell him in a firm voice that what he did was not okay and I was very sad about his choice he was crushed and silently cried. But he hasn't done anything like that since.

R: Can you give an example of a time when behavior management was particularly unsuccessful? How did it affect your student's education?

T1: Um, not based on my experience. I can tell what kind of a person he is though so I know how to be just firm enough to have him respond. If someone is too firm he may shut down or escalate where as if I wasn't firm enough he wouldn't see how important it is to do the right thing. I make sure never to be too firm because it will break his little heart. Even if I correct his behavior I have to go and check with him afterwards so that he knows I'm not mad and he can make the right decisions.

R: Specialized instruction includes instruction delivered by an education specialist, instruction received in a special education classroom, and services received in a general education classroom that are specific to your student. Describe your satisfaction with the amount and level of specialized instruction your student receives.

T1: I think he has the amount he needs. The hardest for him is writing independently. That's when a teacher pushes in for that. Other than that he pretty much catches on and he learns quickly.

R: Do you wish your student had more or less specialized instruction? How would more (or less) specialized instruction benefit your student?

T1: No I feel like what he has right now is perfect for him.

R: Can you remember a time specialized instruction helped your student succeed at school?

T1: Yeah, just the other day when we were working on our end of the year Kindergarten writing reflection. It was just really nice, because I could teach the rest of the class and his educator could take time with him to guide him through and even his handwriting was just amazing that day.

R: Can you remember a time specialized instruction hindered your student's success at school?

T1: The very beginning of the year when his aide was here you could tell that he was kind of self-conscious because nobody else had an aide. But, when we included the aide as a part of our class he realized okay I'm not that different.

R: Describe your satisfaction with your student's social development in his or her current learning environment.

T1: He's like blown me away. He's just really funny and he makes jokes and he's caring. Sometimes I forget he's quote unquote different because he's just one of the boys in our class.

R: Can you give an example of a time your student had a positive social experience? How did it affect his education?

T1: Gosh there's just so many. Well I mean his peers love him so there are so many to name. I just remember the first time he asked by himself, because he goes to the bathroom from recess so I'm never in charge of that. He, for the first time, he asked me to go to the bathroom. He stood up and said Mrs.____, I have to go to the bathroom. I said okay get the pass and show me the bathroom signal. And he showed it to me and he kind of skipped out he was so proud and when he came back he put the pass down, stopped and looked around like did everyone notice I did this by myself. He sat down and was smiling and stemming like crazy like yeah. It was a good day. I just looked at him and was just smiling. It was a big deal because he's never done that.

R: Can you give an example of a time your student had a negative social experience? How did it affect his education?

T1: Yeah, so this was in the beginning. All the negative stuff happened in the beginning of the year. When we told the class about his autism and we kind of read a book trying to explain, and we hadn't said who in our class had it. But I'm sure the class figured it out because the aide was there. So when we were reading the book he was very self-conscious. He sat very close to his aide and didn't look up. But, I don't regret that I feel it was necessary for the kids to know that about him and to know that earlier. And I guess like in any other circumstance you kind of have to read the kid. He was uncomfortable; but, he got over it. That's about all that was negative.

R: What does your student need to be successful socially?

T1: I think because his speech is still a little, he's still working on his speech. In our class they understand him. Sometimes his peers understand him even better than me. But, I'm just thinking of in the future when he switches classes and thinks like that. Because when it's hard to understand him he gets frustrated. So just his speech.

R: What changes or improvements would you like to see in your student's learning environment?

T1: I just feel like I'm really satisfied with his progress and the way the team has really rallied around him.

R: Which components must be included for your student to be successful?

T1: Everything we have in place.

R: Which components must be excluded, or controlled, for your student to be successful?

T1: None.

R: What components of a public charter school are relevant to your student's education?

T1: I think it's nice that we have so much flexibility around how we teach. Since there's not set curriculum, we can tie into his needs. Sometimes it changes year to year based on the kids and that really helps me to help my students get what they want and stay engaged.

R: What makes this public charter school beneficial for your student's education?

T1: Just that. The flexibility. I don't feel like I'm bogged down by this curriculum that doesn't apply to him or any of my kids.

R: What makes this public charter school challenging for your student's education?

T1: I don't know. I feel like you'll talk to my colleagues and they will have different experiences but I think it's because of the child that this whole experience is really, really positive.

R: Are there any other thoughts you wish to share regarding your student's education?

T1: I think it's beneficial for him to stay with our school all the way though. Just because when you are in the same environment and with the same people are looking after your best interests then the only way for him to go is up.

R: Yay! Thank you for taking the time!

T1: You're very welcome. This was wonderful.

Appendix F

Interview with Parent 2

Parent 2 is the mother of student 2 who is in Kindergarten. R = researcher; P2 = Parent 2

R: On a scale of 1 to 10, how satisfied are you with your child's learning environment and why do you say that?

P2: Ten. I have a step-daughter in the public school system. I watched her go through Kindergarten and now she's actually in second grade this year. I have some experience now with Kindergarten, first grade and now second grade in the public schools and comparing that to how I have experienced this year here at this school, the learning environment for my son, it just fits him better.

R: Which parts of your child's current learning environment are you most satisfied with?

P2: Just because it's extremely structured. I think the more opened environment that would work really well for the majority of other kids doesn't work well for him. So the fact that it's very structured. And they do make a point of showing everything that's happening on the calendar and when there's a change they make a note that there's been a change so it gives him some forewarning. And just the icing on the cake for me is that he will be able to transition next year with his same peers and his same teacher.

R: Which parts of your child's learning environment are you most dissatisfied with?

P2: I don't have anything I am dissatisfied with. I wish he had more social interaction time outside of recess. There is such a strong academic focus here which he needs; but, he also needs social focus as well.

R: What is most important for your child to get out of his education?

P2: The skills to be independent and for me socialization and friends. I believe he can make college for certain in the right environment and that was something I didn't think was in his future until we came here.

R: Why is this most important for your child?

P2: He will need the academics and social skills to be independent and choose the life path that is most important to him. I want him to have those choices in his future.

R: Please describe your child's current learning environment(s).

P2: He has school full day, five days a week. He has speech and O.T. at school. He is starting a socialization group soon. He also has ABA therapy at home daily.

R: How does your child's current learning environment differ from his or her previous learning environment?

P2: We've only been to preschool with my child. He was always in a typical setting. Here he is asked to do a lot more and he rises to the occasion. In preschool it was really a lot more focused on play.

R: Which components of the learning environment have the greatest impact on your child? For example, the physical organization, peers, and teaching techniques used are components of the learning environment.

P2: The teachers and his aides and his peers. He gets a lot from PALS which is a part of ABA and I think we are very supportive parents.

R: Can you give an example of the most positive impact on your child?

P2: I genuinely feel like he has friends. He greets them and says good-bye. Learning academically is very easy for him.

R: Can you give an example of the most negative impact on your child?

P2: I don't think he's consciously aware enough. He has a tendency to latch on to one person. Any break in routine throws him off even if he has forewarning sometimes.

R: Describe your satisfaction with communication between the school, home and yourself. For example, is the school responsive when you communicate about your student?

P2: Excellent. We have a daily communication log that keeps me current and I feel like there is an open door policy with his intervention specialist and his teachers.

R: Can you give an example of when communication was excellent? How did it affect your child's education?

P2: When he was exhibiting more behaviors than normal. His intervention specialist emailed to check in for changes at home and have recommendations for what we could do to support him. Here the one-on-one attention he gets has become less frequent as his independence has increased. It's been good.

R: Can you give an example of when communication was poor? How did it affect your child's education?

P2: Never super poor; but, maybe when there was a change in his reward system and I didn't know. That only happened one time and the team has always been good about changing

the system as he shows there is a need to. And the change they made was one I would have approved anyway. I just found out about it after the fact.

R: Do you think your child's teachers have a good understanding of kids with ASD and how to educate them?

P2: I'd say good. Each child with Autism is different. Maybe having some ABA background will help. It's a good way to know how to do it. That would be helpful. It shows how important it is to reward with the positive.

R: Can you remember a time when a teacher showed great understanding of your child? How did it affect your child's education?

P2: His afternoon aide and his classroom teacher are always getting on his level, giving him eye contact and getting his attention and maintaining that attention without disrupting the class. His two aides are quick to know how to handle the situation in the moment and are even more helpful at explaining things to others than I am sometimes.

R: Can you remember a time when a teacher showed little or no understanding of your child? How did it affect your child's education?

P2: Not no understanding. The teachers here are trying hard to understand. Some places people are afraid or hesitant to try. They treat him like a typical kid but also understand that he's not typical. It's a hard balance to walk.

R: Describe how your child's ASD-related behaviors are managed at school. Describe your satisfaction with the management of your child's ASD-related behaviors.

P2: Reward based systems are in place and he has additional services in place to meet his needs.

He has speech and O.T. He also has classroom accommodations where he needs.

R: Can you give an example of a time when behavior management was particularly successful?

How did it affect your child's education?

P2: Brushing has helped at school and even at home to help him refocus when he's stemming.

We changed one of his reward systems from an x system to a positive system where he could move up or down.

R: Can you give an example of a time when behavior management was particularly unsuccessful? How did it affect your child's education?

P2: Times where he was having a behavior or melt down and instead of being removed they tried to problem solve in the classroom. This becomes a fine line for the whole class. Is it better for everyone for him to stay and solve that problem; but, disrupt the class. Is it worth it?

R: Specialized instruction includes instruction delivered by an education specialist, instruction received in a special education classroom, and services received in a general education classroom that are specific to your student. Describe your satisfaction with the amount and level of specialized instruction your child receives.

P2: Excellent. I'm so impressed. I'm so happy with the group. They're trying to find ways to determine if he needs an aide faded out. They are trying to find ways to help him be independent. But they're not taking services away if he needs them either.

R: Do you wish your child had more or less specialized instruction? How would more (or less) specialized instruction benefit your child?

P2: It's perfect how it is.

R: Can you remember a time specialized instruction helped your child succeed at school? Can you remember a time specialized instruction hindered your child's success at school?

P2: This happens every day all the time. His speech has improved so much and his peer interactions have gotten stronger too.

R: Describe your satisfaction with your child's social development in his current learning environment.

P2: Good. It's great. Here they did an incredible job of explaining to others about him and how they can help him. It creates a great learning environment for him and his peers.

R: Can you give an example of a time your child had a positive social experience? How did it affect his or her education? Can you give an example of a time your child had a negative social experience? How did it affect his or her education?

P2: He made a great friend that he would play with all the time. This little boy wanted to play with him too. They became best of friends. When his friend moved that was hard. He has tried to find another best friend but in Kindergarten a lot of the students just like to play in groups. So he plays along-side them.

R: What does your child need to be successful socially?

P2: Social interaction opportunities.

R: What changes or improvements would you like to see in your child's learning environment?

P2: Not any improvements. Maybe more social time. There is not enough time to interact but I don't know where the time would come from. There is a lot to learn when you want your child to be ready for college. Even in Kindergarten.

R: Which components must be included for your child to be successful?

P2: Right now, everything we have.

R: Which components must be excluded, or controlled, for your child to be successful?

P2: Other than social time, I can't think of anything.

R: What components of a public charter school are relevant to your child's education?

P2: My experience with public charter schools is here but; teachers for two years and academic focus is something that highlights his strengths.

R: What makes this public charter school beneficial for your child's education?

P2: The structure, the academics, the staff and his peers. This is a wonderful learning community.

R: What makes this public charter school challenging for your child's education?

P2: I would like to see more extra-curricular options. We're growing and a fairly new school so maybe this will come with time. Right now the programs for early engineers with the lego thing is wonderful and it would be great if it was available for more than just afterschool kids.

R: Are there any other thoughts you wish to share regarding your child's education?

P2: I feel super lucky and blessed to be here. It's the perfect fit. I just love the sense of
community.

R: Thank you for participating in this study and taking the time to interview with me. This was
very informative.

P2: You are so welcome!

Appendix G

Interview with Specialist 2A and Specialist 2B

Specialist 2A is the instructional aide who works with Student 2 in the classroom during the mornings. Specialist 2B is the instructional aide who works with Student 2 in the classroom during the afternoons. R = researcher; S2A = Specialist 2A; S2B = Specialist 2B.

R: How satisfied are you with your student's learning environment on a scale of one to ten?

S2A: Ten. The environment is great. There are only a few things I would change; but, I say ten because he gets clear instructions from talented teachers and is surrounded by peers who help him be prompted and included.

R: Which parts of your student's current learning environment are you most satisfied with?

S2A: His entire class community helps him.

R: Which parts of your student's learning environment are you most dissatisfied with?

S2A: I would want to change a few things with his schedule; but, we do that every time a need comes up.

R: What is most important for your student to get out of his education?

S2A: That he keeps reaching the next level. I've seen cases in the field where students aren't expected to keep going and reaching new phases.

R: Why is this most important for your student?

S2A: I know he can continue to grow and it is so refreshing to be somewhere where everyone expects him to.

R: Can you give me an example?

S2A: With Autism many things are taken for granted like staying in your seat, keeping your hands to yourself, writing full sentences, math and reading. It is important to accommodate students where they need it; but, don't expect them to never learn new skills either.

R: Please describe your student's current learning environment(s).

S2A: He is included in a typical classroom. He has an awesome full-time aide in the mornings. No, seriously his afternoon aide is amazing too. He has an O.T. specialist that integrates O.T. in the class like a seat pad for his chair and a weighted blanket.

R: How does your student's current learning environment differ from his previous learning environment?

S2A: As far as I know it was much less structured and he was more aide-dependent.

R: Can you give an example?

S2A: We had no idea how well he could write or read based on the previous school's report. We adjusted his IEP after just two weeks because we gave him the chance to show what he can do. He keeps growing because of it.

R: Which components of the learning environment have the greatest impact on your student? For example, the physical organization, peers, and teaching techniques used are components of the learning environment.

S2A: The teaching techniques by both teachers. One teacher is very effective at teaching difficult material for him to grasp and the other is very effective at holding him to a high standard behavior-wise.

R: Can you give an example of the most positive impact on your student?

S2A: His peers, his token chart and his basic behavior modification system.

R: Can you give an example of the most negative impact on your student?

S2A: There are times he doesn't understand why we're doing something. He doesn't have that intrinsic motivation to learn about things that are not of interest to him, like describing his favorite part in a story or opinion vs. fact.

R: Describe your satisfaction with communication between the school, home and yourself. For example, is the home responsive when you communicate about your student?

S2A: His parents have been really involved. They listen to feedback and both of his teachers are really responsive and accommodating.

R: Can you give me an example of when communication was excellent? How did it affect your student's education?

S2A: What helps me is when the intervention specialist checks in when I come in an hour after student 2 starts the school day. We want him to have that time in the morning now to increase his independence; but, it is important for me to know how his day is going so far.

R: Can you give an example of when communication was poor? How did it affect your student's education?

S2A: I can't think of a lack of communication.

R: Do you think you have a good understanding of kids with ASD and how to educate them?

S2A: A pretty good understanding. I have been working in this field for years.

R: Can you remember a time when a teacher showed great understanding of your student? How did it affect your student's education?

S2A: That happens all the time. I'm just remembering how often when he's in a group and the teachers ask a general question and they take the time to explain it a little differently to help him understand.

R: Can you remember a time when a teacher showed little or no understanding of your student? How did it affect your student's education?

S2A: Not here. I was working at this agency for a short time at a public school with students of different disabilities and it seemed like they never wanted to let the students feel. Like their feelings weren't valid.

R: Describe how your student's ASD-related behaviors are managed at school. Describe your satisfaction with the management of your student's ASD-related behaviors.

S2A: He is managed by a reward system where he can move his clip up or down. My style of behavior management is included in things intrinsic rewards vs. extrinsic. Student 2 is

great at responding to positive feedback and is really proud of the quality work he produces.

R: Specialized instruction includes instruction delivered by an education specialist, instruction received in a special education classroom, and services received in a general education classroom that are specific to your student. Describe your satisfaction with the amount and level of specialized instruction your student receives.

S2A: I am extremely happy with the level.

R: Do you wish your student had more or less specialized instruction? How would more (or less) specialized instruction benefit your student?

S2A: He gets a lot out of speech. The amount seems to be very effective. I wonder if he is getting enough O.T.; but, we would only want it to be integrated into the class.

R: Can you remember a time specialized instruction helped your student succeed at school? Can you remember a time specialized instruction hindered your student's success at school?

S2A: If he didn't go to speech so much, he wouldn't be able to communicate as much. If he was pulled out more he would miss out on class instruction. I think we have the right balance.

R: Describe your satisfaction with your student's social development in his current learning environment.

S2A: That's tough because he does like being around peers in the classroom and interact with them in his way. On the playground he would rather play with one student or just one game instead of switching from activity to activity like most of the students do.

R: Can you give an example of a time your student had a positive social experience? How did it affect his education? Can you give an example of a time your student had a negative social experience? How did it affect education?

S2A: His friends, the kids really like him. He gets along really well with them. He has pretty typical interactions with them. This motivates him to participate with his peers and enjoy their company. He can have challenges when he pinches or crashes into people. This happened more frequently at the beginning of the school year. When his sensory needs are met these behaviors rarely surface.

R: What does your student need to be successful socially?

S2A: He needs a little better communication to express himself and process others' cues. He needs to touch others appropriately; the difference between a soft touch on the face or a squeeze. He keeps growing in this area.

R: What changes or improvements would you like to see in your student's learning environment?

S2A: Continue to learn to be more social. I would like his desk to be different since it's within eyesight of the computers and he gets distracted by them sometimes. I would like to see him fade off some of the tangible reinforcers and have more intrinsic reinforcers.

R: Which components must be included for your student to be successful?

S2A: To know what is going on, to have a schedule that is organized and feel comfortable with his environment.

R: Which components must be excluded, or controlled, for your student to be successful?

S2A: Just moving the computers that are right by his seat.

R: What components of a public charter school are relevant to your student's education?

S2A: The special education department and the RTI team. That's what distinguishes this place is the department organization. It lends itself to help someone with Autism in a controlled, organized environment.

R: What makes this public charter school beneficial for your student's education?

S2A: We expect him and challenge him to do a lot of these things. We help him learn what he needs.

R: What makes this public charter school challenging for your student's education?

S2A: Some projects are difficult particularly in art with the fine motor skills and descriptive writing; but, we accommodate for him.

R: Are there any other thoughts you wish to share regarding your student's education?

S2A: Nope

R: Thank you for participating in this study and taking the time to interview with me. This was very informative.

S2A: For sure.

R: How satisfied are you with your student's learning environment on a scale of one to ten?

S2B: Six or seven. Seven. Being that he has two teachers, one isn't as equally involved with him as the other. It's helpful for him to have two teachers since he has trouble following directions from multiple people though. This helps him grow.

R: Which parts of your student's current learning environment are you most satisfied with?

S2B: Things are modified for him in a one-on-one setting.

R: Which parts of your student's learning environment are you most dissatisfied with?

S2B: Things within his classroom setting. One teacher rarely modifies for him and the other modifies very well. Since they team teach it is difficult for him to engage when one of the teachers is teaching.

R: What is most important for your student to get out of his or her education?

S2B: A typical education vs. a modified education.

R: Why is this most important for your student?

S2B: He is able to get most academics in the regular classroom. He needs support for his social interactions; in the classroom; at his school.

R: Can you give me an example?

S2B: He started the school year without showing interest in interacting with his peers and as the year has gone on he has bonded with a few students. One little boy in particular befriended him and they spent every recess together. Then his friend moved away and he has not shown interest in finding a replacement friend until recently. He has learned how to go up to others at recess and ask them to play a particular game. The students in his

class love to play with him and there are times still where he will not respond to their invitations to play. This is an area of growth for him.

R: Please describe your student's current learning environment(s).

S2B: At home he has one-on-one therapy with an outside company. He also has school, the classroom. Everything at the school is a learning environment. He is flexible. He can learn just as well inside as outside.

R: How does your student's current learning environment differ from his or her previous learning environment?

S2B: At his previous learning environment he was at a preschool. There were no desks and not much structure. There is a lot more structure here which is good for him.

R: Which components of the learning environment have the greatest impact on your student? For example, the physical organization, peers, and teaching techniques used are components of the learning environment.

S2B: I definitely think his peers who are so interactive with him. I saw him at two other schools and here they grasp his differences and they don't make fun of him. They interact with him

R: Can you give an example of the most positive impact on your student?

S2B: Before this school I've never seen him say hi to a peer, let alone saying hi to a peer along with their name.

R: Can you give an example of the most negative impact on your student?

S2B: I can't think of anything purely negative. That brings me back to what the ideas are in centers. During center teaching, he doesn't focus so the aide is doing more with him one-on-one after in the classroom. It's not necessarily negative. It's just something his teachers need to work on.

R: Describe your satisfaction with communication between the school, home and yourself. For example, is the home responsive when you communicate about your student?

S2B: It is more difficult to get myself and the school on the same page because my supervisor has such a heavy case load. So issues are not remedied as quickly. I consider myself as myself and not part of the school. I have great home to school communication. The school also has great school to home communication and his mom is very involved, positive and supportive.

R: Do you think you have a good understanding of kids with ASD and how to educate them?

S2B: Yes. I've been working with kids who have Autism on every level of the spectrum for six and a half years.

R: Can you remember a time when a teacher showed great understanding of your student? How did it affect your student's education?

S2B: Yes. When he is in guided reading with the student teacher he does very well. She learned his token economy system, that he uses in a home setting and a school setting, and uses it to support him. She gives him positive feedback before the negative.

R: Can you remember a time when a teacher showed little or no understanding of your student? How did it affect your student's education?

S2B: This happened just on Tuesday. They were doing a new center in class. It was a listening center. They were supposed to listen to the story and recall the main idea. He started to say, “no, no, no” and she didn’t stay to help him and she only checked in once and told him don’t say no to me. This was negative vs. positive. He was trying to say he didn’t understand. He ended up being prompted through the whole lesson by his aide later instead of learning the center with his class.

R: Describe how your student’s ASD-related behaviors are managed at school? Describe your satisfaction with the management of your student’s ASD-related behaviors.

S2B: His behaviors are very minimal. His peers don’t really notice them. He used to shout out, crash into peers and now it’s only hand biting. We found a z-vibe pen with knobbies on the end that he can put in his mouth that vibrate. We also use a weighted blanket he can use at the carpet. Usually his needs are sensory related instead of academically related. If an issue comes up like the hand biting, we work as a team to solve it as quickly as possible.

R: Specialized instruction includes instruction delivered by an education specialist, instruction received in a special education classroom, and services received in a general education classroom that are specific to your student. Describe your satisfaction with the amount and level of specialized instruction your student receives.

S2B: I am very satisfied with the amount he gets. He gets speech, O.T., and my supervisor comes as soon as she can if something comes up. There are a lot of kids on her case load; but, she works hard to guide me through any issues that come up.

R: Do you wish your student had more or less specialized instruction? How would more (or less) specialized instruction benefit your student?

S2B: No. I think it is just the right balance. He has an instructional aide that pushes into the classroom and there are times that speech and O.T. push in too.

R: Can you remember a time specialized instruction helped your student succeed at school? Can you remember a time specialized instruction hindered your student's success at school?

S2B: The specialized instruction is always helpful.

R: Describe your satisfaction with your student's social development in his current learning environment.

S2B: That's difficult. The resources provided are not structured at all. We were trying to implement a social goal into his IEP but it was cut short because they are about to go to first grade.

R: Can you give an example of a time your student had a positive social experience? How did it affect his or her education? Can you give an example of a time your student had a negative social experience? How did it affect his education?

S2B: He had a best friend at the beginning of the year and the friend knew how to talk to my student in the right way and he wanted to work and play with him.

R: What does your student need to be successful socially?

S2B: Structured recess along with the other kids at this school and a longer recess.

R: What changes or improvements would you like to see in your student's learning environment?

S2B: More appropriate recess setting. Not the blacktop since it's limited in resources.

R: Which components must be included for your student to be successful?

S2B: I hope next year his teacher is as understanding as his student teacher was this year. He needs a teacher that is as interactive as she was this year and who focuses on the positive instead of the negative first.

R: Which components must be excluded, or controlled, for your student to be successful?

S2B: Just recess.

R: What components of a public charter school are relevant to your student's education?

S2B: Their academic expectations are really high and he meets or exceeds his peers in most academic areas. And the structure.

R: What makes this public charter school beneficial for your student's education?

S2B: The consistency, the structure and the same expectations from everyone at the school.

R: What makes this public charter school challenging for your student's education?

S2B: The academics when he doesn't understand. Since the school has a workshop model the teacher teaches a lesson, gives students time to practice and then assesses them and re-teaches the lesson to the students who don't get it/understand. It can be hard to group him. He understands and succeeds at all most all the academic tasks; but, when he doesn't it is usually because of an understanding that he doesn't get and his peers do. He gets all the stuff that challenges his peers and the stuff that challenges him his peers get. This makes it hard to group him.

R: Are there any other thoughts you wish to share regarding your student's education?

S2B: Nope.

R: Thank you for participating in this study and taking the time to interview with me. This was very informative.

S2B: Anytime. If you want any more information, let me know.

Appendix H

Interview with Teacher 2A and Teacher 2B

Teacher 2A is the classroom teacher for student 2. Teacher 2B is the intern teacher in a year-long mentor credentialing program and co-teaches student 2. R = researcher; T2A = Teacher 2A, T2B = Teacher 2B.

R: How satisfied are you with your student's learning environment on a scale of one to ten?

T2A: Eight point five. I feel like for the most part this student gets his needs met more than other students because he has so many people invested in him. He has seven adults that look out for him at school, and six of them are there only to focus on him. The rest of the class has me which is a one-to-twenty three ratio.

R: Which parts of your student's current learning environment are you most satisfied with?

T2A: The community in the classroom. The level of respect in here. The social aspect that he gets because the class is so caring. The aide situation is also really great right now. It is well balanced.

R: Which parts of your student's learning environment are you most dissatisfied with?

T2A: There should be more communication between the aide and the teacher in the moment. I feel like his aide is the expert but it's a hard balance to pull off. If I'm teaching the class it's not the right time for me to talk to the aide about this one student's needs. But if the students are working independently and I'm circulating or this student is working with me on his own then it's a perfect time for the aide and I to talk about what's working and how to make things better. I think it's a hard balance to pull off though.

R: What is most important for your student to get out of his education?

T2A: The education itself. The knowledge and standards needed to go to college. The accountability and responsibility.

R: Why is this most important for your student?

T2A: So he can succeed in life to his full potential.

R: Can you give me an example?

T2A: Without the core standards and knowledge base, college and the workforce could be very challenging for him.

R: Please describe your student's current learning environment(s).

T2A: He is in class all day, every day. He has an intervention specialist that comes in each morning for the first 25 minutes to help him with his morning routine. He has a morning aide and switches to an afternoon aide after lunch and then spends the last 35 minutes of the school day without extra services. He also gets pulled out for speech and O.T. each week. His services really depend on his needs. We have worked hard this year to change his services as he needs them to be changed. The group is very open and flexible to meeting his needs.

R: How does your student's current learning environment differ from his or her previous learning environment?

T2A: It has changed a lot from what I've heard. He was in a preschool with more freedom and more geared to his needs and learning. There was not a push to succeed academically or any idea that he could one day go to college.

R: Which components of the learning environment have the greatest impact on your student? For example, the physical organization, peers, and teaching techniques used are components of the learning environment.

T2A: I think the routine and structure of the class has a big impact on him. He keeps asking what's next.

R: Can you give an example of the most positive impact on your student?

T2A: His class of peers. It wasn't a huge focus for him before and now he has the social piece he needed. Also the intervention specialist has been a wonderful liaison between the aide and me. It has made a huge impact on the student's learning.

R: Can you give an example of the most negative impact on your student?

T2A: Do you need a current example because I can't think of one?

R: Any point in the school year is fine.

T2A: When his aide first started and she worked one-on-one with him all the time it was hard to see what he was capable of. How much was that really him vs. what she was leading him to do.

R: Describe your satisfaction with communication between the school, home and yourself. For example, is the home responsive when you communicate about your student?

T2A: Yes, very responsive.

R: Do you think you have a good understanding of kids with ASD and how to educate them?

T2A: No. I feel like I look at my student and his needs are so different from student 1 and student 3. Autism is so broad.

R: Can you remember a time when a teacher showed great understanding of your student? How did it affect your student's education?

T2A: The beginning of the year. All our teachers looked out for him.

R: Can you remember a time when a teacher showed little or no understanding of your student? How did it affect your student's education?

T2A: Not really. Every now and then there's a misunderstanding of what he can do.

R: Describe how your student's ASD-related behaviors are managed at school. Describe your satisfaction with the management of your student's ASD-related behaviors.

T2A: The routine piece is very important. He has a check list with Velcro checks for him. His morning aide doesn't start until later and that system keeps getting better. His behavior modification system is different than the rest of the class and that system is adjusted as needed.

R: Can you give an example of a time when behavior management was particularly successful? How did it affect your student's education?

T2A: When he was meeting in guided reading with one other peer and I learned to use a separate incentive to help him focus. It worked wonders. Before he wasn't interested in trying to

comprehend the text, which is challenging for him. He was a strong decoder from the start. Using the other system helped motivate him.

R: Can you give an example of a time when behavior management was particularly unsuccessful? How did it affect your student's education?

T2A: He has a lot of stemming, self-talk, biting his hand. It took us a long time to find things that would help him with this and it's still not perfect. We tried freeze-dried grapes to help him with his hand biting. We do brushing to help with all his stemming. We have a special seat for him on the carpet that helps sometimes. He does have to be pulled out to calm down when his stemming gets to be too much for him and his peers. It happens more often when our schedule is different. So we try and front load the schedule with him as much as possible; but, we also want him to learn flexibility.

R: Specialized instruction includes instruction delivered by an education specialist, instruction received in a special education classroom, and services received in a general education classroom that are specific to your student. Describe your satisfaction with the amount and level of specialized instruction your student receives.

T2A: I'm very, fairly satisfied. To some extent I don't even know what's going on in speech or O.T. Also when he's working with the aide in math I don't always know exactly what's going on. In reading it's very different, he doesn't need much differentiation.

R: Do you wish your student had more or less specialized instruction? How would more (or less) specialized instruction benefit your student?

T2A: Need wise, it's what it should be. I think my goal is to fade the aide eventually.

R: Can you remember a time specialized instruction helped your student succeed at school?

T2A: Our intervention specialist has helped him and myself understand what his needs are and has had a huge impact.

R: Can you remember a time specialized instruction hindered your student's success at school?

T2A: In the beginning of the year the aide was assisting him more than she should have in writing that I'm not sure we got an accurate picture of what he can do on his own.

R: Describe your satisfaction with your student's social development in his current learning environment.

T2A: I'm not totally sure what he's capable of but there's been a ton of growth. Now he notices when someone is missing, he cares when someone is hurt. Before he didn't care to learn his classmates' names.

R: Can you give an example of a time your student had a positive social experience? How did it affect his or her education?

T2A: With his intervention specialist several times with brushing he has had spontaneous conversations where he's talked about things he likes and what's going on in his life.

R: Can you give an example of a time your student had a negative social experience? How did it affect his education?

T2A: I don't know if he thought it was negative. Two-thirds through the year he got much louder and his friends were laughing like he was trying to be goofy or different. He wasn't

trying to be goofy or funny and he didn't pick up on them laughing but we had to talk about it as a class.

R: What does your student need to be successful socially?

T2A: He needs peers around him a lot. He needs to be literally taught about social cues as they come up naturally. The next level would be for him to initiate conversations. Right now he doesn't seem to be interested in that; but, he will respond when others ask to play with him or ask him questions about what he is familiar with like Thomas the Train.

R: What changes or improvements would you like to see in your student's learning environment?

T2A: A little bit more from aides as far as insight; but, at an appropriate time.

R: Which components must be included for your student to be successful?

T2A: Right now his instructional aides. His afternoon aide explains when he does this, this is what I do to help him. We just need to figure out what the right timing is for these conversations.

R: Which components must be excluded, or controlled, for your student to be successful?

T2A: I don't know.

R: What components of a public charter school are relevant to your student's education?

T2A: I don't know. In some ways every aspect is relevant and every public charter school is different.

R: What makes this public charter school beneficial for your student's education?

T2A: At this school he is getting way more than he would at another school. We have more flexibility to change things as they are needed for him than public schools. But, we have less funding.

R: What makes this public charter school challenging for your student's education?

T2A: I can't think of anything that makes it more challenging than any other place.

R: Are there any other thoughts you wish to share regarding your student's education?

T2A: I think it would be nice if there was a little more education for me about students with Autism. There are resources out there. We are getting more students and getting more understanding; but, more school wide training would be helpful.

R: Thank you for participating in this study and taking the time to interview with me. This was very informative.

T2A: You are very welcome. I think these questions are important.

R: How satisfied are you with your student's learning environment on a scale of one to ten?

T2B: Seven. I think that within the people who work with him there could be further communication and goals. Personally I feel like I am not trained enough. I would be satisfied with what he's getting if everyone had more information on a daily basis.

R: Which parts of your student's current learning environment are you most satisfied with?

T2B: There is an in-class aide. Without one he would not be met in a classroom with that many students. He needs the extra communication and differentiation.

R: Which parts of your student's learning environment are you most dissatisfied with?

T2B: I would say not having enough time to talk to the aides. I don't know as much about student 2, like the others.

R: What is most important for your student to get out of his education?

T2B: The basic skills needed to function in this world and the social skills. A safe place to learn.

R: Why is this most important for your student?

T2B: To help him later on in life.

R: Can you give me an example?

T2B: With these skills he can hopefully live an independent and productive life.

R: Please describe your student's current learning environment(s).

T2B: It is inclusive, he has aides for more challenging parts of the day. He has his morning routine on his own and the end of his day on his own.

R: How does your student's current learning environment differ from his previous learning environment?

T2B: The student to teacher ratio was smaller. He was taught differently as well. Here we teach more explicit skills and have a lot more structure.

R: Which components of the learning environment have the greatest impact on your student? For example, the physical organization, peers, and teaching techniques used are components of the learning environment.

T2B: When he has one-on-one teaching and peer interactions.

R: Can you give an example of the most positive impact on your student?

T2B: When he is one-on-one with a teacher he has a great deal of focus and he learns quickly. Working with his peers helps him improve his communication skills and social cues.

R: Can you give an example of the most negative impact on your student?

T2B: I honestly don't know.

R: Describe your satisfaction with communication between the school, home and yourself. For example, is the home responsive when you communicate about your student?

T2B: It's up and down. There are two different aides and his speech provider and his O.T. specialist and his other teacher. That's a lot of people to keep on the same page.

R: Can you give an example of when communication was excellent? How did it affect your student's education?

T2B: RtI and us having a weekly meeting is great.

R: Can you give an example of when communication was poor? How did it affect your student's education?

T2B: Since there are so many people working for student 2, it is difficult sometimes to make sure everyone knows every new aspect of the plan he has.

R: Do you think you have a good understanding of kids with ASD and how to educate them?

T2B: No. But also that is in part because I am a new teacher getting my teaching credential. I am new to ASD and since it is a spectrum I don't assume I can use what I have learned for student 2 and just apply it to any student with ASD.

R: Can you remember a time when a teacher showed great understanding of your student? How did it affect your student's education?

T2B: The intervention specialist does all the time. This happened recently when we DRA'd him. She is very calm and changes the language of assessments so that he understands and can show us the most of what he can do.

R: Can you remember a time when a teacher showed little or no understanding of your student? How did it affect your student's education?

T2B: It was all of us at the beginning of the school year not knowing how to react to his yelling or hitting. Without our intervention specialist, we may not have solved the issue or had his behavior plan so quickly. She helped us all help student 2.

R: Describe how your student's ASD-related behaviors are managed at school. Describe your satisfaction with the management of your student's ASD-related behaviors.

T2B: There are lots of systems in place. We have many sensory outlets that help with general behaviors. He has different systems for showing him how he is doing using a clip system that moves up and down.

R: Can you give an example of a time when behavior management was particularly successful?
How did it affect your student's education?

T2B: In guided reading the token system where he would choose what to work for and then need to get eight tokens. This helped him focus during reading. Without it, he didn't really care about even trying.

R: Can you give an example of a time when behavior management was particularly unsuccessful? How did it affect your student's education?

T2B: Knowing amongst all of us what constitutes a clip up or a clip down on his behavior chart. Also having to manage one system for one student in a classroom with twenty-three other students who have a class-wide system is hard to track all the time.

R: Specialized instruction includes instruction delivered by an education specialist, instruction received in a special education classroom, and services received in a general education classroom that are specific to your student. Describe your satisfaction with the amount and level of specialized instruction your student receives.

T2B: The aide is extremely helpful. He gives him the one-on-one he really needs at times.

R: Do you wish your student had more or less specialized instruction? How would more (or less) specialized instruction benefit your student?

T2B: I wish that he wasn't being pulled out for speech or O.T. so he wouldn't miss anything.

R: Can you remember a time specialized instruction helped your student succeed at school?

T2B: Getting his morning routine down with the intervention specialist really helped.

R: Can you remember a time specialized instruction hindered your student's success at school?

T2: It was hard when his afternoon aide was helping him so much in his writing at the beginning of the school year. We couldn't tell really what he was capable of.

R: Describe your satisfaction with your student's social development in his current learning environment.

T2B: I'm satisfied. His parents do a lot at home to help him. I have no gage of what he should be able to do. He will respond to his friends when they say hi. He doesn't always seek them out though. I don't know if we can teach that if he doesn't really want to and then why would it matter. Some students are shy who don't have Autism and we don't push them to say hi to kids on the playground.

R: Can you give an example of a time your student had a positive social experience? How did it affect his education?

T2B: He has them all the time, even him saying hi to friends and them saying hi back. His class is really supportive and understanding.

R: Can you give an example of a time your student had a negative social experience? How did it affect his education?

T2B: I'm not sure. Maybe in the beginning the kids would stare; but, they didn't understand. I don't know that he was aware of this at all.

R: What does your student need to be successful socially?

T2B: He needs to intake more from conversations. He doesn't always respond to others, he can learn these things with time.

R: What changes or improvements would you like to see in your student's learning environment?

T2B: More one-on-one time with him. I am realistic though. It's not possible to meet with him one-on-one every day; but, it would make a huge impact. Having one-on-one would impact any student. I would also like to experiment with manipulatives with him more.

R: Which components must be included for your student to be successful?

T2B: His aide right now. The behavior management system we have and keeping him with his peers.

R: Which components must be excluded, or controlled, for your student to be successful?

T2B: Pulling the aides at different times to see how he will be.

R: What components of a public charter school are relevant to your student's education?

T2B: I don't know. I don't know anything besides this school. I guess smaller class size.

R: What makes this public charter school beneficial for your student's education?

T2B: The teachers and how they use each other as a team and their rigor and belief that all these kids are going to do something. They hold them to high levels; but with love and don't allow excuses.

R: What makes this public charter school challenging for your student's education?

T2B: The lack of money and resources. Any public charter would have similar issues since we get less funding for special education than regular schools. It's just a challenge we have to deal with.

R: Are there any other thoughts you wish to share regarding your student's education?

T2B: I'm excited to see where he's going to go.

R: Thank you for participating in this study and taking the time to interview with me. This was very informative.

T2B: You're welcome.

Appendix I

Interview with Parent 3

Parent 3 is the mother of student 3 who is in fifth grade. R=researcher; P3=Parent 3

R: On a scale of 1 to 10, how satisfied are you with your child's learning environment and why do you say that?

P3: Eight. The academic focus is wonderful.

R: Which parts of your child's current learning environment are you most satisfied with?

P3: I love the curriculum, the teaching style and how his teacher gets the students' attentions. His teachers are very helpful.

R: Which parts of your child's learning environment are you most dissatisfied with?

P3: The only thing is, I feel that maybe his teacher hasn't dealt with many students on the autism spectrum. She may just need more experience.

R: What is most important for your child to get out of his education?

P3: Learning his core basic subjects is important for me. I don't need him to be an over the top GATE student but to feel solid in the basics. I also want him to have good peer relationships.

R: Why is this most important for your child?

P3: I want him to have college as an option if he desires and/or job options, or something vocational. I also want him to be ready as an adult to deal with different people all over the work environment.

R: Please describe your child's current learning environment(s).

P3: He is mainstreamed all day. He is a visual learner. He follows directions if they are clear. His biggest challenge is his focus and his peer relationships.

R: How does your child's current learning environment differ from his previous learning environment?

P3: The teacher ratio per student is better here. The teacher gets his attention and I think she expects more of him. He has peer buddies that help him get on the same page. He gets to sit in the middle, up front instead of the back where teachers at his other school always put him.

R: Which components of the learning environment have the greatest impact on your child? For example, the physical organization, peers, and teaching techniques used are components of the learning environment.

P3: His teacher's techniques. His teacher's personality draws the students in.

R: Can you give an example of the most positive impact on your child?

P3: She does things methodically and repeats often. This helps everything become ingrained in their brains. Like in math she uses jingles for them to remember.

R: Can you give an example of the most negative impact on your child?

P3: When he feels isolated and lonely. Recess has been a hard part of the day for him. It can impact his whole day. He's at a difficult age where fitting in matters in a way it never has before.

R: Describe your satisfaction with communication between the school, home and yourself. For example, is the school responsive when you communicate about your student?

P3: I am satisfied with communication. Especially with the teacher.

R: Can you give an example of when communication was excellent? How did it affect your child's education?

P3: His intervention specialist contacted me right away when she noticed he was having a few classroom issues that needed to be addressed. It was something he didn't bring up with me and it was nice knowing there were others advocating for him.

R: Can you give an example of when communication was poor? How did it affect your child's education?

P3: Some instances I would have liked to be contacted earlier. Also the fliers being sent home with him are a challenge. He will forget them entirely unless it's something he likes.

R: Do you think your child's teachers have a good understanding of kids with ASD and how to educate them?

P3: I don't think she has a lot of experience with that. She tries whole-heartedly though.

R: Can you remember a time when a teacher showed great understanding of your child? How did it affect your child's education?

P3: They all have. They have a good understanding of him now. His peers are much more challenging. If he had been here since Kindergarten I think it would be different.

R: Can you remember a time when a teacher showed little or no understanding of your child?
How did it affect your child's education?

P3: In the first part of the school year I don't think they realized that he was socially and emotionally a little behind since his academics are so strong.

R: Describe how your child's ASD-related behaviors are managed at school. Describe your satisfaction with the management of your child's ASD-related behaviors.

P3: That we came up with that sometimes he just needs a time out or a bathroom break to clear his head.

R: Can you give an example of a time when behavior management was particularly successful?
How did it affect your child's education?

P3: Talking was difficult for him and the teacher has given him time to talk and gives him questions that she will ask ahead of time so he doesn't feel too much pressure. And if he's upset about something she lets him have space to feel his emotions; but, she'll bring it up the next day so they can work through a resolution.

R: Can you give an example of a time when behavior management was particularly unsuccessful? How did it affect your child's education?

P3: Not that I know of.

R: Specialized instruction includes instruction delivered by an education specialist, instruction received in a special education classroom, and services received in a general education classroom that are specific to your student. Describe your satisfaction with the amount and level of specialized instruction your child receives.

P3: I don't know if it has been very effective. His only service that he needs now is speech. He doesn't like being different or singled out. Besides speech, he doesn't have many accommodations more than another child and that's how we prefer it.

R: Do you wish your child had more or less specialized instruction? How would more (or less) specialized instruction benefit your child?

P3: I think it's fine the way it is. His current IEP was changed so we could have a consultative speech session so it's a check-in instead of pull-out or push-in and a peer buddy.

R: Can you remember a time specialized instruction helped your child succeed at school? Can you remember a time specialized instruction hindered your child's success at school?

P3: His intervention specialist came in when he was having a hard time so she made a lunch bunch of kids who could play games at lunch. These things were positive. Also the cafeteria lady lets him and a few other boys come in and help so he has a place to go and feel like he belongs. She makes sure to make them leave for some of the break too and it sparks conversations with the other boys who are helping.

R: Describe your satisfaction with your child's social development in his or her current learning environment.

P3: I don't know if this is actually the school's responsibility; but, I know they work hard to support him in this area. He is younger on the spectrum emotionally and he's not 11 yet. He is kind of naïve where others are not. He doesn't get the difference between jokes, bullying and teasing. The boys his age joke around a lot and he doesn't get that sense of humor so his feelings get hurt easily.

R: Can you give an example of a time your child had a positive social experience? How did it affect his or her education? Can you give an example of a time your child had a negative social experience? How did it affect his education?

P3: He has a friend that they do comics together and gave him his phone number to hang out on weekends. He also has his speech buddy who is always kind to him and his friends in the after school program.

R: What does your child need to be successful socially?

P3: A coach all day. Especially at recess that could explain his peers and their interactions. This would make him feel singled out though and he wouldn't go for it.

R: What changes or improvements would you like to see in your child's learning environment?

P3: This is the smallest teacher to student ratio I have ever seen; but, even smaller would be ideal.

R: Which components must be included for your child to be successful?

P3: Everything. Good instruction. He has to be in the right mind-frame to take in the information and he needs to be healthy.

R: Which components must be excluded, or controlled, for your child to be successful?

P3: He does lose focus if he is not interested. So learning needs to be exciting always. His teacher is good at that. I don't know what his new teacher will be like.

R: What components of a public charter school are relevant to your child's education?

P3: I have only had experience in public school from pre-K through fourth grade. The teachers here are more involved and I like their teaching methods. At the last class they taught a lesson and didn't re-teach or review it ever again. Here the students are held accountable. The teaching methods are effective. I am not exactly sure what it is. I haven't had to re-teach him at all. There is a lot of structure, routines and the teachers work wonderfully with the parents.

R: What makes this public charter school beneficial for your child's education?

P3: The accountability. I feel like the teachers hold themselves to high standards and are expected to maintain those high standards. The teachers are so enthusiastic and caring. They care about their students in a personal and loving way. I also love the curriculum and the C.A.R.E.S. program that teaches good values, and town hall and morning meeting. It builds a strong community.

R: What makes this public charter school challenging for your child's education?

P3: Some of the kids who don't relate to him have been challenging because they are more street smart. He's more sheltered and they're not.

R: Are there any other thoughts you wish to share regarding your child's education?

P3: This is a great school where he's at now.

R: Thank you for participating in this study and taking the time to interview with me. This was
very informative.

P3: My pleasure.

Appendix J

Interview with Specialist 3

Specialist 3 is the speech pathologist that works with Student 3 as both a push-in and pull-out service provider. R = researcher; S3 = Specialist 3.

R: How satisfied are you with your student's learning environment on a scale of one to ten?

S3: Ten. I think that he was very lucky with all the supports his teacher gets and his school to receive all the supports he has.

R: Which parts of your student's current learning environment are you most satisfied with?

S3: I noticed that he didn't feel good being singled out or pulled out and we considered that in his IEP.

R: Which parts of your student's learning environment are you most dissatisfied with?

S3: It's hard for the teacher to give him all he needs. That's true with any student. Getting him more involved on an academic focus can take away from the social acceptance.

R: What is most important for your student to get out of his education?

S3: A sense of knowing he is not alone.

R: Why is this most important for your student?

S3: Just because I've observed him in his interactions with others and he doesn't have a lot of friends and voices that at home to mom.

R: Can you give me an example?

S3: This is why social interaction is so important to him.

R: Please describe your student's current learning environment(s).

S3: I will talk about speech since I am most experienced here. We're in the library when we pull out for speech and there are other students that come in and out. He now gets to bring in one peer.

R: How does your student's current learning environment differ from his or her previous learning environment?

S3: The library is not the best since it is so large. With the people he is with, they're good with him. I don't think they notice that there are differences with him. He was singled out much more at his previous school and has a complex about it that hurts his self-esteem. He did not want to have anything to do with speech when I first started working with him. He didn't want to be different. Making a group of it helped a great deal.

R: Can you give me an example?

S3: I believe he was pulled out for social groups at his last school with other students with ASD and they mostly interacted with only each other. He was not happy with this and that is part of why they choose to come to our school.

R: Which components of the learning environment have the greatest impact on your student? For example, the physical organization, peers, and teaching techniques used are components of the learning environment.

S3: Location wise speech is not best in the library. One time we were in the library and another group came in and that made him very uncomfortable. His peers are a very important component of his learning environment. People he recognizes and feels familiar with.

Also the teaching techniques the teacher uses impacts him in a great way. Using different modalities, I had my ipad and had him and his group record their interactions and then watch themselves on film to see what they thought. I brought in movies to watch as well to talk about what we see as far as social interactions and always at the end of a session it's a time for them to play a game and gain more free flowing interaction socially.

R: Describe your satisfaction with communication between the school, home and yourself. For example, is the home responsive when you communicate about your student?

S3: Yes. My involvement with his mother is great and she wants to know what we can work on at home. It's nice compared to most others. With school I've been working with his classroom teacher and she's been very helpful and did observations for me in the beginning since he wouldn't act the same when I came in.

R: Do you think you have a good understanding of kids with ASD and how to educate them?

S3: I think I'm working on it. I have the basics down but diving into the details is more difficult. In my teaching program I got the first class on Autism but then there is still a lot more to learn.

R: Can you remember a time when a teacher showed great understanding of your student? How did it affect your student's education?

S3: We work more on the social aspect and pragmatic speech which I am very good at. I don't know much about teaching the standards though.

R: Can you remember a time when a teacher showed little or no understanding of your student? How did it affect your student's education?

S3: No. Even at lunch the lunch lady will have him stay and help for a little while because he wants to and then send him out so that he can also interact with his peers.

R: Describe how your student's ASD-related behaviors are managed at school. Describe your satisfaction with the management of your student's ASD-related behaviors.

S3: With the services and classroom he doesn't... He's pretty typical. Well included in the classroom so he doesn't need much more support for his behavior.

R: Can you give an example of a time when behavior management was particularly successful? How did it affect your student's education?

S3: His classroom teacher makes time to front load the questions and makes sure he participates in discussions.

R: Can you give an example of a time when behavior management was particularly unsuccessful? How did it affect your student's education?

S3: No.

R: Specialized instruction includes instruction delivered by an education specialist, instruction received in a special education classroom, and services received in a general education classroom that are specific to your student. Describe your satisfaction with the amount and level of specialized instruction your student receives.

S3: I think it is good. I think it is an appropriate amount of time. I'm excited about his plan for his next school that will include peer buddy supports and not being singled out for services.

R: Do you wish your student had more or less specialized instruction? How would more (or less) specialized instruction benefit your student?

S3: No.

R: Describe your satisfaction with your student's social development in his current learning environment.

S3: That's hard. I think he had all the supports and tools to develop socially. I just don't know if the motivation is always there for him. His inclusion specialist showed up for him and he struggled and didn't want to go and here he's still a little alone and not having friends but since we started the group speech I've seen him start to interact with those peers at recess and that's a step toward forming those relationships.

R: What changes or improvements would you like to see in your student's learning environment?

S3: That's tough. I don't know if it's more his environment or his motivation and we do a lot to get behind him and he is not as receptive to adult support.

R: Which components must be included for your student to be successful?

S3: Having the peer groups for specialized instruction has helped him engage a lot more.

R: Which components must be excluded, or controlled, for your student to be successful?

S3: Going to the other school with more components available, like the arts, what will help highlight his skills will hopefully motivate him to increase his social interaction.

R: What components of a public charter school are relevant to your student's education?

S3: I think that the investments they feel from the teachers and support teachers give is felt more than what they see in a public school. I think all schools can do this; but, the quality of the teachers is very high. They are sending them to school and being cared for and advocated for by the teachers so parents don't have to demand so much because their requests are heard.

R: Are there any other thoughts you wish to share regarding your student's education?

S3: I think he's doing good. Just looking at his last CSTs to now, the growth is phenomenal. He has been able to succeed. A lot of his needs are just built into the classroom which helps him succeed.

R: Thank you for participating in this study and taking the time to interview with me. This was very informative.

S3: Of course.

Appendix K

Interview with Teacher 3

Teacher 3 is the classroom teacher of student 3. R = researcher; T3 = Teacher 3.

R: How satisfied are you with your student's learning environment on a scale of one to ten?

T3: Eight. Because just from feedback from his mom and grandma, that I as his teacher and the school did a lot to help him. Everyone at the school works hard to support him. I do a lot to help him socially so that he can interact positively with his peers.

R: Which parts of your student's current learning environment are you most satisfied with?

T3: Anywhere he could present or perform. He is really artistic. Anywhere I could showcase him as an artist or actor. And anytime I sought feedback from him. It boosts his confidence and helps him be successful.

R: Which parts of your student's learning environment are you most dissatisfied with?

T3: The most challenging was when I was teaching whole class. He has a really hard time focusing when I am with the whole group. I would use proximity and he would stay focused but I couldn't stand next to him all the time. In many cases I would have to re-teach him in our small groups during workshop time. There he would be focused and learn quickly. Whole group was the hardest for him.

R: What is most important for your student to get out of his education?

T3: As an individual, whole learning. For someone like student 3, for any student really, to feel confident and to show their strengths is important. For them to learn that they can make mistakes and grow from it. Also to master all the standards.

R: Why is this important for your student?

T3: So he can continue to be confident in himself and his learning. So he can enjoy learning.

R: Can you give me an example?

T3: If you are confident and don't give up when things become difficult then you can become a life-long learner.

R: Please describe your student's current learning environment(s).

T3: Student 3 only has speech outside of my classroom. He is in my classroom 99% of the time. I did incorporate a lot of cooperative learning for him in class.

R: How does your student's current learning environment differ from his or her previous learning environment?

T3: The IEP he came with has him for speech only; but, talking with his mom he was pushed-in and pulled-out a lot more for speech there. He didn't like it and when they came here it was a goal for us to have him incorporate speech in a much more co-operative way.

R: Which components of the learning environment have the greatest impact on your student? For example, the physical organization, peers, and teaching techniques used are components of the learning environment.

T3: The biggest difference for him is small group or co-operative learning with a partner.

R: Can you give an example of the most positive impact on your student?

T3: From what his mom said for him a lot of the social learning was hard. He wouldn't talk and here he's feeling confident and excited about himself.

R: Can you give an example of the most negative impact on your student?

T3: The most challenging was that social aspect. There were times where I would have to teach him, or the class, what to do. He has a hard time understanding personal space and so when students would tell him they don't like it when he stands so close he wouldn't understand why. This is the area he grew in the most too.

R: Describe your satisfaction with communication between the school, home and yourself. For example, is the home responsive when you communicate about your student?

T3: Great. His mom is really active and helpful. She was nervous at the beginning of last year and so we got to meet before school started. We emailed often. She is very supportive.

R: Can you give an example of when communication was excellent? How did it affect your student's education?

T3: Definitely the beginning of the year when I was able to meet him before school started and having that open dialogue.

R: Can you give an example of when communication was poor? How did it affect your student's education?

T3: I can't think of one.

R: Do you think you have a good understanding of kids with ASD and how to educate them?

T3: No. I was really nervous before the school year had started and just asked a lot of questions.

Having a student with the label autistic doesn't really mean anything as the spectrum is so wide.

R: Can you remember a time when a teacher showed great understanding of your student? How did it affect your student's education?

T3: I worked with him most of the time. But the intervention specialist came and worked with him on occasion and they seemed to have a good working relationship.

R: Can you remember a time when a teacher showed little or no understanding of your student? How did it affect your student's education?

T3: No. Maybe myself. He's the first student, besides the one I had and didn't know, to have autism. There are times where I find myself wondering if he was doing something and I wanted to know why.

R: Describe how your student's ASD-related behaviors are managed at school. Describe your satisfaction with the management of your student's ASD-related behaviors.

T3: For student 3, he had a little sensory ball. Before he would tear apart erasers and paper and I gave him the sensory ball and that helped a lot. He also didn't want to be pulled out and when he had a speech buddy that made a huge difference. He tried harder to work with the speech therapist and his speech buddy ended up being a great friend for him.

R: Can you give an example of a time when behavior management was particularly successful? How did it affect your student's education?

T3: The sensory ball.

R: Can you give an example of a time when behavior management was particularly unsuccessful? How did it affect your student's education?

T3: When he was pulled out for speech at the beginning of the school year. He doesn't want to be different so for him that meant he would do anything to get out of being there. The speech buddy changed everything.

R: Specialized instruction includes instruction delivered by an education specialist, instruction received in a special education classroom, and services received in a general education classroom that are specific to your student. Describe your satisfaction with the amount and level of specialized instruction your student receives.

T3: He only needed speech. Speech was challenging in the beginning and once the new speech lady was here he was great. We turned a stronger focus to social interactions and picking up on social cues. The speech therapist was so communicative.

R: Do you wish your student had more or less specialized instruction? How would more (or less) specialized instruction benefit your student?

T3: I wouldn't want him to be pulled out any more than he already is because he wouldn't be invested in it and it would become more detrimental than productive.

R: Can you remember a time specialized instruction helped your student succeed at school? Can you remember a time specialized instruction hindered your student's success at school?

T3: Speech was very helpful, especially when they focused on social teaching instead of just actual speech. Having his partner helped him grow so much and he learned a lot about how to interact with peers. He was hindered during the time that we lost our speech

provider and we were looking to hire a new one. Once we hired the speech therapist we have now, it was nothing but positive for him.

R: Describe your satisfaction with your student's social development in his current learning environment.

T3: I am satisfied. Looking back to the beginning of the school year and the time we spent teaching him social norms has helped him come a long way. He has gained friends and a lot of confidence. It's great.

R: Can you give an example of a time your student had a positive social experience? How did it affect his education? Can you give an example of a time your student had a negative social experience? How did it affect his education?

T3: I saw the positive at the end of the year when we had a dance party and he got on stage and his whole class was cheering for him. "Go student 3, go student 3." In the beginning that would have been hard. His peers didn't know why he was different and he didn't know how to show empathy to them yet. When he went with fifth grade to shadow the junior high classes, some of the middle school students started to make fun of him because they didn't understand. My class stood up for him and that was important for him to see that his friends had his back.

R: What does your student need to be successful socially?

T3: Learning to read cues from people. Raise his hand, instead of shout out. To understand when it is okay to laugh and when it is not. Know about personal space and that some people want more personal space. Being empathetic is really hard for him.

R: What changes or improvements would you like to see in your student's learning environment?

T3: One thing is having more support as the teacher to ask questions. I guess some of that is on me. I should have asked more.

R: Which components must be included for your student to be successful?

T3: What he has now including social training and social groups.

R: Which components must be excluded, or controlled, for your student to be successful?

T3: Explaining to peers why he does things differently sometimes. Before any major changes happened I needed to talk to him. Keeping his schedule consistent.

R: What components of a public charter school are relevant to your student's education?

T3: We have an excellent special ed. program and there are lots of people we can go to. Our RtI team is there all the time. The staff we have is amazing.

R: What makes this public charter school beneficial for your student's education?

T3: The RtI team is so on top of it and organized. They are so proactive and work together as a team and have a common vision.

R: What makes this public charter school challenging for your student's education?

T3: I think sometimes RtI gets caught up in RtI and they get caught up in the special education students and forget that we have other kids we still need to meet the needs of. Some of the systems they come up with are great for the special ed. students but are hard to manage while teaching the rest of the class.

R: Are there any other thoughts you wish to share regarding your student's education?

T3: I think that covers it.

R: Thank you for participating in this study and taking the time to interview with me. This was very informative.

T3: This is probably teaching you a lot. I would love to know what sources you found that are the most helpful.

Appendix L

Interview with Intervention Specialist.

The intervention specialist is an active educator and case manager for the special education students at the school of study and works with the students with ASD, their teachers and families on a daily basis. R = researcher; IS = Intervention Specialist.

R: How satisfied are you with your students' learning environment on a scale of one to ten?

IS: Probably seven or eight. I would say eight. I really enjoy that they are learning with a diverse population of peers. It also comes to how much space we have. Having multiple modalities and differentiation is very important. We need more space for it to be best.

R: Which parts of your students' current learning environments are you most satisfied with?

IS: How they are all fully integrated in a regular classroom. I couldn't ask for something better than that. I wouldn't want them to be secluded like happens so often at other schools.

R: Which parts of your students' learning environments are you most dissatisfied with?

IS: That there's not a place established for them to go to if needed. We need a set space for my groups on campus.

R: What is most important for your students to get out of their education?

IS: Social skills. I feel any student, including special ed. students can learn the academic skills; but, the social communication is vital where they can absorb and learn from peers.

R: Please describe your students' current learning environments.

IS: Ninety to ninety-five percent of their learning environment is spent in the general education classroom. The remaining percentage is when they are pulled-out for services like speech and OT. The ninety to ninety-five percent includes all academic time, lunch and recesses and some push in services I provide.

R: How do your students' current learning environments differ from their previous learning environments?

IS: It is difficult to generalize here. Student 2 and 1 both were in preschool and were only there for three hours. All of the students were in learning environments where they had less social interaction and much less structure.

R: Which components of the learning environment have the greatest impact on your students? For example, the physical organization, peers, and teaching techniques used are components of the learning environment.

IS: Definitely the teaching techniques used. The teachers are really strong here, open to collaboration and that makes it very helpful for all students. Our teachers teach to a lot of various styles and integrate the book learning into practical use that is relevant to all of their students.

R: Can you give an example of the most positive impact on your students?

IS: The greatest impact has been the school-wide sense of empathy shown. Our students are not afraid or defensive toward students with learning disabilities. They seek to understand why these students act differently and are then very protective of them.

R: Can you give an example of the most negative impact on your students?

IS: They don't have a really effective space or way to gain their sensory needs and sometimes I don't feel like we are adequately able to meet their needs in these areas.

R: Describe your satisfaction with communication between the school, home and yourself. For example, is the home responsive when you communicate about your students?

IS: There is always room for improvement; but, I am very satisfied with how it is overall. It depends on the family and the teachers. Student 2 has daily communication between the teacher, myself and home; while, student 1 and student 3 have communication only as needed.

R: Can you give an example of when communication was excellent? How did it affect your students' educations?

IS: So this question makes me think of student 2's newest incentive chart and we tried it out with the teachers first to see if there was anything that needed to be tweaked. Then we talked to the parents. I didn't want to get the parents excited about a change unless the teachers were happy with it and the system was sustainable. Then we rolled it out to the classroom and the aides. I was able to meet with them and train everyone on the new system, including the family. It was very effective and it would not have been as successful if everyone didn't know how to implement it well. Having this new system helped motivate student 2 to be more independent, try harder academically and have a positive focus to his behavior.

R: Can you give an example of when communication was poor? How did it affect your students' education?

IS: It can get muddled when there are so many people involved. At the beginning of the school year there was a service provider who didn't take notice of when I had asked her not to pull student 1. So when she pulled him when I specifically asked her not to from art he was very upset and shut down.

R: Do you think you have a good understanding of kids with ASD and how to educate them?

IS: Yes. I hope so. Yes, I do. I worked with a lot of diverse students with ASD. I have worked with students at all different levels on the spectrum, different ages and personalities. Every child is different, an individual with their own uniqueness.

R: Can you remember a time when a teacher showed great understanding of your students? How did it affect your students' education?

IS: Yes. Several times. Student 1's teacher has a great understanding of his emotional state and apprehension with fine motor skills. Writing and drawing were the most difficult for him and he disliked writing all-together when he started here this school year. She gave him step-by-step directions, modeled each part and gave him positive feedback on his success which really set him up to be successful and feel empowered.

R: Can you remember a time when a teacher showed little or no understanding of your students? How did it affect your students' education?

IS: Student 2's verbal communication is difficult to understand sometimes and his teacher has a hard time understanding him sometimes too. At the beginning of the year he was asking for something and she couldn't understand him. She asked another student what he was saying and he explained what student 2 wanted. Then the teacher didn't address his needs

or respond to them and he started to perseverate and his behavior escalated when she could have addressed his need or explained to him when his needs would have been met.

R: Describe how your students' ASD-related behaviors are managed at school. Describe your satisfaction with the management of your students' ASD-related behaviors.

IS: Since every student with ASD is different, their behaviors are different. Student 1 has intrinsic motivation and responds quickly to the teacher's praise. Student 2 has more extrinsic motivation for tangible items. It really depends on the student. Student 3 wants to be treated the same but also needs to learn more social skills in order to interact with peers successfully so his system is based on group mentalities.

R: Can you give an example of a time when behavior management was particularly successful? How did it affect your students' educations?

IS: Student 2 has had really successful behavior management all year. Having an end-goal is motivating for him and our most recent update of his behavior management system wasn't that his previous system wasn't working, it was only to make it better. We wanted to focus on the positive and try and build his internal motivation. Without the end-goal he would not be motivated to stay on task and his behaviors may even escalate. He has been known to bite and kick and hit but this was not an issue for him here because our systems worked for him.

R: Can you give me an example of a time when behavior management was particularly unsuccessful? How did it affect your students' educations?

IS: I don't know for these students. I don't think this was a factor with these students because everything is so individualized and well planned out.

R: Specialized instruction includes instruction delivered by an education specialist, instruction received in a special education classroom, and services received in a general education classroom that are specific to your student. Describe your satisfaction with the amount and level of specialized instruction your students receive.

IS: This is hard because it's a reflection of my own teaching and recommendations. I'm satisfied that they are meeting their IEP goals and benchmarks; but, as with anything with more time and resources more could be accomplished. I can measure the success by how happy the families and students are. Using this measure I am very satisfied.

R: Do you wish your students had more or less specialized instruction? How would more (or less) specialized instruction benefit your students?

IS: More is always better. Not so much pull out but more differentiated centers and co-teaching opportunities. This just requires more time.

R: Can you remember a time specialized instruction helped your students succeed at school?

IS: Yes with both student 1 and student 2 writing was difficult. Writing was difficult because it was abstract and the fine motor skills were difficult as well. We created a journal with pictures they could use to choose what to write about. This helped spark their memories of experiences they have had and motivated them to start and finish their stories. At the beginning of the school year student 1 disliked writing most of all and at the end of the

school year he named writing as his favorite subject. That's a long way from being too discouraged to even try.

R: Can you remember a time specialized instruction hindered your students' success at school?

IS: Not hindering success, but, student 1 was very aware of when he was being treated differently and didn't want to be thought of as different. He would shut down during the first weeks of the school year when he was offered help. He soon saw that everyone got help from the teachers and his ability to accept guidance grew tremendously.

R: Describe your satisfaction with your students' social development in their current learning environments.

IS: I am very satisfied. The social growth they have made is so very positive. It is due in large part to the positive school wide behavior system we have here. There is a focus on tolerance, empathy and respect for everyone and this makes a world of difference for students with ASD.

R: Can you give an example of a time your students had a positive social experience? How did it affect their education?

IS: There are so many it is hard to name just one. I will use student 2 as an example because he's not normally aware of social interactions. He was strategically placed with an elbow partner at his desk and seated around model peers on the carpet as well. By the end of the year he would seek out help from his partners, using eye-contact, specific words and ask them using their names. This is something that became possible because his peers are so very kind and patient with each other.

R: Can you give an example of a time your students had a negative social experience? How did it affect their education?

IS: Student 3 left his previous school because of social difficulty he was having so when he came here his family and the team wanted to focus on this aspect. We planned out how to help him and it was difficult to make progress at first because he was not ready to accept help or training. He wanted his peers to automatically accept him and expected them to only want to do things he was interested in. He didn't want to compromise and had a few conflicts during the beginning. Over time his peers began to understand more about how he works and are very accepting of him. He still struggles with accepting them though. He won't take help from adults directly. He does respond well to model peer training if the peer is not directly teaching him. That's just where he is right now.

R: What do your students need to be successful socially?

IS: It's hard to answer in a broad sense since they are all so different. While structure is important for all students, it can be way too controlled because people have a specific idea of what ASD kids are like. They don't always get the opportunity at other schools to show what they can do. They need understanding and empathy on both sides. Peers need to be willing to accept them and they need to be willing to accept peers. They need confidence that they will be well received and need love and encouragement.

R: What changes or improvements would you like to see in your students' learning environments?

IS: More varied ways that they can produce end work and demonstrate their learning with more variations of output. Many educational guidelines are rigid with writing, reading and

math tests. This needs to be better explored because those assessments do not always accurately demonstrate what my students are capable of or understand. Alternative assessments need to be explored, offered and accepted.

R: Which components must be included for your students to be successful?

IS: This always depends on the student. They are all so different. Needs are broad for students with ASD. There are core foundations though that apply to all kids. There needs to be safe learning environments, some kind of sensory input before they can learn and they need to be able to effectively communicate to others and understand what others communicate to them. Their basic needs should be met and be immersed in social interactions with peer modeling. Students with ASD also still need to be challenged and expectations need to be set high.

R: Which components must be excluded, or controlled, for your students to be successful?

IS: I am hesitant to exclude anything because that could limit them. Basic things should be controlled for safety, as with all children, such as scissors and large objects with specific expectations, modeling and supervision. Some students with ASD also need light and sound to be controlled so that they are not visually over stimulated or receiving too much auditory input.

R: What components of a public charter school are relevant to your students' educations?

IS: This question is harder for me because I've never worked at a regular public school before. I have worked at a private center specifically for students with disabilities and at this public charter.

R: What makes this public charter school beneficial for your students' educations?

IS: Our charter has the freedom to design their own goals around students' needs. The charter is able to truly do what is best for the individuals and these factors really contribute to their goals and their success. This has given parents hope because they see so much more of what could be possible than they have been told is possible and they get to see those possibilities realized at each step.

R: What makes this public charter school challenging for your students' education?

IS: Inclusion is fairly new for students with ASD which is a blessing and a curse. We get to design our program around our students and their needs; but, we do not have much history to pull from so we end up creating a lot of it on our own.

R: Are there any other thoughts you wish to share regarding your student's education?

IS: It's amazing to see what's possible. So many students with their needs being what they are would not be integrated into the general education classroom at other schools. Here they can and you can see how much this has motivated the families, the teachers, the students and their peers to grow.

R: Thank you for participating in this study and taking the time to interview with me.

IS: Of course. Let me know if there is anything else you need or have questions about.