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Student-Centered Practices That Improve Equity

for Students with Disabilities:

Professional Development for Leaders

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Education

by

Susan Ann Wildes

2020

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Creating Student-Centered Practices

That Support Inclusion

for Students with Disabilities

by

Susan Ann Wildes

Doctor of Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2020

Professor Robert Cooper, Co-Chair

Professor Diane Durkin, Co-Chair

This modified, participatory action research study detailed the experiences of school site administrators seeking to increase equity for students with disabilities through the use of student-centered inclusive practices. School leaders with special education backgrounds, served as action researchers to document student-centered practices shown to positively impact achievement for students with disabilities. These practices formed the basis of professional development workshops for leaders lacking such formalized special education training provided by action researchers. Data collection methods included recorded and transcribed action research meetings,

analysis of artifact documents of practices, participant workshop reflections, and both AR member and participant interviews. Results of the study detailed key inclusive, school-wide practices employed by principals holding special education credentials that support students with disabilities in general education. The study also revealed that school leaders do not need to rely on outside training to gain efficacy in special education, but rather the time and space to collaborate and learn from peers realizing success. The study concluded that the collaborative nature of principal professional development positively contributes to leaders gaining greater feelings of confidence, control, and successful involvement in special education. Future research should continue to focus on analyzing school design and principal leadership wherein students with disabilities realize success commensurate with their peers.

The dissertation of Susan Ann Wildes is approved.

Pedro Noguera

Connie Kasari

Robert Cooper, Committee Co-Chair

Diane Durkin, Committee Co-Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2020

DEDICATION PAGE

To my parents, Harriet and Eugene Kozlowski, who always gave unconditional support in pursuit of education, but did not live long enough to witness me taking this final step. For my amazing husband and daughters who have provided endless encouragement and patience. I could not have successfully navigated this process without you.

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VITA

1994	B.A. Elementary Education and Psychology The College of William & Mary Williamsburg, Virginia
1994	Multiple Subjects Teaching Credential, PK – 6 Single Subject, Social Science & English The College of William & Mary Williamsburg, Virginia
2004	Fulton County Teacher of the Year Finalist Fulton County Schools Atlanta, Georgia
2004	M.A. Educational Policy Studies Georgia State University Atlanta, Georgia
2004	Educational Leadership Credential Georgia State University, Atlanta
2016	Administrator of the Year Redondo Beach Unified School District Redondo Beach, California
2017	Clear Administrative Credential University of California, Irvine

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

This qualitative action research study detailed the experiences of school site administrators as they sought to increase inclusion for students with disabilities through student-centered school practices. Those practices included the utilization of a student communication tool, school-wide master scheduling, function-based behavior modification strategies, ongoing professional development, progress monitoring of students, and dedicated collaboration time. Despite research that inclusion enhances achievement (Waldron & McLeskey, 1998), many schools impose practices, including the way instructional schedules are designed, that counter the potential benefits of inclusion and inhibit possibilities for professional collaboration. Action research members, comprised of school leaders with special education credentials, analyzed achievement of students with disabilities and documented student-centered practices they employ that positively impact inclusion and achievement for students with disabilities, elaborated above. AR members used these identified practices to develop professional development workshops for school leader peers lacking formalized special education training. Workshop participants developed knowledge of inclusive practices and steps toward implementation that led to increased self-efficacy in building inclusive cultures and leading special education. Using the School Improvement Framework (Bryk, Gomez, Grunow, & LeMahieu, 2015), this study examined how collaborative learning networks provided administrators the organizational management knowledge in special education to ensure that students with disabilities have equitable access to general education.

Research Questions

1. What do school leaders with special education backgrounds, working in collaboration, describe as high-leverage, standard practices that support inclusion for students with disabilities?
 - a. How do school leaders describe the process for their implementation?

2. How does participation in collaborative learning workshops influence site school leaders' perceived efficacy in improving equity through inclusion?
3. How do school leader participants describe the experience of collaborative learning workshops as a professional development format for studying high-leverage, standard practices that support inclusion?

Statement of the Problem

In the last three decades, school leaders have faced increasing complexities and variabilities as instructional leadership roles expand. No longer are principals tasked solely with managerial duties and discipline. Principals must shepherd school teams to address reform efforts toward more rigorous academic standards and accountability measures, while focusing on school improvement to close academic achievement gaps. To achieve these goals, principals must obtain knowledge, competency, problem solving abilities, and creativity in order to provide such a high degree of leadership (Samriangjit, Tesaputa, & Somprach, 2016). This responsibility rests squarely on the shoulders of site principals, as research on effective schools has well documented the link between principal instructional leadership and student achievement (DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2003; Institute for Educational Leadership, 2000; Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008).

Given the requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2001) and the 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), school leaders must also ensure access to general education for students with disabilities, and increased achievement within rigorous standards (IDEA: USDOC, 1997). Additionally, the Every Student Succeeds Act, signed into law in 2015 to replace NCLB, further outlined the expectation of success for all students. The act specifically included provisions to ensure equity for disadvantaged students and students with high needs with specific protections that all students be taught to high levels of academic standards (ESSA, 2015).

New legislation also ushered in mandates around inclusion for students with disabilities in general education. Between 1989 and 2013, the percentage of students with disabilities who were in a general education class for 80% or more of the school day increased from about 32% to nearly 62% (Mader, 2017). While general education teachers are expected to meet the needs of students with disabilities, staff development and university training programs typically do little to prepare them. A 2007 study by Cameron and Cook found that “general-education teachers in a teacher-preparation program reported taking an average of 1.5 courses focusing on inclusion or special education, compared to about 11 courses for special-education teachers” (p. 360). It is the role of the site principal, as instructional leader, to provide staff with instructional leadership and create professional development opportunities to ensure classrooms meet the needs of all students.

In addition to the increased time students with disabilities spend in general education, the number of students served under IDEA is also on the rise. In 2018-19, 7.1 million students were served in public schools across the U.S. under IDEA; an increase from 1990-91 of 4.7 million. In 2018-19, 725,412 of those students were living in the state of California (IDEA Section 618 Data Products: State Level Data Files; National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). According to the 2018-19 California State Accountability Report Card (SARC), students with disabilities are one of the lowest performing student groups across grade levels and subject areas (State Accountability Report Card, 2019), with greater numbers of students falling into this subgroup. Students with disabilities are the only targeted group of students in the state to fall into the “red” indicator on the 2018 California School Dashboard for college and career readiness (California Department of Education, 2018).

Even more concerning is the continued, persistent disproportionality by race and ethnicity of students in special education. The U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (OCR) revealed consistent patterns of overrepresentation of some racial and ethnic groups in special education, particularly for students who are culturally and linguistically diverse (The Council for Children with Behavioral Disorders, 2013). African American students are consistently overrepresented in overall special education programs, particularly in the categories of mental impairment (MI) and emotional disturbance (ED). American Indian students have found to be overrepresented in the category of learning disabilities (LD). This data holds true in every state (Parris, 2002). Disparities are also found with respect to the restrictiveness of the educational setting. These student groups are underrepresented in inclusive settings that offer access to more rigorous academic standards and grade-level opportunities (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

Although principals' instructional leadership has proven effective in increasing academic achievement of all students, including those with disabilities, few school leaders are effectively prepared (Angelle & Bilton, 2009). Most lack instructional leadership capacity for special education program evaluation and mentoring of special education staff, as well as implementation of curriculum that addresses the needs of students with disabilities. Research has established that there is little instruction or training around special education in principal preparation programs and that on-the-job professional development is scarce (Angelle & Bilton, 2009; Crockett, 2019). Lack of training or background experience makes this highly specialized area of education one of the biggest struggles that principals face (Harper, 2018).

Instructional Leadership in Special Education

Research indicates that the school principal plays a pivotal role in a school's ability to provide effective educational opportunities and success for students with disabilities (Bays, 2004; Bays & Crocket, 2007; Cobb, 2014; Crocket, 2002; DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2003). In 2001, the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) and the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) stated that administrators must be knowledgeable about all aspects of educational programs, including special education. It also declared that the principal's vision is the key to ensuring that students with disabilities learn and succeed (Implementing IDEA: A Guide for Principals, 2001). That vision, influenced by knowledge, is embedded into a school's culture through primary and secondary mechanisms such as allocation of resources, organizational practices and procedures, and design; these can either promote inclusive practices or inhibit them (Schein & Schein, 2017).

Despite the pivotal role of principals, administrative training programs have failed to train principals adequately to be instructional leaders to students with disabilities (Angelle & Bilton, 2009; DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2003; Templeton, 2017). Angelle and Bilton (2009) found that 53% of school principals surveyed had completed no courses in special education during their preservice training and an additional 32% only completed one. This data suggests that principal preparation programs fail to increase knowledge of special education. This absence of coursework was confirmed by a 2013 study by Pazey and Cole. Coursework in which principals have engaged is focused almost solely on legal aspects of special education and Individualized Education Plans, not pedagogy, supervision, or program design. Limited knowledge and weak training may contribute to ineffectiveness as instructional leaders of special education programs (Bays & Crockett, 2007; Crockett, 2002), and negatively influences a

principal's belief system and involvement in the implementation of inclusion (Lasky & Karge, 2006; McLeskey, Billingsley, & Waldron, 2016; Roderick & Jung, 2012; Waldron, McLeskey, & Redd, 2011).

Existing Gap this Research Fills

Principals are expected to demonstrate leadership practices that generate learning environments that allow all students to experience equity of educational opportunities, success, and well-being. Although suggested core competencies (knowledge and skills) for administrators have been established by the Council of Exceptional Children, the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC), CEEDAR Center, and related studies (Bateman et al., 2017; Cooner, Tochtermann, & Garrison-Wade, 2004; Kozleski, Mainzer, & Deshler, 2000; Lyons, 2016; Wagle & Wilcox, 1999), little mention is made of students with disabilities in the revised 2015 Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL). While the standards include expectations of school leaders to address bias, marginalization, deficit-based schooling, and low expectations, the term "disabilities" is only used in one out of the ten national standards.

Principals knowledgeable in special education are more likely to use their knowledge and skills to promote inclusion for students with disabilities and provide them access to general education (Praisner, 2003). That might include recommendations for less restrictive settings, fostering teacher collaboration, organizational restructuring, and professional development (Theoharis et al., 2016). Principals' leadership and conduct during the process of inclusion into general education is one of the most important factors to implementing inclusion successfully. According to Billingsley and Banks (2019), implementation of inclusion requires principals and staff to engage in activities that draw on the leadership practice of organizational management. Fisher, Sax, and Grove (2000) also identified the structure of the school support system, namely

student placement and staff allocation, as a critical reason why inclusive education was successful and allowed students access and services in general education classrooms.

Substantial research asserts the importance of inclusion for students with disabilities. However, little research exists that identifies, for school leaders, specific school-wide practices that support and sustain inclusion and the process for their implementation. Studies do document the effectiveness of principal professional development through professional learning communities (Grissom & Harrington, 2010). Although some research examines school and university partnerships through which principals learn to restructure and transform inclusive schools (Causton-Theoharis et al., 2010; Shogren et al., 2015), such partnerships are the exception, not the norm. A research gap exists on how administrators gain knowledge without partnerships to build inclusive school cultures. The School Improvement Framework stipulates that improvement research is rooted in humans' natural inclination to learn by doing and can build robust, practice field knowledge (Bryk et al., 2011; Bryk et al., 2015). It acknowledges that leadership drives improvement and that schools with strong leaders are 10 times more likely to improve (Bryk, 2010). The framework challenges the autonomy of educator practice in unearthing the knowledge and skills necessary to bring about improvement. Focusing on variations in performance can produce positive outcomes for diverse students across schools, and developing knowledgeable administrators is key in this process. Currently, we do not know how collaborative networks can help principals acquire the knowledge of student-centered practices that ensure equity for students with disabilities, nor do we have an understanding of the skills they need to implement the practices.

Research Design

This project planned and carried out modified action research to document the experiences of a network of school leaders as they sought to increase inclusive education for students with disabilities through the implementation of student-centered practices. Qualitative methodology was most appropriate in exploring the process of how subjects construct and transform knowledge (Creswell, 2018). The methodology was suitable to document both the processes and experiences of principals as they collectively engaged to build knowledge and efficacy. Multiple sources of data (interviews, group observations, workshop reflections, and document analyses) allowed the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding as to the practices identified, implementation process, workshop influence on efficacy, and conditions necessary for organizational change to foster inclusion. The utilization of the School Improvement Framework, which emphasizes an experiential and problem-centered approach to learning, lent itself to a qualitative approach with an emergent design (Creswell, 2018). The framework employs learning networks to accelerate learning. The action research (AR) team, comprised of six experienced school leaders with backgrounds in special education, studied high-leverage practices and then structured learning activities for school leader peers without special education training. The AR team detailed the problem to be solved, set goals, documented effective inclusive practices, and established protocols for professional development across three 2-hour meetings. They then led six 1-hour collaborative workshops for peers (Bryk, Gomez, Grunow, & LeMahieu, 2015). Identified practices included utilization of student passports as a communication tool, school-wide master scheduling, function-based behavior modification strategies, ongoing professional development, progress monitoring of students, and dedicated staff collaboration time. Qualitative methodology provided a holistic understanding of how

school leaders gained knowledge to support students with disabilities, and therefore documented an implementation description to inform districts and guide future trainings.

Research Site

In order to examine the phenomenon of school leadership in special education, it was necessary to find a district with a large population of students with disabilities; the district also needed to have students with disabilities that performed significantly behind non-disabled peers, a majority of school leaders that held general education credentials, and students primarily serviced utilizing a pullout model of instruction. School District R met all of these criteria. Of the district's more than 10,000 students, 12.9% of the total student population had an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), with an additional 4.4% having a 504 educational plan. Students with disabilities in the district performed significantly below non-disabled peers as measured by California state-wide testing (CAASPP) in grades 3 through 8 and 11 in both English Language Arts and Math. According to the California State Dashboard (2018), starting in grade 3, students with disabilities scored 70 mean points lower in ELA and 53.5 mean points lower in math. The discrepancy widened as students age. In grade 11, students with disabilities scored 133.6 mean points lower in ELA and 174 mean points lower in math than non-disability peers. Students with disabilities made up the lowest scoring student group in both subject areas, including English Language Learners (ELL), socioeconomically disadvantaged (LI), foster youth (FY), and all racial groups (California Department of Education, 2018). The discrepancy also appeared in high school graduation rates. Compared to 94.9% of general education students who graduate and 53.5% who were college and career ready, only 78.9% of students with disabilities graduate and only 18.4% were college and career ready (California State Dashboard, 2018). The disparity did

not belong exclusively to District R, as the state of California reported similar gaps in test scores, graduation rates, and college readiness.

The sample for this study was current school site administrators in the South Bay region of Los Angeles who were responsible for the oversight of special education programs and staff. District R was led by 20 site leaders. Of those, 15 (75%) held single subject or multiple subject credentials with teaching experience in general education. There were five site leaders (25%) with special education credentials and teaching experience, a demographic data point unique to District R, as research indicates that approximately 92% of principals nationwide reported having a general education teaching license or certification (Wakeman, Browder, Flowers, & Ahlgrim-Dezell, 2006). The goal was to recruit a sample of school leaders with extensive experience in special education to serve as the action research team, as well as school leaders without such experience to serve as workshop participants. The School District R Director of Special Education and Director of Educational Services, a researcher, rounded out the subgroup of six administrators as the action research team. To date, school site principals in District R had not received any formal training in student-centered practices or supporting inclusion, nor had they engaged in collaborative networks or workshops on the topic.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This study sought to examine school leader participation in collaborative learning workshops and its impact on self-efficacy in implementing inclusive practices. The goal was to support effective inclusion of students with disabilities through student-centered practices. Research has proven the benefits of inclusion in general education for students with disabilities, principles of effective inclusive schools, and the impact principal instructional leadership has on implementation (Angelle & Bilton, 2009; Cobb, 2015). Principal leadership plays a key role in ensuring equity and academic success for students with disabilities. Research has also clearly shown that school principals do not receive training nor have backgrounds to serve as instructional leaders in special education (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003).

Existing research on principal leadership in special education frequently examines principal attitudes and leadership competencies that impact student achievement. Special education is one of the biggest challenges that principals face, consuming more than 50 % of their workweek, yet a research gap exists as to how principals can gain knowledge and support in addressing it (Cooner, Tochtermann, & Garrison-Wade, 2004). Though schools aim to close persistent achievement gaps between students with disabilities and non-disabled peers, scant research highlights practical ways for principals to design and sustain schools wherein all students have the opportunities to reach their greatest potential. This research is relevant as it examines specifically how principals can engage in collaborative learning to increase efficacy in special education leadership and use learnings to improve school organizations, removing barriers to effective inclusion (Billingsley, McLeskey, & Crockett, 2017).

This literature review first focuses on examining the history of special education and the formation of a dual educational system for students with disabilities. The review examines the

inclusive education movement as a response to inequitable educational conditions and landmark legislation. Next, the impact of school principals on the academic success of students with disabilities is considered as a significant factor. The review looks at the current reality of instructional leadership due to failings in administrator preparation and indicates what research recommends as core competencies for leading inclusive schools. These competencies include progress monitoring, tailoring research-based instruction, holding high expectations for all students, implementing a collaborative culture, and the reorganization of schools to support effective special education practices (Billingsley & McLeskey, 2014; McLaughlin, 2009). In particular, the literature review examines what research says in regard to one key recommendation: school organization that promotes effective inclusion, positioning existing school practices as common roadblocks that impede students' equitable and meaningful access to general education. Finally, I will review recommendations for principal professional development, and describe how they might be implemented within School Improvement Framework so that school leaders can gain knowledge, on-the-job, in order to address the achievement gap for students with disabilities.

Introduction

The most basic right of a person with disabilities is the entitlement to a free and appropriate education (IDEA: USDOC, 2004). This education must include designated instruction and services to meet the needs of these students as adequately as their non-disabled peers (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004). It must be provided, to the maximum extent possible, with non-disabled peers (Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Section 504, 1996). This mandate was the birth of inclusive education, and hoped to signal the end of segregated education for students with disabilities. More than 45 years later, the

percentage of students educated in inclusive classrooms has grown steadily. Recent data demonstrates inclusion rates increasing from 40% in 2000 to 63% in 2015 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020).

Growth in inclusion rates, however, has not resulted in equitable outcomes. Students with disabilities continue to score lower than non-disabled peers on state and national assessments (U.S. Department of Education, 2015), demonstrating little, if any improvement over the last few decades. They represent the lowest performing student group, with graduation rates significantly below non-disabled peers across the nation and even lower in California. The substantial achievement gaps have implications beyond schooling; students with disabilities experience fewer employment opportunities and decreased lifetime earnings (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018 & California's Statewide Task Force on Special Education, 2015). With no hope of catching up to their peers, special education, for many students, is a dead end.

The principal's leadership is a powerful predictor of the school's ability to provide effective services for students with disabilities to achieve growth. In 2001, the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) and the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) created "Implementing IDEA: A Guide for Principals," which stated that administrators must be knowledgeable about all aspects of educational programs, including special education. It further declared that the principal's vision is the key to ensuring that students with disabilities learn and succeed (NAESP, 2001). Despite this instructional leader role, most principals lack any program training background, professional development, or practical experience in the field. Additionally, many school leaders impose practices that counter effective inclusion and inhibit meaningful access to general education. These practices include inappropriately used resources, poor design of teaching schedules, and poor scheduling of classes. Such lack of training, and the

defective resource utilization that ensues, reflects a history of special education that prioritizes abled students over students with disabilities.

History of Special Education

School principals currently function as instructional leaders in capacities that are removed from their traditional roles as school managers. As late as the 1970s, school principals had no responsibility for special education programs or students. Federal legislation mandated inclusion and services in general education, yet no changes were made to preparation programs for teachers and administrators. Current inequitable outcomes support research that also demonstrate principals' lack of efficacy in leading special education programs (Angelle & Bilton, 2009). To fully understand the problem surrounding principal efficacy in leading special education, an examination of its history within the U.S. educational system is crucial.

Creation of a Separate Education System

The history of special education is one of inequitable educational access, influenced by misunderstandings, superstitions, inappropriate care, bias, and prejudices (Pazey & Yates, 2019). Individuals with disabilities historically encountered harsh public attitudes and were most often labeled as “idiot,” regardless of disability (Winzer, 2009, p. 20). During the 1800s, an educational system that encompassed all school-age children began to form; however, it did not include those with disabilities. Procedures for categorizing and sorting out students based on cognitive abilities was instituted, limiting students with impairments to home, work, or institutions. This was the beginning of different, dual systems of education separating students with disabilities from their peers (Pazey & Yates, 2019). Over the next hundred years, the practice of institutionalization became the rule in the U.S., not only to protect disabled children from the hazards and cruelty of society, but also to protect “normal” children from the negative

effects of associating with “crippled” children. Intelligence tests developed, providing a more scientific way to identify a person’s “deficits” (Au, 2013), wherein they could be identified and isolated from those without such deficits. The referral and assessment of students were mostly based on opinion, bias, and coincidence, and therefore the numbers of students identified rose sharply, particularly marginalized groups of students by income, race, and ethnicity (Kobe, 2002; Parris, 2002). Special education thus emerged as a management tool for public school systems (O'Brien & Bundy, 2009). The idea of different and unequal education for children with disabilities became the generally accepted norm in American society.

Federal Involvement Sparks Reform

Reform in special education began with the involvement of the federal government in the early 1950s (Pazey & Yates, 2019). The National Association for Retarded Children (ARC) lobbied Congress for financial support and laws for programs geared toward the population of children identified as “mentally retarded.” Public Law 85-926 (P.L. 85-926) provided financial support for colleges and universities to institute training programs for leaders and personnel teaching children in special education and the field of disability studies (Martin, Martin, & Terman, 1996). In practice, the law was weak, allowing states selectivity in how students with disabilities were served.

Slow progress led to the formation of advocacy groups in the 1960s, which highlighted special education and the need for federal government support. The President’s Panel on Mental Retardation, in 1961, brought to light deplorable conditions in institutions, and support for institutional models began to erode (Martin, Martin, & Terman, 1996; Winzer, 2008). The 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was the first major federal act to provide and fund direct services to primary students and ensure expanded access to public education (U.S.

Department of Education, 1965). In response, to many states continuing to turn away students with disabilities, thus strengthened mandates were pursued. *Mills v. Board of Education of the District of Columbia* brought suit against the city for denying enrollment and pursuing expulsion on the basis of disabilities (1972). This pivotal ruling set precedent that students with disabilities had equal rights to public education (Martin, Martin, & Terman, 1996). It produced an outbreak of litigation over the next few decades.

Landmark Legislation Advances Inclusion

Congress's response to *Mills v. Board of Education* came in the form of two federal legislative acts, which each made the integration of students the central theme of special education (Winzer, 2008). First, the 1973 Rehabilitation Act, Section 504 (Public Law 93-112), directed an end to discrimination. It mandated schools receiving federal financial assistance to offer services to persons with disabilities (Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Section 504, 1996). The 1975 Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA), a seminal piece of legislation, created a federal commitment that all students, regardless of disability, would receive an appropriate education in the "least restrictive environment" (Education for All Handicapped Children Act, 1975). The dramatic shift supported the integration of students into schools and environments with non-disabled peers as much as possible and the dismantling of segregated classrooms (Martin, Martin, & Terman, 1996; Winzer, 2008). EAHCA established practices for identification and diagnosis of disabilities and specified a process for providing services. Most importantly, it presented this mandate as a civil rights issue, linking it to other legal and social developments (Martin, Martin, & Terman, 1996; Pazey & Yates, 2019). Amended in 1983 and then again in 1990, the act was renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

IDEA set forth critical elements for the protection and support of students with disabilities. The law provided broad mandates including mechanisms for identifying and counting students, thereby providing accurate funding and disbursements (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004). IDEA set forth evaluation and eligibility determination guidelines, the requirement of parental input and due process procedures, and the novel term “least restrictive environment.” This act gave legal standing to the idea of inclusive education and marked the rise of the inclusive education movement.

The Impact of IDEA on Inclusion

Inclusive education is “entrenched in the assumption that a common education for almost all students is possible” (Winzer, 2008, p.34). IDEA, however, didn’t necessarily mandate inclusion, but rather the “least restrictive environment.” This concept stipulates that students with disabilities have the legal right to be placed in a setting, to the maximum extent possible, with non-disabled peers. That definition could be interpreted and applied on an individual basis as schools saw fit, and mere compliance did not remove the marginalization of students or challenge inequities (Theoharis, Causton, & Tracy-Bronson, 2016). A history of segregation, along with decision makers entrenched in favoring “abled” students, maintained more restrictive interpretations. Principals, as decision makers, often had no background and training within special education that would support inclusive placements (Praisner, 2003). The dearth of knowledge, which continues today, perpetuated the segregation of students with disabilities in a dual special education system, now renamed as a pullout model (Theoharis, Causton, & Tracy-Bronson, 2016). Inclusive education continued to elude students with disabilities due to individual, social, political, and organizational variables that influence how schools are organized (DeMatthews, 2015).

New Era of Accountability

As inclusion grew in acceptance within U.S. schools, questions began to rise as to how accountable schools would be in measuring effectiveness. Inclusion brought an increasing number of students with disabilities into general education classrooms; however, definitions, processes, and practices of inclusion varied widely, impacting its ability to be measured accurately. This variance also caused conflict between special education professionals and school leaders (Pazey & Yates, 2019). As had occurred in the inclusion movement, the school reform movement brought federal legislation mandating changes, standards-based accountability, and increased expectations for all students regardless of disability status. The movement brought little relief from tensions around responsibility for student outcomes, as school leaders and general education teachers dispersed responsibility to special education staff (Boscardin & Lashley, 2019; Pazey & Yates, 2019).

In 2001, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) raised expectations for student achievement and teacher performance to a level previously unseen in U.S. reform movements. The act set forth the measurement of adequate yearly progress (AYP) for schools and dictated that students with disabilities be included in AYP reporting, holding them to the same high standards (Boscardin & Lashley, 2019; Theoharis, Causton, & Tracy-Bronson, 2016). The 2004 reauthorization of IDEA required the development of individualized programs for these students within a “free and appropriate education” and in the least restrictive environment (Boscardin & Lashley, 2019; Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004). Stronger federal mandates would force the integration of the dual educational systems of general and special education to ensure the success of all students.

The focus on student achievement amplified with the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015) shifted the weight of accountability. ESSA established a framework that included the adoption of rigorous standards and assessments for all students, and in particular, a closer examination of at-risk, subgroups to ensure the closing of achievement gaps (Boscardin & Lashley, 2019; ESSA, 2015). This framework, also applied to students with disabilities, increased expectations for, and accountability of, school leaders. Higher achievement standards for all students, regardless of disability, forced school leaders to seek out ways to ensure that all students reached their potential (Theoharis, Causton, & Tracy-Bronson, 2016).

Despite these reform movements, schools continued to fail to ensure academic achievement of students with disabilities compared to non-disabled peers (Schulte & Stevens, 2015). The intersection of reforms with legal protections for students has presented challenges for schools, particularly as most school leaders possess limited experience and knowledge around best practices in special education (Angelle & Bilton, 2009). Public stakeholders strongly support the application of high standards to all; in practice, however, the gap between students with disabilities and non-disabled peers is greater than ever (McDonnell, McLaughlin, & Morison, 1997) with school leaders lacking the efficacy to address it.

Achievement Gap in Special Education

The historically dual education system led to a significant achievement gap for students with disabilities. In order to fully understand the crisis impacting schools that serve students with disabilities, it is important to examine the numbers and proportion of students now identified with disabilities and their current levels of achievement compared to non-disabled peers.

Population of Special Education

Advocates and policymakers have increasingly devoted time and attention to the achievement of students with disabilities (California's Statewide Task Force on Special Education, 2015), as the number of students with disabilities is growing. The National Center for Education Statistics and the U.S. Department of Education estimate that there are approximately 7.1 million students in the country receiving special education services. That number represents approximately 14% of all students in public schools (Digest of Education Statistics, 2017; National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). This number has increased significantly in the last few decades, up from 8.3% in 1977. Much of the increase can be attributed to greater identification of students, predominantly those with specific learning disabilities (Digest of Education Statistics, 2017; National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). Of those 6.7 million students served under IDEA, the race, ethnicity, and gender of students vary. Native American and Black students made up the highest percentages of those served at 17% and 16%, respectively, followed by White students at 14%, and two or more races at 13%. Males outnumber females under IDEA nearly 2 to 1 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). Understanding the growing numbers of students identified with disabilities highlights a growing concern that the identification of students is disproportionately male and racial minorities.

In addition to the long-standing issue of disproportionate overidentification of students from nondominant communities into special education, these students are also likelier to have educational placements in more restrictive programs (Parris, 2002). This disproportionality further contributes to systemic inequality for already marginalized students. African American and Native American students are two to three times more likely to be identified for high incidence categories, such as emotional disturbed (ED), mentally impaired (MI), and learning

disabled (LD), and to receive disciplinary consequences, as compared to White peers (Bal, 2017). Students identified as linguistically diverse (ELL) also suffer from overidentification, representing the fastest growing subgroup in special education (Sullivan, 2011).

Academic Achievement of Students with Disabilities

More students than ever are being identified as having a disability and becoming part of a group of students with substantial gaps in academic achievement. Students with disabilities continue to score significantly lower than non-disabled peers and all other identified subgroups on state and national assessments of progress (Aragon, 2016). According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017), students with disabilities realize significant gaps in academic progress in the areas of reading and math. Starting in grade 4, students with disabilities score approximately 40 points lower in reading than non-disabled peers and the gap sustains through eighth grade (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). Math achievement scores fare no better. Fourth grade students score approximately 30 points below non-disabled peers, increasing to a 40 point gap in eighth grade. Mean scaled scores for students with disabilities represents the lowest scores in almost a decade in the below basic range (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). Achievement gaps exist nationwide; varying from as little as 9% to 51% in reading, and 9% to 49% in math at the elementary levels (Albus, Lazarus, & Thurlow, 2015). Gaps at the secondary school level widen up to 60 percentage points in reading and up to 56 percentage points in math (Albus, Lazarus, & Thurlow, 2015).

Table 1*2017 NAEP National Reading Report Card*

	Students with Disabilities	Non-disabled Peers	Low Socio-Economic Status	English Language Learners
Grade 4 Reading	187	227	208	189
Grade 8 Reading	232	271	253	226

(National Center for Education Statistics, 2017)

Table 2*2017 NAEP National Math Report Card*

	Students with Disabilities	Non-disabled Peers	Low Socio-Economic Status	English Language Learners
Grade 4 Math	214	243	228	217
Grade 8 Math	247	288	267	246

(National Center for Education Statistics, 2017)

California schools reflect this academic discrepancy as well. The California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP) scores reveal similar discrepancies. Students with disabilities score significantly below students with no reported disabilities in grades 3 through 8 and 11, in both English Language Arts and Math. According to the California Department of Education’s California State Dashboard (2018), students with disabilities perform in the “red,” the lowest performance areas for both reading and math. Students with disabilities score 95.5 mean points below standard in ELA and 125.3 mean points below standard in math, and only 9.2% of students with disabilities are considered college and career ready. Across the state of California, students with disabilities make up the lowest scoring subgroup in both subject

areas; this includes English Language Learners, socioeconomically disadvantaged students, foster youth, and all ethnic groups (California Department of Education, 2018).

A secondary indicator of academic achievement is graduation rates. Graduation rates for students with disabilities has shown some growth over the last decade (Samuels, 2015). The growth, however, is overshadowed by significant disparities from non-disabled student graduation rates. In 2015-16, the graduation rate for students with disabilities was 67 percent, compared to all high school students at 87 percent (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018; Samuels, 2015). California's graduation rate for students with disabilities was right at the national average of 66%, compared to non-disabled student rates of 82.7%. The state's high school drop out rate is 12.5% for students with disabilities compared to 9.1% overall (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018; State Superintendent of Instruction, 2018). Academic achievement gaps for students with disabilities continue to require the time and attention of educators, policymakers, and leaders. In particular, school principals, whose influence on student achievement as instructional leaders is profound, must have the knowledge and efficacy needed to help close the achievement gap for students with disabilities.

Table 3

2015-16 Graduation Rates

	Students with Disabilities	Overall Student Population	Low Socio-Economic Status	English Language Learners
U.S. Graduation Rates	67%	85%	78%	66%
California Graduation Rates	66%	83%	79%	72%

(National Center for Education Statistics, 2017)

Improving Student Achievement through Inclusion

Theory of Inclusion

The Inclusive Schools Movement grew in response to criticisms about separate placements for students with disabilities and dual educational systems. It satisfied a call for a unified system for general and special education (Billingsley & Banks, 2019). The movement is rooted in social constructionist theory, focusing on social interactions, classifications of people, and attitudes around which people are most highly valued. Historically, students with disabilities have been viewed from a deficit view, thereby reinforcing concepts of disadvantage and marginalization leading to exclusion (Zaretsky, 2005). Theorists argued that all persons deserve to feel like valued members of the learning community, to have their differences acknowledged and respected, and their needs met (Mallory & New, 1994). Special education advocates focused on changing the social constructions that limit students with disabilities (Zaretsky, 2005). Despite this theoretical perspective, a common definition of inclusion has failed to be accepted by practitioners, advocates, and school leaders, thus creating conflict between stakeholders.

A precise definition of effective inclusion is critical to researchers and stakeholders, and particularly essential to principals charged with its implementation. Although policymakers have frequently defined inclusion as meaningful opportunities to access general education curriculum through a general education teacher, advocates have expanded the definition. In alignment with social constructivist theory, their definition also includes a belief system in which all students feel they belong, as a meaningful part of the community, and that the classroom functions as a community of learners (Cosier, Causton-Theoharis, & Theoharis, 2013). This belief system should also be embedded into every aspect of the organization and evidenced in artifacts, such as

school plans and structures, that signal the inclusive culture of the school (Schein & Schein, 2017).

Improved Access into General Education Settings

For decades, researchers have examined the impact of educating students with disabilities in the general education setting, considering not only the social benefits of access, but also the impact on academic achievement. Waldron and McLeskey (1998) found that when students with both mild and severe learning disabilities were educated in a general education classroom, they made more progress in reading and math than when they were in separated settings (Waldron & McLeskey, 1998). This finding is confirmed by a substantial body of research indicating that students with disabilities make significantly more progress in general education than they do in separated settings (Choi, Meisenheimer, McCart, & Sailor, 2017; Cole, Waldron, & Majd, 2004; McLeskey, Waldron, & Redd, 2014; Rea, McLaughlin, & Walther-Thomas, 2002). A study by Cosier, Causton-Theoharis & Theoharis (2013) also found a significant relationship between time spent in general education and achievement in reading and math; in fact, they found slight increases in standard scores related to each hour spent in general education classrooms. Using larger, nationally representative sets of data, the Special Education Elementary Longitudinal Study (SEELS) and the National Transitional Longitudinal Study 2 (NLTS2), revealed mostly positive outcomes for students with disabilities in the general education settings at the national level as well (Blackorby, Schiller, Knokey, & Wagner, 2007). These studies support social constructionist theory wherein knowledge is constructed in particular social contexts (i.e. general education classrooms) and that social relationships within the context (general education and special education students together) are the catalysts for learning.

Improved Achievement in General Education through Effective Inclusive Practices

Research has established a positive relationship between access to general education and achievement, yet access alone has not maximized results for students with disabilities. Schools that have not only provided access, but have embraced a belief system of inclusion, realize further benefits in several student performance outcomes. That belief system leads to a school-wide improvement model that, in addition to maximizing time in general education, provides supplemental resources, supports, and training. A 2002 mixed methods study by Rea, McLaughlin, and Walther-Thomas described how students with disabilities provided with supplemental supports and served in inclusive classrooms earned higher grades, earned increased standardized test scores, and realized increased attendance (Rea, McLaughlin, & Walther-Thomas, 2002). A 2017 three-year, quasi-experimental study revealed similar findings, finding that elementary schools that implemented a schoolwide inclusive reform model realized a statistically significant effect on math scores and increased reading scores (Choi, Meisenheimer, McCart, & Sailor, 2017). In a meta-analysis of research on inclusion by McLeskey and Waldron (2011), high-quality inclusive classrooms significantly increased academic achievement levels in reading and math for many elementary students with learning disabilities. Students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms realize greater benefits where full access to rigorous content is provided alongside appropriate supplemental supports and services to address areas of deficit (McLeskey & Waldron, 2011).

Access alone thus cannot serve as the sole path for closing achievement gaps. Many inclusion programs lack the high-quality, intensive instruction and collaborative supports that are most needed by students with more severe learning disabilities (McLeskey & Waldron, 2011; Waldron & McLeskey, 1998). The instruction should be targeted on a small group of high-

priority skills and concepts, and given sufficient time for student mastery. Studies also reveal that this instruction should be delivered by a teacher with a high level of specialized skill (Gersten et al., 2009a; Gersten et al., 2009b).

Special education classes, however, are often not equipped to provide high-quality intensive instruction. A study by Fuchs et al. (2015) examined math achievement gaps for very low-performing students, comparing the academic growth of students in inclusive instruction versus specialized intervention. Findings indicated that for students with the highest needs, specialized, intensive intervention indicated significantly stronger results than inclusion only. Yet pulling students away from general education also resulted in significant growth in achievement gaps from non-disabled peers who were engaging in more challenging Common Core State Standards (CCSS) (Fuchs et al., 2015). The conflict for practitioners arises in trying to equally value students with disabilities as members of the school community through inclusive practices, while providing the research-based, intensive instruction needed to realize academic growth. The challenge is made more difficult for leaders, as schools oftentimes implement schedules and organizational practices that are roadblocks for the marriage of effective inclusion and intensive intervention.

The Impact of School Principals

The responsibility for improving outcomes for students with disabilities rests with school site leaders. Research has established that their leadership is pivotal to improving the opportunities for all students, especially those with disabilities (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003). As instructional leaders, principals play a central role in developing cultures that ensure all students have access to high academic standards and expectations (DiPaola, Tschannen-Moran, & Walther-Thomas, 2004). Research shows that principals who remain focused on issues

of effective instruction, provide administrative support for special education, and oversee high-quality professional development realize improved academic and social outcomes for all students (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003). By also providing students with disabilities equitable access to the general education environment through effective inclusion, students can attain academic success and closure of achievement gaps (Theoharis, Causton, & Tracy-Bronson, 2016). In addition to these measures of academic achievement, principals have the responsibility to lead schools that ensure all students achieve college and career readiness.

Leadership Connection to Achievement

Over the past 30 years, research on school leadership has been consistent in its finding that there is a clear link between school leadership and improved student achievement (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008; Marks & Printy, 2011; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008; The Wallace Foundation, 2013). This conclusion is supported by research conducted by Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom and Anderson (2010), which indicates that school leadership is second only to classroom instruction in its impact on student achievement, particularly when principals focus on the essentials of instruction and learning. They further state that much of the research on leadership may actually underestimate its total impact, possibly accounting for a quarter of total school influences (Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010). A meta-analysis of research centered on school leadership concluded that principal leadership is soundly correlated with student achievement and that specific behaviors of school principals are strongly linked to learning (Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2004). Building on decades of research that links leadership to student achievement, the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders set forth ten updated standards of leadership that focus on promoting the achievement of each student (National Policy Board for Educational

Administration, 2015). Those standards include key leadership components that, when also applied to special education, have been linked to the achievement of students with disabilities.

Effective Leadership in Special Education Linked to Achievement

Effective principal leadership is linked to improved student achievement, especially in regards to students with disabilities in an inclusive schooling model (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; McLeskey, Waldron, & Redd, 2014). A growing body of research indicates that principals realize enhanced outcomes for students with disabilities when they explicitly focus on instructional issues facing special education. These actions involve reorganizing school to enhance access to general education and teacher collaboration, providing increased supports and interventions for special education, and offering ongoing, quality professional development (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; Klingner et al., 2001). Hoppey and McLeskey (2013) found the role of the principal crucial in maintaining effective inclusion that resulted in improved student outcomes. Further studies have confirmed that when students with disabilities have realized positive outcomes through inclusive practices, principals have served as a critical catalyst in how inclusion is accepted and implemented within a school (Billingsley & Banks, 2019; Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013; Praisner, 2003). Effective leadership for special education, while critical to achievement, is rarely encountered in schools, as principals come to the job with little to no preparation.

Preparation for Instructional Leadership in Special Education

Dual education systems have both contributed to a culture of segregation of students with disabilities and created a dual system of education for teachers and principals as well. Traditionally, school principals rise from the ranks of classroom teachers. According to the National Center of Education Statistics, 98.7% of principals formerly taught in elementary or

secondary school as general education teachers (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017), without any background or coursework in special education. In teacher preparation programs training general education teachers in the United States, the preparation for teaching special education students varies widely; however, the majority require only a single course (Blanton, Pugach, & Florian, 2011). Leading special education programs without adequate preparation then becomes one of the biggest challenges principals encounter.

The literature supports school principals' reported feelings of being poorly prepared through inadequate training, lack of sufficient coursework, and field experience in special education. A study by Lasky and Karge (2006) surveyed the formal training of 205 principals across school districts in California. Among the sample, 77% had general education credentials and only 8% held special education credentials. More than half of the principals surveyed, 119, felt that course work in special education was critical to their development. Nearly three-fourths, 145, reported little to no experience with children with disabilities during their formal administrative credential course work. Most principals reported that they learned the essentials of special education on the job (Lasky & Karge, 2006). Similarly, Angelle and Bilton (2009) surveyed more than 550 principals and found that administrative internships did not provide sufficient preparation for leadership in special education. Their study of principal preparation programs found that they often failed to address the knowledge base of the novice principal in special education. The research did find, however, that even limited exposure to special education through direct coursework improved principals' comfort level in dealing with special education programming. In a complementary study by DiPaola and Tschannen-Moran (2003), 75% of principals surveyed identified special education law and its implementation as a significant or highly significant problem they were facing. Findings indicated that the principals

lacked training to tackle the challenges and that most lack any background preparation and field experiences from which to draw. Protz (2005) replicated these findings, reporting that principals are inconsistent at best in their knowledge and understanding of special education law and practice, due to their lack of preparedness and formalized instruction in special education. Such training is essential to exert strong leadership among special education and general education teachers, and to address the achievement gap for students with disabilities.

Leadership Barriers to Inclusion

With inconsistent levels of knowledge and sparsity of training, principals face significant challenges to creating inclusive schools. Effective inclusion of students with disabilities was the goal set forth through the critical reforms of IDEA. Unfortunately, it is not the reality, as evidence shows that principals are often wary of inclusive programs. This wariness presents as the first barrier to effective implementation (Billingsley & McLeskey, 2014; Praisner, 2003). Others may not view educating students with disabilities as their responsibility (Lashley, 2007). Historically, dual education systems are linked to principals dispersing responsibility for students with disabilities and their inability or lack of desire to lead inclusive schools (Billingsley, McLeskey, & Crockett, 2017; DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; Lashley, 2007). These beliefs and attitudes embed themselves into school culture, thereby erecting large barriers between students with disabilities and general education access.

To further elaborate on this barrier to inclusion, researchers investigated principals' attitudes toward and beliefs around students with disabilities in general education classrooms. Praisner (2003) conducted a survey of 408 elementary principals and found that those with special education course credits held a more positive attitude toward inclusion. She reported that prior experiences and background with special education students also influenced a principal's

attitude: the more positive the attitude held, the more inclusive a placement selected for a student, i.e. a general education setting selected over more restrictive programs. A 2014 descriptive study by Ball and Green found that training and experience of school leaders in special education was limited and that, overall, attitudes were slightly negative and varied by the disability. The study also found a significant relationship between training and experience and attitudes held toward inclusion (Ball & Green, 2014). A related study by Bays and Crockett (2007) conducted case studies in nine elementary schools and examined site principals' perceptions of special education. This study looked at determining factors and found that prior experiences with students with disabilities greatly influenced principals' perceptions. The findings indicated that these perceptions strongly influenced an Individual Education Plan (IEP) team's placement decision and the likelihood that students would be recommended for inclusion.

Additionally, Bays and Crockett (2007) found that principals were often faced with competing priorities inherent to the role of school principal. These priorities prevented principals from having more than minimal interactions with special education teachers. Priorities caused dispersion of responsibility for special education programming and supervision, thus weakening instructional leadership. They found that many principals took a hands-off style of instructional leadership, viewing special education as being best left to special education teachers. In a study replicating these findings, Templeton (2017) uncovered that experiences and amount of knowledge and skills affected principals' perception of, and therefore involvement in, special education. This finding, that a principal's beliefs, experiences, and values play a critical role in creating a school culture and a vision for instructional leadership that impacts achievement for students with disabilities, is confirmed by numerous studies (Lasky & Karge, 2006; McLeskey, Billingsley, & Waldron, 2016; Roderick & Jung, 2012; Waldron, McLeskey & Redd, 2011).

Effective instructional leadership in special education is hindered by the confluence of a lack of training, belief systems, dispersal of responsibilities, and competing priorities.

Leadership Core Competencies for Inclusive Schools

To better understand competencies that principals need to support inclusion, researchers have examined schools with successful instructional leadership in special education coupled with increases in student achievement. Guzman (1997) studied leadership behaviors of principals in successful inclusive schools and found eight factors that were common among principals. A finding of particular interest was that each principal followed a personal plan of professional development to ensure their own advanced training in special education. Other noteworthy factors were the ability to assess student needs, plan instruction collaboratively, and evaluate results (Guzman, 1997). Furney et. al. (2005) confirmed the importance of leadership behaviors and identified specific themes related to effective special education leadership through the study of 65 schools. Most notably, collaborative leadership and policies were found to support ongoing professional development, for not only teachers, but for administrators as well. Similarly, a case study by Waldron, McLeskey, and Redd (2011) examined school principal influence in a highly effective, inclusive school. Data from interviews, observations, and documents uncovered five themes regarding the principal's successful instructional leadership: 1) developing a shared vision and moral purpose, 2) redesigning the organization of the school, 3) improving working conditions, 4) providing high-quality instruction, and 5) utilizing data to drive decision making. Important to note is the principal's willingness to share responsibility for decision making with teachers in collaboration with ongoing, varied professional development for all staff, including the principal (Waldron, McLeskey, & Redd, 2011). Although principals studied are in the

minority, the common factors exhibited offer useful insight for school leaders looking to mirror their success and for districts looking to increase principal efficacy.

A 2017 meta-analysis summary by Billingsley, McLeskey, and Crockett for the U.S. Department of Education examined principal leadership core competences in developing effective inclusive schools resulting in high achievement for students with disabilities. They identified critical competencies necessary to reconfigure a school. The core leadership dimensions are exhibited by a principal who: supports high expectations for students with disabilities, develops safe learning environments, promotes effective instructional practices, supports ongoing progress monitoring, organizes school structures for instructional effectiveness, creates a collaborative culture, and provides opportunities for professional learning (Billingsley, McLeskey, & Crockett, 2017). Most notably, researchers stated that most schools require extensive redesign or structural change to develop into an effective inclusive school. Principal leadership, they assert, is the most important factor for that redesign to occur (Billingsley, McLeskey, & Crockett, 2017; Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013; McLeskey & Waldron, 2006).

Redesigning School Organizations

Research reveals that school principals with effective leadership in special education are able to make lasting change. These principals engage in a process of reculturing in which new practices and expectations emerge to support inclusion (Billingsley & McLeskey, 2014; Fullan, 2001). The ISLLC Standards which present the research-based knowledge and skills that administrators need to be effective leaders also reflect the competency. Standard 3 states that a school administrator must be “an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by ensuring management of the organization, operations, and resources” and ensuring that practices

of the organization work to support instructional efforts (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015).

This standard highlights how principals leading inclusive schools form and utilize organizational practices that support inclusive practices. Those organizational practices can include master school scheduling, establishing protected collaboration times, developing student service plans, rethinking teacher and staff assignments, and reallocating resources (Causton-Theoharis et al., 2011; Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013; McLeskey & Waldron, 2006). A 2015 case study of a principal's experience creating an inclusive school found that a key component to success was the principal's competency in restructuring school resources to support inclusion (DeMatthews, 2015). The findings were supported by a related case study in which two overarching themes of an inclusive elementary school were identified: instructional quality and organizational features such as a strategically developed school schedule (McLeskey, Rosenberg, & Westling, 2012). A related, 3-year quasi-experimental study in 2017 by Choi et al. investigated a school reform model for increasing equity-based inclusive education as a means of increasing reading and math achievement for students with disabilities. A guiding principle of the model was to reorganize school resources so that all students received the services and supports needed to be successful in inclusive settings. The study found a statistically significant effect on math and reading scores improvement among experimental schools (Choi, Meisenheimer, McCart, & Sailor, 2017). Having identified the core competency of establishing inclusive practices, purposeful training can target principals charged with providing instructional leadership for special education who have insufficient knowledge and skills.

Developing Principals into Effective Leaders in Special Education

The important role school principals play demands that time and attention be dedicated to increasing efficacy in special education (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007). Without sweeping changes to administrative credentialing programs, school districts need to recognize the role they must fill in enhancing principal efficacy in special education. Large numbers of students will continue to fail without intervention on the district level. Professional development for school principals is the vehicle for increasing competence in leading inclusive schools.

Need for Principal Professional Development

Increases in principal responsibilities, high expectations, and difficult work conditions have led to a growing belief among principals and site leaders that the job has become impossible (Bellamy et al., 2007; Rowland, 2017). Nearly 100,000 public school principals across the country (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020) are attempting to do the job alongside greater accountability expectations, often without high quality, targeted credential training (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; The Wallace Foundation, 2019). Principals require on-the-job professional development to support them in meeting increased demands, particularly in the area of improving achievement for students with disabilities. District leadership often fails to recognize the importance of on-the-job principal development, particularly as principals become established in their roles. Professional development for principals has been linked to retention as those who receive training are more likely to remain in their positions than those who do not (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018; School Leaders Network, 2013).

School districts allocate few resources to principal professional development. According to a 2015 survey conducted by the U.S. Department of Education, only 31% of school districts reported spending Title II dollars toward principal professional development, reserving the

majority of funds for teacher trainings (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). In fact, the National Staff Development Council reports that three times as much professional development is provided to teachers compared to principals (Grissom & Harrington, 2010). Trainings that principals do attend are primarily intended for teachers and fail to address the specific needs and challenges that school leaders face (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Rowland, 2017; School Leaders Network, 2013). It is important to consider how a school district can make resources available to provide for ongoing professional development. Creating opportunities for principal professional development can have a broad impact and is pivotal for school improvement (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; Rowland, 2017).

Current Practices in Principal Professional Development

Much research has been conducted on effective professional development practices for classroom teachers. However, research on effective, on-the-job professional development for principals is much less available. Traditionally, principal professional development takes the form of workshop meetings, wherein common content is delivered through one-sided learning and often mirrors teacher trainings (Rowland, 2017). A 2014 report by New Leaders and the George W. Bush Institute found that when professional development does occur, it often does not address the challenges that leaders face, leverage job-embedded learning opportunities that provide for applying new learnings in real situations, or tackle a problem of practice while working with a team (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Ikemoto, Taliaferro, Fenton, & David, 2014).

Research has recognized the importance of providing principals with job-embedded learning opportunities. A 2010 study by Grissom and Harrington examined the connection between principal professional development and national teacher ratings on principal

performance. They compared types of professional development such as university course work, mentoring, and networking, and found that not all professional development practices resulted in the same effectiveness. The data indicated that pairing content learning with on-the-job practice and feedback resulted in increased principal efficacy (Grissom & Harrington, 2010). The findings support research by Darling-Hammond et al. (2007) that identified the importance of linking theory learned to problems of practice in real-world settings.

There are additional professional development methods that link theory to practice in the literature. A 2008 qualitative case study of a cohort of urban school principals analyzed the use of professional learning communities to improve principal practice. The study found several components that supported job-embedded learning such as: a shared vision, collective learning and application, shared personal practice and supportive relationships and structures (Hipp & Weber, 2008). They issued further recommendations for professional development planning, including that districts should consider not only the needs of the system, but the learning styles of the adult learner as well (Zepeda, Parylo, & Bengtson, 2014).

Principal Professional Development Through School Improvement Framework

Although research on effective principal professional development appears infrequently, a substantial number of studies have been conducted on the School Improvement Framework that can be used to support principals' work. The central idea of improvement research within the framework is to "learn by doing" (Bryk et al., 2013). Bryk's School Improvement Framework (2008) involves utilizing networked improvement communities to learn collectively and progress toward a common goal. A key tenet of improvement research is the premise that the organization has more knowledge, tools, and resources than it routinely uses well. It places an emphasis on using evidence from practice to improve, making changes rapidly and

incrementally, and learning from experiences while doing so (Bryk et al., 2013). The networked improvement community is intentionally formed and problem-centered, with key structuring agents to tap the expertise of individuals while advancing joint accountability for a collective goal (Bryk, Gomez, & Grunow, 2011). The community utilizes a plan-do-study-act (PDSA) cycle as the structure of inquiry, reflecting the core tenets of the framework and maintaining attention on quality improvement (Bryk, Gomez, Grunow, & LeMahieu, 2015). The established achievement gap between students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers articulates the need for such attention. Utilizing the tenets of School Improvement Framework, cycles of inquiry can be developed that provide principals with the efficacy to be instructional leaders in special education and establish research-based practices pivotal to effective inclusion.

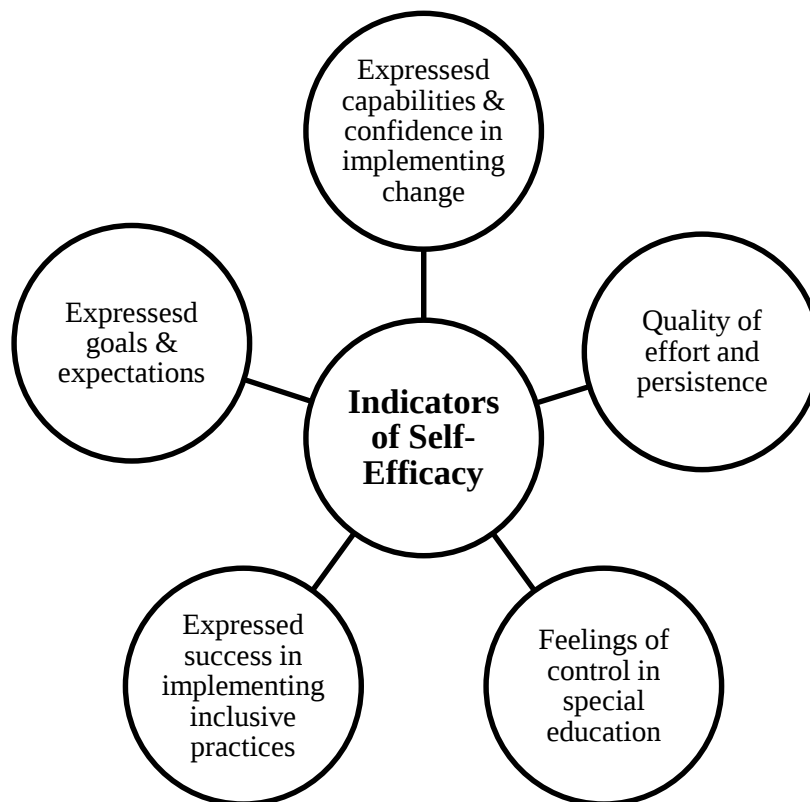
Defining Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy is defined as one's perceived capability (Bandura, 2000), and it plays an influential role for principals serving as instructional leaders in special education. In addition to impacting direct behaviors of school leaders, it also determines their goals and aspirations, confidence, and persistence in the face of obstacles (Bandura, 2006). Redesigning inclusive schools to best support special education can cause school leaders to face additional obstacles. According to Bandura (2000), "when faced with obstacles, setbacks, and failures, those who doubt their capabilities slacken their efforts, give up, or settle for mediocre solutions" (p. 180). Leaders who lack self-efficacy in special education programming are more likely to relinquish responsibilities, limit involvement, settle for ineffective programming, and hold negative attitudes toward inclusion (Lasky & Karge, 2006; McLeskey, Billingsley, & Waldron, 2016; Roderick, & Jung, 2012; Waldron, McLeskey, & Redd, 2011). These competency beliefs in

special education are vital to principals meeting the challenges of building and leading inclusive schools. Figure 1 below illustrates indicators of self-efficacy.

Figure 1

Indicators of Self-Efficacy for Special Education

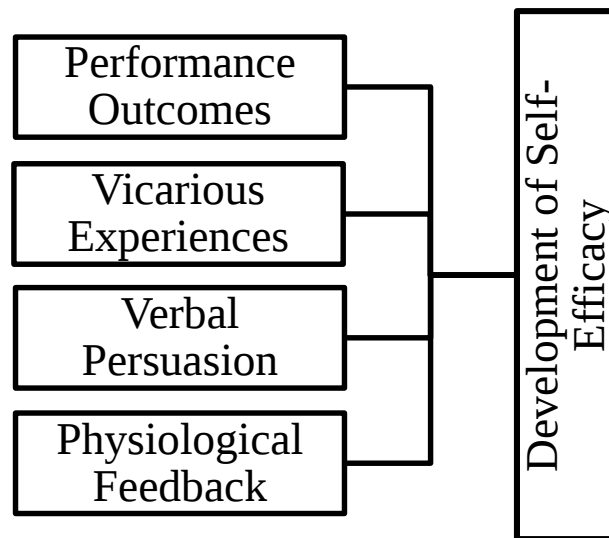


According to Bandura (2000), individuals gain information from four sources when developing conclusions around self-efficacy. The first and most powerful source comes from an individual's performance outcomes, or experiences in which they have demonstrated success. Next, they can receive information from vicarious experiences and by observing the success of others around them. Verbal persuasion from influential people in our lives can also impact self-efficacy, as well as the physiological feedback or emotional responses one may experience in a situation (Bandura, 1997). Providing opportunities for school leaders to master knowledge and

skills, while providing positive role models who can encourage and motivate, can enhance self-efficacy in leading special education.

Figure 2

Sources of Development of Self-Efficacy



Summary

This literature synthesis highlights the need for school site principals to effectively support inclusion for students with disabilities in general education classrooms through student-centered practices. School redesign focuses on maximizing supports and resources for students with disabilities, working toward closing the achievement gap between non-disabled peers. The development of programs that maximize time in the general education classroom while still providing intensive intervention is a pivotal first step in creating effective inclusive schools. Research has demonstrated the impact principals have on the academic success of students with disabilities. However, as administrative programs provide little in the way of training or background to serve as instructional leaders in special education, job-embedded professional development must be designed to increase principal efficacy. This research proposed

collaborative learning workshops for principals in response to this need, utilizing school improvement research. While there are existing studies that examine principal efficacy in special education and identify necessary competencies, research on *how* those competencies manifest as inclusive practices, and how principals obtain those competencies on-the-job, do not exist. This study adds to the literature on how leaders learn and collaboratively tackle the problem of increasing achievement for students with disabilities.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This modified action research study detailed the experiences of school site administrators as they sought to foster inclusion for students with special needs through student-centered school practices. The study took a collaborative approach to school improvement by combining the expertise of school leaders with and without special education backgrounds. Principal self-efficacy in implementing student-centered practices is integral for promoting inclusion for students with disabilities, but is missing from current administrative credentialing programs. Action research captured the experiences of members as they engaged in collaborative work to identify student-centered practices. In addition, the study sought to provide a model for districts seeking professional development for school leaders facing similar challenges in fostering inclusion.

Research Questions

1. What do school leaders with special education backgrounds, working in collaboration, describe as high-leverage, standard practices that support inclusion for students with disabilities?
 - a. How do school leaders describe the process for their implementation?
2. How does participation in collaborative learning workshops influence site school leaders' perceived efficacy in improving equity through inclusion?
3. How do school leader participants describe the experience of collaborative learning workshops as a professional development format for studying high-leverage, standard practices that support inclusion?

Research Design and Rationale

Qualitative methodology was the most appropriate approach for the design of this study because the goal was to capture the process in which members engaged as they worked collaboratively, and to find the influence of this process on efficacy in implementing inclusive practices. According to Creswell (2018), qualitative research is best suited for understanding

participants' experiences and meanings surrounding a social problem. Qualitative research allowed for an inductive process, with data collected from multiple sources in the natural setting, to better understand the complexity of a process (Creswell, 2018). Through observing collaborative learning workshops, interviewing school leaders, and reviewing participant reflections and other artifacts, the researcher obtained a holistic accounts of the processes of participants, and then developed actionable recommendations for school leaders and professional development.

Action research is a specific approach to qualitative research that fit this study. According to Coghlan (2019), action research is defined by several characteristics. It is a collaborative approach to problem solving that includes the researcher. Action research evolves. It is integrated within existing organizational knowledge and applied to solve real organizational problems, and it is not only concerned with bringing about change, but also in developing competencies while engaging in research (Coghlan, Cirella, & Shani, 2012). In this engagement, action research is a social process, wherein participants engage in cycles of self-reflection that focus on problem identification, interpretation, and decision making. Within the context of collaborative learning workshops, systematic reflection helped principals to integrate new learnings and practices as they establish student-centered school restructuring.

Despite research that inclusion enhances achievement, many schools impose practices—such as the way schedules are created—that counter effective inclusion. Through collaborative learning meetings utilizing a structured inquiry process (Bryk, Gomez, & Grunow, 2011), action research members analyzed achievement data of students with special needs, established agreed-upon outcomes, identified current barriers to inclusion, and identified effective, inclusive practices. Workshop participants developed knowledge of inclusive practices, collaborated with

colleagues, and designed implementation plans. Collaboration was the central tenant of the workshops, in alignment with Adult Learning Theory (Knowles et al., 2015) and the School Improvement Framework (Bryk et al., 2015). In sum, action research allowed collaborative learning between school leaders, with and without special education backgrounds, to gain the organizational management knowledge needed to ensure that students with special needs have access to general education.

Quantitative research methodology did not support the research goals for this study. Quantitative methods would have described principal attitudes toward collaborative learning around special education and current organizational structures in schools. However, it could not have described the process as to how AR member school leaders engaged in a process to identify practices that positively impact achievement of students with disabilities, record how workshop participants gained self-efficacy, or collect their experiences as members of learning workshops.

Strategies of Inquiry

Site Selection

The site selected for this study was a public school district whose student population had a large subgroup of students with disabilities. The district failed to ensure that students with disabilities were included in general education 80% of the day or more as measured by state accountability reporting. The site demonstrated achievement data for students with disabilities significantly below non-disabled peers overall, with select schools demonstrating the opposite, with commensurate achievement. Site leaders attaining such variation in achievement were interested in engaging in dialogue to better support students across the district. The district was led by school site leaders both with and without special education credentials and experience.

Overall gaps in achievement for students with disabilities ensured that the research produced findings relevant to other districts desiring to address similar deficiencies.

School District R met all of these criteria. District R is a growing district with eight elementary schools, two middle schools, one traditional high school and one alternative high school. District R's enrollment of just over 10,000 students (Annual Daily Attendance) makes it comparable in size to 87 other California school districts. Overall, the district had 1,294 students with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), 12.9% of the total student population. There were an additional 448 students (4.4%) with a 504 educational plan. This demographic point made District R unique to study, as no other school district in California with a comparable ADA and SES rates had as high a percentage of students with disabilities.

During the 2017-18 school year, the district failed to pass several indicators on the California Local Annual Performance Report (APR) for special education programs. One key indicator benchmark that measured a student's educational environment of regular class placement for 80% of more of their school day failed to be reached. Although some improvement was made the following year, 2018-19, the district continued to fail to meet this local indicator. The indicators for suspension rates and adjusted graduation rates for students with disabilities were also unmet. This, alongside low academic achievement data, signaled the need for this study. A need had been established by district and staff leaders to support school-wide reform and increase inclusion. The combination of District R's student population, academic achievement gap between students with disabilities and non-disabled peers, and failure to meet state mandates made it an appropriate site selection for this study.

Sample Population

Members of the action research team and workshop participants represented a diversity of leadership experiences, teaching backgrounds, and credentials held. They reflected the makeup of personnel found in traditional public school districts. The study participants had sole responsibility for leading school sites with student populations that include students with disabilities, ensuring that the workshop topics and learnings would be relevant to their schools.

In the course of this study, School District R was led by 12 principals and seven assistant principals. No other administrators, leaders or instructional coaches worked on school sites with the exception of four teachers on special assignment/leadership interns and three special education program specialists. Of the 19 site administrators, 14 held single subject or multiple subject credentials with teaching experience in general education and five held credentials in special education. Table 4 shows the experiences and credentials of action research members and Table 5 shows that of workshop participants. Pseudonyms have been used to maintain team member and participant confidentiality.

Table 4

Action Research Members, Credentials, and Special Education and Administrative Experiences

Name	Teaching Credential(s) Held	Special Education Experience	Administrative Experience
Jennifer	Pupil Services Credential	7 years as School psychologist	1 year as coordinator, 3 as director of SPED
Julie	Special Education Specialist Instruction Credential	12 years as a resource teacher	1 year as coordinator, 3 years as AP
Allison	Special Education Specialist Instruction Credential	2 years as an resource teacher, 5 years SDC	3 years coordinator, 3 years principal

John	Special Education Specialist Instruction Credential	2 years as resource, and 5 years as teacher for emotional disturbance	2 years as AP, 3 years as principal
Beverly	Special Education Specialist Instruction Credential	12 years as an resource teacher	3 years as AP
Martin	Special Education Specialist Instruction Credential	9 years as a resource teacher	2 years as AP

Table 5

Workshop Participants, Credentials Held, and Administrative Experience

Name	Teaching Credential(s) Held	Administrative Experience
Heidi	Multiple Subject Teaching	2 years as principal
Mary	Multiple Subject Teaching	5 years as principal
David	Multiple Subject Teaching/Single Subject Math	11 years as principal
Tina	Single Subject English	2 years as AP
Tracy	Multiple Subject Teaching	6 years as principal
Amanda	Single Subject English	2 years as leadership intern
Alex	Single Subject History/Social Science	2 years as AP
Maribel	Single Subject English	3 years as AP
Ellen	Multiple Subject Teaching/Single Subject Math	1 year as AP
Katherine	Multiple Subject Teaching	3 years as AP

Data Collection Methods

Observations and transcribed recordings, of action research (AR) meetings and collaborative learning workshops, served as the primary source of data. The researcher served as an outside observer in the workshops, but was an active participant in action research meetings.

Therefore, recordings of the proceedings were necessary for accurate observational data. The purpose of the observations was to document the work and discussions of the workshop participants and to triangulate data from interview responses. Observations were critical to capturing the live processes of the meetings, including artifacts presented by AR members. They allowed the researcher to learn how AR members implemented inclusive practices. Unlike reflections, observations could fully capture conversations during collaborative workshops, which was key to answering RQs 1 and 3.

Action research members completed a brief background survey prior to the first AR meeting, and participants completed a similar survey prior to collaborative workshops. This snapshot allowed the action research team to understand participants' backgrounds and tailor workshops. A semi-structured interview after the conclusion of the workshop series ended data collection. The purpose of interviews was to probe further with action research members as well as obtain workshop participant perspectives on collaborative learning experiences. They allowed the researcher to investigate in ways observations could not and helped to capture findings regarding self-efficacy. The interviews revealed how participation in collaborative learning workshops influenced efficacy, specifically around goals, reported accomplishments, confidence and involvement, and specific skills and knowledge gained.

Action research members conducted document analysis throughout the study. AR members brought artifacts of inclusive practices (i.e. schedules, meeting agendas, service behavior forms, passports) to help inform the work of the research team. Reflection documents were completed throughout workshops by participants. Time was built into workshops to ensure that reflections were fully completed prior to leaving the meeting space. During post-workshop interviews, additional practice artifacts were collected by the researcher to document successful

implementation. These documents provided the research team with data to analyze in order to reflect on the effectiveness of learning workshops.

School leader participant interviews focused on perceptions of efficacy in implementing student-centered practices. They explored the nature of the impact that workshops and collaboration had on efficacy. Participants were asked about the experience of collaborative learning as a professional development format. Action research team interviews probed to uncover further data to elaborate on inclusive practices, practice implementation, as well as the experience of collaboration learning workshops.

Interviews with all participants were conducted after school hours to avoid taking participants' attention from school-related duties. In addition, conducting interviews after school hours allowed participants to be less distracted. The interviews lasted from 45 to 60 minutes and were audio recorded using a Sony audio recording device as well as an iPhone for backup. Recordings were originally transcribed via Rev.com, and then reviewed and revised by the researcher. Interviews took place in the offices of participants in order to provide privacy and to put interviewees at ease. A district office or conference room allowed for the comfort of the participant.

Data Analysis Methods

Data collected from individual participant interviews was examined based on the transcription of the audio recordings. Transcriptions were analyzed for themes and patterns in the responses related to the constructs of the research questions. The primary categories examined were based on the research questions: standard practices (RQ1), implementation process (RQ1), efficacy (RQ2), capabilities and confidence (RQ2), persistence (RQ2), feelings of control (RQ2), expressed success (RQ2), goals and expectations (RQ2), and experience (RQ3). Post-workshop

interviews were then compared to workshop reflections, observations, and artifacts to look for changes in perceived efficacy (RQ2) around implementing practices for more inclusive schools. Research data was managed, coded, and analyzed utilizing Quirkos.

Documents, AR meeting and workshop observations, and participant reflections were coded in the same manner as the interview transcripts. The participant reflections were primarily used to collect data on efficacy (RQ2), and changes in perceived efficacy as participants engaged in workshops, and workshop experiences (RQ3). More specifically, reflections provided data on participant goal setting, an indicator of efficacy (RQ2). Observation notes and workshop transcriptions provided data on experiences of the learning workshops format (RQ3).

Collaborative Workshop Sessions

The collaborative workshops were comprised of six learning meetings, each with a sequence of specific learning objectives designed to share skills and knowledge necessary to understand and implement student-centered practices (See Table 6 in Appendix G). Action research participants planned workshop agendas, established learning objectives centered around a high-leverage practice that supports inclusive education, created questions to guide the inquiry process, and provided resources. AR members used experiences in prior workshops to plan and revise subsequent sessions as needed, although this was limited due to workshops occurring in tight succession. Workshops tackled the following areas: the role of the principal in special education and vision setting, student communication tools (passports), data and progress monitoring, school-wide master scheduling, function-based behavioral thinking, professional development, and collaboration with special education teams.

Researcher Access

I have been employed by School District R since 2011, serving as a school site principal for one of the largest elementary schools in the district for eight years. I have worked alongside principals and assistant principals during monthly leadership and principal meetings, and throughout the implementation of a number of district-wide initiatives. Those initiatives have included the implementation of new state standards, curriculum adoptions, and district-wide projects. My school realized the district's highest API ranking and earned the National Blue Ribbon Award during my time as its school leader, which helped to ensure my credibility with colleagues. As the Executive Director of Educational Services, I organizationally ranked above that of a principal. However, school site principals did not report to my office, but rather to that of the superintendent's office. My role in educational services was to support, coach, and provide principals with training and resources needed to be effective instructional leaders. I worked alongside the Executive Director of Student Services and Executive Director of Special Education, who first expressed concern about the current achievement status of students with disabilities in Redondo Beach. The Executive Director of Special Education expressed interest in working collaboratively with my office to provide training to school based staff and principals in particular. She expressed interest in establishing workshops to increase principal efficacy.

Recruitment

Potential members of the action research team had already expressed interest in working to increase principal efficacy in special education. I met with them individually in the spring of 2019 to ensure that they understood the study, the AR process and workshop commitment, the time commitment for data collection, and the steps I would utilize to ensure their confidentiality. I met with each individual AR member and workshop participant to ensure that they understood

the study, the consent forms, and their participation commitment. Potential members were made aware that they had the option to remove themselves from the study at any time without losing access to the learning opportunity of the collaborative workshops, which did occur, as there were principals elected not to participate in the study, but did attend all workshops.

Role Management

The action research team was familiar with me as a colleague as well as a district leader. The team was also fully aware of my enrollment in a doctoral program and that this work would serve as the focus of my dissertation work. It is important to note that I did hold positional power as the Executive Director of Educational Services despite not being members' evaluator. The collaborative learning workshops were offered to all principals, assistant principals, TOSAs, and district program specialists to ensure that all site leaders had access to the learning opportunity. Workshops took place after work hours. Interviews were also arranged after traditional school hours at participants' schools. I communicated to the action research team that their work was to better support our students with disabilities through teaching inclusive practices and not for my own educational goals. I also continually reinforced that although I was the lead researcher and presented at some workshop sessions due to a member's last minute conflict, the members of the action research team were the ones driving discussions and determining next steps.

Ethical Issues

The study raised ethical issues around data access and ownership, in addition to the informed consent inherent in action research. As it was important to protect a principal's right to refuse participation due to positionality, the data was kept confidential, secure and away from principals' direct supervisors to avoid undue influence. Principals were free to opt out of participating in interviews, reflections, and any other data collection. To ensure that participants

did not feel undue influence to take part in the research aspect of the workshops and that there were no consequences for those involved, names of those involved remained anonymous and were not provided to any evaluator. All data was kept on my personal computer, password protected, and destroyed at the completion of the dissertation. Despite this practice, confidentiality was still a concern as one can never ensure that other members of the workshops do not reveal identifications of those participating in the research collection. Pseudonyms were utilized in lieu of real names. General findings were shared with stakeholders, including the superintendent; however, specific names were removed. In addition, the emergent nature of action research made informed consent an area for ethical concern. Since the design of action research unfolds while the study is in process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), neither the researcher nor participants could fully anticipate what they had embarked upon. This was addressed individually with each AR member prior to each meeting, fully disclosing what the participant could expect alongside the unpredictability that often accompanies action research.

Credibility and Trustworthiness

My role within the organization and my relationship with participants could have impacted the findings of this study. Principals may likely not have been 100% honest during interviews—responding in ways they thought I wanted to hear or attempting to present themselves in the best light. Prior district presentations spotlighting achievement gaps for students with disabilities may potentially have caused principals to attempt to present themselves as having more efficacy in leading schools with effective inclusive structures. To increase internal validity, I utilized triangulation through the use not only of interviews, but document reviews of participant artifacts and reflections, and workshop observations and transcriptions.

Triangulating the data collected allowed me to source out inconsistencies. Throughout each of the workshop sessions, honesty and confidentiality was repeatedly emphasized.

A secondary threat to the credibility of the study was my bias around effective leadership practices involving special education and students with disabilities. In the spring of 2018, I conducted an action research pilot study examining the background and experiences principals had around special education as well as their beliefs held regarding the experiences of students with disabilities. My interest in the topic of equity for students with disabilities was not new and may have skewed results in a direction favoring my belief system. In order to address this threat, I heavily utilized triangulation and used an outside interviewer instead of conducting all interviews myself. That interviewer served as a secondary source of data interpretation. Member checks were utilized in order to rule out any misinterpretation of what perspective participants held in regards to the collaborative learning workshop format.

Finally, although the findings of the study pointed to an approach for increasing principal efficacy in creating student-centered structures, the findings are non-generalizable as a qualitative study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In addition, with six school leaders holding special education credentials and experience, School District R is unique, as national data shows that 98.7% of principals possess general education backgrounds (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). That distinction may allow outside readers to argue that the findings of the study fail to be of value to school districts. The focus of this study is on principal participation and experiences in collaborative learning workshops to gain efficacy in establishing practices for inclusion. Findings around those experiences can inform districts who hope to support school site leaders through this model of professional development.

Summary

Inclusion is effective if the principal possesses the leadership ability to design a school to support it (Fisher, Sax & Grove, 2000). School-wide practices can promote or prohibit access to general education. This qualitative action research study documented the experiences of school leaders as they engaged in collaborative inquiry and professional development to gain such abilities. The study utilized a modified action research approach to address achievement gaps between students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers by uniting the expertise of school leaders with and without special education backgrounds. Knowledgeable administrators are key to the success of students with disabilities and, prior to this study, we did not know how collaborative learning workshops could help principals acquire the knowledge and skills needed to create student-centered practices ensuring equity for students with special needs.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Introduction

The history of formalized education is one of dual systems, special education sitting apart from general education, contributing to significant achievement gaps for students with disabilities. This study is the story of merging systems, of engaging school leaders with special education backgrounds as action research members to educate school leaders without such experience, referred to as participants, in building inclusive schools and thereby reducing the variability of student experiences. The underlying belief of the study was that by studying standard inclusive practices, all school leaders might better address the more complex issues surrounding special education. Developing standard practices would be key to reducing the cognitive overload associated with leading special education programs as a whole (Bryk et. al, 2017). As previously stated in chapter 3, this study is a modified version of action research, wherein six special education leaders took on the role of co-researchers in identifying high-leverage, inclusive practices and used them as the basis for the professional development and coaching of ten additional school leader participants aimed to increase efficacy. I measured inclusion as special education students receiving larger percentages of their school day in general education classes. The study drew upon the work of Bandura (2000) for indicators of efficacy.

Six school leaders with special education expertise collaborated as an action research team to uncover six high-leveraged practices as the focus of professional development for peer leaders. Practices included the utilization of a student communication tool, school-wide master scheduling, function-based behavior modification strategies, ongoing professional development, progress monitoring of students, and dedicated collaboration time. The AR team designed a collaborative learning format for teaching said practices and coaching 10 participants in their

implementation. Professional development occurred in six 1-hour sessions, teaching practices with 10 to 15 minutes of direct instruction by action research members and 40 to 45 minutes dedicated to table collaboration. During this time, AR members and participants partnered together to study, discuss, question, and rehearse implementation using practice artifacts. AR members provided continued instruction and facilitated collaborations.

The findings in this chapter are based on multiple sources, including pre-surveys, transcript analysis, artifact documents of standard practices, interviews with action research members, participants' workshop reflections, post-workshop participant interviews, and observations of meetings and workshops. School leaders without special education credentials, or participants, showed unexpected enthusiasm for learning from peers. The collaborative nature of the PD was overwhelmingly positive for participants and initiated conversations around special education topics outside of the designated workshop topics. Data indicated that both participants and action research members realized increases in self-efficacy. While school leaders expressed motivation and capability to implement practices, data revealed that they adopted less frequently the practices that necessitated more special education knowledge. The merging of school leader groups positively impacted confidence and capabilities in implementing inclusive practices and leading special education programs.

This chapter first summarizes action research sessions, including identified standard practices and their implementation within the school setting. Next, it discusses the perceived impact on self-efficacy in implementing inclusive practices and, finally, it delineates participants' experiences with collaborative learning as a professional development format.

Action Research Sessions

School and district leaders within Redondo Beach Unified School District expressed a desire to understand and solve issues related to the success of students with disabilities and, in particular, to find what practices support effective inclusion. Within the district, a small number of schools were consistently producing positive outcomes for students with disabilities. Those school sites, led by principals with special education backgrounds and credentials, formed the action research team. Members of this team were highly regarded as successful school leaders and shared a common passion for improving achievement for students with disabilities.

Unlike traditional action research characterized by multiple cycles of inquiry, this study focused on one cycle in which we identified the problem, collected data, analyzed data, and acted on that data. School leaders' time limitations demanded that professional development workshops occur in quick succession without the ability for AR members to meet in between. However, they had enough time to identify high-leverage practices deemed to positively impact achievement through an analysis of student data, then to design and deliver professional development to ensure such practices develop into standard practices across schools.

School leaders with special education credentials participated in three 2-hour planning brainstorming and work sessions during the months of October through December of 2019. As AR members, they defined the problem to be addressed, namely the achievement gap between students with disabilities and non-disabled peers, as well as increasing suspension rates. They analyzed current accountability and achievement data for students with disabilities. The team members defined what they believed to be the current experience of a student with disabilities within the district and established a vision for inclusion. Participants analyzed research on principal leadership in special education and best practices in principal professional

development. Next, participants collected artifacts of inclusive practices believed to contribute to positive variations in student performance, analyzed key similarities, and identified essential components of each. Team members shared practices and asked clarifying questions to gain further detail. Practices that were utilized by more than one team member in some capacity were identified as dominate, high-leverage practices. High-leverage practices were also those that shown to be effective in the data compiled by the team. They researched in regards to principal leadership for special education and core competencies (McLeskey et al., 2016). Practices were sorted by six core competencies in special education for a principal: supports high expectations for students with disabilities, develops safe learning environments, promotes effective instructional practices, support on-going progress monitoring, organizes school structures for instructional effectiveness, creates a collaborative culture, and provides opportunities for professional learning (Billingsley, McLeskey, & Crockett, 2017). Those practices and the process for their creation are detailed in Chapter 2. A full list of high-leverage practices is included in Appendix H. The team developed a professional development format for practices to be taught to all school leaders. It was determined that professional development should utilize a collaborative format with minimal direct instruction from the presenter, activities to simulate the creation and use of the practice, tangible examples, and takeaways for school leaders to implement easily. Planning included the identification of pre-requisite teaching necessary for participants to gain capabilities around the use of each practice. An overview of each action research meeting is detailed in Appendix A and the action research teams' design of collaborative learning workshops is detailed in Appendix B.

Action research meetings unveiled that not only do school leaders with special education credentials implement key practices, but they demonstrate high levels of control over and

involvement in special education programs. Contradicting research that indicates that principals often relegate supervision of special education, these leaders are hyperfocused on addressing the needs of these most struggling students. AR meeting transcripts show members with special education backgrounds expressing the critical role they feel they play in developing inclusive schools and classrooms. One member, John, articulated the role he feels principals should play in special education: “As a principal, you’re the great equalizer or you should think of yourself that way.” Transcripts indicate all members agreeing to this label of “equalizer” and by doing so, focusing the majority of their work time in special education to ensure the success of inclusive practices. Three members expressed that a component of being special education teachers is advocating for students on your caseload, and as school principals, they have continued that mindset.

Findings

The findings in this chapter reveal new data to guide school leaders in merging general and special education programs within schools, with a focus on inclusive practices and the process for implementation. Merging programs leads to equity for all students, particularly for those with disabilities. In addition, findings reveal key learnings around the design of principal professional development shown to increase self-efficacy in leading special education programs. Findings indicate a need for education in this area and enthusiasm for collaborating with peers as a path toward gaining knowledge and skills in it.

Research Question 1a: What do school leaders working in collaboration describe as high-leverage, standard practices that support inclusion for students with disabilities?

Merriam-Webster defines inclusion is defined as the “act of taking in as a part of the whole” (“Inclusion,” n.d.). Inclusion for students with disabilities is the act of bringing this

subgroup of students into general education, providing opportunities to learn alongside non-disabled peers. The complexities created by disabilities cause inclusive education to face more challenges than successes. Successful inclusion necessitates a knowledgeable approach and specialized skills not provided in general education teaching and leadership programs. School leaders with special education credentials possess such knowledge. They employ their understandings and experiences to create inclusive school cultures by implementing standard high-leverage practices to merge general and special education programs. The practices identified in the rest of this chapter emerged during action research meetings, through transcripts and artifacts.

Passports Humanize Students with Disabilities

The first high-leverage practice utilized universally was the use of student passports. Student passports are defined by the AR team as a tool to guide communication between special education and general education teachers from year to year. It establishes high expectations for students with disabilities by helping to ensure full access to grade-appropriate, classroom experiences. Passports are written in person-first language and communicate the strengths of a student, interests, learning styles, effective accommodations, additional supports to access grade-level experiences, and curricular adaptations. Student passports can include tips for connecting with the student, friends and strong social connections, preferred tasks, and effective rewards and praise (See Appendix I). Four AR members include a student photo engaged in a preferred task. Special education and general education teachers create passports in collaboration, including families and, at the secondary level, students. All AR members develop passports toward the end of a school year to support transition to the following grade or course.

One AR member, Allison, explained the critical link between using passports for general education teachers and successful inclusion:

IEPs are overwhelming for [general education] teachers to interpret and get a full picture of the potential of the student. They are often written from a deficit point of view and teachers focus on the goals, as opposed to the present levels and what the student can do. The accommodations are embedded so far in the back; they can be missed. Even the IEP-at-a-glance is too much. Using student passports humanizes the student and brings front and center what the student can do, and how best to accommodate their learning to ensure they are successfully included.

She pointed to the passports as offering clear communication on behalf of the student. Julie echoed the use of passports in guiding general education teachers to view students first, and not their disability. “Passports remind teachers that we are dealing with a human being, not a legal case. They help teachers connect with the student before that student even sits in their class.”

That student-first lens is critical, AR members stated, to develop classrooms that support effective inclusion. One member stated: “When a teacher sees the student first, I have found they are more open to doing all they can to support them. When they know them, they belong.” For secondary students, passports can support students advocating for themselves and fostering independence.

Two of the team members utilized passports solely for special education students, while the remaining members implemented passports for all students, school-wide. After hearing this, the two team members who had not been using passports across their school sites began considering the expansion of passport use the following year. Julie stated: “It didn’t occur to me

that everyone could benefit by a passport, and that using them with only certain students was really singling them out.”

AR members talked extensively about their use of passports as former special education teachers, having used them as advocacy tools for their students in general education classrooms. Members shared that passports were one of the first practices they implemented when they became school leaders, aiming to promote equity for students with disabilities. Passports are not, however, common practice in the district, as schools rely on printing Individualized Educational Plans (IEP), distributing them to general education teachers, and hoping they are read and interpreted. AR members determined that the use of student passports was unfamiliar to school leaders with general education backgrounds. Humanizing a student, rather than utilizing a disability lens, is key to merging programs and thus was selected as a high-leverage practice to target during subsequent professional development workshops.

Equitable Access is Guaranteed Through Master Scheduling

The second high-leverage practice utilized by school leaders with special education credentials was student-centered master scheduling. AR members defined it as the practice of building schedules that meet the needs of students with IEPs, 504 plans, or those designated as English language learners (ELL) first, to ensure they have primary access to classes. At the elementary level, master scheduling involves establishing content delivery schedules by grade to maximize flipped learning centers and co-teaching while minimizing student removal from general education. Master scheduling allows for additional support providers, such as speech therapists and occupational therapists, to provide services without negatively impacting students’ access to core content and grade-level experiences. It also ensures that students with particular needs are able to access core content at times that benefit them. Beverly spoke to her priority of

meeting the needs of the most struggling students first, despite competing demands by parents of non-disabled students.

You design your master schedule around the needs of your neediest students first. First your students with IEPs, and your ELLs. Make sure they have classes they need, teachers they need, in a way that will help them be most successful and not rob them from the content. Then layer over your general ed population. Yeah, I get calls from parents wanting their straight A student's schedule changed, but our 'true north' is access, not making high-flyer parents happy.

This statement highlights a unique feature of student-centered master scheduling, which is the intentional hand placement of students, compared to the randomized computer scheduling most frequently used in secondary schools today. Another member clarified the uniqueness: "As a teacher, my admin would let the computer system randomly assign classes to all students, usually to the benefit of kids in AP classes. I would always have to go in and fight to get my kids' schedules changed. If you have a reading disability, you never should have English in sixth period." A common practice, she continued, is for schools to rely on computer scheduling of all students equally, often with higher priority given to scheduling AP and honors coursework. An outcome of that practice is that students with the greatest needs receive schedules that hinder success. Student-centered scheduling supports the merging of general and special education programs by providing greater equity to vulnerable student populations.

Student Management Over Student Discipline

The next practice that school leaders with special education credentials utilize to build inclusive schools is the practice of function-based thinking (FBT) in managing student behavior. According to Hersfeldt et al. (2010), function-based thinking utilizes core elements from formal

functional behavioral assessments (FBA) to serve as an efficient strategy to address behavioral problems. It is utilized with general education teachers and personnel to apply a more systematic approach to determining the functions of student behavior and problem solving them. In transcripts of AR meetings, members identified function-based thinking as a critical practice in their schools. They universally viewed student behavior as a form of “communication” and utilized FBT to train staff in addressing problem student behaviors by teaching replacement behaviors, as opposed to punishments and discipline. Three members implemented incident referral forms, discipline behavior plans, and school-wide behavior matrixes that support FBT (See Appendix J). Function-based thinking, for team members, resulted in declining suspension rates, suspension rates lower than schools throughout the district, and increased feelings of positive school culture as evidenced by yearly California Healthy Kids Surveys. However, FBT, as a school-wide practice, is not a universally utilized practice in schools within the district. Team members spoke to the challenges in working with fellow school leaders who view their role as disciplinarians, and connected this to suspension rates continuing to rise, particularly for students with disabilities. Discipline as a practice, they described, does not change behavior:

Student management is my mantra, not discipline...When they ask, what’s the punishment going to be at school? I say, we don’t do punishments, we do learning consequences. Because the goal of educational discipline is to provide supports to access education. That’s why suspension is always a bad option. Suspensions don’t teach students what success will look like and how to get there.

Action research members acknowledged the unique understanding and trainings they have in changing student behaviors. They described taking learnings from formal functional behavior assessments conducted as special education teachers and implementing FBT as a practice school-

wide, starting with ongoing trainings of teachers and school personnel. One team member described her usage of FBT when investigating student incidents or providing coaching to general education teachers:

There are three questions I have teachers ask, ‘How effective are my classroom management practices? Is there something I am doing that is contributing to problem student behavior? And Is there a mismatch between academic expectations and student skills?’ Once they answer those, teachers are rarely looking for a student to be suspended.

Function-based thinking, utilized school-wide, establishes a more positive school culture and one in which students with disabilities are more likely to thrive. Suspensions for students with disabilities contribute to their segregation from general education. Therefore, AR members felt strongly that sharing behavior modification principles was critical for all school leaders to possess for inclusion to be successful.

Professional Development in Classroom Accommodations

The distinct differences between general and special education credentialing programs is targeted by the fourth practice identified by AR members. AR members support inclusion for students with disabilities through ongoing professional development for teachers and staff in implementing accommodations and modifications in general education classrooms. All team members acknowledged it was critical that general education teachers be able to understand the importance of accommodations and modifications on access to general education, and implement them without reliance on special education staff. Allison explained the need the need to build capacity in these areas: “There is such a lack of knowledge and training for teachers to support students with disabilities and understand accommodations. As the site admin, you’re having to come in and basically teach it. So you’re providing a credentialing program to teachers that have

been there for 20 years.” She speaks to the vast difference between general and special education credentialing programs and the need to merge knowledge in order for inclusion to be successful. Team members describe this practice as more than one-off sessions, but rather ongoing professional development. In lieu of separate PD for general and special education staff, these leaders merge teams to provide unified learning experiences and the sharing of knowledge once unique to special education staff. They provide space for teachers to highlight successful accommodations and concrete models. One member provided an example:

So last week we had a [general education] teacher that presented on how she runs math in her classroom...how her classroom is set up to meet the needs of all kids during that time and what she's utilizing to do that. Other teachers were asking questions and wanting to know more. Her [special education] colleague also shared how they selected accommodations for certain kids.

The quote illustrates a key component of professional development: teachers sharing best practices in implementing accommodations and modifying their classrooms, and the merging of programs through collaboration. Another member elaborated: “It’s one thing to hear a best practice from me, but when Katherine stands up and shows how she’s able to implement a powerful accommodation and why she knows it’s working, that’s another level.” The recurrent topic of sharing successes teachers have in implementing accommodations was also a pattern; multiple team members felt such examples directly contributed to student success. Professional development was accompanied, for one team member, by a school-wide checklist of possible accommodations and modifications that could be implemented when students faced challenges. He utilizes the list to continue to coach teachers and hold them accountable for implementing what they learn to promote access to general education; “Every teacher has that accommodation

checklist sitting on their desk. When something's not working, I don't want their first instinct to be, 'Let's send the kid to learning center.' Even I, as a special education teacher, forget 'What are all the things that we can do and provide?' (See Appendix K). The practice of providing ongoing professional development, coupled with expectations to implement these tools, aims to foster successful inclusion.

Progress Monitoring for Students with Disabilities and Dedicated Special Education Meetings

Monitoring student progress is key to instructional leadership, however monitoring progress for students with disabilities is often relegated to case carriers and IEP team meetings. A fifth key practice in supporting inclusion for students with disabilities is a system that supports data and progress monitoring toward rigorous, grade-level standards and IEP goals. Action research meeting transcripts revealed all members had established building-wide databases involving multiple indicators such as academic benchmarks, intervention data, state-wide assessments, report cards, as well as IEP progress report data. Data-based conversations assist school leaders in determining where students with disabilities are experiencing success and where more support. This information drives modifications in programming prior to yearly IEP meetings. One member spoke to using these indicators to uncover successful inclusive practices:

I have essential questions that drive what I implement. First, are my special education students meeting or not meeting their goals? Not so much focusing on the kid or the kid's disability, but 'Where are my kids with special needs being the most successful and what's making the difference?'

Examining IEP progress reports is a skill that team members acknowledge is specialized due to their own experience writing IEPs. In order to use them as an effective indicator in progress monitoring, members shared the importance of well-written progress reports that provide

accurate data toward goals. Over time, members have memorialized expectations around IEP progress reports with checklists to ensure their validity in monitoring progress (See Appendix L). For one team member, developing criteria for effective IEP progress reports led to ongoing sampling of reports and providing feedback to case managers:

I always sample progress reports. And it was funny because it definitely had an interesting ripple effect with my case manager. She would ask, ‘Why are you doing that? What's going on?’ That started a dialogue now about some of the goals and created a practice of progress monitoring of goals. They know that I expect frequent monitoring. If a student isn’t progressing, I want to address it now, not wait until their yearly IEP. If we wait, we fail the student.

He indicates that the practice of monitoring IEP progress reports leads to more timely interventions and fewer opportunities for students to fall behind. His quote also shows how establishing expectations and engaging in progress monitoring provided opportunities to engage in teacher feedback and coaching. Team members agreed this was an important element for the sixth and final practice: dedicated special education team meetings.

Merging educational programs involves attention to both general and special education teams. Dedicated special education team meetings, attended and led by school leaders, is the sixth practice that supports successful inclusion. School leaders with special education expertise meet regularly with special education teams to monitor progress data for students with disabilities, coach, give feedback, and share reflections. AR members meet at least one time a month with special education teachers, as well as additional special education personnel such as counselors, psychologists, speech therapists, occupational/physical therapists, and behaviorists, with a team agenda (See Appendix M). Dedicated SPED team meetings is a practice that allows

for targeted collaboration and leader oversight. Several team members expressed the necessity of meeting with special education teachers to determine the effectiveness of inclusive practices. One stated: “It’s about monitoring the monitors and that creates a bit of quality control. How do you know the progress your team or your students are making, if you're not regularly meeting with those that are doing that work?” Team members also used meetings to evaluate and support previously discussed standard practices such as master scheduling and student accommodations. One member elaborated, “That’s the time that we review cases, too. We look at timelines, we progress monitor, we talk about goals, we brainstorm accommodations and alternatives to assessments, or we look to see if the schedule is working for kids.” Dedicated meetings with special education team members serve as a pivotal practice, enacted to not only provide feedback and support, but to boost all of the high-leverage practices that support inclusion for students with disabilities.

Research Question 1b: How do school leaders describe the process for their implementation?

Practice Implementation

School leaders with special education backgrounds view the role of principal as being an advocate for ensuring equity and access for all learners. They understand the requirement of merging the worlds of general education and special education into one cohesive system to achieve equity. That singular focus, alongside unmistakable experience, created high-leverage practices within their schools. The practices identified by this study are concrete examples of the successful integration of students with disabilities in their schools. Each member implemented practices differently at their sites, but all implementations revealed common essential elements. The most common element was that school leaders centered their work on supporting struggling

students and ensuring effective inclusion. The findings around the process for creating practices came out of transcripts and observation of action research meetings as well as individual AR member interviews.

As discussed, AR members acknowledge that in creating and implementing inclusive practices, they had a “leg up.” Given credibility from years of experience as special education teachers, program specialists, and student advocates, they quickly made progress with their staffs. Beverly, another AR member, recognized her credibility:

Oh, I definitely had an advantage. Being able to lead staff while, just having that knowledge base to where they'll come to me and ask me questions because they know my background, is huge. But also them trusting me enough to know that what I'm saying is accurate and not just made up. I was able to support them and even shift their perspective on things. To hear them even change and how they talk about a certain situation or a child...I know that's my influence.

Beverly described how her credibility formed trusting relationships that changed staff attitudes and behaviors. She noted behavioral changes in how staff seek her counsel, accept advice, and change the language they use to describe students as evidence that her credibility has a strong effect on implementing inclusive practices. That advantage, although useful, is not essential to implementing inclusive practices. Additional process elements, discussed by AR members, were also significant in promoting inclusive practices.

Practices are Implemented Through Consistent Messaging

The process of creating and implementing high-leverage practices began with strong principal messaging. All team members spoke about the importance of messaging to school sites, directly from leadership, a clear focus toward inclusion and merging general and special

education. Messaging included, but was not limited to, establishing yearly school-wide improvement outcomes goals for students with disabilities, sharing improvement data, meeting agendas with recurring discussion items toward inclusion, on-going professional development on inclusive practices, and school budgets reflecting purchases to support inclusion. For John, establishing goals for improving outcomes and focusing his leadership team on those goals was key to helping establish his message. He shared the outcome of communicating inclusion goals: “I’ve really come to believe that for our teachers, if you’re messaging [goals], they will try to meet you there. It may take a while...but they will try. Teachers will take time to spend on [inclusion] when they know that this is important to the principal.” His quote illustrates how goal setting messages to teachers on what to work toward and how to measure success. His messaging makes equity a priority for the school.

In addition to principal messaging, district level messaging from the superintendent, across departments, and district leaders is important. When staff heard the focus on inclusion at many levels, the message was more compelling and supported school leaders when push back did occur. Jennifer shared why a common message helped leaders implement inclusion: “I don’t want teachers thinking that inclusion is a fad, or the whim of Allison or Martin. District goals for improving outcomes through inclusion mirror school goals so teachers can see how what they do supports the bigger mission.” Layered messaging provides a larger impact and prevents staff from brushing the message aside.

Although district messaging was influential, team members stated that messaging had to start with them. It was essential that staff understood that inclusion originated with the principal, not a faceless district mandate. Allison elaborated: “I’ve never told my staff that it’s the district wanting me to do this. Or parents pushing for this. Otherwise, it would get brushed off. I believe

in this, so you should too.” Allison shows an awareness of the power of her personal beliefs and her connection to her staff. Leaders who fail to “own” inclusion are messaging that it is not worth taking seriously. It was equally important that messaging stayed the course. All members spoke to inclusion as feeling like a marathon, not a sprint. Julie noted that even in the best of circumstances, she and her principal worked four years to get the staff to change. Allison agreed: “For so many years, teachers would say to me, ‘well why can’t they [low students] go to the Learning Center?’ I couldn’t believe how much I sounded like a broken record. ‘Because we don’t punish students for our inability to offer good instruction,’ I’d tell them.” Changing mindsets to make headway took all members much longer than planned. John spoke about learning just how important consistent cycling of the message was to his teachers. He utilized an inclusive practices document created by his team to ensure common messaging and expectations around co-teaching in math, but felt it most useful among other tools and strategies:

You can’t just provide it [math co-teaching guide] once, you have to, like, keep on cycling through it as well. Make it a recurrent agenda item for discussion. It’s a grounding document for teachers to refer back to, digest with new understandings, and brings people back together. We revise it every year to document our reflections and new insights. And no one can say, ‘I was told the wrong thing.’

John shows a commitment to effectively implementing co-teaching in his math classrooms through the study of inclusive practices. He utilizes a formal written agreement among teachers in how to delivery collaborative teaching. His use of the guide steps beyond messaging, establishing accountability among staff and continuity across classrooms.

Messaging around the importance of inclusion was communicated at every opportunity. Jennifer shared a message at Adams Middle School’s Back to School Night presentation for

parents. The principal had a slide in her presentation addressing co-teaching courses, and what benefit all students would receive. She said: “That spoke volumes, kind of like, this isn’t like a special thing, this is just what we do at Adams. The entire population heard it and it was like, ‘okay, no big deal.’” Martin shared utilizing weekly staff emails to highlight effective inclusive practices and keeping the message alive at the high school level. The emails include a photo demonstrating inclusive instruction in a classroom “for highlighting inclusive practices.” He elaborated that teachers respond positively to garnering praise and the public nature of the emails affirm those implementing his message. Two additional team members agreed that you have to take every opportunity to sell your message, even when messaging to students. Both Julie and Beverly spoke to including inclusive behaviors that they expect to see into their school’s PBIS matrix, including the expected use of person-first language (i.e. student with disability, not “disabled student”), and rewarding students to exhibit those behaviors. Messaging in family newsletters included similar person-first language expectations as well as disability awareness.

The appointment of special education teachers to leadership positions within schools messaged a focus on special education and the merging of dual programs. AR members expressed that there existed subtle messages that special education teachers were not valued in their schools. This manifested through their absence on leadership teams and in prominent school positions. Allison spoke to changing this to send an important message to staff: “I can’t imagine not having a special education teacher on my leadership team. They’re able to see the school from a more global level. Also, it messages that they aren’t second-class teachers.” John concurred that he has an RSP teacher he trusts to make decisions in his absence: “she is the number one person I run all my ideas through first. The staff need to see that I trust her perspective and feedback.” Another member added that the two most important positions at his

school, PBIS leader and Association of the Student Body (ASB) leader, are both special education, special day class teachers. Martin explained that “you can’t message equity if the biggest advocates for equity aren’t part of your decision making teams.” Ensuring special educators held pivotal, visible positions reinforced the priority on creating an inclusive school.

Leading Inclusion is a Dog Fight

Merging historically separate programs often necessitated that school leaders pose uncomfortable questions and push staff out of their comfort zones. Every member shared that messaging had to, at times, make staff angry and ask them to take hard looks at their practices. John explained the conflict involved in pushing for inclusion: “Sometimes there are just too many hurdles in inclusion. I think that special ed is easier to deal with when it’s ineffective. Trying to make inclusion work is hard and uncomfortable. It’s a [expletive] dog fight.” This metaphor rang true for other members as well. Jennifer echoed the fighting aspect of messaging:

I pushed hard for a year on throwing foundations [self-contained middle school course] back in their face. I said, ‘okay, you are struggling with the idea of co-teach? Tell me how foundations is better. Tell me what I’m missing. Show me how doing crossword puzzles is equivalent to a freshman English class.

This quote shows that acceptance toward change comes on the heels of a leader persistently challenging the status quo. She continually redirected teachers to provide data as to why a change to co-teaching versus a segregated English class should not occur and guided them to new realizations. Julie elaborated on why difficult messaging may not always happen:

I think sometimes principals aren’t knowledgeable in special education so they avoid the conversation entirely. It is a terrifying conversation, especially if you don’t have the background and don’t feel like you have a toolkit or answers to questions.

Julie highlights that change is dependent on the comfort level of the leader. School leaders lacking knowledge may avoid discomfort or fail to persist in implementing program changes. Uncomfortable questioning and discussions need to occur in conjunction with support for teachers. Change to past practices is uncomfortable and leaders need to acknowledge that the work is hard. Beverly gave a clear example of that pairing of moving teachers forward and offering support: “I tell my teachers, students with special needs have the highest dropout rate. The highest rates of substance abuse and the highest suicide rates, but we are not going to contribute to that. Are you going to partner with me to make sure that this kid doesn’t go down that path?” Beverly presents her staff with data to move their thinking while using language that demonstrates that she will work alongside them to better outcomes for students. All members agreed that tough conversations were crucial for changing harmful practices, and that offering collaborative support paved the way for implementation to occur.

Implementing Practices Takes a Hands-On Approach

Messaging alone was not sufficient in implementing practices that build inclusive schools. A second component in constructing inclusive practices was enacting a hands-on approach. Action research members consistently spoke of their direct involvement and oversight of practices and special education programs. John recognized that increased involvement is pivotal to making change because, as a principal, “your job is communicating to people how to move the [school] toward effective inclusion. The only means of doing that is being in the classroom and in the meetings. There’s nothing else.” He indicated that moving toward inclusion will stall without the leader’s physical presence. All six team members spoke of hands-on roles which included serving as lead in prominent meetings, including Student Support Team meetings, student IEP meetings, and special education department meetings. In addition to the

direct benefits of their involvement on the ground, they also hoped to illustrate their positive involvement in special education to families, staff, and students. Allison explained why the involvement in these high profile meetings is important: “I am always the admin designee for IEPs, so I know what’s going on in my special education teams. I’m seeing work samples and making sure that my case carriers are doing certain things. If I start to notice a trend, I address it in my monthly SPED meeting.” Serving as lead in prominent meetings provides a clearer vantage point for examining special education programs and addressing issues that arise.

Hands-on involvement went beyond leading meetings. AR members delivered professional development, trainings, and directly coached teachers and instructional aides. Beverly explained why she takes a personal role in working with teachers regarding inclusion. “If I’m asking teachers to implement inclusive practices, I need to be seen as the expert and one person they can turn to for coaching. If I go into a gen ed teachers’ class and they don’t know or understand a behavior plan we wrote, I sit right down and we discuss it.” Her working directly with teachers illustrates a high level of involvement and increases the likelihood of program changes. Again, the team acknowledged that their backgrounds and comfort with special education added credibility when coaching but stated that a leader’s willingness to be “in the room” and get “dirty” is an essential part of the process of creating an inclusive school.

Inclusion Demands Time and Teamwork

A third essential factor in creating inclusive practices is establishing space and time for the work to occur. Members commented on the importance of providing dedicated, recurring times for teams to work collaboratively. John explained the concept of providing teachers time to process how to implement a practice. “Probably the biggest thing is like providing spatial times...where people can like put their brains together to think about, how do you make it

work?” During his post-workshop interview, he elaborated on the importance of this step in teachers’ processing of skills and knowledge.

I have to provide time and space, as well as like, be repetitive. Let’s review that again and process it, to have people start to internalize it. We have to meet teachers where they are at and give them time to learn and process. And man, in such a big way when it comes to special education. Otherwise, they revert back to old habits, which is segregation.

He highlights that learning takes time, particularly when teachers lack necessary knowledge in special education and struggle to make wide changes. Jennifer seconded the gift of time, explaining the importance of not mandating a practice and expecting it to be implemented: “As a leader, building time for conversations between all teachers around a practice is key. Giving them time to work as to how to implement student accommodations, planning for them, speaks volumes as to what you value. When I haven’t built in time, practices have failed.” She reveals in her quote that dedicating collaboration time reveals a leader’s values and prevents implementation failure. Members didn’t take for granted that teachers were collaborating on their own, therefore by dedicating ongoing time and space, leaders could model, coach and support the work needed to implement inclusive practices.

Implementing practices requires collaboration. Not one member spoke of establishing practices in isolation or letting others take the lead. In AR meetings, members consistently described calling a colleague, calling the Director of Special Education, reaching out to resources from previous districts, borrowing ideas from each other, tapping the insight of key teachers, and employing leadership and special education teams together to support implementation. Beverly provided an example of collaborating with others in developing practices:

I invited Ed Services and Katherine to watch our math collaboration class. You asked me, ‘You’ve got two teachers in the room, why aren’t you using both teachers?’ Which goes back to like, I think I know what practice we need, but to make sure it’s effective? I need more eyes on this.

Her example shows her openness to gather suggestions from others in implementing a practice and reaching out for support. AR members collaborate with not only district leaders, but teachers and peers. John shared gathering supports from beyond his office by working with teachers, finding that he “learned so much from teachers in how these practices should work.” He recognized that teacher input is key to effective implementation. Allison shared she regularly collaborates with peers: “When I’m thinking about a practice, I phone a friend. That’s where all my learning is coming from. Talking to other principals.” She uses other school leaders as think partners to help her brainstorm implementations and is open to learning from input. She continued, “I can’t assume that I have all the knowledge and skills to provide each student with everything they need. Sometimes advocating for kids means being open to anything and everything that might help them, and those ideas might come from other people.” Allison acknowledged that for effective practice implementation, she has to gather a variety of perspectives and alternative solutions to each challenge.

Implementing Inclusive Practices Requires Teacher Leaders

Lastly, transcripts of AR meetings revealed that the building the capacity of teacher leaders is the final step to implementing inclusive practices. Members described spending time with grade level leads, department chairs, or key individuals who possess social capital and influence. They invested in getting them “on board” with special education goals and building their ability to lead conversations around inclusive practices. Building the capacity of key players

within the school strengthened the leader's message and helped to ensure the practices took hold and were "owned" by more than a single leader. Allison explained why establishing key players in a building is beneficial to implementing new practices.

Start utilizing staff that you have. Some are very good at inclusion and you get them to be resources because people trust people they know. You bring in somebody they don't know, and they're like, 'Who the heck are you? I'm not going to listen to you.' But if it's Erica, who's in room 19 that you really like, you're going to listen to her. You're going to be like, 'Hmm, I want to try that out.'

She describes the power of trusting relationships developed among teaching staff in helping to promote change. Having key staff members with the capacity to support inclusion also promotes peer to peer accountability. "If the whole system relies on me, then it will fail. It only works with teacher checking teacher," explained John. He recognizes the limitations of a single person leading change. Beverly echoed the need to build teams of staff that have the capacity to continue the work beyond the school leader due to the nature of the job of principal or assistant principal:

It's building the capacity within those individuals to guide others... and make sure that they're able to collaborate independently. You can't control classroom to classroom, and you can't be in every meeting. You have to depend on your building leaders to hold teams accountable.

She points out that building capacity for teachers to lead conversations ensures that implementation can continue in the absence of the school leaders. Members acknowledged that leaders' hands-on involvement in every area is impossible due to conflicting priorities. Allison voiced the logistical challenges of leading, particularly in giving feedback and guiding

instructional aides who work directly with students:

One leader can't be the coach to every teacher and every instructional aide. There's nothing that's going to be more effective than the training and feedback [IAs] get directly in the classroom in which they're working, GEN ED or SPED. So to do that, I have to make sure the GEN ED and SPED teachers have the capacity to provide effective feedback.

Her quote highlights the importance of immediate feedback and coaching, which can only occur if teachers have the capacity to coach staff themselves. By increasing teachers' capacity to provide coaching, student support increases.

Action research members shared common techniques in the process of creating inclusive, student-centered practices that merge general education with special education programs. Members utilized strong messaging focused on creating inclusive schools. They remained the face of the message and persisted over multiple school years. They appointed special education staff in leadership positions within the building. When necessary to change mindsets, they posed uncomfortable questions paired with support and coaching. AR members actively implemented practices, committing to a hands-on approach from leading meetings to delivering professional development and coaching staff. They ensured that staff received the time and space to process and implement inclusive practices, recognizing that inclusion is difficult and unfamiliar to most staff. Leaders collaborated around creating and implementing practices. Finally, members worked to build teacher capacity to ensure the continuance of practices.

Research Question 2: How does participation in collaborative learning workshops influence site principals' perceived efficacy in improving equity through inclusion?

Changes in Self-Efficacy

The next phase of the study involved the uniting of action research team members, leaders with special education expertise, with school leader peers without special education experience. Based on data collected during interviews, school leaders spend upwards of 40 to 60 percent of their work week involved in issues and tasks related to special education. Those tasks include, but are not limited to: attending IEP meetings, handling discipline for students with disabilities, managing instructional aides, and holding parent meetings. The disconnect between the amount of leadership training in special education and the time demands of the program creates an additional strain on school leaders. One action research member commented on the time demands. “I can’t imagine trying to lead a school without my background in special education. Whether you want it to or not, [special education] takes an enormous amount of your work week.” Collaborative workshops were designed by the team to merge the two school leader groups around the study of the six inclusive practices. Under the School Improvement Theory, the knowledge and skills for improving outcomes for students with disabilities exist within the organization in the form of the AR members, and can be transferred to peers through collaborative learning experiences. The collaborative experiences were meant to provide all participants access to the four input sources for self-efficacy beliefs.

Collaborative Professional Development Increases Self-Efficacy for All

People judge self-efficacy based on four information sources: performance outcomes (accomplishments), vicarious experiences or social modeling, verbal persuasion, and physiological feedback (Bandura, 2000). Access to peers who encourage one another, demonstrate accomplishments, share ideas, and coach, as fostered by collaborative workshops, provided participants such information. Participants in this study revealed increased self-efficacy

through expressed capabilities and confidence in implementing change, feelings of how controllable an environment is, expressed goals, success at completing a task, and quality of effort and persistence (Bandura, 2000). Participants felt that workshops increased capabilities and confidence in implementing inclusive practices. Further, participants engaged in goal setting and experienced positive outcomes. They expressed feelings of more control over special education as well as being capable of intentional choices to change behavior. Increased involvement confirmed their belief in their own effectiveness. Participant's effort and persistence in implementing change continued through ongoing connections with AR members after the workshops ended.

Increases in Expressed Capabilities and Confidence of Participants

Prior to collaborative learning workshops, school leader participants without special education credentials reported having little confidence in their special education expertise, due to their lack of experience and the daunting legalities surrounding the topic. Based on pre-workshop surveys, all workshop participants indicated no significant training, background, or experience in special education. Special education experience was limited to exposure to students taught as general education teachers. Workshop reflections and interviews indicate a change in confidence post-workshops with all participants indicating feeling more knowledgeable. Overall, participants reported feeling more in control and capable of supporting special education teams, knowledgeable about the next steps to increase their own involvement, success in increasing hands-on involvement, and confidence in their ability to implement inclusive practices. Despite such advances, participants reported adopting practices they believed required less specialized special education knowledge. Participants expressed less confidence in regard to practices

perceived as requiring more special education knowledge, such as monitoring IEP progress reports. Lack of knowledge led to feelings of unease and requests for follow-up support.

Information gathered by participants during vicarious experiences with peer experts positively impacted expressed capabilities and confidence. According to Bandura (1977), watching and listening to a peer in similar leadership positions allows participants to compare competencies. As one participant noted, her competence grew during her participation watching a peer school leader support special education in a successful manner. “After that first workshop, I was just dumbfounded. Just the awareness of what these principals are doing. I think that’s my biggest ‘ah-ha.’ It’s like there’s some things that I didn’t even think of. I didn’t even know what I didn’t know...if they can do, so can I.” By pairing up with a special education colleague, she was able to see firsthand what she might be able to achieve. Watching multiple peers experience success also positively influenced self-efficacy. Alex commented on his lack of efficacy prior to the workshops and then after:

I feel like special education is such an area where I need to grow, and I didn’t even realize how much I didn’t know. I worry that I’ll never master it at any point, but I think that hearing several other people and how they’re successfully implementing inclusion, from a practices standpoint was so valuable... There’s no one right way, which made me feel like I can make it work too.

Alex went on to reference concrete examples that were provided by AR members as helping him develop confidence and capabilities: “For example, John’s master schedule for math push-in provided me with a more concrete example and steps to implement. I can see how he did it. I may have to change some things, but I’ve got a start.” By seeing and discussing concrete examples of practices, Alex felt he gained the generic skills for diagnosing demands that practice

implementation requires and constructing a course of action toward that implementation. The increase in abilities was echoed by another participant, Heidi, when sharing skills gained in workshops, particularly in how handouts have helped her to plot a course of action: “I just feel more knowledgeable. I know what I should ask. I feel like I have more tools. A lot of the handouts and examples they gave us were things that I’m looking at using. I know what I’m doing next.” In her workshop reflections, she jotted notes of steps to take. When asked about her notes, she elaborated: “I looked at those learner passports and listened to how Allison and Julie implemented them. I made notes as to what I heard that would work with my teams and what I need to change. I just stole everything.” Such comments show feelings of confidence and increased capabilities in tools and practices that participants expressed they could employ. Six participants that attended all three workshops indicated in interviews that they understood what steps to implement practices in order to further support inclusion within their schools and referenced tangible samples being used in their implementation.

Feeling in Control of Special Education

Self-efficacy increases were also indicated through participants expressing feelings or acts of control in leading special education programs. Five out of six of the participants indicated in interviews that they knew steps to take and had the skills to facilitate conversations with special education teams. They expressed knowing what to look for when visiting special education classrooms, and felt confidence in doing so. Newfound capabilities in supporting conversations led participants to increase their involvement, share successes in implementing a practice, and share a realization that they are no longer bystanders to the program. This shift from bystander to controlled leader was demonstrated in Heidi’s interview in questioning and coaching her SPED team:

Now when I walk through the learning center, I'm thinking, 'How have you communicated with the classroom teacher about this child's needs? How are you documenting progress toward those goals? How are you customizing instruction for those students, instead of just pulling out a passage that's the same for everybody?' I'm doing different things based upon going through the workshops.

This data demonstrates the participant engaging in student-centered talking. She is intentional in changes to her behavior, involvement, and thinking. Tina also spoke to intentional changes in leading special education teams in her interview, "Now I realize that it's a start to ask questions. Help the team have conversations. I'm going to follow the agendas they (action research members) shared and at least get started. I definitely started to pay attention to things differently, in terms of the instructional practices for our students." She expressed the skills she has gained, goals for implementation, and an overall understanding of the control she has over the success of special education. These quotes illustrate participant members' feelings of greater agency over their programs. Amanda summarized changes in her behavior and feeling of control: "I learned, 'You can't improve what you don't pay attention to.' Well now I'm paying attention, whether they like it or not, and know I can improve this."

Participants Expressed Goals to Guide Efforts and Success in Implementations

Participants universally articulated enthusiasm for learning the skills to construct inclusive practices. This manifested, for many participants, in expressing proximal goals and timelines to guide implementation efforts revealed in workshop reflections and interviews. All participants shared goals for increasing involvement within special education and end-of-school year timelines for implementing select practices such as professional development in accommodations and modifications, behavioral training and student incident forms, master

scheduling, and learning passports. For example, every attendee in the second workshop spoke about student passports, particularly in having teams write them by the end of the current school year. One participant, Tanaz, summarized the importance of timely implementation of passports in supporting her goal of coaching teachers to see students as people first: “Those passports are so humanizing, but also empowers my teachers...The faster I can get those into practice, the sooner I can establish an inclusive culture in my school.” Aimee, another participant, shared her goal of beginning the school year with increased supports for students and a timeline for implementing the practice of passports.

If I can get [passports] to teachers before they leave for the summer, it reframes who the student is.... So they start off the year already knowing what to implement that could work. I’ve set aside two staff meetings and some PE collaboration time for teachers to start crafting these.

Aimee established a goal with a specific timeline of dates for its implementation and incorporation of teacher collaboration. Two participants echoed successful performance outcomes with passports, stating that they would be willing to share their student passports in district special education meetings.

Successful outcomes were not limited to the practice of student passports. Within days of her workshop, Tina also shared her immediate implementation of function-based thinking, and that it changed the outcome for a particular student:

This week we've actually just had a student who is special needs and his behavior has been challenging for three weeks now. The workshop just made me think, you know—what is triggering it? We tried a more proactive means, based on what we talked about,

we got the family and his teachers together, just so we could see what's going on. What are the triggers?

Her quote shows a change in her behavior by scheduling a meeting to determine the antecedents of the behavior. She spoke to her ability to understand of the impact of antecedent behaviors, and how she used that knowledge successfully to change a student's behavior, rather than punish him as she might have done pre-workshops:

I've been a little more thoughtful and meaningful about his consequences because I know now that there's some teasing. Now I'm trying to be very thoughtful. How can we replace how he's reacting to these triggers?

Amanda also experienced success in utilizing student incident forms and plans to continue to use it to help staff address behavior more effectively. She revealed newfound abilities and confidence in moving from serving as disciplinarian to a behaviorist: "My learning on discipline...I guess I should say understanding behavior. It's coming at it from a different way. We changed our student incident forms the day after the training and it's been so helpful to force the staff to think that way. We now separate the student from the behavior." Similarly, Mary shared her timeline for delivering professional development and how she plans to deliver content herself, rather than leave it up to her staff. She believed that the activities and tools from workshops helped her "understand accommodations better," and that it would be more fruitful for her staff to "hear the training from [her] directly." Three participants shared confidence in their abilities to execute, by the end of the year, a school-wide schedule that would support more inclusive practices, co-teaching, and teacher collaboration. Successful performance outcomes led to increases in self-efficacy in these particular practice areas, providing positive experiences for school leaders and indications that they will continue to evolve and persevere.

Unexpectedly, additional data indicating participants' success in implementing practices surfaced after the completion of workshops and data collection. Three participants sent follow up emails to action research team members sharing progress and seeking continued support. One participant, Heidi, sent an email two weeks after the final workshop, sharing how she facilitated her first special education team meeting and talking about goal writing and aligning goals to state standards. Tina sent an email thanking team members for the learning experience and sharing her success with several students and a teacher in using new student incident forms. Tanaz shared that she and her team were reviewing IEP progress reports and that, although it was challenging for her, she felt that her special education team engaged in meaningful conversations. These spontaneous data sources provided additional indicators of increased efficacy through successful implementations.

New Connections Increased the Quality of Leader Effort and Persistence

Surprisingly, interview data that revealed all participants reached out to an action research member to continue increasing capabilities beyond formal workshop sessions. Participants expressed confidence in implementing inclusive practices through identification of an "expert" to provide further support and growth. One participant judged the difficulty level required for practice implementation and described how she utilizes an AR member as a "mentor" to guide her: "Looking at progress reports are really overwhelming, but I know that it's necessary. In fact, I called John just recently, and asked, 'How are you involved in the process of monitoring? Talk me through it again.'" She described how she was determined to improve progress monitoring but needed his ongoing support to increase her capabilities. This demonstrates efficacy increasing through verbal persuasion. Mary went a step further and made an appointment to watch Allison coach a member of her SPED team; "I actually watched her,

what she wants [the team member] looking for in progress reports...seeing her helped me.”

Continuing to experience an AR member’s capabilities in a new setting increased her own. Such reaching out beyond workshop times also demonstrates participant persistence.

Ongoing connections between AR members and workshop participants grew beyond the practices shared in workshops and provided participants a safe space to develop capabilities and pose site-specific questions. Connections continued to provide verbal persuasion and vicarious experiences. All participants interviewed spoke to connections as being the key influencer on developing their confidence. They were peer “experts” in the district that they could call, experts without a position of authority above them. Heidi experienced the connections as a safe resource for her to rely on to stay the course: “I really liked having access to experts in my group and now I can really lean on that person. I don’t want to always call the SPED office, because I feel like as the principal hired to do the job, I should know these things. Since the workshops, I have called him so many times to answer questions for me. He became a resource for me.” Alex voiced the “expert” as a safer resource as well: “There’s so many times where I will just call, let her talk...ask questions. It’s nice to not feel like a question is too small of a question. It felt safe to acknowledge that I just don’t know.” During interviews, participants acknowledged that in district meeting they refrain from asking questions as to not appear unknowledgeable.

Workshops, they stated, linked them with peers willing to teach, answer questions, and serve as thought partners around practices, instead served to promote learning and confidence.

Self-Efficacy Impacted by Perceived Lack of Special Education Knowledge

Conversely, self-efficacy did not increase when school leaders engaged in tasks they perceived as requiring more specialized knowledge in special education. Progress monitoring is a practice that appeared to fall in this category. Participants did not share feelings of confidence

around monitoring IEP progress reports. In fact, in interviews and reflections, they shared feelings of nervousness, anxiety, and uncertainty. Participants revealed awareness of the importance of progress monitoring but expressed that they did not feel they had sufficient knowledge or confidence to become involved with an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP). Aimee talked candidly in her interview about why she did not feel “ready to monitor IEP progress reports”: “When we were doing that exercise, it made me feel really nervous and ignorant. I don’t know much about writing IEPs and goals.” Negative physiological feedback was experienced by seven out of the nine participants on this exercise, indicating that lack of capability to replicate progress monitoring at this time. Practices directly involving IEPs appeared to make participants the most uncomfortable:

I felt really nervous listening to Allison review what she looks for in an effective progress report. The checklist she gave us was definitely helpful to remind me...but I need to talk more before I try.

David revealed his uneasiness to implement this practice, explaining: “It really struck me when John said, ‘just keep getting your eyes on the data and get into the room with your teams. But, I don’t know, what do I know about writing IEPs? I’m not ready.’”

Lack of knowledge and experience with Individualized Educational Plans (IEP), understanding psycho-educational testing and reports, and developing IEP goals appeared to cause participants nervousness. Despite such feelings, all participants expressed that participation in the workshops led to understanding that monitoring was necessary.

Self-Efficacy also Increases in Action Research Team Members

Despite outward roles as facilitators in the workshop, action research members revealed surprising increases in expressed capabilities and confidence to implement change in special

education through participation in workshops. During their interviews, they expressed new understanding of the vast deficits in knowledge of general education teachers on special education and wanted to use their specialty to be better leaders. All action research members shared in interviews a sense of shock over the lack of knowledge and involvement by peers, making natural comparisons to themselves. John spoke to his level of surprise: “I like the power to be able to make decisions that I know are going to make an impact on students that may not be supported in the same way without those decisions. I was shocked at principals who don’t understand that they have that power too.” Sharing positive performance outcomes in regard to inclusion increased their sense of competence. They compared their own levels of competence against non-special education peers with knowledge deficits. Positive encouragement received during collaboration time and in post-workshop connections served to increase confidence to lead those less knowledgeable. They learned not to take knowledge for granted and expressed feeling more capable of coaching and training general education teachers. Julie spoke to these new capabilities:

Talking with the workshop groups and taking time to ensure they are learning the knowledge and skills necessary to support students, was valuable. I feel like it helped me see things that are blind spots to me about my world. It made me a better communicator and trainer to my GEN ED teachers.

Beverly echoed this new capability of recognizing blind spots. She gained a deeper awareness of her knowledge and received encouragement during workshop collaborations, giving her the capability to be more effective when working with teachers. “I’m more mindful now of my assumptions...I’m a better coach now that I know.” The expressed ability of AR members to

recognize knowledge deficits, and their new confidence in supporting their staff in acquiring competence around special education, shows increased self-efficacy.

Overall, participants, as well as action research team members, felt that workshops increased perceived self-efficacy in leading special education programs. They expressed gaining knowledge and confidence through working closely with peer “experts” in special education. Participants revealed increases in capabilities as well as confidence in implementing inclusive practices, shared goals, and concrete timelines. Confidence and increased involvement led to expressing feelings of more control over special education programs. Despite a limited amount of time between workshops and post-workshop interviews, participants experienced initial success in practice implementation. Finally, an unintended consequence of collaborative learning workshops was the ongoing mentoring connections that developed, leading to persistence in leader effort toward implementing change in special education. Those connections, participants clarified, stemmed from the formatting and structure of the collaborative learning workshops, and their unique professional development experiences.

Research Question 3: How do principal participants describe the experience of collaborative learning workshops as a professional development format for creating high-leverage, standard practices that support inclusion?

Collaborative Learning Experience

The final research question explored how participants describe the experience of taking part in a unique professional development structure: collaborative learning workshops designed, led, and facilitated by school leader peers. Overall, data from interviews and workshop reflections indicated that participants felt extremely positive about the experience and appreciated the time dedicated to collaboration around issues not previously provided space. A

format that provides school leaders with time devoted to talking, sharing, and reflecting on best practices was highly received. Participants described the experience as being unique to past professional development in which they have engaged. The key factor was spending uninterrupted time with other principals and administrators focused around a common issue that was relevant to their work. They identified additional components that also contributed to an overall positive experience and one which they felt strongly about continuing.

Unexpected Enthusiasm for Professional Development in Special Education Topics

School leaders face a multitude of competing priorities and time constraints. As this study required participants to attend three 2-hour workshop meetings, occurring after work hours, commitments to the study were not expected to be high. Initial recruitment for the study elicited five participant commitments. Action research members reached out to participants to thank them for their commitment and to preview the format of the workshops. At the first workshop, two additional participants attended, reporting renewed interest through word of mouth. By the third workshop, three new participants attended bringing the participant total to five action research members and 10 school leader participants (one action research member was unable to attend workshops due to last minute mediations). The total number of participants demonstrated an unexpected enthusiasm for professional development in the area of special education. Interview data revealed that leaders recognized special education as an area of need, but more significantly, the opportunity to collaborate with school leader “experts,” and not canned speakers, was highly motivating. One participant, Maribel, noted what motivated her to attend: “I know our SPED kids are failing. I don’t know what to do about it. The chance to talk to colleagues and get the knowledge they have? I’ll make the time.” She recognized a lack of skill and an opportunity to address that deficit.

All workshop participants, including action research team members, described the experience of spending uninterrupted time talking and collaborating on a topic of interest as the most effective component of the workshop that contributed to their positive experience. In fact, the desire to spend time talking through common problems of practice resulted in seven of the participants expressing that the workshops could have been much longer, giving table teams even more time to talk. Alex elaborated on why being provided time to talk with peers, and particularly experts in the field, was so positive for him and colleagues: “Leading is lonely. I got to know my peers a lot better and know more what special skillsets they have. Now I have a list of connections when I need help. If it’s behavior, I’m calling Allison. If it’s the learning center, I’m calling Beverly. If it’s data and progress monitoring, I’m calling John.” He established a support system in leading special education that had previously been nonexistent. Uninterrupted collaboration time allowed him to pose questions and gain clarifications that were more meaningful to his needs and led him to feel less isolated in decision making. Talking with peers with common challenges was a positive aspect expressed by another participant, Ellen: “The talking with colleagues, the experts and us regular folks. I was learning from everyone at my table, even the questions I heard. When you go to PDs normally, you sit and listen to an expert and you have to process on your own later. You get good ideas, but it’s nice to hear from people who are doing it with our certain populations.” Her experience was amplified by access to peers with student populations that most mirrored her own.

As table teams varied with each workshop, leaders had access to multiple peers across grade bands and with varying perspectives and lenses from which to learn. Despite being facilitators, action research members concurred with benefiting positively from talking with peers. One member explained: “I learned more about my own thinking and lens by explaining

and talking it through with my table. The questions they asked made me think about my practices in a new way and helped me think of ways to improve them. There's power in [the group]." His experience of engaging with peers around a common problem offered an opportunity for refinement and advancement of his own practices for the benefit of students.

Participants described other components that they felt contributed to their overall positive experience. Many referred to working with peers holding specialized expertise, and not an expert from outside the organization, as positive. Participants stated that they felt that learning from peer experts made the learning more relevant to their particular settings. Being a peer made them accessible after the workshops for clarification and follow-up conversations. Hands-on activities, tangible samples of practices, and resources they walked away with for immediate implementation were each referenced frequently as a favorite aspect of the workshop. Ellen participant described how samples supported her understanding and drive to implement: "It was nice that we had resources that we could immediately take and implement without it being too difficult at all. You could just automatically embed them into your practice because it was easy enough to do that." With numerous priorities constantly facing school leaders, planning professional developments around inclusive practices for staff can fall by the wayside. Interview data indicated that tangible resources increased the likelihood of implementation and provided a reference for leaders when working with their staffs. Direct resources for school leaders helped to make the inclusive practice more concrete.

Finally, six participants referenced being provided with time to study and process the standard practice as crucial to their positive experiences. They noted that they appreciated teaching time being limited to less than 15 minutes, with the remainder of the sessions being dedicated to collaboration time. That collaboration time, to all six, was more than just talking and

asking questions; it was time in which they were able to study the use of the practice as a teacher would utilize the practice in their classroom. The time spent on each practice allowed participants a deeper study of the components of the practice and its impact on inclusion. Katherine shared: “To me, we were actually practicing the skill. Taking a look at it and actually breaking it down...people don’t learn how to do that unless you actually give them time to apply it. I can’t lead something I don’t understand and can’t help my teachers understand.” Time is precious to school leaders, and time to deeply understand an inclusive practice was revealed through interview data as lacking. Space for deeper understanding in collaborative learning workshops was a unique factor in this professional development format, and contributed to a more positive experience.

Participants’ post-workshop interviews also revealed areas in which the workshops could improve to support the experiences of school learners within the format. Areas of improvement showed the pressing desire participants have for professional development and support for leading special education programs. All participants and action research members expressed that the limited number of the workshops was not sufficient. Despite recognizing that scheduling for school leaders is challenging, they felt strongly that professional development in this manner, particularly collaboration time, should be occurring on a regular basis throughout the school year. Participants added that they felt many of the topics and practices needed to be revisited frequently, such as practices involving student behavioral supports. One member shared: “I know time is always hard. You could probably do one a month for the whole school year and it wouldn’t be enough. I think that would continue to build up momentum and it wouldn’t let the conversation end.” Another participant agreed: “There were parts where I felt like I wish we had more time. I think we have to keep having it over and over and over.” The desire for more

training and repeated sessions was also expressed in relation to practices shared that participants felt required more advanced special education knowledge. Action research members also recognized this need in regard to particular practices, one explaining: “We need to hit progress reports again. I don’t know how much [participants] got that. Because again, it’s not fault to theirs but it’s a totally different system and requires more knowledge and exposure.” Data from AR members’ interview shows that they recognized the need for further sessions in order to revisit and support all the practices that they felt were critical to effective inclusion.

Data collected through interviews indicated overwhelmingly positive experiences. The unique formatting of the professional development workshops relying heavily on collaboration and the study of targeted inclusive practices was highly regarded. Engagement with peer school leaders, access to peer special education “experts,” and extended time around a single practice were key components that contributed to positive experiences.

Conclusion

Understanding the historically dual systems of education that have contributed to achievement gaps for students with disabilities, the action research team aimed to share the knowledge they possess as leaders and former special education teachers with peer leaders lacking such knowledge, using six identified student-centered practices. The unique formatting of the professional development created to share such knowledge was designed to merge the subgroups of leaders around collective study. Data revealed increases in efficacy with just three professional development workshops, and surprising connections and mentoring relationships developed to sustain learning and leadership support. Ultimately, the action research team designed a professional development format that could address the issues around lack of

knowledge and skills for school leaders around leading special education programs and building inclusive school cultures that foster increased achievement for students with disabilities.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

Overview

A principal, as instructional leader, can encourage and facilitate the achievement of students with disabilities. However, many lack the preparation—and thus the self-efficacy—to do so (Angelle & Bilton, 2009; DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2003). This study revealed practices that principals used to design inclusive schools. Most significantly, the study found that school principals do not need to rely on outside training, but they have the resources within their networks to make changes in their school culture. Leaders just need to be provided with the time and space to collaborate and learn. The study contributes to the literature on inclusive practices, principal self-efficacy, and principal professional development. A summary of key findings follows.

Overall, the action research team's work demonstrated that principals holding special education credentials possess unique knowledge and skills for serving as instructional leaders in special education and ensuring equitable access for students with disabilities. Those school leaders worked to identify and define practices that support effective inclusion. Participants' findings can now be used to build inclusive cultures in other schools, wherein school leaders may be lacking such efficacy. Schools that are interested in creating equity for students with disabilities can learn from these practices, as well as develop processes for implementation. In addition, the collaborative professional development format offers districts guidance on creating effective training explicitly designed to meet the needs of school leaders. The special education complexities place great demands on school principals that few are prepared to tackle. However, when school leaders merge expertise, they develop confidence in creating systemic change toward inclusive schooling.

This chapter first discusses why improving inclusion for students with disabilities matters, explores how principals create equitable access to rigorous, general education curriculum and experiences, and addresses school leaders' need for knowledge and skills. It details the conditions under which leaders can gain greater feelings of confidence and control, goals for change, and successful involvement in special education programs. Next, I discuss leaders' need for professional development in special education and, finally, effective components of such learning opportunities. I conclude by discussing limitations of the study and its research implications.

Significance of Findings

Developing Effective Instructional Leaders

The action research team's findings align with existing research that has identified principal core competencies necessary to ensure improved achievement for students with disabilities within an inclusive environment (McLeskey, Bilingsley, & Waldron, 2016). Principals holding special education credentials exemplify those core competencies. They demonstrate the knowledge and skills for serving as instructional leaders in inclusive education. Specifically, they use that expertise to exact high levels of agency by implementing high-leverage, inclusive practices. They are heavily involved in special education programming, helping students with disabilities to realize achievement commensurate with non-disabled peers (Billingsley, McLeskey, & Crockett, 2017). The action research team found that professional development dedicated toward practices proved extremely influential. This finding aligns with research suggesting that even limited exposure to coursework and training in special education can increase principal comfort level in leading programs (Angelle & Bilton, 2009). Additionally, the team's work demonstrates that collaboration positively affects professional development.

Findings support research that professional development for school leaders should leverage job-embedded team opportunities that tackle a problem of practice (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Ikemoto, Taliaferro, Fenton, & David, 2014). The process that occurred in this study can be used to initiate further cycles of inquiry and continue to develop school leaders' instructional leadership capacity for supporting special education.

Knowledge for Supporting Inclusion Exists Within the Organization

This study's design utilized the School Improvement Framework to address the needs of students with disabilities. It identified standard student-centered practices that support effective inclusion in general education classrooms. The central idea of improvement research is the premise that the *organization* has the knowledge and tools in order to make changes; by tapping the expertise of individuals, the organization can advance toward a common goal. This study found that school leaders with special education expertise do, in fact, possess knowledge and tools, in the form of inclusive practices. They have the potential to bridge the achievement gap between students with disabilities and non-disabled peers throughout the district. This modified inquiry cycle focused on quality improvement for students with disabilities by utilizing district expertise to train peers. Action research members used practices stemming from their training and experience to raise all principals' level of knowledge. Collaboration between school leaders with and without special education credentials thus provided a space to share expertise and develop core competencies. Outside professional development was ultimately unnecessary for addressing achievement gaps.

It may be unlikely for districts to have principals with specialized special education knowledge, as more than 98% of principals nationwide hold general education credentials (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). However, the study found that AR members

harnessed their backgrounds and experiences as special education teachers, adapting practices previously used in classrooms. This study demonstrates how districts and schools can unearth special education teacher expertise and collaborate with school leaders to develop core leadership competencies. Special education teachers possess knowledge and skills which research demonstrates principal preparation programs, and therefore principals, lack. The key, for districts and school leaders without access to peer leader experts, will be to facilitate collaboration with and bring forward special education experts currently residing in schools.

Providing a Roadmap to Develop Core Leadership Competencies

Mandates exist for principals to create inclusive schools, wherein students with disabilities realize high achievement. This mandate includes the stipulation that students receive the majority of learning in general education classrooms. Research shows that to do so, principals must possess six core competency skill areas: (1) high achievement expectations, (2) developing safe learning environments, (3) promoting effective instructional practices, (4) supporting a system for progress monitoring, (5) creating a collaborative culture, and (6) opportunities for professional learning and feedback (Billingsley, McLeskey, & Crockett, 2017). Existing research fails to provide leaders with sufficient guidance or examples of how core competencies manifest in schools (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015). This study's findings provide school leaders with a roadmap of explicit practices that advance these competencies.

When principals establish high achievement expectations, they show leadership competency. Action research members shared that talking about high expectations was insufficient for achieving it. Establishing high expectations requires actionable practices, which existing research fails to provide. The path begins with a principal committing to students'

general education admission; this ensures their access to rigorous teaching, learning standards, and grade level activities. One AR member explained how she links inclusion to high achievement, highlighting the impact of equitable access.

[Inclusion means] making sure teachers, as well as your SPED team, understand that there'll be nothing more impactful than the kid being in your classroom and having full access. How can a student realize high achievement if they aren't even in the room?

Student passports maximize general education inclusion. They communicate student strengths, accommodations, modifications, and curriculum adaptations to maximize student success.

Purposeful scheduling also preserves access to general education. AR members developed master schedules at the highest levels, not relying on individual classrooms. School-wide master scheduling supports co-teaching classrooms and flipped learning centers. These models allow special education staff to serve students in general education during designated core content, in lieu of student pullout.

Learning environments also reveal leadership competency. Research supports the importance of positive, orderly, and safe learning environments for students with disabilities. It fails, however, to outline practices that construct them. Function-based thinking is an identified practice that provides leaders' direction to do so (Hershfeldt et al., 2010). School leaders' ability to think about student behavior, from a function-based perspective, reduces suspensions that result in removal from classrooms. Inclusion advances when schools are purposeful in keeping students in class. Leaders must expect adults to teach appropriate school behaviors, not punish for unwanted conduct. This practice guides leaders to construct more positive learning environments, emphasizing management over discipline.

Promoting effective classroom instruction similarly indicates leadership competency. Students with disabilities require evidenced-based instruction and additional supports to realize achievement. General education teachers tasked with developing inclusive classrooms lack the specialized training and evidenced-based practices of special education peers. This study outlined a practice that tackles this absence of training: ongoing teacher study in curricular accommodations and modifications. School leaders with special education expertise are to routinely provide professional development, collaboration time, and coaching around implementing classroom accommodations to ensure student access to rigorous standards. Trainings should target teachers as well as instructional aides, who offer direct support in classrooms. One member, Julie, explained how she uses repetition to impact efficacy: “It’s about building the capacity within all your staff to provide the best supports they can for all students. We can’t expect one-and-done training to stick. Capacity building takes repeating. Even our SPED teachers need reminders.” This practice ensures teachers employ effective instructional practices and develop inclusive classrooms.

Competent leaders progress monitor instruction and outcomes for all students, disabled and non-disabled. For students with disabilities, frequent progress monitoring is vital, determining the effectiveness of their instructional programs and intervention needs. It allows principals to proactively adjust supports and services based on data. This study illustrated how effective special education leaders do this for students with disabilities. Close monitoring of IEP progress reports provide insight into instruction, accommodations, and inclusion, but is largely ignored by leaders lacking special education training. This study uncovered how IEP progress report monitoring can be taught to principals, adding depth to their leadership. Such monitoring

provides feedback and coaching to special education teams during routine meetings and collaboration time.

Schools Leader Need for Professional Development

Principals face the task of leading special education programs with limited to no formalized training in special education (Angelle & Bilton, 2009). This is especially problematic, as special education programming monopolizes more than half of school leaders' work week. The surprising number of volunteer participants in this study demonstrated this need, as did data from workshop reflections and interviews. Action research members consistently spoke to being unaware of how "unknowledgeable" and uninvolved school leader peers without special education credentials were. AR members recounted having to simplify language around special education and answer rudimentary questions during workshop collaboration. Data revealed that leaders lacked knowledge in basic disability awareness, psychoeducational assessments, and research-based instructional practices associated with different disabilities. AR members expressed that such deficiency would negatively impact inclusion within a school. Julie spoke to fully grasping the dearth of knowledge that colleagues possessed: "But it's funny to me that, no it's not funny. It's sad to me. And these people are running schools and they can't tell the difference between an accommodation or modification." Allison also expressed surprise at how little base knowledge was represented in her group, describing it as "kind of surprising on how little people know about special education."

School leaders gravitated toward the opportunity to grow and learn from one another. Workshop reflections included over a dozen requests to include collaboration time in district monthly meetings. The collaborative workshop format fostered honest conversations around special education issues school leaders face and unveiled learning needs. Workshops created safe

spaces for leaders resulting in unintended consequences. Collaborative conversations became organic, often including special education topics away from chosen practices. Tables groups reported talking about other special education challenges. One reflection noted a principal getting ideas for restructuring instructional aides' schedules and another noted to follow up with Allison on supporting an autistic student at recess. Another reflection indicated questions around disability identification. Questions posed to expert "peers" demonstrated a clear need for knowledge and skills in special education. One principal participant spoke to using the safe space to build knowledge: "I wanted to take advantage of this non-threatening space. Asking questions of the Exec. Dir of SPED can sometimes be embarrassing because I feel like I'm confessing to a superior that I don't know something that I should. Do you think we will be able to do this more often?" This statement reflects desire and awareness of knowledge gaps and illustrates the interest in an impactful workshop component, the non-threatening space wherein participants can ask questions without fear of judgment. Assessment of school leaders' knowledge and skills in special education is needed to further refine the organization of professional development.

Collaboration is Key to Professional Development

According to Bandura (2000), efficacy arises from four sources: performance outcomes, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and physiological feedback. Collaboration provided participants both vicarious experiences and verbal persuasion, advancing self-efficacy. AR members, as peer experts, provided vicarious experiences; participants experienced listening to successes of leaders in similar positions. Collaboration also provided access to verbal persuasion, with AR members providing consistent encouragement. Teaming allowed participants to successfully study practices and artifacts, with collaboration supporting implementation planning and resulting in positive performance outcomes. Data collected from AR members and

participants' interviews indicated that their collaboration persisted long after workshop completion, thus extending verbal persuasion. Small group collaboration also provided positive physiological feedback, as evidenced in the quote above, wherein participants felt safe to ask learn without the anxiety of feeling critiqued or being evaluated. Post-workshop mentoring discussions also contributed to lower anxiety around practice implementation as participants engaged in rehearsals.

Principal is the “Great Equalizer”

This study aligns with research that suggests that when students with disabilities have realized positive outcomes through inclusive practices, the principals have served as the “great catalyst” (Billingsley & Banks, 2019; Hitt & Tucker, 2015; Hoppey & McLeskey, 2010; Praisner, 2003). Principals, as catalysts, influence the context and culture in which teachers and students (disabled and non-disabled) work. According to Hoppey & McLeskey (2010), they “lubricate the human machinery” of a school through goal setting, messaging, protecting instructional time, promoting teacher learning, ensuring effective instructional practices, monitoring student progress, and providing program feedback (p. 6). Serving this role takes a tremendous amount of time and focus for school leaders, already tasked with competing demands. AR members embraced this level of energy and focus on special education, in effect prioritizing their most struggling learners. They understand how building schools that support the most vulnerable students benefits all students. That focus explains how the practices identified in this study came to be implemented. The core of their work is articulated around intervention and closing achievement gaps. During workshops, they communicated this singular passion to participants. John challenged participants to reflect on where priorities lie:

Really, I mean as a principal you're the great equalizer and/or you should think of yourself that way. What I care about is what my teachers will care about. What do you care about? So to me, to not ... focus on [special education], it sort of does beg the question of 'Where is your work?' I mean like where do you put your emphasis of work? He recognized the principal's impact on ensuring equity within a school, and by failing to focus on vulnerable populations, inequity is reinforced. Martin elaborated on the role of supporting all students. "Being a principal is choosing what you're going to address and not going to address. It's a mindset. Our work is with students who are scoring 1s and 2s because that creates an environment where 3s and 4s thrive."

Having the mindset of a "great equalizer" is pivotal to building an inclusive school community. School leaders who design inclusive schools realize achievement for students with disabilities commensurate with peers. They understand the power of principal advocacy, and ensure the school operates in alignment and moves toward a common goal. This study indicates that one way to support school leaders in becoming "great equalizers" is to engage them in meaningful, collaborative professional development around high-leverage, inclusive practices.

Limitations of the Study

Action research is limited by what is often referred to as "messiness," and this study was no exception, as working exclusively with school principals with limited time and demanding roles presented logistical challenges. Unlike traditional action research characterized by multiple cycles of inquiry, this study focused on one cycle in which we identified the variations in performance, collected data on and analyzed variations, and used that analysis to impart knowledge. Impacted schedules demanded that workshops occur in quick succession without the ability for AR members to meet in between. However, they had enough time to identify inclusive

practices, plan learning activities, and make adjustments in workshops based on individual presenters' reflections. Extended time between workshops would have allowed action research members to collaboratively analyze reflections upon which to base adjustments. Additionally, five weeks after the final workshop, COVID-19 necessitated school closures and significantly impacted participants' abilities to follow through with expressed implementation timelines.

Although this study provides important findings around inclusive practices and effective principal professional development, three limitations exist: generalizability, reactivity, and incomplete data sets. The population of this study was limited to seven co-researchers, including myself, and ten workshop participants. Both the AR team and participants sought out the opportunity to participate, indicating that AR members were motivated to share expertise and that participants were motivated to gain knowledge. The action research sample size allowed me to gather ample data on the team as they articulated and defined standard inclusive practices believed to positively impact student achievement. The workshop population size allowed me to gather sufficient data on each participant, experiences, and perceived workshop impact. The study's findings, however, may not be generalizable to all school leaders due to the uniquely high number of school leaders with special education credentials within one school district.

Despite methodology offering a rich data set, the possibility of reactivity still existed. As I am an employee of the district, it is possible that action research members participated in the study due to existing relationships with not only myself, but with action research members. As a director, the possibility existed that my positionality over school leaders also impacted participation. To lessen the impact of positionality, recruitment emails were sent after school hours from a non-work email address. To mitigate it influencing interview responses, a secondary interviewer conducted individual interviews. Member checks were performed, and the

interviewer probed for clarification when responses were unclear to the researcher. Interview responses were triangulated with participants' workshop reflections and researcher observational data. The possibility did exist, however, for bias to occur during data coding as a function of my being a member of the action research team.

Due to scheduling demands, not all participants attended each collaborative learning workshops. Inconsistent attendance by some participants occurred due to unpredictable schedules and therefore reflections were unable to be collected. As stated previously, there were also participants who, due to word of mouth, requested to join the second and third workshop. It is possible that participants would have expressed greater confidence in some practices had they been in attendance for all workshop. However, given the consistent data indicating increases in capabilities and confidence, I do not believe this limitation affected the study's findings. Additionally, one action research member did not attend workshops due to a legal mediation. Despite incomplete data sets, sufficient data was collected from participants and action research members to accurately describe experiences and rigorously triangulate findings.

Implications for Practice

The study's findings offer several implications and recommendations for practice and future research, despite the limitations discussed above. The study offers recommendations for administrative credentialing and principal professional development.

The Need for Merging Systems

The findings of this study suggest that the historically dual educational systems of special and general education must merge to address persistent achievement gaps. Merging systems can occur by collaboratively engaging school leaders and practitioners to design schools around the needs of the most vulnerable students first. Practices that these leaders employ are born out of

special education expertise. Therefore, integrating general and special education teachers and leaders will bring about the most direct change. Collaborative professional development enabled school leaders develop knowledge and confidence in this study by tailoring learning to their needs and establishing connections that fostered continued growth. For districts aiming to build inclusive schools, this leader-driven study can be used as an example of how to examine collective data on students with disabilities, determine where success is occurring, and merge systems to instigate positive change.

Reforming Credentialing Coursework

Another practical implication is the need for leadership and teacher credentialing programs to provide candidates explicit preparation in special education. Coursework on understanding and teaching students with disabilities should be a core component of both programs. Current teacher credentialing programs follow two distinct paths: one for general education and one for special education, which perpetuates dual educational systems and impedes inclusion. Research indicates that most administrator credentialing programs offer one or fewer courses in special education (Pazey and Cole, 2013). School leaders cannot ensure high achievement for all students if they singularly possess general education knowledge. There must be shared knowledge and expertise for a school to support the success of students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers. Credentialing programs must take responsibility for ensuring that candidates are prepared to meet the needs of all students. Leadership knowledge gaps exist around special education programming, particularly around supporting the development and monitoring of students' Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), educational assessments, disability awareness, and effective instructional practices. These basic topics can

and should be addressed in credentialing programs, so candidates enter leadership roles better prepared to support special education programs.

Collaborations Across School Districts

A final implication for district leaders is to consider establishing consistent, collaboration around challenges facing school leaders in regard to special education. The school leader role is lonely and the demand to make decisions in isolation is great. Principals participating in this study acknowledged deficits in special education knowledge which impacted decision making; their enthusiasm to gain knowledge from experts in similar roles was high and should be acted upon further. This study shows that bringing leaders into collaboration to learn from each other's expertise and successes can build collective efficacy and foster community within a group that might otherwise stay within the confines of their own schools. District and school leaders should initiate conversations with one another to determine areas of expertise and engage in the collaborative format presented in this study.

Recommendations for Future Research

Achievement discrepancies between students with disabilities and non-disabled peers presents as one of the biggest obstacles facing school leaders. Dual educational systems in the United States continue to inhibit opportunities for students with disabilities. This is particularly true for students of color and low-socio economic status students who suffer from over-identification and segregation from rigorous academic opportunities. Despite federal law mandating that all students realize high achievement, students with disabilities still experience the lowest achievement levels in the country. Policymakers may continue to address inequities through legislation; however, forcing students into a system not designed to support them is an exercise in futility. Future studies should identify and examine inclusive schools that merge

systems. Case studies should continue to analyze school design and principals by which students with disabilities realize success. This is a unique segment of the school leadership population that can provide greater insight into how to achieve success with students with disabilities.

My goal, as a researcher, was to understand practices occurring in schools wherein students with disabilities experienced the most success. What I uncovered was school leaders who serve as student advocates and redesign schools around the needs of the most vulnerable students. I discovered that the practices they employed can be taught to peer leaders and, even with limited exposure, can significantly increase involvement and confidence in leading special education. I would like to expand the scope of this work beyond School District R. The model of professional development, rooted in collaboration, proved to be highly effective in changing leader practice and my hope is to share this approach with other school districts. I plan to continue the format within my own district, deepening the opportunity for leaders to study practices over time. I aspire to build on this work by studying how ongoing leadership training in special education affects the achievement of students with disabilities.

Final Thoughts

Leaders must have the knowledge and skills necessary to build and lead inclusive schools if we have any hope of closing achievement gaps for students with disabilities. At this time, research indicates that this knowledge is missing. This study's findings provided a roadmap for districts to address inequity through targeted, collaborative professional development for school leaders. This study merged special education and general education experts to study practices aimed to support our most at-risk students.

Schools are designed on the foundation that general education is the norm, and that students with disabilities are a deviation from that norm. Current general education systems

cultivate inequitable outcomes. We can no longer allow special education to live apart from general education and permit dual educational systems to breed disparities for students with disabilities. Nor can we expect students to navigate being “included” into a system that is not designed for them. Outcomes will remain unchanged until school leaders embrace the responsibility to serve as “great equalizers.” Schools must be redesigned to safeguard achievement for all students. Research demonstrates that formalized training, as well as job-embedded principal professional development is necessary for that to occur. The knowledge to enact such cultural shifts resides with special education teachers. They possess specialized knowledge and skills to create inclusive, equitable schools, but their skill sets can no longer be reserved for the few. This study shows that even with limited learning opportunities, intentional collaboration between special and general education leaders can help all educators develop core leadership competencies.

Appendix A: Recruitment Emails

Re: Action Research

Good morning,

My name is Susan Wildes and I am a doctoral student in the Educational Leadership Program at UCLA. I am conducting research for my dissertation on the creation of student-centered school structures that support and foster inclusion of students with disabilities. For this study, I am seeking to work with administrators with special education backgrounds and experience like yourself to better understand issues surround the achievement of students with special needs and to create professional development workshops, based on research.

The goal is to help establish collaborative learning opportunities that provide professional development to school site administrators in creating and implementing student-centered structures within their school site.

Participation in the study would entail the following:

- 1 interview
- 3 group meetings with other administrators and action research members
- 6 collaborative network principal workshops (run time of 30-45 minutes with some follow up discussions and/or questions as requested by school leaders).

So overall, it will be approximately seven to eight hours of your time over the course of 3-4 months.

What are the benefits?

You may benefit from the study by gaining new insight on student-centered structures that support and foster inclusive of students with disabilities as well as an opportunity to collaborate and hear from other school leaders with special education backgrounds and experience.

Additionally, you will be instrumental in creating professional development opportunities for school leaders throughout the district in supporting students with disabilities.

For incentives, you will receive a \$50 gift card at the completion of the study.

I hope that you will consider participation. My data collection phase will run from October until February.

Please let me know at your earliest convenience if you are interested. I look forward to hearing from you.

Re: Collaborative Learning Workshop Participation Recruitment

Dear site leaders (principals, assistant principals, site TOSAs),

As a doctoral student in the Educational Leadership Program at UCLA, I am conducting research on the implementation of student-centered practices that support and foster inclusion of students with disabilities. For this study, I have been working over the last few months with your school leader colleagues who possess special education backgrounds, experience, and training, to better understand the unique practices they implement that have led to their students with disabilities realizing achievement commensurate with non-disabled peers.

Based on our findings, we will be offering professional development, collaboration workshops for school administrators charged with leading special education programs, like yourself, to learn more about the impactful practices these leaders utilize. These workshops will be dedicated space for principals to learn from one another, focused around what research states are the core competencies of special education leadership.

These workshops are optional, and open to all school leaders. The collaborative learning workshops (run time of 2 hours with some follow up discussions and/or questions as requested) will take place on Wednesdays, January 22nd, 29th, and February 5th from 3:30-5:30, location TBD.

In addition, I am seeking to learn more about the experiences of school leaders when dedicated time is established for them to learn collaboratively.

Participation in the study would entail the following:

- 1 brief open-ended survey around participant experience and training in regard to special education
- One 30-minute interview held after work hours

So overall, it will be less than four hours of your time.

What are the benefits?

You may benefit from the collaborative workshops by gaining new insights on student-centered practices that support and foster inclusion of students with disabilities as well as an opportunity to collaborate and hear from other school leaders with special education backgrounds and experience.

You will be instrumental in providing new insights on the format of collaborative principal professional development and the perceived impact of learning from school leaders with special education backgrounds and experience.

If you agree to participate in the additional survey and one-on-one interview, you will receive a \$10 gift card for your time participating.

Participation in the study (additional interviews) is entirely optional. Leaders are welcome and encouraged to attend the collaboration workshops regardless of participation in the study interview.

Please let me know at your earliest convenience if you are interested in attending the workshops and/or are interested in participating in the study, and I will send an Outlook invitation for the dates. I look forward to hearing from you.

Appendix B: Consent(s) to Participate

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH – Collaborative Learning Workshop

University of California, Los Angeles

Creating Student-Centered Practices to Support Inclusion of Students with Disabilities

Susan Wildes from the Educational Leadership Program at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) is conducting a research study.

You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you lead an elementary school that serves students with disabilities and have a background and experience in special education as a teacher. Your participation in this research study is voluntary.

Why is this study being done?

This study is being conducted to detail the experiences of school site administrators as they seek to enhance inclusion for students with disabilities through the creation of student-centered practices.

What will happen if I take part in this research study?

If you volunteer to participate in this study, the researcher will ask you to do the following:

- Participate in collaborate learning workshops with larger principal group
- Participate in brief, opened ended survey around experience with special education
- Participate in individual interview
- Participate in audio recording of collaborative learning workshops

How long will I be in the research study?

Participation will take a total of approximately 3.5 hours over the course of one month.

Are there any potential risks or discomforts that I can expect from this study?

There are no potential risks associated with this study. The potential discomforts include principals not finding success or help within the learning workshops, principals describing negative feelings about collaborative learning, potential disagreements among principals.

Are there any potential benefits if I participate?

You may benefit from the study by gaining new insight into student-centered structures that support inclusion of students with disabilities, as well as an opportunity to collaborate and hear from other school leaders with backgrounds and experience as special education teachers.

Additionally, you will be instrumental in creating a professional development for all elementary school leaders.

The results of the research may result in more professional development for school site leaders, an expansion of training for secondary school leaders as well as the potential to make recommendations and a model for principal professional development in the future.

Will I be paid for participating?

- You will receive a \$10 gift card for your participation as a member of the action research team and participation in an exit interview.

Will information about me and my participation be kept confidential?

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can identify you will remain confidential. It will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Confidentiality will be maintained by means of locked files, digital recordings which will only be accessible to the researcher, and transcription service and coding during data analysis. Pseudonyms will be used for all participants in lieu of names and school sites. Participation will not be disclosed to participant evaluators at any time during or after the research process. All participants will be asked to keep what is said during the group discussions between the participants only. However, complete confidentiality cannot be guaranteed.

What are my rights if I take part in this study?

- You can choose whether or not you want to be in this study, and you may withdraw your consent and discontinue participation at any time.
- Whatever decision you make, there will be no penalty to you, and no loss of benefits to which you were otherwise entitled.
- You may refuse to answer any questions that you do not want to answer and still remain in the study.

Who can I contact if I have questions about this study?

- **The research team:**

If you have any questions, comments or concerns about the research, you can talk to the one of the researchers. Please contact:

Susan Wildes

Diane Durkin,

UCLA Office of the Human Research Protection Program (OHRPP):

If you have questions about your rights as a research subject, or you have concerns or suggestions and you want to talk to someone other than the researchers, you may contact the

UCLA OHRPP by phone: [REDACTED]; by email: [REDACTED] or by
mail: Box 951406, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1406.

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH – Action Research Members

University of California, Los Angeles

Creating Student-Centered Structures to Support Inclusion of Students with Disabilities in Elementary Schools

Susan Wildes from the Educational Leadership Program at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) is conducting a research study.

You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you lead an elementary school that serves students with disabilities and have a background and experience in special education as a teacher. Your participation in this research study is voluntary.

Why is this study being done?

This study is being conducted to detail the experiences of school site administrators as they seek to enhance inclusion for students with disabilities through the creation of student-centered school structures.

What will happen if I take part in this research study?

If you volunteer to participate in this study, the researcher will ask you to do the following:

- Participate in three action research group meetings
- Participate in collaborate learning workshops with larger principal group
- Participate in brief, opened ended survey around experience with special education
- Participate in individual interview
- Participate in video and audio recording of collaborative learning workshops

How long will I be in the research study?

Participation will take a total of approximately nine hours over the course of three months.

Are there any potential risks or discomforts that I can expect from this study?

There are no potential risks associated with this study. The potential discomforts include principals not findings success or help within the learning workshops, principals describing negative feelings about collaborative learning, potential disagreements among principals.

Are there any potential benefits if I participate?

You may benefit from the study by gaining new insight into student-centered structures that support inclusion of students with disabilities, as well as an opportunity to collaborate and hear from other school leaders with backgrounds and experience as special education teachers. Additionally, you will be instrumental in creating a professional development for all elementary school leaders.

The results of the research may result in more professional development for school site leaders, an expansion of training for secondary school leaders as well as the potential to make recommendations and a model for principal professional development in the future.

Will I be paid for participating?

- You will receive a \$50 gift card for your participation as a member of the action research team and participation in an exit interview.

Will information about me and my participation be kept confidential?

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can identify you will remain confidential. It will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Confidentiality will be maintained by means of locked files, digital recordings which will only be accessible to the researcher and transcription service and coding during data analysis. Pseudonyms will be used for all participants in lieu of names and school sites. Participation will not be disclosed to participant evaluators at any time during or after the research process. All participants will be asked to keep what is said during the group discussions between the participants only. However, complete confidentiality cannot be guaranteed.

What are my rights if I take part in this study?

- You can choose whether or not you want to be in this study, and you may withdraw your consent and discontinue participation at any time.
- Whatever decision you make, there will be no penalty to you, and no loss of benefits to which you were otherwise entitled.
- You may refuse to answer any questions that you do not want to answer and still remain in the study.

Who can I contact if I have questions about this study?

- **The research team:**

If you have any questions, comments or concerns about the research, you can talk to the one of the researchers. Please contact:

Susan Wildes [REDACTED]

Diane Durkin, [REDACTED]

- **UCLA Office of the Human Research Protection Program (OHRPP):**

If you have questions about your rights as a research subject, or you have concerns or suggestions and you want to talk to someone other than the researchers, you may contact the UCLA OHRPP by phone: [REDACTED]; by email: [REDACTED] or by mail: Box 951406, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1406.

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Appendix C: Action Research Team Pre-Meeting Survey

This brief survey is intended to collect information around the educational backgrounds and experiences of school site principals and leaders in order to best plan learning workshops. The survey should take no longer than 5 minutes to complete.

Thank you for your time and effort.

Please indicate the type of teaching & administrative credential(s) held, including whether the credential is clear or preliminary. (Check all that apply)

- ☐ Multiple-Subject Teaching Credential
- ☐ Single Subject Teaching Credential
- ☐ Special Education Specialist Instruction Credential
- ☐ Career/Technical Teaching Credential
- ☐ Adult Ed Teaching Credential
- ☐ Preliminary Administrative Services Credential
- ☐ Clear Administrative Services Credential
- ☐ Pupil Services Credential
- ☐ Other:

Please list degrees held and areas of study.

Your answer

Briefly describe your teaching experience (years of teaching, assignments/grade, subject area)

Your answer

Briefly describe your administrative experience (years as a school administrator, assignment, grade levels, programs overseen, departments overseen)

Your answer

Please indicate any other credentials held or specialized trainings that you have received.

Your answer

Explain your experience providing instruction to students with special needs.

Your answer

Students with disabilities in [District R] have the lowest success rate of any other student subgroup. Why do you believe we get the results that we do?

Your answer

What standard, school practices do you implement in order to support inclusion for students with disabilities?

Your answer

Submit

Appendix D: Pre-Workshop Participant Survey

Collaborative Learning Pre-Workshop Survey

This brief survey is intended to collect information around the educational backgrounds and experiences of school site principals and leaders in order to best plan learning workshops. The survey should take no longer than 15 minutes to complete.

Thank you for your time and effort.

Please indicate the type of teaching & administrative credential(s) held, including whether the credential is clear or preliminary. (Check all that apply)

- ☐ Multiple-Subject Teaching Credential
- ☐ Single Subject Teaching Credential
- ☐ Special Education Specialist Instruction Credential
- ☐ Career/Technical Teaching Credential
- ☐ Adult Ed Teaching Credential
- ☐ Preliminary Administrative Services Credential
- ☐ Clear Administrative Services Credential
- ☐ Pupil Services Credential
- ☐ Other:

Please list degrees held and areas of study. Example: Bachelor of Arts – Elementary Education & Psychology, Master of Arts – Educational Leadership, EdD – Educational Leadership and Policy Studies

Your answer

Briefly describe your teaching experience (years of teaching, assignments/grade, subject area)

Your answer

Briefly describe your administrative experience (years as a school administrator, assignment, grade levels, programs overseen, departments overseen)

Your answer

Please indicate any other credentials held or specialized trainings that you have received.

Your answer

Briefly describe your experience providing instruction to students with special needs.

Your answer

What do you believe to be necessary in a school to ensure the achievement of students with special needs?

Your answer

What do you believe to be the barriers that hinder the achievement of students with special needs within your school?

Your answer

Submit

Appendix E: Post-Workshop Interview Protocols

Action Research Team Member Participant Interview Protocol

Good afternoon. Thank you for your willingness to speak with me and participate in a study that will provide information about the preparation and experiences of school site principals. As you know, I am a UCLA doctoral candidate and I have been collecting data that will provide researchers/district office personnel with important information about the demands of school site principals in overseeing and providing instructional leadership to special education programs. You signed a consent form to participate in this interview before the study began. If you would like to review the consent form, I have it available.

This interview will last approximately 30-45 minutes. Everything you discuss with me during this interview is strictly confidential so please feel free to speak openly. In order for me to accurately record our conversation, I would like to digitally record it so I can later transcribe the interview verbatim. The recording will not be shared with anyone, nor will any identifying information be connected to the answers. If there are points during the interview where you would like the recorder turned off, please feel free to simply press the off button on the recording device.

Do you have any questions before we get started? If not, let's begin.

I. GENERAL BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- A. What is one thing you love about being the principal/assistant principal at _____ school?
- B. From your perspective, what is it like to be a student with special needs at your school?
- C. What do you see as your role in relation to special education programs at your school?

II. PROCESS FOR CREATING STRUCTURES (RQ: What do principals working in collaboration describe as high-leverage, standard practices that support inclusion for students with disabilities? How do principals describe the process for their creation? & RQ: How does participation in collaborative learning workshops influence site principals' perceived efficacy in improving equity through inclusion?)

- a. Talk about what the process was like to work with your fellow SPED principals in identifying high-leverage, standard practices that support students with disabilities.
 - a. During our AR meetings, you talked about how you utilize _____(recurring SPED team meetings, data discussions, collab guide, behavior support matrix). Can you talk about how that practice was created?

- b. What practices are you most proud of in regard to supporting special education and inclusion? What work needs to still be done?
- c. After our 3 SPED leader meetings, are there any practices that you want to learn more about or implement?

III. COLLABORATIVE LEARNING WORKSHOP PARTICIPATION (RQ: How do principal participants describe the experience of collaborative learning workshops as a professional development format for creating high-leverage, standard practices that support inclusion?)

G. Now let's shift gears a bit. Talk about your experience in the collaborative learning workshops.

- 1. What did you notice in the workshops?
- 2. What components of the workshops do you believe were the most effective?
- 3. What surprised you?
- 4. What new practices do you plan to utilize after the workshops? Any practices that you might think differently about?
- 5. What do you believe school leaders need more training on?

IV. CONCLUSION

Is there anything else I haven't asked about in regard to our work in promoting inclusion for special education teachers and students that I should have?

Workshop Participant Interview Protocol

Good afternoon. Thank you for your willingness to speak with me and participate in a study that will provide information about the preparation and experiences of school site principals. As you know, I am a UCLA doctoral candidate and I have been collecting data that will provide researchers/district office personnel with important information about the demands of school site principals in overseeing and providing instructional leadership to special education programs. You signed a consent form to participate in this interview before the study began. If you would like to review the consent form, I have it available.

This interview will last approximately 30 minutes. Everything you discuss with me during this interview is strictly confidential so please feel free to speak openly. In order for me to accurately record our conversation, I would like to digitally record it so I can later transcribe the interview verbatim. The recording will not be shared with anyone, nor will any identifying information be connected to the answers. If there are points during the interview where you would like the recorder turned off, please feel free to simply press the off button on the recording device.

Do you have any questions before we get started? If not, let's begin.

I. GENERAL BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- A. What is one thing you love about being the principal/assistant principal/TOSA at _____ school?
- B. From your perspective, what is it like to be a student with special needs at your school?
- C. What do you see as your primary role in relation to special education programs at your school?

II. COLLABORATIVE LEARNING WORKSHOP PARTICIPATION (RQ: How does participation in collaborative learning workshops influence site principals' perceived efficacy in improving equity through inclusion? & RQ: How do principal participants describe the experience of collaborative learning workshops as a professional development format for creating high-leverage, standard practices that support inclusion?)

- G. Now let's shift gears a bit. Talk about your experience in the collaborative learning workshops.
 - a. How were these workshops similar to or different than other professional development in which you have participated?
 - b. What components of the workshop did you find helpful? What would you like more of? Were there components that were not as helpful?
 - c. How do you feel participation impacted your leadership in special education and inclusive practices?

- d. Talk about a standard practice that was shared in the workshop that you plan to put into place? What process will you utilize to implement it?

III. CONCLUSION

Is there anything else I haven't asked about in regard to our work in promoting inclusion for special education teachers and students that I should have?

Appendix F: Table 6: Overview of Action Research Meetings

Action Research Team Meeting Focus Areas
Session 1: October 28, 2019 Causal System Analysis – What problem am I trying to solve? • Identify the specific problem to be addressed in regard to the academic achievement and effective inclusion of students with disabilities within [District R]. Analyze accountability data and state SPED accountability reports • Analysis Cycle: Probes - Why do we get the results observe? Why does that occur? • Seeing the [District R] system as students experience it – What is it like to be a student with a disability in [District R]? What would we hope the experience would be? (establish target) • Review research on core competencies of leading special education • Begin sharing standard practices utilized to support inclusion for students with disabilities Resource Items: • Bryk, A. S., Gomez, L. M., Grunow, A., & LeMahieu, P. G. (2015). <i>Learning to Improve: How America's Schools Can Get Better at Getting Better</i>. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press. • Billingsley, B. S., McLeskey, J., & Crockett, J. B. (2017). <i>Principal Leadership: Moving Toward INclusive and High-Achieving Schools for Students with Disabilities</i>. University of Florida, Collaboration for Effective Educator Development, Accountability, and Reform Center. Gainesville, FL: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs. Retrieved from http://cedar.education.ufl.edu/tools/innovation-configurations/ • https://nils.carnegienetworks.org/ • 2019 California Dashboard for Redondo Beach Unified School District and individual school site reports
Session 2: November 14, 2019 Causal System Analysis • What accounts for the variation in performance between Lincoln/Washington ES and the other six elementary schools? What accounts for the variation in performance

between Adams and Parras MS? What do Principal A and Principal B do that's different and missing in the other schools?

- Analyze artifacts of inclusive practices. What do they share in common? What are the essential elements?
- Create a driver diagram to organize the “standard set of practices”
- What outcomes should we expect to occur?
- Map the essential organizational features in district X that are most likely to manifest themselves as improvement work if inclusion takes place – identify challenges likely to be encountered

Sessions 3: December 5, 2019

Planning Collaborative Learning Workshops

- Where and how might practices best be introduced – review research on professional development for school leaders
- Establish and understand PDSA cycle for structured inquiry– Plan-Do-Study-Act
- Identify necessary components for the workshops to maximize learning for leaders
- **Plan** workshop agendas and learnings for teams of principals – Identify focus practice for each session, who will lead, materials to include
- **Do** - Conduct workshops
- **Study** post workshop participant reflections
- **Act** - adjust plan for next workshop

Appendix G: Table 7: Overview of Collaborative Learning Workshops

Workshop Session	Date	Collaborative Learning Workshop Focus
Session 1	1/22/2020	Learning Target: Gain understanding of a standard practice used to monitor progress of students with disabilities • IEP Progress Report Monitoring & Look Fors
Session 2		Learning Target: Gain understanding of a standard practice for meeting with SPED teams and creating a collaborative culture for teachers' work • Recurring Special Education Team agenda items and feedback protocol
Session 3	1/29/2020	Learning Target: Gain understanding of a standard practice to support high expectations for students with disabilities • Designing student passports from a strengths-based perspective & person-first language • Utilizing school-wide collaboration time to create, review and amend student passports
Session 4		Learning Target: Gain understanding of a standard practice to provide professional learning to teachers that supports inclusion • Ongoing professional development around understanding, planning for, and implementing accommodations & curriculum adaptation
Session 5	2/5/2020	Learning Target: Gain understanding of a standard practice used to develop positive, orderly, and safe learning environments • Function-based thinking for modifying behavior (ABC incident forms and behavior plans)
Session 6		Learning Target: Gain understanding of a standard practice used to promote effective instructional practices • Warehouse of evidenced-based practices in designing interventions

Appendix H: Table 8: Full List of High-leverage Practices as Determined by Action Research Team

Core Competency	High-Leverage Practices Utilized
Supports high expectations for students with disabilities	• Accommodations checklist – understanding accommodations with clear grading practices – transitions between levels • Accommodation/modification planning • Power Standards • Flipped Learning Centers & Use of Co-teach classrooms to maintain access to general education • Knowledge-based responses for teacher/staff who object to accommodations/modifications
Develops positive, orderly, and safe learning environments	• Person-first language, • Clear understanding of Functions of behavior • Alternatives to suspension • “Learning Consequences” in lieu of discipline
Promotes effective instructional practices	• Instructional strategies and matching disabilities • Learning Passports – strengths based, person first language • Collaborative work around determining curriculum adaption needs and incorporating into learning passports • Coaching of UDL practices in lesson planning
Supports a system for progress monitoring	• Constant oversight and review of IEP goals to ensure that they are “SMART” (Specific, Measureable, Ambitions and attainable, Realistic, and Time-Bound) • Frequent reviews of IEP Progress Reports Progress monitoring – Who is meeting goals? Why? Progress report vs. report cards) – SPED meetings – what should you look for? (See checklist of criteria) • Gathering student work and analysis between Gen Ed and SPED teams • Data systems to collect multiple measures of all students’ progress, particularly all struggling students – used to make Tier II, Tier III decisions about effectiveness of programs

Creates a collaborative culture for teachers' work	• Dedicated time for a staff meeting to discuss 504 speed dating, SSTs, Gen Ed/SPED grading • Create intention space and time for teams to review and discuss student passports, ensuring smooth communication around supporting students from year-to-year and across teaching teams ○ Beginning of the year staff meetings ○ Early release/minimum days ○ Department meetings ○ Grade level meetings ○ Special Education Department meetings ○ Release days for SPED teams ○ Collaboration & input from parents ○ End of year reflections
Provides opportunities for professional learning and teacher feedback	• Behavior trainings, IEP pages and what they mean, Going through the IEP and what does it mean that principals can go back and redeliver – and how you qualify • Instructional Aide trainings • Training Gen Ed teachers to communicate clear support expectations to instructional aides • Dedicated, weekly & bi-weekly SPED meetings • Dedicated feedback protocol and meeting agenda

Appendix I: Sample Student Passports

Hello. My name is [REDACTED] & I think you will enjoy having me in your class as I love to learn. I was in Mrs. Fynn's class for 3 years. During those 3 years, she spent a lot of time collaborating with my related service providers to help me to regulate the behaviors that get in the way of the things I love to do and are sometimes disruptive to others. She made a list of the things I do, why I do them, & strategies that may help. If you have any questions, please contact her via email or phone.



IF I...	IT'S PROBABLY BECAUSE...	YOU CAN HELP BY...
Lean back in my chair	I have low tone muscle and get back pain	Providing me with adaptive seating (like a triangle wedge under my legs or a phone book under my feet)
Pace back & forth prior to completing a task	I am mentally preparing myself to sit & concentrate	Showing me a timer and allowing me 30 secs to pace before I start.
Am not eating	I don't like mushy textures	Offering me something crunchy
Clapping frantically and/or crying	I'm thirsty but my body is reacting & my brain isn't getting the message	Turning on a faucet or handing me a cup of water (it reminds me)
Am laughing hysterically	I am experiencing sensory overload! This can go on for up to an hour if someone doesn't intervene!	Giving me the words: BACKPACK SQUEEZE or BALL & I will tell you which sensory item I need and will calm almost immediately



Passport for: C Updated: 04/25/2019

Preschool Contact Info - Teacher: [REDACTED] - SLP: [REDACTED] - OT: [REDACTED] - PT: [REDACTED]	Student Strengths - I love learning, coming to school, and being social - I understand much more than I can currently express in words (verbally) - I love animals- I live on a houseboat and know the seals - I'm funny and like to make others laugh - I love to act out characters in my favorite stories
Communication Skills - I communicate primarily via sign language, gestures, and with picture symbols. - Once I get to know you, I will say more words	Motor Skills - Good fine/ gross motor skills - I am beginning to trace letters of the alphabet - I love to run, bike, and go "all out" at recess
Self-Help Skills - I'm toilet trained and will request to use the bathroom- I need an occasional reminder to wash my hands - I take care of my personal belongings (snack, backpack, etc.)	Pre-Academic Skills - Provided visual supports, I can show you how I count and recognize letters of the alphabet - I can recognize and approximate the names of all my friends during circle time (when I see their name cards) - I love looking at books and being read to
Play and Social Skills - I'm very popular with my classmates - I'm very sensitive and care a lot about my friends - I like being the teacher's helper/ chart helper - I like helping friends (just ask me!) - I like setting up/ handing out materials	Instructional Strategies that Promote Learning - If I'm given a five minute/ two minute notice before an activity ends, I'm much more likely to transition - I respond well to positive reinforcement, high fives and choices
Sensory Needs I love playing with playdough, bubbles, water, sand, you name it!	Other "All About Me" - My favorite movie is "Kong" - My favorite book is "Where the Wild Things Are" - My favorite sing along is "We're Going on a Bear Hunt"

Appendix J: Function-Based Thinking Student Incident Form

Student Incident Form		
Antecedents • Where did it happen? • Who were you with? • What were you doing? • Where were you? • What were you saying to yourself? • What thoughts were you having? • What feelings were you having? A	Behaviors • What were the specific actions? • What were you saying to yourself? • What thoughts did you have? • What feelings were you having? B	Consequences • What happened as a result? • Was what happened pleasant or unpleasant? • What thoughts did you have? • What feelings were you having? C

Appendix K: Sample Accommodations Checklist

<u>Strategies and Interventions Checklist</u>		
<u>Academic</u>		<u>Social/Emotional/Behavior</u>
<u>Attendance/Tardies:</u> ☐ Alarm clock for parent/ caregiver/ student ☐ Earlier bedtime ☐ Student will wake up earlier ☐ Parent/ caregiver will wake up earlier to get child to school on time ☐ Strategize with parent to find better transportation to school	☐ Start with easy tasks and move toward more difficult tasks ☐ Use manipulatives ☐ Task Cards ☐ Learning Games ☐ Allow student to use chromebook to type ☐ Prepare study guides ☐ Use a tracking tool for reading ☐ Provide graphic organizer ☐ Provide copy of board work/notes ☐ Allow student to have a sample or practice test ☐ Provide study guide/questions ☐ Supply student with samples of work expected	☐ Reteach classroom expectations/rules ☐ Reteach classroom routine/ procedure ☐ Provide frequent specific positive feedback ☐ Use visual cues to remind students of routines/ procedures ☐ Re-direct student towards expected behavior ☐ Use choice statements to direct positive behavior ☐ Use First ... Then ... statements to direct positive behavior ☐ Increase proximity to student ☐ Actively supervise student using movement, scanning, and interaction ☐ Use of individual, small group or whole class group contingency (individual/team/class points focused on specific skills) ☐ Provide breaks for student, provide countdown of time left ☐ Allow student to draw to calm down in class ☐ Allow student to move around while reading ☐ Build rapport with student ☐ Call home on a positive day OR call home on an unsatisfactory day for support ☐ Chart/graph student behavior to determine pattern ☐ Clarify consequences with student and follow up consistently ☐ Check In Check Out ☐ Develop behavior contract
<u>Instructional Strategies</u> ☐ Repeat instructions 1:1 after whole group instruction ☐ Maintain eye contact with student while giving directions ☐ Keep directions short and simple; use visual cues ☐ Simplify assignments/ tasks ☐ Shorten assignments/ tasks ☐ Allow for time extensions ☐ Preload content, concepts, vocabulary ☐ Provide an alternative assignment ☐ Implement frequent checks for understanding ☐ Allow for oral responses ☐ Allow for dictated responses ☐ Provide assistance from parent helper, cross-age tutor, peer tutor ☐ Give student immediate feedback (make sure assignments are started correctly) ☐ Provide individual/small group guided practice ☐ Provide individual/small group reteach	<u>Speech & Language Strategies</u> Articulation: ☐ Restate words using correct articulation ☐ Emphasize and highlight target speech sound(s) ☐ Give positive feedback for correct use of target speech sound(s) Spoken Language: ☐ Encourage verbalization ☐ Model expected responses ☐ Restate spoken sentences using correct grammar ☐ Expand on spoken sentence adding adjectives, adverbs Parent Support: ☐ Invite parent to PTA events, Information nights, etc. ☐ Teach parent language arts/ math strategies to	

Appendix L: Sample IEP Progress Report Checklist

Progress Report Monitoring			Yes	Not yet
Does the progress report have the student's correct name throughout?				
Review the annual goal again. Is it SMART? - specific, measurable, ambitious and attainable, realistic, and time bound?				
Does the goal align with the standards? Is that readily apparent?				
Does it explain the extent to which progress is sufficient to achieve goals?				
Identifies contributed, especially when progress varies by discipline/ focus/emphasis?				
Is the student progressing at an expected/desired rate?				
Does the baseline match and support the goal?				
If this is a non-academic goal, is there a clear determination of its worth?				
How was the progress measured?				
How does the progress report marry with the student's report card? Is another goal needed?				
Check "Learner Behaviors" on the report card. Do they indicate another goal is needed?				
Is there evidence that these two data pieces (progress report and report card) are being correlated?				
Is the Progress Report written in parent-friendly language?				

Notes on Student Progress:

What am I seeing?

What is surprising?

What is concerning?

What positive feedback can/should be provided to the student in regards to their progress?

Appendix M: Sample Special Education Team Meeting Agenda

SPED Meeting January 29, 2020 1:50PM @ Conference Room



- Introduction: The Perfect Valentine's Day
- SST and Assessment Season (Jason + Tina)
- Math Collaboration Progress (Liane + Jirika)
- Mid-Year Data & Review
 - What story are reading levels telling?
 - Radar check – who needs to be added?
 - Attendance checks
- IEP Goals + Goal Progress
 - Use the Bank
 - Baselines, Measurable, Accurate Progress
 - Email me when complete
- IA Training Meetings
 - 2/5 – Speech (Lori/Sheri)
 - 3/4 – Behavior Training (Olshan)
 - 4/15 – Safety (Johnson)
 - 5/13 – OT (Marita/Kelly)
 - 5/27 – IA EOY and Reflection Meeting (Johnson)
- CAASPP Test Accommodations
- IEP Stuff
 - Completion – 48 hour rule: 8AM the Day Before
 - Review all IEP pages
- AV Transitions Update (Daniella)
- Case Management Open Discussion

Next Meetings: Wednesday, March 4 & Wednesday, April 29

Appendix N: Professional Development Reflection Guide

Professional Development Reflection Guide

Title: _____

What do I think I heard?	Now I know that...
What surprised me...	What would I like more information about?

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