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Dearth, Hilary Sarah

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Inclusion in Practice: Educators Who are Working to Build Inclusive Schools and the Systems

that Support Them

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Education

by

Hilary Sarah Dearth

2023

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Inclusion in Practice: Educators Who are Working to Build Inclusive Schools and the Systems
that Support Them

by

Hilary Sarah Dearth

Doctor of Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2023

Professor Connie L. Kasari, Chair

Inclusion is not merely a placement; it is a human right. This qualitative study examined
the organizational structures and systems that support the development and sustained
implementation of inclusive practices within a large urban school district that has prioritized the
transformation from a siloed approach to educating students with disabilities to an inclusive
approach. The study also explored how successful implementation of inclusive practices is
measured and professional habits and behaviors of teachers who are doing the work to build
inclusive classrooms. The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with eight classroom
teachers and four district level administrators. In addition data from document analysis of annual
Inclusion Action Plans submitted by the schools where the teachers interviewed were from was
used to inform answers to the research questions. Once data were collected, the researcher
transcribed the interviews and conducted three rounds of coding. Key findings show four

elements of school culture and organization systems that support successful implementation of inclusive practice and a metric currently being used by a district to measure success. Further, the study identifies four professional habits and behaviors of teachers who believe in inclusion and are working to implement inclusive practices. This study suggests inclusion be a part of preservice teacher training for all teachers, including district internship programs, and that professional development around inclusion be context specific. It also recommends districts and schools examine the structural division between general and special education as a way to disrupt broken systems and provide better supports for all students.

The dissertation of Hilary Sarah Dearth is approved.

Jennie Katherine Grammer

Kristen Lee Rohanna

Connie L. Kasari, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2023

DEDICATION PAGE

My family is the source of all things that bring me joy in life.   Bretto mommy loves you so much and always will. Big Brett, thank you for always supporting me in going after what I believe in. Mom and Dad your love and support is never ending and the gift of our growing family is what life is all about. Richard, Luke, Eva, Margot, Mary Grace and Martha - I love you so much.   To my Mom Mom, Pop Pop, Pop, Nana and all my ancestors who have gone before me, I am so grateful to you for my place in this world.

The founder of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd was St. Mary Euphrasia. One of her quotes that has stayed in my heart and guided my work as an educator says: "One person is of more value than the whole world". This quote reminds me that each individual child has more value than can ever be realized. I will never stop working to build schools where all children are valued and belong. I dedicate my work to my own child and all of the children that remind me each and every day why I love getting up and going to work.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to my dissertation chair, Dr. Connie Kasari, for her support, guidance, and expertise throughout this research journey. Her insightful feedback and dedication to my academic growth have been instrumental in shaping the quality and direction of this dissertation. I would also like to extend my heartfelt appreciation to the members of my dissertation committee, Dr. Kristen Rohanna and Dr. Jennie Grammer. I am grateful for their valuable guidance and their willingness to share their knowledge and perspectives.

I would like to thank the entire Educational Leadership Program faculty for creating an intellectually stimulating environment that fostered my academic development. The support and resources provided by the program have been invaluable in conducting this research.

Furthermore, I would like to acknowledge the participants of this study for their willingness to share their insights and experiences. Without their cooperation, this research would not have been possible. Thank you especially to my contacts at the district for their time and responsiveness.

Last but certainly not least, I express my sincere gratitude to my family and friends for their unwavering support, understanding, and encouragement throughout this demanding process. Their love, patience, and belief in me have been the driving force behind my perseverance and success.

VITA

2002	B.A. Elementary Ed - Penn State University University Park, PA
2002	PA and CA Teaching Credential
2002-2003	AmeriCorps Volunteer/Teacher- Good Shepherd Shelter Los Angeles, CA
2003 - 2008	LAUSD - General Education and Special Education Teacher Los Angeles, CA
2008	NY and NJ Teaching Credential
2009-2010	Harlem Children's Zone - Second Grade Teacher New York, NY
2010	M.S. Teaching as Applied Behavioral Analysis – Teachers College New York, NY
2010	Board Certified Behavior Analyst Certification
2010 - 2011	Program Supervisor - Pacific Child & Family Associates Los Angeles, CA
2011 - 2015	Director of Young Learners Preschool and Early Education Programs - The Help Group Culver City, CA
2015 - 2016	Behavior Consultant - Manhattan Beach Unified School District Manhattan Beach, CA
2016 - 2018	Senior Regional Manager - Verbal Behavior Associates Orange County, CA
2018 - present	Inclusion Coordinator - UCLA Lab School Los Angeles, CA

My first experience with inclusion was by accident. In my first job out of college I was co-teaching Kindergarten at a first year Charter School. We had 42 students in a room that had to be broken down and turned into an art room every day at 3pm for the Boys and Girls Club. There was no special education support or separate classrooms– we were inclusive by default. After a few weeks it was apparent there were students who required extra support. One student, Carlos, with limited spoken language, would cover his ears, flap his hands and hide in small places when overwhelmed. I had no special education training at the time, but I discovered by building a relationship, breaking things down for him and allowing him to take breaks, he would join in and participate. He did well in small groups and the structure of a routine. Carlos was a valuable member of our classroom community and it was important to me to learn how to assist Carlos to succeed. I enrolled in a special education intern certification program that I completed while I continued to teach.

Fast forward a few years, I had received my special education teaching credential and was working in a 4th and 5th grade Special Day Classroom. By chance my classroom was connected to the adjoining classroom via a partition on the side wall. The teacher in the adjoining class taught 4th grade general education. A few weeks into the school year we decided to try an alternative approach . She would teach ELA and I would teach Math. We would treat the two classrooms as one class. The teaching assistants assigned to my classroom moved back and forth to support students. We met our students where they were. At the time it did not occur to me we were creating a co-teaching inclusion model. We did what worked in the best interest of the students.

The bioethicist Rosemary Garland refers to a disability as a form of "human variation" and argues that a disability should be understood as a reality to be accommodated, not a problem to be eliminated (Garland-Thomson, 2014). As an educator who has been working in this field for over 20 years, this is consistent with the way I approach my work. As a practitioner and researcher, I am sensitive to the terms typically applied to categorize students who learn differently. I am aware of the power of language and how labels too often become a crutch to categorize and separate groups of individuals.

Based on my experience I have learned that best practice teaching does not fit in a box. Teaching is about being a strategic scientist, a lifelong learner who skillfully uses evidenced based practices to meet students where they are. It involves cultivating curiosity, building relationships and creating environments where students feel a sense of belonging and purpose.

INTRODUCTION

Broad Background of Problem

Prior to Congress enacting the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA, Public Law 94-142) in 1975, students with disabilities did not have a legal right to attend public schools, were denied access to education, or placed in separate classrooms or school settings (Williamson et al, 2020). In the 1970s, 1 in 5 students with disabilities were educated in US schools and some states had laws excluding students with disabilities. During the 1970s it is estimated that over 7 million students with disabilities were excluded from public education. PL 94-142 stated that all students have a right to a free and public education (FAPE). In 1990, when PL 94-142 was reauthorized, EHA changed names to Individuals with Disabilities Education (IDEA), and since then has gone through several reauthorizations to address issues of implementation and interpretation. Within IDEA is the provision of Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) which stipulates those students with disabilities have a legal right to be placed in settings with students without disabilities to the maximum extent possible (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004, 20 U.S.C. 1412 (5) et seq.).

The number of students receiving special education services has increased nationally from 6.4 – 7.0 million from 2012 to 2018 (NCES, 2019). Approximately one out of ten K-12 students in California receive special education services (CDE, 2019). The number of students with disabilities increases yearly, and while the net has been thrown wider, including more students with mild disabilities, these students as a whole continue to be one of the lowest achieving groups (State Accountability Report Card, 2019).

Narrowing of the Problem

This research focuses on K-12 public schools in California. On January 9, 2020

California - AB-1914 set forth guidelines for inclusion, stating:

> Inclusion means that a pupil is receiving education in general education class settings, reflecting age-appropriate groups, in core academic and elective courses, and participating in other school programs as members of the school community. In an inclusive environment, teachers and administrators support universal access to education and have the knowledge, resources, and support to effectively teach all pupils. Teachers are provided access to technical assistance in evidence-based practices, instructional methods and materials, and supports tailored to the pupils' needs. Inclusion is not a place, but rather a systemic approach to uniquely addressing pupil learning and social engagement within the same instructional frameworks designed for the whole school community. Inclusion is supported by research on effective teaching and service delivery and a focus on equity in order to create a school community in which all pupils are valued.

This is the first time there was a clear definition of inclusion in California Law. However, there is significant room for interpretation of the law. Further, it does not address the common measure employed by many districts that offering 80% or more time spent in general education means full inclusion. Since AB - 1914 does not set a clear way to measure if schools are using inclusive practices, most data sources default to the 80% or more time spent in a general education setting as their measure of "inclusion". This is problematic for two reasons. 1) 80% is not 100%, and 2)this measures the criteria for inclusion as a setting, rather than on the implementation of best practice.

Existing Gaps in Research

Providing a seat in a general education classroom does not ensure students with disabilities are being provided the specialized teaching that research indicates they need. In fact, it can provide stakeholders with a false sense of movement towards schools being more inclusive. Without a clear, systemic approach from leadership, teachers are not provided the infrastructure and support necessary to meet the diverse needs of their student population. As previously stated, teachers do not feel prepared to teach students with disabilities in general

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education classrooms (Gokdere, 2012; DeSimone & Parmar, 2006; Hodkinson, 2005; Pavri, 2004; Reyes, 2017).   There have been many studies that explore teachers' perceptions on the topic of inclusion and best practices for including all students (Humphrey et al., 2021; McLeskey et al, 2017; Kurth, Morningstar, Hicks & Templin, 2018; McKee 2020) Assembly Bill 1914 specifically defines expectations for using the principles and strategies of the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework. UDL is one set of strategies but there are others. However, teachers lack explicit guidance on the options available to select from in order to benefit their students. Many studies list best practices for teachers in inclusive classrooms but do not explicitly map out what skills teachers need to be successful in implementing these practices/models (Humphrey et al., 2021; McLeskey et al, 2017; Kurth, Morningstar, Hicks & Templin, 2018; McKee 2020).

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study is to explore the organizational elements required to support the successful implementation of inclusive practices. This perspective examines the adaptive nature of creating a shift in mindset where systems are set up to support the use of inclusion practices to benefit all students.

Additionally, this study will identify a set of professional habits or behaviors for educators who work in inclusive environments. A great deal of research has identified the best practices that lead to effective implementation of inclusion. However, there is limited research focused on how an educator evolves from mastering evidenced based inclusive practices to implementing them successfully in an inclusive environment. Teaching in inclusive settings requires teachers to develop a set of contingency shaped behaviors that allow them to be dynamic and to navigate what tools to use for the diverse learners in their classrooms.   This

study will investigate how teachers develop that expertise and what district personnel can do to support them.

Research Questions

1. What are the elements of school culture and organizational supports/systems that reinforce successful implementation of inclusive practices*?*

    a. How does a large district develop a metric for successful implementation of inclusive practices?

2. What are the common professional habits and behaviors of teachers who believe in inclusion and are working to implement inclusive practices?

Overview of the Research Design

Utilizing qualitative methods, this study explores the habits of teachers within a large school district who are successfully creating inclusive learning environments for all students and the organizational culture, structures and systems that support the sustained implementation. Qualitative methods permit non-numeric data collection through organic conversations with research participants (Maxwell 2012; Creswell, 2018).

This study used document analysis and semi-structured interviews to collect data. Contacts at DISTRICT help to oversee the Increasing Opportunities for Inclusion Initiative for DISTRICT. Each school has an individual school site inclusion plan which includes data analysis to examine student progress as well as a measure to determine if the school is following four elements to guide implementation (i.e., 1. Family Partnership, 2. Quality IEPs, 3. Staff Capacity and Engagement, 4. Planning for an Inclusive Student Experience). In reviewing these school site inclusion plans, the researcher worked with contacts at the district to identify teachers/teams working to implement inclusive practices. Semi-structured interviews were

conducted with eight teachers and four district administrators who were involved with plans to increase inclusive practices within the district.

Study Significance

This study examines the requirements for teachers to become experts in the implementation of inclusion practices and the systems and support districts must put in place to shift mindsets and transform into sustainable truly inclusive environments. This data analysis posits a suggested roadmap for schools to recruit and/or develop teachers who are successful at implementing inclusive practices. Additionally, the study will address specific recommendations for organizational systems and supports that put an end to the "siloing" of students who learn differently.

The study recognizes that preservice programs, school administration, and policies fall short but teachers are at the frontline and can make a difference. For this reason, the researcher went straight to the sources and interviewed teachers and district administrators from a large urban district that has made a policy and practice change, committing to inclusion and doing so throughout the COVID pandemic. Thus, teachers were identified from schools that have committed to the DISTRICT Inclusion Initiative.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research has shown that inclusion benefits all students, not just students with disabilities (Underwood, 2007; Greer, 1991, Mitchell, 2008, Ashby et al, 2014). Additionally, a significant body of research exists about different models of inclusion and best practices to inform educators' efforts to provide highly effective instruction for all students. They include co-teaching, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), Multiple Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports. All of these are situated in the general education classroom and benefit everyone. Creating systems that support inclusion need to address the requirement for teachers at the preservice level to be trained to use these practices with all students in an inclusive classroom.

Despite national and state legislation requiring schools to adopt more inclusive practices, districts are failing to provide the breadth of strategic, systemic changes necessary to support teachers in creating learning environments where all students are provided a quality education. The figure below shows that the time spent in general education for school age students served under IDEA has not changed much from 2009 - 2020.

Figure 1

Percentage of time school aged children served under IDEA spent inside general education classes: Fall 2010 to 2021.

Percent of students

This research aims to:

- Identify elements of school culture and organizational supports/systems that reinforce or support successful implementation of inclusive practices and better understand how success is measured.

- Identify the professional habits and behaviors of teachers who are effectively implementing inclusion and gain insight into how they were developed.

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- Provide data to inform the development of teacher education programs and district professional development guidelines.

This synthesis:

- Identifies the issues impacting effective implementation of inclusive practices while providing clear definition of inclusion.

- Establishes the scale of the problem and outline a brief history of how students with disabilities have been educated.

- Provides an evidence base of research that defines different models of inclusion and teacher practices that affect student outcome. It also provide data on inclusion benefiting all students.

- Discusses how general education is failing to provide inclusion for all students despite knowing for decades what can make it work.

- Finally, provides a conceptual framework within the context of the research that supports the need for this study and situates the study within a large urban school district during the post COVID pandemic.

Background of the Problem

Scale of Problem in the United States

In 2019–20, 7.3 million, or 14% of all public-school students in the United States, ages 3–21 received special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). In order for a student to be identified as a student with a disability, the student must be evaluated by a team of professionals as having a disability that adversely affects academic performance requiring special education and related services. Specific Learning Disability is the

most common category of disability (33 percent). Figure 1 shows the percentage distribution by

disability type for the 2019-20 School Year.

Figure 2

Percentage distribution of students ages 3-21 served under IDEA by disability type: School Year 2019-2020

Disability type

Specific learning disability — 33
Speech or language impairment — 19
Other health impairment[1] — 15
Autism — 11
Developmental delay — 7
Intellectual disability — 6
Emotional disturbance — 5
Multiple disabilities — 2
Hearing impairment — 1
Orthopedic impairment — 1

Percent
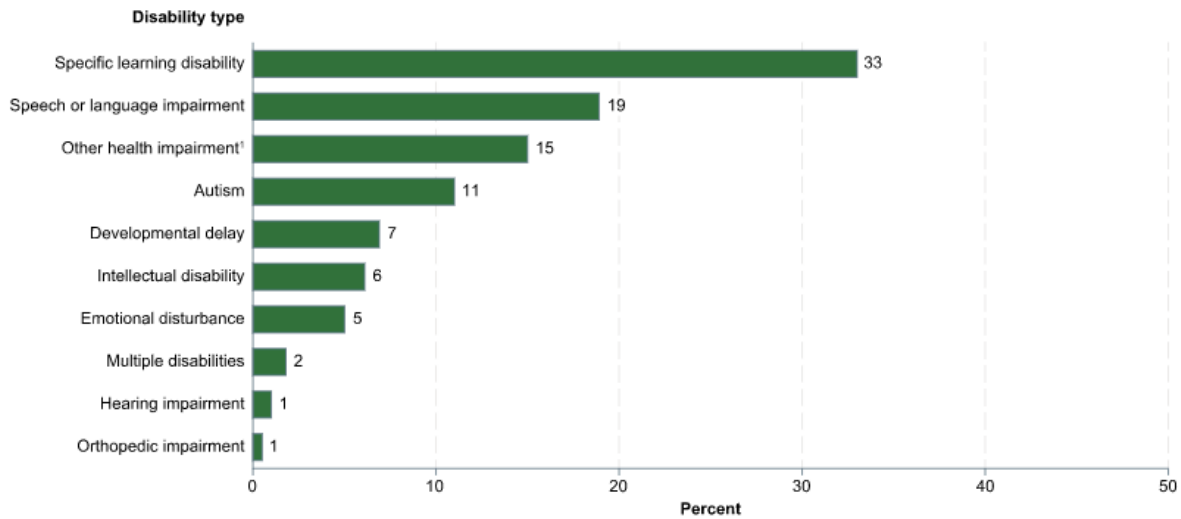
[1] Other health impairments include having limited strength, vitality, or alertness due to chronic or acute health problems such as a heart condition, tuberculosis, rheumatic fever, nephritis, asthma, sickle cell anemia, hemophilia, epilepsy, lead poisoning, leukemia, or diabetes.

NOTE: Data are for the 50 states and the District of Columbia only. Visual impairment, traumatic brain injury, and deaf-blindness are not shown because they each account for less than 0.5 percent of students served under IDEA. Due to categories not shown, detail does not sum to 100 percent. Although rounded numbers are displayed, the figures are based on unrounded data.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) database, retrieved February 2, 2021, from https://www2.ed.gov/programs/osepidea/618-data/state-level-data-files/index.html#bcc. See *Digest of Education Statistics 2020*, table 204.30.

Scale of Problem in California

In 2018- 2019 Special Education services were provided to 795,047 individuals in

California. The top 5 eligibilities were: 1) Specific Learning Disability (38%), 2)Speech and

Language Impairment (21%), 3)Autism (15%), 4) Other Health Impairment (13%), and 5)

Intellectual Disability (6%). These 5 eligibility categories account for 93% of students with

disabilities.

In 2017–18, California had one of the lowest inclusion rates nationally: 56 percent,

compared to a national average of 63.4 percent. In 2019, 187 of 333 (56 percent) districts did

not meet standards for two or more priority areas on the California School Dashboard for students with disabilities and were referred for differentiated assistance (Humphrey et al., n.d.).

History of Educating Students with Disabilities in the United States

Marginalization of students in schools by race, gender, and disability has been a legacy of the education system of the United States since its origins. In the 1800s, individuals with disabilities were often considered unable to contribute to society and placed in institutions (The Anti-Defamation League, 2005). In the early 1960s advocates began to question placement of SWD in these separate settings. In the 1970s, only one in five students with disabilities were educated in US schools and some states even had laws excluding students with disabilities. It is estimated that over seven million students with disabilities were excluded from public education. It was not until the early 1970s, that many right-to-education cases were raised that promoted giving SWDs access to general education settings (Crocket, 2014). This pressure led to the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA, 1975). In 1990, Congress reauthorized EHA and changed its title to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, Public Law No. 94-142).

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) has gone through several reauthorizations to address issues of implementation and interpretation. The main principles of IDEA state that all students have a right to a free and public education (FAPE) and all students have the right to be educated in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). LRE mandates that schools ensure that students are provided access to supplementary aids and services within the general education setting before they are moved to a more restrictive setting (Yell, 2004). Although IDEA does not include the terms inclusion or inclusive education the principle of LRE is used to promote maximum student participation in general education classrooms. It also states

special education is a service, not a place where students should be moved from the general

education classroom when absolutely necessary

     Education Policy and the laws it creates to mandate inclusion of students with disabilities

in public schools is important, but legislation is only the first step. In order to translate policy

into successful outcomes educators must be properly trained and provided the appropriate tools

and organizational support to teach in these inclusive settings.

History of Educating Teachers to Work with Students with Disabilities

     Education of special and general educators has a history of being siloed and ignores the

need for collaboration. In 2008, the National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality at

Vanderbilt University issued the paper, *Teacher Preparation to Deliver Inclusive Services to*

Students with Disabilities. The paper acknowledges that providing inclusive services can only be

realized if general and special educators work cooperatively. Historically, collaboration has not

been incorporated in pre-service teacher preparation programs. Typically, general education

teachers take a single introductory course that provides an overview of 13 eligibility categories in

IDEA. Conversely, preservice special education programs focus on diverse instructional

strategies while providing limited exposure to general education curriculum (Holdheide &

Reschly, 2008). This separation of teacher preparation between general and special education

educators contributes to barriers of teachers working collaboratively in inclusive classrooms.

     The traditional instruction model is built around one teacher per classroom. However,

several policies have highlighted the need for more teacher collaboration. These policies include

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 which required that all students, including students with

disabilities must have access to general curriculum, be taught by highly qualified teachers and be

included in professionals' accountability for achievement outcomes and the 2004 IDEA

emphasis on LRE. Recently, there has been movement towards more collaborative practices within public schools.

Co-teaching is a well-researched collaborative approach to teaching a classroom of students with and without disabilities in which a general education teacher is partnered with a special education teacher or specialist. In their 2010 article, Friend, Cook, Hurley-Chamberlain & Shamberger define six co-teaching approaches.

- One teach, one observe – one teacher leads instruction while the other observes and collects data.

- Station Teaching – stations are set up in the classroom and 2 teachers each run a station while the other stations can be independent work or work with a TA or other adult.

- Parallel Teaching – Divide the class and differentiate the teaching based on individual group of students they are working with.

- Alternative teaching – one teacher works with larger group while the other teacher works with a small group for remediation, enrichment, assessment or another purpose

- Teaming – both teachers lead the whole group.

- One Teach, one assist – one teachers leads the whole group while the other teacher rotates and assists students as needed.

Co-teaching is a dynamic approach to teaching that can be used in different ways to meet the needs of all students in inclusive classrooms. This study investigates the extent to which any of these co-teaching models are implemented by teacher participants.

Defining Inclusion

On January 9, 2020 California - AB-1914 set forth guidelines for inclusion. It stated that:

Inclusion means that a pupil is receiving education in general education class settings, reflecting age-appropriate groups, in core academic and elective courses, and participating in other school programs as members of the school community. In an inclusive environment, teachers and administrators support universal access to education and have the knowledge, resources, and support to effectively teach all pupils. Teachers are provided access to technical assistance in evidence-based practices, instructional methods and materials, and support tailored to the pupils' needs. Inclusion is not a place, but rather a systemic approach to uniquely addressing pupil learning and social engagement within the same instructional frameworks designed for the whole school community. Inclusion is supported by research on effective teaching and service delivery and a focus on equity in order to create a school community in which all pupils are valued.

What Works: Evidenced Based Practices for All Students

Effective teaching benefits all students (Greer, 1991; Underwood, 2007; Ashby et al., 2014; Mitchell 2008).   What works in special/inclusive education is not exclusive to special/inclusive education (Mitchell, 2008). Greer (1991) calls on teachers to act as strategic scientists of pedagogy to provide effective instruction for all children. There is not a one size fits all model for any classroom regardless of it being inclusive or not. All teachers must use dynamic teaching strategies to meet the needs of the students they have in front of them. Kurth, Morningstar, Hicks & Templin. (2018) point out the goal of inclusive education is not to exit students from special education, but rather provide "a richer constellation of support for all learners in a classroom" (p29) and reduce the need for segregated special education. All of the evidence-based practices that are presented are situated in general education classrooms, meaning general education teachers should all be familiar with evidenced based practices that benefit all students, including students with disabilities.

Underwood (2007) investigated the skills for effective teaching of elementary teachers in inclusive classrooms using a classroom observation scale. The study included 63 regular elementary teachers in five inclusive schools over a 4-year time period. The findings demonstrate:

- The importance of direct instruction.

- Mastery of classroom management to maximize instructional time and student engagement.

- Teachers who are effective with students without special learning needs are also effective with students with learning needs.

The researchers specifically point out that effective teachers in the inclusive classrooms adapted and modified their instruction for individual students (Underwood, 2007). The unmistakable conclusion - effective teaching strategies are effective for all students (Greer, 1991; Underwood, 2007; Ashby et al., 2014; Kurth, Morningstar, Hicks & Templin., 2018).

Schoolwide Integrated Framework for Transformation: MTSS & UDL

The Schoolwide Integrated Framework for Transformation (SWIFT) developed at the University of Kansas works to transform schools into inclusive education systems.   Multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) is a cornerstone of the SWIFT model and effective implementation of MTSS allows for robust support to be added to general education classroom settings which reduce the need for specialized placement settings for students with disabilities. Other components of SWIFT include Universal Design for Learning (UDL) differentiation, and flexible grouping. Kurth, Morningstar, Hicks & Templin. (2018) conducted a study to describe the effect of SWIFT implementation on rates of inclusion for students with disabilities. The results showed a 15.7% decrease in need for special education services delivered by specialists. In other words, 15.7% of student needs that were previously being delivered by a specialist were successfully integrated into an inclusive classroom. However, there was also an increase of students served in the most restrictive setting. These are the students with the most intensive needs. Researchers acknowledge the initial implementation of frameworks such as

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MTSS will most immediately improve inclusion of students with less intense needs and it will take significantly more time and effort to meet the needs of the most intensive students (Choi et al., 2017, Kurth, Morningstar, Hicks & Templin. 2018). This is something that needs to be further examined - for true inclusion, the needs of all students need to be met, including the most intensive need students.

Positive Behavioral Intervention Supports (PBIS)

PBIS is a multi-tiered framework for implementation of evidenced based behavioral supports and relies on data and progress monitoring to inform decision making. Many studies show that implementation of School Wide PBIS is associated with improved prosocial behaviors and more positive relationships (Bradshaw, Waasdorp & Leaf, 2012, Pas & Bradshaw, 2012) and fewer disciplinary referrals (Bradshaw, Mitchell & Leaf, 2010). Although there is mixed research results on academic outcomes (Noltemeyer, Ritchie., Palmer & University, 2019), we do know that behavior in the classroom can predict future academic outcomes (Lassen, Steele, Sailor, 2006). PBIS typically has 3 tiers and can be implemented with fidelity in an inclusive classroom (Evans & Weiss, 2014).

<div align="center">

Inclusive Service Models

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This sections offers a concise overview of the existing research on varying inclusive services models, co-teaching research, and the significance of administrative support. Furthermore it presents an insightful discussion on the opportunity COVID-19 provided by disrupting our educational system highlighting the positive aspects of inclusion while acknowledging the concerns often raised by critics of inclusion.

No One Model Fits All

Researchers agree that there is no "one size fits all" model for inclusion (McLeskey, Billingsley, Brownell, Maheady, Lewis, 2019, 2017; Kurth, Morningstar, Hicks & Templin 2018, McKee & Gomez, 2020). Research also illustrates that inclusion can be more effective than placing students all day in resource rooms or self-contained classrooms. This includes both academic and social outcomes. Barrett, Stevenson and Burns (2020) explored the benefits of delivering special education services in four different settings:

- Inclusion with different co-teaching options

- Inclusion with resource rooms

- Self-contained classrooms

- Alternative placements

The study found that inclusive options were more effective in improving student outcomes on statewide assessments in reading and math than the self-contained classrooms. Findings also highlighted the benefit of increased time in general education specifically for students with eligibilities of Autism and Emotional Impairment which could be due to exposure to typically developing peers facilitating increased academic engagement and improved social skills.

There is evidence that students benefit from small group instruction and data-based individualization (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Vaughn 2014), which can both be implemented in the general education setting using various co-teaching models.

Co-Teaching

The term co-Teaching refers to the learning environment in which two or more certified professionals share the responsibility of lesson planning, delivery of instruction, and progress monitoring for all students assigned to their classroom. As a team, these professionals share the same physical classroom space, collaboratively make instructional decisions, and share the

responsibility of student accountability (Friend, 2008). There are various models of co-teaching which include: one teach – one assist, station teaching, one teach-one observe, parallel and team. In her dissertation on teacher perceptions on co-teaching in inclusive classrooms, Banks et al (2018) found that collaboration for co-teaching is key and there are many components that go into making co-teaching work. Ensuring teachers are provided with support, training and collaboration time is key. McLeskey et al (2011) found that co-teaching allowed special education teachers to scaffold instruction as needed for all students regardless of disability.

Administrative Support

Prior research has identified administrative support as a key element to successful implementation of inclusive education (Causteon-Theoharis et al, 2011; Patreese, 1997, Hitt& Tucker, 2016, McLeskey, Spooner, & Algozzine, 2021). In Chapter 2 of the *Handbook of Effective Inclusive Elementary Schools: Research and Practice,* McLeskey, Spooner, & Algozzine (2021) examined peer reviewed case studies in US schools from 1995-2020 that described principal leadership for inclusion and identified five actions of principals that supported effective inclusion schools. They included: 1) shared commitment 2) redesigned school for inclusion, 3) increased capacity for inclusion 4) supported professional collaboration and effective instruction, 5) monitored inclusive progress and outcomes while addressing challenges. The authors acknowledge that there is not one size fits all or sequential order these actions should take. Instead leadership needs to be responsive to the context of the school.

Silver lining of COVID

In their book, *Reimagining Special Education; Using Inclusion as a Framework to Build Equity and Support All Students*, Rufo and Causton (2022), point out that our education system is outdated and was designed to prepare students for the industrial age where uniformity and

rigidity were valued. We are living in different times.   Bolman and Deal (2017) underscore that

disruption becomes the key to bring about change. Covid caused major disruptions to the

educational landscape. In the short term, this forced leaders and teachers to think and act

differently. In the longer term, it illustrated opportunities for systemic change. Covid

demonstrated the educational system is capable of immense change – globally teachers pivoted

to online teaching within a matter of days. There were many challenges and students with

disabilities were one of the populations that were most impacted; however, it showed us that

educators have the capacity to embrace change. When Michael Fullan (2021) refers to learning

loss in the context of Covid, he critiques educators in the US for talking about "making up for

learning loss". He argues that when you are trying to make up for learning loss, you are trying to

reproduce a system that wasn't working in the first place.   We are called to do something

different, not go back to what was already broken.

Currently many researchers are exploring ways to disrupt the system to create better

systems for inclusion. Sailor (2017) suggests reframing how we look at equitable distribution of

resources to meet the needs of all student and calls educators to rethink commonly accepted

terms such as "disability" "inclusion" and "special". He suggests that stakeholders should look

at rearranging the whole school rather than classroom-based systems to serve all students. He

advocates for equity as a basis for inclusive educational systems change. Special Ed has always

been siloed and focused on individual student needs and the IEP sets up an individualized

program.   Sailor argues that framing inclusion as delivering specialized services, to a specific

population of students, in a general education setting is problematic. He instead urges

stakeholders to use frameworks like MTSS and UDL to create a system of education where there

is an equitable distribution of resources based on the needs of all students.

The Disconnect

Critics of inclusion have various arguments against inclusion. They argue that general ed teachers are not trained to handle students with disabilities, that inclusion causes an increased need for additional adult support, students with special needs can be disruptive, and students with disabilities may not get the explicit instruction they need (Sailor, 2017; McCleskey, Landers, Williamson, & Hoppey, 2012; Lyons & Arthur-Kelly, 2014).

In 2011, McLeskey et al, compiled a summary of research on what kind of instruction produces high quality progress in students with Learning Disabilities (LD). The authors explored two central issues:

- The length of time the students were in general education classrooms.
- The extent to which these placements produced desirable results

They found some students with Learning Disabilities do better in inclusive classroom settings while other students do better with part time resource support. They also found that it is not the setting itself, but the instructional variables within the settings. The findings show that SWD did not always receive the highly specialized intensive instruction they needed in inclusive settings. It is important to acknowledge that the instruction was flawed, not the setting.

Teachers who teach in inclusive settings need to adapt to provide access to content for students with a wide variety of needs (Kurth, Born, & Love, 2016; Ruppar et al., 2014, Ruppar et al., 2017). However, the majority of practices and supports observed in self-contained settings (e.g. Specially Designed Instruction (SDI), small group work, direct instruction, use of visual supports, checklists, implementation of behavior plans) can be implemented in more inclusive settings without compromising the effectiveness of instruction (Causton-Theoharis et al. 2011). MTSS, UDL, PBIS are all already situated in general education and benefit all

students, although these strategies and programs are not well integrated into all teacher education preservice programs nor advocated for by supervisors. Teachers should have access to the tools we know work to teach all students but they are not always being trained, supported or expected to use them to create inclusive classrooms.

Professional development, in-service presentations, guides and books can help provide the knowledge, but to be successful, teachers need to know how to apply the knowledge to develop skills and strategies to be a successful inclusion teacher (Nagro & deBettenCourt, 2017). Because many teachers are not provided this knowledge in their preservice teacher preparation programs, they must learn on the job. Some have successfully transitioned to successful inclusion, others have not. This study strives to identify what constitutes successful inclusion, and the pathway to this outcome among teachers in schools that are committed to inclusion.

This information is especially critical now where the number of students with disabilities increase, while the number of qualified teachers decreases. There is undisputed evidence our nation is facing a critical shortage of teachers and specialized instructional support personnel in schools (Resources: Teacher shortages in the United States. (2018, August 17). Covid exacerbated and called attention to the teacher shortage. In March of 2021, The Learning Policy institute released a report titled "CA Teachers and COVID -19: How the Pandemic is Impacting the Teacher workforce". The report stated that "early evidence suggests that the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic could further worsen California's already-critical teacher shortages. With fewer specially trained teachers and instructional support personnel, districts are placing novice teachers in inclusive classrooms with students previously taught solely by special education teachers. (Nusbaum, 2013; Reese, Richards-Tutor, Hansuvadha,

Pavri, & Xu, 2018). California requires its special education teachers to have a caseload of about 30 students, nearly double the national average of 17 (Humphrey, Gamse, Myung & Cottingham, 2020) The lack of resources leads to ineffective models of inclusion, students not receiving appropriate instruction and even more teacher burnout.

The challenges of teacher preparedness, educational systems that perpetuate segregation among students with diverse learning needs, and the ramifications of a teacher shortage demand immediate attention and resolution. These issues are of paramount importance and cannot be overlooked. It is critical to highlight that inclusion is not the problem. Research has shown for decades the teaching practices that benefit all students and that inclusion works. Putting this all into perspective, research over the past 10-15 years provides a framework on how to think critically when implementing inclusive practices. The majority of the literature supports inclusion, consistently reporting better academic and social outcomes for students with disabilities when they are educated along their general education peers (Browder, Hudson, & Wood, 2014; Courtade, Jimenez, & Delano, 2014; Causton & Theoharis, 2014; Florian & Rouse, 2014; Oh-Young & Filler, 2005).

Conceptual Framework

It is time to demand movement on a 48-year consensus that students with disabilities have a right to free and appropriate education in the least restrictive setting. Implementation science is being used more frequently in education to improve outcomes and finally overcome the barrier of putting research into action. It provides a roadmap to translate research findings and evidence into practice and policies.

The conceptual framework for this study incorporates Domitrovich and colleagues' (2008) framework that describes implementation quality as complex and dependent on the

interplay of a variety of factors at macro, school and individual levels. It also situates

implementation in between the stages of adoption and institutionalization. The following section

defines each level and speaks specifically to how this framework will be used in the current

study.

Figure 3

Factors that Can Affect Implementation Quality: A Multi-Level Model
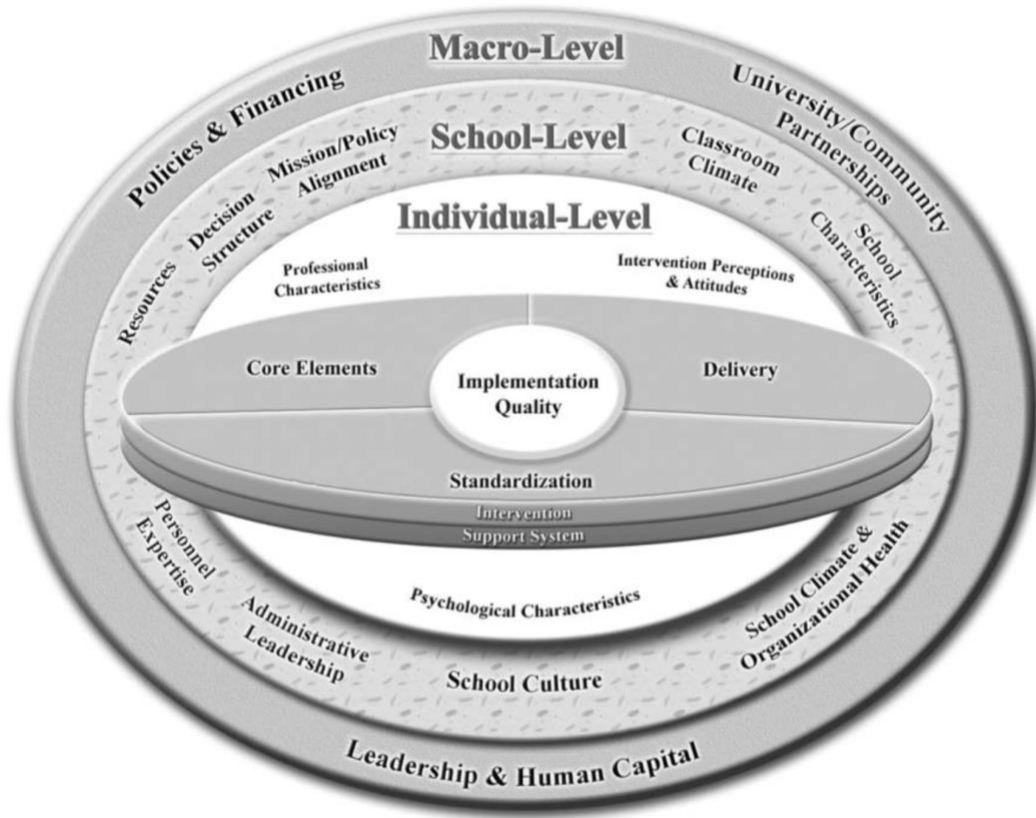
At the core of the model is the implementation quality which is "...the discrepancy

between what is planned and what is actually delivered…" (Domitrovich et al, 2008 pg. 7).

Research Question 1a addresses implementation quality by exploring how the district is

developing a metric for successful implementation of inclusive practices.

The macro level is the broadest level which includes entities that are not limited to the

educational system. The next level is the school level which represents the organizational entity

that is most important to successful implementation. The school level is where children, teachers

and other school staff all share the same environment and play off one another.

For the purpose of this study, research focuses on the school and individual levels. The

first research question targets school culture, organizational support, and systems aligned with

the school level of the model. The second research question examining the common professional

habits and behaviors of teachers matches with the individual level.   Interviewing teachers and

district administrators and reviewing school site plans provides perspective from the school and

individual level.

The study also takes into account adult learning theory which focuses on personal

growth and development. Malcolm Knowles (1968) developed the term andragogy to define the

"art and science of teaching adults." His premise was that adult learning is different from that of

child learning and is based on 5 key assumptions: 1) self-concept , 2) adult learner experience, 3)

readiness to learn, 4) orientation to learning, 5) motivations to learn. Shifting to more inclusive

practices requires a district provide adult learning opportunities. This study examines the

systems in place to provide professional development as one approach to improving inclusive

practices. There are many different models of professional development and the goal here is to

learn from teachers what is most useful and effective to assist them increase inclusive practices

in their classrooms.   The working hypothesis is that effective and comprehensive professional

development is directly tied to the implementation quality of increasing inclusive opportunities

for all students.

As stated in the previous chapter, this study recognizes that preservice programs are at

fault as well as administration and policies. Educators persist. Teachers are at the frontline and

can make a difference. For this reason, the researcher conducted interviews with teachers and

administrators from a large urban district that has made a policy and practice change of

committing to inclusion and doing so throughout the COVID pandemic.

METHODS

Research Design and Rationale

This study utilizes qualitative methods to investigate the systems and structures that support

implementation of inclusive practices, development of a metric to measure successful

implementation and professional habits and skills teachers need to create inclusive environments

where all students' needs are met. Qualitative can methods support in-depth, descriptive analysis

of processes and perceptions and permit non-numeric data collection through organic

conversations with research participants (Maxwell 2012; Creswell, 2018).

The study collected open-ended responses from teachers and district administrators on their

perceptions of inclusion, what supports and systems are needed to increase inclusive

opportunities for all students from their perspective. In addition this study utilized document

analysis of annual school site Inclusion Action Plans to better understand how schools approach

the work of building inclusive opportunities for all students and how a metric for success is

developed. The qualitative nature of this study provided the researcher an opportunity to

synthesize perspectives into common themes and subsequent suggestions for best practice

(Creswell, 2018).

Methods

Site and Population

The research was conducted within a large urban school district. In the 2017-18 school year, the Office of Special Education, Access and Equity started an Increasing Inclusive Opportunities initiative. In a recent Position Paper titled "Equity and Access for Students with Disabilities" published in January 2022, the district laid out their position on inclusion; the steps they were taking towards improving systems; and the components of the individual school site plans to increase inclusive opportunities.

In order to select appropriate teacher candidates for semi-structured interviews, existing data from the school site plans were used to identify schools participating in the increasing inclusive opportunities initiatives. After receiving IRB approval, collaboration with contacts at the district began. This involved the use of data from the school site inclusion plans to select schools to recruit teachers. The initial review encompassed all teachers in a K-12 inclusive classroom setting. Since there are various models of inclusion, which include general education teachers and special education teachers, the researcher left the criteria open to any teacher participating in an inclusive classroom. It is important to note and consider that each teacher's school/classroom context varied by number of students served, grades taught and student demographics. The discovery work led to establishing a qualified list of teachers from classrooms in schools that met the criteria. The actual teacher recruitment was via email. Once a teacher had agreed to the interview the researcher provided him/her with a consent form. Interviews were conducted outside of teacher instruction hours and took place over ZOOM.   A nominal gift card was offered as a thank you for participation. A summary of teacher participants and characteristics is included below:

Table 1

Teacher Participant Characteristics

	Second career	Years teaching	Level	Credential Through-District Intern Program	Gen Ed or SPED	Inclusion Training - Credential
P1	Y	22	EL	Y	Gen Ed	N
P2	N	9	EL	N	Gen Ed	N
P3	N	26	EL	N	SPED	N
P4	Y	7	HS	Y	Gen and SPED	Y
P5	Y	2	HS	Y	SPED	Y
P6	N	8	HS	N	SPED	N
P7	Y	26	MS	N	Gen Ed	N
P8	N	26	HS	N	SPED	N

District Level Administrators were personnel who worked within the district and had been part of the development of the current school site inclusion plans.   Contacts at the district provided the researcher with the contact information, recruitment was done via email and four semi-structured interviews with administrators conducted. A summary of administrator participants and characteristics is included below:

Table 2

District Administrator Participant Characteristics

	Teaching Experience	District Level Administrator	Years in Education
A1	Y	Y	20
A2	Y	Y	18
A3	Y	Y	23
A4	Y	Y	25

It is important to point out that all of the administrators interviewed have had previous teaching experience and have been in the field of education for over 15 years.

Data Collection Methods

Document Analysis

 School site inclusion plans and reflections were used to select specific schools meeting criteria and making improvements in increasing opportunities for inclusion. The timeframe to collect and review the school site plans and reflections was December 2022 through February 2023. The school site plans helped to identify teachers to recruit and provided data that addressed how a metric of successful implementation for inclusive practices was being developed.

Semi-structured Interviews

 Using a semi-structured protocol, the researcher conducted eight interviews with teachers and four interviews with district administrators. Each interview lasted 30-60-minutes via Zoom.   The interviews were conducted between January 2023 - March 2023. Each interview was recorded and then transcribed using Otter.ai The teacher interviews documented individual teacher background, perceptions around inclusion, training and experience. The interviews explored the impact of school culture and teacher perspective on organizational systems that support successful implementation of inclusive practices. These responses inform the first research question. The interviews also examined professional habits and behaviors of teachers in inclusive classrooms and how they were acquired and matured. These responses inform the answer to the second research question.

Data Analysis Methods

Semi-structured Interviews

The data analysis used a hybrid approach that consisted of inductive and deductive

coding. Inductive coding derives its codes from the concepts, themes or process models that

emerge from the data analysis. After each interview the researcher transcribed the interviews

using Otter.ai, a voice-to-text transcription software, printed the transcripts and listened to a full

replay of the interview while taking notes, performing an initial analysis. Next, transcripts were

imported into software Maxqda and a line-by-line review conducted to identify tentative

categories and relationships. These data points and the transcripts were printed and again

examined , using the research questions to sort through the data using a more deductive

approach. The interview transcriptions underwent three rounds of inductive and deductive

coding and were analyzed for patterns related to the constructs of each research question

(Merriam and Tisdale, 2016). Careful analysis of the transcriptions resulted in four elements that

support successful implementation of inclusion and four professional habits/behaviors that are

common across teachers who are working to increase inclusive practices. The researcher

conducted a peer code review with colleagues and subsequently a second coder went back and

provided 89% Inter-Coder Reliability (ICR). Inter-Coder reliability was calculated by dividing

number of agreements by the total number of agreements plus disagreements.

Data triangulation was used to examine data from different respondents using the same

method (i.e. semi-structured interviews). Individual participant responses were analyzed using

the inductive and deductive coding and then analyzed and compared and contrasted across

participants.

Document Analysis

As discussed in the previous section, the school site inclusion plans and reflections provide the

reference points applied to select specific schools meeting criteria and making improvements in

increasing opportunities for inclusion.   Data collected from the district was also used to better understand how the district was measuring success in the implementation of increasing inclusive practices.

Positionality and Ethical Issues

The researcher positioned herself as a researcher and UCLA doctoral student, then as a fellow teacher and coordinator with experience working in both general and special education settings. The researcher recognized the need to clearly position herself as a researcher from UCLA and not from the district. It was important participants felt comfortable sharing their backgrounds and experiences without fear of judgment or disapproval. The researcher needed to suppress my own passion or personal experiences about inclusion.

All data collected from interviews was kept confidential to protect the identity of the participants and their school sites.   Speaking with teachers, it was important the teachers understood the purpose of the research is not to report back to their principal or district administrators.

Reliability and Validity/Credibility and Trustworthiness

Interviews began with a brief introduction and a concise overview sharing the purpose of the study. I recognized the need to avoid discussing personal interest in inclusion. It was important to set a dispassionate, professional tone. Personal bias could affect the interview process or the data analysis. I was mindful that I am immersed   in the work of inclusion.   In the role of researcher, it is necessary to balance experience and expertise with a reasoned focus on the data and where the data leads.

To ensure participants were open and comfortable sharing, it was essential the interview protocol was neutral while thoroughly addressing all research questions. I practiced my

interview protocol with non-participating teachers prior to the study and asked for constructive feedback.

FINDINGS

This section reports the findings of a qualitative research study that focused on understanding how a large urban district works to increase inclusive opportunities for all students. Data sources include interviews and document analysis which were collected between January 2023 and April 2023. The following sections outline the key findings by addressing the two overarching research questions and one sub question.

Findings by Research Questions

Research Question 1: What are the elements of school culture and organizational supports/systems that reinforce or support successful implementation of inclusive practices?

The administrators and teachers interviewed perceived the successful implementation of inclusion dependent on a variety of elements. As supported by previous research, school site administrators play a pivotal role in shifting schools to adopt more inclusive practices. Findings from my interviews with teachers and distinct office administrators, reinforce that principals and assistant principals are instrumental in creating sustainable change for inclusion. As one district administrator said:

> I've seen lots of attempts at inclusion. I've been out of schools for over 10 years in a more central office role. And what I've found is the common denominator is administrative support. As much as a teacher wants to do it, if administrators are not supportive, if they do not completely understand what the goal is, it doesn't go very far. And what also happens is that, often a teacher will leave. And then the whole thing

changes - inclusion stops happening at that school, or for those students or in that classroom. On the other hand if you have an administrator leading it as a school wide effort is much more likely to be sustained. If one person leaves, it doesn't depend on the one - it depends on everybody working together. And so when the administrative team works with everybody on a campus to build a model that expects students to be together, rather than seeing them somewhere else…When an administrator leads that work and leads those discussions and is bought in and gets their staff to buy in, it certainly goes a lot farther. I'm not saying teachers can't make great inclusion happen on their own. But to lead to systemic change, it has to be everybody working together.

Janet, an elementary school teacher who teaches at a school that is fully inclusive, talked about how important administrative support is for making inclusion work, "Admin support is everything. If at any time we've gone to the principal with a concern, or we need help with something, she acts on it right away."

More specifically, participants identified four common elements that school site leadership can put in place to help teachers support successful implementation of inclusive practices. The table below displays how many of the 12 participants mentioned each element:

Table 3

Elements That Support Successful Implementation of Inclusive Practices

Number of Participants	Element
10/12	RSP caseload and limitation of how many general education classrooms the RSP teachers are assigned to.
11/12	Shared Planning time for co-teachers
10/12	Professional Development - more frequent, interactive and context specific.
9/12	Thoughtful pairing of co-teaching teams and structures in place to support shift from single teacher classroom to co-teaching model

Element 1: Manageable Caseloads and Assignments for Resource Specialists

All of the participants interviewed talked about the number of students each resource specialist is assigned to and the number of classes these resource teachers are responsible for co-teaching as a major area for consideration. When a school moves to a full inclusion model, all of the Special Education teachers become Resource Specialists and are given a caseload of students with IEPs. Every site is different. In speaking to elementary, middle and high school teachers, the researcher realized that there are different complexities at each level. However, what is constant is the need for a manageable caseload and thoughtful pairing of co-teaching teams so that the RSP is not spread across more than two classrooms. Since the IEP sets minutes of RSP each student will receive, caseloads cannot just be looked at as number of students. This concept will be further examined and elaborated upon in the subsequent discussion.

Anne is a special education elementary teacher who has taught for over 26 years. She co - teachers with one teacher for most of the day in first grade and then goes to the Kindergarten in the afternoon. She shared that in the first-grade classroom they have a strong team, "They(the students) have two teachers. We have 20 kids…we do small groups and they are always moving….Class and parents understand that we are both teachers."

Jill is a high school teacher who has taught both general and special education. She just recently switched back to being a general education teacher because her caseload and workload being a resource teacher was too much. She talked about the shift from being a SDC teacher to a RSP teacher, having multiple jobs, a higher caseload and why she decided to go back to general education.

> In SDC classrooms special education teachers had a caseload of 12-18 students. Now with inclusion, they have a caseload of 28 students…If we had all the support it (inclusion) would be fantastic for our students. Caseloads need to be lowered to 18 max…SPED teachers need to be assigned to work with two general education teachers and have the same planning conference time.

Element 2: Shared Planning Time for Co-teachers

There is consensus in research and among all the participants I interviewed that shared planning time is a crucial element in making inclusion work. All of the participants I spoke to share that they believe in inclusion and are willing to work with administrators to increase inclusive opportunities for all students. They want to be set up for success and planning is crucial. Anne, the elementary teacher who is part of a school that has shifted to being fully inclusive shared:

> Last year our principal gave us one hour a week and we would have sub time. And this year, of course, there aren't any subs, so she allows us to do it after school and she pays for the hour. Planning is huge because we have groups all day long.

Element 3: Professional Development - More Frequent and Interactive

All of the participants spoke about the importance of ongoing training and professional development. Six of the eight teachers interviewed said they did not have coursework on inclusion as part of their credentialing program. That means they rely on the professional development provided by the district and school.

Sarah, a high school teacher who has taught both general and special education and had training around inclusion in both her credentialing programs and through professional development at her school shared the following about the PD at her school.

> I feel like it gave us a good base but there needs to be more education for teachers and there needs to be an environment that's safe for teachers to say, hey, will this work? Will that work? There needs to be more than just a couple of training sessions on inclusion…In the course of four years we have had training, but they have been more like people talking at us, and not talking with us.

Cara is a high school teacher who has been teaching special education for eight years and is part of a school that is planning to go to full inclusion next year. She did not have training on inclusion as part of her coursework in her credentialing program. She has tried to take advantage

of different opportunities that the district and the school has provided. She spoke about the

professional development at her school:

> They are helpful, but the only way we are going to get good at it is by meeting in person
> and having those hard conversations about…what happens when the two teachers are not
> compatible. What happens when the gen ed teachers completely refuses to let the other
> teacher teach? So things like that. I think the in-person meetings are more helpful than
> those trainings.

Brett a seasoned administrator builds on this idea of the importance of professional

development that is interactive, specific and reflects the needs of the participants.

> Yeah, transform adult learning, if you want to transform student learning. So what you
> expect to see in a classroom for children, you need to make sure that adults are practicing
> those things. So just like, when you're rolling out a new curriculum, it's so interesting
> how when you roll out a new curriculum, they bring teachers into a common space and
> give them a new textbook, and you walk them through it as opposed to saying, you know
> what…no, we're actually going to pretend you're students, and we are going to practice
> this lesson. And you're going to experience it as a student. And so I think that's what
> professional learning needs to look like, you've got to put teachers through the experience
> of what it means to be a student in an inclusive space. That's the only way you can go
> about doing it. They've got to experience it themselves. Because they didn't experience
> inclusive classrooms when they were students. So if we can't envision how it feels, how
> can we create it?

Element 4: Thoughtful Pairing of Co-Teaching Teams and Structures in Place to

Support Shift from Single Teacher Classroom to Co-Teaching Model

One of the district administrators made the point that for a lot of teachers, they have

never experienced an inclusive classroom where co-teaching was the norm. When they were in

school as students, they most likely were not in an inclusive classroom. Most teachers have been

trained in the one teacher classroom model and that is not what is expected in inclusion. All but

one of the teachers interviewed have been teaching for more than seven years. They all have a

lot of experience in the classroom. Shifting to increasing more inclusive opportunities and

having to co-teach is a big change. All of the participants talked about the importance of the

relationship between the special education teacher and the regular education teachers. Putting two teachers whose credentials fit the co-teaching model on paper is one thing; having the technical and adaptive skills to work with another professional to meet the needs of a diverse group of students is something quite different. This needs careful consideration and structures in place to support the shift in expectations.

Steven a special education high school teacher talked about how co-teaching is like a marriage and shared:

> I think change is hard. A lot of teachers have been teaching for many years and are set in their ways…have their own classrooms. I just think it is a good model and I think it may have a rough first year. You learn from your mistakes and push on, and honestly, it doesn't sound like the model is going away. So we have to adapt to the model.

Cara, a special education middle school teachers shared similar sentiments:

> We were all very hesitant when this program started, but I know it's been very successful in other schools…and I think it comes to general education teachers accepting it. I think the more we do it, and the more teachers are involved in it, I think we'll be okay…Once we learn who's compatible with who and whose strengths are where and if the placements are correct, I think we'll be okay.

Research Question 1A: How does a large district develop a metric for successful implementation of inclusive practices?

The district administrators interviewed all shared that the district has tried to promote inclusion for many years. There have been various initiatives. One participant shared that an outside consultant was hired by the previous superintendent and called attention to the growing research base in support of inclusion. This individual called out the district for not doing better and lit a fire to make inclusion a priority.

In response to the growing pressure, in 2019 a labor side letter contract was negotiated with the union labeled the Increasing Inclusive Opportunities Initiative. Part of the contract set forth a list of expectations for schools and a list of supports that the district would provide

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schools in return for increasing inclusive practices. The initiative was optional and schools were

not required to participate. During the first year, 85 schools participated. One administrator who

helped to develop the plans shared:

> One expectation was for the school to write a plan for how they plan to be inclusive, what
> their goals would look like, what their instruction would look like and how it would be
> different. And in return schools whose plans got accepted, which was basically
> everybody - we worked with them until their plans got accepted would receive advantage
> staffing ratios. So instead of being staffed at 28:1 for one resource teacher…we allowed
> them to have 20. So it ended up being a fairly significant impact for some schools where
> they ended up generating additional staff…And then we also gave a stipend to people
> who are the lead inclusion coordinator at every school, and a bit of paid planning time, as
> well.

Over the years there have been some changes to the plans. The administrators interviewed who

currently work in the district talked about how the change in the Department of Education's State

Performance Plan indicators created a very concrete number for what the Department of

Education expects schools to be doing when it comes to inclusion. In the latest State

Performance Plan/Annual Performance Report that was released February 2022, the goal states

that by 2025, 70% of students with disabilities should be in the regular class for 80% or more of

the day . Having a concrete number from the State was a great anchor for the district. As one

district administrator stated:

> Look, by 2025 we need to have 70% of our students included 80% or more of the
> time. That's a very concrete number and we are not talking 100% of students 100% of
> the time. We are talking about right sizing and trying to get more and more of our
> student's access. And so that has been very helpful with our superintendents, and our
> local district leadership, we actually decided to create our own goal which is 80% for
> 80%. So just something to make it easier to latch onto - 80% of our students in general
> education 80% of the time. We think that is reasonable and attainable. So I think those
> things create more momentum around inclusion.

In 2022 the new superintendent created a strategic plan and inclusion is one of the indicators for

success. One district administrator talked about the advantages that have come by having

inclusion incorporated into the strategic plan:

…it is a data point that is constantly looked at - So for example our superintendent chose 100 schools to work with more intensively and look at their data. Every few months those principals come together and they have to speak to the top leadership in the district and explain what is working for them, what is not working, what they need. And one of the metrics that they're looking at is the percentage of time that their students with disabilities are included. It just means more and more people are talking about inclusion.

Having inclusion part of the district strategic plan gives the Special Education Central Office and administrators, who believe in inclusion, the leverage they have needed to build momentum to create shifts within schools. This is evident in the evolution of the Inclusion Action Plans.

On the first page of the latest version of the Inclusion Action Plan for 2022 - 2026 there are two Measures of Success (Metrics) for 2026. The Inclusion Action Plans call out how these metrics are connected to the district's strategic plan. The plans are turned into the division of special education for review. The table below outlines the specific information included on the top of each plan:

Table 4

Components of Inclusion Plan Tied to the District's Strategic Plan

Pillar	1 Academic Excellence
Priority	1C Eliminating Opportunity Gaps
Strategy	1C.S7 Create a learning environment that promotes inclusive education for students with disabilities to foster higher expectations for academic, social and vocational outcomes.
Measures of Success (Metric by 2026)	1C.M4 Increase the percentage of students with disabilities who are in the general education program at least 80% of the school day to 80%.
Measures of Success (Metric by 2026)	Decrease the percentage of students with disabilities served in the general education program for 40% or less of day to under 12%.

The action plans have gone through annual iterations since the Increasing Inclusive

Opportunities initiative started in the 2019-2020 school year. The table below highlights some of

the changes that have been made over the years.

Table 5

Changes in Inclusion Plans

	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022 - 23(26)
Title	Increasing Inclusive Opportunities Plan			Inclusion Action Plan 2022-26
School Info Requested	● School Vision statement ● Inclusion Vision statement, ● School Name, ● School Location Code, ● Inclusion Steering Committee		● School Vision Statement ● School Name ● Lead Teacher for Inclusion ● School Location Code ● Steering Committee	● School ● Administrator ● Inclusion Lead
Tied to Strategic Plan	NO			YES
Type of Data requested	Asks for specific data re: student population, Least Restrictive Environment (LRE), % of SWD by Eligibility, SBAC ELA, SBAC Math, Discipline, Types of Services SWD are receiving, Attendance, SPED Placement Requests		Still asks for specific data, but leaves out SBAC ELA, SBAC Math, Discipline, Types of Services SWD are receiving, Attendance	Ask for 3 percentages: % of SWD served in gen ed for 80% of day or more, % of SWD served in gen ed for 40-79% of day, % of SWD served in gen ed for 0-39%
SMART Goal	YES			

Overall the plans have become much more focused with the current version divided into 4 major

sections: 1) CURRENT STATE: What are you doing now?, 2) FUTURE STATE: Where do you

want your school site to be in two years?, 3) THE PLAN TO GET THERE - Complete with

trimesters in mind, 4) ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS for Team Discussions. The

questions included in each of the sections are meant to guide the school teams to carefully reflect

on how they can implement more inclusive practices and develop SMART goals to ensure they

are meeting their targets. Once a school enters into their second year or beyond they are also

asked to reflect on what has happened in the previous year and what changes they need to

make. Table outlines the main components of each section.

Table 6

Components of Inclusion Action Plan

Section	Questions/Info Requested
Current State: What are you doing now?	- Sites are asked input data % of students with disabilities served in each category (i.e. high % of SWD served in gen ed for 80% of day or more, medium - % of SWD served in gen ed for 40-79% of day, low - % of SWD served in gen ed for 0-39%) - Sites are asked to check off service delivery model(s) that are currently used to serve students with disabilities. General education class with consultation from special educator, General education class with push-in support, One teach one support, Station teaching, Parallel teaching, Team teaching, General education class with pull-out support in, Resource room, Learning Lab period, or Special Day class. - Indicate which students at your school are NOT served in inclusive settings? Are all grade levels participating? Are any eligibilities not being included? - Current SMART goal and if second year, asked to indicate if the goal was met or not.
Future State:	- What service delivery model(s) do you envision will be used to serve students with disabilities in two years at your site? - Sites are asked to indicate any grade levels, eligibilities, or programs that will not be engaged in implementation and provide a rationale for groups not addressed in plan. - SMART goal for following year.
The Plan to Get There:	- This section has 4 strands: 1)The Inclusive Student Experience, 2) Implementation of Service and Supports, 3) Self Capacity and Engagement, 4) Family Partnerships. Each Strand has multiple indicators. - Sites are asked to select at least one focus indicator per strand, identify at least one activity to be done each Trimester and anticipated date of completion
Additional Considerations for Team Discussions	- Budget planning for co-planning and/or PD outside of contractual hours, if needed - Master scheduling and programming of students - PD calendar development - Consideration of work reflected on SPSA (School Plan for Student Achievement) - Communication plan for sharing Inclusion Action Plan with your school community

The two Measures of Success in the second section of the Inclusion Action Plan 2022 - 2026 clearly answers the question of how the district has developed a metric for successful implementation of inclusive practices. As shown in the table above, by filling out the action plan, school teams are guided through a reflective process of looking at data and the systems currently in place to help develop SMART goals to increase inclusive practices and meet the two district wide Measures of Success ties to the district's strategic plan by 2026: 1) By 2026, increase the percentage of students with disabilities who are in the general education program at least 80% of the school day to 80% , 2) Decrease the percentage of students with disabilities served in the general education program for 40% or less of the day to under 12% .

Aside from these plans, all of the district level administrators interviewed shared that there are other context specific indicators that they look at to determine how schools are doing. One of the district administrators shared that other data reviewed includes:

> Looking at summative assessment scores - I would expect that the more a student gets exposure to core curriculum content, that they would be more likely to do better on those assessments at the end of the year. Attendance - Are students with disabilities more likely to come to schools that are inclusive vs SWD in nearby schools that are not inclusive…School experience survey - done once a year - late fall with students and their families - Some questions about self-efficacy…I believe that I am a learning, I believe that I am capable of learning new things, If I don't know how to do something, I can keep trying…And the degree to which we can disaggregate that and see to what degree our students feel a sense of self efficacy. I would expect to see a shift in those measures first before test scores, but I would still expect to see test scores shifting.

Research Question 2: What are the common professional habits and behaviors of teachers who believe in inclusion and are working to implement inclusive practices?

Four common professional habits and behaviors of teachers who believe in inclusion and are working to implement inclusive practices emerged through three rounds of coding interviews with teachers and administrators. The table below shows the common professional habits and

behaviors identified by participants and the following section shares quotes to illustrate the

findings in the words of the participants.

Table 7

Professional Habits and Behaviors

Number of Participants	Professional Habit/Behavior
11/12	Flexibility and Adaptability
11/12	Collaboration and Clear Expectations
10/12	Building Relationships with Students
10/12	Small groups and differentiation of instruction

Flexibility and Adaptability

Participants talked about the importance of being flexible and adapting to the needs of

individual students through reflective conversations, trial and error, and continually reevaluating

what they are doing. As one district administrator stated:

> Teachers who are more defensive tend to put up barriers, say it (inclusion) makes them
> uncomfortable…they don't want to look like a fool in front of a room full of kids. And
> of course that is a risk. But that is a risk every day. So it seems like a lot of it just has to
> do with mindset and that's why I think it's so critical that principals continually
> communicate that we are learning as we are going, it's going to be messy, and we are
> going to make missteps and that doesn't mean the work is not valuable - it's part of the
> learning….Having a growth mindset and being dedicated and excited about being a
> lifelong learner instead of being overwhelmed by it…having an open mind, knowing you
> don't know everything there is to know about how to be a good teacher. Knowing you
> are going to keep learning new ideas and new ways of thinking and being the rest of your
> career.

Another district administrator talked about what he has observed working with teachers

to increase inclusive opportunities:

> Teachers who are flexible in the classroom, and adaptable, and are able to see each
> individual child as an individual are more successful at being inclusive in their classes.

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One of the special education teachers interviewed works with a general education teacher who had been teaching for over 20 years. She shared that for teachers who have run their classrooms a certain way for many years, change is hard and flexibility is key. Even some of the systems that are used for grading and taking attendance are only set up for a single teacher, so learning to be flexible and adapting to one another and the students can be challenging and at times frustrating.

Another special education high school teacher shared that he was asked to co-teach with a general education teacher because the other special education teacher who had initially been paired with that teacher did not work out.   He shared that there was conflict because both teachers were set in their ways and did not want to know how to be flexible and adapt to each other's teaching styles. He shared that a lot of general education teachers are set in their ways and are used to being "…their own boss, it is their class and they may not be into sharing with another person."

Collaboration and Clear Expectations

One of the special education teachers created a list of pros and cons for inclusion.

Collaboration is a pro - Getting to work with someone who has 20 years' experience teaching the content and then I have experience with technology and new strategies I have learned at some of the training sessions. We are able to collaborate and pitch in different ideas, strategies and I am able to create a shared google doc with all of the students who need accommodations.

This teacher was very invested in making inclusion work and had an asset-based mindset around how to make inclusion work. Teachers talked about the importance of clear expectations regarding curriculum, classroom management, roles of adults in the classroom, shared system to keep track of accommodations, attendance and grading.   One of the district administrators

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shared the importance of a shared expectation that it is possible to educate students who have

disabilities with their peers in the general education setting:

> I think it is very much about expectations…once you have set your mind that it is
> possible to educate students with their peers, things flow from there. But when you have
> to try and convince people, it's almost like you have to get the mindset going before the
> work begins. And I think that is a huge hurdle and there is still a lot of skepticism from
> teachers in our district that this is a way for the district to save money…But I feel like
> what we started doing in our professional development is shifting to this idea of why is it
> so important to belong? What does that feel like for us? Are we okay with students
> feeling like they don't belong when they come to our school? What does that say about
> us…about our belief system and what we are communicating to every single student in
> the school by having that belief system?

Another special education teacher who is a newer teacher shared his challenges with

working with a general education teacher at his school. He shared that when the administrators

talk about inclusion, "They say it's a collaborative effort…but it is not a collaborative effort."

He talked about how the general education teacher is seen as the content expert and is leading the

class most of the time and expects him to take care of the classroom management. He talked

about it being difficult because he wants to help deescalate situations and not "step on any toes

or violate boundaries.", but he feels like the kids are not set up for success and he is being

reactive instead of proactive. He also shared that he teaches three subjects, and he does not have

adequate planning time to meet with the general education teachers. When asked about

expectations, he shared, " I'm supposed to collaborate with the teacher to break down the lesson

plan so that all students can understand and feel included. But there is no formal structure to do

that."

Building Relationships with Students

Research supports that building relationships matters. The importance of building

relationships came up in the interviews with both teachers and administrators. One of the

administrative participants shared the following:

Number one, you need teachers who know how to build relationships with students. Because without building authentic relationships with students, you really can't bring out the assets and the cultural and linguistic strengths of young people.

Sean who is a coach and high school special education teacher spoke about the importance of relationship building with students:

The first and foremost is establishing therapeutic rapport…navigating throughout the classroom, checking in with every student, making sure every student matters. Challenging students, creating an environment where students feel comfortable to make a mistake.

Three of the special education teachers talked about how the special education students, even when they were in the general education classrooms were referred to as "those students" by colleagues. Inclusion is not only about placing students in a general education classroom. Teachers cannot build relationships with students if they do not even consider them to be their own students.

Small Groups and Differentiation of Instruction

All of the teachers spoke about meeting students' individual needs. Sue, a middle school teacher who has been teaching general education for over 26 years shared:

So this is true of every student, we differentiate based on student's needs…we might modify homework…we do all the things that we do just generally with all of our students.

Another teacher with previous experience working as a behavior support provider talked about meeting students where they are:

When teachers do collaborate we are able to break class into groups and work in small groups. Teachers and aides are on the same page: classroom management and expectations. Having the time to break the content down and provide positive reinforcement…once we establish that positive behavior momentum…we can increase the demand.

These findings of professional habits and behaviors were not gen ed or sped specific.

They are best practice teaching. As one administrator shared:

> And so and how does that relate to inclusion. Inclusion really is everything. Inclusion isn't just a special ed initiative. It's the way we educate children that's built on a belief that when you teach students in an inclusive setting all students benefit. So it's not always how we do the work, or how we've always done the work. We'd like to segregate kids, either by ability level, or needs, or by race or by whatever that might be. But inclusion is just really good teaching.

The twelve educators who participated in this study spoke about their experiences creating more opportunities for inclusive practices. Through these interviews and document analysis of the school site plans four key elements that support implementation of inclusive practices and four professional habits and behaviors of teachers working to increase inclusive practices emerged. These findings are significant because they derive from educators who are on the ground, in the classrooms and from administrators working to directly support teachers. The school site plans provide insight into how a district develops a metric for success. The next chapter highlights what is significant about these findings, sets forth recommendations, and suggestions for future research and practice.

DISCUSSION

For too long, we have been operating in systems that perpetuate segregation of students with disabilities (SWD) and view students who learn differently from a deficit perspective, one that suggests separate classrooms with only specialist teaching. Inclusion is a way to remedy this siloed approach. Inclusion is not merely a placement; it is a human right. Inclusive education uses practical evidence tested strategies to meet the needs of all students within a classroom.

This chapter summarizes the key findings of the study and connects these findings to previous research. The chapter considers the significance of the study and the limitations of the research. Lastly, there is discussion of the implications of the study and how findings can be disseminated.

Summary of Key Findings and Connection to Research

Prior research identified administrative support as a key element to successful implementation of inclusive education (Causteon-Theoharis et al, 2011; Ingram, P.D. 1997, Hitt & Tucker, 2016, McLeskey, Spooner, & Algozzine, 2021). The current study confirms that administrators play a pivotal role in setting the culture, improving organizational conditions and teacher capacity in providing inclusive education for all students.

Research Question 1: Elements of School Culture and Organizational Supports/Systems that Reinforce Successful Implementation of Inclusive Practices

The following section summarizes the four elements of school culture and organizational supports/systems the current study identifies reinforce or support successful implementation of inclusive practices.

Element 1: Manageable Caseloads and Assignments for Resource Specialists

All participants interviewed talked about the number of students each resource specialist is assigned and the number of classes these resource teachers are responsible for co-teaching as a major area for consideration. Caseloads vary by context and number of minutes of services that are included in the IEP. Prior research has identified caseload stressors as a key contributor to special educator attrition and acknowledged the variations within special educators' caseloads make it more complicated to make accurate comparisons. (Gersten, Keating, Yovanoff, & Harniss, 2001; Kozleski, Mainzer, & Deshler, 2000; McLeskey & Billingsly, 2008; Russ et al., 2001). These same researchers suggested that caseloads need to take into consideration the total school population, rather than exclusively students with IEPs. Within the systems of MTSS and RtI, there are many at-risk students who do not qualify for IEP services. Therefore, an approach of looking at SPED students vs. GenEd students fails all students. It is apparent the current systems set up to provide appropriate caseloads are not working. This is further discussed in the recommendations for further research.

Element 2: Shared Planning Time for co-teachers

In her dissertation on teacher perceptions on co-teaching in inclusive classrooms, Banks et al (2018) found that collaboration for co-teaching is essential and there are many components that go into making co-teaching work. Ensuring teachers have adequate support, training and collaboration time is key. The need for consistent planning time was identified by all participants. Teachers talked about the importance of the special education teachers having the same planning time as the general education teachers they teach with to review technical tasks such lesson plans, grades, types of assessments, and accommodations. Additionally to build relationships, learn each other's classroom management styles, interests, areas of expertise, and other more adaptive activities. Prior research supports that offering effective service delivery is

more than teachers having the right skills. It is also about having adequate time to plan and work together. (Giangreco, M. F., Suter, J. C., & Hurley, S. M., 2013). Administrators have control over master scheduling and ensuring shared planning time needs to be a top priority to make inclusion work.

Element 3: Professional Development - More Frequent and Interactive

Professional developments, in-service presentations, guides and books can help provide the knowledge, but to be successful, teachers need to know how to apply the knowledge to develop skills and strategies to be a successful inclusion teacher (Nagro & deBettenCourt, 2017). Six of the eight teachers interviewed shared they had no coursework on inclusion as part of their teacher credentialing program. These are teachers from schools who have opted into increasing inclusive opportunities and believe in inclusion. They rely exclusively on professional development and administrative support to learn about inclusion. All of the teachers and district administrators interviewed expressed the desire to make inclusion work and believe it is best for all students. Many acknowledged they know this is the direction the district is headed and they want to be part of making it work. Three of the teachers specifically pointed out that so much of the training and focus has been on student learning and the benefits of inclusion for students and acknowledge that the students are at the core of why education exists. However, they identified the need for PD and training that focus on adult learning and involve them in the process of flagging problems and developing solutions. As suggested in Domitrovich et al (2008) implementation model, there are many factors that can affect implementation quality.

Just as it is critical to individualize and be strategic in providing appropriate instruction to students, we need to do the same for teachers. They are being asked to change the structure

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of the way they teach. This was one of the most important findings of this research.

Surprisingly, teachers and administrators spent more time talking about their adaptive needs as opposed to more technical needs. There clearly is a need for more training in the technical components that are proven to increase all student learning such as: MTSS, UDL, PBIS, use of evidence-based curriculum, explicit instruction. Initially, schools need to set the appropriate environment in schools to clearly define the teacher behaviors desired. In a perfect world, schools could press pause, focus on shifting mindset, then train up all teachers on technical evidence-based practices, then hit play. That is not reality. The solution requires addressing environment and training simultaneously. Adapting the approach to the unique context of each school. Examining this finding through the lens of adult learning theory (Knowles, 1968) it is clear that adult learning is different from child learning and focuses on personal growth and development. This is especially true for general education teachers who may not have much experience working with students with disabilities. As one participant identified, general educators needing to accept that inclusion is a priority. There is general agreement the current operating system is broken and change is needed. Inclusion disrupts the current state and demands change. General educators need to embrace change and adjust their teaching. It is important to confront the mindset that pigeon holes students with disabilities as "those students". As educators every student in the school is "our student".

Element 4: Placement and Support for Co-Teaching Teams

The National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality at Vanderbilt University issued the paper, *Teacher Preparation to Deliver Inclusive Services to Students with Disabilities*, in 2008 that acknowledged that providing inclusive services can only be realized if general and special educators work cooperatively (Holdheide & Reschly, 2008). Historically, collaboration

has not been incorporated in pre-service teacher preparation programs. Most teachers currently teaching were not trained to co-teach in an inclusive classroom. Inclusion requires a mindset shift in the way teachers work together. This needs to be thoughtfully orchestrated and supported by the administrators. One teacher talked about how she was given time with her co-teacher before the school year started to get to know her partner on a personal and professional level. She shared how beneficial that was in building an effective working relationship. Many teachers talked about how co-teaching is like a marriage. One teacher talked about the need to have clear expectations set forth by administrators and a protocol in place to help work through when things are not going well. Another teacher discussed visiting another school that was a fully inclusive school and shared how helpful it was to visit classrooms and talk to teachers. The same teacher shared that it was only the special educators who went on the visit and it would have been more beneficial if the general education teachers went as well.

It is important to point out that each of these four elements does not exist in a vacuum. They are interrelated and have different weights based on the dynamic context that exists in individual schools. That is why one size does not fit all. However, these four elements should be considered by administrators and discussed with teachers to improve the implementation of inclusive practices.

Research Question 2: Professional Habits and Behaviors of Teachers who Believe in Inclusion and are Working to Implement Inclusive Practices

The findings from this study confirm much of what prior research has discussed as being habits and behaviors of good teaching. Research illustrates that what works in special/inclusive education is not exclusive to special/inclusive education (Mitchell, 2008). The findings confirm effective habits and behaviors are best practice regardless of type of classroom.

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That being said, these four professional habits were specifically mentioned by participants as essential to build more inclusive environments and serve as important skills to be coached and developed.

Flexibility and Adaptability

Participants talked about being flexible and adapting the needs of their individual students and co-teaching partner/s. There is no step-by-step manual or universal checklist for inclusion. Teachers need to be responsive to the students in front of them and adapt and change as needed. The same is true for administrators who have to be responsive to the needs of the educators, students and parents within the context of their specific school and community.

Collaboration and Clear Expectations

There is an increased demand for collaboration when co-teaching. Inclusion disrupts the way most teachers are accustomed teaching and participants shared the importance of collaboration and setting clear expectations for students and agreed definitions, roles and responsibilities around what co-teaching will look like between general and special education teachers.

Building Relationships with Students

To promote academic progress teachers need to develop positive relationships with students (Stipek, 2006). From speaking to teachers across grades K-12, it becomes more challenging as students get older and have different teachers, but research tells us relationships matter.

Small Groups and Differentiation of Instruction

Kurth, Morningstar, Hicks & Templin. (2018) point out the goal of inclusive education is not to exit students from special education, but rather provide "a richer constellation of support

for all learners in a classroom" (p29) and reduce the need for segregated special

education. Providing small group and differentiated instruction is at the core of inclusive

education and these practices are situated in general education classrooms, meaning general

education teachers should all be familiar with these practices. When asked about how teachers

supported students in the classroom many teachers talked about providing small group

instruction and differentiating the instruction to meet student's needs. Three of the interviewees

shared that what they did was best practice teaching.

It is important to note that although many teachers   have not been explicitly trained to

co-teach in inclusive classrooms, the technical aspects of how they meet the needs of the

different students in their classroom is really best practice teaching. Effective teaching benefits

all students (Greer, 1991; Underwood, 2007; Ashby et al., 2014; Mitchell 2008).   There is not a

one size fits all model for any classroom regardless of it being inclusive or not. What works in

special/inclusive education is not exclusive to special/inclusive education (Mitchell,

2008). Greer (1991) calls on teachers to act as strategic scientists of pedagogy to provide

effective instruction for all children. This reiterates the point that so much of the transition to

inclusion involves a mindset shift, especially for general education teachers.

<div align="center">**Significance of Key Findings**</div>

An increasing number of schools are moving to adopting inclusive practices. This infers

teachers are expected to adjust to the requirements of working in the new model. Research

consistently reinforces that inclusion benefits all students, not just students with disabilities

(McGhie-Richmond et al 2007; Greer, 1991, Mitchell, 2008, Ashby et al, 2014).   One surprising

omission from the interviews was any explicit mention of MTSS or other more technical terms

from the teachers. Two of the teachers talked about UDL and many talked about small group

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instruction and differentiation. The findings imply that teachers require explicit coaching and guidance to establish connections between their existing effective practices in addressing student needs within their classrooms and how those same strategies can be utilized in an inclusive classroom setting. Many teachers do have expertise in supporting struggling students and have access to different curriculum. MTSS and UDL offer a framework for categorizing the needs of all students. However, what remains absent from this framework is a repository of strategies and interventions, as well as a decision-making protocol that aligns with the different tiers of support, and is adaptable to the specific context of individual classrooms or student needs.

Teachers are asking for support in working through issues that come up when they are expected to co-teach but do not have shared planning time, do not get along with a co-teacher, or are overwhelmed by the amount of students on their caseload. They are asking to be included in discussions of how to make inclusion work within the context of the school they work in and be part of the solution.   They want PD that supports them coming up with solutions to their own problems of practice. Teachers need to know that there is going to be trial and error involved and given support towards finding solutions to meet the needs of the students in their classrooms.

Teacher education programs need to be disrupted and designed in a manner that offers teacher candidates exposure to diverse inclusive service models. Simultaneously such programs should provide candidates with the necessary knowledge and experiences to foster effective collaboration. By implementing these measures, future teachers can be equipped with the essential tools to deliver effective inclusive services.

Research Limitations

While the study is constructed on sound principles there are limitations. These include more perspectives, observations of teachers interviewed and a quantitative analysis of student

outcome data. Additional participants would serve to in providing more perspectives especially since there is selection bias in who was invited and who agreed. Observations of the teachers interviewed to further explore professional habits and behaviors would allow the researcher to observe teachers working with students and evidence of habits and behaviors in action. A more quantitative approach to test the effectiveness of student outcomes for students at schools who participated in the inclusion initiative from the beginning compared to schools who did not participate would have added more concrete and explicit data to examine implementation quality.

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Implications for Practice

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Implication #1: Inclusion as Part of Preservice Teacher Training and District Intern Training

Teacher Education Programs need to be disrupted and prepare all teachers for inclusive classrooms. General education teachers are expected to go into inclusive schools and need to be trained. They cannot be expected to meet the needs of all learners without recommending that multiple subject teachers leave their credentialing program with an in-depth knowledge of inclusive teaching practices, neurodiversity and disabilities. Structuring teacher preparation programs that expose teacher candidates to a variety of inclusive service models while providing the knowledge and experiences to collaborate and equip future teachers with the tools necessary to deliver effective inclusive services (Gokdere, 2012).

#2 Restructuring Professional Development

Adopting a one-size-fits-all approach to professional development is fundamentally flawed. Teachers require professional development opportunities that incorporate adult learning principles, offering them a platform to address the specific problems they encounter within their

classrooms. The inclusion action plans implemented in schools emphasize the formulation of SMART goals. Consequently, any initiatives designed at the school level to enhance inclusive practices should also be applied at the individual level. This would provide a structure for co-teaching teams to establish SMART goals and utilize improvement science tools, such as Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycles, to overcome barriers to inclusion within their respective classrooms. It is essential to empower teachers as problem solvers rather than mere problem observers. Administrators play a pivotal role in coaching and reallocating resources and support to align with the teachers' needs.

#3 Restructure Systems

By adopting Domitrovich et al's (2008) framework for implementation quality as a lens, it becomes evident that restructuring systems is vital to ensure every student has access to inclusive education. This necessitates strategic implementation of support structures across multiple levels. At the school level this includes providing teachers with tools and training to enable the confidence to address true inclusion for all students. Inclusion is moving from a one teacher classroom model to a co-teaching model. We are asking teachers to restructure their classrooms and that means change for the systems that support these classrooms and schools. Inclusion needs to be integrated into all systems that exist within a school and across the district. As inclusion evolves from a traditional single-teacher classroom model to a co-teaching model, it requires a restructuring of classrooms and, consequently, changes within the systems that support these classrooms and schools.

Sailor (2017) suggests reframing the problem of inclusion and suggests that stakeholders should look at rearranging the whole school rather than classroom-based systems to serve all students. He advocates for equity as a basis for inclusive educational systems change. He urges

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stakeholders to use frameworks like MTSS and UDL to create a system of education where there is an equitable distribution of resources based on the needs of all students. Efforts to promote inclusive education must be undertaken collaboratively, both from the bottom up and the top down. School districts should critically examine the structural division between general education and special education, potentially considering an organization based on content areas. Additionally, the work of inclusion should permeate all aspects of the school environment. When offering professional development focused on content areas, such as math and literacy, inclusion should not be treated as a separate topic. Rather it should be embraced as a lens that implores teachers to critically reflect on how they can structure their lessons to effectively meet the diverse needs of all students.

#4 Develop More Sophisticated Metrics for Success

For all of this to be realized, there also has to be careful consideration of how data is used to guide decisions. The metric for success across the board must go beyond 80% for 80%. Having something linked to the district strategic plan is a step in the right direction, but not enough.

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Implications for Further Research

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Future research may benefit from an exploration of teacher self-efficacy and the role it plays in shaping teacher attitudes towards inclusion. The findings of this study showed that teachers believe in inclusion and want more professional development that is interactive and involves them in the problem-solving process. Thus it would be valuable to look at how involving teachers in planning research with administrators and researchers could help improve outcomes for increasing inclusive practices and teacher self-efficacy around inclusion.

Reflection

This study has strengthened my commitment to inclusive education. At every level, there are adaptive and technical challenges. For inclusion in practice to be successful it has to be integrated into every level of school systems. It cannot exist as a separate entity. Every teacher and administrator I spoke to believes in inclusion. Believing in something is not enough.

Systems are designed to get the results they get. School systems were not set up to be inclusive. Teacher and principal leadership programs were not set up to teach and lead in inclusive schools. Teachers need to be prepared to teach in inclusive classrooms and leaders need to be prepared to lead in inclusive schools. Shelley Moore, an inclusive education activist, says: "Inclusive Education: It's not more work, it's different work." This study highlights some practical steps educators at all levels can take towards embracing this different work to create schools that meet the needs of all learners.

APPENDIX

Interview Protocols

A. Interview Protocol District Administrators

Introduction:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. I appreciate your time. I hope to learn more about your mindset around inclusion and your professional experience in building systems and supports to increase inclusive opportunities for all students at a district level. I am a UCLA doctoral student and I am collecting data that will provide districts with information on how to select and build pathways for teachers to develop expertise in inclusion, shift mindsets and help build systems that support implementation of inclusive practices. It is important to understand there is no right or wrong answer. What is most helpful is information based on your real-life experience.

The interview should last approximately 30-45 minutes. In order to be fully attentive to your responses I will be recording the interview. Please share what you feel comfortable sharing. You can choose not to answer a question if you prefer not to.

The data collected in this interview will be transcribed, analyzed and included in an Educational Leadership Program dissertation. Individual identifying information will be kept confidential. Do you have any questions before we get started?

Is it okay for me to begin recording?

First, I'd like to learn more about you and your experience:

- Tell me about your role at DISTRICT and how it is connected to inclusion?

- What is your definition of inclusion?

- From your perspective, what are the core components to make inclusion work within a large school district?

- Can you tell me what you believe are elements of school culture and systems that are necessary to support teachers and students who are part of inclusive classrooms?

- Can you tell me what you think are specific professional habits and behaviors teachers need to be able to make inclusion work?

- Can you talk about how you build meaningful professional development around inclusion?

Next, I'd like to learn more about how a district can develop a metric of success for implementation of inclusive practices.

- How do you measure if a district is successfully increasing inclusive opportunities for all students?

- From your experience working in the district, regarding increasing inclusive opportunities…

    - What is going well?
    - What needs to change?

Thank you so much. We are almost done. Is there anything else that you would like to share about your experience that you didn't already mention?

B. Interview Protocol Teachers

Introduction:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. I appreciate your time. I hope to learn more about your personal experience and mindset around inclusion. I am a UCLA doctoral student and I am collecting data that will provide districts with information on how to select and build pathways for teachers to develop expertise in inclusion, shift mindsets and help build systems that support implementation of inclusive practices. It is important to understand there is no right or wrong answer. What is most helpful is information based on your real-life experience.

The interview should last approximately 30-45 minutes. In order to be fully attentive to your responses I will be recording the interview. Please share what you feel comfortable sharing. You can choose not to answer a question if you prefer not to.

The data collected in this interview will be transcribed, analyzed and included in an Educational Leadership Program dissertation. Individual identifying information will be kept confidential. Do you have any questions before we get started?

Is it okay for me to begin recording?

First, I'd like to learn more about your background and teaching experience.
- How did you get into teaching?
- Tell me about your teaching experiences - what is your current position, how long have you been teaching, where have you taught, what grades and subjects have you taught?
- Tell me about your undergrad major, credentialing program and any post-secondary(higher ed) schooling?
- Before teaching at your current position did you have any training or experience with inclusion?
- How do you define inclusion?

    o What experiences have shaped your definition of inclusion?

Next, I'd like to ask about your experiences in your current position.

- Tell me about how you felt when you started in your inclusive classroom. Is there anything you think could have made starting easier?
- How much do you know about the increasing inclusive opportunities initiative at DISTICT?
- Can you tell me about the inclusion model at your school?
    - What is going well?
    - What school wide or district wide supports are most meaningful for you as an inclusion teacher?
    - What needs improvement?
    - What organizational systems within your school or district do you think could change to better support inclusion?

Shifting a bit to you personally as a teacher…

- What are the specific professional habits or behaviors that you use in your classroom that allow you to meet the needs of all your students?
    - How did you learn these professional habits and behaviors?
- How would you describe the school culture specifically regarding inclusion?
    - Has there been a shift in mindset towards including students with disabilities in the general education classrooms since the school has become part of the Supporting Inclusive Initiatives?
    - What organization supports or systems help to shift the mindset towards being more open to inclusion?

Thank you so much. We are almost done. Is there anything else that you would like to share about your experience that you didn't already mention?

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