

**Resource Guide for Educators and Families:  
Meeting the Needs of Children with Autism**

Almavida Hendrick

Biola University

Action Research Project

### **About this Resource Guide**

The historical baggage attached to autism spectrum disorder (ASD), blatantly referred to as “mind blindness”, has continued to infest human perceptions negatively. Kruse (2021) asserts that in the early 1940s, people with autism were viewed as having mental retardation, childhood schizophrenia, or psychotic and needed to be institutionalized because they were deemed socially unfit. They were treated like “outcasts and stigmatized as imbeciles” who would live a life of “doom.” Similarly, ethically responsible scholars announce that autism should not be described as a disorder, disability, or impairment, but rather viewed as a social construct by humans who crave power (Kruse, 2021). Moreover, due to the vast assortment of levels and capabilities among those with autism, it also lends itself to further scrutiny and skepticism about successfully teaching children with ASD. The linear model of autism spectrum disorder is denounced by an adult with the condition, who promotes that a “rounded spectrum of traits and cognitive processes” better justify the “enormous versatility” of ASD (Kruse, 2021).

### **The Inspiration for this Project**

As a single mother of a seven-year-old son with autism, I bear the sole responsibility of raising a child with ASD. Because of this fact, research on this topic is personal, spirit driven, and educational. As I write this guide, I want to share and acknowledge the challenges experienced while on, what I will call, this “autism journey”. Let me first acknowledge that there have been many moments when I am frustrated, impatient, stressed, and have even lacked emotional presence. While I have many difficult days, I stand firm in my belief that I was blessed with my son, because God knew that he would need an advocate; and as I complete this project, I am more confident than ever that I have been called to walk alongside my son during

his autism journey. It is my sincere desire that by going through the process of this project, the gnawing feelings of guilt that I often experience would subside when impatience surfaces.

Therefore, the inspiration for this project is grounded in the desire to discover evidence-based methods for children with ASD in the home and school settings. I believe that my overall goal for my son is no different from any other parent. I want my son to function at his highest potential, have a sound spirit and overall positive self-image, and to become self-sufficient in later years. Therefore, the objective of this project is to explore evidence-based strategies that parents and teachers can implement in their interactions with their child with ASD. In addition, I will examine how families navigate the diagnosis and prognoses of autism.

### **Meet My Family**

Although the genuine desire of this project is to help me become better equipped to meet the daily needs of my son with autism, I would be thoughtless if I did not introduce you to my family. Kyla who is 19 years old, is my eldest child. Obviously, she is a brand-new adult who has just recently begun adulting in the experiences of going to college, working, and driving. Kyla is in bliss with all things boba and sushi, and impressively keeps her biases in check. She is unaffectionate, yet demonstrates her love through paying for family meals, purchasing random gifts for loved ones, or offering to treat me to Starbucks. Now, she expresses interest in writing scripts, and forming her own band. My middle child, Ty is eleven years old and is endowed with such spiritual maturity at a tender age. He is enormous with empathy, advocates righteousness, and struggles with fractions. Ty remarkably, tends to probe and discuss topics that are beyond the scope of the average 11-year-old boy. He is intelligent, loves to dine wherever shrimp baskets are served, and would be the first among his siblings, to lend a hand to the less fortunate. Though Ace, my youngest, was diagnosed with autism at the age of five, his mind and spirit

beams with sheer luminosity. I was baffled upon discovering his fluency in reading because I never taught him how to. Although I am a teacher, I did not train him to phonetically blend words. Nevertheless, he could pronounce challenging multisyllabic words with ease and even read college level textbooks. I just assumed that he was a child prodigy, who self-taught with the aid of a tablet. As I delved further into my action research, I found that his super fluent skill in reading, was attributed to an autistic trait or splinter skill (discussed in the following paragraph) called, hyperlexia. Ace is a sweet angelic little boy, who is outwardly affectionate toward me and his siblings, laughs frequently, and is content with simplicity. He enjoys viewing family photographs, lemonade, limber movements, and listening to rhythmic tunes.

### **Autism Defined**

According to Rosenblatt and Carbone (2019), autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental (cognitive) disorder that prohibits proper communication, socialization, and the pursuit of differing activities (Nathan, 2018). There is varying extent of degrees in which autism affects individuals, hence the term, “spectrum.” Children with ASD are characterized as socially inept, limiting themselves to repeated patterns or routines, deficient problem-solving skills, and a natural tendency to mimic (Nathan, 2018). Contrarily, astounding traits coined as “splinter skills” also identify some children with the disorder as being prodigies with profound knowledge on certain topics (“Here’s How to,” 2014). For example, hyperlexia (HPL) is a type of splinter skill on the spectrum, characterized as having superior phonemic skills, but lacking in reading comprehension (McDonald et al., 2022). Kruse (2021) projects, “The literary landscape has produced an impressive array of diverse accounts about the condition. The sudden ascent of autism in literature becomes all the more remarkable if we consider that stories about the neurodevelopmental disorder were virtually non-existent 40 years ago” (p. 5).

## Executive Functioning Disorder

Executive functions are analogous to the “very important person” section of the brain that exists in the frontal lobe. It is powerfully responsible for executing tasks that overall, allow individuals to be self-sufficient, such as: cognitive processes (memory, reasoning, problem solving) communication, social interactions, self-regulation, goal setting and transitioning. Innumerable thoughts and emotions also reside within the executive function of our brains (Nathan, 2018). However, despite the profound, yet natural operations of this organ, children with autism experience executive functioning disorder. Kluth (2004) relays the testimony of a woman with autism. She recalled a distressful moment in taking a school assessment, seated under a cacophonous wall clock, with numerous sheets of paper and pencil. Concludingly, she never commenced, became overwhelmed, and drained her anxieties upon the exam papers in the form of doodles. In retrospect, she believed that if the data in the assessment were “chunked” or given to her in bits, anxiety could have been prevented or better managed (Kluth, 2004). The preceding account illustrates the mechanisms of executive functioning disorder as the woman lacked the ability to transition from data to data per page and find ease in the cognitive processes of test taking. Although some believe ASD spawns a disadvantage, others believe it births opportunities to flourish. Greef and Jan van der Walt (2010) perceive autism as “a severely debilitating developmental disorder” (p. 1). Furthermore, Jerry Kartzinel, doctor and father of an autistic son attests that autism “steals the soul from a child” (Foss, 2018). Conversely Kruse (2021) affirms, “Throughout the last decades many people on the spectrum have proven that they possess rich inner lives, astuteness, humor and, in many cases, immense talents that challenge our understanding of disabilities (p.15).

## **Educator Legalities for Special Needs Children**

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which emerged in the early nineties, is a government mandated law that supports both complimentary and appropriate education for children with special needs. It also provides legal security for the parents and guardians involved and careful evaluation of educator methods. IDEA promotes and requires that children with disabilities are instructed in the least restrictive environment (LRE). This fundamentally entails that these students should receive optimal education in a mainstream, inclusive environment, taught by a general education teacher (Garguilo & Bouck, 2021). IDEA is a fitting safeguard for the educational rights and needs of all children with special needs and their families.

### **Research Questions**

- 1) How do teachers design effective classroom environments to maximize learning for students with ASD?
- 2) How did parents navigate through the process of the autism prognoses of their loved one?
- 3) How do parents optimize meaningful learning experiences for children with autism?

## **Section One: Resources for Educators**

### **Differentiated Instruction and Serving Students with Autism**

#### **in the Elementary School Classroom**

##### **The Prevalence of Autism and Evidence-Based Practices**

According to Kruse (2021) the ascension of children with ASD has javelined since its peak in the 1960's, where 1 in 2,200 children were reported with autism. Currently, researchers discovered the rise in diagnoses as 1 in 54 children in just the United States alone (Kruse, 2021). Due to the ever-climbing diagnoses among children, it is critical for educators to be professionally and thoroughly equipped to properly instruct this population of students. Unfortunately, the lack of teacher competence (belief in their own abilities to impact change) resources, materials, and inadequate training cause students with autism to be underserved (Alqurashi, 2017). Garguilo and Bouck (2021) describe the frustrating experience of a special education teacher toward her general education cohorts about students with autism. She projects, "Most general education teachers have no experience with ASD; their only reference is the movie Rain Man. Many teachers will refuse to work with my students simply because of their label" (p. 95). The complexity of this disorder, could cause educators to feel incompetent, intimidated, threatened, or even pressured into preparing proper instruction for children with ASD. Therefore, the implementation of evidence-based practices (EBPS) is critical for these students to thrive. Pinto et al., (2015) describes evidence-based practices as instructional strategies that have been thoroughly researched and proven to be effective in the classroom. With the application of EPBs, teachers discover tremendous academic growth in their students.

### **Planning Ahead: Corrective, Preventive and Supportive Strategies**

Researchers Leach and Duffy (2009) propose that human nature causes us to immediately veer toward corrective techniques when children with ASD and their peers exhibit misconduct. The scholars believe that educators and parents invest more energy in finding solutions once unacceptable behaviors occur. Instead, preventive, and supportive measures should be considered ahead of time. Furthermore, they suggest accountability be shifted upon both teacher and peers, to initiate change to produce positive behaviors from students with ASD, and not vice versa. Primarily, preventive strategies consist of attentively planned lessons, proper groupings and activities that are finely well structured, then disorderliness would not emerge. Leach and Duffy (2009) also suggest using social stories to discuss transitions or school events as a preventive strategy. These stories can be shared through a PowerPoint presentation with graphics or videos and is helpful because students with autism know what to expect, which therefore promotes a secure environment. Secondly, supportive strategies are categorized as techniques used while instruction is in effect. These include using visual and peer supported cues and the review of rules, procedures, and expectations. Researchers recommend emphasizing the main details of lessons, providing a medley of methods in which students with ASD can demonstrate what was learned, adjusting content to favor special interests or hobbies and using visual aids. These serve as excellent techniques to keep students engaged. For example, learned academic content can be exhibited through movement. Kinesthetic activities such as having students act out a read aloud or asking students to demonstrate procedural expectations by asking them to role play what each classroom protocol physically looks, like can increase overall



comprehension and maintain engagement. Leach and Duffy (2009) present the corrective strategy last. If both preventive and supportive strategies are chosen as the preferred methods primarily, having to rectify unacceptable behavior may not be necessary. However, if such behavior does arise, strategies like redirecting or refocusing students to activities that would yield pleasant outcomes are recommended (Leach & Duffy, 2009).

According to Hyland (2007), students individual needs are met when instruction is customized for various learning styles. The incorporation of differentiation is derailed when differing student abilities are not served (Ismajili & Imami, 2018). Watts et al., (2012) found that school-based research showed that when teachers utilized differentiated instruction, strides in student improvement increased in word reading and reading comprehension in centers, stations or flexible learning groups opposed to students who were products of teachers that engaged primarily in whole-class instruction. Identically, Jesus taught people using differentiation through parables to serve their variegated levels of spiritual needs in order to propel understanding of salvation and accrue more motivated followers of his word. Mark 4:33 states, “With many such parables he was speaking the word to them, so fast as they were able to hear it.

### **Various Differentiation Strategies**

#### **Realia for the Tactile/Kinesthetic Learner**

Both a multicultural and scientific event are explored when a student uses realia. Abstract concepts or text on a page are not displayed, instead real-life objects construct an understanding of the real world while academic language is built (Kinard & Gainer, 2015). With this technique, learning is not explicit, and students learn through exploration. Kinard and Gainer (2015) found in their investigative study of a Pre-K teacher’s integration of science and language

arts in the classroom based on a book entitled *Leaves*, were interested in this teacher's creative style of choosing an unattractive lot of green for his students to search for realia. Moreso, they were further interested in the hypotheses students formed in examining a hole in the leaf. In parallel, Jesus used realia to engage his listeners by using a coin to emphatically relay the message of paying Caesar what is due and to God what belongs to God. Matthew 22: 19-20 asserts, "Show me the coin used for paying the tax. Whose image is this? And whose inscription?"

Learning by doing Camilleri (2012) declared, is a stark facet that is linked to drama, dance and music. Physical appeasement can stem from activities such as: role-playing, field trips, using tools, working in a lab or hands on training. Reese (2002) suggested tactile/kinesthetic learners have the desire to touch and make things, assembling a model to demonstrate an understanding of a lesson can also be an option. In the bible, Noah used his tactile abilities by using his hands to build an ark for God, which was a physical demonstration of differentiation because through the ark, God's love and omnipotence were learned. God commanded, "This is how you are to build it: The ark is to be three hundred cubits long, fifty cubits wide and thirty cubits high. Make a roof for it, leaving below the roof an opening one cubit high all around." Genesis 6: 15-16. Therefore, teachers of students with autism can make every effort to ensure all children have the opportunity to learn and demonstrate what they know through tactile modalities.

Correspondingly, Munroe (2015) proposed, there are multiple methods to make music relevant to other subjects. Affording students experience in arts integration will enable the application and connection of other experiences inside and outside of school. In fact, DiDomenico (2017) claimed music often unites people of different beliefs and backgrounds,

equally in an elementary school classroom. Including music in the classroom nurtures self-esteem for frustrated students of lowly environments, promotes optimism and independence, builds interpersonal skills and comfort in engaging in peer collaboration (Playsted, 2012). Psalm 150:3 reads, “Praise him with the sounding of the trumpet, praise him with harp and lyre, praise him with timbrel and dancing.” This conveys that even during the biblical era, music was positively used to encourage and reinforce the concepts of faith and comfort in God's sovereignty. Consequently, ideas to incorporate music in the classroom, DiDomenico (2017) recommends, changing the lyrics (contrafactums) to renowned children's nursery rhymes such as “Mary Had a Little Lamb,” or “Row, Row, Your Boat “ to reinforce new concepts, creative writing, or fact memorization. In addition, the use of rhythm, rhyme and alliteration heard in raps, poems and chants can be used to remember detail in content. Furthermore, peers can collaborate through studying verses in a song and compose a book about it.

### **Differentiated Instruction for Boys**

Impulsiveness, kinesthetic learning, and physical aggression are often considered as cons instead of positive traits that boys possess in the learning environment (King et al., 2019). Although, it is a common thought that the natural learning design of boys is to boisterously explore and make their imaginations mimic superheroes, teachers cannot assure that all boys have these traits. The following section is not to imply that all boys have the stated traits. Johnson and Gooliaf (2013) found that this learning style is not frequently permitted in the school setting and that schools need to take advantage of the boy imagination and energy in order to be successful.

King and Gurian (2006) in their study of high performing boys at Douglas Elementary School in Colorado found that their teacher utilized sentence card sequencing to music, instead

of worksheets. This physical movement and access to space tapped into the neurological strengths of the boys which resulted in more energy and attentiveness. (Jones, 2017) announced, “Encouraging more movement was the most powerful innovation in the boy’s program. Sing every day. Go outside and just play. Learn action songs and singing games and use the many websites that demonstrated dance moves to rock music. Remember sitting is the new smoking.”

Boys are doers of their world and like to create things out of random materials, build with blocks and be busily into games. Manipulatives, active centers, computers and information books are factors that make the elementary classroom fitting for boys (Jones, 2017). If boys are prevented from using manipulatives, building things and being active in the classroom, they can become discouraged and unmotivated to learn. (Johnson & Gooliaf, 2013). Psalm 127:4-5 relays, “Like arrows in the hands of a warrior are children born in one's youth. Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them.” A teacher of differentiation (can be the owner of the quiver) that holds all the keen arrows (which can be analogous to male students) has the power to positively target their enthusiastic energies toward creative learning spaces in the classroom environment, like sharp arrows with a destination.

### **Differentiated Instruction for Girls**

Research shows that the learning behaviors of girls can be affected by chemical or hormone make-up. As stated in the section above, this section is not to imply that all girls have the stated traits. Gurian and Stevens (2004) addressed that girls are less impulsive than boys because of the amount of serotonin in their brains and bloodstreams. Similarly, Tyre (2005) found that girls are more likely to sit and discuss during carpet time due to the amount of oxytocin which is related to attachment and bonding. Reading and writing are attractive to the female brain because of the memory storage of the brain (corpus callosum) is larger than boys

(Gurian & Stevens, 2004). Moreover, Tyre (2005) also determines that girls have stronger connections between brain hemispheres and “language centers” that mature earlier than their male counterparts.

Gurian and Stevens (2004) recommended that girls play physical games to advance gross motor skills, use puzzles to strengthen real life connections, work collaboratively, and use manipulatives during math. Likewise, Jacobs et al. (2014) also found that relevant life lessons, peer-based lessons, and a range of hands-on activities, are effective and engaging for the female learner. Additionally, Kruschwitz and Peter (1994) determine that group learning is natural and promotes reciprocated understanding for girls to be connected to one another. In Proverbs 31:20 girls are portrayed as being nurturers. “She opens her arms to the poor and extends her hands to the needy.” Application of this verse, pertaining to differentiation reinforces that peer collaborative relationships and activities are beneficial for the female learner.

### **Differentiated Instruction for Gifted Students**

Teachers must create useful and relevant lessons in order to meet the needs of the gifted student (Celik & Schmidt, 2014). Relatively, Gradzikowski (2013) marked that challenging exceptionally bright children calls for the teacher to bridge new information with their prior knowledge. Even King Solomon, though already gifted, still needed guidance and inquired of God's wisdom. 1 Kings 3: 7-9 King Solomon addresses, “But I am only a little child and do not know how to carry out my duties. Your servant is here among the people you have chosen, a great people, too numerous to count or number. So, give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong.” In reference to differentiation, teachers are not removed from assisting gifted students in their customized activities just because they are self-sufficient. God did not leave King Solomon to his own devices just because he was

smart. Instead, he still provided direction. Relatively, upon studying the strategies of two GATE teachers, conducted by Cohen and Hertzog (2007) who found that both educators allotted time for students to independently make connections between curriculum and the real world, as they facilitated experiences that challenged them.

Cohen and Hertzog (2007) described that gifted students are motivated through dictating the pathway of their learning and giving them choices will give them a sense of owning their learning. Furthermore, Gradzikowski (2013) added that when children are making decisions in alignment with their interests, they are made to be more responsible of what occurs in the classroom, such as allowing students to choose their station or center of choice. Celik and Schmidt (2014) found that gifted students should be given chances to direct themselves, have free choice of available topics and choose peer collaboration if desired.

Gradzikowski (2013) found that gifted students are more challenged when they answer their own inquiries. This challenges students with higher order thinking. Celik and Schmidt (2014) were in accord with the aforementioned perspective as their research demonstrated through their study that teachers of gifted students need to be facilitators and guides instead of direct instructors. Moreover, Cohen and Hertzog (2007) specified that one teacher of their study merely equipped his gifted students with the tools and resources they needed to ensure success as they directed their own learning.

### **Differentiated Instruction for Struggling Learners**

Cooter and Cooter (2004) conveyed that struggling learners have no concept of future thinking and adhere more to situations or learning in the present moment. Therefore, these learners do not function well with long term goals. Shaw (2010) furthermore addressed that

struggling learners do not know how to transfer new knowledge and apply concepts to new situations. There is a challenge for the struggling learner to blend prior information with recently acquired information and organize these concepts cognitively. Additional research by Cooter and Cooter (2004) suggested that slow learners lack problem solving tactics which also results in difficulty with them following multistep directions. Therefore, repetition and creative methodologies are beneficial for teachers to employ.

Shaw (2010) addressed that struggling learners have a poor self-image because of their low academic performance. Accordingly, Cooter and Cooter (2004) presented that social and verbal disruptions in the school setting can be expected due to their low self-esteem. Margolis and McCabe (2004) discovered the need for teachers to promote self-efficacy within the struggling learner, by not assigning tasks that cause frustration and anxiety. They assert that self-efficacy is the belief in oneself to achieve a task with persistence and that struggling learners possess very little of it.

Struggling students build self-efficacy through teachers that are optimistic and passionate and that promote a safe and nurturing classroom environment (Margolis & McCabe, 2004). Deuteronomy 6:7 asserts, "You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise." According to scripture, perseverance is mandated on the part of the teacher to help every child, regardless of academic ability. Owing differentiation with diligence is the duty of the teacher, to keep struggling learners academically abreast. Both, Shaw (2010) and Cooter and Cooter (2004) encouraged the use of hands-on activities such as puzzles, games, condensing instructional time, and shortening assignments for the struggling learner. Peer collaboration is emphasized among the researchers in order to create stronger interpersonal relationships and

even strengthen fluency as well as giving struggling learners immediate feedback and sincere praise for their efforts. Margolis and McCabe (2004) related the importance of making real life connections between content and outside the classroom. Shaw (2010) determined that experiential learning (seeing, touching, feeling activities) are beneficial for the struggling learner because abstract concepts are hard for them to grasp compared to their peers. Additionally, prefacing lessons clearly and concisely, Cooter and Cooter (2004) and Margolis and McCabe, (2004) state, helps the struggling learner build self-efficacy and esteem.

### **Effective Learning Stations for Differentiation**

Exodus 31: 3-5 conveys, “I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with wisdom, with understanding, with knowledge and with all kinds of skills-to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze, to cut and set stones, to work in wood, and to engage in all kinds of crafts.” This biblical picture sets the scene of simultaneous workmanship in accordance to given talents or skills. Similarly, in the differentiation classroom, there are various stations operating where students are accomplishing activities designed to fit their levels of learning. Ediger (2011) addressed that learning stations are designed for the students to have a variety of choices that range from hands on, literacy or research projects and that the purpose of the teacher, is to conduct by merely overseeing and motivating. Peterson and Davis (2008) promoted that similar to adults, children desire enjoyable activities and avoid those that require lots of work. Learning stations give students selection and alternatives (Ediger, 2011).

Jarrett (2010) asserted that directions for learning stations should be kept simple and complemented with pictures to be stored with the materials of use in a tub or bag, along with a stack of ready to go books for early finishers. Both Jarret (2010) and Peterson and Davis (2008)



prefaced and modeled the do's and don'ts of utilizing the centers with clear procedures and suggest less than six students per station.

Literacy stations such as: buddy reading, genre writing, comic book sequencing and word games kept students self-regulated and engaged (Peterson & Davis, 2008). Contrarily, Jarrett (2010) selected realia objects to dominate learning stations such as: rain forests, butterflies and geology in order for students to infer, observe, classify and make inquiry an option.

### **Viability of Visual Equipment**

Dr. Temple Grandin, a renowned autistic and advocate (also recognized as professor and engineer) accredits success in building livestock establishments, to her potent visual abilities. She depicts the visual process of her mind as analogous to the operation of a videocassette recorder or an internet search limited to solely access images (Kruse, 2021). Additionally, she states that visual giftedness aids her in understanding social cues as her mind customizes a virtual reality of social studies, by naturally storing people and events like “library videotapes.” This helps her to predict behaviors when confronted with similar social scenarios. Furthermore, Grandin contends that language is better understood when it is transcribed into pictures (Kruse, 2021). Likewise, Rao and Gagie (2006) affirm that students with ASD have the tendency to be more inclined as visual learners rather than audio learners. Understanding concepts such as abstract and figurative language, multiple meaning words, the proper use of creative language or simply having an imagination, pose great difficulty for them. Therefore, Marks et al., (2003) recommends using graphic organizers or Venn Diagrams so students have the option to clearly represent data through the use of pictorial components. Moreover, typical commands that direct students to clean up or begin a new transition, are not as effective as when used with their peers

without autism. Visual schedules help students with ASD securely anticipate upcoming activities, display choices and prevent anxiety or tantrums (Rao & Gagie, 2006). The Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) is another beneficial tool that helps to create order in the classroom. PECS is a specific method of communication cards that are designed with an illustration of a skill or task, and minimal words above the picture that describe the action or object. For instance, a PECS card with a person running, would be labeled 'run' above the image and would be used to prompt students with ASD to begin the action (Wert & Mowling, 2013). However, although visual methods have been widely effective in teaching these students, Martins and Wilkins (2022), argue that teachers should be assiduous in selecting classroom displays due to overstimulation. The teachers aim to enhance content with a decorative border of trains on the bulletin board, may backfire and cause distractions for students. Furthermore, these researchers also claim that students with ASD have a more challenging time shifting from one vantage point to the next. Hence, students will be more apt to be less focused on the teacher. Overall, Kidder and McDonnell (2017) advocate that visual aids lend solid signals to students with ASD to acquire and register data to perform activities, routines, and skills successfully.

### **Special Interests and Project Based Learning**

Students with autism tend to have fixated fascinations on things or topics for prolonged durations, which are labelled as special interests. For instance, they may devote their attention to trains, electronics or even the weather (Kluth, 2004). Jung and Sainato (2015), claim that incorporating special interests into teaching methodologies, curbs unacceptable behaviors and enhances performance. Contrarily, South and Sunderland (2020) propose that some professionals and parents make special interests inaccessible for students with autism, in efforts to develop "normalcy." However, the researchers support that special interests encourage lifelong skills and

career development, if their interests are not detrimental to themselves or others. Due to the severity of fixated interests that several students with autism possess, project-based learning (PBL) is suitable (Kluth, 2004). PBL is a teaching strategy that capitalizes on student interests through designing projects of their own. With this method, desired topics are deeply explored as they are given the autonomy to choose their own topic and perform extensive research. There are multitudes of opportunities to learn and demonstrate multifaceted skills such as: creative and critical thinking, communication, collaboration, work ethic and time management. PBL is personalized for all students and compels them to be accountable for their learning, which in turn provides rich, relevant, and meaningful learning experiences (Wurdinger, 2016). An adult autistic fondly shares her testimony about her project-based learning experience in high school. With special interest in the Civil War, the teacher approved her 26-page project, chock full of cut outs and illustrations which resulted in an A. She relayed that while other teachers found her adversarial, this teacher thought her to be smart, comical, and convicted of her abilities. On the other hand, the special interest of another adult autistic was debunked, as he recalled writing a fantasy story about kittens that could convert into puppies. The teacher regarded the story as “babyish” and failed to inquire the motivation behind the concept. He stated that their family cat just birthed kittens and adopted a puppy. The story was written with special interests dedicated to fancying the new baby animals in his family. However, the teacher lacked empathy and understanding about his interests to enrich the writing project (Kluth, 2004). Moreover, research proves that incorporating the special interests of children with ASD within the school curriculum is both effective and transformative. In their study, researchers Jung and Sanaito (2015) discovered that students with ASD were more interactive with their peers and more willing to be in a collaborative setting when their special interests were included. The participants consisted

of seven kindergarteners, three of whom had autism, to be observed performing natural play in an inclusive classroom. Their teacher conveyed that the students with ASD were aloof, preferred solitude, required repeated prompting, engaged in scripted self-talk, and refrained from joining their peers during play or center time. The three students with ASD were partnered with their mainstream counterparts in the ratios 2:2 and 2:1. Two of them had special interests for Mickey Mouse and the third participant was equally fond of princesses. During the initial baseline observation, board games Candyland and Make n' Break were distributed to the participants. They were commanded to play without rules or procedures. The study revealed that although their mainstreamed peers attempted to initiate play, the students with ASD chose to daydream and engage in repetitive behaviors. Subsequently, students were shown a video model of game procedures with two adults dressed as Mickey Mouse and a toy princess crown accessory given for Candy Land (Jung & Sanaito, 2015). Finally, studies proved that implementation of these special interest tools were effective as the students with ASD abstained from off task behavior and were also motivated to take turns, offer help and compliment their mainstreamed peers during the structured game setting. Overall, researchers assert that the three participants with ASD dramatically increased their verbal and nonverbal communications with peers during play, because of their favorite characters. Hence, incorporating the special interests of students with ASD into the curriculum is beneficial both academically as well as behaviorally.

### **Execute Environmental Accommodations**

Highly structured learning environments are pertinent for the success and overall wellbeing of students with ASD. Learning environments are defined as the physical classroom, wall displays, materials and how they are ordered (Deris & Carlo, 2013). Additionally, Davy and Tynan (2021) claim that “cultural, social, temporal and virtual” factors are also components

that constitute the learning environment. Students with ASD are inclined to have sensitive sensory impulses, which triggers over attentiveness to irrelevant stimuli in the classroom. Furthermore, spaces that lack organization or are filled with clutter, will also cause these students to perform poorly. Fleury et al., (2021) describes the experience of an early primary student with ASD, who was “easily distracted by his surroundings.” During office appointments with the speech and language pathologist, the student-maintained focus due to less distractions. However, when the student returned to the classroom, there was frequent disengaged conduct. This caused the general education teacher to seek advice from the pathologist, who suggested that physical accommodations be made. The teacher sectioned off a nook in the corner of the room, used a bookcase to enclose the area, incorporated kid friendly seats, removed unnecessary items and posted a chart of visual procedures. Additionally, the window adjacent to the nook emitted a disturbing glare, which was covered with butcher paper, allowing the student with ASD to feel even more comfortable and secure in the revamped space. Although there is irrefutable evidence on the best lighting choices for students with ASD, Martin and Wilkins (2022), reinforce that excessive natural sunlight be shielded, as it presents negative stimuli for students with ASD. Additionally, they further suggest that teachers utilize area rugs to eliminate the glaring sunlight that may reflect onto linoleum floors in the classroom. The researchers also reinforce the aforementioned account of the student with ASD by also promoting clearly defined workspaces and overall, a “neat and orderly classroom.”

### **Conclusion**

Although various strategies of differentiated instruction have been utilized in the educational field and is a popular proven method, as discussed in the aforementioned paragraphs, there may be a need for mandated professional development trainings because research suggests

that many educators have poor perspective, lack efficacy and the time to, or are unaware how to properly implement differentiated instruction into the classroom.

Dr. Carol Ann Tomlinson, guru and originator of the differentiation model, affirmed that there are a “jigsaw puzzle of learners” emerging from numerous cultures and varying economic profiles who possess countless levels of academic abilities and talents, which is not extraordinary in today's classroom. According to Tomlinson, the concentrated objective of differentiation is to support teachers in constructing avenues for students to learn whatever is instructed apart from content standards. With appropriate usage of differentiation, the model is favorable, and theory proves to be foolproof as prior research indicated (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2012).

However, Kapusnick and Hauslein (2001) addressed that most teachers are overwhelmed with teaching cumbersome curriculum with time restraints and heightened demand on testing, that they ultimately renounce differentiation because of the foregoing struggles. Psalm 89:47 observes, “Remember how fleeting is my life. For what futility you have created all humanity!” Considering biblical times, mankind grappled with the experience of having a lack of time long ago. (Marshall, 2016) attested many teachers experience burnout during the instructional planning stage, where they are at risk to overthink and overwork or as (Tomlinson, 2000) stated, competing with a “race against the clock” or “feel torn.” Moreover, in a qualitative study conducted by Roiha (2014) on the perceptions, practices, and challenges of differentiation among three interviewed teachers, denoted that one expressed having a lack of time and strength due to the various complex roles of what the teaching job entailed. Otherwise in a perfect world, more teachers would put differentiation into practice. Schmoker (2010) noted from worldwide classroom observations, that attempts to apply differentiation caused confusion in planning, as

teachers were in duress scrambling to provide a proper package of gathered materials to coordinate with the learning style, ability, and interest levels per student.

By the same token, Dijkstra et al., (2017) proclaimed that teacher attitudes concerning differentiation is a critical component for successful implementation because they are solely responsible for the results of student learning. Philippians 4:8 certifies, “Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable-if anything is excellent or praiseworthy-think about such things.” Originating from scripture, if educators adjust the burdening perspective about differentiation and focus on the model's positive features, there could be ease implementing it in the classroom. Additionally, many teachers are not willing to embrace change outside of their traditional teaching practices in order to accept novel ones such as differentiation. Geelan et al., (2015) researched a teacher's positive perspective towards students as being free thinking and sincere in accepting students for their organic selves, unchanging them to gain mutual respect conducive to differentiation success. In this respect, Birnie (2015) further investigated Dr. Tomlinson's philosophy on the practice and discovered that the education scholar promoted differentiation as a process in which teachers view thinking and learning and how the operation of assessment, curriculum and time are visualized in the classroom, completely renounced as a strategy. According to Geelan et al., (2015) teachers can reduce pressure on feelings of self-doubt and inadequacy in the differentiated classroom by merely looking at students as educational assets instead of debts and that capitalizing on these differences can garner abundant learning relationships among one another. “Children are a heritage from the Lord, offspring a reward from him.” Psalm 127:3 promotes the idea of perceiving students as educational assets, which can bring effortlessness in planning for differentiation. In the same regard, Geelan et al., (2015)

described the need for teachers to exhibit confidence and efficacy in their professional environments. Dixon et al., (2014) explained teacher efficacy as a belief in one's ability to carry out tasks to produce desired learning results, essentially persevering over obstacles and maintaining resilience with interruptions in the classroom setting. Furthermore, Dixon et al., (2014) proclaimed the comprehension of varying student abilities in the classroom is an arduous undertaking for the teacher. Differentiation is dependent on the tenacity and skill set of the teacher to plan and execute a single concept to be instructed simultaneously to varied level groups and lack of teacher efficacy causes feelings of expected failure and inflexibility of lesson adjustments for learners due to emotions of inadequacy. Hence, some teachers are unaware of differentiation techniques and feel that they lack the potential to instruct diverse groups, therefore posing a struggle to be rejected. Efficacious teachers believe in their potential and power to educate their students effectively. Jeremiah 17:7 encourages, "But blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord, whose confidence is in him." Therefore if teachers believe in God to impart them confidence to perform with efficacy, this tactic would never be seen as an obstacle.

Dixon et al., (2014) also proposed that more opportunities for professional development training can be a solution. Informative, in-depth sessions should be made available for teachers by their school districts because the initial exposure to the strategy is fundamental and introductory. In addition, the researchers relayed that the presenters chosen to lead these training courses should have expertise in differentiation and already be consultants. The scholars also stressed that after obtaining knowledge, teachers should be obligated to put the strategy into practice. Proverbs 15:22 declares, "Plans fail for lack of counsel , but with many advisers, they succeed." This verse, as it pertains to education, examines the networking among teachers and mentors to devise a plan to succeed using the mentors' differentiation skill set. Likewise,



Dijkstra et al., (2017) also promoted long term professional development as necessary in order to make differentiation functional for teachers. Additionally, the researchers expressed that the principal's role is critical in providing teacher support and designating time for teacher's to collaborate, co-teach or even observe one another implementing the practice in their own classrooms. Hence, Proverbs 11:14 affirms, "For lack of guidance a nation falls, but victory is won through many advisers." If principals fail to guide their teachers into giving them the proper resources necessary to drive differentiation into the classroom, the staff will not flourish in the practice. The principal as a sole entity is a solution to raise consciousness about differentiation.

Finally, Roiha et al., (2014) advocated the development of schools adopting their own policies and tactics regarding differentiation. Including the synchronization of assessment in relation to the practice. This will also advertise policy makers as good representations for the natural design of the differentiation model as an unquestionable part of teaching.

## **Section Two: Families and Autism**

Because the 'autism journey', from diagnosis to daily life, can be a challenging and isolating experience, I wanted to interview a parent to learn and interpret their experience of their autism journey. Therefore, the thorough examination and multiplicity of parental perspectives (optimistic or pessimistic) on child prognoses of autism spectrum disorder (ASD), is fitting to reiterate the features of the ASD. ASD is a neurodevelopmental disorder that is marked by limited interests, repetitive behaviors, extreme sensorimotor issues, and frail interactions socially and communicatively (Kutuk et al., 2021). The spectrum itself, is comprised of differing levels of abilities, ranging from average to even seemingly genius IQs on one end, and ending with

mild or severe mental retardation on the other (Kruse, 2021). Considering these facts, the breadth and depth in which each family is affected by their loved one's diagnosis is radical.

Nevertheless, Kruse (2021) retells a fellow colleague's opinion about autism and writes, "Autism produces a dizzying set of responses, from fascination and concern to sentimentality and fear" (p. 1).

### **Family Experiences of Diagnoses**

Children who have just been diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are initially grieved upon by their parents or caregivers. Upon report, it is normal for families to experience feelings of hopelessness, shock, depression, frustration, worry and grief (Snijder et al., 2022). Moffet et al., (2006) describe a dismal testimony of a parent interviewee who was informed of their child's diagnosis, claiming that the term "autism" in and of itself, was already a "death sentence" and that aspirations for their child were now "shattered." Additionally, another interviewee also shared an outlook of penalty, professing that the prognosis has "caused problems." The parent felt shoved and alienated into a "special kids club" instead of the "normal mommy club," and further relayed that the autism diagnosis evoked misconceptions that children with ASD are "brain damaged and sit in a corner and rock all day." Yet another parent attests that even with a great lapse of time since her child's prognosis, it is still an "uphill struggle" and that wearing "thick skin" is an absolute necessity to keep negative attitudes at bay. (Mansell & Morris, 2004). Opposingly, other parents have taken more optimistic stances and asserted that their diagnosis unveiled compelling quests for practical help, awareness in dealing with their child's behaviors and eliminated self-blame (Wong et al., 2017). Mansell and Morris (2004) in their study, report of a couple of parent participants who claimed that flexibility was inevitable and they would "adapt" because they had to, and moving past the "label" to build

support systems with other parents and forming “suitable” friendships for their children with ASD. Nevertheless, despite an accurate diagnosis of ASD, a plethora of parents have complained that generally, pediatricians and general practitioners have scant knowledge about autism spectrum disorder overall and were shuffled among various medical professionals to acquire an initial diagnosis. They claimed to be “uninformed, unadvised and dissatisfied” (Wong et al., 2017). Gentles et al., (2020) projects, due to minimal data regarding ASD after prognosis, many families resort to independent research through the internet, probing relatives or friends who also care for those with ASD and even investigating self-referral procedures to other qualified professionals who provided well rounded answers. Wong et al., (2017) discusses a testimony of a parent who sought the advice of a neighbor whose child had ASD and through a lengthy conversation, was able to gain further insight on the condition. Furthermore, researchers Gentles et al., (2017) also assert that other parents regret being hindered from their intuitions of their child having ASD and obtaining a diagnosis early on, because doctors were “dismissive” and pacified them with a “let’s wait and see” response. These families mentioned that psychologists and psychiatrists were better equipped, with the expertise to answer their concerning questions, instead of “uncooperative clinicians.” Moreover, parents were also dissatisfied with the lack of training and resources of school personnel. Mansell and Morris (2004) in their survey of parent reactions to diagnoses, declare that schools are ill- informed about autism spectrum disorders and have minimal support in mainstreaming children with ASD. An account taken from their survey, relayed that a parent advocated “speech and language therapists, including educational therapists” should be consistent in making frequent visits to schools “throughout the school year” and that instructional assistants should be trained in autism before providing support in the classroom. Finally, Gentles et al., (2017) propose that support

interventions after an ASD diagnosis should be tailored per family because of the fluctuating levels in which grieving occurs and the varying levels of background knowledge about ASD that some families already possess. The researchers suggest that clinicians be assiduous in selecting families to immediately implement strategies at home, because some are not psychologically prepared for “high levels of involvement” as they may still be processing grief. Therefore, family centered intervention is personalized and critical. According to Gentles et al., (2017), the data below describes the general stages of an ASD diagnosis and what each entail:

Stages of Diagnoses	What to Expect
Pre-diagnosis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• parents heed to concerning behavioral signs in their child (typically noticeable before age three)</li> <li>• most observe delay in language/communication</li> </ul>
Diagnosis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• parents experience mixed emotions of relief, shock, denial, self-blame, anger, etc.</li> <li>• involvement with multiple professionals</li> <li>• medical personnel minimal communication with parents</li> </ul>
Post-diagnosis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ongoing search for more information via (professionals, peers, internet, books, etc.)</li> <li>• prescribed treatments/interventions</li> </ul>

### **The Aftermath of Autism: Detailed support systems**

Since autism is a montage of diverse traits with differing tiers of severity, a montage of treatment options is necessary. As mentioned earlier, many parents and caregivers find themselves in the emotional limbo of stress and instability as they await a post diagnostic starter kit (a mere tentative sketch of an agenda) as families need customized itineraries. There is either

scarce or broad and impersonable information delivered about ASD and its after care steps (Bradford, 2010). Milgramm et al., (2022) discovered that programs such as parent education training (PET) are designed to cater to the emotional and mental welfare of parents after an affirmed autistic diagnosis of their child. Unlike other programs that are child centered and require parents being heavily involved in direct intervention of their own, PET programs empower parents in building self-efficacy through psychoeducational activities (informative texts, exercises, group meetings) to better cope and meet the needs of their entire family (Milgramm, 2022). In addition, Selimoglu et al., (2013) recommends keeping close and consistent liaisons with professionals to access needed information and incorporate new techniques to aid in their child's developmental success.

Family therapy is another pertinent support system that aids in cultivating social skills needed to be successful within interpersonal relationships. Therapists instruct children with ASD to read nonverbal communication, such as deciphering emotions as well as understanding the perplexing verbal communication of figurative language. Parents and siblings benefit through role playing social scenarios, and are assured that their therapy sessions will promote competency for their loved one with ASD to begin interacting with peers (Bradford, 2010). Bradford (2010) furthermore asserts, that family therapy freely lends an outlet for both siblings and couples to vent as they simultaneously learn strategies to deal with the daily stressors of residing with a family member with ASD. Overall, Milgramm et al., (2022) suggests that careful evaluation of family dynamics (including race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status) is critical in accurately prescribing next steps in the post diagnosis period.

### Section Three: One Family's Autism Journey

The “autism journey” as I am referring to, is one that varies from family to family. For this section, I interviewed a mother of a child with autism. To follow are direct quotes that provide insight into her experience of being a homeschool teacher for her son Mike, diagnosed with autism.

My participant Cynthia was a married, middle-aged mother of three. The day of our meeting presented emotions of reverence for a woman who chose to add teacherly duties upon the already toilsome responsibilities of motherhood, wonderment for having one with autism, and comfort in the commonality of our sons' diagnoses. We met at a well maintained, quaint little park in a beautiful neighborhood, on a windy afternoon, just minutes away from her home. As I sat anticipating our initial meet, I retrieved a bright yellow sheet of paper from my coat pocket and reviewed 15 pre-interview questions I wrote the day before, pondering if more should be added. Simultaneously, I directed Ace, my younger son with autism, to use his napkin to wipe the food from around his mouth, as he was eating black beans and rice from his thermos. I also reminded him to hold on to his napkin while he ate, so the wind would not blow it away. For several minutes, I thought about autism, and how it hinders a child's ability to multitask independently. Ace would have set his napkin down had I not prompted him to grasp it. Then, my cell phone chimed with a text from Cynthia, stating that she was getting all the kids' shoes on and would see me shortly. As I waited for her arrival, I resumed watching Ace eat and felt happy that he was going to meet Mike, another boy alike in autism.

Our introduction to one another commenced with huge smiles and a warm relevance that arose from just being mothers, as well as mothers of Black American sons with autism. Cynthia's other two children were toddlers. Her daughter Jasmine, age 4, and her younger son,

Justin age 2, were both precocious and full of energy. When I greeted Mike, he refrained from making eye contact, but lightly smiled, which showed awareness of the interaction. I then introduced Ace to Mike, assuming their autism would immediately magnetize them into a natural play date, however they did not bat an eye. Our boys zipped and zoomed past each other and onto the playground apparatuses, away from one another as if they did not exist. Cynthia on the other hand, projected a mellow and well composed demeanor and spoke to her children in a calm tone. She was very patient in responding to Jasmine's inquiries of wanting to get further acquainted with another little girl she met at the park, while visually multitasking Justin's whereabouts as he explored the slide area. Mike was content on the swings, smiling, laughing occasionally, and delighted in solitude. He did not engage with his younger siblings, nor did he warm up to my son Ace. Ace, likewise, was oblivious to all of Cynthia's children as he went up and down the slide. Most of our time was spent in the swing section with Mike, as Cynthia discussed her triumphs and challenges of having a child with autism. She smiled as she mentioned Mike's newest repetitive sound effect and relayed that she redirects him.

### **Early Concerns**

A mother's intuition contains much strength and gives insightful guidance in being proactive about getting help for autism suspicions. In Cynthia's case, she instinctively knew "something was there" with Mike when she visited her girlfriend, who also had children. Here is her testimony of concern about Mike's conduct in that social atmosphere:

I guess his story of him being diagnosed...I guess we noticed early signs, shortly after he turned two, with just a lack of talking and or, kind of disinterest in playing and interacting with us or other kids, ...so that was, I remember, like literally we were at a friend's house, and it was like a playdate. She had two kids, and I had my two kids, and we were there for maybe about an hour and a half or two and we were just playing, the kids were having fun, and we were just talking, then I realized, like we've been here this whole time and he has said nothing...like, he's playing with the kids, well *near* them, but

he hasn't said anything...anything to me, and like other kids, were like talking back and forth, asking for stuff and this and that, and so...

### **Mike's Interactions with Siblings**

The autistic traits of "parallel play" or playing alongside other children, sound sensitivity, and refraining from engaging or initiating conversations is evident in Mike's conduct around his siblings. Cynthia describes the relationship among her children and how Mike can get disturbed by his siblings.

If prompted, he will engage in conversations, but not on his own. He will, um... they play together, it's still more of a parallel play, mostly. But he's often not the one that initiated it. He's just not making eye contact, looking at what they're doing... unless they're doing something that's bothering him auditory wise, that usually triggers something, but usually no, it's just...not paying attention. Yeah, he would do his own thing. That was always him. Even when young and as a baby, he always kind of just did his own thing, played on his own, and we didn't, my husband and I didn't think much of it. Other people would be like, "Oh wow, he can just play on his own?" And we're like, "Yeah." I didn't realize that kids don't...

So sometimes, I will redirect and try to get his attention back, or maybe find something else for the other two to do, in another room that won't be as distracting, or then again kind of like what you said, or we just take a break for a second, maybe we all just need to go outside and get it out and then we can revisit it later.

### **Balance of Homeschool Responsibility**

In homeschooling a child with autism, there is much to consider. Outbursts (mild, moderate, or severe), short attention spans, and distractions are inevitable and result from the various features on the autism spectrum. Therefore, having a flexible schedule as well as being flexible minded are pertinent. As for Cynthia, a seemingly innate nature of patience and allotting herself grace, works in her favor when Mike displays challenging conduct. Furthermore, she is also fortunate to be part of the small percentage of mothers of children with ASD, whose burdens are shared along with the direct, hands on support of her husband Cam. The following quotes



are confirmation of Cynthia' rhythm with her spouse as co-teachers and her steady pace in balancing responsibilities as a mother and teacher:

I find my style is a little looser than what a traditional school schedule is. So, depending on the day, our flow of homeschooling can happen in the morning, it might happen in the evening. So, for example, on a day we'll wake up and they have a checklist of things that they do, as far as like breakfast, getting dressed, brushing your teeth, making your bed. Then, we will start with maybe some reading aloud, books, the other two...sorry for *him* it depends, so right now we're working on number recognition...not number recognition, but knowing that if I show him two cars, knowing that's two and that relates to this number. Then also some of his letter sounds and blends, and so we're starting with those early steps of reading. We probably only work for maybe five to ten minutes, and then he gets a break. He goes outside, he jumps on his trampoline...he takes a break, and then we circle back around, and he works for another ten minutes, and then he just like focus in for another ten minutes and then he gets a break, and then we move on to something else.

I think the most challenging thing would be, sometimes his meltdowns...I don't want to call them tantrums. It's more like a meltdown, can be a little aggressive where his arms are flailing and kicking and things like that. That often happens when he's overwhelmed, a sound that's bothering him... but my husband and I have been trying to work with him where he can verbally express what's going on or help him give words to what he's feeling. So, when he's like in that, we just work with him in like, you can just say, "Dad, I'm angry because..." whatever just happened. We noticed that has helped or limited the duration of the meltdowns.

It depends on my husband's schedule. There was a time when he was taking over the Math portion of it. Then, he would sit with him and then work on the stuff we were doing for Math. My husband focuses on him also with his drums, so he's learning the drums, so his like music part of it, that's kind of my husband's thing. But we kind of just like work, what I'm I trying to say...I head up like what we're doing. I just let him know where we're going and he's like, cool.

### **Attendance at Special Day Preschool**

The special day, all autistic preschool that Mike attended, proved that direct instruction is not an ideal teaching methodology for students with ASD, for prolonged periods of time.

Teachers included evidence-based practices (strongly emphasized by researchers) such as:

creating a highly structured environment, utilizing organized teaching equipment, assistance by one-on-one aides and most importantly, incorporated differentiated instruction for Mike and his

peers to excel. It was at this special day school that Cynthia was introduced to the benefits of a weighted vest and adapted it into her homeschooling. Here is her observation of Mike's special day preschool experience:

So, they would come in and they would do like a lesson kind of together and they did kind of like hands on sensory things together with them in the beginning. Then they would do like a traditional circle time thing, and then a good chunk of the day was spent one on one. So, each child was with the teacher or the aid and was working through whatever that child's goals were. Yeah, so that I liked. So, each child had a whole like, box that was theirs, so no matter who was working with him, they knew what he was working on and where he was. Yeah, so they just pulled out his thing and worked on whatever his goals were one on one.

He constantly needed that sensory input. So, in order for him to kind of focus and sit when they needed...when they were working on their one on one, they did incorporate a weighted vest. They would do...I wanna say they did 20 minutes on and then twenty minutes off throughout the day. So, the teacher was telling me that was working for keeping his focus, we did use one here at the house. They used it, or they were using it during his ABA sessions and stuff like that or whenever we needed him to just like really focus on whatever we were working on. I think that's really the only thing we used from what they were doing.

## **Homeschool Strategies**

The desire to ensure that Mike does not feel pressured and stressed to progress academically is an apparent objective that Cynthia is mindful of during homeschooling. It is clear that she moves at a steady pace and meets him and his siblings at the academic levels of their understanding. Additionally, she is aware of when to differentiate instruction and add challenging material for her precocious daughter who is already learning the basics of writing prematurely. Cynthia understands that assistive devices such as: flash cards, learning apps, music and noise cancelling earmuffs are significant tools that enhance or act as preventive measures to curb Mike's undesirable ASD behaviors. She is also aware of Mike's inclination to both kinesthetic and tactile activities and makes time for these accommodations. The

following quotes describe the fashion in which these instructional accessories and strategies are used in Cynthia's home front:

So, I mean, they're still obviously much younger, so I give them just different activities to do. So maybe its coloring or painting or...our middle, my daughter, she is doing some like pre-writing stuff and her numbers, we give her some activities to do that. Yeah, but they kind of, sometimes they're in the room and I kind of just go over with everybody and they kind of listen, kind of not. So, I try to spread my time around.

Yeah, because some standard says that's where he needs to be. But I'm okay if he gets that, but maybe he's in second grade. To me, that doesn't matter, we'll get there when we get there. I want to work with Mike where he is and just move from there, without the pressure of... "Oh my God, he's behind." Kids his age are doing *this* already. Our focus right now is reading, writing, and math. Those are our focus right now. Yeah, my thoughts are, as he gets older, we can start doing that and start introducing those (science and social studies) subjects. Those are the ones I'm sticking with right now.

But for him, he does well with just like flashcards and repetition. He does very well. He does use some hands-on manipulatives, that works well too. He loves music, so anything we can put to like a song, he's good too. Or even just...we realize even if it's not a song but the beat of it, like if he taps while we're saying it, he tends to retain it really well. He shocked me the other day, and then I didn't realize some of the sight words he already knew, just off of a game that he was playing on his tablet. So, I did start trying to see if there's like different games, we could like include into that, that would help. I have a few workbooks that we go off of, that we might pull from. But right now, yeah, it's all self-composed. He doesn't love worksheets as much but um, I very early started some online type apps.

So that's why we use his trampoline during breaks or when he gets overly stimulated, he has a little trampoline in his room, or just letting him go outside and just run and just move and so sounds can be overwhelming to him, at times. So, he has noise cancelling earmuffs.

## Conclusion

While it is feasible for mothers of children with autism spectrum disorder to homeschool, it is critical to first dissect the irrefutable facts within the single study of this particular family. Cynthia and Cam were business owners that had the means to manipulate time and flexibility upon their schedules, as they were not affixed to the rigidity of a supervisor's demands. This entrepreneurial aspect of their marriage allowed a surplus of availability to be able to support one another and manage their family unit as a team. Nevertheless, this detail does not minimize the couple as a successful prototype for families rearing a loved one with autism, but as an informative measure to meticulously examine the practicalities of their own circumstances, before embarking upon homeschooling a child with ASD. Yet, another fact to review is that Cynthia and Cam both planned and communicated effectively about Mike's needs, which prevented the stress and burnout that marriages inevitably undergo, as parents of children with ASD. Cheatham and Fernando (2022) affirm that healthy communication between couples about hopes, concerns and emotional wellbeing bring cohesion to the family unit. Additionally, unlike Cam who was hands on and highly interactive with Mike, most fathers of children with ASD spend time as indirect supporters outside the home, as mere financial providers. Guler (2021) confirms that fathers of children with ASD are apt to experience both marital and employment burnout due to the taxing responsibilities of the unyielding mental and emotional demands. Furthermore, Cheatham and Fernando (2022) also proclaim that mothers tend to have more increased levels of stress, compared to their spouses because of the incessant around the clock care of their child with ASD. As research shows, Cynthia's case contradicts the marital and maternal struggling norms prevalent in most families with ASD. During the initial meeting and interview, she did not radiate being highly stressed or burnt out, but rather a mellowness that

resonated from the foundation of a supportive husband, in a healthy marriage, working as a team. Therefore, this study was indeed an atypical model of a family managing their daily lives caring for a loved one with ASD.

It is noteworthy to discuss Cynthia's keen ability of pacing. The compassion and patience she possessed for her son Mike, and also the grace she gave herself in homeschooling was perceptible. She made references about wanting to "work with Mike where he is" "without the pressure" of utilizing the Common Core standards in her home curriculum. Additionally, Cynthia taught in intervals which allowed Mike to take multiple breaks in between lessons, working 10 minutes on then 10 minutes off. Her decision to consistently incorporate this, demonstrated the sensitivity as an educator to Mike's needs as a student. Smith (1994) asserts that spaced trials or teaching in intervals results in material being easily retained because data is taught in increments. Contrarily, if data is taught in massed trials or information is being presented back-to-back, to children with ASD, it is deemed ineffective because of their inability to cognitively process data normally. Moreover, researchers performed a study on children ages with ASD to find a solution for memory enhancement. In their research, they utilized a method of teaching by using actual block intervals. Students were given a four by four grid of blocks with data on them and were directed to memorize, and afterward were given a 90 second break to repeat the pattern (Fantasia et al., 2020). Therefore, Cynthia's mindfulness to pace and take frequent breaks in instructing Mike will help him recall information better and prevent restlessness.

As a mother and educator, myself, it is righteous to acknowledge Cynthia's industriousness and determination to homeschool. Partaking in the role of motherhood alone is already taxing, and then deciding to take full responsibility of her children's education, (one

having autism) is commendable. However, inclusion in a mainstream educational setting is also beneficial for building social skills and relationships. Mashiach et al., (2021) proposes special needs children in these leaning environments enrich their communication, receive daily interactive experiences with peers and opportunities to observe real-life models of learning. When questioned about Mike's access to cultivating peer relationships when homeschooled, Cynthia expressed that the social aspect is fulfilled during events at the community center, park visits and interaction among immediate family members. Nevertheless, due to her concern of him being unable to express himself with details, the decision for Mike being homeschooled was also motivated for the need for him to be secure in a safe space, as autism is unpredictable.

### **Limitations**

The time frame in which the data collecting process occurred was brief. If time was not a factor, this study would have included an interview with Cam and his paternal perspectives of raising a child with ASD and how it affects his performance as a husband. After detailed research, it is apparent that the father's role in families managing autism, is seemingly unseen or not as plentiful in data compared to mothers. Additionally, this study only involved the study of one family with a child with mild/moderate autism. Therefore, the gamut of behavioral interventions and instructional strategies were not thoroughly and widely explored. Interviews with more families navigating through autism would reveal even more resourceful information, that could lend a deeper awareness for families with ASD who are struggling.

### **Questions for Further Research**

Cynthia and her family were Black Americans with an entrepreneurial background. The presentation of other Black American families who lack resources and are not business minded, yet still have the responsibility of raising children with autism, is significant for further research. Also, studying families of various racial and ethnic backgrounds, who have children with severe autism or violent behaviors and their discussion of coping techniques is supportive data worth researching extensively.

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## **Appendix A: Biblical Integration**

### **A Christian Educator's Biblical Perspective**

Our world is alive with diverse dimensions, from textures in nature, to a portfolio of distinguishing features on human faces, and even the spots or shades of fur on animals (or lack thereof). The dimensions of both the metaphysical and physical realms of our world alone, is enough to exhibit the unconfined, multifaceted, and infinitesimal philosophies of the human mind. This is all made possible by a God who is diverse in power and entity as he created edible “green plants” for both airborne and terrain animals, making humans in his “likeness,” bequeathing dominion over them all (Genesis 1:30, New International Version). Hence, it is the spiritual obligation of parents and teachers to embrace the diverse layers that children with ASD also possess. As with all of God’s creations, they are a unique wonder branded by God’s miraculous hands. Walking in the role as a Christian parent and educator, a crucial need to deeply examine how my son’s autistic brain operated was a compelling force. It is honorable and fascinating to be placed in a stance of understanding the diverse nature of autism, to be better equipped as both, a mother and educator to serve students with ASD. Revelation 7: 9-10, proclaims the interconnectedness we have with one another, though we may speak different languages and originate from different places, “tribes or nations” (New International Version). Accentuating God’s best in children with autism (no matter how extraordinarily different) is a natural and bible-based truth for parents and educators to adhere to.

## Appendix B: Autism Interview Transcription

1. Almavida Hendrick
2. SEED 594
3. An Interview with Mike's Mother: A Child with Autism
4. I: Good afternoon, this interview is conducted on behalf of Biola University for the Action
5. Research course 594. Do you consent?
6. Participant: Yes.
7. I: Okay! Let's get started! Number one, is there anything unique to your story, um regarding
8. your son, Mike's autism?
9. Participant: Is there anything *unique*?
10. I: Yeah unique, as with the diagnosis, and how you found out...the process, or prior to the
11. diagnosis...
12. Participant: Uh, I don't know, I don't know if I would consider it *unique*. I guess his story
13. of him being diagnosed...I guess we noticed early signs, shortly after he turned two, um with
14. just a lack of talking and or, um a kind of disinterest in playing and interacting with us or
15. other kids, um...so that was, I remember, like literally we were at a friend's house, and it
16. was like a playdate. She had two kids, and I had my two kids, and we were there for maybe
17. about an hour and a half or two and we were just playing, the kids were having fun, and we
18. were just talking, then I realized, like we've been here this whole time and he has said
19. nothing...like, he's playing with the kids, well *near* them, but he hasn't said anything...
20. anything to me, and like other kids, were like talking back and forth, asking for stuff and this
21. and that, and so...
22. I: Wow.

23. Participant: I was like, okay something...and so that was the first time. I was like, I think

24. something...there's something there, and um...so yeah, I don't know, yeah.

25. I: Okay, so um, was he, during that time in that setting, was he kind of like clinging toward,

26. near you, like being very clingy or was he just doing his thing next to you?

27. Participant: No. Yeah, he would do his own thing. That was always him. Even young and

28. as a baby, he always kind of uh, just did his own thing, played on his own, and uh...we

29. didn't, my husband and I didn't think much of it. Other people would be like, "Oh wow, he

30. can just play on his own?" And we're like, "Yeah." I didn't realize that kids don't...

31. I: (giggle) You looked at it as a positive thing, like that's a good thing!

32. Participant: (giggle) Yeah, he gives me a little bit of a break! Yeah, but I didn't realize that

33. kids that young...and he was our first, so I didn't think we didn't know what to look for, um

34. or have anything to...not necessarily that you would compare kids, but we didn't have

35. anything to gage it off of, I guess, so...yeah.

36. I: Okay. Okay, number two, what prompted...can you give me *specifics* on what prompted

37. you homeschooling Mike?

38. Participant: Um, uh, *specifically*...well, so homeschooling had always been kind of a  
thought

39. or kind of in the back of my head, like, oh this is something I think I could do. Um, when

40. got Mike's diagnosis, I thought maybe it's not...at first I thought maybe it's not the right

41. thing to do. Maybe he needs the extra help, maybe we should send him to school, and so he

42. did go to like a special day, um preschool for kids with autism. Um...so I felt okay with that

43. and he was doing well, and he was okay. Um...there were probably a few things that I

44. didn't love, just about the whole thought of him going...once he was ready to go to the

45. public kindergarten, um...as far as how much time he would be there, like the full day, the  
46. whole seven, eight hours, however long that day was, um...so I guess the length of time uh,  
47. that he would be in school. Uh, I didn't feel would be beneficial to him.

48. I: Okay.

49. Participant: Um and being in IEP meetings I didn't love (smiles) and um I guess the thought  
50. that having to get someone else's permission on what, or run by somebody else what my son  
51. needs to be working on and where he's going. That just never...

52. I: Yes. You wanted to take control of your son's education, basically.

53. Participant: Yes. Yes, and so um and even minor things. I remember in an IEP meeting, uh  
54. they were talking about his goals and kinda where we were going, and they wanted to add a  
55. goal of um, I think letter sounds or him being able to say letter sounds, and I said, "Well he  
56. knows most of those, that's something we've already been working on."

57. I: mmm hmm

58. Participant: Like, but it was, my comment was a little ignored, to an extent...

59. I: Oh wow.

60. Participant: where it was kinda like, "Yeah, but I think we should do it anyway so like, so I  
61. guess *we* can see if he can do it." I don't know what it was.

62. I: Was it kind of dismissive? Would you use the term dismissive?

63. Participant: Pretty much. Yes. He just woke up from a nap. (lifts her infant son)

64. I: Hi!!! Hi baby! (smiles)

65. Um, yeah so it was kind of like, okay...that's how I felt about it. It was just

66. I: You would voice your...they would listen to your concerns but then they would still  
67. reroute it to what they wanted to do.

68. Participant: Yeah, it was kinda like, “Yeah you said that’s what he can do, but we should
69. still x, y, and z, so it was like, okay so but then it..
70. I: mmm hmm
71. Participant: And then having to reschedule... sorry, people are calling me (taps the screen)
72. Hello everybody! (giggles)
73. I: (laughs)
74. Participant: It’s okay. Dad’s trying to keep everyone away for a few minutes. (laughs)
75. Um so, Faith, can you go back with daddy please (directs daughter). Um, I forgot what I
76. was saying. But yes, uh...I don’t know where I was (laughs).
77. I: That’s okay (laughs). That’s okay (laughs).
78. Participant: Um but I think you pretty much said what I was thinking so yes (smiles)...
79. I: (laughs) That’s okay! Okay, so at the special day school, was there curriculum combined
80. with play, or was there mostly hands on activities and play? What did they teach?
81. Participant: So, um they would come in and they would do like a lesson kind of together
82. and they did kind of like hands on sensory things together with them in the beginning.
83. Then they would do like a traditional circle time thing, and then a good chunk of the day
84. was spent one on one. So, each child was with the teacher or the aid and was working
85. through whatever that child’s goals were.
86. I: Oh, that’s neat. I like *that*. I really like that.
87. Participant: Yeah, so *that* I liked. So, each child had a whole like, box that was theirs, so
88. no matter who was working with him, they knew what he was working on, where he was...
89. I: Okay, organized spaces, equipment, and tools.
90. Participant: Yeah, so they just pulled out his thing and worked on whatever his goals were

91. uh, one on one.

92. I: Okay, so that's cool. I like that. Okay, so for your homeschooling, what exactly...can

93. you take me through a day of what you teach? Is it like alternate days you teach some

94. subjects? Kind of like a general statement about your day.

95. Participant: Mmm hmm, so...I have kind of fallen into a...I find my style is a little looser

96. than what a traditional school schedule is. So, depending on the day, um our flow of home-

97. schooling can happen in the morning; it might happen in the evening. So, for example, on a

98. day we'll wake up and they have a checklist of things that they do, um, as far as like

99. breakfast, getting dressed, um brushing your teeth, making your bed. Then, we will start

100. with maybe some reading aloud, um books, the other two, well sorry, for *him* um, it

101. depends, so right now we're working on uh, let..number recognition...not number

102. recognition, but knowing that if I show him two cars, knowing that's two and that relates

103. to this number. Then also some of his letter sounds and blends, and so we're starting

104. with those early steps of reading. So, for him it usually looks like sitting in his room

105. and we're going over that. We probably only work for maybe five to ten minutes, and

106. then he gets a break. He goes outside, he jumps on his trampoline...he takes a break, and

107. then we circle back around, and he works for another ten minutes, and then he just like

108. focus in for another ten minutes and then he gets a break and then we move on to

109. something else. That's kind of how our day flows, in between going to speech or OT

110. um, the park, those types of things, yeah.

111. I: So would your curriculum, would you say that it takes place over the span of like three

112. hours or four hours with breaks? Or...longer or less?

113. Participant: Um, probably three hours at the most a day. Yeah, I would say.

114. I: Do you happen to um...how do you teach? Do you teach creatively? Does he do good  
115. if you incorporate visual and performing arts? You know like music and acting, any of  
116. those things?

117. Participant: Um, for him, it depends on what we're doing. But for him, he does well  
118. with just like flashcards and repetition. Um, he does very well, um he does use some  
119. hands on manipulatives, that works well too. He loves music, so anything we can put to  
120. like a song, he's good too. Or even just...we realize even if it's not a song but the beat of  
121. like if he taps while we're saying it, he tends to retain it really well.

122. I: Okay.

123. Participant: Yeah, so um those are the different things I incorporated into it. Yeah.

124. I: Okay, do you, so...everything you do in homeschooling, it's all self-composed, self-  
125. designed? Or...do you go on the internet and look for your own...

126. Participant: Yeah.

127. I: Oh, you just make up your own lessons?

128. Participant: Pretty much, I have a few like workbooks that we go off of, that we might  
129. pull from. But right now, yeah, it's all self-composed. Yeah, mmm hmm.

130. I: Okay, so you do utilize workbooks and worksheets?

131. Participant: He doesn't love worksheets as much but um, I very early started some online  
132. type apps...(Mike appears) Are you saying hi? (grins)

133. I: Hi! Hi there! Peek a boo! (laughs)

134. Participant: to see if that goes well too, because I did... he shocked me the other day, um  
135. and then I didn't realize some of the sight words he already knew, just off of a game that  
136. he was playing on his tablet. So, I did start trying to see if there's like different games,



137. we could like include into that, that would help. So yeah.
138. I: That's nice. Okay. Does he have any challenging behaviors?
139. Participant: Um, he, depending on what's going on sometimes his uh..(Mike appears  
140. again) You wanna say hi? Okay, say hi, then say bye bye. (grins) Um, I think the most  
141. challenging thing would be, sometimes his meltdowns...I don't want to call them  
142. tantrums. It's more like a meltdown, can be a little aggressive where his arms are flailing  
143. and kicking and things like that. That often happens when he's overwhelmed, a sound  
144. that's bothering him, um...
145. I: So how do you bring resolve to those challenges?
146. Participant: Uh, it's really a case-by-case situation, like we might tweak it a little bit.  
147. But my husband and I have been trying to work with him where he can verbally express  
148. what's going on or help him give words to what he's feeling. We noticed that has helped  
149. or limited like the duration of the meltdowns...
150. I: Or those flashcards too...do you show flashcards like, "I'm sad?" (hand gesturing)
151. Participant: No, we just verbally just tell him. I mean we've done flashcards with like  
152. emotions on them...so we've done flashcards with like, *sad, happy, angry*, so he  
153. understands that. So, when he's like in that, we just work with him in like, you can  
154. just say, "Dad, I'm angry because..." whatever just happened. So, he started to repeat  
155. what we say and we notice as says it, he kind of starts to calm down. We realize he can't  
156. express what he's feeling and that's the way he's acting it out. I guess.
157. I: Okay, right. So, as a homeschool teacher and mother, do you feel any inadequacies as  
158. a teacher?
159. Participant: Absolutely! Yes! (laughs)

160. I: (laughs) Honesty reigns!
161. Participant: That is something I work through quite regularly. Um and um yeah,
162. cuz especially, like I told you that homeschool was always a thought in my mind like,
163. “Oh yeah, I could do that.” I never thought I would be doing it with a child that needed a
164. little extra help, or with special needs.
165. I: Right. Yes.
166. Participant: So that’s uh, you know, a whole other layer of it.
167. I: Right.
168. Participant: Yeah, so I do. I don’t know... (smiles)
169. I: Do you feel inadequate about what you’re going to teach and how you’re going to
170. teach it? Or...
171. Participant: Um, I think it’s not *what* I’m going to teach, it’s if I can teach it in a way
172. where he will understand it.
173. I: Okay. Do you use strategies? What type of strategies do you feel are useful for him...
174. that are more beneficial for him, where you feel it’s like “Wow, this is clicking with him
175. and he is really gelling with this strategy.” Do you have any of those....
176. Participant: When you say *strategy*, meaning the way that I teach it?
177. I: Yes. How you deliver and how you present the material. Yes.
178. Participant: Well, I know that just repetition and like flash cards really are the main
179. things he clicks to fastest, so that’s usually where I start with most topics or subjects.
180. um and then just move from there if he’s catching, if not, if we feel like we have to add in
181. some hands-on manipulatives, so he can kind of get that aspect of it.
182. I: Okay, so that’s what keeps him highly engaged? Mostly manipulatives and

183. flashcards...If you remove those things, he probably won't be as engaged?

184. Participant: Uh, probably not. I mean...

185. I: Okay. Do you utilize the Common Core in any way into your curriculum? Do you  
186. implement?

187. Participant: No. I would say, well...I have looked at them. I looked them up online um,  
188. once, just to try and get a gage of what we could work on next. But uh, not really. No.

189. I: Okay. Is there a reason why?

190. Participant: Um, I don't want to...I want to work with Mike where he is and just move  
191. from there, without the pressure of..." Oh my God, he's behind. Kids his age are doing  
192. this already"... um...

193. I: Okay. I get it.

194. Participant: That's one of the main reasons. I do look at it just to be like, "Oh we can  
195. work on this or let's move towards this to see..." But, I don't wanna get stuck at *this*  
196. is what he needs to be doing because he's at the kindergarten age...

197. I: Yeah, because the world says it too.

198. Participant: Yeah, because some standard says that's where he needs to be. But, I'm  
199. okay if he gets that, but maybe he's in second grade. To me, that doesn't matter, we'll  
200. get there when we get there. (giggles)

201. I: That's cool. So, you could go at your child's pace. Well, that's beautiful. Okay.

202. What advice would you give parents who would love to homeschool their children who  
203. have autism?

204. Participant: Um, I would say (repeats the question). Um, I would tell them to do it, or no  
205. never mind. I would tell them to trust their instinct as a parent, knowing what's best for

206. your child. I honestly believe God gave you the children that you have for a reason, so  
207. there is something that *you* have, that only you are able to help your child with. Your  
208. child wasn't given to any other mom or dad, and um that's one thing. Then two, do a lot  
209. of reading about homeschool, homeschool styles...I found some great books about just  
210. homeschooling, there's actually a whole podcast on special education and homeschool  
211. that I was listening to...so there's a, I was surprised at how so many people homeschool  
212. children with special needs...

213. I: Wow! A whole continent huh? I didn't know that! (smiles)

214. Participant: Yeah, there's a whole organization, yeah for it. So, um yeah, just really  
215. educating yourself on your options, what's out there, what other people have tried and  
216. done...but um, yeah, that's what I would say.

217. I: Okay, since we have time I'm going to circle back to adding upon to the core  
218. curriculum that you teach...Aside from the core subjects like Math and ELA, do you  
219. teach any of the other subjects like Science or Social Studies too?

220. Participant: Not right now. No, our focus right now is reading, writing, math. Those  
221. are our focus right now. Yeah, my thoughts are, as he gets older, we can start doing that  
222. and start introducing those subjects. But, those are the ones I'm sticking with right now.

223. I: Okay. As far as reading comprehension goes, how is that? Do you use practical  
224. methods for him to understand and grasp what he's reading? Is it easy for him to  
225. understand like basic books?

226. Participant: I don't. I'm not sure how much he understands. He really enjoys reading,  
227. sitting and listening to reading. He enjoys certain books and he'll want you to read the  
228. books over and over. Um, I'm honestly unsure how much he is...

229. I: Absorbing?
230. Participant: fully understanding about them, so because to ask him questions about it,  
231. he's unable to answer...if that makes sense.
232. I: So he just, does he just stay quiet? Is that what he does?
233. Participant: Um, yeah. So, for example, if we're reading a book and I ask him about  
234. something on the page like, "Where is something or what is this person doing?..." He  
235. might be able to answer me. But, if we're done with the book and I ask him in the next  
236. five minutes, "What did the hungry caterpillar eat on Monday?" I don't think, he's not  
237. gonna answer me.
238. I: Okay. If it's like too specific too, he'll just shy away from it. Will he look down or  
239. just look at you like, "Can you move on?" (laughs)
240. Participant: Yeah, just like that. (laughs)
241. I: You answer the question! Huh? (laughs) I love this. Okay and then, I have a question  
242. about his sensory, sensorimotor...is he highly sensitive to like the sounds and lighting?
243. Participant: Yes. I think he would be considered a sensory seeker. I think that's what  
244. they call it. So, like he constantly, um movement helps him think, is what I've learned  
245. too.
246. I: So, he's a kinesthetic learner?
247. Participant: Yeah, so whether that means uh jumping...so that's why we use his  
248. trampoline during breaks or when he gets overly stimulated, he has a little trampoline in  
249. his room. Um, or just letting him go outside and just run and just move and so sounds  
250. can be overwhelming to him, um at times. So, he has uh, noise cancelling...  
251. I: earmuffs?

252. Participant: earmuffs...yeah. So, those are types of things he does. He loves water and  
253. any kind of ...hands...

254. I: Okay, so tactile too? Do you integrate kinesthetic activities into your curriculum...to  
255. where you connect it to academics?

256. Participant: Um, to some degree, not anymore than just during his breaks, not really  
257. during his focus time, but when he's on his break time, then yeah.

258. I: Okay, okay. Did you have to do any adjustments to your environment, to  
259. accommodate his needs? Any, like too much light coming in or you had to buy different  
260. lights, or move to a different room to teach him or?

261. Participant: No, not really. Um, yeah not really, other than, just the trampoline in his  
262. room. Yeah no, not really.

263. I: Okay, um let me see there's another one...so he has attended the SDC school was  
264. basically, a public-school setting, right?

265. Participant: Yeah, the school itself was all children with special needs, but his particular  
266. class were all kids with autism.

267. I: Okay. Did you adopt any of their strategies or methods that they used in their SDC  
268. school into your homeschooling?

269. Participant: Um, for a little bit we did use...so when he was in the school, um they did  
270. have him using a weighted vest because he was always moving...

271. I: Oh, wow! I've never heard of that! (smiles)

272. Participant: Yeah, so he constantly needed that uh, like sensory input. So, in order for  
273. him to kind of focus and sit when they needed...when they were working on their one  
274. on one, they did incorporate a weighted vest. They would do...I wanna say they did 20

275. minutes on and then twenty minutes off throughout the day. So, the teacher was telling  
276. me that was working for keeping his focus, we did use one here at the house. They used  
277. it, or they were using it during his ABA sessions and stuff like that or whenever we  
278. needed him to just like really focus on whatever we were working on. I think that's  
279. really the only thing we used from what they were doing. So yeah.

280. I: Okay. So, do you research other resources to enhance your curriculum? Or do you  
281. just kind of like, improvise?

282. Participant: Um, right now I'm just improvising...yeah. (laughs)

283. I: Okay, now the roles...I'm going to ask something else. I'm going to go into a  
284. different aspect of our interview. As far as assigning roles between you and your  
285. husband, like how do you do that? How does your week look like with that?

286. Participant: Um, just in general or the homeschool aspect?

287. I: The homeschool aspect.

288. Participant: So, its majority, myself. It depends on my husband's schedule. There was a  
289. time where he was taking over the Math portion of it. Then, so he would sit with him and  
290. then work on the stuff we were doing for Math. My husband focuses on him also with  
291. his drums, so he's learning the drums, so his like music part of it, that's kind of my  
292. husband's thing. But we kind of just like work, what I'm I trying to say...I head up like  
293. what we're doing. I just let him know where we're going and he's like, cool.

294. I: Oh okay!

295. Participant: He's just like okay, "This is what we're working on?" You know if he asks  
296. this...This is what we're doing, um so that's kind of our roles, I guess. If that makes  
297. sense.

298. I: Yeah, so you do get his input on your lessons. You kind of like run it by him and say, "What do you think about this?"
299. Participant: Not necessarily, I mean, he knows what's happening. I mean he's welcome.
300. He doesn't necessarily input, but he can. (giggles)
301. I: Okay. (laughs)
302. Participant: Like for example, like I told him like when he's reading and for his speech,
303. we're working on if he asks, if he brings us a book to read it. We're asking him, okay,
304. "What's the title of the book and what's it called?"...Working in that way, so that's the
305. kind of stuff we communicate, so that way if he brings my husband a book...he knows,
306. okay, this is what we're working on, or vice versa if he says...
307. I: Okay, so he knows the skills you're trying to teach?
308. Participant: Yeah, during his last, you know, meltdown, this is what I did, and he lets me
309. know and I'm like, "Okay cool, I'll try that the next time." So that's kind of what we do.
310. I: Okay, so the majority...you're basically the head honcho of homeschooling then. It's
311. just you.
312. Participant: Yes.
313. I: Okay. (laughs) That's really where I'm going with that question. Okay and um
314. another question, so since we have some time I'm just going to ask about self-care and
315. the additional siblings. So, when you are teaching Mike, his siblings are...they're home
316. schooled too, right? All three of them are being homeschooled?
317. Participant: Correct. So, I mean, they're still obviously much younger, so I give them
318. just different activities to do. So maybe its coloring or painting or...our middle, my
319. daughter, um she is doing some like pre-writing stuff and her numbers, we give her some
320. activities to do that. Yeah, but they kind of, sometimes they're in the room and I kind of



321. just go over with everybody and they kind of listen, kind of not. So, I try to spread my  
322. time around, but yeah.
323. I: So when you teach Mike is he in a setting all on his own and then his siblings are in a  
324. different room?
325. Participant: It depends, sometimes we'll work in his room, and they'll be in the living  
326. room, or they'll be in the room with us or we're all in the living room and Mike and I are  
327. doing his stuff sitting on the couch and the kids are on the floor, um...so it just kind of  
328. depends.
329. I: Does he get easily distracted by his siblings? Is he able to focus?
330. Participant: (laughs) It depends. Yeah, it depends on the day, but yeah, they can be a  
331. distraction, yes. (laughs)
332. I: So, when you see that he's being distracted, does he show it in a way that it is  
333. extremely noticeable and obvious, where it's like, "I can see he's being distracted."  
334. Is it outward, like...?
335. Participant: No, he's just not making eye contact, looking at what they're doing...
336. I: Oh okay. So, he doesn't have like a tantrum or anything?
337. Participant: Not really, unless they're doing something that's bothering him auditory  
338. wise, that usually triggers something, but usually no, it's just...not paying attention.
339. I: So, do you redirect him when you see that, like to focus on what he's doing? Or do  
340. you say, okay maybe this is not the day and let's go do something else and just forget all  
341. about it.
342. Participant: It depends on the day. So sometimes, I will, my first is I will redirect and try  
343. to get his attention back, or maybe find something else for the other two to do, um in

344. another room that won't be as distracting, or then again kind of like what you said, or we  
345. just take a break for a second, maybe we all just need to go outside and get it out and then  
346. we can revisit it later.

347. I: Okay, I'm gonna ask you a personal question. You don't have to answer it if you  
348. don't want to.

349. Participant: (laughs) Okay.

350. I: Do you feel resentful towards your spouse that you're doing a lot of the homeschool...  
351. it's really huge what you're doing. Do you feel resentful sometime that you're doing all  
352. the academic part and the social...? It's *a lot* of work.

353. Participant: It is, um but no. I would say, I don't.

354. I: That's good.

355. Participant: Um, yeah no I don't.

356. I: Okay, that's good! That's great! Now, with his siblings, does he engage in  
357. conversations with his siblings? Do you see them help one another?

358. Participant: Um, if prompted, he will engage in conversations, but not on his own. He  
359. will, um... they play together, it's still more of a parallel play, mostly. But, he's often  
360. not the one that initiated it.

361. I: Oh okay. Will his sister help him? Do you find her being helpful in assisting in his  
362. needs or anything like that? Do you catch her trying to do anything? (giggles)

363. Participant: (giggles) Not...does she help him?

364. I: Yeah, you know like one of those moments like, "Wow that's so sweet!"

### Appendix C: Autism Interview Codebook

Interview Questions	Codes	Quotes
<p>1. Is there anything unique to your story regarding your son, Mike's autism? As with the process, how you found out, prior to diagnosis?</p>	<p>1: recognition of social/communicative frailties</p>	<p>18: "Then I realized, like we've been here this whole time and he has said  19: nothing...like, he's playing with the kids, well <i>near</i> them, but he hasn't said anything...  20: anything to me, and like other kids, were like talking back and forth, asking for stuff."</p>
<p>2. Can you give me specifics of what prompted you homeschooling Mike?</p>	<p>2: temporal concerns</p>	<p>44: "Once he was ready to go to the  45: public kindergarten, um...as far as how much time he would be there, like the full day, the  46: whole seven, eight hour, however long that day was, um...so I guess the length of time uh,  47: that he would be in school. Uh, I didn't feel would be beneficial to him."</p>
<p>3. Would you use the term, dismissive? (referring to IEP meeting)</p>	<p>3: dissatisfaction with professional input  4: executes control of education</p>	<p>49: "Um and being in IEP meetings I didn't love (smiles) and um I guess the thought  50: that having to get someone else's permission on what, or run by somebody else what my son  51: needs to be working on and where he's going."</p>

		58: "Like, but it was, my comment was a little ignored."
4. At the special day school, was there curriculum combined with play, or mostly hands on activities and play?	5: evidence of differentiated instruction 6: structured schedule/ organized equipment	81: "They would come in and they would do like a lesson kind of together 82: and they did kind of like hands on sensory things together with them in the beginning. 83: Then they would do like a traditional circle time thing, and then a good chunk of the day 84: was spent one-on-one. So, each child was with the teacher or the aid and was working, 85: through whatever that child's goals were." 87: "So, each child had a whole like, box that was theirs, so 88: no matter who was working with him, they knew what he was working on, where he was."
5. For your homeschooling, can you take me through a day of what you teach?	7: flexible schedule 8: preventive strategies	96: "So, depending on the day, um our flow of home- 97: schooling can happen in the morning, it might happen in the evening." 99: "Then, we will start 100: with maybe some reading aloud, um books, the other two, well sorry, for <i>him</i> um, it 101: depends, so right now we're working on uh, let..number recognition...not number 102: recognition, but knowing that if I show him two cars, knowing that's two and that relates

		<p>103: to this number. Then also some of his letter sounds and blends, and so we're starting</p> <p>104: with those early steps of reading. So, for him it usually looks like sitting in his room,</p> <p>105: and we're going over that."</p>
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<p>6. Would you say your curriculum takes place over the span of three or four hours with breaks? Or longer or less?</p>	<p>9: instructional intervals</p>	<p>105: "We probably only work for maybe five to ten minutes, and</p> <p>106: then he gets a break. He goes outside, he jumps on his trampoline...he takes a break, and</p> <p>107: then we circle back around, and he works for another ten minutes, and then he just like</p> <p>108: focus in for another ten minutes and then he gets a break and then we move on to</p> <p>109: something else."</p>
<p>7. Do you teach creatively, incorporating the visual and performing arts (music/acting) any of those things?</p>	<p>10: accommodates learning needs</p>	<p>117: "But for him, he does well</p> <p>118: with just like flashcards and repetition. Um, he does very well, um he does use some</p> <p>119: hands on manipulatives, that works well too. He loves music, so anything we can put to</p> <p>120: like a song, he's good too. Or even just...we realize even if it's not a song but the beat of</p>

		121: like if he taps while we're saying it, he tends to retain it really well."
8. So, everything you do in homeschool is all self-composed or self-designed? You just make up your own lessons?	11: improvises lessons	128: "Pretty much, I have a few like workbooks that we go off of, that we might 129: pull from. But right now, yeah, it's all self-composed."
9. Does he have any challenging behaviors? How do you bring resolve to those challenges?	12: positive terminology 13: modeling and communication	141: "I don't want to call them 142: tantrums. It's more like a meltdown, can be a little aggressive where his arms are flailing 143: and kicking and things like that." 153: "So, when he's like in that, we just work with him in like, you can 154: just say, "Dad, I'm angry because..." whatever just happened. So, he started to repeat 155: what we say and we notice as he says it, he kind of starts to calm down."
10. As a homeschool teacher and mother, do you feel any inadequacies as a teacher? Do you feel inadequacy of what you're going to teach and how you're going to teach it?	14: self-efficacy struggle 15: learning disconnect concerns	159: "Absolutely! Yes! 162: I told you that homeschool was always a thought in my mind like, 163: "Oh yeah, I could do that." I never thought I would be doing it with a child that needed a 164: little extra help, or with special needs." 171: "I think it's not <i>what</i> I'm going to teach, it's if I can teach it in a way 172: where he will understand it."

<p>11. What types of strategies are more beneficial/useful for him when you deliver/present material?</p>	<p>16: use of low-tech assistive devices</p>	<p>178: “Well, I know that just repetition and like flash cards really are the main 179: things he clicks to fastest, so that’s usually where I start with most topics or subjects. 180: um and then just move from there if he’s catching, if not, if we feel like we have to add in 181: some hands-on manipulatives.”</p>
<p>12. Do you utilize the Common Core in any way into your curriculum?</p>	<p>17: disagrees with traditional schooling/standards 18: meets his academic level</p>	<p>198: “Yeah, because some standard says that’s where he needs to be. But, I’m 199: okay if he gets that, but maybe he’s in second grade. To me, that doesn’t matter, we’ll 200: get there when we get there.” 190: “I want to work with Mike where he is and just move 191: from there, without the pressure of...” Oh my God, he’s behind. Kids his age are doing 192: this already.”</p>
<p>13. What advice would you give parents who would love to homeschool their children with autism?</p>	<p>19: detailed research 20: awareness of own children</p>	<p>208: “Then two, do a lot 209: of reading about homeschool, homeschool styles...I found some great books about just 210: homeschooling, there’s actually a whole podcast on special education and homeschool.” 205: “I would tell them to trust their instinct as a parent, knowing what’s best for</p>

		<p>206: your child. I honestly believe God gave you the children that you have for a reason, so</p> <p>207: there is something that <i>you</i> have, that only you are able to help your child with.”</p>
<p>14. Aside from the core subjects, Math and ELA, do you teach any other subjects like Science or Social Studies too?</p>	<p>21: high concentration on core subjects</p> <p>22: pacing planned</p>	<p>220: “No, our focus just right now is reading, writing, math.”</p> <p>221: “Yeah, my thoughts are, as he gets older, we can start doing that</p> <p>222: and start introducing those subjects.”</p>
<p>15. As far as reading comprehension goes, use practical methods for him to understand and grasp what he’s reading? Does he just stay quiet? (referring to comprehension questions)</p>	<p>23: repetition</p> <p>24: comprehension improvements</p>	<p>227: “He enjoys certain books and he’ll want you to read the</p> <p>228: books over and over. Um, I’m honestly unsure how much he is...</p> <p>230: fully understanding about them, so because to ask him questions about it,</p> <p>231: he’s unable to answer.”</p>
<p>16. Is he highly sensitive to sounds and lighting?</p>	<p>25: sensory seeker</p> <p>26: auditorily sensitive</p>	<p>243: “Yes. I think he would be considered a sensory seeker. I think that’s what</p> <p>244: they call it. So, like he constantly, um movement helps him think, is what I’ve learned,</p> <p>245: too.</p> <p>143: “That often happens when he’s overwhelmed, a sound</p> <p>144: that’s bothering him.”</p> <p>250: “Sounds can be overwhelming to him, at times.”</p>
<p>17. So, he’s a kinesthetic learner, tactile too? Do</p>	<p>27: non-curricular activities</p>	<p>247: “So that’s why we use his trampoline during</p>



<p>you integrate kinesthetic activities into your curriculum?</p>		<p>breaks or when he gets overly stimulated, 249: or just letting him go outside and just run and just move 252: He loves water and 253: any kind of ...hands..."</p>
<p>18. Did you have to make any adjustments to his environment to accommodate his needs?</p>	<p>28: positive energy structure</p>	<p>261: "Just the trampoline in his room..."</p>
<p>19. Did you adopt any of their strategies or methods that they used in their SDC school into your homeschooling?</p>	<p>29: use of mid-tech assistive device</p>	<p>273: "When they were working on their one 274: on one, they did incorporate a weighted vest. 250: "So, he has uh, noise cancelling... 252: earmuffs...yeah."</p>
<p>20. So, do you research other resources to enhance your curriculum? Or do you just improvise?</p>	<p>30: basic teacher equipment 31: use of high-tech assistive devices</p>	<p>128: "Pretty much, I have a few like workbooks that we go off of, that we might 129: pull from." 134: "He shocked me the other day, um 135: and then I didn't realize some of the sight words he already knew, just off of a game that 136: he was playing on his tablet. So, I did start trying to see if there's like different games, 137: we could like include into that, that would help."</p>
<p>21. As far as assigning roles between you and your husband, what does your work week look like with that?</p>	<p>32: spousal co-teaching 33: shares behavior techniques</p>	<p>288: "So, its majority, myself. It depends on my husband's schedule. There was a 289: time where he was taking over the Math portion of it. Then, so he would sit with him and 290: then work on the stuff we were doing for Math.</p>

		<p>My husband focuses on him also with</p> <p>291: his drums, so he's learning the drums, so his like music part of it, that's kind of my,</p> <p>292: husband's thing."</p> <p>303: "We're asking him, okay,</p> <p>304: "What's the title of the book and what's it called?"...working in that way, so that's the</p> <p>305: kind of stuff we communicate, so that way if he brings my husband a book...he knows."</p>
<p>22. So, when you teach Mike, is he in a setting all on his own and his siblings are in a different room?</p>	<p>34: flexible learning environments</p>	<p>325: "It depends, sometimes we'll work in his room, and they'll be in the living</p> <p>326: room, or they'll be in the room with us or we're all in the living room and Mike and I are</p> <p>327: doing his stuff sitting on the couch and the kids are on the floor, um...so it just kind of</p> <p>328: depends."</p>

<p>23. Does he get easily distracted by his siblings? Is he able to focus? Do you redirect him to focus on what he's doing?</p>	<p>35: positive techniques for off task behavior</p>	<p>342: "So sometimes, I will, my first is I will redirect and try</p> <p>343: to get his attention back, or maybe find something else for the other two to do, um in</p> <p>344: another room that won't be as distracting, or then again kind of like what you said, or we</p> <p>345: just take a break for a second, maybe we all just need to go outside and get it out and then</p> <p>346: we can revisit it later."</p>
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<p>24. Does he engage in conversations with his siblings?</p>	<p>36: engages in parallel play 37: non-conversation starter</p>	<p>358: "If prompted, he will engage in conversations, but not on his own. He 359: will, um... they play together, it's still more of a parallel play, mostly. But, he's often 360: not the one that initiated it."</p>
<p>25. Do you feel resentful towards your spouse that you do a lot of the homeschooling?</p>	<p>38: accepts complete responsibility of homeschool</p>	<p>353: "It is, um but no. I would say, I don't." 355: "Um, yeah no I don't."</p>
<p>26. So, he knows the skills/lessons you are going to teach?</p>	<p>39: evidence of spousal teamwork/support</p>	<p>308: "Yeah, during his last, you know, meltdown, this is what I did, and he lets me 309: know and I'm like, "Okay cool, I'll try that the next time." So that's kind of what we do."</p>

### **Appendix D: Permission Form**

Participant was asked:

This interview is conducted on behalf of Biola University for the Action Research course 594.

Do you consent?

Participant gave verbal consent:

Yes, I do.

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**\*Note\* All information remained confidential and was recorded on Wednesday, the 10<sup>th</sup> day of March 2023.**