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Law Enforcement in Schools: Evolving Roles in Florida

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LAW ENFORCEMENT IN SCHOOLS: EVOLVING ROLES IN FLORIDA

by

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ABSTRACT

In response to several pieces of state legislation aimed at increasing safety in public school settings, school districts in Florida were provided state funding and given the autonomy to partner with local law enforcement agencies on school safety issues. One such issue is providing safety for students with disabilities, namely; autism. A school district in central Florida chose to ensure either a city police officer or sheriff deputy was placed in each public school within their zone, serving as a school resource officer (SRO). The purpose of this research study was to examine the lived experiences of SROs, including exploration of the training they receive to prepare them for their roles. The researcher used a phenomenological methodology research design for the study. Eight participants (N = 8) who were SROs serving at middle schools in a central Florida public school district were interviewed using a semi-structured interview protocol. The researcher performed an analysis of the SROs’ interview responses using thematic analysis, member checking, and repeated interviews. From the analysis, 4 themes- (a) law enforcement, (b) relationships, (c) school safety, and (d) training and preparation and 15 subthemes emerged. With the requirement that a law enforcement officer be present at each school in the school district, understanding what this essential role entails is relevant to stakeholders with a vested interest in school safety concerns.

Keywords: school safety, school resource officer, autism
This is dedicated to my mother Lisa, my husband Kristopher, and my two children, Krista and Timothy.

Your continuous encouragement, understanding, and support are what made this possible.
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CHAPTER ONE: LAW ENFORCEMENT IN SCHOOLS: EVOLVING ROLES IN FLORIDA

In December 2015, Public Law 114–95, also known as Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), was created to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA, 1965) and reform the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2002). The previous presidential administration enacted public education legislation, No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2002) over a decade before the introduction of ESSA. As with NCLB, ESSA called for state accountability and required assessments of students to ensure all were receiving an appropriate education. Both NCLB and ESSA require the obtainment and retention of high-quality teachers with special attention to educator’s certification in the areas in which they teach. A focus on students with disabilities’ achievement and inclusiveness, including the requirement for state reduction in the use of alternate assessments, as well as exclusionary discipline and restraints, was also a component of ESSA (National Council on Disability, 2018). However, one of the biggest differences between NCLB and ESSA was the shift in authority from federal to local, state agencies. The 2015 ESSA gave autonomy to states and local agencies over public education concerns, including providing state control over curriculum standards and alternative assessments for students with disabilities (SWDs) meeting such requirements, as indicated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEIA, 2004). Additionally, ESSA addressed school safety and climate concerns, again necessitating that states make decisions on important aspects affecting the education of all students. According to McCurdy, Empson, Knoster, Fluke, and Grant (2019), the requirement that states increase school safety and promote a positive school climate by ESSA encouraged an increase in the utilization of law enforcement officers (LEOs) as school resource officers (SROs) by school district officials.
LEOs were assigned to serve in educational institutions as early as the 1950s (Bleakley & Bleakley, 2018). Approximately 43% of present-day public schools across the nation report the use of security personnel, including the use of school-based LEOs (McCurdy, et al., 2019). The responsibilities and expectations of such personnel have transformed to reflect societal needs over the decades. The role of the school-based LEO has been influenced by drugs, gang violence, and other criminal activity including horrific instances of school shootings (Schlosser, 2014). Most recently Florida’s school-based law enforcement presence has shifted to reflect the need for protecting students and staff. Effective March 2018, Senate Bill 7026, also referred to as the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Public Safety Act (S. 7026, 2018) was enacted to increase public safety in schools.

Following the passage of Senate Bill 7026 (2018), school districts across the state of Florida were provided state funding totaling $64,456,019 for Safe Schools initiatives (Florida Department of Education, n.d.). School districts were given limited autonomy to partner with local law enforcement agencies to increase school safety using school-based LEOs. A school district in central Florida now requires either a city police officer or county sheriff deputy be placed in each of the district’s 58 traditional public schools.

Statement of the Problem

Prior to the Implementation of Legislative Recommendations of the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Public Safety Commission (S. 7030, 2019), there were no set of standards outlining the role of school-based LEOs (Florida Department of Law Enforcement, (FDOLE), 2018). However, FDOLE suggested roles and trainings provided through the National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO) could be used to prepare SROs. The training sessions for SROs and school resource deputies (SRDs) are offered at specific times throughout
the year, yet they are not mandatory. However, Autism Awareness Training for LEOs (H.B. 39, 2017) became mandatory for Florida officers in October 2017.

School safety is one of the main concerns of public-school officials and community members in the school district studied in this research. According to an earlier study conducted by Maskaly, Donner, Lanterman, and Jennings (2012), reducing crime in schools and fostering secure schools is a “crucial, and often difficult task” (p. 160). Safe schools promote an environment conducive to learning, and the presence of an LEO provides a sense of security to families and school staff (Kupchik & Bracy, 2009). For the purpose of this study, the researcher will use the term SRO to interchangeably describe SROs, who are hired police officers through municipalities, and SRDs, who are hired deputies through county sheriff departments. This chosen usage is accepted by NASRO, which represents and recognizes both titles and refers to both SROs and SRDs as SROs.

Schools may vary in the utilization of the SRO assigned to their respective sites and use them for a variety of duties (Schlosser, 2014). The use and misuse of SROs as disciplinarians, hall monitors, and/or traffic directors are common roles school administrators assign to their school-based SRO, and these roles vary greatly from administrator to administrator (Counts, Randall, Ryan, & Katsiyannis, 2018). Interactions with youth in the school setting may differ from interactions with civilians outside of the school community. Police interactions with students, especially SWDs, are inevitable (Turcotte, Shea, & Mandell, 2018). The SROs’ training in such encounters, which are specific to schools and working with SWDs can have an impact on the culture of the school (Bolger, Kremser, & Walker, 2019). Likewise, the lived experiences of the SRO may affect their contribution to the functionality of the school.
Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research study was to investigate the roles and preparedness that LEOs possess as members of the public-school setting. This research study will examine the lived experiences of SROs regarding their duties and experiences serving in public middle schools, including interactions with SWDs, and experiences SROs have had assessing threats to school safety. The study will also explore the preparedness and training that SROs possess to serve in such a capacity. With the district’s decision to require an LEO be present at each school, gaining an understanding of what this essential role entails, including but not limited to interactions with SWDs and threat assessment, is relevant to school safety and safe school climate concerns.

Significance of the Study

A multitude of research studies surrounding SROs and their roles in schools, including their impact on school safety, exist. There are numerous research articles related to LEOs and their interactions with persons with disabilities such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD) (Copenhaver & Tewksbury, 2019; Gardner & Campbell, 2020; Railey, Bowers-Campbell, Love, & Campbell, 2020). However, there is limited research on the training and professional development SROs have received in preparation for their role. The research related to their experiences working with SWDs, especially autism, in the school setting, is limited. Stemming from recent legislation, there has been an increase in the presence of law enforcement in Florida schools serving as SROs to enhance school safety. As the SRO population has increased in schools, so have the numbers of children diagnosed with autism in the United States. Many of these children will receive their education in public school settings. This research study is beneficial to those who have a vested interest in school safety and the education of all students.
Investigating the preparedness and the lived experiences of SROs serving in middle schools will contribute to the body of knowledge in the fields of education and law enforcement.

**Research Questions**

This research study will seek to investigate the following questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of SROs who work in public middle schools?
2. What lived experiences have SROs had with SWDs?
3. How are SROs prepared to work with students in middle schools, including students who have disabilities such as ASD?

**Research Design**

This study will use a qualitative phenomenological research design to answer the research questions. Having obtained approval from the University of Central Florida’s IRB and the IRB of the central Florida school district, the researcher initiated contact with potential participants via standard postal service through their respective school’s physical mailing address. Participants were provided informed consent forms (see Appendix B), including a description of the nature and scope of the research study, as well as the preliminary questionnaire (see Appendix D) related to their service as SROs. The informed consent packet, which included a hard copy of the questionnaire used to obtain preliminary data prior to face-to-face interviews, was mailed to participants at the address of the school in which they serve. The completed survey was collected in person by the researcher to ensure confidentiality. Once potential research participants were identified, the researcher followed up with a telephone call to participants and scheduled face to face interviews at a mutually agreed upon location.
The researcher used the purposive sampling technique in selecting participants from all middle schools in the targeted central Florida school district. The researcher also used a semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix E), with questions vetted by experts in the field through the use of the Delphi technique, to conduct interviews with SROs. The researcher conducted semi-structured, face-to-face, and audio-recorded interviews with consenting SRO participants until saturation was met, and no new themes emerged from the collected data. Confidentiality was ensured by aggregating any identifiable data from the preliminary questionnaire and using a voice scrambling technology to conceal the identity of the participants during the recorded interview. The researcher then reviewed the transcribed interviews and conducted a thematic analysis of the responses provided by the SROs.

**Definitions of Terms**

The following terms could help the reader understand the context in this study.

**Crisis intervention training (CIT).**

Training program created to reduce criminalization and unnecessary arrests and incarcerations. The CIT curriculum includes but is no limited to information on “behavioral health, substance abuse” and “police officer liability” (Bailey, et al., 2018).

**Law enforcement officer (LEO).**

Defined as one who is hired by the government and works for the criminal justice system to ensure that members of the community adhere to the rules and are safe (Gordijn, Vacher, & Kuppens, 2017).

**Florida Association of School Resource Officers (FASRO).**

The largest nonprofit association of school resource officers in Florida with over 850 members, it provides comprehensive training to its members (FASRO, n.d.).
Florida Department of Law Enforcement (FDLE).

The government law agency of Florida’s mission is “to promote public safety and strengthen domestic security by providing services in partnership with local, state, and federal criminal justice agencies” (FDLE, n.d.)

National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO).

This nonprofit association is the largest provider of school resource officers in the nation (Bolger et al., 2019).

School resource officers (SRO) and school resource deputies (SRD).

These are sworn LEOs that are employed by city municipals and sheriff departments to serve in public school settings (Bleakley & Bleakley, 2017).

Students with disabilities (SWD).

These are students who receive support as required by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, 2004).

Assumptions, Delimitations, and Limitations

An assumption of this research study is that those who participate will provide honest responses to the semi-structured interviews and preliminary survey data. Another assumption is that school-based LEOs will be open to sharing their experiences as SROs. A delimitation of the study is the number of interview participants. According to the Safe Schools Appropriation Expenditures Report 2016 - 2017 by FLDOE (2018), there were over 1,500 school-based LEOs in the state of Florida. This study will be limited to SROs serving in grades 6 – 8 in public middle schools in one district in the central Florida area. SROs from Title-1 and non-Title 1 schools will be represented. Due to the size and location of the study, the findings from this qualitative research study may not be generalizable.
Being a parent of a child with ASD and having worked as an exceptional student education teacher (ESE) in Florida public middle school settings, the researcher may possess conscious and unconscious bias stemming from personal experience. To ensure fidelity in the research process and in reporting results, the researcher will use the following techniques as suggested by Creswell and Poth (2018) to check potential biases: journalling, memoing, member checking, and bracketing. According to Creswell and Poth, the bracketing technique should be used during phenomenological research and allows “investigators [to] set aside their experiences, as much as possible” (p. 78).

**Summary**

The presence of SROs in public school settings is becoming a mandatory personnel requirement in our schools. The climate of school safety is under threat. No longer is it a matter of *if* the next school shooting will occur, but rather *when*. Parents/guardians, teachers and school staff, and the students who attend schools are aware of the school safety issues that are being faced in our schools today. This is evident by Florida’s newly enacted senate bills 7026 (2018) and 7030 (2019), addressing school safety and the increase in safety personnel in schools across the state.

Understanding the unique role of SROs and their potential contribution to the culture of safe schools would be invaluable for creating atmospheres that provide effective education to all students.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this literature review is to examine the literature concerning the legislation surrounding SROs and their roles in schools; the preparedness of SROs to interact with SWDs, particularly students with ASD; and training for SROs in working with students who have particular needs.

How does the existing literature on police training and preparation to serve in and out of schools aid in understanding the dynamic role SROs play in today’s diverse public schools? Civic apprehensions of school-based police officers include concerns that assigning LEOs in schools may perpetuate the “school to prison pipeline” (Mallett, 2016, p. 15). This chapter will address such concerns and review Florida legislation that is shaping the role of SROs and the need for school safety. With an understanding that the placement of SROs in schools will increase, this literature review will also explore an equally important population in public school settings whose numbers are also on the rise: students with autism. Interactions between students with autism and LEOs without knowledge of autism could lead to negative outcomes that could be avoided if proper training were provided.

Federal Laws and Florida Legislation

Throughout the United States of America’s history, when a specific need is identified and collectively assigned importance, pieces of legislation and laws are created to support and mandate changes. Public educational institutions and law enforcement agencies are not immune to such changes. For decades, the Department of Education has been the recipient of ongoing reform in several areas, including education for SWDs and school safety. More recently, as the review of literature illustrates, LEOs, including those serving as SROs, are also being required to transform their practices.
Federal Legislation Impacting Those with Disabilities

That education reform must reflect the needs of society is no novel concept. However, as demonstrated by court cases that led to Public Law 94-142, such as Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka (1953), Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Citizens (PARC) v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania (1971), Mills, v. Board of Education of the District of Columbia (1972), and Board of Education v. Rowley (1982), the history of education for SWDs has continued to evolve over the years.

Critical to understanding the development of the current legislation related to education is reviewing past presidential administrations and the focus of reform. Under President Lyndon B. Johnson, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 targeted poverty and education for all students including those experiencing hardship. The act was changed to No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2001, under the George W. Bush administration, and it focused on accountability. The NCLB Act mandated each student be taught by highly qualified teachers using evidence-based strategies and that each state assess student achievement on the skills being taught by utilizing state tests. Again, in 2015, President Barack Obama reformed the act and renamed it Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015). The focus of ESSA also included high standards and accountability and the need for SWDs to be afforded equal access to programs and increased opportunities. Additionally, ESSA recognized the need for physical and mental well-being such as support for psychological matters (Hoover, 2019).

With respect to the right to free and appropriate schooling for all students comes the right to an education in a safe environment. Challenging the current safety of public schools is the increase in school violence, evidenced by the horrific school shootings that have taken place over the past two decades. School shootings have continued to alarm the nation since the tragedy that took place on April 20, 1999, at Columbine High School in Jefferson County, Colorado, where
13 people were killed (Tran, 2019). Unfortunately, numerous school shootings followed that event with one of the deadliest high school shootings taking place on February 14, 2018, at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, where 17 lives were taken (Katsiyannis, Whitford, & Ennis, 2018).

Just as educational reform and legislation have reflected the needs of society in the past, new laws have been enacted to address the concerns for security and protection of students and staff in schools. All students have a right to an education. Although equal access to education and opportunity will always remain a vital concern in schools, the challenge presently being faced is how to provide that right safely.

**Public Law 94-142 and a Free and Appropriate Education**

In 1975, 2 years after the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 was adopted into law, Public Law 94-142 (P.L. 94-142), which targeted equality in the public classroom setting, was passed. The law created opportunities for young children with disabilities to be identified and staffed in appropriate classrooms serving their individualized educational needs. According to the U.S. Department of Education, P.L. 94-142 included four purposes for which the law was constructed upon; (a) ensure all children with disabilities receive a free appropriate public education (FAPE); (b) protect the rights of students and parents; (c) provide assistance to states to provide education; and (d) to assess the effectiveness of such efforts in providing education to children with disabilities.

The law also stipulated that students be educated in their least restrictive environment (LRE), which for many students receiving specialized education support services, meant being educated in mainstream settings with their typically developing peers, rather than placed in classrooms with only other students receiving specialized education services.
Americans With Disabilities Act of 1990

The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) prohibits discrimination of persons with physical and/or mental impairments. The purpose of the ADA is to protect individuals from prejudice and mandate federal and state provisions of equal opportunities to perform major life activities, which are defined but not limited to “caring for oneself, performing manual tasks, seeing, hearing, eating, sleeping, walking, standing, lifting, bending, speaking, breathing, learning, reading, concentrating, thinking, communicating, and working” (ADA, 1990).

According to Lewis (2019), the petition for equality, as outlined by the ADA stems from the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, which prevented workplace discrimination due to the individual’s “handicap”. As outlined by the ADA, reasonable accommodations for individuals with disabilities must be made to allow equal access in public settings, which includes construction of facilities, equal access, and transportation.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1990 (IDEA) was a law that ensured children with disabilities be provided services. Under Part C of IDEA, young children from birth to two and their families are classified as early interventions. Once the child turns three and until the age of 22, Part B of the IDEA mandates the individual receive FAPE and related services (IDEA, 1990). Revisions to expand the IDEA of 1990 occurred in 2004. The act was renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEIA) and addressed special education components such as early intervention, the student’s Individualized Education Plan (IEP), adherence to FAPE, and transition planning for post-secondary education. Regarding IDEIA transitioning, Clark (2007) noted eight areas related to the individual student including (a) interests; (b) student interests; (c) student cognitive achievement and progress; (d) adaptive
behavior; (e) interpersonal and relationship skills; (f) emotional and mental health; (g) employability; and (h) community participation.

The law also stipulated that students be educated in their LRE, which for many students receiving specialized education support services, meant being educated in mainstream settings with their typically developing peers rather than placed in classrooms with only other students receiving specialized education services.

**School Safety and Legislation**

According to most of the literature produced on the subject, there is a positive relationship between school safety and student achievement. When students and staff perceive their school climate as safe, an environment conducive to learning exists (Davis & Warner, 2018; Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools Technical Assistance Center, 2018). Highly publicized instances of school violence, particularly school shootings, have led to the public endorsement of increased school safety measures (Reingle-Gonzalez, Jetelina, & Jennings, 2016).

Interest has been generated in the area of school safety on a global scale. According to Perrodin (2019), three-billion dollars have been spent, nationwide, to protect schools since the tragic school shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School on December 14, 2012, where 27 children and adults were killed by a school shooter (Lundin, 2020). In fact, ESSA (2015) provided a framework for improving school climate through funding for areas including, but not limited to, mental health supports, collaboration with outside agencies to improve school safety, trauma training for school-based personnel, and bullying prevention (ESSA School Safety for Decision-Makers, n.d.).
Protecting students, including SWDs, is pertinent to creating an environment rich in learning (Ivery & Endicott, 2018). Measures such as developing Individual Emergency Lockdown Plans (IELPs) are being utilized in some states to ensure SWDs are safe and prepared for school-based crisis in response to the changing climate of the nation’s schools (Embury, Clarke, & Weber, 2019). The state of Florida has also implemented safety measures as mandated by legislation in response to school violence.

**Florida State Laws**

*The State of Florida’s House Bill 39*

Taking effect on October 1, 2017, Florida enacted House Bill 39 (H.B. 39), which required the Department of Law Enforcement to include training on ASD as part of LEO’s continued education requirements to maintain employment. This piece of legislation called for the training to include recognition of the signs and characteristics of persons with ASD and training on appropriate responses and interactions, and it permitted such training to count toward the required 40 hours of continued employment training.

*The State of Florida’s Senate Bill 7026*

On February 14, 2018, a young man entered Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. Armed with a semi-automatic assault rifle, the gunman opened fire and killed 17 people. Schools in Florida would never be the same from that day forward. The need for increased involvement of LEOs in public school settings has affected educational settings as never before. The Parkland tragedy has caused many to rethink public safety in our public schools. Legislation and policy changes have occurred in response to this tragic occurrence.
Law-makers in Florida responded quickly to the outcry of families and educators to make schools safe places. Less than a month later, on March 9, 2018, the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Public Safety Act S. 7026, (2018) was enacted. Senate Bill 7026 addressed the need for safe schools by providing funding for school districts to choose either an SRO or an armed guard trained by the sheriff’s office through the Coach Aaron Feis Guardian Program, named after the football coach who lost his life while shielding students from bullets at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High.

Additionally, Section 21 of Senate Bill 7026 (2018) addresses the Office of Safe Schools, which serves as a centralized source for standards and best practices in areas such as security. To ensure the safety and security of students and schools school safety specialist personnel are also required to be staffed. The legislation also mandates the development and implementation of a School Safety Specialist Training Program for such specialists, one based on national and state standards of safety and security. Senate Bill 7026 (2018) also requires regular active shooter and hostage situation drills for all faculty, students, and staff.

The social emotional climate of schools forever changed with the passage of this bill. With little research exploring the history of LEOs in public school settings as SROs and the variables impacted by SROs being assigned to serve in such capacities, the question remains whether school leaders can make the right choices concerning the role of SROs, if one is assigned to the school.

*The State of Florida’s Senate Bill 7030*

On May 9, 2019, Senate Bill 7030, titled the Implementation of Legislative Recommendations of the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Public Safety Commission, was enacted. Building upon Senate Bill 7026, Senate Bill 7030 (2019) mandated public schools
use the Florida Safe Schools Assessment Tool (FSSAT) as their assessment for school safety. The FSSAT is designed to aid school officials in the identification of threats and vulnerabilities. The tool is also required to address the following components: (a) crisis preparedness and planning; (b) security, crime, and violence prevention; (c) professional development; (d) examination of support service roles in the area of safety and security, (e) school security and police staffing; and (f) a return on investment analysis of physical safety controls (S. 7030, 2019). The bill also specifies the requirement for annual training for specific personnel in school districts and mandates the sheriff’s department implement either a guardian or other comparable program.

As part of the allocation for funding to support safe schools, Senate Bill 7030 (2019) addressed mental health issues for students and stated a minimal monetary amount of $100,000 would be disbursed to each school district in Florida. Training for school faculty and staff regarding and providing appropriate services to students experiencing mental health issues was also addressed in the legislation.

Law Enforcement in Schools: A Brief History

The SRO program was first introduced in the 1950s in Flint, Michigan by local law enforcement to improve relations between police and the community and dissuade crime (Theriot & Cueller, 2016). According to Bleakley and Bleakley (2018), over a decade later the SRO program became nationwide after its implementation in Fresno, California - again with the intent of building positive relationships between officers and neighboring communities.

During the 1960s, a new public law, the Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act of 1968 (P.L. 90–351, 1968) made provisions for the attorney general to award grants for building community relationships and continue public outreach in public settings, including schools. An
amendment to this law would eventually take place in 1998 in response to violence in public schools (Theriot & Orme, 2016). Continuing the focus on school safety and crime prevention, SROs in Fresno California served as “plain-clothes” agents in high schools during the 1970s and acted as a “point of contact between the police department and the school community” (Bleakley & Bleakley, 2018, p. 249).

In the 1990s, in response to school violence, the role of SROs changed. The prevalence of violent behavior was evident by the tragic school shootings at Heath High School in Kentucky in 1997, the shooting deaths of two students a year later at Thurston High School in Oregon (Myrstol, 2011), and one of the most notorious school shootings which transpired in 1999 at Columbine High School in Colorado (Bolger et al., 2019). In an article published in the *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, Mark Benigni (2004), an assistant principal, urged officials to fund SRO programs to ensure the safety of schools. State laws were proposed in response to school shootings, and federal funding was provided to meet the cries of concerned parents and educators, as well as a nation shocked at the state of affairs in public schools, especially on weapons such as firearms in schools (Myrstol, 2011).

Programs such as Drug Awareness Resistance Education (DARE), which began in the 1980s, and Gang Resistance Education and Training (GREAT), enacted in the 1990s, were implemented in public school settings as drug and violence prevention curriculums. The DARE program consisted of 17 lessons to be taught by uniformed LEOs who were certified through an 80-hour training course (Harmon, 1993). The initial purpose of DARE was to prevent drug and alcohol use among adolescents through weekly lessons. A decade later, a focus on gangs and gang related activity became the reason for GREAT. Similar to DARE, GREAT was taught by
uniformed LEOs who received the required 40-hour training (Palumbo & Ferguson, 1995), with the intent of providing youth with the skills to prevent peer pressure and gang influence.

However, according to Scholsser (2014), students were instructed by SROs and the programs were designed to increase the role of SROs as teachers and counselors. Scholsser’s findings, as the literature states, showed that SROs were often not utilized for their main purpose, which was school safety.

Support for School Resource Officers

There are several reasons for inquiring into the support for and positive impact that SROs have on educational institutions. A recent empirical review conducted by Javdani (2019), stated the most important characteristics of SROs is their ability to respond immediately and utilize the training they have received to react to threats and emergencies. As noted by Bleakley and Bleakley (2017), the very nature of the police officer profession often draws attention from the general public and their “perception often plays a significant role in the success or failure of police officers” (p. 250). However, as Myrstol (2011) stated, even with an increase in funding to support the presence of SROs and an increase in their placement in schools, there is an absence of research related to SROs’ impact on student behavior and achievement. In his research study, Myrstol also reported that public perceptions of SROs were influenced by their own interactions with LEOs. In a study on juvenile perceptions of police in general, Sanden and Wentz (2017) noted that vicarious interactions with police, such as watching police-related television shows or police officers in the news, affected the perception of LEOs possessed by the juveniles.
The placement of SROs in public school settings appears to enhance the feelings of a just society, and in some cases, they have been revealed as the first positive interaction between law enforcement and communities (Benigni, 2004). Critics of SRO programs remain concerned with the occurrence of police criminalizing student misconduct resulting in arrest, which in effect introduces the students to the judicial system (Bolger et al., 2019). Scholsser (2014) highlighted the policy of zero-tolerance, which was intended to keep weapons out of schools by giving school administrators the right to dismiss any student in possession of a weapon on school grounds, yet it has resulted in student expulsions for simple misbehaviors. The literature on school safety frequently addresses the belief that the more prevalent SROs are in schools, the more likely students will be referred to them for disobedience and misbehavior, rather than to school administrators, which was not the intent of the law (Bolger et al., 2019; Counts et al., 2018; Scholsser, 2014).

The potential for the criminalization of student misconduct has warranted concerns for some educators and society. The authors also found a “rising number of school-based arrests in some districts” (p. 370) across the nation. Outcomes of criminalization result in students being arrested and missing school and opportunities to learn. Yet, there is a stark difference between a student making a poor choice and acting out in aggression with the intent of striking their teacher or another student and a SWD, such as ASD, who lacks other means of communication and therefore acts out. For some SWDs, however, the behavior may be a manifestation of their disability (Theriot & Cuellar, 2016). For example, a student with ASD may push or place hands on their teacher in an attempt to avoid the task at hand or get away from the teacher. Although the physical contact could be labeled as assault and battery of a teacher by the SRO, knowledge
of the law, awareness of characteristics of ASD, and protections for students with disabilities can avert unfounded criminalization (Ivery & Endicott, 2018).

The literature highlights another point of view regarding having police officers in schools and the goal of utilizing SROs, which is the ultimate safety and protection of students, faculty, and staff (Javdani, 2019). Central to keeping educational environments safe, McQuiller (2018) gave attention to the idea that having an SRO on campus “forces a shooter to react to the responding force” of the SRO, which “improves the odds of survival for students and educators” (p. 19). Likewise, DeVos, Nielsen, Azar, and Whitaker (2018) elaborated further and revealed that school personnel such as SROs who are trained to respond to threats are the best line of defense in situations of school violence. In the Final Report of the Federal Commission on School Safety (2018), DeVos et al. mentioned the benefits of SROs related to building relationships with students as a means of preventing school violence.

**Training for SROs**

In addition to the training required to become an LEO, many SROs receive ongoing training from organizations such as the National Organization of School Resource Officers (NASRO). According to the association’s website and Bolger et al., (2018), the NASRO is the leading provider for training for SROs with over 1,500 school-based officers trained each year (p. 258).

The Florida Association of School Resource Officers (FASRO) has hosted an annual conference for school safety for 41 years (FASRO, n.d.). The conference provides SROs with annual training on a range of topics, from school safety to working with children with disabilities. Until recently, with the implementation of H.B. 39, mandatory training for LEOs regarding autism was not required. However, as of October 1, 2017, H.B. 39 requires training on
autism, including but not limited to recognizing common behaviors and characteristics, best practices on interacting with persons with autism, and de-escalation tactics.

Another training most often required for LEOs and SROs is Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) training. CIT is used to educate first responders on recognizing mental health issues, conducting de-escalation practices, and utilizing and coordinating community resources such as crisis centers (Kubiak, Shamrova, & Comartin, 2019). According to Sandoval (2002), crisis intervention theory is decades old, stemming from a nightclub fire in the 1930s in Boston, Massachusetts. Sandoval also reported two types of crisis: developmental and situational. Training for CIT includes a specific curriculum that targets the recognition of a person in crisis and targets de-escalation techniques. Although Peterson and Densley (2018) reported mixed findings on the effectiveness of CIT training, many pieces of literature support the use and practice (Dempsey, 2017; Kubiak et al., 2019). In a study investigating the use of CIT for persons with mental health issues in the central Florida region, Franz and Borum (2011) reported a 19% arrest prevention rate, based on the number of calls received and individuals actually arrested, due to the LEOs use of CIT.

Adolescence: Middle School

The typical age for students in middle school grades six, seven, and eight range from 10 to 15, and in some instances, 16, due to retention. It is a time of rapid transformation, both cognitively as well as sexually. The body begins to change, and such biochemical changes are referred to as puberty (Glass-Godwin, & Kalumuck, 2016). According to Goss and Holt (2014) middle-school-age students face a different reality in today’s school settings due to the aggression they have been exposed to in the media. In addition to their biochemical changes, students face changes of a different kind, in the form of stress and threats to safety. They are also
at risk for suicide, bullying, and school violence. Today’s middle-school-age students are not aware of a time when school shootings or violence in schools were not widespread.

*Social and Physical Development*

The adolescent phase of development takes place during the ages of 12 to 19 according to Gemelli (1996). However, Rapee, et al., (2019) claimed the age of adolescence should typically be used for ages 13 to 18. Regardless of the agreed-upon age of adolescence by researchers, the developmental time period is marked with copious amounts of transformation for the individual. These include hormonal changes, fluctuations in sleep patterns, becoming increasingly self-aware, and being concerned with social acceptance (Crone, 2017). Within this time period, Gemelli (1996) also noted the following progression in typical development: (a) an advance in formal thinking; (b) the ability to reason and problem solve; (c) the ability to classify people and objects into categories; and (d) thinking creatively including symbolically. Wright and Kutcher (2016) further elaborated on adolescent brain development and stated that, during the phase of impulsivity and risk-taking behavior, poor decision-making may be observed. The literature reveals a diversity of opinions with regard to adolescents’ ability to project their selves into future states. Although Gemelli (1996) also included the ability to plan with the future in mind in his list of advancements during adolescence. One decade earlier, Tugend (1986) reported that a lack of ability to imagine the future and experiencing perceived disappointments as temporary contributed to adolescent suicide rates.

Sheftall, Asti, Horowitz, Felts, Fontanella, Campo, and Bridge (2016) investigated suicides committed by elementary school and early adolescent age children and found impulsivity and relationship difficulties to be a potential reason for their deaths. Additionally,
Sheftall et al. recommended caretakers and school personnel, including SROs, be aware of the warning signs displayed by someone with suicidal thoughts to help prevent such tragic endings.

**Suicide and Mental Health**

A commonality between Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015) and the Implementation of Legislative Recommendations of the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Public Safety Commission (2019) is the addressing of mental health interventions. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2017), over 4,500 deaths occur yearly due to adolescent suicide between the ages of 10 to 24. In fact, the second leading cause of death for persons ages 10 through 19 was reported as suicide (Hinduja & Patchin, 2019; Hooper-Weatherly & Smith, 2019). Modern-day middle schooler teens and pre-teens face the challenge of growing up in a world that is mostly digital. Everything they say or do is potentially video-recorded and online for all to view. According to much of the literature on the topic of youth suicides, depression and a decrease in self-worth (Tugend, 1986) play a major role. According to Tugend, who reported on numerous teen suicides in Colorado in the late 1980s, clinical depression was one of the main causes of death by suicide.

**Bullying and Cyber Bullying**

Safe schools and school climates that are conducive to learning are the goal of stakeholders across Florida. Mentioned in both the ESSA (2015) and the Implementation of Legislative Recommendations of the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Public Safety Commission (2019) are anti-bullying measures. According to Ryzin and Roseth (2019) bullying has been linked to numerous emotional and behavioral issues. Florida also has the Hope Scholarship program which provides vouchers to families of children who have been bullied.
(Vouching for Bullied Kids, 2018) and offsets the cost for relocating to another school. Bullying, which Hinduja and Patchin (2018) defined as being “willful and repeated” (p. 334) behaviors intended to hurt another person either physically or mentally (Woolley, 2019), is no longer torment limited to the bus or schoolyard, ending when students go home from school. There is another platform that permits bullying to be constant and committed on a wider scale: The Internet and social media.

Social media plays an important role in the self-esteem and socialization of adolescents. People measure their self-worth in the amount of likes and views they receive on online outlets such as YouTube, Snapchat, Instagram, and Tik-Tok. Defined by Savage and Tokunaga (2017), cyberbullying is repeated behavior intended to cause harm, and it takes place over electronic communications such as text messaging, emails, and the Internet. As with bullying, cyberbullying involves an imbalance in power between the perpetrator and the victim, is repeated, and is intentional (Barlett, 2019). According to Hinduja and Patchin (2018), literature on the relationship between cyberbullying and suicide is growing, and there are reports that those who have been victims of cyberbullying are 1.5 times more likely to attempt suicide. Of further interest is research on cyberbullying victimization of adolescents with high functioning ASD conducted by Liu, Hsiao, Ni, Liang, Lin, Chan, Hsieh, Wang, Lee, Chou, and Yen (2019). According to Liu et al., children and teens with ASD spend more time on electronic devices and may use electronics as a means of socialization. Although preventative measures are being put in place, once teenagers have taken their own life, the damage is done. Walker and Burns (2019) reported that preventative measures are not enough to counteract suicide because media, such as that portrayed in the Netflix series 13 Reasons Why, perpetuates suicide idealization.
According to Walker and Burns, the fictional drama in which a teenage girl takes her own life for 13 reasons, which are explained one episode at a time, rekindled researcher interest between behavioral scientists and suicide idealization. It also enhanced the dialogue surrounding teen suicide. Similarly, a widespread discussion on the prevalence of school violence has become an important topic in public school settings.

**School Violence**

Accumulating research on school shootings and school violence has left policy makers, educators, parents, students, and other stakeholders continuing to look for ways to prevent tragic outcomes since the school shooting at Columbine High School in April 1999. Unfortunately, school shootings and school violence have continued and intensified to the present day. A review of the literature portrays differing opinions as to the root of the problem. Researchers such as McQuiller (2018) addressed America’s gun laws and highlighted the ease at which a person can obtain a gun and use it to mass kill. Other researchers such as Williams, Rivera, Neighbours, and Reznik (2007) focused on the development of youth and examined the culture of violence and portrayals in the media as contributing factors to school violence. Although the debate regarding the reason continues, SWD are at greater risk for negative outcomes.

**Autism Spectrum Disorder**

Since the 1940s ASD has been recognized as a medical diagnosis with no known cause or origin (King & Murphy, 2014). In March 2020, the CDC released updated statistics stating that 1 in 54 children, up to age 18, in the United States of America has ASD (CDC, 2020). Furthermore, the CDC also stated that 1 in 45 adults have ASD (CDC, 2020). Autism is often defined by the manifestation of certain behaviors which may include but are not limited to: (a)
the avoidance of eye contact; (b) preference to be alone; (c) perseverance on sameness; (d) difficulty with expression; (e) lack of understanding social cues; (f) communicatory deficits; (g) echolalia or echoing what one hears; (h) spinning; and (i) hand flapping, (Debbaudt, 2002; Hepworth, 2017; King & Murphy, 2014). As reported by Loefgren (2011), “it is the only disability that has quintupled since 1997” (p. 226). Scientists are starting to uncover, there are often comorbidities with other disorders, such as attention deficit disorder (ADD) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). In addition to the comorbidities impacting attention often presenting with ASD, persons on the spectrum are at greater risk for suffering from anxiety and depression (Gates, Kang, Lerner, 2017; Loefgren, 2011).

Theory of Mind (ToM) and Vulnerability

Premack and Woodruff (1978) developed theory of mind (ToM) to investigate chimpanzees’ ability to communicate and determine the intention of their caregivers. They defined ToM as the following:

In saying that an individual has a theory of mind, we mean that the individual imputes mental states to himself and to others (either to conspecifics or to other species as well). A system of inferences of this kind is properly viewed as a theory first, because such states are not directly observable, and second, because the system can be used to make predictions, specifically about the behavior of other organisms (p. 515)

Richman and Bidshari (2016), further defined ToM as the ability to attach mental states to persons other than oneself. Persons with autism often possess a deficit in ToM, which impairs their expectation of what the other person is going to say or do (Colle, Baron-Cohen, & Hill, 2006). In both adolescent and adulthood interactions with others, understanding that individuals have their own perspective and recognizing one possesses their own thoughts, aid in
socialization. Using ToM, Attwood (2007) noted the eyes serve as a great cue to communicate emotions, whereas persons with ASD typically avoid making eye contact and tend to look at the speakers’ mouth as a way to construct meaning. A study conducted by Booules-Katri, Pedreño, Navarro, Pamias, and Obiols (2019) investigated differing aspects of ToM in persons with high-functioning autism (HFA) compared to persons with schizotypal–schizoid personality disorder (SSPD) and utilized three tests: the Strange Stories Test which encompassed stories with white lies, cheating, and double meaning words; the Faux Pas Test, which required the identification of inappropriate sayings or words that may hurt another’s feelings within a series of stories; and the Reading of the Mind in the Eyes Test, in which 36 black and white photos were shown to participants who were asked to report how the person in the picture felt. According to Booules-Katri et al., participants with HFA (N = 35) scored lower than both the participants with SSPS (N = 30) and the healthy control (HC) group (N = 36). As noted previously, deficits in ToM may relate to impairments in communication for persons with ASD. Although Booules-Katri et al.’s study was primarily concerned with persons with HFA, Richman and Bidshahri (2016) stated a lack of empathy or “self-other switch” (p. 47) may provide an explanation as to why echolalia, repeating words and phrases heard from another individual, is common in persons with ASD, especially in those who are functioning at a lower cognitive level. Within the context of ToM, Richman and Bidshahri further remarked that the person with lower functioning ASD repeating another’s words or phrases may stem from a “failure to represent words belonging to the other and instead representing them as one’s own words” (p. 47). Colle et al., (2007) found that children with ASD who possessed low levels of language abilities demonstrated specific deficits in ToM.
An impairment of ToM and deficits in communication skills increase the vulnerability of children and adults with autism. Vulnerability has been the subject of much literature surrounding ASD. Difficulty understanding the “intentional states of others” (Caruso, 2010, p. 506) can lead people with ASD to be victimized. They are vulnerable to sexual assault, bullying, and other forms of peer victimization, such as being provoked. According to Visser et al., (2016), in a study comparing adolescents between the ages of 13 - 18 with ASD ($N = 94$) and their typically developing peers ($N = 94$), 10% of adolescents with ASD and 15% of adolescents without ASD underestimated the appropriateness of sexual behavior, as depicted on 44 images shown to them. Although adolescents with ASD and their typically developing peers scored similarly, Visser et al. reported the need for guidance because they represented a vulnerable group that could fall victim to sexual abuse without being provided information on inappropriate sexual acts. A lack of understanding what contributes to inappropriateness may be problematic for sexual abuse victims with ASD with regard to reporting and seeking help, as outlined in a case report by Reese and Deutsch (2020), where a 16-year-old girl with ASD was admitted to the emergency department due to a sexual assault. Reese and Deutsch elaborated further on the emergency visit, in which the girl and her grandmother were escorted to by a police officer and on how the victim was unable to provide details of the assault due to her communicatory deficits related to her ASD.

Forrest, Kroeger and Stroope (2019) evaluated the associations between subscales of the Children’s Social Behavior Questionnaire, a self-administered questionnaire, filled out by parents of children ages 6 - 17 years old with ASD ($N = 1057$). The authors reported a significant and positive correlation between communicatory difficulties and being bullied often, supporting the hypotheses that adolescents with ASD are at an increased risk for victimization. Another study
concerned specifically with the association between facial emotion recognition and bullying was Liu, Wang, Yang, Shyi and Yen’s (2019) investigation of participants (N = 138) between the ages of 11 and 18, with HFA and their ability to recognize the intensity in other people’s faces using the Computerized Facial Emotion Recognition Task. They reported that victims of bullying with ASD had a decreased ability to recognize the intensity of emotions, as depicted through facial expressions when compared to typically developing peers. Liu et al. established that adolescents with ASD may fall victim to increased bullying due to their inability to recognize the facial expressions of others and in turn be considered impolite by their neuro-typical peers, thus resulting in negative interactions. Adams, Taylor, Duncan, and Bishop (2016) highlighted another problem related to deficits in social functioning and victimization faced by students with ASD in mainstream settings: being provoked by typically developing peers who possess knowledge of what bothers the student with ASD. The authors reported associations between peer victimization and educational outcomes through data collected by participants (N = 1,221) who completed the Bullying and School Experiences of Children with ASD Survey (BSE) and were parents of children with ASD ages of 6 - 15. Furthermore, Ung, McBride, Collier, Selles, Small, Phares and Storch (2016) also examined peer victimization and characteristics of adolescents (N = 81) with ASD between 9 - 17. Their findings supported the correlation between victimization by peers and characteristics prevalent in youth with ASD, such as social skill deficits, social avoidance, and anxiety.

Pertinent to developing an understanding of others, increasing ToM skills may occur in quality social interactions in which the child or adolescent with ASD is able to practice such skills (Huyder, Nilsen, & Bacso, 2017). Additionally, suggestions for further research on
effective practices, including longitudinal studies and interventions (Peterson, Garnett, Kelly, & Attwood, 2009) to develop ToM and social skills, are repeatedly mentioned in the literature.

**Social Skills**

A basic assumption, pertinent to the study of ASD, is that deficits in communication and social skills exist in individuals on the autism spectrum. The notion of social skill deficits and the relationship with social anxiety for persons with ASD has been explored by Bellini (2006). According to Bellini, social anxiety in ASD can be described as cyclical in nature. Because the person with ASD is typically hypersensitive to outside sources due to their physiology, this may lead to social withdrawal, which further exacerbates the social skill deficit, leading to further negative interactions with others. The cycle is repeated, and without positive interactions, the adolescent with autism continues to lack appropriate social skills. Choque-Olsson, Rautio, Asztalos, Stoetzer, and Bolte (2016) evaluated and reported positive findings on a social group training program for adolescents with ASD. They described social skills to include “understanding of social signals, emotion processing, alternatives of thoughts and behaviors, increased self-confidence, independence, and awareness of own difficulties” (p. 1,006). Gates, Kang, and Lerner (2017) reviewed social skill efficacy in youth with autism and revealed self-reported measures of social skills tend to have greater validity than parent and teacher reports of the same skill, indicating many students with ASD are able to learn appropriate social skills and report on their effectiveness. Within the context of social skills training for students with ASD, Mckenney, Stachniak, Albright, Jewell, and Dorencz (2016) conducted an observational study to evaluate social academic behaviors of secondary students with ASD. They found that academically successful students with ASD more appropriately used social skills and observed declines in inappropriateness.
Furthermore, Bellini, Peters, Benner, and Hopf (2007) conducted a meta-analysis of social skill interventions provided for children with ASD within the school setting. Bellini et al. observed that, for social skills training to be effective, the intervention program must be matched with the specific skill deficit of the child with ASD. Consequently, Bellini and Peters (2008) stated that, when clinicians identify the social skill deficit, match treatment to target the skill, and create opportunities for the child with ASD to transfer the learned skill in other areas of their life by partnering with caregivers, including parents and teachers, effective training for social skills emerges.

**Interactions Between Law Enforcement Officers and Persons with Autism**

Bleakley and Bleakley (2018) found that SROs are often called upon to manage student behavior. Literature about SROs interaction with SWDs, such as autism, is limited. However, although sparse, there is available literature pertaining to interactions between LEOs and persons with autism outside school settings (Archer & Hurley, 2013). The lawsuits from such uniformed interactions that result from the maltreatment of persons with disabilities by LEOs, are indications of the high need for education of law enforcement personnel in general and SROs in particular (Myers, 2017). The literature stated the likelihood of persons with ASD meeting LEOs increases (Rava, Shattuck, Rast, & Roux, 2017) as they become older. With the increasing prevalence of autism, clearly the need for professional development for law enforcement is growing.

Deficits in social skills, the theory of mind, and sheer vulnerability place persons with ASD in situations where interactions with LEOs are probable. Much of the literature about police interactions with persons with ASD focuses on events outside of the school setting, yet
with the placement of SROs in public schools, an increase in the chance of contact is more likely.

Persons with ASD are not immune to committing criminal offenses nor are they immune to being victimized (Chown, 2010) reported. Chown elaborated further and revealed that persons with disabilities, including those with autism, are 10 times more likely to be sexually assaulted due to vulnerabilities and deficits in communication. Often a comorbidity of depression, ADD, and ADHD exists with ASD (Debbaudt, 2002). If persons with ASD are interviewed by an LEO, they may result in definite problems due to this comorbidity.

Children, adolescents, and adults with autism are highly vulnerable due to their communicatory deficits. North, Russell, and Gudjonsson (2008) found that officers may not recognize such vulnerability if the person with ASD appears to use language competently. Studies also suggest individuals with ASD are more likely to show compliance and be eager to please or want to avoid further questioning, by giving responses that could potentially cause them further problems with the law if they perceive that is what the officer wants to hear (Myers, 2017). Not recognizing the intentions of the officer could directly be related to the person with autism’s “impairment of theory of mind” (Hepworth, 2017). The theory of mind allows one to understand or consider what the other person’s thoughts or next steps may be. Impairments in understanding, such as social cues, leaves the person with ASD open and vulnerable to incriminating him or herself. Myers (2017), in a review of laws according to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), found that LEOs’ speaking in plain language could be helpful in such interactions.

School Resource Officers in Schools Working with Students with Disabilities
The literature states over and again that placing SROs in schools to prevent crime and increase campus safety is one of the most important reasons for their implementation. Through the years, SROs have been utilized for multiple roles, including LEO, as counselors speaking with students in crisis, and as teachers instructing programs such as DARE (Schlosser, 2014). Being such an integral part of the educational institute, interacting with students, should be encouraged. SWD have the right to a free and appropriate education (IDEIA, 2004) tailored to their needs and in accordance with their IEPs. They also have the right to benefit from interactions with SROs serving as teachers or mentors, counselors, or LEOs if needed. However, public officials such as SROs must possess the training required to work with SWD such as ASD (Loegren, 2011).

*Training for SROs*

Prior to public safety laws being enacted in Florida schools, federal guidelines pertaining to SRO training did not exist (Counts et al., 2018). According to Meade (2019), there is no nationally accepted training for SROs related to working with SWD or on special education laws. Instead, trainings such as those offered by NASRO, were recommended. Although NASRO does not certify officers, they provide a 40-hour training to SROs on a variety of topics and recommend law enforcement agencies require the specialized training offered before assigning sworn officers to schools (NASRO, n.d.).

One of the most important aspects of Senate Bill 7030 (2019) was the requirement for school administrators and school safety teams to have an active shooter plan in place. According to McQuiller (2018), more than 350 cases involving gun violence on school grounds took place over the last six years. SROs are “uniformed, armed, police officers” who work directly in
school settings and are “trained” and “assigned to protect and serve education environments” (Counts, et al., 2018, p. 407).

**Gap in Literature**

Literature on the interactions between police officers and persons with disabilities in settings outside of educational institutions is scarce but available. Meyer (2017) reported that people with disabilities affecting their mental state and their behavior are more likely to be injured during interactions with LEOs. Several interactions between police and persons with ASD have resulted in unfortunate endings, as reported by Crane, Maras, Hawken, Mulcahy, and Memon (2016). Chokshi (2016), in the *New York Times* reported that a therapist in Miami, Florida was shot while trying to calm down his adult patient with ASD. In a mixed-methods exploratory study conducted by Copenhaver and Tewksbury (2018), they emphasized other instances in which persons with ASD were injured by LEOs, such as the case in which two police officers from Los Angeles, California, shot and killed an unarmed adult male with autism because they thought he possessed a firearm, which turned out to be a cell phone. Another publicized incident in which a young man with autism, aged 15, was killed by police happened in Denver, Colorado, in 2003. Osborn (2008) reported that, shortly after the young man was discharged from the hospital, he was home pacing and holding a kitchen knife. When he got too close to responding police, he was shot four times (Osborn, 2008). Due to such tragic occurrences, a public outcry for training for law enforcement on interacting with persons with ASD has sparked new legislation, such as Florida House Bill 39, which requires training on autism for LEOs in the state of Florida. However, there has been little investigation on what specified training SROs need to receive in preparation for their multifaceted role in which they work with students with and without disabilities.
Summary

The important role that the SROs hold has evolved to meet the ever-changing needs of the public. Intended to build relationships between members of society and law enforcement, police officers were assigned to schools as an extension of community service. The role of SROs changed to reflect the need for protection and prevention, following an influx of violence and school shootings in the 1990s. Students identified as having a disability that affects behavior, discretion, and communicatory ability, such as individuals with autism have, are at an increased risk of interactions with LEOs, including SROs, which could lead to negative outcomes. It is crucial to school safety that school-based LEO are trained and prepared to work with all students, especially students who display deficits in social skills and awareness.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to investigate the role of SROs working in public middle schools in central Florida. This study will seek to describe the professional preparation and lived experiences SROs have had regarding school safety specific to SWD. The study will also explore how SROs are prepared to serve in a changing school climate.

Research Design

This research study utilized a qualitative methodology and a phenomenological research design to investigate the research questions and collect qualitative data. According to McMillan (2016), phenomenology seeks to clarify commonalities and lived experiences “as consciously perceived by and described by participants” (p. 317) of the study. Furthermore, Creswell and Poth (2018) defined a phenomenological study as one that “describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon” (p. 75). Ary, Jacobs, Sorensen, and Walker (2019) attested to the notion that “multiple realities are rooted in subjects’ perspectives” (p. 15) in phenomenological research design. Using a semi structured interview protocol vetted by professionals related to the research field through the use of the Delphi technique, the researcher conducted individual audio-recorded interviews with SROs. Each participant met with the researcher for approximately one hour at a neutral location that was convenient for the research participant and allowed for confidential discussion.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What are the lived experiences of SROs who work in public middle schools?
2. What lived experiences have SROs had with SWDs?
3. How are SROs prepared to work with students in middle schools, including students who have disabilities such as ASD?

**Population**

The population of this study included LEOs who serve as full-time SROs. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics (2019), an LEO is defined as a person who has sworn under oath to protect and uphold the law of the constitution. Participants of this research study were selected using purposive sampling of SROs who work fulltime at 1 of the 12 middle schools in a central Florida school district. A homogenous sampling of research participants was selected based upon two criteria: (a) SRO had worked at least 2 years as an SRO; and, (b) SRO had interacted with SWD. Utilizing purposive sampling was most appropriate for this study because it permitted the researcher to select participants who had experienced the central phenomenon of serving as an SRO in a public middle school in Florida.

**Role of the Researcher**

In qualitative studies, such as a phenomenological research design in which in-depth interviews are conducted between participants and researchers, the researcher is known as an instrument of the study (Given, 2008). To ensure the credibility and validity of the results from the research study, the researcher’s beliefs, potential bias, and experience with the subject matter are transparent and addressed. The researcher may utilize techniques such as bracketing, memoing and journaling to further increase the validity of the research study. Bracketing procedures included the researcher acknowledging and recording any preconceptions or foreknowledge they possessed as such ideas arose during the data collection and analysis process (Tufford & Newman, 2010).
The researcher’s qualifications to serve as a human instrument for this research include 12 years of working in public middle school settings in a variety of capacities, including as an exceptional student education (ESE) teacher. The researcher’s educational background in special education includes a bachelor’s and master’s degree in ESE. Furthermore, the researcher is a mother of a teenage male who was diagnosed with ASD at the age of three. As an educator and a parent, this researcher supports school safety and the means to protect all students from in-school violence, and the researcher has a genuine interest in the use of school-based LEOs serving as SROs in public school settings and their preparedness to interact with SWDs such as ASD.

**Procedures**

To ensure ethical procedures and standards related to human research, including confidentiality disclosure and informed consent, are upheld, the researcher obtained permission from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Central Florida (UCF) to conduct this study. Additionally, the researcher received research board approval from the central Florida public school district in which the study took place.

Upon university and school district approval, and permission from the school principals to contact the SRO in their schools, the researcher contacted SROs working in each of the 12 middle schools by phone call to their respective law enforcement agency phone number. Each SRO was mailed an initial request for participation packet using their school-based site address through standard mail. The packet included an informed consent document requesting participation by the participants, including a consent form for audio-recording, and the researcher’s contact information. The potential participants were provided an abstract that defined the purpose and nature of the research study and were provided a hardcopy of a preliminary survey (Appendix A) to ensure both participant criteria of at least 2 years’ experience
as an SRO, and experiences interacting with SWD were met. The researcher went and retrieved the completed packet from the SRO in person. Participants meeting the two criteria were considered for the next step, a face-to-face interview. The researcher phoned the participants to schedule face-to-face interviews. Before any face-to-face meetings, the researcher collected the surveys, obtaining preliminary data about the subjects in person to ensure confidentiality.

Instrument

The researcher utilized two data collection instruments. An initial survey was mailed to potential participants (Appendix A) to obtain descriptive data such as gender, number of years in law enforcement, number of years as an SRO, number of trainings attended related to working with individuals with disabilities, and number of trainings attended related to school safety and threat assessment. The researcher collected the surveys in person to ensure confidentiality.

The second data collection instrument was the semi-structured interview protocol. In collaboration with a panel of experts on the topic being studied, the researcher used the Delphi research method to generate questions for the semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix B). According to Bhattacharya (2017), the Delphi research method is useful when there is no established theory available. The method relies on the expertise of professionals with knowledge related to the field being investigated. For this research study, the following six experts contributed to the final protocol questions for the semi-structured interview:
Panel expert (a) is the chief of police of a city in the central Florida district where the research will be conducted and who served as an SRO during his career; (b) is a lieutenant with over 20 years of law enforcement and military training and who served as an SRO in central Florida public schools; (c) is a university professor who holds a doctorate and possesses expertise in the field of autism; (d) is a retired lieutenant who holds a doctorate and who served as a substitute teacher in a public school system and held a variety of positions in law enforcement, including police academy coordinator; (e) is a professor from the department of criminal justice who served as an SRO and possesses over 20 years of experience as an LEO; and (e) is a police sergeant with over 18 years in law enforcement, who served as an SRO and currently serves as an adjunct professor for a police academy.

Linstone and Turoff (1975) described the Delphi process as cyclical in nature. The original questions were provided to all members of the panel who then examined and amended interview questions they deemed relevant to the research study. The researcher then made suggested changes to the survey instrument and sent it again to the panel for additional feedback. The researcher was responsible for revisions and disseminating the results to the panel. Once the process reached the final phase which consisted of all evaluations being considered, the interview protocol was finalized (Linstone & Turoff, 1975). With the consensus of the panel of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DELPHI Committee Member Panel</th>
<th>Law Enforcement Experience</th>
<th>School Resource Officer Experience</th>
<th>Higher Education Instructor/Professor</th>
<th>Knowledge on Persons with ASD</th>
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Table 1 Delphi Technique Panel of Experts

Linstone and Turoff (1975) described the Delphi process as cyclical in nature. The original questions were provided to all members of the panel who then examined and amended interview questions they deemed relevant to the research study. The researcher then made suggested changes to the survey instrument and sent it again to the panel for additional feedback. The researcher was responsible for revisions and disseminating the results to the panel. Once the process reached the final phase which consisted of all evaluations being considered, the interview protocol was finalized (Linstone & Turoff, 1975). With the consensus of the panel of
experts, the researcher moved forward with conducting interviews with the vetted interview protocol (Appendix B).

**Data Collection**

The researcher met with each selected SRO individually at a neutral location preferred by the participant and that allowed for confidentiality. According to Van Manen (2016), interviews conducted over coffee or a meal allow for a more relaxed atmosphere, one conducive to encouraging the participant’s comfort in sharing stories and anecdotal accounts. Before the interview began, the researcher explained the confidentiality agreement to the participant and asked the participant to refrain from using any identifiable names, including their own, or students, or the school. The participants were informed that, with their verbal consent, the interviews would be audio-recorded using both a Sony digital audio recorder and the Voice Recorder and Audio Editor app. The information collected would be stored in a locked safe file for confidentiality purposes. The participants were informed that they could conclude the interview at any time or choose not to answer any part of the questionnaire. At that time, the researcher would stop the interview.

The researcher utilized the semi structured interview protocol (Appendix B) which was deemed appropriate by the expert panel, with the research questions serving as the foundation for the meeting. As suggested by Vagle (2014), the researcher limited dialogue, thus allowing the participants to fully relate their experiences as SROs. Vagle (2016) stated that the participants’ role is to share their lived experience of the phenomenon. With paper and pencil in hand, the researcher recorded notes or ideas as they entered their mind. The researcher elicited further details from the participants, as necessary, using prompts to explore answers. After the interview, the researcher provided the participant with a verbal summary of the interview, as well
as a chance for the participant to provide further input. The researcher conducted the interviews until no new topics were revealed in interviews, and saturation had been reached. According to Saunders, Sim, Kingstone, Baker, Waterfield, Bartlam, and Jinks (2018), saturation in qualitative research such as interviewing is attained when “the researcher starts to hear the same comments again and again” (p. 1,896).

**Data Analysis**

The researcher ensured confidentiality of the research participants by protecting their voice recordings using the voice scrambling program, Voxal Voice Changer (NCH Software, n.d.). After voice recordings had been changed by Voxal, the audio-recorded interviews were transcribed using Rev (Transcribe Audio to Text, n.d.), an online transcription company. The participants were provided a transcription of their interview for review and to ensure validity via traditional mail through the U.S. Postal Service. According to Seidman (2019), providing participants with a written report of their interview for review, serves as a form of member-checking and contributes to the reliability of the study. Transcribed interviews were systematically read and evaluated by the researcher using a thematic analysis.

The researcher used the following steps for analyzing the transcribed data from phenomenological research (Vagle, 2014, p. 98 - 99):

1. A holistic reading of the entire text
2. A line-by-line reading
3. Follow up questions in the margins to identify the phenomenon
4. A second line by line reading to create follow-up questions for participants
5. A third line by line reading, analyzing researcher thoughts in the margin
6. Subsequent readings, extracting themes

As stated by Guest, MacQueen, and Namey, (2012), analyzing data for themes is a process in which the researcher looks for patterns in the responses which are “often readily apparent” (p.24). Furthermore, the researcher used Colazzi’s (1978) method, a seven-step process for abstracting themes from phenomenological data, which included the following: (a) familiarization with the data; (b) identification of significant statements; (c) formulation of meanings; (d) clustering themes; (e) development of exhausted description of the phenomena; (f) production of a condensed structure; and (g) seeking verification from participants. According to Campbell, Quincy, Osserman, and Pedersen (2013), although it is not impossible to achieve, “there are no clear guidelines in the literature as to what the appropriate unit of analysis should be for coding interview transcripts” (p. 303). Basit (2003) described qualitative analysis as an ongoing process that the researcher conducts throughout the entirety of the study. During the initial analysis of the interview transcriptions, the researcher used a colored highlighter approach, as suggested by Stottok, Bergaus, and Gorra (2011), to manually code and evaluate repeated words and phrases, contrasting and similar answers, analogies or metaphors, and potentially missing data such as unanswered questions. Specific highlighter colors were assigned to particular words and phrases. Once the researcher identified reoccurring themes in the data, the researcher was able to construct answers to the research questions.

Bracketing

Creswell and Poth (2018) stated researchers conducting a phenomenological study may report their own personal experiences related to the phenomenon in the form of bracketing. This process, also known as “phenomenological reflection” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 77) allows the researcher to avoid implicit bias while conducting and analyzing data. The researcher used two
forms of bracketing in this study. First, the researcher participated in a bracketed interview. According to Tufford and Newman (2010) a non-managerial colleague of the researcher can serve as a supportive outsider. If qualified to conduct the interview, they can, allowing for the researcher to share their beliefs regarding the phenomena. Before data collection, the researcher was interviewed by a colleague who worked at the same middle school as the researcher. She was chosen to conduct the bracketing interview because she did not hold an administrative role, yet she was also an educator who held a master’s degree in special education. The interview was conducted outside of the workplace at a park and was audio recorded for transcription purposes (see Appendix B). Additionally, the researcher used field notes to bracket their beliefs or compile their own interpretations of the findings as an ongoing process throughout the data collection (Ahern, 1999) by writing thoughts and ideas as they surfaced. The researcher strictly adhered to reporting themes and findings based on transcribed interviews with SRO participants.

**Validity, Credibility, and Reliability**

The goal of any research study is to answer the research questions by obtaining and reporting results that accurately reveal the truth of the subject. The purpose of this phenomenological approach was to obtain a clear understanding of the phenomenon being studied, which includes stories and anecdotes from those experiencing the phenomena (Fuster, 2019). As stated by McMillan (2016), validity in qualitative research is sometimes referred to as credibility. The researcher used techniques such as member-checking, asking for clarification, and thematic analysis to minimize threats to validity. McMillian (2016) stated that the length of the questionnaire and number of items measuring the same data effect reliability and should be consistent. The interview protocol was chosen with the purpose of investigating the lived experiences of SROs related to their roles. The semi structured interview protocol was
developed and vetted by a team of six experts in the field to ensure the questions aligned with the research objectives (Ary, et al., 2019). The researcher used member checking and sought participant feedback to ensure reliability. Member checking and participant feedback was used to triangulate data. Creswell and Poth (2018) described the process of triangulation to include participants verifying and, if necessary, correcting the researchers account of the qualitative research. As consenting research participants, it was assumed the SROs provided honest and accurate responses and reflections to the semi-structured interview questions, giving credibility to their recollections. Anecdotal data that were shared by SROs were presumed to be truthful accounts of the participants’ experiences.

Limitations

There were a number of limitations to this research study: First, the sample size was relatively small due to the number of middle schools in the selected school district. There was also the potential that many SROs were new to education and did not meet the criteria pertaining to their length of service of 2 or more years. The study was restricted to one central Florida school district, and the SROs worked only in the middle schools of that district, thus decreasing generalizability. However, in his literature supporting generalizing data from qualitative research, Firestone (1993) argued that “providing rich” and “thick description” help understand the “processes that go on in a situation and the beliefs and perceptions of those in it” (p. 22).

Although measures were taken to ensure the researcher has accurately captured the participant’s answers during interviews, the participants self-reported their accounts based on their perspective. There remains the possibility that participants possessed biases, exaggerated, or provided inaccurate answers, and thus this is a weakness of the research design, because the researcher had no means to verify reported experiences. The location of the face-to-face
interviews was in a location that was also not the “natural field setting” (Creswell, 1994, p. 150). Finally, recent changes in Florida’s legislation related to Senate Bill 7026 (2018) and Senate Bill 7030 (2019) limited the applicability of prior studies related to SROs, school safety, and interactions with SWD, as research in this area is in its infancy.
CHAPTER FOUR: DATA ANALYSIS

Within this chapter, the researcher will present findings obtained from conducting this phenomenological research study. The following research questions guided the study:

1. What are the lived experiences of SROs who work in public middle schools?
2. What lived experiences have SROs had with SWDs?
3. How are SROs prepared to work with students in middle schools, including students who have disabilities such as ASD?

The procedures for the data collection were developed to answer the research questions and discuss the experiences of SROs working with SWD in the public middle school setting, as well as their preparedness to do such.

From the data analysis, four themes emerged: (a) law enforcement; (b) relationships; (c) school safety; and (d) training and preparation. Further analysis of the data revealed 15 subthemes, which are presented within this chapter.

The chapter is organized into two sections: The first section includes aggregated participant data of all SROs who completed the screening survey and a biographical sketch of each of the eight interview participants. The second section includes the data collection process, data analysis, and the results. Additionally, the data analysis is presented in the order of the research questions and answered by the four themes, including overarching subthemes. The research questions were answered using the participants’ words and phrases, which served as thick and rich descriptions of the phenomena- the lived experiences of middle school SROs.
Participant Data

Prior to contact with any potential SRO participants, the researcher communicated with each middle school principal, approved by the district IRB, to obtain permission to conduct research with their school’s SRO. The researcher answered all the questions asked by the principals and provided a copy of the initial data collection survey when requested. Following contact with the principals, the researcher hard copy mailed the seven-question survey (see appendix D) to obtain demographic data from each of the middle schools’ 15 SROs. Of the 15 mailed surveys, 87% (N = 13) were returned to the researcher. All 13 SROs indicated they had interacted with a student with disabilities as part of their role in schools, thus meeting one criterion for interview participation, additionally, 9 of the 15 SROs also met the second criteria, having served as an SRO for 2 or more years (see Table 2).
## Table 2 Survey Participant Experience

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<td>Years as SRO</td>
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The researcher contacted each of the nine SROs, and successfully secured interviews with eight of the participants. Interview meeting places were selected by the participants to allow confidentiality, convenience, and flexibility.

*Biographical Sketches of Participants*

In research studies where qualitative data were collected through the use of interviews, biographical sketches were used to provide the reader background information on the research participants. Three of the participants were female and 5 were male. All participant names were pseudonyms inspired by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) phonetic alphabet, which is commonly used by military and law enforcement personnel (Colman, 2015) and in no way corresponds to the number assigned to the survey participants from Table 2.

**School Resource Officer Alpha:**

Officer Alpha has been an LEO for over 10 years. She chose to become an officer because she did not like the idea of “sitting behind a desk and doing a nine to five” (Participant 1, personal communication, February 7, 2020). Officer Alpha is the first person in her family to pursue a career in law enforcement. She has a close family member with ASD, and she believes her experiences with her family members influenced the way she works with SWD within the school she serves. She wanted to become an SRO to make a difference in the lives of children and influence them in a supportive way and “make a positive connection with children who do not have that in their lives” (Participant 1, personal communication, February 7, 2020). Officer Alpha helps with extracurricular activities at her middle school, including an after-school club that promotes social skills and community engagement for students who are struggling in school.
Officer Alpha has prior experience teaching the GREAT program. She currently helps maintain the school’s food pantry and organizes holiday help for families in need.

**School Resource Officer Bravo:**

Officer Bravo has been in law enforcement for over 20 years. He began his career in New York State where he worked in an institution for persons with intellectual disabilities and illnesses. From there, he chose to work as a correctional officer in the jails. Once Officer Bravo moved to Florida, he attended a police academy and began his career as a LEO after completing the academy. He applied for the position of SRO at the encouragement of the retiring SRO who formerly held the title, advertising it to him as the “best kept secret” (Participant 2, personal communication, February 9, 2020). Officer Bravo has previous experience with teaching GREAT and currently facilitates a junior police academy.

**School Resource Officer Charlie:**

Officer Charlie has over 15 years of law enforcement experience. Before becoming an officer, he served in the military. After leaving the Air Force, Officer Charlie did not want to work at a desk or in a position that was “redundant” (Participant 3, personal communication, February 9, 2020). Law enforcement appealed to him because it would provide the ability to work outdoors and allow him to encounter a variety of situations. Officer Charlie initially became an SRO because he favored the schedule and wanted a change from being on patrol. He has previous experience teaching GREAT at his middle school; however, Officer Charlie is not presently involved in any camps or clubs at his school. He supports students by attending talent shows and making himself available for conversations with students. Officer Charlie prides
himself on school safety and stated, “I take a very assertive role in the school and toning the school safety aspect” (Participant 3, personal communication, February 9, 2020).

**School Resource Officer Delta:**

Officer Delta originally went to college to become an accountant. He found that line of work unfulfilling and started to join his friends, who were police officers, on ride-alongs, where civilians are permitted to join an officer during their shift to observe the duties performed. Officer Delta decided that becoming an LEO was the role he wanted, so he enrolled in a police academy to obtain the certification required. With the goal of mentoring youth, Officer Delta left patrol to become an SRO. He assists the physical education coaches at his school and helps with sports teams. Officer Delta has been in law enforcement for over 5 years.

**School Resource Officer Echo:**

Officer Echo has been in law enforcement for over 30 years. Prior to becoming an officer, she worked for the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), as well as a fast food worker, at a department store, and then eventually became a 911 dispatcher. Officer Echo believed she could do a better job than some of the officers, described as “kind of arrogant” whom she knew while serving as a dispatcher (Participant 5, personal communication, February 16, 2020). Officer Echo has experience teaching DARE, and organizing student councils and safety patrols at the elementary level. She currently serves as an SRO at a middle school and prides herself in interacting with the students at her school.
School Resource Officer Foxtrot:

Officer Foxtrot has over 15 years of law enforcement experience. He began his career as an officer after working in accounting and finding it unfulfilling, as well as after serving as an educator. Becoming an SRO was preferable to Officer Foxtrot because he had prior experience working in schools and appreciated the schedule of the position. His initial reason for becoming an SRO was to build positive relationships with youth. He stated, “If you can reach out to them at a young age and build a relationship and a bond with them, that it will foster good relationships as they move out of school” (Participant 5, personal communication, February 29, 2020). Officer Foxtrot is involved with athletic camps and is part of the Florida Sheriffs Youth Ranch, which is a summer program. He has prior experience teaching a program called Focus on Safety.

School Resource Officer Golf:

Officer Golf has been in law enforcement for over 15 years. She comes from a military family and almost enlisted in the military as well. Instead, however, she started a family and moved to Florida. At the insistence of a friend and coworker, she enrolled in the police academy. Officer Golf left the patrol to become an SRO because she was a single mother, and the schedule was more convenient for her and her child. Officer Golf does not currently run any clubs; however, she has previous experience teaching programs such as GREAT. She stated working with children keeps her young.

School Resource Officer Hotel:

Officer Hotel is originally from South Florida. He has a background in the military and over 5 years as an LEO. Officer Hotel has family members who have served in a variety of
branches of law enforcement and the military, including Immigration and Customs Enforcement and the Air Force. After assisting his community as a patrol officer, Officer Hotel became an SRO. He quickly realized that “this job is a lot harder than the road” (Participant 8, personal communication, March 12, 2020). Officer Hotel does not currently teach any programs at his school; however, he does coach and assist with several of the middle school’s sports teams.

**Data Analysis Results**

In this study, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews were conducted. The interviews ranged from 17 to 31 min, with the average interview lasting 24 min. The researcher used the Bridges Semi structured SRO Interview Protocol (see Appendix E), vetted by a panel of experts, as described in Table 1 (Chapter 3) to guide the interview. With the verbal consent of participants, interviews were audio recorded, scrambled using a voice-scrambling application, transcribed, and analyzed to extract themes and subthemes. Each participant was mailed a handwritten thank you note and provided a copy of their transcribed interview for review (see Appendix F) and invited by the researcher to comment or add to the interview.

Using steps four and five of Colaizzi’s (1978) seven-step method for analyzing phenomenological data, themes were clustered and an exhaustive description with 109 original words and phrases derived from the data (see Appendix H). Further analysis of the transcribed words, phrases, and statements of the participants allowed the researcher to condense data into 15 subthemes with four overarching themes: (a) law enforcement; (b) relationships; (c) school safety; and (d) training and preparation. The final four emergent themes and frequency of themes using Colaizzi’s step 4 are indicated in Table 3.
Table 3 Frequency of Themes Represented in Emergent Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Frequency of Themes</th>
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<tr>
<td>Law Enforcement</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Safety</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training and Preparation</td>
<td>31</td>
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</table>

Subsequently, the researcher followed up with interview participants through email (see Appendix G) and provided them with a graphic of the emerging themes and subthemes. According to Morrow (2015), participants “should be able to recognize their own experiences” (p. 644) within the structure created by the researcher. Participants were encouraged to provide input and ask questions as applicable. This practice of providing participants with extracted meanings corresponded with step seven, the final step, in Colaizzi’s descriptive phenomenological method—seeking verification of the fundamental structure from the participants.

**Results**

The results of this study are organized to answer the three research questions. The presentation of the qualitative data was embedded within each theme and subtheme. The use of direct quotes and phrases from the participants allow the reader a true and accurate account of the phenomena, as experienced by the SROs, enhancing the credibility of the researcher.

According to Creswell and Poth (2018), phenomenological research design seeks to obtain meaning from the experience and beliefs of those who have lived through the phenomenon. The researcher analyzed data and extracted themes and subthemes as they emerged using words and expressions from the participants. By using the exact words and
phrasing of the participants, the reader will be provided the true essence of what it means to be an SRO serving in the middle school setting.

**Research Question One**

The first question addressed was “What are the lived experiences of SROs who work in public middle schools?” The participants’ accounts of their experiences as SROs substantiate a multitude of roles, including that of an LEO, a resource for school staff, parents, and students; and as security personnel.

Several participants shared that their role as an SRO had changed over the years. Whereas programs such as GREAT were once taught by many of the participants, not one presently offered that or a comparable program during the school day, which can be attributed to the new focus on school safety.

**Theme One: Law Enforcement**

All participants are sworn LEOs either employed by the county sheriff’s department or city police departments. As SROs, the participants possess the responsibility to uphold Florida State statutes and respond to unlawful activity. However, they also possess the ability to pursue charges at their discretion and at the discretion of school administrators when warranted. As revealed through interviews, the participants have experienced being called to classrooms for student misconduct, such as noncompliance. Participants illustrated the challenge of being called to classrooms for disciplinary action, which they stated was not an appropriate utilization of their role in schools. Rather, the participants reiterated the fact that school staff must follow the proper discipline procedures, and that calling on the SRO to address insubordination was a last
resort. Conversely, there are specific matters in which the SRO must act within the capacity of an LEO.

**Theme One, Subtheme One: Baker Act**

Most commonly known as the Baker Act, the Florida Mental Health Act of 1971 (Florida Statute 394, 2013) refers to the mandatory 72-hour observation of a person deemed mentally ill or posing a threat to themselves or others. Once a student has displayed behaviors or made comments indicating they wish to harm themselves or others, guidance counselors become involved and include the SRO.

The counselor calls after they do their risk assessment and if the student is making any comments about suicidal ideation, I am called in to do an assessment. I find out what’s going on and why they feel this way. If they make any comments that fall under the form [Report of Law Enforcement Officer Initiating Involuntary Examination] then they are Baker Acted. Basically, if there’s a substantial likelihood that without care or treatment they will cause harm to themselves. (Participant 1, personal communication, February 7, 2020)

Participant 2 shared insight on dealing with students in distress or threatening to harm themselves:

Most of them is just crying out for help. And they cut themselves, but they really know that they’re not cutting himself enough that that is going to kill them, but I try to tell them that, you never know how deep you cut, once you cut, if you cut an artery, its too late. You better get to the hospital or you can bleed out. (Participant 2, personal communication, February 9, 2020)
Participant 5 shared personal feelings on the Baker Act in school settings:

I'm not real crazy about teachers Baker acting kids. Especially like in middle school and elementary school because those kids are trying to find themselves pretty much.

(Participant 5, personal communication, February 16, 2020)

Theme One, Subtheme Two: Mandatory Reporting

Florida Statute 39.201 (2019) states that any person including those who are state or county employees, are required to report suspected child abuse. There are two types of reporters: mandated and professionally mandated. Any person who has knowledge or suspects a child is being abused by their caregiver is a mandated reporter. Those who hold professional occupations, including physicians, teachers, and LEOs are considered professionally mandated reporters. Participant 4 expressed their position as follows:

So, technically by state law, no matter who you are, if you are an adult, you're a mandatory reporter. That's how the law reads. It has nothing to do with your job, it has nothing to do with your involvement of a situation. The law is so vague as to the point, where if you watch a child get beat in the grocery store, technically you can make a mandatory of that, cause you witnessed it. Now the hard parts of this or, the tricky part is obviously a lot of people aren't law enforcement or lawyers, so they may not know that child abuse is only from a caregiver. Two kids can't abuse each other and it'd be called child abuse. So, I would really like it more if the teachers just came to the law enforcement on their campus and said; hey, can I run this by you? You doing that is the mandatory reporting right there, and just utilize your resources that you have on campus. We're here to help you. (Participant 4, personal communication, February 15, 2020)
However, Participant 1 expressed a different viewpoint and referred to the Department of Children and Families (DCF) and Child Protective Services (CPS) as they shared their experience:

When it comes to mandatory reporting we are getting a lot of teachers that don’t know what constitutes mandatory reporting so we get a lot of teachers calling to ask SROs or even the guidance counselors wanting to know if this rises to that level of reporting and then they’ll ask for us to put the report in and we’re like no you need to be the one to put the report in since you had first-hand knowledge of this information and we also tell them to put the report in and if DCF or CPS whoever is taking the report doesn’t feel that it rises to the level that documented and what we’re also finding is that if there are three reports even if it is not to that level that CPS will automatically go out there. (Participant 1, personal communication, February 7, 2020)

**Theme One, Subtheme Three: Threat Assessment**

According to the participants, threat assessments are a rather new protocol involving law enforcement and government agencies, such as Homeland Security. Due to tragic events such as school shootings, threats to do harm made by students are taken with extreme seriousness and are fully investigated. Participant 2 shared the following:

I work with the deans and in today's day everything is an HS report. That's a Homeland Security report. And there's people at the County and all they're doing is watching when an officer creates an HS, I guess they get pinged. And HS is when there's a threat made whether it's a credible threat or whether it's not. If it was a threat, we have to do a Homeland Security report and we have to contact the parents and find out if there's any
weapons in the house, if not, send an officer to see if they are allowed to search. And so, with that I deal with the dean and he has to do a threat assessment report. (Participant 2, personal communication, February 9, 2020)

Participant 6 provided information on his experiences with threat assessment:

We have had, where I am working now, we have probably had about eight or nine threat assessments on students this year. Some of them, because we have gone to the zero tolerance for students making any remarks that are related to a direct threat to the school or to other students or student safety. None of them have necessarily panned out to be actual threats, actual credible threats. We've had domestic security division go out and interview students and families at their homes, but what well I will say that collectively across the board that those students that we have identified or have done threat assessments on continue to have issues or they've had a lot of issues in the past and several of them are dealing with mental health issues. (Participant 6, personal communication, February 29, 2020)

Participant 7’s premise on threat assessment was the following:

I think it’s working well. We get together whenever there’s a threat. I pull an HS number. It’s Homeland Security, I contact them, we have a meeting, we assess the situation and we talk to the students, any students involved. And then it goes to our Homeland Security deputy. They follow up with it (Participant 7, personal communication, February 18, 2020).

Participant 8 also shared the following:

Threat assessments, we do those every time there's a threat on campus. It's mandated by Florida State Statute that every time there is a threat, we have a threat assessment team on
campus, which involves one of the assistant principals, some of the counselors and myself and we evaluate the threat and we talk with the students, we get statements and evaluate the threat and determine whether it's low risk, medium risk or high risk or no risk. And then from there we take the appropriate course of action, whether it's a substantiated threat and we have to go to their house and search and talk to their parents or if they actually have a plan and based on Florida state statutes, they meet the criteria to be arrested or if they need help with a social worker and stuff like that. (Participant 8, personal communication, March, 12, 2020)

Theme Two: Relationships

The second theme revealed from the data was relationships. Participants felt most strongly about building relationships with students, noting that, in some instances, their impact on students had a long-term effect, years after the student was no longer a middle schooler. Participants also expressed the importance of having relationships with administrators, parents, and teachers. Participant 1 shared the following:

I think I’m pretty fortunate with the school that I’m at, and the admin that I have, and the teachers. They’re very supportive. And I don’t come in here trying to be an enforcer. I come here with a positive attitude and try to treat all the kids with respect. And we have really good kids here and I can’t sit here and say that I’ve had negative interactions.

(Participant 1, personal communication, February 7, 2020)

Participant 8 referenced the role of school resource deputy when using the acronym SRD and stated:
I mean the job is different when you become an SRD, it's very different, I mean a lot of the things that you do on the road don't really apply here, the rules are different. I mean you're still a law enforcement officer, your primary job is, you're never going to get in trouble for enforcing Florida state statute, but you have more discretion in the schools because you're dealing with juveniles and you're dealing with more administrative stuff. So like a crime is happening right now and you're heading there. So, whereas in the school you're there every day, so there's no fixing a problem one day, cause you're going to see the kid the next day and the next day and the next day. So, there's no fixing a problem today or throwing somebody in jail and be done with it. So, it doesn't really work like that in the school, so you have to go in depth and figure out the roots of the problem and in order to do that is to build a relationship with people and to be approachable, I guess. So, whereas on the road you can just... If somebody runs a red light, you pull him over, get him taken in and be done. So, it doesn't work like that in schools, so. (Participant 8, personal communication, March 12, 2020)

Participant 2 shared the importance of building relationships within the school:

So, we work hand in hand. They always call me to, to try to talk down to because I build a relationship with them. That's what it's about. You go to them, you let them express themselves and let them know you understand. And then you try to get them out of the situation where sometimes some teachers are just frustrated and they can't deal with that kid who has emotional behavior disorder and the stress, we're trying to teach everyone and he's distracting the class. So, they don't have time to do this, so I am talking to them and trying to calm them down because you [are] teaching the class. So that's where I come in. (Participant 2, personal communication, February 9, 2020)
Theme Two, Subtheme One: Administration

School administration included the principal, assistant principals, and the dean of students. Participants presented evidence supporting the need for a positive relationship between administration and SROs to ensure they are able to fulfill their role within the schools.

Participant 3 expressed the following:

I think that success comes from the SRO individually, themselves. Obviously, the administration would have to be receptive, but the entire concept of like, you have your role, I have mine, and not using cooperation is detrimental. I think the idea of the SRO being open and understanding that the school system has certain things that they need to do, but the school system understands, like, these are experts in security and this is the world we live in. (Participant 3, personal communication, February 9, 2020)

Participant 5 shared their experience on a noncollaborative relationship between SROs and school administration:

I think there’s only about, what I’ve seen, only about three principals in this county that really seem to not like SROs. I know that the school I came from, I got the impression [the principal] did not want a law enforcement officer and I think that is really the biggest issue. (Participant 5, personal communication, February 16, 2020)

Participant 1 expressed the following:

I have a positive relationship with administration, they also know that they can reach out to me for anything, and they do. I’ve gotten calls in the middle of the night about students and the fact is that trust has allowed us to handle situations together. (Participant 1, personal communication, February 7, 2020)
Based on the participants’ responses, having a cooperative relationship with school administration was desirable and contributed to a cohesive partnership between school and law enforcement.

**Theme Two, Subtheme Two: Mentor to Students**

Participants articulated a clear motivation for wanting to become an SRO; a desire to make a difference in the lives of children. Although middle school SROs no longer teach the GREAT program, they are continuously seeking opportunities to interact with students in a positive manner. Of the eight participants, five were active in their schools as athletic coaches, club mentors, or as facilitators of junior police academies.

Participant 2 shared the following story:

> Once I became an SRO in the actual job, it is a gratifying experience. It really is. It's stressful, but when a student comes back to you, you're working at say the light at the corner of the traffic and you knew they didn't like you and they started to walk up to you and they say, "Oh, Officer…" you kind of get yourself in a position to get ready because you're thinking, wow, this kid didn't like me and he's like, "Hey man, you were right. I was a knucklehead and I did some stuff but I'm doing this now and I'm in college and I'm working." That's when you know that the fruits of your labor is worth planting the seed and then you see it later grow. So, it is worth for what you're going through it's tough. It's a tough job. (Participant 2, personal communication, February 9, 2020)

Participant 4 discussed the negative connotation that being an SRO often has, which was also echoed by other participants, and how they overcame it:

> I feel there’s a little bit of a stigma around it for the guys who are on patrol or other divisions. It’s like; Oh, now you’re going to go to being retired but on duty. Essentially,
you’re not going to do anything anymore, or you’re going to have a hard time dealing with kids. But I didn’t view it that way, because I specifically had the goal of mentoring involved to do and I left the road and came to the school system. (Participant 4, personal communication, February 15, 2020)

Additionally, Participant 6 shared their reasoning for leaving the road patrol:

. . . wanting to have an impact on the county’s youth because I feel like if you can reach out to them at a young age and build a relationship and a bond with them that it will foster good relationships as they move out of school. (Participant 6, personal communication, February 29, 2020)

Further, Participant 7 disclosed “Most of the kids at school are good kids and I loved it. I loved working with them and being around them.” (Participant 7, personal communication, February 18, 2020)

Theme Two, Subtheme Three: Resource for Parents

The participants reported communication with parents as a theme due to students’ displaying behavioral issues that land them in the office of the SRO, such as criminal activity.

Participants were especially in contact with parents or guardians if their child was being assessed for the Baker Act.

Participant 3 communicated the following:

Anytime the students have a crisis, I try to call the parent. I try to communicate with the parent and give them the power to address their kid’s issues. Less government involvement and more parental ownership of raising their children is what I believe.

(Participant 3, personal communication, February 9, 2020)

Participant 5 shared the same sentiments:
I try to find out are they, what's going on at home? Are they on any medications and have they been diagnosed with anything? If they have a therapist when their next appointment is if they do. And then I usually, I like to call the parents and talk to the parents and find out what the parents feel about it or make them aware if they don't know and most the time I would rather, if the families are involved and they're willing to get the children the help that they need, I think it's better to go that way than under Baker Act or at least under arrest. I don't think, you know we're not in the schools to arrest kids for teachers. There are times when we have to make an arrest, but that's definitely not our goal.

(Participant 5, personal communication, February 16, 2020)

In addition to the SROs providing families with help during crisis, many of the district’s middle schools operate food pantries in which students and their families are supported. Participant 1 assisted with their school’s food pantry and reached out to community vendors for assistance on numerous occasions. Participant 1 also assisted in organizing an Angel Tree in their school’s front office allowing volunteers to select a child in need from the tree to support during the holidays.

Theme Two, Subtheme Four: Support for Teachers

Following students, teachers are the largest population within the school setting. Participants expressed the significance of building relationships and working positively with teachers.

Participant 6 shared the following:

And it took me a full school year before people who were at the, the teachers especially, who were like, 'I do not know why, why do we even need this? You know, why is he here?'

And then when they saw the impact and the role that we can actually help with students
that are difficult, we can get into mentoring. When kids are in crisis, we can help intervene. We can take some of the weight off the teacher's shoulders when they need to report things. And it took me a full school year but by the end of the year, teachers who I could tell were not real sure about us being there were happy that we were on their campus. I had teachers even comment, “I feel safe that you are here” and the mentality of a change, but it took me a whole school year to make that kind of an impact. (Participant 6, personal communication, February 29, 2020)

Although positive relationships between SROs and teachers were preferred, Participant 2 expressed the need for teachers to follow the proper chain of command when addressing student misconduct was expressed:

We have good relationships. With most of the teachers I have a good relationship with. The hardest part about that is they want to call you. They want to bypass the system. They don't want to call the deans, they don't want to call security, they don't want to call the front office. I don't want to call administration because they're always in meetings, et cetera et cetera. So, they call me and I explained to them, every year it's the same speech. "Don't call me because the reason why, I come into your classroom, the kid you sent him to discipline, he refuses to leave. I tell him, let's go. He tells me F off. At that point, the only thing I could do is F off." I said, "Because he didn't commit a crime, not a crime to be a knucklehead. He's not listening to you. That's not a crime either. It's inappropriate. It's a disciplinary action." (Participant 2, personal communication, February 9, 2020)

Participants highlighted the positive relationships they shared with their middle school’s exceptional student education departments and the open communication within the partnership. Participant 8 stated they possessed a good relationship with the department chair and was kept
informed of any student who might require assistance from the SRO. Likewise, Participant 4 shared the following:

So, our ESE department, it's fairly broad. That was also another eyeopener to me. It’s been about 13 years since I've personally been in school. I didn't know how many kids were receiving the label, the ESE and what it involves. There's varying levels to it, whether it be children with autism, children with EBD, which is emotional behavioral disorders or whether it be like disruptive disorders. I didn't know any of these things existed until I got into a school, and seeing kids' behaviors with different labels first hand. Now, there's a lot of situations where I feel like if these children were on patrol, like were on the streets and patrol responded to their calls, they would be arrested right away because patrol would not recognize, or know that this kid has some type of specialty, or exceptionality, sorry. (Participant 4, personal communication, February 15, 2020)

**Theme Three: School Safety**

The top priority of SROs is to ensure the safety and security of schools. The importance of school safety can be inferred from the amount of times participants mentioned varying aspects of securing schools such as mandatory Code Red and fire drills.

**Theme Three, Subtheme One: Code Red Drills**

A Code Red drill is a required practice in which the entire school population pretends there is an active threat on campus, such as a school shooter. All doors are to remain locked; lights are turned off, and students and teachers are silently required to move to a place in their classroom that is away from doors and windows. Working alongside the administrative team,
SROs play an active role in Code Red drills. Participants shared their responsibilities within conducting Code Red drills.

Participant 3 stated:

The drills, my role is supposed to be just an observer to watch and make sure that the drill is occurring as it's been dictated and planned out by the county regulations. I give suggestions and ideas by basically security survey, meaning that I determine what are some areas of weakness, some areas that need to be improved on, and areas that are deficient. (Participant 3, personal communication, February 9, 2020)

Participant 2 shared the following:

Myself and the deans, first of all, we are the ones who run the Code Red drills and that's only just to get the teachers to train them for a real emergency. Hopefully it will never happen, but its fire alarms, teachers know how to do it because that's all they do. They've always done that in their career. However, we haven't had a fire in a school in over a hundred years that caused any anybody to die. Whereas shootings, the numbers are astronomical. So, I go to trainings and then I bring that back. What are we supposed to do? Why do we have a hard corner? Why do we have a soft corner? Why do we have the lights on? Why should you block your window? Why should the kids be quiet? Right? There's a lot of factors that you know they take for granted, but we got to train them in that. (Participant 2, personal communication, February 9, 2020)

Participant 2 further explained the difference between a hard and soft corner:

When you're at a door, most classroom doors I believe by law has to have a window. So, if you can look in the window, and even if I'm looking towards the left, inside the classroom from outside, anything that I can't see left of it's a hard or soft corner. So of
course, if I look to the right and I pinpoint something, let's say it's a dry easel board. And from that point on to the right, I can't see nothing else. That means the hard corner on the safety zone for them is from that easel board to the right. So, when they get their kids down, they need to make sure they kind of line from that board easel to the right of them down on the floor and quiet. (Participant 2, personal communication, February 9, 2020)

Participant 6 shared the following:

During a Code Red drill, the way I see the role when we are doing the practices for those, I like to move around usually the exterior or internal campus. I tend not to like to be in the same spot all the time. I assign our administrative staff different areas of search so we can check the school very quickly so that it is not going to shut the school down for a long period of time. You want to have a minimal effect on the campus as possible, especially when you have students that have disabilities. You are trying to move, depending on the size of the campus it can be a big deal. But the way I see my role is just very quickly assessing the exterior of the campus, making sure that we do not have a lot of movement on the campus, that we are walking down and that basically we are kind of following the protocol that we have sent out to all the teachers and that is being followed so that we are all kind of on the same page. (Participant 6, personal communication, February 29, 2020)

**Theme Three, Subtheme Two: Elopement**

In addition to verifying protocols such as doors being locked at all times and that teachers are following proper procedures, participants mentioned keeping students safe. Especially students who possessed the tendency to elope from their designated classrooms. Whereas
teachers are not able to leave their other students to chase one who has taken off; SROs reported
their involvement in assisting with students who eloped quite frequently.

Participant 1, on responding to the front office calling on the radio for a student eloping, stated:

Front office calls when she takes off. When she would get upset, she would hide in the
bathroom and I would have to stay in there with her and talk with her until she was ready
to come out. I would never force her; it was when she was ready because if I forced her
then she’s gonna be pissed. (Participant 1, personal communication, February 7, 2020)

Participant 2 shared the following:

We have a kid, first day at school, the autistic teacher came out and says, "[Officer’s
name], we got a runner and he ran." And he was upstairs on the third floor. That's what
he got. He runs away. So, they got to hold them at all times. So, you got to learn who's
who. Cause if you see them somewhere and there's no one around him, he probably ran
away. So, if you didn't know that, you just leave him alone and keep going. But if you
know that this is your runner, then you go grab the kid. (Participant 2, personal
communication, February 9, 2020)

Participant 8 disclosed an experience with a student with a disability who was in the process of
eloping:

There was one time in particular, the student was about to run off campus and as law
enforcement officers, we have to make sure the student is safe at the same time. There's a
line that we can't cross, we have to let the school handle it for the most part cause like I
said, there are certain things that we can and can't do when it comes to students with
disability. (Participant 8, personal communication, March 12, 2020)
Theme Three, Subtheme Three: Fire Drills

Within the school district of this research study, fire drills are scheduled to take place once per month. Prior to the tragic 2018 shooting in Parkland, Florida, fire drills were often unannounced. Participant 4 addressed the change in fire drill procedures as a result of the Parkland shooting:

After Parkland, and I'm not sure what you know about it, but the way that happened is that the young man responsible for that, pulled the fire alarm. He pulled the fire alarm to get all the kids to evacuate the school, and then he conducted his shooting. After we learned that information, we changed how we do fire alarms and the frequency in which we do code reds now became state law. You have to do it as much as you do any other drill. So, the state law now is you need to do a fire drill per month. Now you're going to do a lockdown or Code Red drill one time per month, just like a fire drill. So, the kids are kind of getting exposed to this drill a lot. Now it's when we schedule it, we announce it, the school plays an active role in it. (Participant 4, personal communication, February 15, 2020)

Participant 1 also expressed concerns for school safety before and after the Parkland shooting, related to fire drills:

I have addressed this with my principal before Parkland happened when I put together our emergency response plan, because our school did not have one. So, I had to create one for every scenario that I could think of and that was one thing that I told the principal that if there’s a Code Red that is active, that that comes first, and if the fire alarm goes off unless you see smoke they stay (Participant 1, personal communication, February 7, 2020)
Following the sound of the fire alarm, the district now requires an announcement be made instructing an exit before staff and students evacuate the building.

**Theme Three, Subtheme Four: Protocol Implementation**

According to participants, they are trained on school safety procedures at least yearly. One of the roles that participants shared was that of ensuring such safety protocols were being implemented with fidelity. The SROs indicated they not only observed the school’s proceedings during drills, but at various times throughout the school day.

Participant 2 shared the following:

> Well, the primary reason we're in the school is for safety, unfortunately because of what's been going on in the nation with school shootings. So that's why there's so much vigorous trainings now more than ever. That's why every school in the district has a SRO and now we're kind of the pilot program. We have a security officer as well. My understanding is, this upcoming year, every school will also have a security officer. So, safety is paramount. Safety, that's where we have so many drills, code red drills, and you know the reason we're there, I tell the kids is that we need to protect them from that because 98% of the time when there's an incident, it's a student or former student.

( Participant 2, personal communication, February 9, 2020)

Ensuring the safety of the school environment is the top concern expressed by SROs. Participant 4 further explained:

> So specifically, for our county, the sheriff got a mandate to work with the school. I worked for a city department, but the sheriff still oversees all the SROs and all the SRDs. Our specific role is obviously to prevent tragedies, and then our secondary role after that is general safety; making sure kids aren't bringing things to school or games that they
shouldn't have, educating them on certain dangers of drugs, or bullying or peer pressure, making sure in between classes, transitions that they are safe, there's nothing happening to them. Those are kind of the main three areas that we focus on. For my specific school, I do a lot of traffic in the morning and in the afternoon, because of the area we're located in is off of a major highway that gets very congested. (Participant 4, personal communication, February 15, 2020)

**Research Question Two**

The second research question addressed by this study was “What lived experiences have SROs had with SWDs?

*Theme One: Law Enforcement*

In conjunction with the direct connection SROs possessed with school staff and the families they served while working in middle schools, SROs worked closely with all students including SWDs. As reported by participants they are called to assist as necessary and intervene when appropriate. Although the safety of students and the security of the school is a top priority, building and sustaining relationships with SWDs was recounted numerous times by participants.

*Theme One, Subtheme One: The Baker Act*

It is important to consider behaviors that are often common with students with certain disabilities. Individuals with EBD have a difficult time regulating their impulses and processing their emotions which leads to poor social, academic and behavioral outcomes (Mitchell, Kern, & Conroy, 2019). Likewise, students with autism may struggle socially, unaware of social cues and
Participant 1 shared their experience with a student with disabilities and the discretion they had to make regarding the Baker Act:

Okay. This was a while ago. There was a student with autism, this was a long time ago, and he's been a little bit destructive in the class, and he actually eloped from campus, and he hit the button to cross the road on the highway and went across the road. And so, I was able to get him to come back. But I was asked about Baker Acting him and I said, "Absolutely not." That does not meet the criteria for a Baker Act. She was like, "Well, he went across the road." I said, "Well, he actually did everything the right way. He hit the button. He waited for the light, and really, that does not meet any sort of criteria for a Baker Act." I was actually very proud that he crossed the road the right way. (Participant 1, personal communication, February 7, 2020)

Participant 3 shared their experience related to an interaction with a person with autism and the Baker Act as a patrol officer:

. . . I did but it was just dealt with like, oh they don't meet the criteria for Baker Act. Have a nice day. You deal with the problem, is typically if we were dealing with somebody just losing their marbles and they call law enforcement. Our hands are kind of tied. The other times would have been when you had a missing child with a disability or adult with disability. Those circumstances, but I can't say that I was like directly dealing with as much as we were just trying to locate them. (Participant 3, personal communication, February 9, 2020)
Theme Two: Relationships

Given the preceding context, establishing and maintaining positive rapport with administration, students, parents, and teachers is important to SROs and their exchanges with the school’s most vulnerable populations.

Theme Two, Subtheme One: Administration

Participants illustrated the importance of their relationship with administrators in acquiring information about certain SWDs with the purpose of supporting the students. Participant 4 shared the following:

When I first came to the school, I didn't know what IEP was, I didn't know what a behavior plan was. I didn't know these things exist...I had to get educated on all these things, and that came from me specifically asking the administrators; hey, can you tell me what these things are? May, I sit in on one. And, I didn't know that these were federally protected, I didn't know that an IEP was actually a part of HIPAA because it's a medical diagnosis as well. So, once I learned that, I discovered if I want to sit in on these things, there's only certain kids that I want to sit in for. I don't need to sit in for all the kids. But for specific kids I want to know more about, I will go to the parents and the parents will usually be kind enough to grant me consent. If they don't grant me consent, then I can't have knowledge of their IEP for disabilities or behavioral plans. (Participant 4, personal communication, February 15, 2020)
Theme Two, Subtheme Two: Mentor to Students

The importance of building relationships with SWDs was stated frequently by SROs. Many participants serve their schools by providing supervision during lunches and take that time as an opportunity to interact with SWDs.

Participant 5 shared the following:

I love kids. Those kids are my favorite. So, I always make it a point to go into a classroom or see them at lunch. They're definitely different, but they're very special and I learn a lot from them and I learn a lot from the teachers about how to manage stuff. So, I think a lot of those kids are misunderstood. So, I love, they're very interested in me.

(Participant 4, personal communication, February 16, 2020)

Participant 6 also recollected the following:

I mean a lot of times what I do is we kind of, they have their own area, the way my school set up, we have an area where they kind of all eat together and congregate together. A lot of times I will just go in there and just do high fives or sometimes I have even sat down and have lunch with them and they like to ask me lots of questions and poke, touch, all this stuff that I wear on the belt and ask about it and we just have some good conversations. I have gone in there, they asked me, when it was a law enforcement appreciation day, they asked me to come in and talk to the group a little bit and to the ones that had some understanding, this was being said, it was a good positive interaction.

( Participant 6, personal communication, February 29, 2020)

Asides from the lunch setting, SROs expressed building relationships in everyday experiences which aids in their ability to deescalate situations, such as described by Participant 2:

Friday that just passed that same kid that has Down syndrome, we built the relationship this year. And when he sees me every day, his routine goes... Now he just changed his
term before he used to be, "[Officer’s name]" and then he would scream "[Officer’s name, buddy!" And then he comes and hugs me and he slaps my back. I got like a bulletproof pad and he slapped it hard and he starts screaming, "That's my buddy, that's my buddy!" So, he had a breakdown in PE, in the gym. I guess they hit him in the stomach by accident and he dropped to the floor and he would not get up. So, they called me to come because everybody knows that I have a relation with him. So, I talked to him for a little bit and I got him convinced to get up. I took him to my office where I knew I had a fidget spinner because he loves fidgets too. He's got a backpack full of... And he was asking me, "You got a fidget spinner?" I said, "I gave you one." He goes, "I want the other one." So, I give it to him... So, he was happy. He went back to class and he said, "Okay, buddy." Saw me at lunch. He was good. So yeah, I do learn to, to deal with certain kids. I know what they like and I know how to calm them down. (Participant 2, personal communication, February 9, 2020)

Similar experiences were shared by many of the participants, including an occasion in which Participant 5 assisted a student with autism who was upset:

Even if the kid is acting out, I let them vent for a little while and give them the time to call it out. I mean there was one at school and I didn't know what they were doing. She was just staring, staring. They were outside. I didn't even recognize the sound. I'm like, "Are you okay?" She said, "Yeah," and I said, "Do you want to sit down?" She was crying. She said, "They're all messing with me." "what are you doing out here?" And she said, "I got upset in my class," and it was over a game or something, and she said, "So I came outside to stare at something because I calm down when I can stare." And I said,
"Okay, is there anything you want to talk about?" She said, "No." (Participant 5, personal communication, February 16, 2020)

Theme Two, Subtheme Three: Resource for Parents

Being a support for parents of students with disabilities is another way in which SROs build relationships. Participant 8 shared the following:

We have a few students with disabilities and I always see them in the hallway, we know who they are and there's one in particular I can think of that, I chat with him all the time, very sweet kid. I chat with him all the time and he's always respectful and you can tell some time when he's off his meds and I have a good relationship with the teacher and mom. I'll call mom just to give her a heads-up if he needs to be picked up cause he might be a threat to himself, should he choose to elope or run off campus, which happened before. So, I have a good relationship with mom, I'll call mom and let her know what's going on and she'll come out and figure out what needs to happen from there.

(Participant 8, personal communication, March 12, 2020)

Theme Two, Subtheme Four: Support for Teachers

Aside being able to help locate students who have eloped from their classroom, The participants described times in which they assisted teachers dealing with students in crisis. Participant 6 shared the following:

. . . this year we had a young man who if he is having a bad day, everybody on campus knows that he is having a bad day. And the last time that they called me for help was because we were in the process of about having a class change and he was in the hallway basically having a complete meltdown and tantrum and we were trying to get him moved
out of the hallway so that he would not hit, he was rolling around the floor kicking everybody and, just again in distress. That was the most recent time and probably one of only handful of times where they will call me for that. And that was to try to help coerce him into the class again trying not to go hands on as much as possible. We were able to get him just, thankfully, just as the bell was ringing, we were able to, it took myself and a couple other teachers to kind of corral him and you know, move him and unfortunately we had to kind of grab arms and where you have to move you in and that is just the way it is. And I put my hands up, he did. He kind of went limp and just goes wee, it was funny how like all of a sudden, he was fighting everything like that. And when I went to pick him up and he would just turn into like a little kid and was just like, okay, fine, I am going to go. And we were able to get him out of the hallway before we had a thousand students walking up and down the hallway . . . it worked out okay. But you just, you never know sometimes. (Participant 6, personal communication, February 29, 2020)

Additionally, SROs may be used to encourage student success, as reported by Participant 1:

Some of the students really like law-enforcement so part of their rewards was they could earn time hanging out with me or hanging out with my dog. They were having a lesson on safety day so I had different officers from different divisions like SWAT, the helicopter, [and] motors come out and show them all their tools and gadgets and vehicles and then at the end we let the kids put their handprints with the temperate paint all over my vehicle (Participant 1, personal communication, February 7, 2020)

Participant 1 also shared:
I think most of the teachers have my personal cell phone or a way to make contact with me and now I’m available 24/7 for any questions about students or even for themselves. (Participant 1, personal communication, February 7, 2020)

Theme Three: School Safety

Ensuring the safety of students remains the most important role of the SRO. As described by participants, their main reason for being on campus was, as Participant 1 stated, “to keep kids safe.” Responding to events as they arise and assisting SWD was a shared sentiment by all participants. Student elopement remained one of the most commonly reported occurrences by participants.

Theme Three, Subtheme Two: Elopement

Any student roaming a campus unsupervised would be a breach in safety. When a student with a disability has eloped from their classroom, it is crucial that the student is located and provided adult supervision. Administrators, teachers, and SROs often have a procedural plan in place for students who frequently run from their designated classrooms. Participants shared their experiences responding to calls regarding students who eloped.

Participant 1 expressed concerns and referred to reaching out to the Autism Society of Greater Orlando (ASGO) with questions:

We had one student who they would allow to run around but then when he would get too far they would chase after him and he would think it was a game I went to the assistant principal and I said that this is not appropriate. He is not understanding boundaries and you cannot allow him to run and then chase him and then put them to the ground because he’s not understanding what he did wrong. That situation really upset me and there was no
change with that, they still continue to practice that behavior and I was shut down from
that I was told that this was what was the protocol and I did speak to a friend who is a
behavior therapist who owns a behavior school and I talked to the ASGO about this and
they felt that this behavior on the school was completely wrong and it should not have been
allowed. (Participant 1, personal communication, February 7, 2020)

Participant 7 stated the following:

It's a while back, but I got called down all the time to help them out. Like, if they had a
kid run out of the classroom, they would call me to go find him, [and] chase him down. I
used to take my German shepherd to class, to school, with me and take it in there and the
kids just loved it. I used to spend a lot of time in those classrooms, but because I wanted
to. Not just because I was called to. (Participant 7, personal communication, February 18,
2020)

Participant 3 shared their experience in assisting with a student with disabilities who eloped from
the classroom:

Kid stormed out. He was nonverbal. Staff was not allowed PCM because it was at the
request of the parents. So, they put me on their IEP or their behavioral plan to deal with
their behavior. The kid stormed off. He was biting and hitting everybody. I showed up.
He's has this thing where when he gets upset, he would pull his pants down and play with
his penis. And so, it was a very, it's a nontraditional situation to deal with. And so
particularly I didn't want to be touched by the individual but at the same time I wanted to
help out. So, I do recall that one time that the student came up and I tried to talk to him,
try to be soothing, nice hands, nice hands. His hands were not being nice. I tell you that.
And he came up and straight out of nowhere just whacked me in the face. And getting hit
in the face, I don't know if it's for everybody, but for me it just kind of like makes my blood pressure go through the roof, it gets almost want to instinctively react. And being able to just say, okay, remember we're dealing with somebody else who is having a warfare and brains and the neurons aren't firing as they should. So just letting him go to the field and walk and generally speaking it was over for him when he would openly urinate. Once he did that, he was good. Marked his territory, ready to go back home or to the classroom. (Participant 3, personal communication, February 9, 2020)

Theme Three, Subtheme Three: Fire Drills

Given the loud nature of fire drills and the knowledge that some SWDs are sensitive to sounds, it was reported by participants they will often give the teachers of self-contained classrooms forewarning. Participant 1 shared, “We usually tell them ahead of time so they can leave the building” (Participant 1, personal communication, February 7, 2020). Participant 2 also expressed “Some of the kids, the noise bothers them. Some wear earphones to cover the noise, so not to get the agitated. We allow them to at least exit the building” (Participant 2, personal communication, February 9, 2020).

Research Question Three

The third and final question this research study addressed was, “How are SROs prepared to work with students in middle schools, including students who have disabilities such as ASD?

Theme Four: Training and Preparation

To maintain certification as a LEO, SROs are required to attend trainings throughout the year. It should be noted that all participants mentioned summer training sessions. The annual
FASRO conference and the school district’s Wraparound Training received the most reference. Most participants asserted trainings should take place at least once a year to keep SROs current on changes in laws, procedures, and refreshed on the topic being instructed.

**Theme Four, Subtheme One: Autism Awareness**

To maintain employment as an LEO, with the enactment of House Bill 39 (H.B. 39) in October of 2017, officers are required by the State of Florida to attend training on autism. The bill obligates the Department of Law Enforcement to provide officers instruction on how to interact with persons with autism, including characteristics of which they should be aware.

Participant 2 shared their experiences attending trainings on autism awareness:

> The class went on to show everybody what to do in scenarios with autism. Like not touching them. They don't like to be touched. So, you got to be careful when you meet him in the street also that some of them it doesn't have an outward appearance. So, you out with somebody on the street that somebody called they were acting funny looking in people's window and you approach them, you got to be into this. There's certain things you got to look out for that they can display that there's something wrong, that it could be autism and they are not going to respond the way others will. So that's why there's fights involved because when you try to, "Hey, have a seat." And you're trying to force them to sit down, they [are] taking that as aggressive and they just don't act out on that. And it was a real good training. (Participant 2, personal communication, February 9, 2020)

Participant 3 shared the following:

> We had these trainers where they actually brought their own adult children and we were dealing with adult autism and it was really good actually. I didn't agree with everything that they said but personally it was very educational and in ways to identify in those
individuals that might be exhibiting signs of autism so that we can learn how to just have different approach to treating things. Not every law enforcement tactic is ideal for dealing with individuals who don't have cognitive reasoning and understanding. So, it was very good way to equip people. (Participant 3, personal communication, February 9, 2020)

Participant 4 also shared:

So, I went through training at a [college], and one of the instructors is a critical intervention instructor. That's her main role, at the sheriff's office she teaches the FDLE, certified 40-hour class. So, she spends quite a bit of time on that, in the academy. They bring in multiple people that actually do have autism, so that you can see firsthand the different degrees on the spectrum of all persons with autism. Some people are really high functioning, some people aren't. (Participant 4, personal communication, February 15, 2020)

Participant 7 stated the following:

We get that training all the time. Before school started, we had an entire day of autistic awareness training, where we actually had a lady come in whose son was autistic and he spent the whole day with us. It was quite extensive and very eye-opening. (Participant 7, personal communication, February 18, 2020)

All participants mentioned their experience with training on autism and stated it was applicable to their role as an SRO.

Theme Four, Subtheme Two: CIT

Many participants discussed having received and being certified in Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) training. It is reasonable to assume SROs are often called to respond to students in
crisis and crisis situations on their campuses. Participant 6 shared their involvement in attending to crises:

The day-to-day stuff. The incidents, the dealing with parents as they come to school, dealing with kids in crisis. Going through Baker Acts and students with weapons on campus, students bringing drugs on campus. So, I do not think I knew to the extent of how often that happened or how often that occurred and, you kind of sometimes feel like you are putting out a lot of fires at the same time behind the scenes. (Participant 6, February 29, 2020)

Participants also offered their experiences on being trained in CIT. For example, Participant 2 shared the following:

Well CIT, that's Crisis Intervention Team. I got certified, I don't know, maybe 8, 9 years ago, long time. I've been certified for a while, took a training in Orlando and so I'm part of the, we call it CIT team, Crisis Intervention Team. But my background being that I came from New York State working with the mentally retarded slash psychotics for so many years. Anytime when I worked on the street, anytime there was an incident whether it dealt with a crisis or suicide, my sergeant called on me because he knew my training, that I can talk someone down from doing something and et cetera. So, at school it's the same way. That's why for kids who are threatening to do themselves harm or others, there are certain ways and certain terms to use with the kids. To try to see if there's something that they're going through at home or they really mean that they just want to die. (Participant 2, personal communication, February 9, 2020)

Participant 8 discussed the process of responding to students in crisis and a resource utilized at their school:
Yeah. So usually we'll all work together with the counselor and with the district mental health. We also have a program with the Sheriff's office, a mobile crisis unit where we can also get them out to talk with the student and figure out what exactly that they need, if they need to be medicated and just basically see what they need and give them the resources that they need, instead of . . . We always, we work well together and we have good discretion on certain things. They don't always have to be arrested or anything like that. (Participant 8, personal communication, March 12, 2020)

Theme Four, Subtheme Three: FASRO

For the past 41 years, FASRO has hosted an annual conference where SROs obtain training and certification on topics related to their roles. The FASRO Conference is a large event drawing SROs, administrators, and other LEOs from all over Florida. Participants discussed their experiences with training through FASRO.

Participant 1 shared the following:

A lot of the recent trainings at FASRO have focused on active shooters. A lot of times officers who were there, we have also had families who were involved in it that maybe lost a family member, and share what they have created. We have breakaway classes where during the day you can learn about sexting, juvenile gangs, autism, sex crimes against children and creating camps and stuff like that for kids. They talk about drugs and vaping. Mostly, it is tailored around current trends. (Participant 1, personal communication, February 7, 2020)

Participant 7 also stated:

Being in school resource, we have trainings during the summer, we go to FASRO and we have a whole week's worth of different topics, trainings, and I've had those for 13 years,
13 summers of those trainings. (Participant 7, personal communication, February 18, 2020)

Theme Four, Subtheme Four: Wraparound

According to participants, the school district offers a summer training course for all SROs within the district, referred to as Wraparound Training. During the three-day instruction, SROs receive information on numerous topics related to their roles within the school setting. Participants shared their experiences with the training. For example, Participant 3 voiced the following:

Wraparound Training is where they take all the notable trainings and present them in a condensed three-day course for all the SROs and SRDs. Last year they discussed mental health and the mobile crisis unit. They addressed the county’s juvenile Baker Act policy, reasoning with individuals with autism, and legal updates. (Participant 3, personal communication, February 9, 2020)

Participant 4 further explained where they received training on autism:

Part of our Wraparound Training that we do every year before school starts, as SROs, we do probably about a two-day refresher and update on dealing with children. ’Cause obviously we don't have any adults at our middle school. So, dealing with children that have autism and how to respond best to their needs. (Participant 4, personal communication, February 15, 2020)

Participant 5 shared the following:
We have our, we call it a wraparound training and that we're a... The school board pretty much comes in and tries to help us with that. And then what we see in class, like on autism. So, they do educate us and I have learned a lot. I wish that the things that I've learned now as a school resource deputy that I knew on the road because all those kids are already in school, they're the places where we go. So, I think I did a good job on patrol, but I wish I'd learned the things that I know now that I could've used… to recall the situation. (Participant 5, personal communication, February 16, 2020)

Given the evidence of trainings provided in the accounts and experiences shared by participants, SROs receive instruction on a variety of topics through the district-offered Wraparound Training.

Summary

In this chapter, the researcher presented the lived experiences of SROs serving in a district in central Florida. This phenomenological study examined the personal accounts of SROs, including their interactions with SWD and their preparedness to work in middle school settings. Data were collected, analyzed, and guided by three research questions. Overall, 13 SROs participated in the first part of data collection. Of the 13, 8 participants met the criteria for interviews. The participants shared their beliefs and experiences through face-to-face semi-structured interviews conducted by the researcher. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed for themes by the researcher using Vagle’s (2014) steps for analyzing transcribed data from phenomenological research and Colaizzi’s (1978) seven-step process for thematic analysis. From the data, 4 themes and 15 subthemes emerged. The researcher used quotes from the participants throughout the chapter to provide the reader an accurate narrative of the lived experiences of SROs.
The first theme to emerge was law enforcement and the role that SROs serve as an officer of the law. Dealing with instances that are unlawful such as students bringing drugs or weapons on campus are areas that SROs must intervene. They are also required to assist guidance counselors and assess students in crisis who may require transport for evaluation. Enforcing Florida state statutes while using discretion in working with juveniles is a unique function within the role of SROs.

The second theme to extracted from the data was relationships. It was apparent that SROs believed building relationships with all school personnel to be valuable. Having relationships with administrators and teachers benefited participants in their understanding of SWDs and allowed them certain insights into student behavior. Participants shared a general consensus regarding the importance of mentoring students and that being a positive person in their lives was crucial.

The third theme that emerged was school safety. The importance of keeping schools and students safe from threats and violence was echoed through all interviews. The participants expressed that their main duty on campus was to ensure the safety of students and make certain teachers and staff followed the guidelines when it came to safety drills and exercises.

The fourth and final theme to be revealed through data analysis was training and preparation. Participants shared their accounts of numerous trainings they attended to stay up to date on a variety of topics. Their training sessions typically took place in the summer before the school year began. They attended several trainings related to school safety, legal updates, and interacting with students with autism.
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

Introduction

The final chapter of this phenomenological research study will address (a) a summary of the findings; (b) a review of the methodology used; (c) the interpretation of the findings; (d) study limitations; (e) implications of findings; (f) impact of COVID-19; and e) recommendations for future research.

Summary of Findings

In this research study, four themes emerged from the data regarding the three research questions. These themes were presented in detail in Chapter Four using quotes and phrases directly from participant interviews to provide a rich description of the participants’ experiences. The four themes included three themes that supported research question one: (a) law enforcement; (b) relationships; and (c) school safety. Three themes also supported research question two: (a) law enforcement; (b) relationships; and (c) school safety. The final research question, three, was answered by one theme: (d) training and preparation.

Review of Methodology

This study used a phenomenological research design (Creswell & Poth, 2018) to explore the lived experiences that SROs possessed related to their roles, working with SWD, and their preparedness for serving in middle schools in a central Florida school district. Data collection consisted of a survey used to collect demographic data and screen for interview participant criteria and semi-structured interviews guided by a protocol created by the researcher and vetted by experts in the field using the Delphi technique (Linstone & Turoff, 1975). Interviews were
conducted face-to-face by the researcher. The research study was guided by three research questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of SROs who work in public middle schools?
2. What lived experiences have SROs had with SWD?
3. How are SROs prepared to work with students in middle schools, including students who have disabilities such as ASD?

**Interpretation of the Findings**

This section will present each of the four themes and the literature that supports them. Some themes support more than one research question and will also be presented under the research question. The first three themes will answer the first and second research questions. The fourth theme will answer the third research question.

**Research Question One**

What are the lived experiences of SROs who work in public middle schools?

**Theme One: Law Enforcement**

There are times when the SRO must act as the law enforcement agents they ultimately are (Bleakley & Bleakley, 2017). Data from this research study indicated such times included when students made poor choices by bringing inappropriate items to school such as drugs or weapons, by committing acts of stealing, or by engaging in other criminal activity.

The literature stated that during the middle school age of development, students are not often focused on the long-term consequences of their actions and often act impulsively (Wright and Kutcher, 2016). Many SRO participants shared their experience with making threat
assessments and Homeland Security reports based on threats and remarks made by students. All participants expressed the importance of taking threats seriously, even if further investigation revealed the threats to be unsubstantiated.

Furthermore, times that warranted action from a law enforcement standpoint were when participants needed to respond to students who were in crisis and in need of assessment due to the threat of harm to themselves or others, such as being evaluated for the Baker Act. Guidance counselors and SROs were reported to work closely together to provide services to students in need, such as a referral for mental health services or, in some schools, the sheriff’s mobile crisis unit. As noted previously, in the literature, LEOs are often trained in CIT and possess knowledge of assistance resources (Kubiak et al., 2019).

Pertinent to following Florida state statutes is the mandatory reporting of suspected abuse. School personnel including all teachers and support staff are required to obtain yearly certification in the identification of child abuse. The SROs on campus are familiar with the channels of reporting abuse and work closely with CPS and social workers within the community. Participants expressed their knowledge of mandatory reporting and welcomed teachers to utilize them as a resource in doing such.

**Theme Two: Relationships**

In the 1950s LEOs were first placed in public schools to improve community relations between law enforcement and citizens (Theriot & Cueller, 2016). By building relationships with students, SROs can provide a positive influence and serve as mentors for youth. Throughout this research study, the participants expressed the importance of creating relationships with students and school staff.
Participants shared that some of their students had only ever experienced negative interactions with LEOs, such as witnessing the incarceration of a parent or hearing negative comments within their community. During an open house night, one of the SROs stated they had recognized parents/guardians that they had arrested while serving as a patrol officer before becoming an SRO. The literature stated that juveniles’ perceptions of law enforcement may also be influenced by the media, such as television shows or in music (Sanden & Wentz, 2017). One participant recollected a reunion with a former student while conducting traffic. He stated he was worried at first because that student seemed not to like him, yet the former student wanted to share his successes and apologize for being difficult when he was a youth. Another participant shared the importance of ensuring SWDs, such as those with autism, knew how to appropriately respond and interact with LEOs, and taught those skills during their afterschool program. The literature supports the significance of positive and informed interactions between persons with ASD and LEOs (Myers, 2017). Building positive relationships with students proved to be an area of focus for all participants.

Additionally, establishing relationships with school staff such as teachers and administrators was important to participants. The participants shared that they possess a close working relationship with administration, including deans. They stated how important it was that each entity of the partnership understood the roles and responsibilities of the other to ensure proper procedures took place when dealing with matters such as threat assessments, Baker Acts, or disciplinary issues that resulted in the involvement of the SRO. Contrary to the literature, not one participant shared they felt misused at their middle school (Counts et al., 2018) or were utilized for tasks that were not within their SRO responsibility.
Theme Three: School Safety

The role of the SRO has evolved to match the needs of society. Although building relationships between community and law enforcement through the Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act of 1968 (P.L. 90–351, 1968) may have begun the placement of officers in schools, the most key reason for SROs is presently school safety (Javdani, 2019). The role of the SRO has changed since the tragic Colorado shooting at Columbine High School in 1999 (Bolger et al., 2019; Tran, 2019) and especially the recent horrific shooting in 2018 at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High in Parkland, Florida (Katsiyannis et al., 2018).

In response to the Parkland tragedy, Florida laws changed to support safe schools. Both pieces of legislation, the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Public Safety Act (S. 7026, 2018) and the Implementation of Legislative Recommendations of the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Public Safety Commission (S. 7030, 2019) mandated school districts organize a safety plan to prevent and prepare for threats. As part of the fulfillment of Florida legislation, the school district at which this research study was conducted requires at least one SRO on each campus. Participants shared their roles in supporting school safety such as their function during Code Red drills.

Additionally, participants shared their experiences on a rather new part of their role as security: threat assessment. The Implementation of the Marjory Stoneman Douglass Act necessitates investigations into all threats directed at schools. The SROs work with administration as well as outside agencies such as Homeland Security to thoroughly investigate threats of harm with the goal of preventing another horrific tragedy.

Research Question Two

What lived experiences have SROs had with SWD?
Theme One: Law Enforcement

All participants serve their schools as officers of the law in full uniform. Of the many roles that an SRO served, being an LEO was mentioned as the first. Participants stated they interact with SWD on a daily basis. When students are in crisis, they respond with the skills to assess the student and when applicable deescalate the situation.

Participants stated they had experienced being called to assess SWD for the Baker Act. They stated that because they were aware of the characteristics of the student and the criteria for a mandatory evaluation such as the result of a Baker Act, the SRO was able to respond appropriately to the student and provide alternative solutions such as contacting the parent/guardian of the child. Research in the area of SROs implementing Baker Acts within schools is still in its infancy.

Theme Two: Relationships

At the beginning of this study the researcher desired to explore the relationships that SROs had with SWD, particularly students with autism. As noted by the literature, those with ASD have an increased likelihood of interacting with an LEO (Rava et al., 2017) due to their social and emotional characteristics. The SROs of this study shared accounts of their interactions with students with a variety of disabilities and remarked that they enjoyed the interactions they had and looked forward to sitting with students during lunch and holding conversations.

The data revealed the close relationships that SROs shared with SWDs. On several occasions, the SROs shared they felt they were a calming person and utilized that behavioral trait when students were in distress and required assistance relaxing. Participants shared the
importance of establishing relationships with students when they were not in crisis mode to build relationships so that they may be called in the child’s time of need.

Moreover, participants shared the importance of establishing relationships with school staff and parents when it came to their interactions with SWDs. They looked to the exceptional student education teachers as the experts in working with SWD and the parents as the ones who knew their child best. Viewing the SRO as a resource and as a person who is safe may contribute to increased educational outcomes as outlined by Kupchik and Bracy (2009).

Theme Three: School Safety

Although no SRO mentioned knowledge of a specialized IEP plan, such as IELPs and/or addressing school safety procedures, such as described in recent literature (Embury et al., 2019), several participants shared special provisions that were made to prepare SWDs during mandatory fire drills.

Many students with ASD have sensory processing deficits which make the loud sound of the fire alarm unsettling and difficult to deal with. Additionally, the act of a fire drill strays from routine. As the literature stated, many individuals with ASD thrive on routine (Hepworth, 2017). Participants shared that they often let the teachers know about fire drills so that students were able to leave the building prior to the sound of the alarm. The SROs explained this was done to prevent meltdowns as a result of the unexpected loud sound.

Research Question Three

How are SROs prepared to work with students in middle schools, including students who have disabilities such as ASD?
Theme Four: Training and Preparation:

Before one can become a certified LEO, they must attend an accredited police academy program and obtain the required training (Gordijn et al., 2017). Participants shared they are required to keep abreast of policy and legislative changes to the law. The FDoLE mandates that officers continue to receive specified training to maintain employment.

One such training is that required by Florida H.B. 39 (H.B. 39, 2017) on autism awareness. All research participants shared their experiences of ASD training. Many participants mentioned receiving training through their agencies or attending courses during the summer through FASRO. The SROs contributed their training to helping them identify the characteristics of students with autism such as communicatory difficulties or perseverating (Debbaudt, 2002; Hepworth, 2017; King & Murphy, 2014). They also shared their knowledge on ways to approach and interact with students with ASD, such as speaking in a calm way and not giving numerous directives at once.

Additionally, many participants shared they were certified in CIT training and were prepared by the training to use de-escalation techniques and manage crisis situations (Dempsey, 2017; Kubiak et al., 2019). Participants shared that their expertise in managing crises aided them in their roles as LEOs and as SROs. Several participants shared their knowledge of contacting outside resources such as a mobile crisis unit to help students in need.

Finally, all participants shared their experience with the school districts’ Wraparound Training. This training was explained as taking place prior to the beginning of the school year and covered a range of topics from school policy and resources, legislation updates, autism awareness, and SRO contracts. Participants stated the training was conducted over the span of three days and was beneficial in preparing them for the school year.
**Study Considerations**

This study was not without its limitations. The first limiting factor was the sample size. Although there was no specified number of participants required in the collection of qualitative data, this study focused on the lived experiences and beliefs (Creswell & Poth, 2018) of several SROs serving in middle schools and who possessed 2 or more years of experience. The study also concentrated on only one school district, which was small in size compared to neighboring districts in Florida.

Another limiting factor was the unforeseen occurrence of the global pandemic, COVID-19. Although the researcher contacted participants and provided them with transcripts of their interviews (Vagle, 2014), as well as results from the thematic analysis (Colaizzi, 1978), it is likely participants were attending to more pressing concerns in their profession and in their own lives.

**Implications of Findings**

To answer the three research questions, the researcher considered the lived experiences and beliefs of participants. The SROs shared their perceptions of their roles in schools and the duties assigned to them. The themes extracted from participant data aligned with legislation as outlined by the Implementation of Legislative Recommendations of the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Public Safety Commission (S. 7030, 2019) which required schools to be safeguarded against violence through safety plans and preparation. The placement of an SRO at each school within the district accomplishes one of the requirements of Senate Bill 7030 (2019). Additionally, established by the personal accounts of participants, each participant had received training on autism which satisfies the requirement of the Florida Department of Law.
Enforcement (FDoLE) by House Bill 39 (2017) requiring autism training to maintain employment as an LEO.

The findings of this research highlight the benefits of training LEOs on individuals with disabilities (Bolger et al., 2019), especially disabilities such as autism. Some participants were unaware of exceptional student education and the different categories of SWD until they began their role as SROs. It would be advantageous to expand upon the types of SWDs that SROs will come into contact with while serving in the school settings, perhaps during their summer training sessions and throughout the school year. It would also be beneficial for SROs to have more opportunities to build relationships with students in addition to maintaining the safety of the educational institution.

Impact of COVID-19

This research study was conducted just as the novel coronavirus, known as COVID-19, was making its way to the United States. The researcher conducted the final face-to-face interview right before the district’s Spring Break began. Students, teachers, and SROs did not return for the duration of the school year- rather, classes were taught virtually. The researcher was able to follow up with two of the participants and learned they had been delivering food and technology to students in need. Many of the SROs were placed in other departments within their agencies such as traffic, patrol, and community relations.

It is unknown what the next school year, 2020-21, will look like. However, it is anticipated that the need for mental health services, support, and positive relationships will be vital to the successful transition back into school settings. The executive director of FASRO and Chief of Sarasota County Schools Police Department, Timothy Enos stated, “Mental health will
be the main piece of returning, with the anxiety of the unknown”. (T. Enos., personal
communication, April 24, 2020)

All of society will be required to adjust to living in a post- COVID-19 world. It should
be expected that there will be fear returning to settings where groups of people are permitted to
gather. New routines and ways of conducting class will also unfold. More than ever schools will
be serving students in need. It is crucial that the school setting be a safe place for all to learn and
grow.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

As illustrated throughout the literature and expressed by participants of this study, the
role of the SRO is multifaceted (Schlosser, 2014). They serve schools as law enforcers, mentors,
and a resource for staff and parents, and they are responsible for the protection of the school. As
more SROs are placed in schools across the state of Florida, the need for quality training on
interacting with youth will be vital.

Although conducting individual interviews was true to the methodology of this selected
phenomenological research design (Vagle, 2014), the researcher recommends future studies in
which focus groups are incorporated to garner further description of the phenomenon shared by
SROs and provide even richer data for analysis. Expanding the sample size to include schools at
the elementary and high school level, as well as removing the criteria of serving for two years
would provide a larger participant pool and perhaps additional data.

From the information provided by the participants within this phenomenological study,
the researcher also recommends future studies explore the experiences of the first-year SRO,
perhaps as an ethnographic study, where the perceptions of the new SRO regarding their role, are
evaluated and the evolvement of their beliefs over the duration of the school year is explored.
Furthermore, research on mentorship programs for SROs such as inductions to the role would be of value for addressing knowledge gaps in interacting with SWDs and ensuring SROs are a vital piece of the organization at which they serve. Additionally, the researcher recommends conducting a similar study in a larger school district and expanding the research to include primary as well as secondary schools. It would also be beneficial to explore the specific topics covered in training aimed to prepare SROs for interactions with SWD. There is much to research in the area of SROs, including their preparedness and contributions as public servants in educational settings.

Conclusion

Through the years, SROs have been utilized to reflect the needs of society: from the early implementation of the SRO program in the 1950s intended to build community relations (Theriot & Cueller, 2016), to targeting the drug and alcohol problems of the 1970s and 1980s (Bleakley & Bleakley, 2018), to using programs such as DARE and GREAT to educate youth of the dangers of substances and gangs (Harmon, 1993; Palumbo, & Ferguson, 1995). However, from the mid-1990s to the present time, a different threat to the safety of our children has risen (Theriot & Orme, 2016), the threat of gun-violence and school shootings. The senseless killing taking place in schools, claiming the lives of so many, has left stakeholders in shock. As a result of the Parkland tragedy, Florida passed new legislation, thus changing the role of SROs to meet the demand for safe schools and the prevention of further violent acts. The topic of gun violence and active shooters in society is so prevalent, that famed rap artist Eminem included a controversial song titled “Darkness” in his most recent album, in which an active shooter is psychoanalyzed. The eerie lyrics emphasized the current state of society and the need to draw attention to the motivation for such horrific events:
But if you'd like to know the reason why I did this. You'll never find a motive. Truth is I have no idea. I am just as stumped, no signs of mental illness. Just tryin' to show ya the reason why we're so [expletive]. (Mathers, Resto, Simon, & Montgomery, 2020)

Indeed, attention should be directed at prevention. An emphasis on school safety, mental health, and building relationships were echoed in the comments of Chief Enos of FASRO, as he stated, “It is most important to build relationships with students and staff, to build a bond of trust to prevent active shooter situations” (T. Enos, personal communication, April 24, 2020), as was shared throughout the experiences by study participants.

The placement of SROs in each school provides stakeholders with a sense of safety. Knowing there is someone who is trained to respond to crises as they arise brings a sense of security. The SRO possesses not only the skillset to ensure school safety but also the opportunity to build relationships with all students, thus teaching them how to interact with LEOs and view them not as a threat but as a resource.

We are at a delicate stage in society. Threats to the safety and wellbeing of our children do not end at the conclusion of the school day. The Internet and social media perpetuate negative interactions and bullying. The mental health of our children, including our most vulnerable populations, our SWDs, are also at stake. Although the focus has been on tolerance, the shift to acceptance should occur. We should accept our differences in beliefs and political viewpoints on topics such as gun control. We should accept that each student comes to school with differing abilities and life experiences yet with the desire to connect to other people and the right to be safe while they receive an education. Without hesitation, we should assume our responsibility as modern leaders and ignite the changes that must take place to safeguard our youth and ultimately save our humanity.
APPENDIX A: IRB DETERMINATION
December 6, 2019

Dear Tricia Bridges:

On 12/6/2019, the IRB determined the following submission to be human subjects research that is exempt from regulation:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Review</th>
<th>Initial Study, Category 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Law Enforcement in Schools: An Evolving Role in Florida</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Investigator</td>
<td>Tricia Bridges</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IRB ID</td>
<td>STUDY00001238</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funding</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grant ID</td>
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</table>

This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made, and there are questions about whether these changes affect the exempt status of the human research, please contact the IRB. When you have completed your research, please submit a Study Closure request so that IRB records will be accurate.

If you have any questions, please contact the UCF IRB at 407-823-2901 or irb@ucf.edu. Please include your project title and IRB number in all correspondence with this office.

Sincerely,

Racine Jacques, Ph.D.
Designated Reviewer

Page 1 of 1
December 20, 2019

Tricia L. Bridges
2300 Stone Street
Oviedo, FL 32765

Dear Ms. Bridges,

I am in receipt of the proposal and supplemental information that you submitted for permission to conduct research in the Seminole County Public Schools. You are granted permission to conduct the study described herein, *Law Enforcement in Schools: An Evolving Role in Florida*, with the following parameters:

1. Please inform Captain Richard Francis, RCFrancis@semoleosheriff.org, via email of all activities related to contacting Middle School Level School Resource Officers and Deputies for surveys and interviews.
2. Please contact the principal of each middle school prior to conducting your study. The principal of the school has the final authority regarding participation.
3. All study-related research must be conducted outside of participants contracted time and your contracted time.
4. Use of the SCPS email system is not permitted for research projects.
5. Upon completion of your study, please send a copy of your results to my office.

Best of luck!

Respectfully,

Anna-Marie Cote, Ed.D.
Deputy Superintendent, Instructional Excellence and Equity

cc. Captain Richard Francis, Seminole Sheriff’s Office, SCPS Director of Safety
Ms. Demearia Faison, Executive Director, Middle Schools
Dr. John Auzmann, Principal, Lawson Lakes Middle School
Ms. Breezi Erickson, Principal, Greenwood Lakes Middle School
Dr. Craig Johnson, Principal, Indian Trails Middle School
Ms. Sarah Mansur, Principal, Jackson Heights Middle School
Ms. Linda Muney, Principal, Marjham Woods Middle School
Dr. Maggie Gunterson, Principal, Millennium Middle School
Mr. James Kuba, Principal, Millwee Middle School
Mr. Martin Dunlop, Principal, Rock Lake Middle School
Mr. Byron Durais, Principal, Sanford Middle School
Dr. Mia Coleman-Baker, Principal, South Seminole Middle School
Ms. Deb Abbott, Principal, Teague Middle School
Mr. Randy Shieler, Principal, Tuskaills Middle School
EXPLANATION OF RESEARCH

Title of Project: Law Enforcement in Schools: An Evolving Role in Florida

Principal Investigator: Tricia L. Bridges M.Ed.

Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Suzanne Martin

Dear School Resource Officer/School Resource Deputy:

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Your participation in this study is voluntary and any personal or school identifiable information will remain confidential. You must be 18 years of age or older to participate in this study.

The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of middle school level School Resource Officers/Deputies (SRO/SRDs) in their roles including experience with students with disabilities, with a specific focus on their experiences working with students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in a Central Florida school district.

Participants will be asked to complete a brief survey containing seven (7) questions about their experience as a school resource officer/deputy, as well as a few demographic questions. The survey should take no more than 15 minutes of your time. The survey may be completed in print (paper copy included) in this envelope.

If you have questions, concerns, or complaints please contact: Tricia L. Bridges, Graduate Student, Curriculum and Instruction, College of Community Innovation and Education, (321) 262-3728 or by email at TriciaBridges@knights.ucf.edu or Dr. Suzanne Martin, Dissertation Chair, College of Community Innovation and Education, (407) 823-4260 or by email at suzanne.martin@ucf.edu.

IRB contact about your rights in this study or to report a complaint: If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or have concerns about the conduct of this study, please contact Institutional Review Board (IRB), University of Central Florida, Office of Research, 12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501, Orlando, FL 32826-3246 or by telephone at (407) 823-2901, or email irb@ucf.edu.
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You are being asked to participate in a confidential interview. We will do the interview in a mutually convenient place, chosen to ensure your privacy. The interview should last between 30 minutes to an hour. The interview will be audio recorded and transcribed. The audio recording will be deleted, and the transcript will be encrypted in a file for five years. You must be 18 years of age or older to take part in this research study.

If you have questions, concerns, or complaints please contact: Tricia L. Bridges, Graduate Student, Curriculum and Instruction, College of Community Innovation and Education, (321) 262-3728 or by email at TriciaBridges@knights.ucf.edu or Dr. Suzanne Martin, Dissertation Chair, College of Community Innovation and Education, (407) 823-4260 or by email at suzanne.martin@ucf.edu.

IRB contact about your rights in this study or to report a complaint: If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or have concerns about the conduct of this study, please contact Institutional Review Board (IRB), University of Central Florida, Office of Research, 12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501, Orlando, FL 32826-3246 or by telephone at (407) 823-2901, or email irb@ucf.edu.
APPENDIX C: BRACKETING INTERVIEW
Kelly:
All right. It's recording. So, tell me about your experience in the field of education.

Tricia:
All right. Well, I started off as a substitute teacher. That was my first experience in the classroom, and I was a sub for about three years. Then I became a paraprofessional, and I worked as kind of like a support facilitator for the ESC department and I would go in and check on students and make sure that they were getting support. And then after a year of being a paraprofessional, then I was placed into a self-contained EBD unit and there I worked for about two years. I was still completing school, and after I completed my internship, which was in a VE pre-K class, then I became a teacher in a middle school that was Title I.

Kelly:
Why did you choose pre-K as your internship?

Tricia:
I didn't actually choose pre-K. I always like secondary education, but because all my experience was in secondary and middle school, I was assigned to do my internship in a primary. So, they put me in the VE pre-K class, because I didn't do an internship one. That was waived because I was a paraprofessional.

Kelly:
Okay. So, what's your current position?

Tricia:
I'm currently the AIP academic intervention program teacher at a middle school, so I have sixth, seventh, and eighth graders, and I provide supports, and interventions, and help them with their missing assignments.

Kelly:
Is that a special education position?

Tricia:
No, it's MTSS, but I do have a lot of students that are receiving exceptional student education. I have a lot of students that are with IEPs and disabilities.

Kelly:
What led you to become an educator?

Tricia:
I always wanted to be a teacher on some level. I used to love to play school with my siblings. It started with that. I just want it to work with kids. I knew that I liked being around kids, I understood them, especially ones that were troubled. At one point I thought I would be a
psychologist, a child psychologist, but I kind of started a family and I was taking the education route to get to being a child psychologist. It just wasn't going to work for me, so I just knew that maybe teaching I could still work with kids, and help them, and make a difference.

Kelly:
Awesome. So, describe your educational background.

Tricia:
Well, I have my master's in exceptional student education, my bachelor's in exceptional student education, and then when I was working on my associate’s degree, I did a lot with special ed and I focused a lot on English language arts and psychology. I was interested in all those areas.

Kelly:
And your current program?

Tricia:
Oh, and then I'm working right now on my doctorate, so finishing up that degree now, and that'll be in curriculum and instruction with a focus on special education.

Kelly:
Okay. So, with everything you've told us now, tell me, what is your experience with exceptional student education?

Tricia:
Well, from the very beginning of being even a substitute teacher, I used to get called a lot of times to the self-contained classrooms at the middle school. I would work there. My first experience at the middle school was actually in the autism unit, and I loved it, and I loved working with those teachers and the students, so I kept coming back. They said it was hard to find subs that would come to that class, so that's how I kind of got into that. And then once a paraprofessional position became open, that's when I wanted to be there full-time. And so I just kept on that path and I knew I wanted to work with students with disabilities.

Kelly:
And I know you mentioned that you were in a classroom with students with autism, but do you have any other experience with autism?

Tricia:
Well, while I was working as a substitute teacher, I was going to school and I was noticing that my own son, he was at the time two, was not really hitting milestones that his older sister had hit. I was always talking to the behavior specialist that would come in and I was always just trying to find out is this typical? Is this what I should be looking for? And actually because of that position, she referred me to a center. It was, I believe it was the Howard Phillips Center for development, and I started that process of just having him evaluated, because he wasn't talking, he would become very frustrated. He kind of would make sounds through his nose. So, through
that experience he was diagnosed with PDD-NOS, pervasive developmental delay, but they don't have that. That's not really a diagnosis anymore, but it's under the umbrella of autism. So, my son-

Kelly:
So, your son.

Tricia:
Yeah, that was a great eye opener for me being a parent and then also working in the schools with kids that were also on the spectrum.

Kelly:
What's your experience with school resource officers?

Tricia:
My very first experience with a school resource officer, or an officer in general, was when I was in elementary school and we'd have a D.A.R.E. officer come, and I always looked forward to the D.A.R.E. officer. I just learned so much from him and I thought that we, D.A.R.E. when they talked about the gangs, I was terrified of gangs, but I just looked forward to it. I thought it was really neat. From there, then working in the schools, I was just always very friendly with the school resource officers. They would come to the self-contained classroom. A lot of times they were called there. They had relationships with the kids and the kids seemed to respect them and sometimes they would be the person that would help them calm down. So, I've had positive experiences.

Kelly:
What do you think the role of the SRO is?

Tricia:
Well, before I have worked in the schools and have observed it, I kind of thought that they were someone there to direct the traffic and just kind of be there in case something illegal happened, in case there was a student that maybe brought something to school that they shouldn't. So I really didn't know exactly what they were supposed to do until being in the school and then seeing, yeah, they taught D.A.R.E. or they taught, at one point when I first started as a paraprofessional, our SRO taught a program called G.R.E.A.T, and I would see her go into the classroom and she would teach. It was during a life skills class, and she would go in and she would teach all day, she would teach the students this program. It was kind of like D.A.R.E. on gang resistance.

Kelly:
Elementary school?

Tricia:
This was a middle school.
Kelly:
Oh, middle.

Tricia:
This was in middle school. My other experiences were when my kids were growing up and they went and they had their D.A.R.E. graduation, so that was also something that I saw and they enjoyed that.

Kelly:
So, talking about SROs, what kind of trainings do you think that they should have?

Tricia:
I think with working with kids, I feel like SROs should definitely know that there's a difference between working with adults on the street or out in their communities then when they come on to a campus and when they're working with kids, especially with kids that have maybe had negative experiences with law enforcement, which I kind of observed that when I worked at another school where most of the experiences that the kids had were maybe their parents being arrested or just not something that was positive. So, I do think that they need to be trained on how to work with different populations in schools, especially students that have disabilities, such as autism.

Kelly:
What do you expect to find from your study and why?

Tricia:
Well, I'm hoping to find out what school resource officers actually do and how they look at their role and how they perceive their role. I really want to know how they were prepared and what led them to become a school resource officer, because it's a big difference between being out on the road or patrol then being in a school, because you're kind of a teacher.

Kelly:
Right?

Tricia:
You're making an impact. The students are looking at you, you build a relationship with kids, so I feel like I really just want to know what their experiences are and how were they prepared to come into a school.

Kelly:
And why?

Tricia:
And why they were prepared?
Kelly:
No, just why you expect it. What do you expect to find in your study and why?

Tricia:
Well, I expect to find that, I'm hoping to find out that they are indeed prepared to work with kids, and it's important because there have been issues in other schools in other states where, even this state it's been on the news, where school resource officers maybe didn't respond appropriately to behavior where kids have been tased, arrested. Not too long ago there was something on the news about a, I think it was a five or a six-year-old girl who was actually arrested. So I think that I just want to know how are officers prepared to come into schools and not only protect the schools itself, but to be that positive influence on students.

Kelly:
So, with all of this, do you feel that you have any bias or preconceived ideas that should be shared as you conduct your study?

Tricia:
I do, because I have had the experience of attending FASRO, it's the Florida Association of School Resource Officers, a conference. And so, I was able to see some of the classes and sessions that were offered to school resource officers, and most of that, it had happened right after Parkland, so most of that was geared towards active shooters and safety. So, I think that my bias, being a mom, too, of a child that has a disability and also having worked in school, having worked in the schools, I think that I feel ... I'm hopeful actually. I'm hopeful that they are prepared to work with kids with disabilities and that they know that they're people first and not just that special kid, that they actually have some type of training to work with them, calm them down maybe, to deescalate situations. Because I think that would always be a fear of any parent, that your child lost control and now they've been arrested.

Kelly:
Or tased.

Tricia:
Or tased. Exactly. It's kind of scary. It could be potentially scary.

Kelly:
Well, thank you for all this information.

Tricia:
Thank you.
School Resource Officer/School Resource Deputy Questionnaire

1. Name ________________________________

2. Gender
   o Male
   o Female
   o Prefer Not to Answer

3. How long have you served as a law enforcement officer?
   o Less than 2 years
   o 2-5 years
   o 6-10 years
   o 11-15
   o More than 15 years

4. How long have you served as a school resource officer?
   o Less than 2 years
   o 2-5 years
   o 6-10 years
   o 11-15
   o More than 15 years

5. What experiences have you had working with students with disabilities while serving as an SRO? Please check all that apply.
   o Assist teacher in classroom
   o Assist with Discipline
   o Arrest, Baker Act,
   o Counsel
   o Witness to incident at school
   o Student in question regarding incident at school
   o Other, please specify ________________________________

6. What are the number of trainings you have attended related to working with individuals with disabilities?
   o 1-2
   o 3-5
   o 6-7
   o 8 or more
   o I have not attended training related to working with individuals with disabilities

7. What are the number of trainings you have attended related to school safety and/or threat assessment?
   o 1-2
   o 3-5
   o 6-7
   o 8 or more
   o I have not attended training related to school safety and/or threat assessment
APPENDIX E: BRIDGES SEMI STRUCTURED SRO INTERVIEW PROTOCOL
**Bridges' Semi-structured SRO Interview Protocol**

The purpose of this study is to understand the lived experiences of middle school level School Resource Officers (SROs*) in their roles including experience with students with disabilities, with a specific focus on their experiences working with students with ASD in a Central Florida school district.

*References in this protocol referring to police officer refers to police officer, deputy, or any sworn law enforcement officer assigned to a school. This interview will be given to full time SRO officers exclusively.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data</th>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Prompts &amp; elicitations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To break the ice and provide some background.</td>
<td>Please tell me about yourself. What led you to become a law enforcement officer?</td>
<td>Was it a dream you always had? Did you have a family member who served as an officer?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience as an SRO.</td>
<td>Tell me about the programs you are involved in at your school. What committees do you belong to? What were your perceptions of the role of an SRO when you first started? How did your perception of what the job entailed change?</td>
<td>Camps? Clubs? Classes? What are the goals of those camps/clubs/classes? Special teams?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Experience with school safety.</td>
<td>Tell me about your role as an SRO and school safety. Describe your experience related to crisis intervention for youth, and alternatives to detention and incarceration.</td>
<td>Trainings? Role in Code Red drills? Experience with threat assessment?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiences with exceptional student education teachers as an SRO.</td>
<td>Tell me about your relationship with the special education department at your school?</td>
<td>Are you provided updates on students with disabilities and their behavior goals? Behavior plans? Informed of students considered at risk for behavior issues?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness of students with disabilities</td>
<td>Please describe any specific training you have received related to interactions with persons with disabilities.</td>
<td>Interactions before being an SRO? Relative or friends with disabilities? Recall hearing about it in police academy?</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Perceptions of students with disabilities.</td>
<td>As an SRO, what type of interactions do you have with working with students with disabilities? Can you describe a time you were called to assist that involved a student with a disability? Tell me about your experience related to training on legal issues such as special protections for students with disabilities.</td>
<td>Positive experiences? Negative experiences?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience with ASD</td>
<td>Can you describe a time you were called to assist that involved a student with ASD?</td>
<td>Outcome? What was the reason for call? How did you handle the situation?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience of training pertaining to autism.</td>
<td>Please describe any specific training related to working with persons with ASD.</td>
<td>How long ago? How many hours of training? Do you recall who taught the training? What topics were covered? CIT training? Positive experience? Negative experience? Applicable to your role as a Police Officer? Applicable to your role as SRO? How many trainings have you gone to? What organization did you receive your training from? (Ex. CARD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perception of training</td>
<td>Imagine that you were asked to help develop a training program to teach SROs about working with students with disabilities, including ASD. What would you want to include in that training?</td>
<td>How often would you suggest that training be given? What kind of information would you like SROs to receive?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience as an SRO</td>
<td>Is there anything that would make your role as an SRO more successful?</td>
<td>Relationships with admin? Student interactions? Working with teachers?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX F: MEMBER CHECKING LETTER AND DIRECTIONS
Dear [Participant],

Thank you again for meeting with me. Attached you will find a copy of your transcribed interview. Please review it to ensure this is an accurate representation of your words. If you have any questions, comments, or concerns, or would like to make any additions or changes, please contact me at XXX-XXX-XXXX.

Thank you for all you do to keep our schools and students safe.

Sincerely,

Tricia Bridges
APPENDIX G: MEMBER CHECKING EMAIL AND DIRECTIONS
Greetings [Participant],

I hope that this email finds you and your loved ones doing well. Since we met several weeks ago, the world seems to be a different place. Before Spring Break began, I mailed a transcribed copy of our interview for your records and review to your respective schools. I also welcomed your questions and comments to ensure the transcription of the interview represented your responses.

Since our meeting, I have continued my dissertation work and have analyzed the interviews that were conducted with you and your colleagues. I have identified several themes and subthemes. Please review the graph below. I welcome your thoughts and feedback. If you have any questions or would like to make any additions to our conversation, I look forward to speaking with you.

Thank you again for taking time out of your busy schedules to assist me in my research and thank you for all you do. Please stay safe.

Sincerely,

Tricia Bridges

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Emergent Theme</th>
<th>Subtheme</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Relationships</td>
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APPENDIX H: ORGANIZING THEMES
### Exhaustive Description

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ABA Program</th>
<th>Homeland security</th>
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<tr>
<td>Active killer</td>
<td>IEP Meeting</td>
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<tr>
<td>Administration</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Individualized Education Plan (IEP)</td>
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<td>Anxiety</td>
<td>Interact with law enforcement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Laws do not apply</td>
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<td>Autism Society of Greater Orlando (ASGO)</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Baker act</td>
<td>Literal meaning</td>
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<tr>
<td>Biting and hitting</td>
<td>Lockdown</td>
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<tr>
<td>Body language</td>
<td>Lots of respect</td>
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<tr>
<td>Build rapport</td>
<td>Lunch with kids</td>
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<tr>
<td>Build relationships</td>
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<td>Bullying</td>
<td>Medications/Meds</td>
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<tr>
<td>Calm down</td>
<td>Meltdown</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cerebral Palsy</td>
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<td>changed</td>
<td>Mental retardation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chase him down</td>
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<td>Mobile crisis unity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Coaching</td>
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<td>Perimeter check</td>
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<td>Discipline</td>
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<td>Relationships with parents</td>
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<td>Focus on Safety</td>
<td>Retire</td>
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<td>Following protocol</td>
<td>Role changed</td>
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<td>GREAT</td>
<td>Routine</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hard corner</td>
<td>Runner</td>
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</table>

Links:
- [Autism Society of Greater Orlando (ASGO)](https://www.autism.org)
- [Individualized Education Plan (IEP)](https://www.autism.org)

Notes:
- The text includes a variety of terms and phrases related to autism, behavior, crisis management, and safety protocols.
- The document appears to be an exhaustive list of terms and related concepts, possibly for training or reference purposes.

*Page 126*
Safety patrol
Safety team
Scheduled drills
School safety
Self-contained classrooms
Social media
Soft corner
Stress
Student about to run
Suicidal
Summer
Summer training
Therapist
Threat assessment
Threat assessments
Training
Triggers
Understand the kid
Victims
Weapons on campus
Wraparound trainings
Zero Tolerance
## Identifying Emergent Themes and Subthemes

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<tr>
<td><strong>Relationships</strong></td>
<td>Administration</td>
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<td>Resource for Parents</td>
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Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools (REMS) Technical Assistance (TA) Center.


