

It Shall Not Return to Me Void: Teaching Religious Content to Individuals with  
Cognitive Disability

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## DEDICATION

This is dedicated to my family who love me whether I fail or succeed. Especially to my husband Daniel Iguchi and my parents Edward and Barbara Holland who have spent many years filling my toolbox.

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I am particularly grateful to the participants in my research. You inspire me by your love for children and your faithful response to God’s call to serve them. Matthew 19:14: “But Jesus said, Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me: for of such is the kingdom of heaven.” Your reward in heaven will be great for your investment in these precious children.

A world of debt is owed to my parents, Edward and Barbara Holland, for being my partners in education. You invested a lot of time and money—I hope it’s worth it!

Finally, I would like to express my love and thanks to my husband Daniel Iguchi. When you asked for my hand in marriage, my Dad made you promise that I would finish my dissertation. Four years and two wonderful babies later, here we are! Despite all my threats to quit, you never pushed me too hard, always giving just the right amount of encouragement. From now on you may call me Dr. Iguchi.

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## ABSTRACT

### IT SHALL NOT RETURN TO ME VOID: TEACHING RELIGIOUS MATERIAL TO INDIVIDUALS WITH COGNITIVE DISABILITY

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This research is an exploratory qualitative investigation into the challenges of teaching religious material to individuals with cognitive disabilities. The study setting was a single large evangelical Christian church known for excellence in ministry to individuals with disabilities and their families. The following issues were explored: (a) classroom management and teaching strategies utilized in Sunday school classes for students with disabilities, (b) the ways that Sunday school teachers evaluate the effectiveness of their teaching and assess student comprehension of material, and (c) the influence of religious beliefs regarding disability on the approach to teaching and expectations for student learning. Data were collected in the form of interviews with church staff workers and volunteer Sunday school teachers and observations of Sunday school classes. Findings show that teachers utilized many of the same instructional strategies and classroom management techniques to present Biblical material as teachers of traditional academic content. Teachers were resourceful in making adaptations to address the unique needs of

their students. Based on the limited cognitive abilities of their students, teachers reported few techniques to evaluate the effectiveness of their teaching and limited methods to evaluate student understanding. Regarding beliefs of the participants about disability and the influence of these beliefs on teaching religious material, teachers reported doing their best to offer the message of the gospel to students but believed that it was God's work to enable students to understand and to bring individuals to a point of conversion. Teachers persisted in teaching Biblical concepts to children regardless of the limited ability to determine what portion of the material children understand. Findings are examined in relationship to theories of learning and recommendations are made for applying this research to other church communities.

## 1. Introduction

Does teaching religious material differ from traditional academic content? What challenges do Sunday school teachers face when presenting religious concepts to children and young adults with cognitive disabilities? What do teachers and staff members believe regarding their students' abilities to understand religious concepts? How do those beliefs influence the approach Sunday school teachers take to presenting their lessons and the responsibility they feel for students comprehending and applying the material? I asked myself these types of questions while volunteering for a Sunday school program designed to meet the needs of children with cognitive and physical disabilities. This study examines the experiences of paid church staff members and volunteer Sunday school teachers in a large disability ministry in an evangelical church. The purpose is to gain an understanding of the unique challenges of offering religious instruction to people with cognitive disability.

This introductory chapter describes the purpose, goals, and context of the study; establishes the conceptual framework; and states the specific research questions that guided the research.

From a personal perspective, my goal is to help church communities understand and meet the needs of individuals with disabilities. By examining how one church approaches the task of including individuals with disabilities, I hope to apply my learning

to other religious congregations, particularly congregations that have not yet addressed the needs of this population. I believe this project helped me to develop a well informed position regarding best practices for addressing the spiritual needs of the disability community. Thus, I have established a reasonable foundation for suggesting improvements to the research site and offering help to other church congregations.

Throughout its history, the Christian church responded to individuals with disabilities both positively and negatively. At times, the church excluded people with disabilities from fellowship and blamed their disability on personal or family sin. At other times, the church offered care and compassion when other sources of help could not be found (Covey, 2005). Recently, there is a movement in many Christian churches to become more inclusive to individuals with disabilities and their families. To accomplish this, churches provide both structural accommodations to church buildings and make adaptations in church services and related programs to incorporate those with cognitive and physical disability.

Previous research explored the positive benefits of faith for individuals with disabilities and their families and the efforts churches have made to include individuals with disability; however, little research has been conducted on church efforts to adapt religious instruction which—along with worship, fellowship, spiritual growth and evangelism—is one of the primary functions of the church. Full inclusion should allow individuals with disabilities to participate in every facet of a religious community. Therefore, what accommodations are made to adapt religious education programs to meet the needs of individuals with disabilities? The goal of this project is to explore Sunday

school teachers' and church staff's perspectives on the practical challenges to adapting religious instruction to the learning needs of individuals with cognitive disabilities and to examine how religious beliefs make these challenges unique from the typical challenges reported by special education teachers in general academic settings. I approached a specific congregation known for their extensive programming for individuals and families effected by disability and asked for permission to allow this research to take place. The director of the disability ministry granted permission to interview Sunday school teachers and church staff members.

Teaching religious curriculum shares many of the challenges of teaching other types of abstract content to students with cognitive disability. Some of these challenges involve classroom management, adaptation of curriculum, diverse learning needs, and creativity in teaching modality. Given the recent push in holding special educators responsible for content instruction, much research has been conducted recently on best practices for teaching content material (e.g., Maccini & Gagnon, 2000; Mastropieri & Scruggs, 1997; Sikorski & Niemiec, 1996). However, there are several attributes to teaching in church settings that make teaching religious material distinct from other types of content material. First, Sunday school teachers are generally volunteers who spend no more than two hours per week in the classroom with their students. Many of these teachers may lack a background in education or access to training in specific pedagogical strategies. Second, the goal of religious instruction in evangelical churches extends beyond mere comprehension of material or concepts to promote what evangelicals would refer to as an individual's *relationship with God*. For example, during a pilot interview,

one participant stated that her primary goal is to “deepen their understanding of who God is and what it means to have a relationship with Him.” Third, the responsibility for the students’ comprehension of material may be seen as a function of both the teacher’s efforts to clearly present the material and God’s divine intervention in the individual’s ability to comprehend and apply the lesson. As one participant put it:

You really have to rely on just the goodness of God that whatever information you are putting out there in the way of teaching the stories of the Bible or the...good news of what God is,...you are relying on God to really impress that upon their minds and their hearts.

This research explores how teachers in this congregation balance the responsibility of good teaching with their faith that ultimately God imparts truth to an individual through intervening on the part of the teacher and in the heart of the student. In other words, how are the typical challenges of teaching students with special needs mediated by spiritual beliefs?

### Conceptual Framework

I conducted a small pilot study to begin an initial exploration of the challenges of religious education for students with cognitive disabilities to more clearly define the research questions for the project and to provide a basis for the conceptual framework. I conducted two pilot interviews with members of the Open Gate Ministry staff. Both participants are women, full time staff members of the church with responsibilities for a variety of programming for the Open Gate Ministry. The participants were selected for their primary responsibility of selecting and implementing curriculum for the Sunday

school program. Between the two, they are responsible for programming for both the children's program and the young adult/adult program. The first participant, Judith, is the director of the Open Gate Ministry. She oversees all of the Open Gate Ministry programs and works with staff and volunteer development. The second participant, Carla, is responsible for the ministry to young adults and adults (ages 16 years and over). She serves as the primary teacher for the Sunday school program for this age group during the Saturday evening service and two of the three Sunday morning services. Interview questions included items about the participant's responsibilities in the Open Gate Ministry, the challenges of providing religious education for students with cognitive disabilities, and the key goals of the Open Gate Ministry in general and the Sunday School program in particular (See Appendix A).

These interviews provided groundwork for the conceptual framework which describes the philosophy and motivation behind Open Gate's ministry to individuals with disabilities (see Figure 1).

First, the Bible teaches that the church, also referred to as the *body of Christ*, is made up of many parts and that all parts have a special role to play in the body. This teaching motivates the church to promote inclusion of individuals with disabilities. Without recognition that all parts of the body are important and necessary to the effective functioning of the body, the body is unable to function successfully. In the book of I Corinthians, chapter 12, the writer Paul speaks about each member of the church having a special part in the community. He instructs the church that no one part is more or less important than another. Carla explains this during her interview:

...if you are a Christian and you understand the concept of the Church being the body of Christ, then as Paul writes, the body cannot function without all of its parts. And so we [the disability ministry] consider ourselves to be a necessary part of the church body.

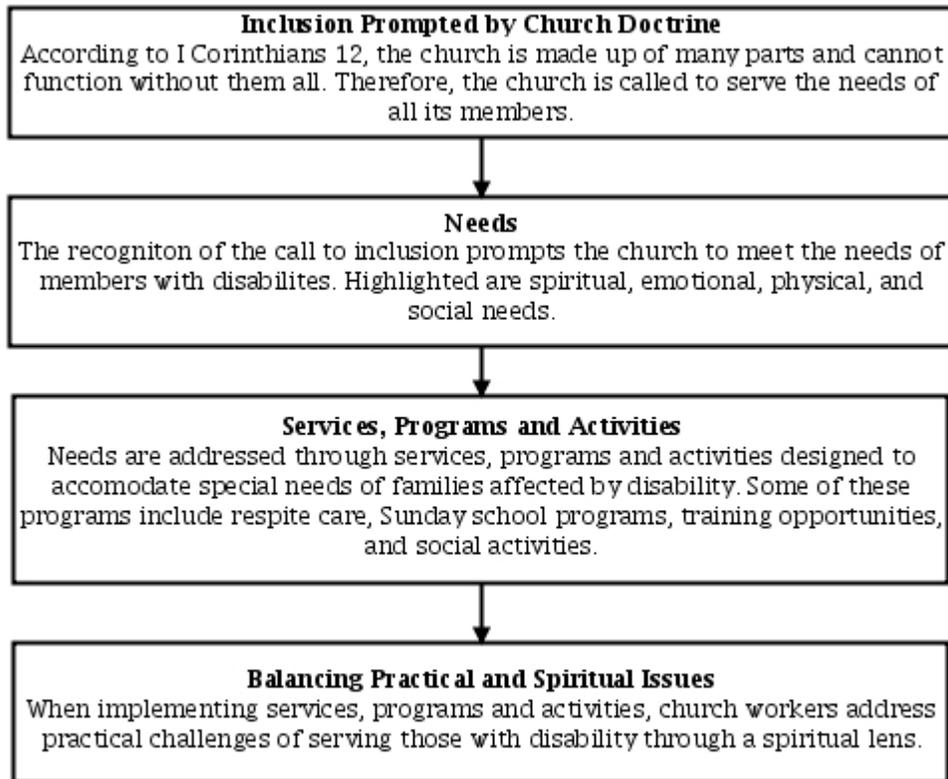


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework. Biblical doctrine prompts the church to meet the needs of individuals with disabilities through services, programs and activities while balancing practical and spiritual issues.

Given this Biblical call to make the church family inclusive to all individuals, including those with disabilities, the church proceeds to identify the needs of individuals with disability and their family members. During pilot interviews, participants highlighted efforts to meet spiritual, emotional, physical, and social needs. To respond to these needs, the church instituted a variety of programs for individuals with disabilities,

or made adaptations to existing programs. Obviously, the church site selected for this study possesses the resources and passion to provide a wide spectrum of services and support to families affected by disability. That said, this church is located in an affluent suburban environment, where the local school system and county offer similar services. The heart of this project then is to determine how a faith becomes intertwined with service to families with disabilities. In addition to the practical challenges of serving the disabilities community, how does faith influence this process, specifically in the area of providing religious education? This leads to the last element of the conceptual framework, the addition of faith into the responsibility of teaching.

The last element of the conceptual framework and the most significant element for this study is the balance between practical and spiritual issues. When asked about the challenges of providing religious education to students with disabilities, the pilot study participants described practical challenges that could be cited by any special education teacher in an academic setting. For the younger children, these challenges included adapting curriculum to the needs of diverse learners, thinking of creative teaching ideas, managing the classroom, and lacking specific feedback from students to indicate their understanding of the material. For older students, teachers are challenged by arranging transportation so that individuals would have the opportunity to attend Sunday services and other events and differentiating instruction to meet the needs of each member of the class. However, the challenges are slightly different from teaching academic material because of the spiritual aspects of the program. The respondents emphasized beliefs about disability, specifically how God uses the efforts of the staff and volunteers to meet

the needs of the individuals in the ministry. For example, when asked whether she believed that the young adults and adults were able to grasp the Biblical concepts taught in the Sunday school program, the participant remarked:

For the rest that are certainly more profound[ly] affected by their disability who do not have the ability to articulate their faith, I trust God to really implant in their hearts His true love and I see in the eyes of those that cannot speak and see the smile of those who cannot say a word the joy that they have when they come into the classroom and I just see that they are at peace and so I [am] trusting God for the rest.

Many times during the interviews, the respondents demonstrated the belief that teachers could offer the message to the best of their ability, but it is God's responsibility to enable the student to understand. One of the staff members described the frustration that some Sunday school teachers feel when they don't see a clear response in their students: "I think that another thing that the teachers struggle with is...salvation and that it's not their job to save, it's their job to plant a seed and that God will do the rest."

I asked how teachers should approach instruction when it is difficult to determine whether the students have the cognitive ability to grasp the concepts. The participant responded:

Well I think you teach that child the best you can and...as any good instructor or teacher does you try different modalities, and try to get to where they are cognitively and teach the language and really have to have to be the Holy Spirit that you are trusting that if you're in God's will and you pray to the lesson that

God will give you that creativity or that wisdom to teach that lesson to those students.

The idea that teachers share responsibility with God to impart truth through their instruction paints a different picture of teacher effectiveness than would normally be described in teaching other content areas. The respondents in the pilot study were church staff members. This research widens the participant pool to determine if Sunday school teachers feel the same sense of responsibility for teaching the lesson and then trusting God for the outcome. Teachers were questioned regarding how their beliefs affect the way that they prepare for lessons and evaluate the effectiveness of the lesson after it has been presented. In addition, teachers were asked whether they expect that the students will ever cognitively grasp the Christian teaching of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.

#### Primary Research Questions

The primary research question for this project is: What are the experiences and beliefs of volunteer Sunday school teachers and paid church staff regarding religious instruction for people with a cognitive disability in a large evangelical disability ministry? To elaborate on the main research question, the following sub-questions were developed:

- What classroom management techniques and instructional strategies are being implemented by these Sunday school teachers and do these practices differ from the teaching of traditional academic material?
- How do Sunday school teachers evaluate the effectiveness of their teaching and assess student comprehension of lesson material?

- What are Open Gate Ministry staffs' and Sunday school teachers' religious beliefs regarding disability and how does this influence their approach to or expectations regarding religious education?

These research questions guided the methods of data collection of this project: semi-structured interviews with church staff and Sunday school teachers and observations of Sunday school classrooms. The next chapter addresses the literature on the benefits of spirituality for individuals with disabilities and inclusion of individuals with disabilities in faith communities to set the groundwork for the significance and necessity of this study. This is followed by chapters on the methods, the findings, and finally the conclusions of the study.

## 2. Related Literature

This chapter presents an examination of the previous research on inclusion of individuals with disabilities in faith communities in order to create context and to justify the need for the present study. Research on disabilities and the church approaches the topic from two key directions: the significance of spirituality for individuals with disabilities and their families and the church's efforts to include those with disabilities.

### The Benefits of Spirituality for Individuals with Disabilities

Previous research finds many positive benefits of spirituality or religious beliefs for individuals with disabilities and their families. Spiritual or religious beliefs offer a means for coping with disability and a way of creating meaning of the experience of disability (Tarakeshwar & Pargament, 2001; Treloar, 2002), instill a sense of belonging to a community (Minton & Dodder, 2003), provide a means of broadening one's self-definition and increasing self-esteem (Vogel, Polloway, & Smith, 2006), allow a place for religious expression (Turner, Hatton, Shah, Stransfield, & Rahim, 2004), and increase quality of life (Poston & Turnbull, 2004).

To explore how spiritual beliefs help individuals make meaning of disability, Treloar (2002) interviewed evangelical Christians with disabilities and family members of individuals with disabilities. Results indicated that the participants' personal relationship with Jesus Christ promoted positive adaptation to disability, even more so

than the church's support. Treloar (2002) observed a pattern of spiritual growth due to the experience of disability: "trial or difficulty contributed to spiritual challenge, the breaking of self, reliance on God, and strengthened faith in God." The participants chose to live with thankfulness and joy despite their hardships and reported that their spiritual beliefs provided stability, created meaning for disability, and offered a means of coping. Overall, Treloar found support for the coping benefits of spirituality in the lives of people with disability and their families.

Minton and Dodder (2003) examined the church experiences of adults living in group-homes. They interviewed the adults themselves, group-home managers, and the pastors and Sunday school teachers of the churches where some of the adults attended. They asked the adults with disabilities about their experiences with church—whether they go to church and what they like and dislike about their church. The researchers questioned group-home managers, pastors, and Sunday school teachers about challenges faced by people with disabilities and attitudes of the people in their congregation toward people with disability. Nearly all of the group home residents expressed the importance of going to church. They reported that church was a place where they felt welcomed, were recognized, and were able to visit with others. They also reported enjoying the music and singing. Of the four churches represented in the study, all offered separate Sunday school classes for people with developmental disabilities, but only one had religious educational material adapted to the cognitive level of the participants. The house managers reported that the church only minimally accepted the individuals with disabilities. They wanted members of the church visit the residents or call more

frequently. Based on observations at church, the researcher cited several incidents where church members appeared to be uncomfortable by behaviors of the individuals with disabilities. Some challenges to church attendance were lack of adherence of social norms (getting up or talking during the worship service) and disruptions during instruction time in Sunday school classes.

Vogel, Polloway and Smith (2006) reviewed literature on religious participation in faith communities for people with disabilities. They argue that participating in a faith community provides a way for a person with a disability to broaden their self-definition. Often, these individuals define themselves solely by their disability, which may have negative implications for self-esteem. In addition, participation in faith communities provides an opportunity to foster friendship and a sense of belonging. In a society that values productivity and competition—values that often exclude those with disabilities—church settings focus more on one's inherent value in the eyes' of God and thus create a shelter from a competitive society.

Turner, Hatton, Shah, Stansfield and Rahim (2004) asked people with intellectual disabilities in the United Kingdom about the meaning of religion for them, the role of religion in their lives, and the attitudes of others toward religious expression. They studied individuals from various religious faiths, including Christian denominations, Islam, and Hindu dharma. They found that participants expressed strong religious identification, were able to state their specific religious affiliation, and were often able to describe elements of their faith. The participants reported prayer as the most common type of religious expression. Other types of religious expression included watching

religious television programming, helping others as a religious obligation, and participating in religious festivals. However, many reported that their religious expression was hindered by services or faith agencies because of issues with accessibility and transportation or from feelings of not having a valued role in the congregation.

Religious participation can provide a framework for coping with the often demanding experience of having a disability or caring for a disabled individual, but research demonstrates that the church does not have a perfect record of serving families with disability. In a group of families effected by autism, Tarakeshwar and Pargament (2001) found both positive and negative dimensions to religious coping. Those that reported positive religious coping demonstrated more stress-related growth, increased closeness with God, and more spiritual growth. Those that reported negative religious coping demonstrated more depressive affect and lower religious outcome. Forty percent of participants reported looking to clergy and church members for support. But 30% felt abandoned by their church or were not satisfied with the clergy.

Curious about the quality of life for families affected by disability, Poston and Turnbull (2004) interviewed families and found that spirituality was an important element of quality of life. Faith strengthened the participants and helped them make sense of disability. They relied on God to give them strength, patience, inner peace and direction in their lives. About an equal number of respondents stated that their child was fully accepted by their church community as reported that they faced difficulties when they wanted to attend church. The authors concluded that families are looking for three

things from their church community: (a) acceptance of their child, (b) spiritual and emotional support, and (c) support for their child during services.

#### Inclusion of Individuals with Disabilities in Faith Communities

Given the many benefits of spirituality for individuals with disabilities, does the church create a welcome and inclusive environment for this population? Research shows that while many churches recognize the special needs of these individuals, they lag behind on taking steps to accommodate this population. The U.S. Congregational Life survey revealed that only ten percent of congregations provided some sort of respite care, home care, or skills training to people with disabilities within their congregation or living in their community (Woolever & Bruce, 2002). Forty-four percent of clergy reported that religious education was not available for people with disabilities in their congregations (Riordan & Vasa, 1991). Though 65% of people without disability go to church services at least once a month, only 47% of people with disabilities attend at least monthly according to the 2000 NOD/Harris Survey (U.S. Newswire, 2001).

In a survey of 91 Christian, Jewish, and Muslim congregations, most reported being in only the early stages of increasing accessibility to people with disabilities (LaRocque & Eigenbrood, 2005). Though 71% were aware of barriers to the participation of adults and children with disabilities, 69% of the congregations had not yet started or were only getting started at initiating accessibility, and only 53% were well on their way to increasing participation of people with disabilities.

The authors of the aforementioned studies provide a number of suggestions for churches seeking to be more inclusive to individuals with disabilities. The participants in

Treloar's (2002) study recommended that churches provide more teaching on theological understandings of disability and increase religious support that would allow for more participation in church. One interview participant commented on the difficulty of asking for help over a prolonged period of time. The longer her family dealt with the challenges of having a child with a disability, the more difficult it was to ask for respite care so that the family could have time to participate in normal activities.

Minton and Dodder (2003) felt that more specific training should be offered to church workers who, through lack of knowledge, tend to act as babysitters rather than educators or mentors. With more training, church workers could facilitate greater participation of those with disabilities in the church community.

Vogel, Palloway, and Smith (2001) cited several barriers to inclusion in faith communities. Among them were attitudinal barriers, liturgical barriers, theological barriers, and lack of support. They noted that many families fear ostracism or the possibility of creating awkwardness in the church, thus they participate in church without their disabled child or stop participating altogether. Many churches fear lacking the experience or knowledge necessary to work with individuals with disability, apprehensive of inflicting harm on the individual or not knowing what to say or do. In addition to these attitudinal barriers, families may feel unwelcome by vague interpretations of the appropriateness of individuals with cognitive disability participating in various religious rituals or observations. Some church congregations hinder participation by fostering the beliefs that disability is somehow the fault of the family or a

sign that the individual lacks faith in God. Finally, issues with transportation, scheduling conflicts, and lack of support personnel create barriers to participation.

In a case study of a church that had been successful at including children with disabilities, Haythorn (2003) found that the church emphasized the importance of offering hospitality to all who want to participate in church activities. The church leaders created a hospitable environment by doing whatever necessary to include families affected by disability by evaluating needs on an individual level. Haythorn recommends that educators and clergy simply ask people with disabilities what might be helpful to them and what they find meaningful.

These recommendations are helpful for churches that want to be inclusive in a general sense, but missing from previous literature are studies on or recommendations regarding inclusion in religious education programs in particular.

The exception to this gap in knowledge is one article by Collins, Epstein, Reiss, and Lowe (2001). They summarize a conference presentation on including children with disabilities in religious education. The authors provide guidelines for increasing inclusion of children with disabilities in religious education programs. They recommend (a) making lessons applicable to everyday life, (b) using a hands-on approach to teaching, (c) teaching the same material in multiple ways, (d) using cooperative learning activities, and (e) using prompts to demonstrate expectations for the disabled child. In order to include children with mild mental retardation, the authors recommend focusing on the child's abilities and not singling out the child for having a disability. For students with profound disabilities, the authors advise that these students may not be able to understand

the content of the lessons, but are able to benefit from the love in the classroom. They also advise preparing students without disabilities by emphasizing that all individuals have abilities, that inclusion offers a way for us to share love with others, and by modeling proper behavior and encouraging friendships. Though these recommendations are a good start, there appears to be no evidence on whether or not these strategies are being used by Sunday school teachers who serve individuals with cognitive disabilities.

### Conclusion

Despite barriers to religious involvement for individuals with disabilities, spirituality or religious beliefs have been demonstrated to be beneficial to this population. Thus, it is important for churches to understand how to make their congregations fully inclusive to this population. Part of this process is including individuals with special learning needs in religious education. Indeed, churches want to be inclusive, yet lack the knowledge for how to proceed with this goal. In addition to a lack of knowledge on religious instruction for individuals with disabilities, is the lack of literature that focuses on children. The studies included here rely on self reports of adults regarding the significance of religious expression. Children are typically unable to express how inclusion in a church congregation is personally beneficial. By examining a church that places special emphasis on providing appropriate Sunday school accommodations for children, young adults, and adults with disabilities, this study begins to fill in the gap in the literature on inclusion and accommodation in the religious education aspect of a church community.

### 3. Research Methods

The purpose of this study is to examine the perceptions, beliefs and experiences of Sunday school teachers and church staff on conveying religious curriculum to children with cognitive disabilities. This chapter includes a rationale for the qualitative design of the study; provides a description of the setting, the data collection methods (including participant selection), and the data analysis methods; and reviews issues of validity.

#### Research Design

The methodology for this project is a single-site qualitative design with thematic analysis, using data drawn from face-to-face interviews and classroom observations. This methodology was chosen because of the nature of the research questions. I am interested in the beliefs and perceptions of the Sunday school teachers and church staff. I believe this data will be best understood through semi-structured interviews and observations, particularly as there is a paucity of previous research on this topic.

#### Setting

The church initiated the Open Gate Ministry to respond to the needs of families in the congregation with children with disabilities and has been serving families for over ten years. I assume that this period of time should be sufficient for working through the challenges of establishing a disability-focused ministry. I further assume that the ministry has moved from a phase of establishing a ministry to having a more formal

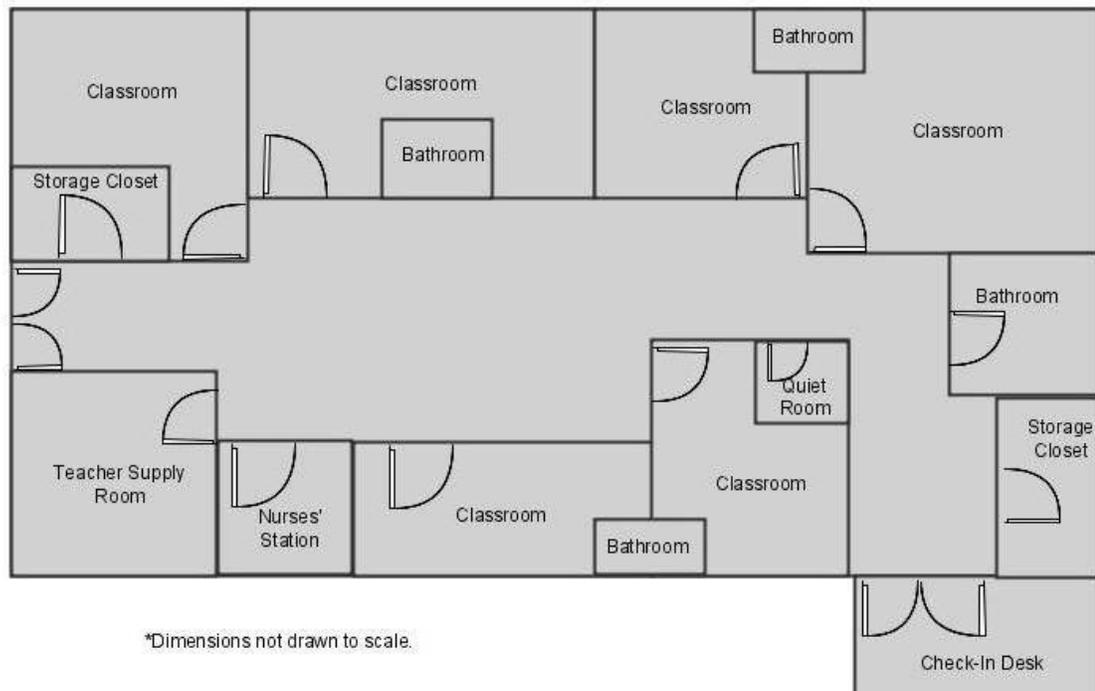
organization, structure, and routine. The ministry serves over 500 families affected by disability. Therefore, the staff, volunteers, and families provide an adequate pool of individuals to participate in the research. The ministry is known nationally as an innovator in disability ministry. They hold an annual conference where church representatives from across the county learn how to minister in their own congregations to the disability community. Therefore, this church represents a model that other churches would follow when approaching the challenge of adapting religious instruction to individuals with disabilities. Finally, the ministry is part of a non-denominational Christian 'mega-church' in the Washington metropolitan area, giving the ministry both financial and human resources to offer programs and services to the families effected by disability.

The ministry offers a wide variety of programs for children and adults with disabilities and support programs for their families. For example, children who would experience difficulty in a typical Sunday school classroom have the option of attending a Sunday school program designed to meet the needs of children with cognitive and/or physical disabilities. The church set aside a specially designed wing for these Sunday school classes (See Figure 2). For children with disabilities who opt to participate in the typical Sunday school program, the Open Gate Ministry offers extra support such as an individual aide. The church provides respite care four times a month to give parents a break from the demands of caring for a special needs child. In addition, families can participate in a summer camp program, an annual disabilities conference, training seminars open to any church member, parent support groups, and social activities for

typically developing siblings of children with disabilities. Individuals over the age of sixteen can participate in a Sunday school program, participate in social activities, and worship with peers during one of the worship services. There is also an adapted adult vacation Bible school program during the summer and Tuesday evening classes. In 2006, the church sponsored their first beach trip for young adults and adults with disabilities. The ministry is part of a non-denominational Christian 'mega-church' in the Washington metropolitan area, giving the ministry both financial and human resources to offer a wide range of programs and services to the families affected by disability. Because of their extensive resources, the Open Gate Ministry is not likely to be representative of a typical American church, but rather represents an extreme case where the church has the resources to carry out best practices for addressing the needs of the disability community.

In addition to these reasons for choosing this research site, I benefit from easy access to the research site, as I have been a volunteer for the ministry for the past three years. My relationship with the staff that oversees the disability ministry established a sense of trust that I would treat the staff, volunteers, children and family members with respect and make all efforts to not harm any individuals associated with the ministry. As a volunteer for the disability ministry, and as someone who attends the church, I possess greater insight into the way that programs function and the doctrinal background that participants are likely to draw from for establishing their beliefs about disability. Although this has obvious advantages, I may be biased in that I have decided to be a

member of this congregation because I agree with their views and interpretation of the Bible.



**Figure 2.** Floor Plan of the Open Gate Ministry Wing. This section of the church was specially designed to meet the needs of children with disabilities. Seven classrooms, two storage areas, a supply room, a nurse’s station, and a quiet room open onto a central space decorated with multi-sensory murals.

This research focuses on the Sunday school program for children, young adults and adults. The children’s Sunday school program is named Ranger Kids. Sunday school classes meet during a Saturday evening service, three Sunday morning services and a Sunday evening service—a total of 14 to 15 Sunday school classes per weekend. Each service lasts approximately one hour and fifteen minutes. There are 110 children enrolled in the children’s Sunday school program. On a busy weekend, approximately 80

children will be in attendance. There is generally a one-to-one ratio of children to staff in the classroom, with one lead teacher and several volunteer aides. Teachers generally teach one class, but there are some exceptions of teachers that teach for multiple services or teachers that team-teach a class and switch off weekends.

The Open Gate Ministry serves children and adults with a range of disabilities. The most common disabilities are autism, Down's syndrome, cerebral palsy, mental retardation, and emotional disabilities. Oppositional defiant disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder, bipolar disorder, and mood disorders are less common, but still represented by participants in the program.

The young adult and adult Sunday school class meets Saturday evening and during the first and third service on Sunday mornings and they sit together in the main worship auditorium during the second worship service. This class is lead by a church staff member with help from volunteer aides. Approximately 70 individuals participate in the adult Sunday school program.

#### Data Collection

After receiving permission from the Human Subjects Review Board at George Mason University and permission from the church site, I conducted pilot interviews with two of the Open Gate Ministry staff members in August 2007 (as described in the conceptual framework). These interviews established the conceptual framework for the research and this data were also used to answer the broader research questions. The dissertation proposal was defended on December 12, 2007.

I conducted one-on-one interviews with seven Sunday school teachers and two additional members of the church staff between September 2008 and March 2009 for a total of 11 interviews included in the data analysis. To recruit participants, I approached Sunday school teachers between church services, explained the purpose of the research, and requested their participation in the study. I scheduled interviews with all individuals who were willing to participate. Having volunteered for the Open Gate Ministry for several years I was already familiar with some of the teachers and staff members, however because I had volunteered more frequently with the respite program than the Sunday school program, I did not have previous relationships with five of the seven teachers. The additional two church staff members also had responsibilities regarding or previous volunteer work in the respite program, so they already knew me and were eager to participate in interviews. Inclusion of anyone willing to share their experiences enabled me to interview teachers with a broad range of previous experience and differing teaching styles. Teaching experiences included no previous teaching experience, public school general education teaching, public school special education teaching, private school special education, and teaching Sunday school students without disabilities. All of the paid church staff members who work with the Sunday school program participated in the study.

I collected e-mail addresses from individuals willing to participate in interviews then designated meeting times either before or after church services (this was the most convenient for participants). We met in unused Sunday school classrooms. The interviews were audio taped. Before starting each interview, I reviewed the informed

consent documentation with the participants, collected a signed consent form and gave the participant a copy of the consent form to keep (See Appendix B). The consent forms were stored in a locked cabinet. The interviews were semi-structured and open ended, but generally followed the following list of questions.

1. Can you give me an idea of what happens during Sunday school from the time students are dropped off until pick up?
2. What do you think are the main goals of the Ranger Kids program, both practical and spiritual?
3. What are your personal goals?
4. What are your responsibilities? Have those changed since you started volunteering?
5. Do you have other teaching experience outside of the Sunday school program?  
How is Ranger Kids the same or different from other experiences?
6. What do you do to get ready for Sunday school?
7. Can you tell me about a time that a lesson went really well? Really poorly?
8. Are there certain strategies that you use to teach the material?
9. What do you do when it's just not working?
10. Other than through Bible lessons, are there other ways you teach the children in your classes?
11. What are your biggest challenges?
12. Do you think your students are getting what you are trying to teach?
13. How do you see students benefiting from the program?

14. Are you accomplishing what you set out to do in Sunday school?
15. What makes for a good Sunday school teacher in this environment?
16. How do you know whether or not the kids in your class understand what you are trying to teach?
17. What do you think the parents want out of the Sunday school program?
18. Do you get suggestions or feedback from parents?
19. Do you have enough support?
20. What advice would you give to other churches trying to minister to children with disabilities?

Interviews with the Open Gate Ministry staff members addressed the same topics as the questions used for the teachers, but I adapted these interviews to include questions regarding staff members' responsibilities, their means of offering support to teachers, and their experiences helping the teachers present material to students.

After completing interviews with the teachers and the staff members, I conducted a total of six classroom observations from November 2008 to March 2009. I arrived at the classroom several minutes before students were scheduled to arrive. Before starting the observation, I tried to put teachers at ease by thanking them for letting me observe and stressing that I was there to learn from how they interacted with the children, not to judge their teaching. I stressed that they were the experts and that I felt I had much to learn from watching them. I also tried to emphasize that I understood how much they cared for the children in their classroom. My goal was to empower the teachers to feel that they were giving me knowledge, rather than position myself as an expert trying to

judge their performance. I also introduced myself to the volunteer aides in the classroom, giving them a brief description of my research and my reasons for observing the lead teacher in the classroom.

During the observations, I sat in a chair in the corner of the class and took notes using a laptop computer. I was concerned that the computer would be a distraction to the children in the class and intimidating to the teachers, but I type much faster than I can take notes and found that the children were rarely interested in me or the computer. I focused my observations on how the teachers interacted with the students, instructional strategies used, classroom management strategies used, how teachers handled behavior problems, the amount of time spent on each of the classroom activities, and interactions between teachers and parents or teachers and staff members. The observations lasted the duration of the church service, about an hour and fifteen minutes each.

### Data Analysis

My data analysis process focused on a coding system of examining the interview and observational data. In my study, coding was used to fracture the data in order to rearrange it for the purpose of comparison between participants and across classroom observation sessions. I was looking for both consensus between teachers regarding their approaches to teaching and beliefs regarding disability as well as instances where the data differed as a result of different levels of background experience.

The first stage of data analysis was interview transcription. After conducting interviews and observations, I transcribed the interviews using Express Scribe software. I felt that the process of transcribing the interviews helped me relive the interview

experience and reflect more deeply on the content of each interview. Listening to each interview reinforced my belief that the teachers are deeply committed to the Sunday school program because of their love for the children and their sense that they are called by God to serve in that capacity. Even though they often expressed the feeling that lessons went poorly or that behavior challenges and cognitive impairment in the children made teaching difficult, teachers demonstrated a strong commitment to sharing Biblical concepts.

The second stage of data analysis was assigning codes to the raw data using NVivo data analysis software. The codes served the purpose of breaking the data out into areas of content that could be related back to the original research questions. To create an initial list of codes, I skimmed two interviews and created a list of potential codes in Microsoft Excel, then after some revision transferred these codes as Tree Nodes (or parent level codes) in NVivo. From this initial list, all of the interview data were coded, adding additional codes as necessary. After completing coding, I re-examined the codes, combining codes that had similar meaning and grouping codes in such a way that I could separate various aspects of what was happening in the research setting. As a result, the data were grouped into the following categories: background information, inclusion into the larger church community, classroom management issues, evaluation of student understanding, goals, parent issues, spirituality, student issues, staff issues, teacher issues, and teaching strategies.

The background information category is applied to data that gave information about the history of the ministry, descriptions of services offered, recruitment of Sunday school teachers, and general policies and procedures.

The inclusion into the larger church community category includes ways that the staff tries to educate other church staff regarding inclusion of individuals with special needs and their families into their area of ministry. It also includes ways that participants try to encourage children and young adults to participate in programs or worship services outside of those specifically designed for the disability population.

The classroom management issues category is applied to instances where teachers refer to strategies they use in the classroom to manage students and to observations of classroom management strategies. This category also contains information about class size and ratio of adults to children. In addition, this theme is applied to the role of volunteer helpers in the classroom and how the teachers managed the volunteer helpers.

The category of evaluation of student understanding includes data that reveal how teachers assess student comprehension of Sunday school lessons and the teacher and staff members' beliefs regard their students' ability to comprehend the material being taught.

The goals category was derived from teacher and staff member reports of the goals of the Sunday school program. This category includes personal goals, practical goals, social goals, spiritual goals, and teaching goals.

The parent issues category contains information regarding the perceptions of the challenges that parents face raising children with disabilities; interactions between

teachers, parents and staff members; feedback from parents; and perceptions of what the parents expect from the Sunday school program.

The spirituality category and related codes are applied to data that refers to issues of the Bible, the role of faith in God for teaching outcomes, and salvation of the students. Data in this group particularly shed light on the participants' religious beliefs regarding disability and how this influences their teaching practices or approach to teaching.

The student issues category covers student behavior and student characteristics. Student characteristics often refer to the specific disabilities being serviced in the Open Gate Ministry and how these characteristics influence teaching. This category also contains information on how student behaviors impact the classroom environment.

The staff issues category is applied to data specifically about the full time church staff. Subgroups of this theme include communication between staff members and teachers, placement of students in the classrooms, staff challenges, staff responsibilities, and the teachers' meetings run by the staff members.

The teacher issues category is applied to data that pertains specifically to the Sunday school teachers. Topics in this category include: reasons for working with the ministry, responsibilities, previous teaching experience, length of time volunteering for the ministry, beliefs regarding what makes a good teacher, training, support, challenges faced by the teachers, and what the teachers have learned as a result of working with their students.

The teaching strategies category is applied to data that revealed how teachers taught lessons. Codes in this category include classroom activities, curriculum issues,

evaluation of lessons, instructional strategies, and lesson preparation. This data is taken from the interview material, rather than the observational sessions and so it represents the teachers' beliefs and perceptions regarding teaching.

After coding the interviews, it was apparent that creating a separate set of codes would be beneficial for analyzing the observational data. The observation notes took the form of short paragraphs, each time-stamped. I coded these paragraphs individually, applying relevant codes to the entire paragraph. Eight categories emerged from the observational codes: classroom activities, classroom management, instructional strategies, volunteers, child behaviors, environmental observations, verbal interactions, and parent interactions. Separating the observational data from the interview data allowed for examination of how the teacher interviews aligned with actual teacher behavior in the classroom.

After coding all of the data, I printed the material by codes and created data notebooks; one notebook for interview data and one notebook for observational data. After grouping the data in this way, I wrote memos to summarize the content of each of the interview coding categories and each of the observational coding categories. In doing so, I identified themes that characterized what the teachers were saying in each of these areas. Examples of themes include teachers' perceptions regarding what contributed to class going well or poorly, teachers' criteria for evaluating student comprehension, and beliefs regarding persisting in the ministry despite a lack of short-term evidence of student understanding. These memos served as the basis for writing the findings chapters. As I was writing, I revisited the research questions frequently and edited the

research questions to accurately capture the elements of the research that were most significant to the participants and most represented by the data. This helped the research questions to be accurately aligned with the findings.

In addition to the interview and observational data, I studied the published curriculum materials for the Sunday school program. This was examined to determine what assistance or suggestions were given to the teachers through the curriculum for making adaptations for children with special learning or behavioral needs.

### Validity

This discussion on validity is based on Maxwell's (1992) five categories of validity in qualitative research: descriptive validity, interpretive validity, theoretical validity, generalizability, and evaluative validity. Descriptive validity refers to the factual validity of the data. To insure descriptive validity of the interview data, interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. During observations, I aimed to make my observational notes low-inference, being as specific as possible about the events taking place in the classroom. During the observations I tried to make my notes non-evaluative, rather focusing on the activities taking place in the classroom.

Interpretative validity refers to the inference the researcher makes about the meaning of the data to the participants in the study. Does the researcher accurately understand what the participant meant by what they said or did? To increase interpretative validity, I received participant feedback (also referred to as a member check) from one of the Sunday school teacher participants after completing a first draft of my findings. This meeting helped me to validate that my interpretations of teachers'

beliefs and experiences were accurate and also provided me with new ways of looking at the findings. In particular, the participant felt that the curriculum used by the Sunday school program has a significant impact on the ways that the teachers approach instruction.

Comparing the interview data to the observational data of each informant also strengthens interpretative validity. I have been able to determine that the teachers are actually approaching religious education in the way they reported during the interviews. I found that teachers were honest in their interviews regarding the challenges they face in the classroom, since I was able to observe the specific behaviors that teachers reported make it difficult to teach lesson material.

Theoretical validity is the accuracy of the constructs or concepts derived from the data and the accuracy of the relationships between these constructs and concepts. In the final chapter, I compare constructs and concepts identified in this research with previous research to examine whether teachers are implementing the types of strategies suggested for teaching children with disabilities.

Maxwell (1992) defines generalizability as “the extent to which one can extend the account of a particular situation or population to other persons, times, or settings than those directly studied” (p. 293). This study includes a sufficient number of Sunday school teachers and church staff to ensure internal generalizability of the findings. Internal generalizability can be strengthened in this study by examining similarities and differences in individual participants’ interview responses to determine if there is consensus among the participants regarding their beliefs about teaching religious

curriculum, the ability of students to comprehend and religious beliefs regarding disability. By and large, there was a great deal of consensus between the participants. In reporting the findings, I make note where respondents differed in their perspectives. The special characteristics of the church and the Open Gate Ministry, particularly the size and scope of the disabilities ministry, limited external generalizability, as is the case in any qualitative study. This is further addressed in the following section.

Evaluative validity is the degree to which a researcher appropriately evaluates the correctness or justness of the phenomena recorded. In this case of this study, as a member of the church under investigation, my bias leans toward evaluating the beliefs of the Sunday school teachers and staff as correct as I myself am a member of this community. On the other hand, as a student of education, I may be more critical of the teaching practices and beliefs about learning than an observer with a different sort of background. Given that the evaluative validity could be compromised in either direction, I attempted to identify my beliefs about religious education for students with special needs before beginning the research so that I can separate my evaluations from the data.

#### Limitations

As with all qualitative data, this study is limited in its external generalizability in that I have chosen to focus on a single-site; a site that is known to be a model program for disabilities ministry. The scope of this study is also limited to religious education, and not other aspects of church life, such as worship and service. The primary focus of this study also excludes the other programs offered to families of children with disabilities in this church, such as respite care, support groups, and training. It is possible that the

families served by the Open Gate Ministry value these other programs more highly than the Sunday school program, or feel that other programs meet needs specific to their individual circumstances.

This study is also limited in that I am not objectively measuring the effectiveness of teaching in the Sunday school program or assessing student learning, merely reporting on the teachers' and staff members' perceptions. Teachers' beliefs about learning might not correctly reflect actual student learning. This is particularly true with this population because it is very difficult to conduct an accurate assessment of student comprehension.

In additions to these limitations, I have found it difficult to build on the knowledge presented in the literature review because of the special circumstances of this study and this setting. Previous literature examined how church congregations embrace or fail to include those with disabilities. The Open Gate Ministry has set aside space in the church for the special needs Sunday school; therefore I was not able to observe how the church as a whole interacts with individuals with disabilities. Though having a dedicated space for the Open Gate Ministry in the church is generally viewed as positive, children may also experience isolation from their typically developing peers. One of the church staff members described the Open Gate wing as a *safe place*; a space that creates a feeling of emotional safety for the parents of children served by the Sunday school program. According to the participant, families need to at times be pushed out of this safe place to meet the larger goal of mainstreaming children into the typical Sunday school program. By accommodating children with special needs in a safe place this

research is not able to examine how other churches could incorporate individuals with special needs into the larger church community.

#### 4. The Faces of Open Gate

Sunday school teachers were drawn to Open Gate Ministry for a variety of reasons. Some individuals were personally affected by disability or had a family member with a disability. Some wanted to apply their professional experience to service in the church setting. Others had no experience at all, but felt the call of God to minister to individuals with special needs. This chapter describes the participants that shared with me their experiences and perspectives regarding religious education for children and young adults with disabilities.

The next chapter describes what is actually happening in a special needs Sunday school classroom followed by a chapter on how religious education differs from teaching traditional subject matter. In the seventh and final chapter, I first summarize the research, then examine the theoretical foundations that teachers and staff draw from, draw conclusions regarding the practical implications of the findings, and offer recommendations for future research.

##### Description of the Participant Groups

I divide the participants into three groups: lead teachers, church staff, and volunteers. Lead teachers were unpaid (except for rare exceptions) and they were responsible for leading a Sunday school class on a weekly or sometimes bi-weekly basis at one of the four weekend church services. One of the lead teachers interviewed was a

floating, or substitute teacher; the rest of the teachers had the same group of students each week. One of the participants was both a lead teacher and a full time church staff member. Lead teachers participated in one-on-one interviews and classroom observations.

The lead teachers were responsible for supervising the students and the volunteer helpers in the class. They were provided with a Sunday school curriculum that is designed for typically developing students, but each teacher made modifications and adaptations to the material to meet the needs of the students in their class. Four of the teachers had outside teaching experience (Open Gate Ministry does not make this a requirement to teach in the Sunday school program). The ministry encourages committed volunteers who appear to have teaching potential to become lead teachers and they designed a mentoring program so that potential teachers could shadow experienced teachers.

I asked the teachers what characteristics make a good teacher in the special needs Sunday school environment. Patience and flexibility were cited as key requirements for an effective teacher. Responses also included the ability to adapt to many types of personalities and disorders, creativity, good communication with the children, classroom management skills, having unconditional love for the children, and being grounded spiritually.

The church staff members were paid to oversee the Sunday school program as well as a number of other programs offered by the church to families of children with disabilities. The church staff provided teachers with a training manual that described the

policies and procedures for the Sunday school program. Teachers also had the opportunity to participate in periodic training sessions on a variety of topics. These sessions were open to church members at large who are interested in learning about issues that pertain to disability. The staff members led quarterly teacher meetings where teachers could solicit advice about problems they were experiencing in their classroom and offer the staff suggestions for improving the program. The teacher meetings were also used for teachers and staff to collaborate on larger projects between classes. In addition to teacher meetings, the staff e-mailed the teachers a weekly synopsis of the content of the coming weekend's Sunday school lesson. Several teachers reported resolving classroom or planning problems with staff through e-mail.

One of the key responsibilities of the church staff was grouping students into classes and assigning teachers to groups of students. The staff considered factors such as age, behaviors, and cognitive ability to group students. They also considered feedback from the teachers. In addition to grouping similar students, the staff tried to vary ability levels to encourage lower ability students to learn from higher ability students. Room assignments change twice a year to allow for refinement in the classroom environment and to emulate the changes that students would experience in the typical Sunday school program.

The third group of individuals that I commonly refer to in the study is volunteers. The volunteers were not formal participants in the study—they did not participate in interviews—but they were frequently referred to by the lead teachers and the church staff as an important part of the ministry. Volunteers were church members who signed up to

help with the Sunday school program on either a one-time basis or semi-regular rotation. The volunteers assisted the teachers during the weekend church services by helping with classroom management tasks such as getting children to the table for story time. Volunteers may consistently work with the same class over time, but more often floated between classes based on the number of children in attendance on a given week. Some volunteers helped every week, but they mostly help on a monthly or even less frequent basis. The staff attempted to maintain a ratio of one child per teacher or volunteer. This was the case in the classrooms that I observed.

#### Lead Teachers

Colleen. Before this research, I met Colleen while volunteering for the respite care ministry at Open Gate. Colleen was working on an undergraduate Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA) program and she worked with some of the Open Gate Ministry families outside of Sunday school as an ABA therapist and as a babysitter. This position helped her to build deeper relationships with some of the children and their families. Colleen was a floating Sunday school teacher, covering the classrooms of absent teachers, so she was familiar with many of the children. Colleen had previously taught typically developing Sunday school students in another church and her decision to attend this church was based on the Open Gate Ministry. She told me that she has always worked with special needs children so serving in the Open Gate Ministry would be a good way to serve children with special needs and get more experience teaching. Colleen worked in both the Sunday school and the respite care program for Open Gate Ministry since 2003.

Colleen taught in a middle school autistic program “a few years back, [but] didn’t particularly care for it because it was too stressful.” She told me that she preferred teaching in the Open Gate Ministry to public school because the program was more relaxed.

Harmony. Harmony had a warm and bubbly disposition and appeared to be a favorite with the children. She eagerly offered children hugs and enthusiastic verbal praise. She was completing an undergraduate degree in special education. She worked in a public school system as a student aide for children with disabilities, starting in an autism class, and then worked as a one-on-one aide for a child with a physical disability in a general education class. In addition to the Sunday school program, Harmony volunteered for the respite care program and summer camp.

Lawson. Lawson had been volunteering for the Open Gate Ministry for over ten years, initially volunteering every other week. He taught two classes, one on Saturday night and one on Sunday morning. He described his call to the Ministry as a feeling that “this is where I’m supposed to be...and I have not felt the Lord lifting this burden from me as of yet.” The sense of being called by God to the ministry was a sentiment felt by a number of the teachers.

Lawson was in the minority as a male volunteer in the program and he brought a different perspective from the other teachers. In his regular profession, Lawson worked for a utility company and he carried over aspects of that job in his constant vigilance for the safety of the children. Lawson had no previous teaching experience, but his family

had been affected by disability; his adult son was born with mild cerebral palsy.

According to Lawson:

I know to a degree what these families go through...I know the shock of dealing with something like that. Now what I can't relate to and I'm not trying to relate to the family that has a severely mentally disabled child and raising that child in today's society. There's just no way I can relate to everything on that. I do know something about how they feel and my goal is to take a little bit of the edge of the tensions of life off of them and so reach out to their kids, love their kids for who they are.

Lawson and his wife had built relationships with some of the families outside of the church setting by providing respite care.

Faith. Faith was soft spoken and warm. She taught first grade in the local public school system and had previously taught kindergarten. Faith was fairly new to the Open Gate Ministry, but her professional experience facilitated an easy transition to the responsibility of being a Sunday school teacher. Not long after joining the ministry, Faith served as the assistant director for the Open Gate Ministry's summer camp program. Despite her experience working with children, Faith told me that she was scared and reluctant at first to work in the Open Gate Ministry because she had no experience working with special needs children. Faith was moved to respond to a sermon given by the head pastor of the church on serving others in the church, but was unsure where to volunteer. After nudging from her husband and prayer, she decided to try out the Open

Gate Ministry, and was the lead teacher for the youngest children (two to four years old).

When asked what she had learned so far, Faith responded:

That these kids are awesome...you really see what love is through these kids and it's just, it's so true because they just, they're so happy all the time, so happy and they don't have any worries and don't have all those other things that hinder our happiness...They come in every week and just light up the room and so that just lights up your heart and you just want to pour into them so much.

Annabel. Annabel was probably the most seasoned of the Sunday school teachers. She earned a doctoral degree in special education and taught students with disabilities at the high school level. She had over 30 years of experience working in special education. At the time of the study, Annabel was responsible for the class of students with the most severe disabilities, all children had cognitive impairments; some had additional physical disabilities, and/or medical conditions. Annabel had been a volunteer with the program since its beginning. She has observed the growth and development of the program from informal caretaking of children during worship services to formalized Sunday school classes with policies and procedures. My interview with Annabel had a different feel than with the other teachers because she was much more familiar with terminology related to teaching children with special needs. In addition to teaching Sunday school, Annabel periodically offered training sessions to the other Open Gate Ministry volunteers.

Lucy. Lucy's first experience working with children with disabilities was on a short-term trip as a missionary in Eastern Europe. She also volunteered in a church-

based program for individuals with disabilities in another state. According to Lucy, “when God brought me here it was a no-brainer I was going to go to [this church] and I was going to be involved in the Open Gate Ministry.” Though Lucy had no outside teaching experience, she was fluent in special education jargon and had spent time researching the disabilities represented in her class on the internet, often trying to incorporate new teaching strategies with her students. According to Lucy, “I’ve learned so much through Open Gate, how to teach, how to, you know, work with different kids, how to handle a classroom, I’ve learned it all through Open Gate.” Her class was comprised mainly of boys in upper elementary school. She tried to emphasize social skills in her classroom with the goal of eliminating maladaptive behaviors that would have been overlooked in smaller children with disabilities, and helping them learn how to properly behave in a Sunday school setting. Lucy stated that prayer is the most important thing she does to prepare for Sunday school.

Abigail. Abigail was the only interview participant in my research that was a classroom helper, rather than a lead teacher. I made the decision to include her because she was a regular volunteer with the adult program for which there was only one lead teacher, a paid staff member at the church. Therefore, Abigail offered a second perspective on the adult group. Abigail taught one lesson for the adult group, but told me that she felt more comfortable helping in the background, keeping the members of the class at the table and focused on classroom activities. Abigail did not have previous teaching experience outside of the Open Gate Ministry.

## Church Staff

Susan. Susan was responsible for overseeing the Sunday school program as well as summer camp, respite care, and the sibling support programs. During the church services, Susan's responsibilities were checking children into their classrooms and offering support to the Sunday school teachers. Support to the lead teachers usually took the form of helping with behavior problems and offering advice on teaching or classroom management strategies.

Carla. Carla was responsible for all aspects of the adult programs of the Open Gate Ministry, including Sunday school classes during church services and fellowship activities for the adults outside of regular church meeting times. Carla taught the lesson during adult Sunday school. Carla's background was in nursing, but she told me that she had the opportunity to observe great teachers whose techniques helped her incorporate various teaching strategies into her lessons.

Mercy. Mercy started out as a volunteer in the Open Gate Ministry and worked part time for the Open Gate Ministry as the coordinator for the Sunday school program. According to Mercy:

My major responsibility is to pour into the teachers with motivation and encouragement so that they can pour into the kids and to be a contact person for the parents and um the children and kind of pass on information and words of encouragement to them as well. And then also be like a liaison between Judith and Susan to the parents and vice versa.

Mercy's full time job was not in education, but she previously worked in an inclusive preschool setting for six years. Mercy was born with cerebral palsy, which she said helps her to relate to the children. Mercy saw her involvement with the Open Gate Ministry as one way to give back.

Judith. Judith served as the director for the entire Open Gate Ministry. She oversaw all of the programs offered to children and adults with special needs and she managed the other Open Gate Ministry staff. During our interview, Judith spoke extensively of the work she does to educate other leaders in the church about the goals of the Open Gate Ministry with the purpose of incorporating the Open Gate children and families into the larger church community.

#### Conclusion

This chapter provided an overview of the participants of the study. The participants reflect a broad range of previous teaching experience but a shared sense of commitment to the students served by the Sunday school program. The next chapter addresses what actually happens in the Sunday school classrooms during the church services.

## 5. What Happens in the Classroom

On a typical Sunday morning, parents and children line up at the greeting booth outside of the Open Gate wing of the church, waiting to be checked into the computerized attendance database. Children are assigned a number when they register for Sunday school program. In the event of a problem, the number flashes on a light board at the front of the main auditorium, alerting parents to go check on their children. Once checked in, children head to their classrooms, some reluctant, but most excited. Parents are already slightly frazzled at the task of getting the kids fed, dressed, and out the door for church service. The hand-off from parents to teacher is quick, sometimes with a brief report of how the morning is going and a quick summary of any concerns of which the teacher needs to be aware. For the next hour and fifteen minutes, parents worship or attend an adult Sunday school class while children play, are presented with a lesson and snack, and on a good morning complete a craft and sticker worksheet. Parents return after the service, crafts are admired, coats and bags are collected and the classroom is cleaned for the next round of students.

The first two research questions for this study address classroom management practices, instructional strategies, teacher evaluation of lesson effectiveness, and assessment of student understanding. To answer these questions, this chapter examines what happened in a special needs Sunday school classroom in relationship to these four

elements. Before that however, I examine the goals of the Open Gate Ministry to determine how teachers prioritize various elements of the program.

### Goals

To understand how the teachers and the staff teach religious material, I felt it important to first ask what they are trying to accomplish in the Sunday school program. One participant succinctly summarized goals for the special needs Sunday school program as follows:

One goal is to provide kids an opportunity to participate in a Sunday school class that can be individualized and accommodate with their different needs and their styles. Certainly to try to spiritually and soulfully address their needs if possible. Certainly trying to educate them in terms of the Biblical truths and spiritual lessons and then giving parents an opportunity to go and to participate in their own Sunday school class or worship service without having to worry about their child.

The first goal addressed is providing a place for children to safely participate in a Sunday school program. The children in the special needs Sunday school would have a very difficult time in a typical Sunday school class, either because of behavioral issues or medical concerns. When possible, the Open Gate program attempts to place children with disabilities in typical Sunday school classrooms, usually by assigning the child to a one-on-one volunteer to shadow them during the service. But, when the characteristics and needs of the student do not allow for inclusion, the special needs Sunday school is available. The special needs classes are characterized by a small adult to child ratio,

teaching geared toward the students' cognitive level, and a greater awareness on the part of the teachers toward adapting to behaviors that would be disruptive in a typical classroom.

The second goal of the program is the provision of Biblical teaching and spiritual education for children with special learning needs. The teachers and church staff agreed that the program needs to be more than merely a respite care or babysitting program. The church offers respite to families, but Sunday school is different. The teachers may have a difficult time understanding or evaluating what the children are learning (a topic that will be addressed later); still, they felt that it was important to try to present Biblical material. Related to this was the finding that, in addition to more concrete teaching, the teachers attempted to create an atmosphere that was spiritually uplifting. A participant described Sunday school as an environment that is "spiritually uplifting somehow...even if they can't understand what the Bible is or understand exactly what we are saying." The term *soul cleansing* also described this concept.

In addition to teaching Bible lessons, teachers desired to promote the students' relationship with God, a Christian concept that is highly emphasized in evangelical churches. One participant elaborated on this goal:

My goal is to deepen the relationship that the participants have and deepen their understanding of who God is and what it means to have a relationship with Him; understanding that they were made by Him, that He loves them just as they are and that they can rely on Him twenty-four-seven to be their dearest companion for all of their desires and hopes.

Integral to the idea of having a relationship with God is what many of the participants referred to as “making a formal decision for Christ;” the idea that children are making a conscious choice to believe the Christian doctrine that Jesus Christ was God who became a human being, lived a sinless life, and died on the behalf of humanity to make an perfect atonement for sins. This emphasis on spirituality is significant given Treloar’s (2002) finding that an individual’s personal relationship with Jesus Christ exceeded church support in promoting positive adaption to disability (see Chapter 2). By emphasizing the students’ relationship to God over respite, the Open Gate Ministry makes the role of church potentially more beneficial to the students.

The third goal of the special needs Sunday school is to provide respite care for parents. The teachers recognized that without their Sunday school program, it would be difficult for parents to attend an adult Sunday school class or worship service. Participants emphasized the goal of making the environment safe and accepting so that the parents would not have to worry about their child during the service. When the teachers were asked what they believe the parents most want and expect from the program, the ability to attend service and a have a safe place for their children was the most frequent answer.

It is interesting to note that the goals of the Open Gate Ministry teachers and staff mirror what the families in Poston and Turnbull’s (2004) research listed as their expectations from churches: (a) acceptance of their child, (b) spiritual and emotional support, and (c) support for their child during services.

In addition to these key goals, the director for adult programming included the goal of fostering social relationships and a sense of community among the participants of the adult program. The teacher for the youngest children cited the goal of helping the children adjust to being in a Sunday school program and to feel safe away from their parents. Another teacher emphasized the social goal of teaching her students how to behave according to the expectations placed on children in a typical Sunday school class.

Finally, inclusion in the larger church community was an important goal to Judith, the director of the Open Gate Ministry, and Carla, the leader of the adult ministry. Judith felt it was important to educate leaders of other ministries to be aware of the needs of families of children with special needs when designing programming. She described the problem of *silo ministry*—the idea that in a large churches various ministry areas become too distinct and forget to work together as a larger church community. She envisioned all ministries in the church placing a priority on including individuals with special needs and the Open Gate Ministry serving as a resource for helping accomplish that goal. Finally, Carla emphasized finding ways for participants in the adult program to become involved in worship services and in service projects in the larger church body.

When I asked if the goals of the program are being accomplished, the participants responded positively. Participants reported that children look forward to coming to the program and continue to be involved over long periods of time. Teachers also reported seeing their students grow in faith or understanding of the concepts being taught. Possible hindrances to goals being accomplished are not having enough teachers and

volunteers or having behavioral issues with students that prevent the teachers from getting through lessons.

### Classroom Management

After establishing the goals of the program, I will now move on to what actually happened in a special needs Sunday school class during my observations. The next sections will address issues of classroom management and instructional strategies. Overall, I noticed that teachers in a special needs Sunday school class face the same behavioral issues as teachers in school-based special education classes such as aggressive behavior, inattention, non-compliance, and verbal disruptive behavior. Thus, the strategies they select to manage their classrooms are important for their ability to accomplish the instructional goals of the program. Classroom management is not an end goal in itself, but a means for establishing a learning environment that allows students optimal access to the curriculum (Evertson & Weinstein, 2006).

All of the classes generally followed the same schedule. Teachers tried to arrive early to set up the classroom, prepare teaching materials, and select toys that would be appealing to their students. Parents dropped off children while volunteers were arriving. The teachers quickly oriented the volunteers to the classroom and the children, informing them of any likely behavior issues, allergies, and student preferences. Students engaged in play for the first fifteen to twenty minutes of the service. Teachers gathered students to the table for a story time lasting about ten minutes. Students ate snack, completed a craft and a sticker worksheet, and sang. Sometimes another adult visited the classroom to lead music with the children; sometimes the classroom teacher led singing as part of story

time. After this, students were permitted to have free play until parents arrived for pick-up.

Frequently, teachers reported that the ability to meet their teaching goals were dependent on the behaviors of the children in the class at any given time. In the worst case, disruptive student behavior forced the teacher to omit the lesson altogether so that the teacher could maintain a safe and calm classroom environment. The teachers reported having to be flexible to adapt their plans to what is happening in the class. Most of the participants spoke about the challenge of getting all of the students to come to the table and stay at the table at the same time for the story time. Several teachers mentioned using snack as an incentive to reach this goal.

To illustrate the types of behavior problems that teachers cited in their interviews, the following account describes the ways that a teacher managed the behavior of a student reluctant to participate in classroom activities.

Jason was experiencing what the teachers would describe as a bad day. My observation took place during the second Sunday morning service, and Jason had already attended the first service. So for him, the second service meant transitioning to a new teacher as most of the other students left the room and new students began to arrive.

As I observed the interaction between Jason and his teacher, I noted that the teacher attempted to incorporate a number of strategies to calm Jason and encourage his participation in class activities. At the start of class, Jason appeared irritated. Not long into class-time he hit the teacher. She attempted at first to ignore the behavior and instructed a volunteer to sit at the table and write and draw with Jason, apparently

activities that he had enjoyed in the past. This was effective until it was time to transition to the story time. The teacher had posted the class schedule on the white board and read the schedule aloud to the students to facilitate the transition to story. She then offered snack to the students to encourage their transition to the table for story time. Jason was reluctant, and the teacher persisted by verbally prompting him about class expectations: “What do we do during story time?” When this was ineffective, the teacher moved closer to Jason, encouraging him to move out of a beanbag chair where he was entertaining himself with a noisy toy. The teacher attempted a compromise: “You know what the rule is; you can play with quiet toys if you are not going to come to the table, no noise toys.”

For the time-being, the teacher chose to ignore Jason’s noncompliance and continued with structured group time, starting with singing. However, after experiencing difficulty keeping students on track, she decided to move the lesson to the carpeted area of the classroom, where Jason was already seated. “When you can’t beat them, join them,” she remarked. The teacher and the volunteers move the center of activity to the carpet and put away the larger toys in order to focus the students’ attention. Jason resisted giving up his toy and his frustration increased. The teacher maintained a calm voice, close physical proximity, and eye contact to transition Jason to story time. She tried to vocalize his feelings, “I know you’re frustrated; come read with me, I know you’re frustrated.” She guided Jason to the board to read through the schedule again:

We finished free play time, all finished, where are we now? Bible story, listen time, work time, not play time. What comes after Bible story, what comes after Bible story? Free play time, but first, Bible story, first Bible story, snack and

craft, then free play time, reading and drawing, then we clean up. Right now we do Bible story, listen time, work time, okay? Let's go, let's go do it, let's go work.

Throughout the story, Jason tried to sit on the teacher's lap. She responded: "No sir, you need to sit on the floor, you are being very disruptive, you can do better than this. No markers, no crayons until you listen to story." At this point, the teacher struggled between addressing Jason's behavioral problems and pushing through the lesson. She decided to delegate Jason to a volunteer and completed as much of the story as possible. By the end of the lesson, Jason had made his way to the table in the classroom and was engaged in drawing. The teacher used this opportunity to have a volunteer read the story to Jason while he was drawing.

In addition to behavior problems, the limited amount of time that teachers interact with students creates a challenge to classroom management in this environment. Teachers work with their students for one hour out of the week, a fraction of the time that students spend in their regular school classroom. To compound this problem, students may not come every week or teachers may team teach a class, switching off each week. It is difficult for students to adjust quickly to the expectations and the routine of the Sunday school class.

The teacher of the youngest students expressed that one of her goals was to help the students adjust to being in Sunday school as opposed to the church nursery. The classroom management techniques that she used focused on proactively keeping the children engaged in play activities to avoid boredom that might lead to behavioral issues.

In the following example, the teacher actively engages a boy in play. The teacher and student sat on the floor and dumped out a bin of large building blocks. While they were working, the teacher made frequent comments to engage his interest: “Let’s build a big tower. Give me a big one. Let’s stack them on top. Good! I know you love to knock them down. Let’s build it tall.” Though the child was easily distracted, the teacher worked to focus his attention on the task. As they build, the teacher asked the boy to find her specific color blocks: “Can you find me a yellow? Yellow? Yay! Now can you find me red?” She picked up the color that she wanted to demonstrate. Once they have built up a few blocks, the child knocked the tower down. They built a tower again, going through colors as before. Given this teacher’s background in education, she is clearly thinking about practical skills that her students would be working on in school such as colors, letters, and numbers and she incorporates these concepts in the play. As the observation continued, the teacher constantly scanned the classroom to see that each child was engaged in a play activity. She offered to read one child a book, danced with another child who appeared interested in the CD playing in the background, and located toys that were similar to a toy that was engaging the interest of a student. Since these children were very young and new to the concept of Sunday school, the teacher’s main priority was helping them to stay engaged in tasks that would keep them happy during the service.

Volunteer helpers were commonly mentioned when addressing classroom management issues. The teachers were thankful for the volunteers, but managing the volunteers, educating them quickly about the needs of individual children, and having

different volunteers each week created challenges. Teachers attempted to delegate tasks to volunteers and demonstrated an ability to quickly judge whether a volunteer could manage a child having a behavioral problem. In cases where the teacher delegated the behavior problem to a volunteer, the teacher offered specific instruction to the volunteers to deal with behavioral issues. But, in cases where volunteers were less experienced, the teachers reported having to deal directly with behavior issues and forego structured classroom activities such as story time. Overall, the teachers seemed to effectively delegate responsibility to the volunteers. The teachers enlisted help from volunteers in the following activities: playing with children, meeting physical needs, reading the Bible story individually to children, working one-on-one on crafts and worksheets, keeping children at the table during the lesson, and transitioning children from one activity to another. One teacher made a point of instructing each volunteer on safety issues in the classroom.

Stichter, Lewis, and Whittaker et al. define classroom management as: “as those general environmental and instructional variables that promote consistent classroom-wide procedures of setup, structure, expectations, and feedback” (p. 69, 2009). There is no one set of practices that define effective classroom management, rather teachers tend to pick techniques that accommodate the needs of their students and the educational setting. Were the teachers in this context implementing the classroom management strategies supported by research in education? Beyda, Zentall, and Ferko (2002) provided a concise list of classroom management strategies found to be effective in special education settings. These strategies included: offering choices to students, giving clear directives

and feedback, using frequent reminders of what students should be doing, using positive verbal responses during academic instruction, and promoting cooperation between students.

Teachers in this setting were clearly applying these techniques. For example, teachers gave clear verbal instructions to guide students through times of transition, giving warnings that transitions would soon be taking place. The teachers offered ample positive feedback during instruction to keep student attention and to encourage participation in the lesson. Students were offered choices of activities during free play and snack time.

Little and Akin-Little (2008) surveyed teachers to determine the frequency with which teachers use various strategies in the classroom. In reporting their findings, they state:

Overall, teachers are reporting the use of evidence-based [classroom management] procedures (e.g., rules, positive reinforcement, antecedent procedures) in relatively high frequencies. Still, teachers report responding to infractions with a large amount of attention (e.g., verbal reprimands, moving student closer) that may act as a positive reinforcer for misbehavior (i.e., attention)” (p. 232).

Similar to the teachers in Little and Akin-Little’s research, the teachers in this study were observed using positive reinforcement and antecedent procedures (such as scheduling class time to avoid unstructured time). Teachers used a number of other strategies as well. Frequently used classroom management strategies included: posting

the schedule on the board, redirecting behavior, using a quiet-time or time-out chair, using snacks to draw children to story time, using rewards for good behavior, verbally praising good behavior, physical touch, prompting students to maintain eye contact, adapting the schedule to accommodate behavior issues, and delegating volunteers to work one-on-one with children. One area of weakness in classroom management was lack of clarity regarding classroom rules. I did not observe any posted rules, nor did I hear teachers refer to specific classroom rules when addressing student behaviors. Teachers seemed to be operating on a more implicit understanding of classroom rules to establish behavioral expectations for students. It was difficult to determine whether teachers were giving attention to disruptive students in a way that would positively reinforce negative behavior because of the nature of the classroom environment. Negative behaviors required immediate attention in order to maintain safety of both the disruptive child and his or her classmates.

Classroom management in this environment also included a great deal of physical care of children: wiping runny noses, transitioning children from wheelchairs to beanbag chairs, guarding against self-harming behaviors, monitoring food allergies, and helping with toileting and hand washing.

Were the Sunday school teachers using appropriate classroom management techniques as a result of their previous teaching experiences in traditional general education or special education classrooms? From the data, there were 86 instances of the six observed teachers using classroom management strategies. Of these 86 instances, 52 (60.5%) were observed in the four teachers with previous teaching experience.

Therefore, the teachers with previous experience did not appear to be using classroom management strategies with greater frequency than the teachers without outside experience. While this finding is only based on a small number of observations and no strong statistical analysis, it appeared that these teachers are not necessarily learning how to manage their classrooms based on previous teacher training. The volunteers without previous training may have more challenges when it comes to managing the classroom, but they seem to have learned strategies through other means, perhaps by observing the teachers with previous experience or perhaps through trial and error.

In addition to individual classroom behavior techniques, educational research supports the use of more systematic approaches to classroom management and behavior management. Some of these approaches include: school-wide positive behavior support systems (see Sugai & Horner, 2002), cognitive-behavioral interventions such as self-monitoring and social stories (see Harris & Pressley, 1991; Etscheidt, 1991), behavioral strategies such as token systems (see Matson & Boisjoli, 2008), and functional assessment to determine appropriate match between behaviors and interventions (see Gresham, Watson & Skinner, 2001). One teacher made reference to creating a social story for a child that was homeschooled and thus not familiar with the expectations of a more traditional classroom setting. A social story is an individualized short story that describes socially appropriate behavior for a given situation through the use of visuals and written text (Gray, 1994; Gray & Garand, 1993). The purpose of the social story is to teach particular social skills such as taking another's point of view, following rules, or understanding expectations. Other than this example, there was no evidence that the

teachers were using a formal system of classroom management or that the staff was encouraging the implementation of such a system.

### Instructional Strategies

Teaching Biblical material and spiritual concepts is a main goal of the special needs Sunday school program. What strategies were the teachers using to teach the material? Teaching the Bible lesson typically took up 10 to 15 minutes of class time. Teachers based their lesson on the Sunday school curriculum selected by the church staff. The younger children (up to third or fourth grade) were taught using a curriculum that is recommended for use with children ages two and three years. The older children (up to age 16) used a curriculum designed for third and fourth graders. Both curricula are divided into three units to be taught in 13 weeks, each lesson based on an account taken from the Bible. A typical lesson plan started with a teacher's devotional, followed by a brief overview of the week's lesson and a teaching tip. For the younger students, the curriculum guided teachers to divide their classroom time into three parts: center-based activities, teaching time, and worksheet-based activities. The curriculum suggestions for the older children were more dependent on group discussion and more complex activities and less dependent on center-based activities. The curriculum made suggestions for visual aides to use during teaching, gave the teacher a scripted lesson, and provided ideas for relevant songs to sing with the children. The curriculum lacked specific suggestions for making adaptations for children with special learning needs or for methods to evaluate whether students comprehend the lesson. The teacher's handbook outlined instructional activities and provided the content of the lesson. Given this scarcity of

suggestions for specific teaching strategies or adaptations, it can be assumed that the strategies observed for this study were based either on previous teaching experience, observation of a more seasoned teacher, or a teacher's personal research regarding instructional strategies.

What then did the teachers do to teach the lesson? During the classroom observation, the teaching strategies that I most frequently observed were use of visual aides, repetition of material, encouraging children to use hand motions to highlight elements of a story or song, hand-over-hand to help students with crafts and worksheets, using activities during free play to illustrate concepts taught specifically during the lesson or more abstract spiritual concepts, having children physically touch the materials such as flannel graph cut-outs or the Bible, directly questioning students to elicit feedback or gain the students' attention, prompting children to engage in appropriate social behavior such as greeting peers and adults and sharing, incorporating children's names into the story, prayer and songs, and verbally praising children for participating in instructional activities.

As an example of the most effective teaching, the following account describes a lesson given to the children in the class for the most severely disabled or medically fragile children.

The children in the classroom represented a range of ability levels and individual characteristics. One child was non-verbal and seated in a wheelchair; another child had to be watched closely as he may have hit his head on the floor at any time. During the first part of the class, the teacher engaged the students in appropriate play activities,

obviously based on her familiarity with the children and their abilities and preferences. Several minutes before the lesson time begins, the teacher prompted the volunteers and the students that lesson would begin in several minutes. The teacher used goldfish crackers to draw one student to the table. The teacher facilitated an uneventful transition to table-time.

Before starting the group lesson, the teacher assigned a volunteer helper to each child to read from the Bible the story that would be taught in the group lesson. Volunteers sat with their children and read from illustrated Bibles. After individual reading, the volunteers worked with children to complete a worksheet based sticker-activity. Volunteers used hand-over-hand with the children to complete this task. As they were working, they talked about the characters from the story that are represented by the stickers.

Next, the teacher began group time with singing. She incorporated the students' names into the songs they sing. I noted that she selected songs that have simple hand motions so that the non-verbal children could participate with the help of the volunteers. During music time, there were several distractions in the classroom: a new student arrived, one student wandered away from the table, and another student was moved from a wheelchair to a beanbag chair. The teacher managed these distractions by effectively using her volunteers while continuing with the singing.

Finally, the formal lesson time began. The teacher started the lesson by showing the Bible to each student. "Where does our story come from?" she asked. "Yes, the Bible." She prompted each child to touch the Bible. The teacher used a flannel board to

tell story of Abraham sending Eliazar to find a wife for Isaac. She brought the flannel board to each child, having them touch the characters as she talked about them. The teacher encouraged the children to look at the pictures. A volunteer offered verbal encouragement to one student: “Good looking.” Though this child seemed to not be listening, he touched the appropriate picture on the flannel board. To conclude the lesson, the teacher said, “We can pray too because God hears us.” She showed them pictures of a family praying together. “Did you pray at Thanksgiving, yes you did! And you thanked God for lots of food and being together. And we can pray too, so let’s bow our heads and pray together.” The teacher and volunteers demonstrated clasped praying hands and the teacher concluded by praying for the group.

The previous account described a lesson that was well received by students and met the criteria that teachers described for a good lesson: children sat at the table, each child participated by touching the curriculum materials, and there were no behavioral issues that prevented completion of the lesson. This was not always the case, however. In my observations, I witnessed a range of success in instruction. Several teachers appeared to be less prepared to present the lesson material and in these instances the lesson was shorter and teachers incorporated fewer hands-on materials to engage students. In one observation in particular, the lesson was very short, thus creating an excessive amount of free play time at the end of the service. Students, free to wander the classroom unengaged, became distressed, and waited at the door for their parents to arrive. In this case, the teacher of the class had no previous teaching experience, and thus

was not prepared to improvise activities to keep the students engaged during the full service time.

In the interviews, teachers cited adapting the curriculum to meet the diverse learning needs of their students as a key challenge. But, there was a diversity of opinions in this area as well, often based on previous teaching experience. Teachers with no professional teaching experience were more likely to state that the curriculum was sufficient. One participant commented that she trusted the church staff to pick out the best available curriculum. Perhaps the teachers without teaching experience had no reference for objectively evaluating the curriculum or social models that could inform them of better methods for teaching the material.

In contrast to the children's program, the adult program used a curriculum published specifically for teaching adults with disabilities. A participant spoke highly of the adult curriculum because it offered suggestions for teaching the material to individuals at a range of cognitive levels, but stated that she also drew from her personal experience to make adaptations to make the material relevant.

For the children's program, teachers felt that it was difficult to match the curriculum designed for non-disabled students to their students' ability levels. According to one teacher:

It doesn't match kids' interests or ability levels, so this is where I have usually the most problems is trying to come up with different [activities]...the arts center, they have a game center, but some of them, it's like, where are people coming from?

This participant recommended that the curriculum be based more on principles of universal design and incorporate several alternative ways to impart the information. She suggested that the curriculum provide more resources such as objects or toys that relate to the story for children to touch. Several of the teachers felt that the curriculum could be improved, but had difficulty making specific recommendations for improvement. The general feeling from many of the teachers was that just getting through the story with all the children at the table was an enormous accomplishment. This sentiment was reinforced during my classroom observations—teachers struggled to have students attend to the Bible story. However, the teachers with more professional teaching experience seemed to have greater success.

Some of the observed adaptations that were made for the lessons included shortening the Bible story, paraphrasing the Bible verse for the week, shortening the lesson to accommodate the students' short attention span, and reading the Bible story to children both individually and as a group. Teachers reported that most adaptations were based on knowing the characteristics and abilities of their students. A profile of each child is kept in a notebook in the classroom that includes information regarding the student's diagnosis, allergies, preferences, and typical behavioral issues. Some teachers referred to this information for ideas on relating the materials to students.

One teacher mentioned several ways that she has worked with parents for ideas on how to adapt the curriculum. She described one student who was intimidated by the use of the word "memory" for the weekly Bible memory verse. She took the word "memory" out of the activity and saw better results from the child. She also created a social story

for a student who was having difficulty understanding what was expected of him when it was time to sit at the table for story time. In general, the teachers seemed open to ideas from parents, but explained that child drop-off and pick-up times were fairly hectic, causing it to be difficult to talk with parents about specific strategies. The interactions that I observed between parents and teachers focused more on child behaviors than instructional issues. Comments from teachers were mixed regarding whether parents followed up with materials that were sent home, some feeling that the parents highly valued the worksheets and others feeling that sending items home was a waste of time either because the materials were not realistically matched to student ability or because parents did not have the time or desire to work on the materials with their children.

Given the lack of guidance from the published curriculum provided the teachers, the variety of instructional strategies observed in the classroom is impressive. However, given the difficulty of evaluating the lesson comprehension in this population of students, it is difficult to say whether these instructional strategies were effective for teaching religious content. In the next section, I will examine how teachers attempt to evaluate whether the students comprehended the lesson.

#### Evaluation of Lesson Effectiveness

An important aspect of teaching any type of material is the teacher's self-evaluation of their instructional methods and the assessment of the students' understanding of the material. I asked the teachers to describe for me lessons that went well and lessons that went poorly and to explain how they evaluated whether or not students understand the material in an effort to answer the research question: How do

Sunday school teachers evaluate the effectiveness of their teaching and assess student comprehension of lesson material?

Teachers were in agreement on the methods they used to evaluate lessons. At the most basic level, teachers were pleased when they were able to complete the teaching component of the Sunday school lesson in a group format. The ability for the teacher to do this depends heavily on student behaviors. If the students had a good day and came to class eager to learn, the lesson went better. The definition of a *good day* was vague, but seemed to imply that students did not have behavioral meltdowns, were healthy enough to enjoy being in Sunday school, and had sufficient motivation and interest to attend to the lesson. When one or more of the students caused behavioral disruptions, this affected the quality of the lesson and the behaviors of the students around them. Sometimes student behaviors prevented the teacher from teaching altogether. A participant remarked:

It's frustrating from the teacher's standpoint and also from the volunteers standpoint as well because it's hard to know how to engage a child who's having so much difficulty expressing themselves and really doesn't have the ability to do anything else other than scream or yell or to bite and that kind of, when you have that going on at one side of the table and you are trying to continue to teach on the other, it kind of distracts the other kids and can set everything awry.

In my observations, I found that smooth transitions between activities contributed to a level of behavior from the students sufficient to allow for story time. Teachers tried to create smooth transitions by offering warning that play time would be ending, by

referring to a posted schedule, and by encouraging students that table time would be followed by snack or some other desirable activity. During one classroom observation, student behaviors caused disruptions during story time, so the teacher had a volunteer pull the disruptive child aside to tell him the story individually while allowing him to draw at the same time. Teachers seemed frequently called to decide whether to push through the lesson in the face of student disruptions or to stop the lesson to deal with a child's behavior. A participant described a student in the adult class who caused frequent interruptions: "If he's having a bad day he pretty much yells all throughout the sermon and sometimes he'll calm down and sometimes he won't." When asked how the lead teacher responds to this behavior, the participant replied, "Most of the time she'll continue. She'll stop sometimes and she'll kind of get him to stop. Sometimes she'll talk a little louder."

Teachers frequently cited having the children all come to the table as a group to listen to the lesson as a standard for evaluating a lesson. However, not all of the participants agreed that this standard was a marker for a successful lesson. A participant stated:

So table time, although it's nice to have everyone at the table, it's not something I really strive for...because of the different cognitive levels of our kids and the disabilities that they have. Some of them are just not capable of staying at the table.

When one teacher experienced difficulty moving the boys in her class from the play area to the table, she decided to have story in the play area instead. She joked, “When you can’t beat them, join them.”

Teachers reported that lessons were successful when children demonstrated enthusiasm for the content of the lesson. A teacher described her students’ response to a lesson about Jonah and the big fish: “They were really into that and they were really excited and they were looking to see what was next and they were so excited, they were really excited about the story.” She cited her own level of enthusiasm as a gauge for how well the students would receive the lesson.

Having too many children or not enough volunteer helpers was a reason cited for the group lesson going poorly. In this situation, the teachers felt pulled in too many directions and unable to concentrate on giving the lesson. They described working hard to stay calm and get through the service under those circumstances.

#### Evaluation of Student Understanding

When I asked the teachers and the staff to describe how they evaluate student comprehension, teachers listed some behavioral evidence they look for to determine comprehension, but largely felt that they were incapable of evaluating whether a student was truly grasping spiritual concepts. In this section I will focus on the tangible means of evaluation and address the intangible role of faith in the next chapter.

Student reactions such as smiling, shaking their head, and touching materials were commonly cited as evidence of student understanding, particularly in children with lower cognitive abilities. When referring to children with more severe disabilities, one

participant remarked "...it's only through smiles or reactions that you get any sense that they might be alert, aware, you know, recognize you, things like that." She continued, "...they can at least respond to pictures and they can respond to people touching them, they know the Bible is a special book and that's what's driving our stories; those kinds of things."

Another teacher noted changes in her students' behavior over time as evidence that they understand the lesson and that they are growing in their relationships with God. She shared:

And it's not verbal, not always verbal; it's really just a change in behavior. It's like all of a sudden something clicks and they want to hear about the story or they want to hear, it's just different, something's changed and it's different...I've seen kids light up...most kids will light up when they hear their name, they light up when you talk about Jesus, that's just awesome. If they are not capable of communicating anything else, when they light up when you talk about Jesus, that's just awesome and that, that lighting up is their soul and that's just neat and that soul is important to God.

For children with higher cognitive abilities, teachers looked for students to be able to answer basic questions about the lesson and pay attention to the story as indication that they understand the concepts being taught. One teacher was satisfied if the students could give her even one word to summarize the content of the story, although she told me that some children want to repeat the entire story back to her. A staff member explained to me that it can be a challenge for the teachers to gauge comprehension because the

curriculum and most methods of teaching are overly dependent on the students' expressive language abilities as a measurement of understanding. She tried to encourage teachers to use other modes of communication to evaluate understanding because many of their students have receptive language skills that are higher than their expressive language skills.

In the lessons that I observed, teachers worked hard to take Biblical accounts and draw out the simplest possible message that could be understood by their students. For example, a teacher used the Genesis account of Abraham's servant Eliazar being sent to seek a wife for Abraham's son Isaac. Eliazar prays for success in his journey and finds Rebecca at the well. To make this relevant to the children, she said, "We can pray too because God hears us. Did you pray at Thanksgiving? Yes you did, and you thanked God for lots of food and being together."

One participant made the New Testament account of the widow's mite into a lesson on sharing with our friends. She purposely had only one pen available for students to write their names on their paper, thus forcing them to act out the principle of sharing in the lesson.

A further limitation to the efficacy of the lesson was the limited time teachers have with students. A staff member contrasted the Sunday school program to the summer day camp program offered by the Open Gate Ministry. Campers attend the program daily for a month and the staff have access to more space in the church, allowing the camp staff to use skits, large visual props and more repetition of the story for teaching.

In conclusion, teachers largely evaluated the lesson on the basis of having the children sit at the table and attend to the teacher's instruction. Basic evaluation of comprehension took the form of students being able to point to visuals, answer very basic questions, or display facial expressions to indicate happiness. The teachers did not report having a means to assess deeper understanding of the content of the lesson, such as student comprehension of the story or understanding of how the Biblical account was meant to apply to their everyday lives. In addition to a general lack of means for evaluation, teachers did not indicate that they used either self-evaluation or student-evaluation as a basis for making changes in their teaching practices.

## 6. It Will Not Return to Me Void

In the previous sections, I described the classroom management and instructional strategies used by teachers in the special needs Sunday school program and described scenes that mirror the teaching of material in academic educational settings. But, the heart of this research is to examine how teaching religious content is different in the Open Gate Ministry because of the role of faith. This chapter addresses that issue and answers the research question: What are Open Gate Ministry staffs' and Sunday school teachers' religious beliefs regarding disability and how does this influence their approach to or expectations regarding religious education?

### Planting the Seed

The title of this dissertation includes the phrase “it will not return to me void” taken from the following Bible verse, “So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it.” (Isaiah 55:11, King James Version). This verse was cited by several of the participants to reinforce the idea that while they are responsible for transmitting the teachings and doctrine in the Bible to their students, it is God who is responsible for accomplishing His purposes in those that hear the message. Christians illustrate this concept with the analogy that a gardener may plant and water a seed, but God is the one to make the plant grow. This concept of partnering with God is

described by the teachers as their work “being placed in God’s hands”, or the ministry to the children being “the work of the Holy Spirit.” One teacher stated, “I’ll hold them and read them the story and show them the pictures and just do my best and know that God will use that.”

One of the research questions addresses how the typical challenges of teaching are mediated by the beliefs of the teachers regarding disability. In one sense, the teachers approached teaching students with disabilities in the same way as Sunday school teachers who teach students without disabilities; they felt responsible for spreading the message and relied on God to make the message take root. In this way, teaching religious material was less stressful for teachers than teaching academic material because they were not ultimately responsible for the results. In the great commission, Jesus calls his disciples to “Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature” (Mark 16:15, King James Version). Followers of Christ are responsible for sharing God’s message of salvation, but not for forcing individuals to convert. One teacher mentioned in her interview that teaching in Open Gate was less stressful than her public school position had been because of the lack of individualized educational plans and pressure to meet specific goals. Students are not required to take yearly Sunday school exams and the program does not have to meet a certain degree of yearly progress to receive funding.

On the other hand, the lack of measurable change in students or evidence of understanding could be a cause of distress for some teachers. A participant reported:

I think it's a struggle for the teachers who are feeling pressure to lead a child to Christ and they want that 'yes,' hit the, you know, that old 'recite the sinner's prayer' and they won't get that from the kids that we are working with.

Most of the teachers I worked with understood that they would not be likely to see much evidence of comprehension in their students, but they were looking forward to the rewards of their efforts in heaven. One participant put it succinctly: "We may not know here, we will likely find out in heaven, at least I'm hoping that's the way it's going to be."

Given the lack of expected short-term gratification from teaching this population, teachers were highly committed to the Sunday school program as evidenced by the fact that teachers have been part of the program for many years and did not refer to feelings of burnout or a desire to quit. Teacher self-efficacy here seemed to be based on love for the students and the teachers' perception that they are doing their best to present the Christian teaching. Does this align with standard definitions of teacher self-efficacy? According to Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2007) teacher self-efficacy can be measured along the following dimensions: instruction, adapting education to individual students' needs, motivating students, keeping discipline, cooperating with colleagues and parents, and coping with changes and challenges. These dimensions encompass the instructional strategies and classroom management techniques discussed in the previous chapter which were determined to closely reflect teaching traditional academic content. Therefore, self-efficacy in this setting was not vastly different for teachers of religious content than teachers of traditional academic content according to Skaalvik and Skaalvik's definition.

## Age of Accountability

A key concept related to the teachers' and staff members' belief regarding disability was the doctrine of the age of accountability as accepted by this church and other evangelical churches. A participant described this concept:

...at some point in time that we all have a cognitive ability to make a decision for Jesus Christ as our savior, for most people they reach a cognitive age, it might be different for you know different children but if our children you know never reach that age I think it is a great concern for many of the parents and the teachers too. How do you [know] they're protected and they have that assurance that they will be in heaven for eternity. It's a very gray [area], there is not a special magic number.

In other words, Christians believe that at some point individuals reach a cognitive level of understanding where they can make a choice to either accept or reject God. According to this teaching, individuals who never have the cognitive ability to reject God will automatically be saved and go to heaven after death.

The practical challenge with this doctrine is that only God can judge a person's age of accountability. Therefore, the teachers were responsible for giving the message regardless of their assessment of the student's ability to understand. According to a participant:

My personal goals are to reach as many kids as I can and give the message of Jesus and so we don't know whether these kids are saved or not because they can't say you know, 'I believe in Jesus Christ' and so we don't know. God He

does, have the, or decides that or judges, so you know, my goal is to teach the kids about it and so that in their minds or however they communicate with God they can say that they believe in Jesus Christ.

For the children with lower cognitive ability, a participant described her responsibility to the children as follows:

I'm feeling like I'm feeding their souls, the Holy Spirit is going to take whatever we are doing here and preparing those kids for when they go to heaven. And that somehow that will get translated you know,... they will have spiritual souls, they will recognize, they are familiar with what we've tried to preach here.

Even for children of very low cognitive ability, another teacher expressed the belief that these children can sense the love of God:

...every person if they have any cognition whatsoever, their soul can belong to God and God loves their soul. And if, and it's important to God that that person know that their soul is important to God. And my, I have this philosophy, that we had a kid that came in years and years and years ago and he [was] profoundly disabled and when he was, he had separation anxiety and the only thing that would calm him down was Disney music. And okay, if he can know that Mickey Mouse loves him, he can know that God loves him.

An understanding and acceptance of this doctrine further contributed to the teachers' reliance on faith in God as they teach their students. This explains how faith combines with traditional teaching methods for religious content. Teachers attempted to share the message of the gospel to all their students because they were incapable of

reliably evaluating an individual's ability to understand. Teacher self-efficacy did not appear suffer as a result of students not understanding because the goal was to spread the message, an objective that teachers could control.

### Sharing the Message

I will now turn to teacher belief's regarding the children that have the cognitive ability to understand spiritual concepts. What sets religious instruction apart from academic instruction in this group was the concept that it's not enough for an individual to understand a spiritual concept, the important thing is for an individual to believe a spiritual concept. Biblical concepts without belief are just knowledge; Biblical concepts with belief are transformative. The goal of the Sunday school program was to offer students the information required to understand the gospel message. From that point, God is responsible for enabling the message to take root. A teacher described what other teachers echoed, that deep cognitive ability is not necessary for this belief, because it is a work of God and He is powerful enough to compensate for the gaps in our knowledge. She stated:

They may not understand it deeply. I don't think that's unusual. I think there are plenty of people walking around the planet who state that they are Christians. I myself, there's much about what God did on the cross and the Trinity that I don't understand. I think that that's part of faith, waiting to understand that, when we get to understand and get that fuller understanding.

Teachers and staff were very confident that some of the students had the ability to receive knowledge that would lead to a sincere faith. One teacher described a student

who professed to be a Christian and could explain the gospel to others. Another teacher cited students who had transformations in their behavior and attitude as a result of coming into a relationship with God. A common theme was to not underestimate the children. According to one participant, “I do believe these kids process much much more than we will ever understand they do and much more than even the professionals do.” Another teacher repeated this belief, “And I don’t underestimate anyone. I might be guilty of overestimating sometimes, but like anybody else, if you hold high estimations of someone they’ll rise to those estimations.”

In addition to teaching the curriculum, the teachers desired to use their time with the children to model these concepts and to show love to the children. In several interviews, teachers expressed this as “pouring into” or “loving on” the children. Twice, the teacher to the youngest children referred to “loving on” the little children in her room, something that she feels she does not have the opportunity to do in the public school setting. Another teacher talked about being a role model of a good Christian to her students.

### Summary

To summarize, in an attempt to reach the goal of offering children with special needs a Sunday school education, teachers reported doing their best to offer the message of the gospel to students but recognize that it was God’s work to enable students to understand and to bring individuals to a point of conversion. For children with very low cognitive ability who may never reach the age of accountability, teachers strove to create an environment that shows God’s love to the children and maintained faith that the

children may comprehend more than can be evaluated so they will continue to present the material. For children of higher cognitive ability, teachers were very confident that their students could understand the material so they taught Biblical concepts and fostered a classroom environment where they could model the love of God to the children. Perhaps their students' understanding is incomplete and can not be evaluated, but it is sufficient for the child to have a relationship with God.

## 7. Conclusions

This chapter begins with a summary of this research study. I then examine the theories of learning underlying the practices of the teachers in the study. This is followed by the practical implications of the research. The chapter concludes with recommendations for future research in this field.

### Summary

This study sought to examine the experiences and beliefs of volunteer Sunday school teachers and paid church staff regarding religious instruction for children with cognitive disability in a large evangelical disability ministry. In addition to that central research goal, three research questions were addressed:

- What classroom management techniques and instructional strategies are being implemented by these Sunday school teachers and do these practices differ from the teaching of traditional academic material?
- How do Sunday school teachers evaluate the effectiveness of their teaching and assess student comprehension of lesson material?
- What are Open Gate Ministry staffs' and Sunday school teachers' religious beliefs regarding disability and how does this influence their approach to or expectations regarding religious education?

With regard to the first research question, findings indicate that teachers in this special needs Sunday school program utilize many of the same classroom management and instructional strategies to teach as would be observed in traditional classrooms. Despite the lack of guidance found in the curriculum for adapting material to students with cognitive disabilities, teachers can resourcefully adapt materials to address the unique needs of their students. In addition, the teacher defined goals for the special needs Sunday school program provide structure to the program.

The second research question addressed the methods and criteria by which teachers evaluate their teaching and their students' understanding. Based on the limited cognitive abilities of their students, teachers reported few techniques to evaluate the effectiveness of their teaching and limited methods to evaluate student understanding. Evaluations tended toward surface level criteria, such being able to complete a lesson in a group setting and having students respond to basic questions or touch lesson materials. Teachers cited changes in student behavior over time or the ability to explain concepts to others as evidence that students had genuine conversion experiences.

To answer the third question regarding beliefs of the participants about disability and the influence of these beliefs on teaching religious material, findings indicate that teachers made their best efforts to offer the message of the gospel to students but believe that it is God's work to enable students to understand and to bring individuals to a point of conversion. For children with very low cognitive ability who will never reach the age of accountability, teachers strive to create an environment that shows God's love to the children and maintain faith that the children may comprehend more than can be

evaluated. Thus, the teachers persist in presenting the material. For children of higher cognitive ability, teachers are decidedly confident that their students can understand the material they teach. Therefore, the teachers teach Biblical concepts and model the love of God to the children. Perhaps their students' understanding is incomplete and can not be evaluated, but even a basic understanding is sufficient for the child to have a relationship with God. Despite a lack of understanding in the short-term, teachers persisted in teaching material. This was due to their doctrinal beliefs regarding their responsibility for teaching material and their reliance on faith that God will impress truth on the hearts of their students.

As referenced in Chapter 2, Collins, Epstein, Reiss, and Lowe (2001) provided guidelines for increasing participation of children with disabilities in religious education programs. These recommendations were: (a) making lessons applicable to everyday life, (b) using a hands-on approach to teaching, (c) teaching the same material in multiple ways, (d) using cooperative learning activities, and (e) using prompts to demonstrate what the expectations are for the disabled child. Did the teachers in this study follow these recommendations? There is evidence that teachers endeavored to make lessons applicable to everyday life. Teachers related complex abstract concepts to events that regularly occur in students' lives. Instruction was chiefly conducted through direct instruction by verbally presenting the Bible story and using visual aides, not necessarily through a hands-on approach. Teachers attempted to teach the material in multiple ways by reinforcing the themes of the lesson during free play time, however the limited amount of time spent in instruction and few recommendations in the curriculum restricted the

ability of the teachers to teach material in multiple ways. Given the social skills deficits of the students in the Sunday school program, cooperative learning activities were rare. Several teachers tried to emphasize cooperative activities through sharing materials. Teachers demonstrated classroom expectations by using prompts such as posting the schedule and frequent verbal reminders. Teaching could be improved by educating teachers specifically about Collins et al.'s recommendations.

#### Theoretical Basis for Instruction and Classroom Management

In my interviews, participants made few references to learning theory or educational schools of thought when reflecting on their teaching. One teacher suggested that the curriculum be based on principles of universal design. Proponents of this school of thought—originating in architecture and engineering—advocate that living, working, and learning environments be designed to be accessible to the largest number of people possible (Preiser, 2001). The Center for Applied Special Technology adapted the principles of universal design to teaching and refers to this approach as universal design for learning (CAST, 1998). The universal design for learning model proposes three components for teachers to follow to overcome barriers to curriculum for special education students, as described by Spooner, Baker, Harris, Ahlgrim-DeLzell, and Browder (2007):

*Representation* refers to modifications that can be made to classroom materials that would make them more accessible to students with disabilities (e.g., modified books, larger print, digital text). The second component, *expression*, designates alternate methods of communication for students with limited speech (e.g., use of

augmentative devices, computers, graphic programs). This second component explains how students can express themselves by answering questions and communicating within the classroom setting. The third component, *engagement*, designates the use of strategies that involve students with disabilities in the learning process (e.g., providing repetition, familiarity, opportunities to respond). To encourage engagement for all students, the curriculum needs to provide flexible alternatives. (p. 109)

In the case of the Open Gate Ministry, the participant recommended that the curriculum have more suggestions for modes of conveying the material; modes that would impact the largest number of students by using multiple senses and methods of communication. Perhaps she is also advocating for a multiple intelligences strategy for presenting material. The theory of multiple intelligences, proposed by Howard Gardner, asserts that learners access knowledge through various modalities and that individuals vary in the way that they best receive information (Gardner, 1983). Gardner proposes eight categories of intelligences: bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, verbal-linguistic, logical-mathematical, naturalistic, intrapersonal, visual-spatial, and musical. It should be noted that some proponents of Gardner's theory make claims that the multiple-intelligences theory constitutes a *brain-based* approach to teaching, meaning that the brain is structured to process each of Gardner's seven intelligences separately. In fact there is no neurological evidence to support the assertion that the brain divides up learning along the lines of Gardner's proposed intelligences but rather that the same set of brain processes (sensory information processing, memory, language, etc.) are used for

tasks that relate to each of Gardner's intelligences (Carroll, 1993; Geake, 2008). Geake (2008) states, "there are no multiple intelligences, but rather, it is argued, multiple applications of the same multifaceted intelligence" (p. 126). In addition, studies which base their findings on data from brain imaging technologies draw their conclusions from data across groups of subjects, rather than individuals, thus preventing educators from applying this knowledge to individual differences in learning (Kalbfleisch, 2008). Therefore, it is more useful to approach the theory of multiple intelligences as a teaching strategy that equips teachers to devise more creative and varied classroom activities than an explanatory model of intelligence.

The lessons that I observed were presented largely through direct instruction. Principles of universal design and the theory of multiple intelligences could be easily interwoven into the Sunday school program were the teachers trained in the basics of these theories. One staff member is responsible for sending the teachers an overview of the Sunday school lesson during the week before church services. In this communication, the staff member could take the theory of multiple intelligences as a basis for creating numerous suggestions for instructional activities. For example, bodily-kinesthetic modalities could inspire games that get students up and moving about the room. Visual-spatial modes of presenting material could give rise to more hands-on materials that relate to the lesson. For example, the teacher could bring stuffed animals to play with during lessons on Noah's ark. To combine these modalities, a lesson on the feeding of the five thousand may be enhanced by having goldfish and bread for snack and playing a game that involves handing out the snack to classmates. These theories are

particularly relevant to this population because their disabilities may often cut them off from traditional teaching techniques that rely solely on the teacher verbally conveying the story and questioning the students regarding the content.

When asked about her goals for the Sunday school program, a participant shared that she would like for the program to be more child directed. I asked her to describe what that means to her, and she responded:

As far as like the crafts and stuff like that, instead of having something that looks the same you know from person to person because an adult has taken the time to cut things out and put them together so that it looks nice when it gets goes home...the kids are hands on and kind of like blank materials, like you would give them a sheet of paper and provide materials where they can create something meaningful to them...open ended materials to kind of see where they are and to see how much of the story they've processed and what they've taken away from it more so than the end product.

She seems to be responding to the traditional Sunday school format of children creating craft projects that all look the same and correctly completing worksheets. I believe that what she is referring to is more of a constructivist view of learning where children are encouraged to build their own knowledge based on the resources with which they are provided and guidance from teachers. Constructivist theorists argue that children generate knowledge and create meaning from their experiences; therefore it is beneficial to provide children with the tools and resources for meaningful experiences so that they can construct new knowledge which is tied to and built on previous experiences

(Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000). Learning that is strongly tied to previous knowledge is more solidified in the brain. For this discussion, Lev Vygotsky's particular model of constructivist learning has the greatest potential for application in this research setting. Vygotsky's key contribution was the idea of the zone of proximal development as a model to understand a child's progression through developmental stages (Wertsch, 1985).

According to Vygotsky, the lower limit of the zone of proximal development describes a stage or level of development that encompasses tasks that the child is able to accomplish independently. As the child attempts more difficult tasks at the outer reaches of the zone of proximal development, he requires the assistance of adult guidance or collaboration with a more capable peer (Kozulin, 2003).

There are three assumptions that characterize the common interpretation of the zone of proximal development: the generality assumption, the assistance assumption, and the potential assumption. The generality assumption indicates that a zone of proximal development can be applied to any type of learning task. The assistance assumption emphasizes how the teacher, model or peer should interact with the learner. The potential assumption places focus on the characteristics of the learner, specifically the learner's readiness or potential for learning.

In addition to these assumptions, scaffolding is a key concept in Vygotsky's theory. The term scaffolding refers the process of stretching the student from the lower limits of the zone of proximal development to the outer limits of this zone with appropriate support. Scaffolding is a useful model for how teachers can present lessons

in a way that aligns the lesson content to the child's experiences. The Biblical accounts being taught occurred thousands of years ago in a culture foreign to these students. Teachers in this environment clearly attempt to make connections between lesson content and experience, but may not go far enough. For example, one teacher presented a lesson on Zacchaeus, a sinful but repentant tax collector who hosts a dinner for Jesus. The teacher simplified the message by concluding, "Jesus loves Zacchaeus. Jesus loves Ben, Jesus loves Joshua, Jesus loves Nathaniel." While this was a good start, and clearly an attempt to make the message relevant to the students, I felt that she oversimplified the conclusion and underestimated the students' ability to make connections to their own experiences. With scaffolding, the teacher could have guided the students to make the following connections between the story and their experiences. Zacchaeus had difficulty getting close to Jesus because there was a great crowd and Zaccheaus was very short. Students with disabilities may feel that their physical limitations may prevent them from being close to God. Zaccheaus was looked down upon by society but Jesus chose to honor him by joining him for a meal. Students with disabilities can certainly relate to feelings of being left out by peers and benefit by knowing that Jesus accepts all those that draw near to Him. Teachers who are prompted to draw out more elements of the story that relate to the children's experiences may be able to be more creative in thinking of practical implications for their lessons.

In order to further strengthen the student's connection with the lesson material, Tomlinson and Kalbfleisch (1998) suggest that teachers implementing constructivist principles focus their instruction on concepts and principles rather than focusing on the

facts that support them. By doing so, students are able to individually apply concepts to their own experiences and relate individual facts to the larger concept, thus creating a stronger sense of context and meaning for individual facts. Based on this recommendation, it would be beneficial for the Sunday school teachers to stress the larger concept behind the lesson first, then present the facts of the Biblical accounts meant to support the concept.

In addition to instructional elements, I agree with this teacher that a constructivist model of teaching may offer a better way of evaluating what students have taken from lessons. In many of my observations, volunteers rushed to complete crafts for children so that they would have something to present to the parents—a finished product which certainly the parents would understand had been created by an adult rather than their child. Perhaps the teachers and the volunteers were trying to reinforce the goal of having children with special needs participate in a Sunday school program by emulating the traditional products that would be created by a typically developing child. However, given the degree of assistance required by an adult to complete the crafts, the tasks were clearly well out of the zone of proximal development for these students. A craft project with more flexible expectations regarding outcomes would give the teachers a more accurate picture of the students current ability level, thus inform the teacher regarding an appropriate level of scaffolding necessary to increase the student's skill set.

It should be noted that the common interpretation of the zone of proximal development has been criticized in that Vygotsky did not intend for his theory to be a theory of learning, rather a theory of development and thus the idea of the zone of

proximal development was not intended to be applied to specific learning tasks, but rather broader stages of development as defined and constructed by the historical period and culture in which the child is developing (Kozulin, 2003). This criticism provides the groundwork to apply Vygotsky's theory on a broader level in the present research setting.

To apply Vygotsky's theory according to the interpretation that the zones of proximal development refer to broader stages of development, it must first be determined what these broader stages of development are in the context of belonging to a church community. After identifying each stage, the Sunday school curriculum can target specific skills that would enable the child to master the stage and progress to the next stage with the help of adults or more capable peers.

I propose three stages to describe development in this environment. At the first stage, the child is mastering the skills necessary to attend and participate in Sunday school classes. These skills include the ability to part with parents during services, to attend to the teacher, to participate in classroom activities at the appropriate time, and to follow classroom rules. At the second stage, the child attains the ability to attend to the content of the Sunday school material and to comprehend the meaning of the lessons. Skills at this stage might include the ability to grasp the abstract nature of Biblical accounts and the ability to envision how Christian principles are relevant to one's own experience. At the final stage, the child internalizes the lesson material and doctrine of the church and considers himself to be a member of the community. Skills necessary for this stage would be the ability to evaluate the merits of the doctrine being presented, to

make a conscious decision that would lead to a conversion experience, and the ability to apply Christian principles as an ongoing developmental process.

These stages can be supported by the reports of the teachers in the research setting. The teacher of the youngest child desired that her students feel safe and secure apart from their parents during the worship service and to master the basic routines inherent in attending Sunday school. Teachers for children in lower elementary school were emphasizing appropriate behaviors in class and stressing skills necessary for students to attend to the lesson. Participants made reference to older children when describing children that had made a decision to accept the church's doctrine and considered themselves to be Christians.

In addition to constructivism, the notion that teachers were attempting to model for their children beliefs and demonstrate love to the children in their class follows a social learning theory of education. Social learning theorists assert that individuals learn from observing social models in their environment (Rosenthal & Zimmerman, 1978). The most powerful learning experiences occur when the observer can identify with the model or when the model receives a highly valued reward for a behavior. Albert Bandura, the most influential theorists in this area, developed his social cognitive theory based on research on observational social learning (Bandura, 1977). This type of learning is probably the most realistic for this group of students because the abstract nature of the lessons is more difficult to understand and less relevant than actual demonstrations of love from the adult leaders of their Sunday school class. This type of

learning is reflected in participant comments that refer to building a “soul cleansing” or “spiritually uplifting” environment.

Teachers in this environment could be more purposeful in incorporating social learning opportunities to demonstrate the concepts taught in lessons. This could be accomplished through skits where adult actors model the behaviors and characteristics supported by the lesson materials. This might also be accomplished by having structured opportunities for the special needs classes to participate in activities with the general Sunday school program. The children in the special needs program are entirely cut off from typically developing children during Sunday school, thus they lack the opportunity to learn from peers who could serve as positive social models.

My findings demonstrate the teachers are evaluating the effectiveness of their teaching on surface level criteria, such as being able to complete the story with the children seated at the table. By educating teachers in the basics of the aforementioned learning theories and the practical application of these theories to their teaching practices, the teachers may be able to move on to more concrete evaluations of their teaching. In addition, deeper engagement into the lesson may lessen the frequency of behavioral issues presented by the students who may be acting out because the lesson is not grabbing their attention sufficiently.

In addition to teaching approaches, when questioned regarding classroom management strategies, teachers focused more on common sense approaches or trial-and-error learning to maintain a peaceful environment in the classroom, rather than making reference to specific theories of classroom management. In addition to purely behaviorist

approaches, there are several research paradigms that guide inquiry in the area of classroom management: (a) process-outcome research, (b) ecological approaches, (c) classroom discourse perspectives, and (d) critical theory perspectives (Evertson & Weinstein, 2006).

Process-outcome research focuses on examining the relationship between classroom processes and student outcomes (Gettinger & Kohler, 2006). Researchers in this field are concerned with identifying management and instructional variables associated with high student achievement. Practices associated with process-outcome research are the establishment of classroom rules, smooth transitions between activities, establishing routines at the beginning of the school year, efficient use of learning time, monitoring student performance, and communication between teachers and students that promotes awareness of classroom behavior. In some ways this research paradigm has direct application to religious educational environments because the variables of interest are directly observable and teachers can and do implement many of the recommended techniques. During transitions between activities teachers gave clear directions and prepared students for the expectations for each activity. However, as stated earlier, it is difficult to measure student outcomes for the type of material being presented in religious education; therefore it would be difficult to determine the practices that lead to the highest student achievement. Based on this perspective, I recommend that the staff create a program-wide set of rules to be applied to all of the Sunday school classes and the other activities offered to children (such as respite care). With a consistent set of rules, the

children would be aware of behavioral expectations regardless of what classroom they are in or activity they are attending.

Ecological perspectives examine the physical environment of the classroom as a habitat for learning and researchers examine how order is established in the classroom (Doyle, 2006). The ecological perspective takes into account the complex interactions that occur between the members of the classroom environment. Based on their findings, ecological researchers make recommendations regarding the physical design of the classroom setting, emphasize the importance of establishing order at the beginning of the school year, encourage teachers to attend to the dynamics of the entire group when monitoring students, and promote group participation in learning. I can see how this research paradigm would be useful for the special education classroom because the dynamics between students in my research setting contributed significantly to classroom order. Behavioral disruptions were overt and affected the entire classroom. Students fed off of each other's behaviors, therefore it would be vital to examine the dynamics of the classroom as a whole, rather than to isolate the behaviors of individual students.

Teachers who are trained to be sensitive to the entire classroom environment would be better prepared to construct a setting where students interact in positive ways, rather than bring standards for behavior down to the lowest common denominator. An emphasis on group participation would be beneficial to these students as well. Many of the students in the program are autistic, thus their propensity toward social interaction is limited.

Students with autism could benefit from activities that promote group participation.

Classroom discourse perspectives hold that classrooms are chiefly environments where communication takes place between teachers and students and that the meaning of the communication is dependent on the context (Morine-Dershimer, 2006). This area of research mainly consists of studies on the rules and routines in classrooms that are related to communication. Recommendations for classroom management procedures based on research in classroom discourse include: use a variety of questioning processes and lesson structures, use procedures that promote wide participation of pupils, and observe how students participate in different types of communication tasks. The application of this paradigm to my research setting highlights the variety of communication methods used by students and teachers in this setting. Often, verbal communication is the least accessible method of communication for these students; therefore classroom discourse perspectives could examine the alternative forms of communication utilized by these students. Although verbal communication was the rarest communication modality in students, it was the most common means of conveying lesson materials. Research in classroom discourse may offer a broader range of communication modalities for teachers to use when attempting to convey knowledge to students with limited communication skills.

Critical theory research examines of students' and teachers' social class, race, and gender influence classroom dynamics (Brantlinger & Danforth, 2006). Researchers in this field rarely make suggestions for classroom management procedures; rather they seek to uncover problems that create imbalances or injustice in learning environments. Research related to special needs populations in this perspective focuses on the

overrepresentation of minority groups in special education. In my research setting, the critical theory approach could be used to examine how the church as a whole embraces the children with disabilities and their families. Is the special needs Sunday school program ultimately serving to create a space for this population where one did not exist, or is it further isolating these children from their typically developing peers? It appeared that as students graduate to the adult ministry, more effort was made to incorporate them into the larger church body, but there remains the difficult task of balancing inclusion with tossing individuals with disabilities into environments where they are doomed to failure.

#### Practical Implications

The Sunday school teachers in this setting employed many of the same classroom management techniques and instructional strategies as teachers of traditional content subject matter and those teachers with more traditional classroom experience were able to most effectively implement these strategies. Therefore, one practical implication of this study is that research that informs best practices for classroom management and teaching practices can be applied to the teaching of religious curriculum. Teachers evaluated the effectiveness of their teaching by reflecting on the efficacy of their classroom management strategies. This includes the ability to bring children to the table for story time and being able to manage disruptive child behaviors in order to maintain the attention of the children and complete the lesson. Further training on classroom management and instructional techniques would help these teachers to improve their teaching practice.

As referenced in the literature review, Treloar (2002) recommends that churches provide more teaching on theological understandings of disability and increase religious support to allow for participation of individuals with disabilities and their families in church. It appears that the congregation selected for this research has been successful in providing a Biblical framework for the Sunday school teachers and the church staff to guide their mission to serve these families; both for children with limited cognitive ability and those with higher cognitive ability. The implication of this finding is that when church staff and volunteers have a positive religious framework for understanding disability, they can find purpose in serving children with cognitive impairment without feeling burdened by limited short-term tangible rewards for their efforts.

Finally, this research will be useful to religious congregations who desire to start a ministry to individuals with special needs or to move their ministry beyond a respite care program but do not have a model on which to base an educational element of their program. The participants in this research believed that just in trying to have a Sunday school program, they were going beyond what many churches have been able to provide for children with cognitive disability. The teachers in this ministry offer many examples of children who are able to grasp spiritual concepts and find comfort in their faith; therefore, if churches desire to be truly inclusive to individuals with disabilities, they must provide the same access to Sunday school teaching as typically developing children.

#### Recommendations for Future Research

First, my research was limited in that I was not proposing to objectively measure student learning, merely understand the teacher and staff reports of their self evaluations

of teaching and learning. Future research that incorporates methods of objectively measuring student learning and the effectiveness of teaching practices would be helpful for the church staff and the teachers in this environment. However, creation of objective measures would be difficult because of the issues addressed in Chapter 6. It would be impossible to create an objective measure of faith or a conversion experience as Christians believe that God is the only one able to judge these matters. That said, academic assessments could be applied to Sunday school materials to determine if students comprehend the Biblical stories in the Sunday school curriculum. In addition, teachers might be able to improve classroom management practices by applying observational assessments of students attending to the lesson or adherence to behavioral interventions that would reduce disruptions during instructional time.

Secondly, I observed that while all of the teachers had good intentions and a love for the children in their classes, generally speaking the teachers with professional teaching training and classroom experience were better equipped to manage challenging student behaviors and had a larger repertoire of strategies to draw from when presenting the lesson material. Future work in this area should examine strategies for quickly equipping volunteer teachers with the skills that seasoned veterans learn through teacher education programs and years of classroom experience. Clearly, an accelerated course for a volunteer could not match the thoroughness of a college teacher education program. Still, non-professional Sunday school teachers could benefit from the self-efficacy derived from an effective training program.

Third, in response to the sentiment shared by the teachers and staff members, more work needs to be done to develop religious educational materials that can reach children with special learning needs. I don't believe that the special education students necessarily need an entirely different curriculum from the typical Sunday school curriculum. I agree that if principles of universal design were more broadly applied to traditional Sunday school curricula, all students would benefit.

Finally, in the limitations section of the research methods section, I described the limitation that children in this study are accommodated by being served in a program for children with special needs only. The church makes efforts to mainstream children into the typical Sunday school program, but this study did not include observations of those children. Future research can examine how children with special needs are included in traditional Sunday school. Do the teachers know how to make special provision for these children? Are typically developing peers benefiting from the presence of these students? Proponents of mainstreaming in traditional academic environments point to the importance of teaching children empathy, compassion, patience, and an attitude of acceptance of diversity in learning ability. Clearly, these are characteristics that Sunday school teachers want to instill in their students. What better environment to examine mainstreaming than a church setting?

## Appendix A. Pilot Interview Guide

What are your responsibilities in the Open Gate Ministry?

What do you see as the goals of the Open Gate Ministry?

Can you talk about the challenges of providing religious education to children and young adults with cognitive disabilities?

How is religious education different in an Open Gate classroom compared to a typical Sunday school class?

What questions would you like to have answered about religious instruction in the Open Gate Ministry?

What lessons or understanding would you like the children to walk away from Sunday school having?

Probe: How well do you feel you are able to accomplish that goal?

Do you feel that the staff have similar philosophies or beliefs about teaching, or do their views and approaches vary?

Probe: Are there differences in priorities or approach among the staff?

What issues would you like to see my study focus on? What topics or questions would benefit your work?

## Appendix B. Informed Consent Documentation



## REFERENCES

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## CURRICULUM VITAE

Carolyn M. Iguchi was born in Fairfax, Virginia on May 1, 1979. Carolyn graduated from Oakton High School in Vienna, Virginia in 1997. She received her Bachelor of Arts in Psychology from the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia in May, 2001. She received her Masters of Arts in Educational Psychology from George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia in January, 2005.

Carolyn has volunteered for the Special Olympics and worked with children and adults with disabilities through the Fairfax County Department of Therapeutic Recreation. She volunteered for her church's ministry to individuals with disabilities and their families and has worked as an individual caregiver for children with special needs.

As a graduate student, Carolyn taught courses in practical life skills for college age students with cognitive disabilities for the George Mason LIFE program. She also completed a research assistantship for KIDLAB, part of the Krasnow Institute for Advanced Study at George Mason University. As a doctoral student, Carolyn served as a graduate student lecturer for the Graduate School of Education.