DISABILITY-INCLUSIVE EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP COMPETENCY: A DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS

A Dissertation

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AUTHORIZATION TO SUBMIT

DISSERTATION

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This process has stirred in me a special feeling of gratitude to my parents, Jerald and Kathlyn Jensen, and forefathers who patiently and selflessly labored for my future. Their immeasurable hard work and sacrifice make every goodness in my life possible.

> To increase abiding satisfaction for the mass of our people, and for all people, someone must sacrifice something of his own happiness. This is a duty only to those who recognize it as a duty. The larger the number ready to sacrifice, the smaller the total sacrifice necessary . . .. The truth today, be good, be decent, be honorable and self-sacrificing and you will not always be happy. You will often be desperately unhappy . . .. But with the death of your happiness may easily come increased happiness and satisfaction and fulfillment for other people—strangers, unborn babes, uncreated worlds. If this is not sufficient incentive, never try . . .
>
> —W. E. B. Du Bois

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my wife and our five amazing children. Micah, you have always been a believer, listener, and supporter of my endeavors. I could never have done this without your knowledge, experience, and insight. Brock, Miranda, Ryann, Sydney, and George, you are my greatest teachers. May you also work to your full potential and succeed on your own terms.

> "Just get out of bed, get a life, laugh, sweat, dream, go like hell . . . Do it!"
>
> —Nike T-shirt

ABSTRACT

Traditional knowledge and practices dominate the special education landscape. As the American education system continues to adopt accountability measures related to disability-inclusive practice, the challenge facing special and general education leaders lies in need for joint efforts to solve problems of practice. In the diverse, complex, and high-stakes environment that is public education today, there are increasing demands to create schools that support equity, access, and opportunity for students with disabilities and their families. Research cites the inadequacies of pre-service principal preparation programs and calls upon districts and local education agencies to provide professional learning opportunities that build administrative capacity for instructional leadership. As special education implementation continues to be the critical factor missing from pre-service principal training, this study aims to identify and describe principals' and special education directors' perceptions of their roles and the associated competencies for addressing the implementation and support of disability-inclusive education in districts and schools.

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Introduction

School leaders play a core role in providing opportunities for students with disabilities (SWDs) to learn in inclusive schools (Billingsley et al., 2018; Kozleski, 2019). Research cites recurrently inadequate leadership preparation as hampering efforts to confront the barriers posed by disability-inclusive education. Principals who lead effective inclusive schools hold high expectations of SWDs, emphasizing teaching and progress monitoring practices that ensure all students have equal access to uniform content (Billingsley et al., 2019). Despite what has been learned about the benefits of inclusive education, placement of SWDs in segregated settings is a prevalent practice (Agran et al., 2020; Cameron, 2016; Esposito et al., 2018; Toews et al., 2020). Closing the gap between the best-known practice and common practice is within the ability of school leadership, but principals are unprepared to lead schools that serve SWDs (Billingsley et al., 2018; Cornelius & Gustafson, 2021; Esposito et al., 2018; Lewis-Vice, 2020; Sun & Xin, 2020; Taylor, 2020; Wilkins, 2020).

Given the more than four decades of studies affirming principals' influence on student achievement (Bauer & Silver, 2018; Bellibas & Liu, 2017; Campanotta et al., 2018; Wallace Foundation, 2016) and their responsibility for implementing federal special education laws in schools (Esposito et al., 2018), the fact that research has yet to show any significant level of proficiency in the field is cause for concern (Auletta, 2018; Cornelius & Gustafson, 2021; Esposito et al., 2018; Samuels, 2018). Without, at a minimum, foundational literacy in special education programs, policies, and procedures, there are no building blocks for supporting inclusive and special needs services in schools (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003).

University-based principal preparation programs (PPPs) face continual and constant criticism for a variety of reasons but especially for their lack of attention to special education (Campanotta et al., 2018; DeMatthews et al., 2020; Miller, 2018; Moore, 2020; Taylor, 2020; Wallace Foundation, 2016). Since the inception of special education laws in the 1970s, considerations of special education leadership, both empirical and prescriptive in kind, have emphasized the importance of principal preparation that focuses on inclusive practice that is attentive to SWDs (Boscardin et al., 2009; Crockett et al., 2009; Lashley, 2007). At the same time, principals have also reported that preparation programs do not cover services for SWDs (Bai & Martin, 2015; DeMatthews et al., 2020). In short, program models do not reflect the real job of a principal (Wallace Foundation, 2016).

A 2016 publication from The Wallace Foundation synthesized findings from reports by the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE), The School Superintendents Association (AASA), the American Institutes for Research (AIR), and the University Council for Education Administration (UCEA) intended to reduce ambiguity on matters related to programming such as perceived strengths and weaknesses, barriers to improvement, and the formative role of states and school districts. University respondents acknowledged several obstacles to progress, especially the shortage of funding for clinical experiences (Wallace Foundation, 2016). More generally, however, the reports suggested the need for principal preparation that includes “the provision of learning experiences that reflect the job of a principal” (Wallace Foundation, 2016, p. 17).

The following year, a joint endeavor of The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and the Collaboration for Effective Educator Development, Accountability, and Reform Center (CEEDAR, 2017) sought to translate research to action and increase interplay

between leadership development and special education. The collaboration produced a "guidance document" integrating the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL) with research-based leadership practices supporting high-quality inclusive school environments focused on the success of SWDs. The document furnishes recommendations for principal preparation founded on research and feedback from consulting groups consisting of state and local education heads, university instructors, school principals, and scholars. CCSSO and CEEDAR (2017) emphasize the principal's predominant role as an inclusive school leader and advocate for models of professional development that instill a working knowledge of disabilities, and a results-oriented approach to leading and monitoring instructional progress. A summary of corresponding success indicators is mapped to each PSEL standard in Table 1.

Table 1

PSEL 2015 Standards and CCSSO/CEEDAR Guidance Document

PSEL standard	CCSO/CEEDAR guidance document focus on success of students with disabilities
Mission, vision, and core values	Principals work collaboratively with parents and other stakeholders to develop a mission and vision that supports all students, including students with disabilities.
Ethics and professional norms	Principals possess an ethical mind-set and adhere to ethical professional norms as they manage through dilemmas that arise when serving students with disabilities. They focus on developing productive relationships with effective communication to build awareness and trust.
Equity and cultural responsiveness	Principals ensure the success and well-being of students with disabilities by providing equitable access to resources, supports, and learning opportunities. They use an assets-based approach in their leadership and educate others on the historic and institutional forces that impeded equitable access and opportunities for students with disabilities.
Curriculum, instruction, and assessment	Principals communicate high academic expectations for students with disabilities and work with teachers to develop their capacity to plan and deliver evidence-based approaches to instruction and assessment.

Communities of student care and support	Principals build a safe, caring, and healthy environment that encourages students with disabilities to be active and responsible individuals. They support teachers in efforts to create inclusive environments that foster acceptance, caring, and positive student-peer relationships.
Professional capacity of school personnel	Principals hire and retain effective teachers who value inclusion while providing high-quality professional development and identify strategies to continually motivate faculty and staff to effectively educate students with disabilities.
Professional community for teachers and staff	Principals encourage teachers to set high expectations, be open to feedback, and exercise discretion. They also promote collaboration, provide opportunities for teachers to learn and experiment, and manage tensions and conflicts.
Meaningful engagement of families and community	Principals create partnerships with families to support students with disabilities inside and outside of school. They partner with families to gain insights into the child's disability that better allows teachers to make educationally sound decisions.
Operations and management	Principals manage budgets in collaboration with the central office to effectively and efficiently utilize resources that support students with disabilities. They are purposeful about assigning roles and responsibilities to staff and effectively manage school structures and systems to maximize support to students with disabilities.
School improvement	Principals emphasize the "why" and "how" of improvement, provide learning opportunities for teachers, and address capacity problems to ensure that the needs of students with disabilities are intentionally addressed as part of the school's improvement processes.

Note. PSEL = Professional Standards for Educational Leaders; CCSSO = Council of Chief State School Officers; CEEDAR = Collaboration for Effective Educator Development, Accountability.

Adapted from "Leadership Preparation for Special Education and Inclusive Schools: Beliefs and Recommendations From Successful Principals," by D. E. DeMatthews, S. Kotok, and A. Serafini, 2020, *Journal of Research on Leadership Education*, *15*(4), p. 306 (https://doi.org/10.1177/1942775119838308).

The implementation of disability-inclusive school environments and special education services in schools entails a range of organizational, educational, and lawful leadership practices (Billingsley et al., 2018). These actions are effective within and across leadership domains (Hitt & Tucker, 2016). Disability-inclusive school leadership is practiced in accordance with special education laws and policies, the intent of which every principal should know (Pazey & Yates, 2019). DeMatthews et al. (2020) declared that guidance from local education agencies (LEAs) ensures

- the school identifies, locates, and evaluates any child suspected of having a disability;
- all eligible students receive a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE);
- school personnel work collaboratively with the child's family to annually develop an Individualized Educational Program (IEP);
- timely and appropriate changes to an IEP are made when the students fail to meet goals or when misconduct disrupts learning; and
- appropriate procedures and supports are implemented when a student consistently struggles with managing his or her behavior and/or is regularly removed from his or her placement (e.g., the use of response to intervention [RTI], the development or redevelopment of a behavioral intervention plan [BIP]) (p. 307).

Experts have also advised that school districts "should have more say in program offerings and continuous improvement efforts that are informed by evidence of graduates' effectiveness on the job" (Wallace Foundation, 2016, p. 17). District support is a vital issue for principals in an era of school reform (Zepeda & Ponticell, 2019). The development and support of capable principals require adequate preparation and continuing professional development

(Darling-Hammond et al., 2014). Research has found high-quality professional learning opportunities for principals to be the key to building principals' leadership capacities (Levin et al., 2020). Adapting leadership practice in light of changing demands requires in-house training from school districts. Unfortunately, very few principals have access to authentic, job-embedded professional learning (Levin et al., 2020). In many states and school districts, professional development is altogether neglected (Manna, 2015; Rowland, 2017). Policymakers have been urged to rethink, prioritize, and budget to improve principal professional development through research-based, on-the-job training (Levin et al., 2020; Rowland, 2017).

Perhaps the most significant barrier to developing effective disability-inclusive school environments and special education services in the United States is the amount of support afforded to principals by district-level leaders (Billingsley et al., 2017; Billingsley et al., 2018; Cartagena & Pike, 2020; Kim et al., 2020). Limited access to professional development and resources impedes school leadership practice and the imperative to provide SWDs with opportunities to learn. These obstacles frustrate progress toward serving SWDs in less restrictive settings when added to inadequate preparation (Billingsley et al., 2018).

Scholarship on the training or lack thereof that school principals receive in helping SWDs is scarce (Bateman et al., 2017; Roberts & Guerra, 2017; Sider et al., 2017). Research does show a lack of professional development opportunities provided in both pre-service and in-service settings (Billingsley et al., 2018; Pregot, 2021; Sider et al., 2017). Consistent with these findings is the recurring theme throughout most of the literature that principals regret not having had more professional learning opportunities, both in their pre-service preparatory programs and through in-service training (DeMatthews et al., 2020; Sider et al., 2017).

In the absence of pre-service training to help facilitate IEP meetings and make difficult decisions, principals learn their lessons "the hard way" on the job (DeMatthews et al., 2020). Considering the principal's central role in shaping disability-inclusive school cultures (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010; Roberts & Guerra, 2017), the influence of day-to-day activities in promoting a growth mindset cannot be understated. "This on-the-job training is reflected in the day-to-day activities that principals engage in to support students with special education needs" (Sider et al., 2017, p. 12).

Statement of the Problem

Principals have done little to merge the worlds of special and general education teachers and other personnel (Sun & Xin, 2020). The educational leadership gap is evident with inadequate knowledge and skills to aid, employ, and organize effective intervention and appropriate special education services. What is less apparent is principals' propensity for maintaining the status quo (Cameron, 2016; Meeks, 2016; Sun & Xin, 2020). Behind decades of research and millions of federal dollars, cyclical leadership practices persist (Meeks, 2016). What is missing from the literature is any discussion of what special education administrators have to say about why. Aside from consensus about inadequate preparation, insufficient experience, and lack of professional development opportunities, perceptions from the field could reveal the sources of dissonance between general and special education.

Research on special education leadership from the perspective of school principals is limited. Even more rare are studies that explore the intersection between school principals and district-level or system leaders regarding special education and disability-inclusive practices. Cobb's (2015) meta-analysis of 19 North American articles—ranging mostly from 2001 to 2011—connected special education leadership to elementary and secondary school principals'

spheres of responsibility. This research confirmed the effect of principals' leadership practices on teacher competence and prioritized their role in the field of inclusion and special education as tone-setters and signposts. However, previous research remains silent on the specific understanding and experience of special education directors in interpreting and implementing policy, and their expectations for service delivery in schools. As key facilitators in the work environment of principals, capable special education directors can fill gaps in the availability of resources and processes to ensure that principals are skilled and competent practitioners (Fan et al., 2019).

Consideration of the important mentor-mentee relationship between special education directors and principals and select disability-leadership competencies provides a starting point from which to explore a number of questions, including what process (if any) informs service and placement decisions involving SWDs in schools; what types of supports or initiatives would be effective in developing district- and building-level competencies, and whether there are specific monitoring and impact indicators related to the existence and/or effectiveness of programs, the delivery of services, training, knowledge, attitudes and intentions. Assessment of competencies could be used for providing performance feedback. Principals' and special education directors' assessment of competency could be used to identify areas for initial training and professional development. It could also ensure that general and special education teachers are adequately prepared to offer collaborative support to SWDs.

The dynamic around resource management, personnel supervision, and ensuring compliance with federal laws are too important to ignore (Bublitz, 2016; Cameron, 2016). When school heads are not academically qualified, they deter the development and implementation of special education services. Research findings reveal a familiar pattern of approval among school

district leaders integrating special and general education in schools (Cameron, 2016). However, traditional approaches continue to prevail (Cameron, 2016; Sun & Xin, 2020).

Despite a seeming optimism for supporting students receiving special education services (Bai & Martin, 2015), such assurance exceeds reality. Commitment toward implementation is lacking, and antiquated education models for SWDs remain (Jahnukainen, 2015). Not surprisingly, the co-curricular efforts of school leaders are more functional than academic. There continues to be a gap in understanding the difference between integration and inclusion among principals (Jahnukainen, 2015).

Research citing that most building administrators favor serving all children in the classroom stands in contrast to its stated emphasis on the formation of administrative attitudes toward challenging (not bolstering) systems grounded in supporting how things stand (Thompson, 2015). Leaders may recognize the importance of delivering services to SWDs but lack the time and resources to acquire the requisite skills and knowledge (Luckner & Movahedazarhouligh, 2019; Mestry, 2017). Or another possibility, they "work within a system that has enough room for adaptations, yet few explicit requirements for accountability regarding inclusion (Killoran et al., 2013, p. 242).

The mechanism prescribed under IDEA by which specialized instruction and related services are documented and delivered to SWDs is in the IEP. The foundational principles for providing meaningful benefits to SWDs with IEPs were set forth in *Cypress-Fairbanks Independent School District v Michael F, 1997* and summarized by Yell et al. (2007) as follows:

1. The program must be individualized on the basis of the student's assessment and performance.
2. The program must be administered in the least restrictive environment.

3. The services must be provided in a coordinated and collaborative manner by key stakeholders
4. Positive academic and nonacademic benefits must be demonstrated. (p. 6)

The components are all there, but the execution is lacking. Moreover, foundational knowledge and special education skills are not required for supervision (Essex, 2016; Sun & Xin, 2020).

Background

In the name of "education reform," the public policy objective at the federal level to promote a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) to all students regardless of their disability status has spread roots through a broad range of legislation, including the following: Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA) of 1975 (Public Law 94-142), now the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) after a 1990 reauthorization; and No Child Left Behind (NCLB) from 2001 (Public Law 107-110), replaced by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015 (Public Law 114-95). This legislative evolution of special education reflects our nation's adjustment to refine approaches to educating SWDs (University of Massachusetts Global, 2020).

Under IDEA, states are responsible for meeting the special needs of eligible SWDs. Key federal statistics on the provision of special education services for SWDs have contributed to the formation of special education policy (Lewit & Baker, 1996). The government response to statistical evidence of underserved SWDs has led to a gradual increase in the number of children three to 21 years old served as a percent of total enrollment since 1977 (see Table 2).

Table 2

Children 3 to 21 years old served as a percent of total enrollment under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), 1976-77 through 2019-20

1976-1977	1980-1981	1990-1991	2000-2001	2008-2009	2009-2010	2010-2011	2011-2012	2012-2013	2013-2014	2014-2015	2015-2016	2016-2017	2017-2018	2018-2019	2019-2020
8.3	10.1	11.4	13.3	13.2	13.1	13.0	12.9	12.9	12.9	13.0	13.2	13.4	13.7	14.1	14.4

Note. Adapted from U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2021). *Digest of Education Statistics* (NCES 2021-009). Table 204.30. Public Domain.

Apart from establishing guidelines for the diagnosis of disabilities, the statute and its successive amendments offer fiscal incentives to schools based on the number of SWDs receiving special education and related services. Several studies have established the significance of school-based incentives on the provision and availability of special education services to students (Cohen, 2007). Reduced to the singular aspect of the setting, the percentage of SWDs six to 21 spending at least 80% of their day inside general education classrooms has more than doubled from 31.7% in 1989 to 64.8 in 2019, while those spending less than 40% of their day inside general education classrooms has been nearly cut in half from 24.9% to 12.8% over the same time span (see Appendix A).

Anthony-Higley (2019) interpreted this increase in time spent by eligible SWDs inside general classrooms to indicate services rendered as part of inclusive practice. But just because SWDs are studying in a regular classroom doesn't mean they are being educated among their peers. Likewise, the pursuit of policy does not of necessity translate into practice. Inclusive rhetoric contained in education policy documents exceeds the reality of implementation. Jahnukainen's (2015) work on this issue established a gap in understanding the difference between integration and inclusion among principals and Kim et al. (2020) laid bare a range of

administrative discrepancies. Often the determination of which inclusive model to follow is made at the discretion of the school administrator. That's why examining and monitoring administrators' knowledge of disability-inclusive leadership competency can benefit student learning (Kim et al., 2020; LeMay, 2017).

Disproportionate inclusive opportunities are not always an oversight of legal compliance. Teachers have communicated an urgent need for administrative support for successful implementation of disability-inclusive educational practices (Kim et al., 2020). Lack of support from state or district administration is commonly identified as a barrier to inclusive practice (Kim et al., 2020). Nonetheless, teachers also identify administrator-level support as the most efficient factor for addressing their concerns regarding inclusion (Kim et al., 2020). Administrators can exert a "top-down effect" in schools and the related educational aims. Their decisions shape school climate and culture, consequently affecting the successful implementation and overall effectiveness of the inclusive paradigm (Kim et al., 2020).

Fortunately, ownership of teaching and learning for SWDs is no longer the sole responsibility of the special education teacher. The influence of facilitators across the ecological system of schools on the implementation of disability-inclusive education is telling (Tahir et al., 2019). Familiarization with the laws and regulations that impact SWDs can help principals adapt and better understand this shift in stewardship.

As of 2020, the number of students ages three to 21 receiving special education services in the U.S. exceeded seven million – 14 percent of all public-school students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). These students and their families rely heavily on principals' capacity to safeguard and promote their best interests (Heibutzki, 2017). As instructional leaders, principals can either help or inhibit effective inclusionary practice (Bai & Martin, 2015).

Principals often unwittingly create feelings of uncertainty and marginalization for key stakeholders because they do not understand the essential leadership elements of special education (Cornelius & Gustafson, 2021). Lack of knowledge and understanding is a large part of the reason (Cornelius & Gustafson, 2021), but it is also because stakeholders take their cues from school leaders (Samuels, 2018).

Whatever one's definition of disability-inclusive education, it seems inseparably connected to place (Dukes & Berlingo, 2020). Placement, in a sense, assigns students to a learning environment, but from a broader perspective is the manifestation of the belief that all students, regardless of their support needs, should be educated with their non-disabled peers (Harrower, 1999; Schulte et al., 1998). Outside deployment of environmental observations with the flexibility to assign students to a specific location, inclusive philosophy transcends the idea of physical location. Classroom placement demonstrates to SWDs their worth as learners (Dukes & Berlingo, 2020).

Inclusion of SWDs in general education settings has been practiced in a fashion from the turn of the 20th to the 21st century (Kauffman et al., 2017). The measure of evidence that inclusive philosophy guides educational placement decisions is slight (Dukes & Berlingo, 2020). The separate, unequal education of SWDs in the LRE raises more questions than answers (Pratt, 2017), leaving students on the outside looking in. Even more perplexing, the amount of knowledge about effective instructional techniques for SWDs has never been greater (Orelove et al., 2017).

Meaningful access to the general education curriculum creates a proportional partnership for SWDs (LeBarre, 2017). The inclusive approach to combining special and general education students in classroom settings promotes diversity, equity, and lifelong learning (Tahir et al.,

2019). Federal and state legislation directives imply that principals have the knowledge and skills to advocate for all students (Bateman et al., 2017; ESSA, 2015; IDEA, 2004; Roberts & Guerra, 2017). Federal regulation also calls for accountability on behalf of SWDs (Schulze & Boscardin, 2018). Furthermore, principals are obligated to adhere to all elements outlined in IDEA. The legal requirements of principals relating to IDEA consist of identification, placement, appropriate services, and discipline of SWDs (Roberts & Guerra, 2017; IDEA, 2004).

Research is lacking "on the detailed proficiencies that are essential for principals to be effective special education leaders" (Roberts & Guerra, 2017, p. 5). The obvious solution to this void seems to be in providing opportunities for future leaders "to acquire essential knowledge and skills to implement and supervise an effective special education program for the success of all students with disabilities" (Roberts & Guerra, 2017, p. 13). With so much evidence of best practices from existing literature to support SWDs, using a representable sampling of competencies to assess district and school leadership's understanding of disability-inclusive practice is fitting and could prove to be categorically informative.

The special education leadership competencies utilized to conduct this study offered an opportunity to correlate preparation and practice. Research to revise and refine such competencies is in order (Bateman et al., 2017). School success hinges on the school principal's instructional leadership. The extent to which a principal ensures instructional effectiveness and inclusivity hinges on his or her understanding of all students' needs, including SWDs (Cornelius & Gustafson, 2021). Special Education Directors work with principals to engage in professional learning that enables principals to facilitate the design and alignment of accessible disability-inclusive instructional approaches that meet the needs and abilities of all learners.

Research Questions

The following questions were developed to guide and shape the research conducted for this study:

1. What competencies do special education directors and principals perceive essential to implementing and supporting disability-inclusive education in districts and schools?
2. How do special education directors and principals perceive select competencies related to the implementation and support of disability-inclusive education in districts and schools?
3. What types of professional learning do special education directors provide for principals to develop disability-inclusive educational leadership competency?

Description of Terms

The following description of terms designates and defines the terminology used throughout this study:

Advocacy and Program Development. "Lobby to system leaders and community organizations for programs, services, and supports that will enhance students' success" (Sider & Maich, 2022, p. 24).

Agency. "Actively engages students, their family members, teachers, and others in the educational environment to work from an asset-based perspective, focusing on strengths and opportunities as opposed to only focusing on the challenges and needs" (Sider & Maich, 2022, p. 25).

Collaboration. "Engage educators in collaborative communities of practice to strategically develop and implement programs contributing to student success" (Sider & Maich, 2022, p. 24).

Communication. "Communicate consistently and comprehensively with teachers, system leaders, other educators, students, parents/guardians, and other stakeholders" (Sider & Maich, 2022, p. 24).

Contextual Knowledge. "Awareness of the specific contextual factors for students and their families, individuals within the school, community (e.g., champions of inclusion, toxic naysayers) as well as knowledge of the overall school climate and of the neighboring community" (Sider & Maich, 2022, p. 25).

Differentiated Leadership. "Knowledge of flexible class and school-wide approaches to students' strengths and needs and models the way" (Sider & Maich, 2022, p. 25).

Disability-Inclusive Education. "Students with disabilities being educated in the general education classroom and having full access to the general education curriculum, instruction, and peers with needed supports" (Theoharis & Causton, 2014, p. 83).

Disability-Inclusive Leadership Competencies. "The knowledge, skills, and attitudes that principals need to foster inclusive education" (Sider & Maich, 2022, p. 16).

Embodies Professional Standards. "Holds up ethical standards such as trust, respect, integrity, and care in their work to support all students" (Sider & Maich, 2022, p. 25).

Fosters Relationships. "Recognizes that relationships are fundamentally important to the successes of all students and actively works to foster professional relationships that model acceptance and inclusion" (Sider & Maich, 2022, p. 25).

Free appropriate public education (FAPE). Access to FAPE is supported by "special education and related services that (A) have been provided at public expense, under public supervision and direction, and without charge; (B) meet standards of the State educational agency; (C) include an appropriate preschool, elementary school, or secondary school education

in the State involved; and (D) are provided in conformity with the individualized education program required" (20 U.S.C. 1401 (602)(9)(A-D)).

Human Resources. "Hire, train support, and retain staff committed to the inclusion of students with special education needs" (Sider & Maich, 2022, p. 24).

Individualized education program (IEP). Development of an IEP "means a written statement for each child with a disability that is developed, reviewed, and revised in accordance with section 614(d)" (20 U.S.C. 1401 (602)(14)).

Instructional leadership. Focused more on promoting student learning than on teaching (Lashway & ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, 2002).

Least restrictive environment (LRE). "To the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities, including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with children who are not disabled, and special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only when the nature or severity of the disability of a child is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily" (20 U.S.C. 1412 (612)(a)(5)(A)).

Legal Requirements. "Knowledge related to provincial or state regulations for inclusion and special education" (Sider & Maich, 2022, p. 24).

Lived Experience of Students with Special Education Needs. "Awareness of the experiences of students with special education needs and insight into the potential barriers they experience and the opportunities to overcome these barriers" (Sider & Maich, 2022, p. 24).

Policies and Procedures. "Awareness of and ability to navigate school jurisdiction identification, placement, review, staffing, and funding issues" (Sider & Maich, 2022, p. 24).

Principal. Manager of building-level school operations and activities, whose role is to coordinate curricula, oversee teachers and other school staff, and provide a safe and productive learning environment for students.

Principal Preparation Programs (PPPs). These serve as "a primary means for providing beginning principals with the tools they need to lead their schools effectively" (Grissom et al., 2018, p. 74).

Problem-Solving. "Ability to frame, re-frame, and examine challenges leading to effective implementation of solutions" (Sider & Maich, 2022, p. 24).

Professional Learning. "Identify problems of practice and implement professional learning opportunities for oneself, for teachers, and for the staff to target areas of need" (Sider & Maich, 2022, p. 24).

Special education. The IDEA was put in place to ensure that children from infancy to 22 years of age are provided "specially designed instruction, at no cost to parents, to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability, including (A) instruction conducted in the classroom, in the home, in hospitals and institutions, and other settings; and (B) instruction in physical education" (20 U.S.C. 1401 (602)(29)(A-B)).

Special Education Director. Responsible for implementing and maintaining age 3-21 special education programs and services in conformance to district, state, and federal objectives and laws.

Students with Disabilities (SWDs). The diagnosis of "a child with intellectual disabilities, hearing impairments (including deafness), speech or language impairments, visual impairments (including blindness), serious emotional disturbance (referred to . . . as "emotional disturbance"), orthopedic impairments, autism, traumatic brain injury, other health impairments,

or specific learning disabilities; and who by reason thereof needs special education and related services" (20 U.S.C. 1401(3)(A)(i-ii)).

Values Inclusion. "Actively communicates and models a belief that all students should be included in their neighborhood schools" (Sider & Maich, 2022, p. 25).

Theoretical Framework

The increased complexity of the role of the principal has turned effective administrative leadership into an essential prerequisite to school-level educational reform. Still, the dilemma remains as researchers have suggested, principals are unprepared to accomplish the tasks expected of them (Billingsley et al., 2018; Cobb, 2015). The research gap between school inclusion of SWDs and effective school leadership is significant (Lynch, 2021; Sider & Maich, 2022). Findings from each domain can inform the other, but the field is short on literature leading to competency benchmarks for principals to support inclusive schools for SWDs (Bateman et al., 2017). The framework proposed in this study highlights standards for leadership competency in transforming a wide range of well-established school and classroom practices to meet inclusive school demands. The framework, developed by Sider and Maich (2022), identifies three competency areas and serves as the basis for the research agenda.

Disability-inclusive leadership competencies comprise the skills, knowledge, and attitudes required for principals to promote the development of inclusive education (Sider & Maich, 2022). Establishing competencies and competency frameworks enables principals' innovative and monitoring capabilities in setting their own direction and that of their schools to ensure that progress is being accomplished towards specified objectives (Sider & Maich, 2022). It is important to acknowledge that educational leadership competencies are often framed in similar ways. Lost in their construction, yet critical in the application, is a precise language that

clarifies the defining characteristics of leadership competencies deemed most instrumental in fostering inclusive schools for SWDs.

Comparative analysis of competency standards for principals helps to identify expected patterns of behavior in different jurisdictions (Lambert & Bouchamma, 2019). Absent from the sphere of leadership practices comprising common communicative, legal and regulatory, and developmental activities are the specific competencies related to disability-inclusive leadership in special education (Lambert & Bouchamma, 2019). Research on disability-inclusive school leadership competencies sifts the existing special education literature for principal proficiencies corresponding or relevant to inclusive education and how they are incorporated by accreditation entities, if at all (Bateman et al., 2017; Thompson, 2017). The distinguishing feature linking general leadership competencies and those applicable to inclusion for SWDs are the specific skills emphasized in disability-inclusive leadership models (Sider & Maich, 2022). For example, awareness of the IEP process, parent relations, professional development of staff, and flexibility on behalf of SWDs. Also relevant to the leadership competencies required of principals in supporting disability-inclusive education are the leadership competencies of special education administrators. Thompson's (2017) meta-analysis refers to eight categories of competencies essential to leaders of special education services and programs: collaboration, program development and organization, program and individual research and evaluation, leadership and policy, professional development and ethical practice, shared vision and decision-making, retention of personnel, and data analysis for planned decision-making.

The purpose of this study was to identify and describe principals' and special education directors' perceptions of their roles and the associated competencies for addressing the implementation and support of disability-inclusive education in districts and schools. Based on

their review of the scholarly literature and experience as long-term educators, Sider and Maich (2022) identified and defined leadership competencies that are particularly important for principals to foster in relation to supporting the wide-ranging needs of SWDs in schools (Table 4). Participant data were mapped for analysis against selected indicators from this framework.

Significance of the Study

The goal of inclusive education**,** as defined by Cochrane (2016)**,** is to support diverse classrooms and meet the needs of all students, including SWDs, in a general education setting. If a disability-inclusive school setting is one in which special education services are provided within the general education classroom, then SWDs receiving special education services can attend school with typically developing age- and grade-level peers. This study supports the significance of an increased focus on the leadership competencies for disability-inclusive education program delivery to help facilitate this union. Otherwise, SWDs will linger within the constraints of antiquated structures without support.

Leadership skills, knowledge, and attitudes correlated to disability-inclusive education practices intersect and proceed in tandem with joint leadership through collaboration between principals and directors of special education (Green, 2008; Hite et al., 2005). In this way successful implementation of disability-inclusive education practices within a school system is contingent upon principals' and special education directors' interactions as leaders. Identifying the leadership proficiencies perceived as essential to implementing and sustaining a successful disability-inclusive education framework informs principal professional development and helps fill the gap between preparation and practice (Lynch, 2021). Additionally, gauging district and school leaders' estimation of the other's ability to develop and foster system-wide or school-level disability-inclusive competency reveals the transfer gap between policy and best practice.

Most school leaders recognize the importance of serving all students but do not have the expertise in delivering services to SWDs (Pregot, 2021; Roberts & Guerra, 2017). While not every principal can be an expert, all stakeholders would benefit from consistent skills, knowledge, and attitudes among principals regarding their roles as disability-inclusive leaders in special education, and how they apply within schools.

Principals' influence is instrumental to the successful implementation of pivotal practices that shape the programs they are responsible for administering (Murphy, 2018). Sider et al. (2017) also noted that "principals set the tone and expectations in a range of foundational processes, including inclusion and special education, and their leadership role in the field is a top issue" (p. 7). Whereas many studies related to special education leadership in the U.S., and internationally, emphasize PPPs to drive improvement, the significance of this study lies not in its recognition of the need to improve PPPs but in its consideration of the connection between district-level competency, skill requirements, and professional development that determine the readiness of school principals. Competency plays a critical role in the design of experiences that enable learners to close specific performance gaps (Donovan, 2018). A competency framework establishes a common language about implementation within a functional context, outlining role performance in general terms of required knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Across the similar yet different functions of principals and special education directors emerges the intersection of leadership competency. The administrative practices conceived as relational, comprised through the intersection of competencies, constitute the building blocks of organizing processes (Donovan, 2018) such as the implementation and support of disability-inclusive environments and special education services in districts and schools. Enhancing these practices through in-service training and allocation and alignment of resources is within a special education director's

scope of influence. Even so, movement without direction is movement without progress. Calling for action without first identifying competency gaps and best practices criteria for program design and delivery will only promote further inconsistency and inefficiency within and across settings (Donovan, 2018; Jesteadt, 2012; Lashley, 2007). The identification and unification of these practices can offer insight into the development of aspiring leaders and current practitioners (Hitt & Tucker, 2016). The distribution of leadership for instruction puts a premium on proper task allocation, collaboration, and the professional development of others through ongoing interaction (Bauer & Silver, 2018). Further research is needed to increase principals' capacity for efficacious influence on best disability-inclusive school practices and processes. Identifying and describing principals' and special education directors' perceptions of their roles and the associated competencies for addressing the implementation and support of disability-inclusive education would inform principal preparation and professional development.

Overview of Research Methods

This descriptive analysis employed semi-structured interviews with a purposeful sample of special education director and principal pairs representing five LEAs in five states. The purpose of this study was to identify and describe principals' and special education directors' perceptions of their roles and the associated competencies for addressing the implementation and support disability-inclusive education. Counter to the recurrent academic narrative, curricular dissimilarities to practice expectations at preparation programs endure (The Wallace Foundation, 2016). Rather than add to the already substantial existing literature concerned with the need to improve PPPs, research was oriented by a theoretical ideal and aimed to bring "systemic" deficiencies into the picture and designate opportunities for intervention. Through the interviewee's answers to questions about what he or she should be doing in a specific context,

the problems of practice became less a matter of better academic training than a fundamental misconception of leadership roles in special education by those with statutory responsibilities.

A framework of competencies for inclusive school leaders was used to guide and focus the initial interview questions. The framework provided specific direction about three topical areas addressed in the interviews. The researcher collected data through in-person semi-structured interviews. Participants were selected from traditional public schools within the participating school districts. A purposeful sampling process was followed to solicit and explore the experiences of participants (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). The researcher looked for commonalities and differences in participants' experiences within and across the data. Interviews were framed by open-ended questions that reflected competencies from the organizing framework. Qualitative description began with a detailed summary of the first interview, followed by summaries developed for each subsequent interview. Competencies were used to code and combine key content into coherent results (Miles et al., 2014; Sandelowski, 2000). Participants consented to all interviews. The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and checked for accuracy. The methods used for this study were chosen to ensure its validity and reliability in capturing participants' perceptions of disability-inclusive education.

Chapter II

Review of Literature

There is an absence of scholarly work examining the linkage between building principals and special education directors and the impact this relationship has on supports and services for SWDs (S. Sider, personal communication, November 2, 2021). A review of related literature was conducted to synthesize current knowledge within the field of special education and disability studies. Findings for this chapter are presented under the following headings: disability-inclusive education, leadership and special education, theoretical framework, school culture and leadership, leadership and disability-inclusive school reform, and conclusion.

Introduction

The status quo in special education has prevailed over a long period. Research spanning five decades is clear on two counts. First, effective administration of special education programs necessitates foundational knowledge, skills, and understanding (Bateman et al., 2017; Boscardin et al., 2018; Esposito et al., 2018; Pregot, 2021; Roberts & Guerra, 2017; Sider et al., 2017; Sun & Xin, 2020; Thompson, 2015). Second, the foundational knowledge, skills, and understanding specific to special education administration are lacking (Bateman et al., 2017; Cornelius & Gustafson, 2021; Esposito et al., 2018; Pregot, 2021; Roberts & Guerra, 2017; Sider et al., 2017; Sun & Xin, 2020; Thompson, 2015). This void in expertise draws attention to the types of training and experiences that inform leadership practices and the issues related to inclusive education supports for SWDs.

Disability-Inclusive Education

The right to quality, inclusive, and equitable education is guaranteed but not always observed in practice. This type of negligence in public schools is commonly ascribable to social

attitudes, inadequate data, and ignorance of what constitutes inclusive learning environments. As a result, SWDs are overrepresented among society's illiterate and economically marginalized groups (USAID EducationLinks, 2022; Saavedra et al., 2021).

Full participation in education is the right of all SWDs. Disability-inclusive education fosters an ethos of intentional community and a culture of respect and belonging in schools (USAID EducationLinks, 2022). Recognizing SWDs as equals promotes a sense of connection, learning, and efficiency of teaching (Cser, 2006; Davidson, 2008). Yet today, promoting the full participation of SWDs remains a difficult task. Many SWDs are still not in school or inadequately supported (Saavedra et al., 2021; UNESCO, 2019).

Legal History

Students with disabilities have traditionally been segregated from their typical learning peers. Cartagena and Pike (2020) relate that with the commencement of IQ testing in the early 20th century, students worldwide who did not learn at the same rate or manner as their peers were relegated to self-contained settings apart from general society. Their research indicates that slowly, views shifted and schools for SWDs began to be established in western nations. Despite progress, they finish by noting that it wasn't until the 1990s that the inclusion of SWDs in general education settings became a global movement.

The collective focus on inclusive education reform has been modeled on the pattern of human rights legislation drafted in *The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action* which was signed in 1994 at the World Conference on Special Needs Education (UNESCO, 1994). The Salamanca document set forth the fundamental principles and expectations of inclusive practice, namely all children's right to education, recognition of individual learning needs, and access to curriculum in the general education setting (UNESCO, 1994, 2020). Reiteratively, the

Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006) formally acknowledged the rights of disabled persons to an inclusive education system that is:

- non-discriminatory;
- accessible in the communities in which they live;
- accommodative of individual requirements;
- duty-bound to facilitating required support within general education settings; and
- individualized to maximize academic and social development

In contrast with the fact that many countries have adopted inclusive models of education, social theories and models continue to thwart full inclusion. Beyond provisions, education providers must intentionally construct new realities and dismantle social barriers to establishing inclusive educational environments (Cartagena & Pike, 2020). Confronting these challenges is essential for policy and practice to move forward (Ainscow et al., 2012).

Legislation and litigation have fundamentally dictated the development of disability-inclusive education practices in the United States. The influence of social and economic factors has been minimal (Kim et al., 2019). Special education programming and services are enacted under the protection of federal and state laws. America's public education system operates within a web of legal and policy limitations. Building principals charged with extensive administrative tasks are tangled in mandates affecting school-level action. Shortage of training, time, teachers, and talent is restricting reform (Scott, 2017).

Laws proceeding from the exclusive history of U.S. public schooling such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) are evidence of reluctance to recognize and ratify the rights of SWDs as requisite for a just society (Padia & Traxler, 2020). Reform has remained a trademark of contemporary special education in the United States since

its inception in the mid 1970s. Provisions pertaining to a free appropriate public education (FAPE) for all students, including the disabled, were patently set forth in the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975. Public Law 94-142 (PL 94-142) is distinguished by the following four major decrees:

- to assure that all children with disabilities have available to them . . . a free appropriate public education which emphasizes special education and related services designed to meet their unique needs;
- to assure that the rights of children with disabilities and their parents . . . are protected;
- to assist states and localities to provide for the education of all children with disabilities; and
- to assess and assure the effectiveness of efforts to educate all children with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2021)

Since 1975, multiple revisions of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act have been absorbed into what is presently known as IDEA (2004). Whereas the rule of law affirms that education is an inborn right of all individuals and that SWDs and their parents must be protected, access to FAPE is beleaguered by disparities (Barber, 2020). These assertions feature prominently in political discourse where policy promises are predicated on their implementation.

The Incheon Declaration is the latest vision of change implementation within the Education 2030 Framework for Action (UNESCO, 2016), but the rhetoric of leading disability-inclusive school implementation does not match the reality (Mfuthwana & Dreyer, 2018). In the face of a half-century of advocacy and research on disability-inclusive education and its benefits, implementation efficacy is mixed at best (Bai & Martin, 2015; Thompson et al., 2015).

Progression of improvement is slow, and much of the practice points to grand efforts at compliance that over time, have been unproductive (Thompson et al., 2015).

The challenge of disability-inclusive education lies in confronting the inherent belief systems behind policymaking and practice (Thompson et al., 2015). Practice is driven and shaped by policy, but even though the policy may denote the pluralism of underlying legal and value systems, it is within schools and classrooms that policies are ultimately enacted (or ignored). Enacting rhetoric and turning it into practice captures the role of disability-inclusive leadership (Carter & Abawi, 2018).

Ideologically, inclusive education is less about child placement and more about providing a continuum of collaborative services and support to all children with or without disabilities (Dreyer, 2017; Jahnukainen, 2015; Thompson, 2015). For the same reason, disability-inclusive education is more than a one-size-fits-all approach to teaching children with a range of needs, including SWDs. The main difference between integrated and disability-inclusive education is that the onus is on the students to fit into the existing school system. In contrast, disability-inclusive education adapts to the individual needs of students (Besic et al., 2017). Because SWDs have distinct needs, their progress toward learning outcomes is reliant on tailored teaching environments. In view of their differing learning levels, promoting the inclusion of SWDs requires much more in the way of effort than federal initiatives (Agran et al., 2020).

Since the implementation is done in the classroom, teachers need to be supported. Mfuthwana and Dreyer (2018) note that traditional training of mainstream teachers does not address barriers to learning, but disability-inclusive education obliges them to accept the full range of learners in their mainstream classrooms. Former teachers functioning as administrators

lack the skills needed to oversee inclusive pedagogies and therefore undertake policy implementation effectively (Mfuthwana & Dreyer, 2018).

The foundation for upholding education statutes is far from settled. Educational practice remains nebulous (Barber, 2020) and its discharge depends on the normative context of states, school districts, and not infrequently, individual school sites (Padia & Traxler, 2020). What is more, educational access alone is not enough: Students need individualized, peer learning opportunities in conjunction with high expectations (Powell, 2015). Under IDEA (2004) conditions, SWDs have the right to participate in the general education curriculum. The LRE regulations specify that SWDs are to be educated with non-disabled students to the extent possible unless their disability hinders their potential to succeed in a regular classroom setting with supplementary aids and services (IDEA, 2004; Morningstar et al., 2017a). Simply put, supports and services are to drive student placement. Schools should start by developing ancillary services to support individual learning needs within a regular classroom setting rather than consider the inclusion of SWDs as a culminating arrangement (Padia & Traxler, 2020).

As a reform strategy, disability-inclusive education was conceived as a single education system to serve all students (Mitchell, 2005; UNESCO IBE, 2008). Though U.S. federal policy has continued to reinforce disability-inclusive practices, the segregation of students for more individualized and confined instruction continues to be an acceptable choice despite its previously established disadvantages (Brock, 2018; Cameron, 2016; Morningstar et al., 2017a; Morningstar et al., 2017b; O'Laughlin & Lindle, 2015; Sun & Xin, 2020). Kirby (2017) points to current deficit-based practices as the result of legislation that compels disability labels for students to access the specialized curricula. Subsequently, many SWDs have come to associate

special education with a place, clouding the conclusions that special education facilitates services implemented within general education classrooms (Kirby, 2017).

Despite established and legal assurances, America has not fully embraced the practice of educating all students in the mainstream of regular education (Powell, 2015). Ultimately, the extent to which SWDs are educated jointly with non-disabled peers depends upon a school or district framework rather than the student's individual needs (LeMay, 2017). The model on which SWDs participate in the general education curriculum is often made at the discretion of the school administrator (LeMay, 2017; Osiname, 2018).

Benefits

Understanding and adhering to the legal requirements of special education is essential but not the only reason schools should operate within an inclusive paradigm (Murphy, 2018). When implemented with purpose, inclusive models of education yield greater benefits to students than traditional models (IDEA, 2004). Research establishing the benefits of inclusive education for both students with and without disabilities has increased substantially over the past quarter-century (Carrington et al., 2016**).**

The work of Jackson et al. (2008) identified the pivotal role of context in the education of all learners, and this is true for SWDs. A more recent appraisal of placement outcomes distinguished a multitude of benefits resulting from inclusive placements of SWDs (Agran et al., 2020). Among these benefits for students with and without disabilities are improved communication skills and social interactions, self-determination, positive perceptions of belonging, and high expectations for learning. A 2016 (Hehir et al.) analysis of nearly 300 studies found that inclusive practices are beneficial to children's short- and long-term cognitive and social development.

Knowledge about students educated across different settings has been achieved through the accrual of studies examining the relative benefits of inclusive practices. Of significant note from the data, disabled students who access content in regular settings outperform their disabled peers who receive academic services in alternate settings. A study conducted by Hehir et al. (2012) examined the influencing factors linked with positive learning outcomes by analyzing close to 70,000 disabled primary, middle, and high school students across the United States. Their analysis controlled for factors that vary from setting to setting (e.g., English language proficiency, family income, and school quality). Results indicated a positive correlation between the amount of time students spent in regular education settings and their performance on language skills and mathematics assessments. A similar but opposite correlation was found for students educated in more segregated settings. Research examining data from the Special Education Elementary Longitudinal Study (SEELS) sees parallel benefits (Blackorby & Wagner, 2014). Further inspection of SEELS data by Blackorby et al. (2007) discovered that disabled students who access academic content in regular education courses exhibited significantly better reading skills.

A longitudinal study completed by Cole et al. (2018) adds fresh evidence to the body of comparative data supporting inclusion. Students receiving special education services in the State of Indiana were tracked from 2013 to 2018. Propensity score matching was used during the first year of the study to compare disabled students being educated in a regular setting for at least 80% of the day with similar disabled peers who were educated less than 80% in general settings. Over the five-year span of the study, these students' reading and mathematics assessment scores

were collected and compared. The standardized reading and mathematics test scores of students who were “included” proved superior to the scores of students educated apart from their mainstreamed peers.

According to Agran et al. (2020), studies comparing severely disabled students between general education settings and segregated, self-contained settings establish the regular education classroom as the setting that affords greater access to general education curriculum, subject matter expertise and developmentally appropriate instructional materials, and naturally increased support from typical peers. Also, Wehmeyer et al. (2021) found that IEPs were of better quality and social engagement levels were higher in inclusive settings.

Barriers

In terms of research, the treatment challenges of disability-inclusive education are wide-ranging and multifaceted (Rapp & Corral-Granados, 2021). Given the extensive scope of the field and its conceptual complexity, the research diverges considerably (Rapp & Corral-Granados, 2021). The absence of a common definition of inclusion for educational purposes can lead to a range of different practices. The real difference for SWDs lies in the delivering of evidence-based practices within general education settings (Agran et al., 2020).

Sharma and Mahapatra (2007) found the foremost barrier to inclusive education is the negative societal attitude toward its implementation. At present, De Beco’s (2018) research indicates that overcoming opposition to inclusive education is even more difficult given the conditions of the current political climate. He adds that education functions in the reflection of present-day societal standards which restrict curriculum to the acquisition of literacy, numeracy,

and science skills. These standards are prioritized to create a cycle of continual evaluation and successive stratification among students (Thomas, 2013) with the objective of preparing future adults to compete in a global economy (Liasidou, 2012; Slee, 2011). In this regard, the chief orientation of inclusive education stands in direct contrast to an external political context in which regular schools are expected to enhance the neoliberal agenda of competitiveness by equipping students with the skills and abilities to advance the production of economic growth (De Beco, 2018). By comparison, inclusive education is a social justice question that seeks to promote access to disabled students (De Beco, 2018).

Opposing standards in combination with established customs, organizational culture, and traditional practices continue to be the resistant forces to changing principals' habitual modes of thinking (Mestry, 2017). Sharma and Mahapatra (2007) also emphasized physical barriers to inclusive education, such as the pliability of the curriculum to meet a broad scope of learners and insufficient training opportunities for staff. Beyond the verbal commitment of school leaders to inclusive education, implementation at the building level must be a way of thinking about how educators eliminate barriers to learning without diminishing the wealth of individuality (Abawi & Oliver, 2013).

Legislative mandates have long been the propellants for organizational changes in public schools often posing new challenges for leaders (Mestry, 2017). As we approach the 20th anniversary of IDEA, the U.S. public education system still has not fully embraced a single uniform model of educating all students jointly in general classrooms (Powell, 2015). Regardless of any shared understanding about inclusive education at the theoretical level, practicality at the

operational level is affected by multiple political and policy realities (Armstrong et al., 2011). A study by Lyons et al. in 2016 made clear that while support for inclusive education at the time was bolstered by almost four decades of studies examining perspectives, procedures, and practices, knowing how to support diverse learners within general education classrooms and schools has not translated into a windfall of implementation work. Their research also drew attention to the considerable frustration expressed by experienced researchers and educators over straggling implementation, particularly amid settings that share common policies, funding, and demographics.

The methods and policy measures by which the government has attempted to influence educational placement practice on behalf of SWDs have thus far been unsuccessful in establishing a system-wide approach to disability-inclusive education, nor has the nationwide goal of "education for all" been met (Tahir et al., 2019). As verified again according to Table 3, the number of students spending less than 40 percent of the day in mainstream environments has declined every year since 1999. But, about half of students with intellectual or multiple disabilities are included in that category (see Table 3). Federal initiatives that could have a substantive impact on educational placement decisions have been put forth (Agran et al., 2020), but as Connor and Ferri observed (2007), special education policymakers are either uninterested or unwilling to make such changes.

Table 3

Percentage of students ages 6 through 21 served under IDEA, Part B, within disability categories, by educational environment: Fall 2018

Disability	Percentage of day inside the regular class			
	80% or more of the day	40% through 79% of the day	Less than 40% of the day	Other environments
All disabilities	64.0	17.9	13.1	5.0
Autism	39.7	18.4	33.4	8.5
Deaf-blindness	25.7	12.8	35.6	25.9
Developmental delay	65.6	18.5	14.4	1.5
Emotional disturbance	49.2	17.3	17.4	16.1
Heating impairment	63.0	14.8	10.8	11.5
Intellectual disability	17.4	27.2	48.6	6.8
Multiple disabilities	14.3	17.6	44.8	23.3
Orthopedic impairment	54.3	15.5	21.9	8.2
Other health impairment	67.3	20.0	8.4	4.2
Specific learning disability	72.3	21.2	4.7	1.8
Speech or language impairment	87.5	4.7	3.9	3.9
Traumatic brain injury	51.1	21.5	19.6	7.8
Visual impairment	68.2	12.4	8.9	10.5

Note. Adapted from U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, Office of Special Education Programs (2021, p. 56). Public Domain.

At the school level, preserving a segregated (specialized) approach appears to be a matter of choice (Lyons et al., 2016). Powell's comparative account of twentieth century special education in the United States and Germany demonstrated how multi-level management of American schools has led to considerably different responses, as well as non-responses, to the challenges of student diversity and individual learning needs. His analysis concluded that from an institutional perspective, observation of the structural and cultural barriers (e.g., diverse school settings and concepts of student disability) to comprehensive education for all reflects the ambivalence toward special education. Inclusive education at all levels represents a commitment

to learning, understanding of purpose, and movement toward acquiring a range of successful practices, analyzing barriers, and addressing challenges (Lyons et al., 2016).

Best Practices

The debate on inclusive education has advanced from the justification stage to implementation (Mfuthwana & Dreyer, 2018). Implementation of federal mandates pertaining to inclusive practice in schools and their interpretation is not universal (LeMay, 2017). Across the United States there is an absence of uniformity and consistency as it relates to the application of special education law in public schools (LeBarre, 2017). Ultimately, the extent to which SWDs are served within inclusive school settings is an IEP team decision, but one that is often predetermined by a school or district framework rather than the individual needs of the student (LeMay, 2017). Inclusion is difficult to define because of its broad use within education. The absence of a common definition of inclusion for educational purposes has led to a range of different practices which are often distorted by references within the literature to special needs (Carter & Abawi, 2018). Education in inclusive settings does provide students local access to instruction within regular classrooms (Thompson et al., 2015), but inclusive education is not just about mainstreaming SWDs into general education settings (Kendall, 2018; Toews et al., 2020).

Educational inclusion is manifest in the provision for a free appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE) as mandated by state and federal law but is neither defined nor drafted in IDEA (2004). Consequently, the inclusive idiom is commonly confused with similar concepts such as least restrictive environment (LRE) and mainstreaming (which is written in the statute). The placement feature of inclusive education is frequently obscured by perceptions of LRE (LeMay, 2017). Reduced to the singular aspect of the setting, merely integrating SWDs into general education classrooms, though unharmful, perpetuates an

education experience that both sells students short and has the effect of limiting their growth (Bublitz, 2016).

According to the literature, integration is only a first step (Anati & Ain, 2012). Learners are no longer required to fit into the existing school system; on the contrary, inclusive education adapts to meet the needs of all learners (Besic et al., 2017; Celik, 2019; Mfuthwana & Dreyer, 2018). The defining feature of inclusive education is the conviction to structure the general education classroom to meet the needs of all its members, irrespective of ability or disability (Abawi et al., 2018; Murphy, 2018). Tying an inclusive lens to a firm belief that all students can learn empowers principals in their role as school leaders to successfully advance differentiated instructional methods together with individualized initiatives that drive positive student learning outcomes. Celik (2019) emphasizes that acknowledging learner diversity can prevent low-level learning outcomes for students, and expectations should be adjusted and learning content and activities adapted according to student abilities and differences.

Abawi et al. (2018) asserts that each principal's approach to inclusive school practice should be "to support capacity building and professional learning focused on addressing individual student and staff need" (p. 14). Equally, Abawi et al. acknowledge, the types of leadership practices that grow and preserve inclusive school culture, irrespective of context or student need, are unclear. While specific steps to implementing inclusion in schools have yet to be delineated, inclusive education can be understood best as a process that incorporates different ways of acting in response to the diverse needs of every child (Besic et al., 2017). In principle, there are two approaches to meeting individual learning needs (Dreyer, 2017). One is supplemental, and the other is adaptive (Dreyer, 2017). Educators can provide customized

interventions to accommodate individual learning needs or modify the curriculum and instruction according to the specific needs of a learner.

Intervention is the deliberate and active teaching of content for the purpose of improving learning outcomes and adaptative support provided to children with greater access to the content taught (Dreyer, 2017). The aim of inclusion is to implement interventions and adaptations within all-encompassing academic environments, thus promoting the meaningful participation and learning of all students (Dreyer, 2017). Environments that are responsive to the academic and developmental needs of students identify target skills and evidenced-based practices with fidelity, and at the same time account for the components of implementation, those individuals responsible, as well as the feasibility of the intervention (Dreyer, 2017).

Organizationally, a school deepens its capacity to realize the intended purpose of inclusion through discourse and careful consideration of what context best meets the specific needs of students (Carter & Abawi, 2018). Understanding the interaction between everyday practice and contextual factors during the implementation process can help principals plan for disability-inclusive school structures, staff development, and collaboration with parents. To facilitate these processes, it is important for administrators to be acquainted with the current contextual realities in their buildings and in the community at large (Mfuthwana & Dreyer, 2018; Slater et al., 2018). Beyond training, teachers and principals need contextually responsive support (Mfuthwana & Dreyer, 2018).

Educational inclusion is more than a one-size-fits-all approach to teaching children with a range of needs, including special educational needs. Inclusion ensures that students with or without learning disabilities receive a quality education through appropriate curricula and organizational actions (Celik, 2019). From this perspective, inclusion is less about geographic

placement than a school staff's efficacy and capacity to educate all students within a general education setting (Bublitz, 2016). At the school level, building capacity for change is indispensable to fostering growth in staff efficacy and student learning (Bailey, 2020; Bublitz, 2016). To educate a diverse range of learners a principal must identify effective strategies to engage teachers and staff in driving sustainable cultural and organizational change within the framework of the LRE (Bublitz, 2016).

Leadership and Special Education

Effective administrative oversight of special education includes monitoring legal compliance with the rules, policies, and processes that regulate special education practice (Wilkins, 2020). The necessary expertise comprises command of IDEA (2004) and the know-how to dispatch a FAPE within the context of the LRE. School and district administrators must additionally acquire extensive operational experience with IEPs. This sample of terms is but a small set of the professional codes by which special education administrators are bound (Wilkins, 2020).

A fundamental premise emerging from the research is the importance of school leadership (Bellibas & Liu, 2017). Requiring competence in special education policy and advocacy is essential at both the instructional and administrative levels (Rodriguez et al., 2019). The instructional and operational roles of leadership are central to school improvement. Alas, unprepared administrators must assume supervisory positions in the special education process because pre-service training is insufficient (Wilkins, 2020).

Boscardin et al. (2018) likened explaining leadership in special education to wrapping "one's arms around an amoeba" (p. 64). His findings confirm efforts to harmonize the ambiguities of aptitude in special education's administrative field have failed to establish a

blueprint for proficiency. Leadership models of competence that highlight important functions supporting the instruction of SWDs and their families, he explains, minimize role ambiguity. Academic preparation, field-based experiences, and in-service development combine to enhance leadership's capability to support disability-inclusive school environments and special education services in schools (Boscardin et al., 2018).

Boscardin et al. (2018) also observed that experiences condition special education administrators' understanding of leadership. He stresses these experiences are not correlated with years of service but instead embedded in leadership positions. In other words, context and setting are ancillary to the strategic application of different approaches to leading special education.

Principals

Special education supervision is a responsibility that falls under the principal's role (Wilkins, 2020). Part of the difficulty that principals face is balancing the many-sided aspect of their positions. Principals develop budgets, allocate resources, dispense professional development, recruit and assess teachers, and establish expectations. Creating disability-inclusive schools comes with the added challenge of limiting district directives, shortage of resources, teacher opposition, and discontented parents (DeMatthews et al., 2020).

Special Education Directors

The role of special education director is often played by special educators with extensive classroom or leadership experience. As district-level managers, special education directors are active participants in decision-making, and in facilitating positive learning outcomes for SWDs. This administrator oversees all aspects of special education, including programming, services, personnel, and budgeting (Fenell et al., n.d.). The job title may differ from district to district, but the leader in this position is the foremost interpreter of special education law and ensures access

for SWDs to a FAPE (Anthony-Higley, 2019), as well as provisions for inclusive practice (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003). Together with principals, special education directors are mutually responsible for implementing disability-inclusive education practices in public schools (Anthony-Higley, 2019).

Functions of Leadership

Special education programming and inclusive practices on behalf of SWDs operate under the dual support of both principals and special education directors. With the integration of disability-inclusive education practices in the LRE, special education expertise has emerged as a growing resource for regular education (Anthony-Higley, 2019). Special education directors are interpreters of policy as it relates to the inclusion of SWDs in regular classrooms. It follows that special education directors are better able to integrate their knowledge into professional learning opportunities, offsetting the limits of training reported by principals to support the needs of SWDs (Hallinger & Murphy, 2012; Levenson, 2012; Lynch, 2016; Pazey & Cole, 2013). The leading function of district-level special education leadership is to provide oversight for compliance with regulatory governance and facilitate and plan instructional programming for SWDs in need of special education services at the building level (Boscardin, 2005; Bays & Crockett, 2007; Pazey & Cole, 2013).

The role of the educational manager has changed to that of the instructional leader, responsible for all aspects of school programs. Findings from Bellibas & Liu (2017) analyzing principals' perception of their own leadership practices were consistent with this view. Results indicated that effective schools are led by principals who allocate the bulk of their time to instructional issues rather than managerial matters. They found that creating an academic climate and work environment that engenders commitment to teaching excellence focused on learning

requires principals to maximize and protect instructional time. Supplementary indicators of effective instructional leadership gave prominence to principals who incentivize a growth mindset in school; who are accessible, visible, and willing to provide necessary resources. Endeavoring to balance the competing demands of instructional and managerial leadership can be both challenging and overwhelming (Skaalvik, 2020). Evidence-based teaching practices form the strongest basis from which to allay concerns about inclusive instruction, learner needs, and provision of resources together with academic expectations of SWDs in inclusive environments (McKenna et al., 2018).

Collaboration of Leadership

As with general education, college- and career-ready achievement levels are the outcomes sought by special education. Raising expectations for the achievement of students with disabilities is made possible by leaders who cue the alignment of instruction to learning standards while implementing collaborative and best practices (Van Boxtel, 2017). The combined expertise and shared responsibility are indicative of a school system strategy for continuous improvement (Nilsen, 2017). The provision of these opportunities and the requisite instruction enables the meaningful participation of all students (Van Boxtel, 2017). To this end, fostering collaboration between general and special education teachers is the key to forging a common cause for teaching and learning (Van Boxtel, 2017). Engaging special education directors in the strategic planning and leveraging of resources to establish minimum in-service proficiency expectations of principals as stewards of collaborative processes represents both a challenge and an opportunity.

Perceptions of Leadership

The portrayal of effective leadership is most frequently represented by the perceptions, behaviors, and interactions that influence teaching and learning (Bellibas & Liu, 2017). Research has sufficiently probed parents' and educators' perceptions of disability-inclusive education, but studies pointed at principals' and district leadership's awareness of the same is sparce (Chandler, 2015; Cobb, 2015). Few studies have focused on the pressures of special education leadership or examined perceptions of present practices and problems with the profession (Hussey et al., 2019). Understanding the perceptions and attitudes of educational leaders related to their responsibility for SWDs is imperative to ensuring their support in schools.

Designated leadership roles play a less important part in perceptions than experience, expertise, and work environment (Tudryn et al., 2016). Assigned leadership tasks are more a function of purpose and activity than part or position (Tudryn et al., 2016). Perceptions of leadership also shift as special education leaders mature in their positions, suggesting that approaches to leadership are more dependent on situations and expectations over time (Tudryn et al., 2016).

Special education directors and principals routinely assess situations and make decisions involving SWDs. These considerations are often based on their past experience—and perceptions of—effective practices (Cameron, 2016). Cameron (2016) and Cobb (2015) helped explore principals' perceptions about supporting SWDs, but neither reported on the types of training they receive nor their everyday experiences. There is no evidence that special education background impacts principals' perception of leadership one way or the other (Schulze & Boscardin, 2018). Nevertheless, accounting for principals' types of professional learning can abet understanding their knowledge of disability-inclusive education policies and practices (Sider et al., 2017).

Development of Leadership

A prominent point of scholarly analysis it to prepare leaders capable of supporting the equitable and effective education of SWDs. The link between special education knowledge and leadership practices is consistent with research arguing for the improvement of leadership preparation and development. There are many reasons why special education knowledge and beliefs figure prominently in research aiming to provide opportunities for a diversity of learners. Foremost among these is developing special education administrators at both the school and district levels in ways that tighten the connection between leadership, learning, and equity (Crockett, 2019).

Field Experience. Developing knowledgeable and skillful special education leadership personnel is critically important (Rodriguez et al., 2019). At the core of creating knowledge is the mechanism of experiential learning and real-world application of skills and theory. Special education leaders often function in the reflection of their own background and experiences (Waters & Hackney, 2020). Research provides a long history of evidence affirming the positive impact of experience and observation on leadership development (Rodriguez et al., 2019). One study published in 2008 (Rhee) foreshadowed the significance of field experience as a means of leadership development. The study found that the realization of course value from practical experience makes students more effective educators. This study suggests that application enhances students' (pre-service leaders) conceptual understanding of their roles and obligations and the transfer value of knowledge acquired through coursework (Rodriguez et al., 2019).

Role Evolution. The effect of leadership on academic, administrative, and instructional performance has been researched extensively (Barber, 2020; Nappi, 2019). Educational leaders are critical change agents for moving schools toward policy-based educational targets (Barreau

& McIntosh, 2020; Khumalo, 2019; Osiname, 2018; Rinehart, 2017). In these circumstances, a school's effectiveness, including (though indirectly) student learning outcomes, hinges on its principal (Barber, 2020).

Historically, principals served as school managers and disciplinarians. As part of a broader policy toward access and inclusion, legislative reform has shifted the principal's role to prioritize instructional leadership for all students, including disabled students. The failure of PPPs to adequately train pre-service administrative candidates for the responsibilities of special education leadership, though unfortunate is a current established reality (Moore, 2020). Research confirms that principals' self-perceived levels of competence in special education practice are equally minimal (Moore, 2020).

All students benefit from effective principals, but none more than those with disabilities (CCSSO & CEEDAR, 2017). In schools headed by uninformed principals, gaps between preparation and practice preserve inequities for disabled students (Moore, 2020). Certainly, more can be done to clear the path toward proficient principal leadership for disability-inclusive education.

Since the reauthorization of the IDEA in 2004, research substantiating the effectiveness of disability-inclusive educational practices has led school districts across the country to implement special education programming that is increasingly inclusive of SWDs (Bublitz, 2016; Carson, 2015; IDEA, 2004; Romanuck Murphy, 2018). Before the reauthorization of IDEA (2004), district administrators and special education teachers traditionally fulfilled special education responsibilities. With the burgeoning focus on inclusive education for SWDs, the administrative oversight and implementation of disability-inclusive education programming have

trended toward principals (Cobb, 2015 in Romanuck Murphy, 2018; Osiname, 2018; Voltz & Collins, 2010).

Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework plays an important role in analyzing and deriving meaning from data. In layman's terms, a theory provides a view of the entire forest rather than just a single tree (Kivunja, 2018). The structure used to summarize concepts in this study was developed from previously tested and published knowledge that is synthesized to serve as a sensemaking lens through which to view the data.

Questions posed to participants for this study were based on Competencies for Inclusive School Leaders compiled by Sider and Maich (2022). These competencies, gathered from experts in the field, are organized (see Table 4) into three domains reflecting foundational skills, knowledge, and attitudes necessary for educational leaders to support SWDs. This framework serves as ballast for exploring the collaboration and communication between building administrators and directors of special education as they apply to the development, implementation, and improvement of disability-inclusive school environments and special education services in schools. Understanding how school- and district-level special education leaders ~~mutually and reciprocally~~ perceive and prioritize leadership attributes of their roles can help improve how they supervise and manage the provision of special education and related services while ensuring that SWDs are provided a FAPE in the LRE (Tudryn et al., 2016).

Table 4

Sider & Maich Competencies for Inclusive School Leaders

	Competency	Explanation	Evidence and further reading
Skills	Communication	Communicate consistently and comprehensively with teachers, system leaders, other educators, students, parents/guardians, and other stakeholders.	Bateman et al., 2017; Lambert & Bouchamma, 2019; Schultz et al., 2011; Sider et al., 2021
	Professional learning	Identify problems of practice and implement professional learning opportunities for oneself, for teachers, and for the staff as a whole to target areas of need.	Cusson, 2010; Thompson, 2017
	Advocacy and program development	Lobby to system leaders and community organizations for programs, services, and supports that will enhance students' success.	Cusson, 2010; Lambert & Bouchamma, 2019; Stevenson-Jacobson et el., 2006; Thompson, 2017
	Collaboration	Engage educators in collaborative communities of practice to strategically develop and implement programs contributing to student success.	Duncan, 2010; Lambert & Bouchamma, 2019; Stevenson-Jacobson et al., 2006; Thompson, 2017
	Problem-solving	Ability to frame, re-frame, and examine challenges leading to effective implementation of solutions.	Bergstrom, 2012; Thompson, 2017
	Human resources	Hire, train, support, and retain staff committed to the inclusion of students with special education needs.	Bateman et al., 2017; Stevenson-Jacobson et al., 2006
Knowledge	Policies and procedures	Awareness of and ability to navigate school jurisdiction identification, placement, review, staffing, and funding issues.	Bateman et al., 2017; Thompson, 2017
	Legal requirements	Knowledge related to provincial or state regulations for inclusion and special education.	Bateman et al., 2017; Stevenson-Jacobson et al, 2006
	Lived experience of students with special education needs	Awareness of the experiences of students with special education needs and insight into the potential barriers they experience and the opportunities to overcome these barriers.	Cohen, 2015; Ross & Cozzens, 2016; Sider et al., 2017

	Differentiated leadership	Knowledge of flexible class and school-wide approaches to students' strengths and needs and models the way.	Schultz et al., 2011; Sider, 2020; Sider et al., 2021; Thompson, 2017
	Contextual knowledge	Awareness of the specific contextual factors for students and their families, individuals within the school, community (e.g., champions of inclusion, toxic naysayers) as well as knowledge of the overall school climate and of the neighboring community.	Cohen, 2015; DeMatthews et al., 2021; Lambert & Bouchamma, 2019; Ross & Cozzens, 2016; Schultz et al., 2011
Attitudes	Values inclusion	Actively communicates and models a belief that all students should be included in their neighborhood schools.	DeMatthews et al., 2021; Passman 2008; Sider et al., 2017; Sider, 2020; Stevenson-Jacobson et al., 2006
	Agency	Actively engages students, their family members, teachers, and others in the educational environment to work from an asset-based perspective, focusing on strengths and opportunities as opposed to only focusing on the challenges and needs.	DeMatthews et al., 2021; MacCormack et al., 2021; Passman, 2008; Sider et al., 2017
	Fosters relationships	Recognizes that relationships are fundamentally important to the successes of all students and actively works to foster professional relationships that model acceptance and inclusion.	Bateman et al., 2017; Sider et al., 2021; Stevenson-Jacobson et al., 2006
	Embodies professional standards	Holds up ethical standards such as trust, respect, integrity, and care in their work to support all students.	Sider, 2020; Thompson, 2017

Note. From *Leadership for Inclusive Schools* (pp. 24-25), by S. R. Sider and K. Maich, 2022, Rowman and Littlefield. Copyright 2022 by Seven Ray Sider and Kimberly Anne Maich. Reprinted with permission (see Appendix E).

In view of the inadequacies of PPPs, the role played by local education agencies (LEAs) in providing principals with special education knowledge and experiences looms large (Miller, 2018). However, reliable and objective measurement of principal preparation for practical

applications is neither required nor has been demonstrated in practice; the caveat being that such requirements focus on behavioral educator competency but not necessarily affective behavioral competency (Gregory, 2018). Affective behavior is addressed through experiential learning that builds efficacy (Gregory, 2018). Examining the indicators of successful disability-inclusive educational leadership from a competency-based perspective can serve as a starting point for improving accountability and in-service assessment of principals and special education directors as they work together to create successful models of inclusion. Identifying the elements perceived as essential to implementing and sustaining a successful special education framework informs principal professional development and helps fill the gap between preparation and practice (Lynch, 2021).

Broad consensus among scholars points to the lead role played by principals in ensuring successful disability-inclusive school practices and delivery of special education services (Cass, 2021; Schulze & Boscardin, 2018). Research regarding resources and professional development furnished by central administration and special education directors toward creating successful disability-inclusive models and sustained change capacity within school districts is minimal (Bublitz, 2016). Even more conspicuous is the absence of research that explores the intersection between school principals and district or system leaders concerning disability-inclusive education supports.

Implementation and change management are functions of school leadership (Osiname, 2018). Change initiatives often start with principals whose influence drives and sustains the changes at the building level (Osiname, 2018). However, the critical role of Special Education Directors in supporting principals' work cannot be overemphasized (Billingsley et al., 2017). It is within their scope of influence to improve pre-service preparation and professional development

and align resources to benefit SWDs (Billingsley et al., 2017). Implementing effective disability-inclusive school models of inclusion for SWDs is a collaborative learning exercise involving both stakeholders (Kendall, 2018). The partnership between principals and special education directors ensures that disability-inclusive schools are not just models but realizations.

The actions of effective principals are critical to the implementation and support of disability-inclusive school environments and special needs services in schools. Special education services in schools reflect the implementation competencies required by their leaders (Fan et al., 2019). Instead of altering views about inclusive education and dropping new knowledge about disabilities, principals need adequate training and knowledge of development best practices to equip teachers with what's real (e.g., applicable IEP and differentiated instruction skills) and not just ideal (Alborno, 2017). Their goals are achieved through collaboration and communication with all stakeholders to establish inclusive learning environments for SWDs that facilitate curricular adaptations, feature a range of educators, offer a wide scope of academic content, and provide academic supports (Osiname, 2018).

School Culture and Leadership

Current research has begun to explore the norms and assumptions of disability-inclusive school culture (Abawi et al., 2018). The language of school leaders and teachers help researchers gain insight into how educational rhetoric and policy translate into practice (Abawi et al., 2018). Implementation of disability-inclusive educational practices at the teacher and class level is of great concern to teachers and schools (Besic et al., 2017). For inclusive practice to be successful, positive attitudes toward SWDs must abound (Besic et al., 2017). The availability of adequate resources and support systems determine to a large extent attitudes toward inclusion (Besic et al., 2017; Dreyer, 2017).

Inclusive education for SWDs is fostered by a clear focus on high-quality education (Carter & Abawi, 2018). School leaders must be thoughtfully chosen for their core competency and communication skills (Carter & Abawi, 2018). Principals lead and empower others to lead by articulating a clear vision and establishing structures (i.e., process and procedures) that support inclusivity (Carter & Abawi, 2018). Inclusiveness increases program effectiveness and community support and breaks down barriers to learning (Celik, 2019).

Blurred Inclusive Learning Environments

The value of inclusion is acknowledged across the educational landscape, both legally and socially, as the optimal learning model for children (Gregory, 2018). Be that as it may, predictive knowledge of socially acceptable responses to disability-inclusive concepts does not seem to have had any bearing on other domains (Gregory, 2018). Disability-inclusive education is characterized by a lack of conceptual clarity (Slee, 2011). Prevalent but disparate treatment of the term differs among researchers depending on its situational context and ultimate objective or goals (Jahnukainen, 2015; Kendall, 2018; LeMay, 2017; Rapp & Corral-Granados, 2021). Some scholarly definitions of inclusive education encompass all forms of student diversity (Florian et al., 2010) while others denote curriculum, instruction, and learning (Westwood, 2018). In keeping with an ecological perspective, research orientations emphasizing inclusion in educational leadership (Randel et al., 2018) and as a normative principle in society (Van Mieghem et al., 2020) have been adopted.

Academic proponents of IDEA frame inclusive education as a workable approach to educating disabled children. A survey of the disability-inclusive education research conducted in 1994 distinguished four lines of inquiry in the studies: accessibility and participation, critical research, special education, and systems and structures (Hernandez-Torrano et al., 2020). The

same review of the literature revealed a steady increase in disability-inclusive education publications beginning with the advent of IDEA in 2004 that continues today.

In a setting as diverse as America's classroom, creating environments that meet all students' learning needs is more pragmatic than utopic. As reported in the literature, implementing such systems is innocuous and not overly complex, but it entails changes that run counter to time-honored institutional structures, policies, and practices. Implementation and organizational change are functions of school leadership (Osiname, 2018). As whole-school leaders, including SWDs, principals need a clear understanding of special education (Bateman et al., 2017).

School Leadership in Crisis

There is no question that school closures across the United States caused by the COVID-19 virus-imposed limits on education leaders' ability to alter teaching and learning practices. Conversely, this 're-organization' represented an opportunity to change schools and school systems for the better (Zhao, 2020). Harris (2020) argued that to view leadership practices employed during the pandemic "as some temporary, quick fix until normal service is resumed misses the opportunity to lead differently and potentially, to lead more effectively" (p. 321). Prior to COVID-19, traditional leadership followed "the contours of role and position" (p. 321). Subsequently, Harris (2020) explains, "voices speak of the possibilities that come with COVID-19 to re-position and re-model education" (p. 322). Now, district and school leaders are faced with the added challenge of whether to blend education practices "back into the previous education order" (p. 322).

The pandemic laid even more bare the issues of education inequality and inequity pre-dating the outbreak (Harris & Jones, 2019). Hargreaves et al. (2020) urged that all "efforts

should acknowledge this inequality, not increase it" (p. 323). Harris (2020) added, "Before the pandemic, those leading schools and school systems thought about their leadership roles in ways that had hardly changed over many decades" (p. 323). After revisiting claims from recent empirical literature about successful school leadership, Leithwood et al. (2020) suggested that effectual leaders distribute leadership and develop it in others while building positive cultures. The conclusions drawn from their analysis strengthened the empirical position from the field about the inherent features, enactment, and outcomes of successful school leadership.

Local educational agencies (LEAs) that continued providing educational opportunities to general education students during school closures were not exempt from providing for the inclusive education and rights of SWDs, including the provision of a FAPE (Section 504, 1973; Title II of ADA, 1990). Lost in the shift to online tools such as Google Classroom and Zoom, students who were nonverbal, or who received one-on-one support encountered difficulty adapting. Due to the perceived inability to meet the requirements of Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and IDEA, many school districts reacted by withholding remote learning opportunities from *all* students (Nadworny & Kamenetz, 2020). In turn, the unheard voices of SWDs during normal times were only heightened through the course of a public health emergency. The policies and guidelines endeavored by prominent organizations conferred with disseminating information and fighting COVID-19 also failed to address the needs of SWDs. The resulting digital divide and social exclusion served to further preclude their constitutional rights (Toquero, 2020).

The ongoing provision of services mandated under the ADA and IDEA, accompanied by established educational processes, protections, and rights for SWDs and their families are no less relevant in the time of an emergency. Irrespective of the challenges, mitigation strategies must be

inclusive for SWDs and all children (Petretto et al., 2020). School closures due to an incipient public health crisis, or to prevent and limit transmission of an infectious virus, however unpredictable, do not relieve district or school leaders of the burden to promote student equity, development, learning, and wellbeing. Inclusive and adaptive competency in all phases of an epidemic crisis can lessen negative psychological consequences, prevent present learning difficulties from getting worse, and reduce the risk of increased disparity (Armitage & Nellums, 2020; Golberstein et al., 2020; Van Lancker & Parolin, 2020).

Leadership and Disability-Inclusive School Reform

Principals play a linchpin role in defining and fostering disability-inclusive school environments and special education services for SWDs (Cobb, 2015; DeMatthews et al., 2021; Esposito et al., 2018). This is evidenced by a growing body of research highlighting leadership practices that support disability-inclusive school environments and special education services in schools (Billingsley et al., 2018; Council of Chief State School Officers & The Collaboration for Effective Educator Development, Accountability, and Reform Center, 2017; DeMatthews et al., 2021). Salisbury (2006) affirmed: “Schools that function inclusively do so for a reason … [and] the principals in these schools were the reason” (p. 79).

Research underscores the link between educated, responsive leaders and quality special education programming in schools (Fan et al., 2019; LeBarre, 2017). At the building level, principals ensure the delivery of special education services (Schulze & Boscardin, 2018). Enhancing the quality of education for special needs students entails creating the ideal conditions for sustaining classroom improvement (Trichas & Avdimiotis, 2020).

Special education leadership characteristics are not typical of leadership in general education. The inherent diversity of special education distinguishes its leadership content

(Fairbrother et al., 2019; Theoharis & Scanlan, 2015; Trichas & Avdimiotis, 2020). For this reason, developing knowledgeable and skillful special education leadership personnel is critically important (Rodriguez et al., 2019). From the perspectives of current service provision stakeholders, the specialty skills perceived as critical for special education leaders include legal and ethical practice, open communication, conflict resolution, mentoring, and facilitation of interdisciplinary collaboration (Fan et al., 2019). Research from the field also points toward the significance of special education leaders' investment in relationships, personal development, and improvement (Trichas & Avdimiotis, 2020). Lost in the analysis of educational leadership are the voices of parents, students, and the community at large (Bertrand & Rodela, 2018; Chandler, 2015; Cobb, 2015; Fan et al., 2019).

Inclusive education is about providing access to a curriculum that is appropriately modified and used by educators to guide students' progress (Gregory, 2018). Proper adaptive programming calls for the capacity of principals to coordinate general and special education services and cultivate a culture that emphasizes intervention and calibrates high expectations for student learning outcomes (DeMatthews et al., 2021; LeBarre, 2017). This kind of leadership is focused on inclusivity that promotes high-quality teaching and supportive relationships (LeBarre, 2017). Maybe more importantly, leadership's influence is contingent upon attitudes about and valuation of educating children with disabilities; especially those who are less capable of acquiring academic knowledge (Trichas & Avdimiotis, 2020).

Embracing inclusion is more often the result of pressure from policy rather than positive attitudes (Gregory, 2018). Educators might be aware of the cognitive benefits of inclusion, but the behavioral or affective aspect of their attitude abides with traditionally separate special education systems (Gregory, 2018). Nowhere is the bifurcation of special and regular education

more entrenched than it is in the United States (Gregory, 2018). Acknowledging inclusion as the mode that benefits children is a predictable response from educators who have been groomed in a system that espouses the value of inclusion (Gregory, 2018). But knowledge does not of necessity transfer to other domains. Given the unmet expectations of IDEA (2004) and ESSA (2015), research on how attributes associated with delivering special education are prioritized and instilled is not only relevant and timely but urgent and overdue (Cass, 2021; Fan et al., 2019; Schulze & Boscardin, 2018).

Findings suggest that the more experience and expertise principals have, the less influenced they are by their background (Schulze & Boscardin, 2018). Research agrees that the acquisition of leadership skills is not limited to a specific role or position, but rather likely or able to change (Tudryn et al., 2016). Drawing attention to a model of professional progression that acts in response to the developmental needs of principals may well improve the preparation and mentoring of pre- and in-service professionals (Schulze & Boscardin, 2018).

In view of the inadequacies of PPPs, the role played by state and local education agencies in providing principals with special education knowledge and experiences looms large (Billingsley et al., 2017; Hitt & Tucker, 2016; Miller, 2018). Improving pre-service preparation and professional development and aligning resources to benefit disabled students is within their scope of influence (Billingsley et al., 2017). IDEA (2004) specifically states that provision for professional development of special education leaders ensures appropriate educational opportunities for disabled students. On-the-job training can indeed impact the efficacy of school-based special education leadership (Thompson, 2017). Shifting the emphasis from pre-service preparation to in-service practice shapes development and bolsters confidence and efficacy,

bridging the knowledge gap and increasing school leaders' capacity to meet the legalities and associated challenges of serving SWDs (Lewis-Vice, 2020).

School effectiveness and improvement are derivatives of leadership preparation and training (Mestry, 2017). Without adequate preparation and training, school achievement and learner performance are diminished (Mestry, 2017). Participation in well-thought-out continuing professional development qualifies principals to make autonomous decisions and adapt programs to student needs (Mestry, 2017).

Educational leadership programs are of limited value to public education leaders (Miller, 2018). Pre-service preparation is inadequate and unrelated to implementing educational ends (Lewis-Vice, 2020). When school district development or university preparation programs recommend practitioners as candidates for organizational leadership, the endorsement falls short of providing the specifics necessary for application (Gregory, 2018; Hitt & Tucker, 2016). The importance of synthesizing useful knowledge and skills cannot be understated. Practitioners need specific, high-yielding practices to guide their professional interactions and decision-making (Hitt & Tucker, 2016).

As research continues to demonstrate the benefits of inclusive school settings, it is also critical to weigh how education can exercise the development of principals' capacities for influence in favor of inclusive school frameworks (Sider et al., 2017). There is a significant shortage of case studies supporting school principals' professional learning (Griffin & Ryan, 2018). Above all, more deliberate and strategic efforts to organize what is known about special education leadership can improve the conditions for all students' achievement (Hitt & Tucker, 2016).

Irrespective of the fact that policymakers, scholars, and supporters have been especially persistent in pushing for greater inclusion (Hayes & Bulat, 2017), little is understood about how school leaders interpret or characterize inclusion. They can recite a definition of inclusion, but can neither recognize nor practice it (Gregory, 2018). From a procedural perspective, little research has been conducted on educational leaders' ability to discern special education program deficiencies, let alone design reliably and implement a methodical approach to achieving consistent, equitable outcomes among the disabled population in this context (Brown, 2018).

There is a gap between what principals are tasked with accomplishing in their roles as special education administrators and what they are prepared to offer in return (Taylor, 2020). This vacuum of skill can create a vacuum of leadership that bears upon teachers, students, and parents (Cass, 2021; Taylor, 2020). Granting, there is widespread agreement about the importance of special education competencies, accrediting and professional bodies offer few specifics about the tasks they expect principals to facilitate and monitor (Bateman et al., 2017). Scholarly study does show a lack of professional development opportunities provided in both pre-service and in-service settings (Sider et al., 2017).

School environments where all students are welcomed and supported are nurtured by principals (DeMatthews et al., 2021; Esposito et al., 2018; Fairbrother et al., 2019). Those who are preparing to be principals should have a basic understanding of inclusion (Fairbrother et al., 2019). Lack of preparation and inexperience hinders a principal's ability to implement and monitor the varied aspects of inclusion (Cameron, 2016).

Clearly, there remains a gap to fill in the literature as to the administration of disability-inclusive education services in schools (Lynch, 2021; Taylor, 2020). Further research is needed to increase principals' capacity for efficacious influence on best inclusive school practices and

processes. Identifying the elements that are essential to implementing and sustaining a successful special education framework would inform principal professional development.

Conclusion

Without oversight from special education directors, implementation of IDEA at the building level rests solely on principals. School-site decisions constrain proper placement in general education settings. Neither the type nor severity of a student's disability nor the administrator's beliefs and experience should limit access to regular educational settings (Horrocks et al., 2008).

Since the reauthorization of IDEA in 2004, the least restrictive environment LRE requirement for determining the placement of school-age students with disabilities is fundamentally unchanged (O'Laughlin & Lindle, 2015). Under IDEA conditions, students with disabilities have the right to participate in the general education curriculum. LRE regulations specify that disabled children are to be educated with non-disabled children to the extent possible unless their disability hinders their ability to succeed in a regular classroom setting with supplementary aids and services. Best practice would dictate that consideration of student supports within general education settings precede deliberation about more restrictive placements. Notwithstanding this well-founded principle, LRE remains an amorphous concept within the public education arena (O'Laughlin & Lindle, 2015). Principals may be aware of the LRE requirement, but without any guidelines or criteria for educating *all* students, segregation will persist unheeded (O'Laughlin & Lindle, 2015).

Even with the trajectory toward greater access to general education, there is recurring evidence of disparities among special needs student groups concerning LRE (Morningstar et al., 2017a). These findings highlight the ongoing need for local education agencies to align policy

and practice to promote better learning outcomes for students with significant disabilities. The factors that promote or impede inclusive and special needs services in schools should guide leadership's collaborative efforts in this endeavor.

Classroom setting has noticeable effects on students' access to and engagement with content standards (Morningstar et al., 2017b). Students placed in separate locations are much less likely to engage with the curriculum than their peers supported in general educational settings (Morningstar et al., 2017b). The LRE mandates articulate the responsibilities for educating SWDs in general education settings (IDEA). Guidelines stipulate removing students from the general education classroom as a last resort and only when supplementary aids and services are not adequate to support them in that setting (IDEA). Since Congress reauthorized the IDEA in 2004, participation and progress in the general education curriculum for many disabled students have been minimal (Morningstar et al., 2017a).

District leaders' support for traditional approaches to special needs education suggests a reluctance to critically assess systems and methods they have introduced or preserved under their tenure (Cameron, 2016). Research has also revealed that district leaders feel pressure to avoid the unfamiliar in favor of the more traditional approaches applied in the schools they lead (Cameron, 2016). These findings explain the static characteristics of special needs education and invite further exploration of the variables affecting special education leadership practice.

The potential for increased student access to inclusive settings and achievement opportunities hinges on the preparation, development, and support of school principals (Billingsley et al., 2018). However, even with a wide distribution of self-professed positivity among school district leaders about special education provision in schools, a prevalence of segregated approaches persist (Cameron, 2016; Gregory, 2018). Most disabled students continue

to be isolated from their non-disabled peers (Brock, 2018; Cameron, 2016; Morningstar et al., 2017a; Morningstar et al., 2017b; O'Laughlin & Lindle, 2015; Sun & Xin, 2020). Real action requires intentional investment in the ongoing cultivation and support of leadership preparation from within (Movahedazarhouligh, 2021). Plainly stated, "It takes more than leadership preparation programs to support and sustain quality leadership" (Movahedazarhouligh, 2021, p. 168).

Chapter III

Design and Methodology

The passive avoidance of special education, characterized by hands-off leadership, has been cyclically preserved by the lack of specific directions and guidance going on five decades (Meeks, 2016). Contrary to the abundance of studies, special education implementation continues to be the critical factor missing from principal training (Esposito et al., 2018). Pazey and Cole (2013, p. 248) underscore the fact that "there is no absence of theoretical papers attesting to the need for training in special education and special education law."

Before the turn of the century, the research identified special education as the most time-consuming factor dampening enthusiasm, increasing frustration levels, and inhibiting principals' ability to lead schools (Garrison-Wade, 2005). Without knowledge of IDEA, principals cannot provide leadership to students with disabilities (SWDs), staff, and programs within their schools. Those principals who are conscientious of their responsibilities will remain so; those who delegate their responsibilities to others will find ways to continue (Bateman et al., 2017).

Research Design

This study assessed existing interpretations of special education directors and principals pertaining to the necessity of select competencies for effective leadership of inclusive education for SWDs. Further, this study aimed to examine the professional learning provided by special education directors to improve disability-inclusive educational leadership competency. Guiding the design of this research was the Competencies for Inclusive School Leaders framework developed by Sider and Maich (2022). Navigating the perspectives of special education directors and principals within a competency framework gives depth to understanding district-level

educational leadership praxis for disability-inclusive school reform. Qualitative descriptive analysis was used to explore three research questions:

1) What competencies do special education directors and principals perceive essential to implementing and supporting disability-inclusive education in districts and schools?
2) How do special education directors and principals perceive select competencies related to implementing and supporting disability-inclusive education in districts and schools?
3) What types of professional learning do special education directors provide for principals to develop disability-inclusive educational leadership competency?

This study was performed utilizing semi-structured interviews. Participants were asked to reflect on questions that addressed essential leadership competencies for implementing and supporting disability-inclusive education services in districts and schools.

Participants

The sample for this study consisted of special education director and principal pairs selected from five LEAs in five states: California (CA), Idaho (ID), Utah (UT), Washington (WA), and Wyoming (WY). Only public-school settings were considered and only districts with similar organizational systems were included (see Table 5).

Table 5

Study Sample

School District	Number of Special Education Directors	Number of Principals
Lincoln Unified (CA)	1	14
New Plymouth (ID)	1	3
Duchesne (UT)	1	12
Pasco (WA)	4	25
Uintah #1 (WY)	1	8

The target population were district special education directors and principals who oversee the provision of special education services in their districts and schools. All participants in the sample had similar education credentials. Seven of the 10 participants were female, and three were male.

Data Collection

A descriptive approach to this qualitative study followed a research framework that employed semi-structured interviews with a non-random but reasonable combination of five special education director and principal pairs to gain and describe their perspectives on how to support disabled learners within general education classrooms and schools. Given this study's focus on participants' skills, knowledge, and attitudes, reflective interviewing techniques were deemed an appropriate method of inquiry. Chosen for its utility in "making visible the tacit knowledge persons bring to bare on their . . . activities" (Roozen, 2009), reflective interviewing was required to facilitate the link between participant's knowledge and practice. Furthermore, interviews offered valuable insight into what strategies could feasibly be used to drive decision-making and jumpstart change processes. Similarly, an important driver of this approach was making the translation of findings into accessible disciplinary knowledge for practitioners.

Granting no description is unrestricted by interpretation, basic or fundamental qualitative description, contrasted with phenomenological or grounded theory description, involved low-inference interpretation likely to generate consensus among researchers (Sandelowski, 2000). Unavoidably, descriptive summaries of interview data were filtered through the researchers' choices about what to describe. Considering the interpretive nature of phenomenological, theoretical, ethnographic, or narrative descriptions, the researcher sought validity and proximity

to the data by focusing on facts and the meanings assigned to those facts by participants (Sandelowski, 2000). The facts in this study were obtained from unadorned answers to questions of special relevance to special education directors' and principals' proficiencies as they relate to the implementation and support of disability-inclusive education in districts and schools. Re-presentation of data consisted of a straight descriptive summary (Sandelowski, 2000) of participant responses arranged in three major categories reflecting the competencies about which the researcher elicited information: (a) skills, (b) knowledge, and (c) attitudes. There was no objective to manufacture anything beyond that of a descriptive summary of responses, arranged in such a way that is grounded in the accounts of the participants and yet accessible and relevant to its intended audience. The summaries may themselves bring forth "working concepts, hypotheses, and thematic moments for future grounded theory or phenomenologic study (Sandelowski, 2000, p. 339).

All interviews were conducted by the researcher via Zoom videoconference. Each interview was recorded and transcribed using the Otter.ai platform and then reviewed and edited manually. Interviews were approximately 20-30 minutes in length. Interviews were semi-structured, meaning they were conducted one respondent at a time using open-ended *what* or *how* questions (Adams, 2010). The researcher posed a series of questions about the participant's perception of disability-inclusive education practices, with interest in the provision of special education services in schools. These guiding questions led to new questions and responses. Table 6 shows the dates of participant interviews and their corresponding roles.

Table 6

Interview Dates by Role

Date	Role
July 26	Special Education Director
August 3	Principal
August 10	Principal
August 18	Special Education Director
August 26	Special Education Director
August 30	Principal
September 19	Principal
September 22	Special Education Director
October 7	Principal
October 7	Special Education Director

Content validation of interview questions. For this study, Sider and Maich's (2022) Competencies for Inclusive School Leaders were used as a guide for drafting interview questions. One special education director and one principal participated in a pilot interview prior to the commencement of the study to ensure adequate representation of the competencies for which the interview protocol(Appendix D) was created (Van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001). Accordingly, semantic adjustments were made and questions were omitted. Sekaran (2003) argued that bias can influence data collection if the subjects do not understand the questions posed to them. As stated by Calitz (2009), testing pilot questions help identify unclear or ambiguous questions in the interview protocol (Appendix D). Van Wijk and Harrison (2013) believe a pilot study can add value and credibility to research. Given that an interview was used as the research instrument, a pilot study helped with the following:

1) Highlighting ambiguities and difficulties and unnecessary questions discarding or modifying the same (Dikko, 2016, p. 522).

2) Recording the time taken to complete the interview and determining its reasonability (Dikko, 2016, p. 522).
3) Determining whether each question elicited an adequate response (Dikko, 2016, p.522)
4) Establishing whether replies could be properly interpreted in relation to the information required (Van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001).
5) Determining whether the research had incorporated all the questions necessary to measure all concepts/competencies (Berg, 2001).
6) Allowing the researcher to practice and refine interviewing techniques (Berg, 2001).

Interviews. Ten interviews were conducted to gather the data and all participation was voluntary. Once participants agreed to take part in the study via email, a follow-up email was sent to arrange a date and time to conduct the interview via the Zoom video platform (Appendices B and C). Interviews were audio-recorded and checked for accuracy by the researcher. During the research, data were stored on a password protected computer. The computer files will be destroyed by the researcher three years after the study in compliance with the Federalwide Assurance Code (45 CRF 46.117).

Analytical Methods

Subjects were recruited between May and October 2022. Purposeful sampling was used in this study, whereby representative participants were selected. As prospective participants were recruited, further demographic data were not collected to protect anonymity. New and experienced elementary and secondary principals representing five districts contributed to the data collection. Special education directors from each participating district were also represented. Together, these subjects captured a somewhat bounded range of experiential views, as seen from the sampling frame in Table 7.

Table 7

Sampling Frame for Interviews

Years of Experience	Directors	Principals
0-5	1	3
6-15	4	1
16-25	0	1

Transcription data were organized and sorted according to participant stakeholder type (special education director or principal). To uphold confidentiality, ID codes were used to indicate participants and their roles.

Horrocks et al. (2008) recognized that gaining insight into principals' perspectives is needed to support disability-inclusive education and advance best practices. To develop a deep understanding of participant perspectives, and thus begin articulating latent themes, the researcher listened to the audio recordings, read and re-read transcripts, and reviewed written interview notes and reflections. Coding was used to align Sider and Maich's (2022) competency framework to participant responses in preparation of identifying central themes and sub-themes. Data were organized in a systematic way that was grounded in participants' responses yet oriented to particular competencies. This allowed the researcher to maintain an overall perspective of the participants collectively. Interview questions also informed the identification of themes. A table relating research questions to interview questions helped guide the initial data sort (Table 8).

Table 8

Research Questions in Relation to Interview Questions

Research Question	Corresponding Interview Question
1. What competencies do special education directors and principals perceive essential to implementing and supporting disability-inclusive education in districts and schools?	• What is the most important element in your role in developing disability-inclusive education competency in your district/school? • What communication skill(s) is/are essential to implement and support disability-inclusive education in your district/school? • What advocacy and program development skill(s) is/are essential to implement and support disability-inclusive education in your district/school? • What collaboration skill(s) is/are essential to implement and support disability-inclusive education in your district/school?
2. How do special education directors and principals perceive select competencies related to implementing and supporting disability-inclusive education in districts and schools?	• What level of knowledge of legal requirements do you need to implement and support disability-inclusive education in your district/school? • What level of contextual knowledge do you perceive as essential to implementing and supporting disability-inclusive education in your district/school? • How do you foster relationships in a disability-inclusive educational environment? • What professional standards do you consider when determining the LRE for SWDs?
3. What types of professional learning do special education directors provide for principals to develop disability-inclusive educational leadership competency?	• What type(s) of professional learning do you provide to develop/improve disability-inclusive leadership competency in your district/school?

Interview transcripts were organized digitally and classified according to district (by number) and role (D or P). Special education directors were labeled “D” respondents, and principals were labeled “P” respondents. File folders were created for each special education director (“D”) and principal (“P”) interview and named as follows: D1; P1; D2; P2; D3; P3; D4; P4; D5; P5. After this, a descriptive analysis was carried out to examine participant responses. Files were coded to compare participant responses to interview questions. Datasets were organized to analyze the interviews and verify themes that emerged from participant responses (Saldaña, 2016). For further comparison and thematic analysis, datasets were categorized into three data types: Type 1 – Special Education Directors; Type 2 – Principals; Type 3 – Special Education Directors and Principals. Placing data in a particular class or group allowed for contextual comparison of individual participants, role comparison, and cross-comparison of participant pairs.

Conceptual coding was applied to establish connections between participant responses and competencies within the structure of the questions (Saldaña, 2016). Elaborative coding was used to align Sider and Maich’s (2022) competency framework to participant responses. Sider and Maich’s (2022) framework for inclusive school leader competencies is arranged into three categories:

Category I – Skills

Category II – Knowledge

Category III - Attitudes

Within these three categories, 15 competencies associated with disability-inclusive education practices are listed: communication, professional learning, advocacy and program development, collaboration, problem-solving, human resources, policies and procedures, legal requirements,

lived experience of students with special education needs, differentiated leadership, contextual knowledge, values inclusion, agency, fosters relationships, and embodyies professional standards. Not all competencies from the framework were assessed in the interview. Participant responses were classified according to category and where possible, to a corresponding competency. Organizing the data in this fashion allowed for cross-comparison between groups and participant pairs.

Limitations

The study was subject to certain limitations due to sample size and regional differences in the collection of data. The study sample was limited to one participant pair from each of five states, which may have prevented the results from being generalized beyond the sampled districts. The research results must also be considered in view of possible regional differences in participant responses since different states and localities within each state provide varying levels of support to disability-inclusive leadership in districts and schools. Even though local variations for implementing special education policies and procedures exist, the competencies for inclusive school leaders referenced in this study are universal. The findings of the study may not be generalizable to include the entire population of special education directors and principals across all regions and states, but the focus on shortcomings of leadership in special education addresses an empirically acknowledged problem in the United States public education system that has been highlighted by researchers for nearly half a century and yet to spur meaningful action. Interview prompts and questions were based on the most current scholarly inquiries related to educational leaders' responsibility for the inclusion of SWDs.

A qualitative descriptive study is a valuable research design that can provide insight into complex phenomena in natural settings. However, the results of such a study must be considered

in light of the limitations inherent in the design and sample size. In the case of a study with only five participant pairs from five states, the sample size is limited, which affects the generalizability of the results. The small sample size makes it difficult to generalize the findings to larger populations or to draw conclusions about the experiences of individuals who may have different backgrounds, perspectives, and experiences. Furthermore, the geographical spread of the participants may have introduced differences in the participants' experiences that are not easily detectable. As a result, the findings of this study should be interpreted with caution and cannot be applied to other populations without further investigation.

Chapter IV

Findings

The term “disability” describes more than a narrow state of existence. It includes those with physical challenges and intellectual capabilities—from extreme to mild impairment (Schinagle & Bartlett, 2015). Disability-inclusive education, then, is students with disabilities (SWDs) having full access to the general education curriculum, instruction, and peers with needed support (Theoharis & Causton, 2014, p. 83). Optimally, SWDs would be placed in a regular classroom, but this is not always the most beneficial place of instruction and can hinder “the development of an appropriate IEP” (Colker, 2006, p. 8). Adherence to the strict placement of “children in the general education population is a dangerously simplified view,” which “can benefit some students but irretrievably damage others” (Schinagle & Bartlett, 2015, p. 229).

The IDEA guarantees accessibility to education in public school systems for SWDs. The IDEA also mandates educating SWDs in the least restrictive environment (LRE). The LRE for SWDs is not necessarily a physical place but a principle. Although not directly, it is an indicator of location but also denotes what services SWDs receive and how they receive them. Hence, the LRE is more than a place; it’s a student’s entire education program, including services. Regarding physical space, the LRE for SWDs is the general education classroom with support. Conversely, the *most* restrictive environment for SWDs would be specialized programming outside of a school district or even homebound services.

There is consensus among scholars that principals play a core role in providing opportunities for SWDs to learn in inclusive schools (Billingsley et al., 2018; Kozleski, 2019). However, research has yet to show any significant level of proficiency among principals in the field implementing federal special education laws in schools. What research has shown is that

high-quality professional development opportunities are the key to building principals' leadership capacities. But according to principals, the most significant barrier to developing effective disability-inclusive school environments and special education services is the amount of support afforded by district-level leaders.

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive study was to identify and describe principals' and special education directors' perceptions of their roles and the associated competencies in addressing the implementation and support of disability-inclusive education in districts and schools. This chapter presents the data collected from this study. Qualitative results are framed within Sider and Maich's (2022) Competencies for Inclusive School Leaders. Data are summarized, organized, and described using key concepts and findings and arranged in relation to pre-determined indicators of competency.

Data Collection

Qualitative data were obtained through interviews of special education director and principal pairs representing five LEAs (local education agencies) in five states. Participants for this qualitative descriptive study were chosen using purposeful sampling. Data collection was guided by the following research questions:

1) What competencies do special education directors and principals perceive essential to implementing and supporting disability-inclusive education in districts and schools?
2) How do special education directors and principals perceive select competencies related to implementing and supporting disability-inclusive education in districts and schools?
3) What types of professional learning do special education directors provide for principals to develop disability-inclusive educational leadership competency?

Concepts developed from the review of literature served to guide data collection and analysis and the exploration of variables affecting disability-inclusive education leadership practice. Concerning LRE, there is recurring evidence of disparities among special needs student groups (Morningstar et al., 2017a). Classroom setting has noticeable effects on students' access to and engagement with content standards. Students placed in separate locations are much less likely to engage with the curriculum than their peers supported in general education settings (Morningstar et al., 2017b). Regarding the status quo, district leaders feel pressure to avoid the unfamiliar in favor of more traditional approaches (Cameron, 2016). Still, opportunities hinge on school principals' preparation, development, and support within their districts.

It is necessary to reinforce pre-service and in-service professional learning that provides explicit training in inclusive practices. Examination of inclusive school leadership practices and the related literature has shown that specific knowledge, skills, and attitudes promote the development of inclusive school leadership competencies (Sider & Maich, 2022). As proposed by Miles et al. (2014), the researcher used a competencies framework for inclusive school leaders to guide and focus interview questions reflecting the relevant published literature.

Participant Profiles

Each participant pair represented a single school district. To accurately report findings and preserve anonymity, descriptive summaries differentiate each of the five school districts by number (District 1, District 2, District 3, District 4, District 5), and distinguish participants by their role: Special Education Director = D and Principal = P (see Table 9). In this way, data reported from D4 denotes a special education director in District 4, and data reported from P4 denotes a principal in District 4. Five special education directors and five principals were interviewed. Participants' experience in their respective roles ranged between zero and 17 years.

Four principals were elementary, and one was secondary. Three participants were male and seven were female.

Table 9

Distribution of Participants by Experience and Gender

Participant	Years of Experience	Gender
D1	8	Male
D2	0	Female
D3	7	Female
D4	11	Female
D5	6	Male
P1	5	Female
P2	1	Female
P3	17	Male
P4	2	Female
P5	7	Female

Data Analysis

The researcher transcribed all interviews. Irrelevant data were eliminated during a close reading of transcripts, after which the researcher collated pertinent quotes to identify salient themes for each question. The researcher refined themes in accordance with research questions and reported quotes for each theme in narrative form.

Data Presentation

The researcher designed interview questions to address the following:

- Defining Practices
- Developing Competency (skills)
- Legal Requirements (knowledge)
- Contextual Knowledge (knowledge)
- Fostering Relationships (attitudes)
- Professional Standards (attitudes).
- Supportive or Complimentary Means.

The researcher arranged interview questions to create a consistent flow for exploring participant perceptions of the abovementioned skills, knowledge, attitudes, and their corresponding competencies. The researcher analyzed responses to the interview questions and coded them thematically to produce a comprehensive and accurate data summary of participant samples (Sandelowski, 2000). The results are reported below in Table 10 according to theme in the order presented in the accompanying table.

Table 10

Themes Derived from Qualitative Analysis

Category	Themes	
	Principals (*n* = 5)	**Directors (*n* = 5)**
Defining Practices	All Students (*n* = 6)	
	Extracurricular Events and Programs (*n* = 2)	
	Setting (*n* = 6)	
Developing Competency	Professional Development (*n* = 5)	
Legal Requirements	Least Restrictive Environment (*n* = 4)	
		Professional Learning (*n* = 3)
	Human Resources (*n* = 3)	
Contextual Knowledge	Physical Setting (*n* = 5)	
Fostering Relationships	Communication (*n* = 3)	
	Facilitation (*n* = 3)	
Professional Standards	No Theme	

Defining Practices

Principals and special education directors were first prompted to define disability-inclusive education practices. Their definitions were analyzed for comparison by the researcher and fell into one of three themes:

- All Students
- Setting
- Extracurricular Events and Programs

Analysis found that the All Students and Setting themes encompassed the greatest number of responses (n = 6).

All Students

From both perspectives, definitions of disability-inclusive education practices distinguished between mild/moderate and severely disabled populations. When participants referred to 'all students,' the researcher found a patent delineation of disabled learners who constitute a portion of the population for which upper limits have been pre-determined. P5 put it succinctly: "Every kid, regardless of their disability, receives core instruction" except for "those extremely high-needs kids that can't function in a regular classroom."

Vague indications that "creating an environment" in which "everyone is loved and cared for and treated just the same" (P1) is preferable to "creating separate programs for kids" (D1) gave the impression that leadership views are more strongly related to social climate than they are to the cognitive aspect of inclusion. Rather than focusing on the treatment and utilization of learning differences, participants were more comfortable giving emphasis to the prevention of negative outcomes stemming from social categorization of SWDs. D4 opined about the merits of "signage," "geography of classrooms," and "the way we talk [and think] about kids," which she

says are inclusive of disability in her district. P2 made a particular point of reminding the researcher that inclusive practices aren't "necessarily just for students with special needs," but "[for all students] in general." Her director (D2), while endorsing the provision of general and extracurricular education opportunities for SWDs, stopped short of advocating a curricular model that is accessible for all students.

Setting

Director definitions were most concerned with placement or "activities" with respect to the general education classroom. D1 emphasized that students are "entitled to being in their least restrictive environment," and "for kids, that's really [about] them having access and participating with typical students in a non-specialized setting to the maximum extent that they can." He continued,

> To me, inclusivity for students with disabilities is about students being in a typical program and setting and us providing the support and tools they need, and then targeting our services to address the goals in the IEP and not programs separate for kids. It's really about getting kids in a general ed. setting (D1).

D2 added, "I would define it as children with disabilities being included in all school, general education, extracurricular activities, and providing those opportunities for them as well."

Three of the principal participants also gave prominence to students' physical surroundings. P2 asserted, "They're in the general education setting as much as possible." P3 asked, "Instead of pullouts and, you know, having students segregated, that'd be more in the classroom, right? It's including them in the classroom right there just like normal to get'em their regular education." P4 explained, "[it's] just the idea of trying to make sure that all students get core first if possible and then are with the gen. ed. peers as much as possible."

Extracurricular Events and Programs

Yet, the wording and application of the definitions to LRE need to account for individual differences and which context can provide appropriate services. None of the principals noted the LRE in the definition. From the perspectives of two principals (P1 and P2), one theme emerged that did not arise from the director's responses: Inclusion is limited to extracurricular events and programs without support for students to access the whole curriculum. P1 remarked,

> Third and fourth grade SDC (special day class) kiddos are still playing on the same playground as [typical] third- and fourth-graders. They're eating lunch with the [typical] third- and fourth-graders. They're still seen on campus as typical third- and fourth-graders. They're not just singled out because they're different (P1).

P2 was emphatic in likening disability-inclusive education practices to "just [doing] some games and, like, tournaments where you have that inclusive piece so students with disabilities and wheelchairs or whatever can be involved."

Summary of Responses: Defining Practices

Principals and special education directors defined disability-inclusive education practices primarily as those that pertain to the general education classroom or setting and support children with mild-to-moderate disabilities, exclusive of those with severe disabilities. Only one special education director (D1) referred to a student's right to their least restrictive environment. Another director (D5) did, however, connect disability-inclusive practices to learning targets and the assessment criteria for equipping every student with as many tools as necessary for individual success.

Developing Competency

What emerged from principals' and special education directors' responses when asked to talk about *the most important element in their role in developing disability-inclusive education competency* in their school or district was more fog than clarity. Most participants generally discussed current or past experiences relating to professional development and collaboration without explicitly addressing elements of implementation. Professional development was not so much a theme among participants as it was a vehicle for demonstrating their commitment or service offerings. Follow-up questions stimulated participants to think deeper about their answers and provided more precise and accurate data. The researcher connected follow-up questions to competencies from Sider and Maich's (2022) framework and their associated domains. Only three participants (D1, D3, and D5) replied directly to the initial question without follow-up prompts by the researcher.

Perusal of the aspects mentioned by participants as essential to developing disability-inclusive education competency produced three additional categories: communication and creating an inclusive school culture to ensure equal access to core curriculum. The categories were not themes but, more accurately, markers to assist in grouping data. These additional categories are included to ensure that all responses are given equal attention and maintain the data's generative function.

Professional Development and Collaboration

For D1, professional development "has to do with understanding the intent of students being in general education and not being afraid of not making benchmark(s)." He also stressed the formation of effective professional development to support students in a general education setting.

> We talk about what that looks like and how to redesign the way we teach or structure our classroom to be more supportive of the different kinds of learners in that room. It's obtaining information and knowledge about good universal practices for engaging learners and then working with staff to understand each person's job and supporting the learners in the classroom, trying to look at how we engage each student in the class (D1).

Aware that his description would not be lost on the researcher, he continued in detail to explain the professional development he facilitates to develop disability inclusive-leadership competency in his district:

> Some of that work is just going over general concepts – the idea of students in general ed., least restrictive environment, the special ed. side of things. Then also, you're getting down to the meat of how we support those learners, doing work with concepts around UDL (universal design for learning). We've had individuals come in and provide professional learning and development with our principals around how to help teachers plan and differentiate their instruction for different students. Again, that's bringing in that UDL stuff, but trying to give tools and resources to admin. to work with their teachers at their school sites on practices and reviewing how we adjust the content standards to be accessible for the different learners in our classrooms. How do we differentiate an assignment to be more accessible for a kid, and how do we utilize tools and different approaches to engaging or having output from a student? A lot of the work has been grading for equity and how we assess students for success in the classroom. What is successful completion of a course at the high school level? And how do educators determine content mastery? A lot of those conversations and work have been managed through those types of training (D1).

D3 had the same opinion about the need to build competency in special educators but further stated that for SWDs to be successful in general education settings, the professional development of general education teachers is of equal value. She shared that "it has been huge to do some book studies and professional development" with all teachers "so that they understand their role in providing those services and making sure those kids progress." She is even more emphatic about a common traditional approach to educating SWDs. "There's the age-old adage – they're the SPED kids – and they're the responsibility of the SPED teachers. I've been working hard to pull that back in so that we all take responsibility for their learning and development."

Responding to the query about which types of professional development she provides to develop disability-inclusive competency in those she supervises, she referred to her previously stated experience with book studies:

> Two years ago, the platform that we used was [a book] about setting up multi-tiered systems of support in classrooms. We took it step by step. For accountability we trained administrators and assessment teams, and then they had professional development days in their buildings to train their teachers. At the end of each section, we required them to have evidence of moving forward with their systems. So we help them build their systems of intervention step by step (D3).

Teachers in D3's school district "traditionally have referred [students] to special ed. for intervention rather than taking responsibility. My approach to reducing referrals and holding teachers and staff accountable for intervention," she continued, is to "make sure we're not over-qualifying students." For this reason, "at the beginning of the school year, I put together a training video that I send out and require all schools to show to their teachers." Her real struggle, she said, is with general ed. teachers.

> I think so much of it boils down to that Tier 1 instruction. We're never going to fix Tier 1 [instruction] with Tier 3 interventions. That's why I have felt like I needed a voice in what Tier 1 should look like. It's that universal design for learning (UDL). Why build stairs for some if you can build a ramp for all (D3)?

D3 was not the only participant to emphasize the connective relation between the general education teacher in cooperation with the special educator. P1 said that developing disability-inclusive special education competency "goes back to [general education] teacher training and what that looks like." From an institutional perspective, professional development tends to revolve around classroom issues that transcend the limited legal standards of accommodation. With inclusive practices, the teaching role has shifted from providing specially designed instruction to adapting the general education content to SWDs (Zigmond et al., 2009). The aspects of multi-tiered systems of support illuded to by D3 imply that its practices be implemented within the general education classroom by both general and special education teachers. P1 feels strongly that such practices promote positive outcomes for SWDs and "need to stem from the adults and work [their] way down to the kids. We are creating those opportunities for our students to be with each other and learn amongst each other," she concurred. When asked to elaborate about the type(s) of professional development opportunities she provides to help teachers find ways to educate students with a wide range of preparation levels, P1 was honest about not having yet arranged for "full-on professional development." What she has provided (and required) are opportunities for her special day class (SDC) teachers to collaborate with grade-level teacher teams. "That's my expectation," she said.

D5 takes a similar albeit more expansive approach regarding professional development. His aim "is to create opportunities for training on how to support [his] people" to implement

disability-inclusive practices. “Training to me,” he says, is “equipping paraprofessionals, general education teachers, and special education teachers to know how to plan together so that all students are being discussed with the appropriate data. And that takes training.” He candidly pointed out that “it’s an easy thing to say, but we have to provide the professional development and we have to provide the coaching.” His face was pensive as he contemplated what to say. Then came what seemed the realization, “I think I have to have that expectation and communicate that with the resources to support that expectation in creating that inclusive environment.”

The researcher suggested that to a degree, professional development is synonymous with training. Sensing that professional development was a big administrative burden for D5, a follow-up question was posed as to whether he feels like most of his school leaders come prepared with the requisite knowledge, or if professional development is something that he’s constantly having to find. His response was surprising, if not misplaced.

> It (professional development) dips into the academic training and what I would call ‘what do the big kids in the room do?’ How does a general education teacher interact with the special education paraprofessional? How does the certified special educator interact with the special education paraprofessional? How do they all interact together (D5)?

His answers to these questions were to the effect that the adult training which lies within his scope of control must be continual due to the high turnover of paraprofessionals. “We can have a solid group of people, feeling good about things, and then a third of them are gone,” he lamented. “Even with our certified staff, from year to year it’s a revolving door.” The expectation “to keep that understanding, that fundamental capacity alive in the district” appeared to weigh heavily on his shoulders.

Communication. D4 highlighted the need for buy-in before professional development is undertaken. She feels the need for administration and leaders to first communicate the rationale for developing disability-inclusive education competency.

> I think you have to build the why. If you can't, or if people don't understand the why, then you can't really get them to change. Our job is helping people understand why it is so important for kids to be included in a full way that they feel a sense of belonging. To me, it's about changing the why. Why are we doing what we're doing, and why is it important (D4)?

Referring to her role in effecting such change among leadership, she applies it to a combination of advocacy and professional development.

> It comes from advocacy when you're sitting in an IEP or student evaluation meeting making decisions for kids – questioning decisions. We have a lot of [special education] teachers who pull [students] for reading, pull for math, and pull for writing. Why? Why do you need to pull them that long? What are they doing in gen. ed. at that time? What are they going to be missing? What is the intervention that you're using, and how long does that take? Why pull [a student] for 30 minutes each Wednesday to teach them a social skill when you can build that into something else throughout the week? Is there a different way to think about that? Is there a way to build that into the gen. ed. classroom so that maybe all the kids are learning that skill and can practice it together? In that way it's advocating. And then it's professional development around interventions. How long do they take? What might you want to be using them for? What might you not want to be using them for so that we're making sure that kids are getting what they need in gen. ed., as well as the special ed. setting (D4)?

Inclusive School Culture and Access to Core Curriculum. Rather than something that is done by one party to another, and possibly a sub-theme of professional development, is building a culture of inclusivity to ensure that all students have access to core curricula. Besides educating staff about inclusive practices, one middle school principal (P4) spoke to the role of advocacy through her administrative position in professional development and its impact on practice:

> It doesn't mean that everybody gets the same thing. It means that everybody has access to core curriculum. We may have to modify or accommodate, but we can ensure that all students have that access to the core. So, one is advocacy, and then two is ensuring teachers have that professional development and creating that culture of inclusivity across the building by defining those specific behaviors and what it means to be inclusive (P4).

In terms of training personnel in-house, she deemed student advocacy and professional development for educators to be paradigmatic of her approach to developing disability-inclusive education competency.

Different from culture, one special education director and principal pair alluded to the significance of climate in their school district. Rather than speak to the element(s) of implementation, P2 focused instead on her role as a model for students.

> The big thing that we talk about is kindness and being kind. We developed a mantra last year to be respectful, be responsible, and be kind. So, all our disciplinary things and everything roll back to that. I think my role is to continue to show that to the students; make those conversations with students that maybe struggle with communication, or you know, those nonverbal kids. Just because they're a little bit different than this child or this child doesn't mean that they're any less special. Showing that as a principal, having

> the teachers model that is the best way to get students to see it and accept it and understand it and do it themselves (P2).

D2's comments about developing disability-inclusive education competency in her district centered around proactively seeking opportunities and activities to teach students and teachers about inclusion generally.

> We have tried to set up an initiative with Special Olympics to do inclusion activities, just providing that opportunity to teach students about inclusion. And on top of that, teaching the teachers in our staff meetings and trainings about the initiative and the programs and our purpose, including internet inclusion (D2).

In answer to a follow-up question put to her by the researcher, the first-year director described what would be her part in training her administrators and teachers: "I'm the one who would do that," she responded and then quickly added, "I do train our special education staff and teachers. I attend the regular gen. ed. teacher staff meetings as well, and usually present on something. Sometimes it's about the referral policies or anything like that." Still fixed on the unrelated topic of the Special Olympics, she turned swiftly to her role as liaison: "With the Special Olympics, I'm their contact." Rather than address the specific types of professional development she intends to provide to aid and improve disability-inclusive education leadership in her district, D2 closed her remarks by stating that her goal is "to transition into that inclusive setting." She stressed, "I think it's just going to take time, something different every year."

> It's just slowly incorporating those practices and those trainings. We did go to the four-day school week. So, we're going to have more training days for teachers and staff. I'm hoping to utilize those days to teach inclusion practices and [build] relationships (D2).

Summary of Responses: Developing Competency

Only D1, D3, and D5 addressed the initial question independently, citing the provision of resources as the most important element in their role. In its place, acronyms and jargon distracted from any message that respondents might have otherwise conveyed. The frequency of particular words like collaboration and inclusion and acronyms such as MTSS, RTI, and UDL suggested a sense of insecurity. Participants knew the study's aim, meaning they may have given the answer(s) or tried to implement language they thought the researcher wanted to hear. The use of rambling or cluttered prose seemed less intentional than it was naïve, verging on a need to cover for lack of knowledge.

Legal Requirements

Three prominent themes became apparent from principals' and special education directors' responses regarding legal requirements to implement and support disability-inclusive education environments in [their] districts or schools:

- Least Restrictive Environment
- Professional Learning
- Human Resources

One principal response, the most experienced interviewed, acknowledged the importance of knowing special education legal requirements but only spoke to the value of education in the past tense.

Least Restrictive Environment

More than one-third of interviewees' responses to this prompt (n = 4) segued, through their own environmental lens, into narratives about LRE rather than addressing their self-perceived level of need for legal knowledge. D5 declared, "It's all about least restrictive environment and receiving [a] FAPE." He carried on,

> As much as we delve into how to be an educational leader, that whole compliance thing is just always looming. Do you have a well written IEP? Does it define what a FAPE is? does it define that least restrictive environment and how many minutes and so on and so forth (D5)?

He summarized his response, again reiterating his previous statement that,

> a well written IEP should be a great roadmap to justifying what the least restrictive environment is, and a tool for everybody to use. If it's well written, that really goes into why we're doing what we're doing and whatever level of inclusion is appropriate (D5).

P4 pointed to data. "We can look and see that our students who are in inclusive environments outperform students who are in more traditional pullout programs. Data shows us that." For those members of her staff who are reluctant or unsure, she reminds them that "it's legally an obligation to provide a least restrictive environment for students to ensure they're getting access to core." Her remarks were in the main dismissive of legal knowledge as "nice to have" but unnecessary if disability-inclusive discourse is centered around what's best for the individual as it relates to learning outcomes.

The principal-director pair from Idaho were in sync on the least restrictive environment but unsure of the requisite level of legal knowledge. The principal qualified her response by first

touting her degree in special education, after which she confidently summarized and added further input:

> It all goes back to that least restrictive environment and making sure parents are aware. Where does this child need to be? The focus is trying to get them in the classroom with their peers as much as possible. There are some cases [in which] they need to be pulled out for a different curriculum, different instruction, modification, different classroom setting, and things like that. Still, we try to keep them in the classroom as much as possible. That percentage of time they're in the classroom is laid out to the parents. It all boils down to the percentage of time they receive services in special education or in the general education setting (P2).

Her director (D2) answered, "I don't know," citing student needs as the dominant factor in determining LRE. Given the individualized approach educators must take to planning services for SWDs, she found it difficult to articulate the level of legal knowledge needed to implement and support disability-inclusive education environments in her district.

Professional Learning

Only special education directors (n = 3) mentioned the significance or value of professional learning as a means of maintaining the level of legal knowledge they need to implement and support disability-inclusive education environments in their districts. One director summed it up best when she candidly exclaimed that the amount of legal knowledge she needs is "More than I have" (D3)! For this reason, she feels that additional formal and informal learning activities are the only way to stay current.

> There is so much case law around legal requirements that it is hard to keep up on. I have to stay a step ahead of all of that. Every year I attend the law conference and make sure I

> know the hotspots. I subscribe to a platform that sets out articles and strategies to stay legal within all compliance and service areas. I set up the automatic email, so when that comes to my email, I take a few minutes and browse over a couple of those articles to keep in the know (D3).

Another special education director talked about what enables his team to keep abreast of legal thought and dynamics.

> One of the things that's nice out here is we've got a wonderful association. They do a great job providing a lot of training opportunities. Throughout the year, we participate virtually and in person in training and conferences that focus on laws, best practices, and current cases that are going before both our state and also the Ninth Circuit decisions that affect our region (D1).

Virtually every challenge special education directors face includes a significant legal component, and much of that legal piece, according to D1, concerns helping administrators understand that disability-inclusive education is not optional, but mandated by federal law. "This is a legal responsibility and onus that we have. Without that legal knowledge and understanding how the law is interpreted, a director would be lost."

Human Resources

Most confident was D4, who declared, "We know 90% of what we have to know, and then we have resources for the other 10%." Within her district, "it falls on the directors to know and understand the law." By joining professional organizations, she says she is able to stay up-to-date and keep compliant. "I try to go to the Pacific Northwest (PNW) Institute on Special Education and the Law every other year to keep track of court cases or trends that are

happening." She also joined the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) to "keep up with the rules and regulation changes."

As with directors and professional learning, the notion that responsibility for legal knowledge lies solely on district administrators or special educators was exclusive to principals. "I have some knowledge," conceded P5 in response to the original prompt, "but I rely heavily on that consulting teacher." When asked if there are other supports or resources she depends on to execute within legal bounds on behalf of SWDs, she was adamant, "Like I said, it's between my consulting teacher and director." P1 echoed with a similar sentiment. "I just go to my director and learn and hear and take [that] back." She articulated her role of administrator as follows:

> Making sure that we're politically correct and everyone is working as a team. I feel like it's my job to facilitate that a little bit. I feel like my position is to make sure that things are being said properly and everything's being explained properly, and the parents have been given their rights. Certain IEPs I have been in have been more challenging than others, so I constantly ask our special education director or our program specialist if they can sit in on meetings or give me some advice about the right thing to say in a situation (P1).

She summarized her thoughts thusly: "Again, I don't have a special education degree, but I definitely feel like if I went back, I would have a huge base of knowledge."

Summary of Responses: Legal Requirements

Instead of the necessary *level* of knowledge, most participants offered legal *sources* of knowledge for implementing and supporting disability-inclusive education environments in their districts or schools. P4 maintained that implementation and support are about "what's right for kids, and you don't need legal knowledge to know what's best for kids." More to the point, she

believes that legal requirements don't need to come into play if student learning outcomes or what's best for the individual are the focus. Another principal (P3) flailed as he tried to convey the significance of student rights and mistook special education law as the impetus for curricular assessment and reform. He affirmed the need to "know the rights of the student and laws." That's why, he told the researcher, "We have an IEP team to do all that." Referring to "those courses we had to take for special ed. law," he said, "that was good to know because the rights those parents have, and the rights of the student guarantee a viable and guaranteed curriculum for them." Once again, participants' tendency to appeal to acronyms like FAPE, IEP, and LRE served to cover a lack of coherence, and distract from relevant responses to the question.

Contextual Knowledge

Most principal perceptions (n = 4) of contextual knowledge essential to implementing and supporting disability-inclusive education environments in schools equated (or conflated) inclusion with mainstreaming (i.e., placing SWDs in general education classes with no support). Only one director confounded the LRE requirement for educational placement with mainstreaming. Three participants verbalized their thoughts about developmental needs and impactful experiential factors, and two principals referred to teacher fit and the IEP as driving the sole focus of placement. This line of thinking was less a theme than a preoccupation with one aspect of disability-inclusive education (placement).

D5 and P4 were bullish on consulting multiple data sources and stakeholders to establish implementation support services for SWDs. Divergent responses from the three remaining directors about contextual knowledge standards did not accord with any patterns. However, their statements about legal aptitude, different ways of looking at or dealing with the same situation,

physical environment, and transport did convey a leading role in setting the direction and structures to support disability-inclusive education environments in their districts.

Developmental Needs and Impactful Experiential Factors

The least experienced principal in the study (P2) was quick to point out that team decision-making allows key stakeholders in a child's life to participate in placement decisions. She spoke to team decision-making as a structure to facilitate stakeholder collaboration and ensure the whole child is centered in discussions.

> When we meet as a team, there are a lot of pieces that go into that: myself, the counselor, the classroom teacher, if they have a one-on-one aide, the special education teacher, the special education director, and then you also might have the speech language pathologist (SLP), or someone else who works with that child. There are a lot of pieces that go into that. How does the child behave in the general education setting when they're working on material they don't understand versus the special education setting where they are? Behavior is a piece of it. Then there is the social aspect. You're looking at the whole child and not just academics. Sometimes children are in the general education setting and need help understanding everything happening. That still might be the best placement for them. So again, it's just the idea of the whole child and not just one specific, isolated piece (P2).

P1 correspondently expressed more concern for the whole child than test scores and how a student performs at school. She provided the example of a student who received two hours of resource specialist program (RSP) intervention every school day for reading but wasn't making progress. Although the student is a hard worker, his RSP teacher wanted him placed in a special

day classroom (SDC) because that's where she thought he would learn best. The principal recounted,

> Mom was fine with it but her son had a hard time with the placement change because he would have to move schools. So, mom came back and shared her concerns. After I tried to sell it to her, I said, go home and think about it. She allowed me to talk to her son. My heart sank for him. I couldn't sleep for a couple [of] nights, so I called the program specialist and was like, this kid isn't a SDC kiddo. He can function in a gen. ed. classroom and needs more support. That's the difference. Yes, he has a learning disability. He has struggled reading, but [in] math, he's pretty strong. He's doing okay in math. He gets along with his peers. He just has this learning disability in reading and needs support with that. So how are we going to give him that support without moving him? So that's what we did. Every program is different, and you have to look at the individual based on needs and supports, not just a number or how they score (P1).

An interview with the special education director from the same district (D1) provided another example of a student with a unique neurological condition to illustrate his view of contextual value, which he maintains comes from "teams really communicating well about kids in classrooms." Mindful of the student's strengths, he was careful to note that her condition "causes regression of skills, but not mental capacity." He explained why:

> She started typical in her development, but now she's losing motor function and her ability to talk [and] move. Her brain is still typical, but she can't communicate or express herself. She has to learn how to use an augmentative alternative communication (AAC) device to speak and interact with her peers and her teacher. From the outset, you would think this is a kid who would be inappropriate in a general classroom, but [with] that

> context, you understand that she can understand and pick up on everything being discussed. She no longer has the physical or expressive means to verbally reciprocate or provide feedback about what she's learning. And so teams need to meet and ensure that the general ed. teacher and support staff are all on the same page with our goal and what we're working on. That's going to create the most successful outcomes for kids. I've always said, presume competence. We want to take the standpoint that kids are capable and will come through when we believe in them and challenge them. So really important to have that understanding of what you're working with because sometimes it's easy to pass judgment on someone on their presentation. Not taking time to understand or appreciate their situation fully can be damning to that person's potential for how they are included and what kind of demands we put on them (D1).

Teacher Fit

P5 was insistent on "really looking at the student and determining best fit with teacher." Her response was created largely by drawing from the example of a violent fifth-grade student. "He'd throw chairs, yell at people, tell you off, it was pretty intense," she reflected. "But each year because of his teacher [his] behaviors got better." Gleamingly, she added, "And he's in her class again this year. It was a no-brainer." Her synopsis was two-fold: "One, because of the special ed." his teacher has, and "two, because of that relationship, he's a different kid." She carried on, "It's amazing to see. More than anything, it is really trying to place the student with the teacher, so they really jive. There are times they won't work for support staff, so let's change support staff. It's like magic."

The IEP

As with his response regarding legal requirements, assessment of contextual knowledge prompted P3 to elaborate on his previously stated views of IEPs. “That’s why we have the IEP,” he reiterated. Observing the contribution of other disciplines to placement, he wandered from aspects of context.

> We’ve got to see where they’re at, what’s going on, where they’re going to be placed; what’s gonna be best for that student. What’s great is the input, not just what I think but as a team – the parent, psychologist, special ed. teacher, and regular teacher. If we have everybody involved, we can, with the student and their parent(s), make appropriate decisions. And the nice thing is we can always come back and change those [decisions] if we need to. We don’t want to put them in a place [where] they can’t achieve. We want to collect the data and put them in a place where they’re going to get the best help on the level that they’re at (P3).

Consulting Multiple Data Sources and Stakeholders

D5 grumbled, “We have some teachers that refuse to let students out of their classrooms, and that’s a big contextual piece.” Tying in his experience from a district perspective, he advocated the need “to work hard with teachers given what we know about a student,” and make data driven decisions. Noting the range of stakeholder input, he offered the following rhetorical questions:

> What is the best physical location? What is the best level of support? [What are] all of those things that make up [the] least restrictive environment? And when you bring in the family’s point of view and a parent’s perspective, what are their expectations? How do we see the bigger picture (D5)?

From his conclusion, it is evident that these questions represent what he perceives to be the litmus test for implementing and supporting disability-inclusive environments.

> At the end of the day, we don't know everything, but we are the experts at our craft. So, I want to take in all those contextual dynamics from the general ed. teacher's perspective, from the special educator, from the psychologist, and make data driven decisions (D5).

In terms of building a contextual picture by consulting a range of stakeholders, the only principal participant to steer clear of placement or setting and focus on service delivery for SWDs was P4. Talking particularly about contextual knowledge, she distinguished between the tacit and the explicit:

> It's about gathering it from a variety of sources because often, if we just look at the data, it may not show us the picture of what that student can actually do. That's one slice. We need to look at the [student's] behavior in different situations (P4).

She further contends this distinction stretches beyond the discourse of practitioners for the mere purpose of student placement. "It's every single aspect of their environment," she argued.

> When you're thinking about the contextual, it's not just the information from the test scores, it's looking at the whole picture. How do they do in different settings? How do they do at home versus school? What if they have a medical condition? What about medication(s)? Do we know how to set that student up for success? I think the biggest thing to know about all our kids is their strengths, so we can capitalize and help them be successful (P4).

Legal Aptitude

One director's preoccupation with legal shortcomings and issues of inadequate implementation of existing legal frameworks diverted her from addressing relevant context

matters. For her, the essential level of contextual scrutiny applies strictly to the law. “I don’t feel like anybody in our district understands the legal side of special education [and] why we’re doing what we’re doing. So, the law is the biggest learning experience and opportunity” (D2).

Two Sides of the Same Coin

D3 took another approach to the topic of contextual knowledge, comparing it to a double-edged sword. She started with the acquisition of contextual knowledge and the reality that “the more we know a student’s environment at home, the better we can support them.” On the other hand,

> you also find those teachers who use that as their excuse. Have you met their mom? What do you expect, they live in the trailer park? So, there’s that balance between understanding enough to serve them better and meet their needs, versus using that as an excuse to look out the window and say, I can’t help this kid (D3).

Reflecting on the frequent display of contrasting responses to the same contextual factors, she stated,

> I see both sides of that all the time. I feel like it’s important that we know of some of those basics. As we try to implement and support their mental health and social wellbeing that gives us a lot of knowledge of what we can do to implement some more there (D3).

Physical Environment and Transport

As a final point, D4 deliberated about seeking cooperative and context knowledge. First, she clarified the interrelationship between district and special education contexts: “Special ed. is impacted by everything that happens in the district, and special ed. impacts everything that happens in the district.” For example, when transportation changes busing routes, “that changes everything for our special ed. students in terms of how we request services and aides.” She

insists, if the district builds a new school, “we have to be involved in the construction piece because we have to understand how the school is being built. Can our students access that [building] and does it have the facilities that we need?” She accepts that though it “becomes frustrating, we have to be aware of everything that’s happening in the district. We have to understand how changes impact special ed.” Navigating environmental complexity, she decided, involves “a high level of contextual knowledge about a little bit of everything.”

Summary of Responses: Contextual Knowledge

Faced with the question of applying context to the implementation and support of disability-inclusive education environments, principals focused their comments on one area (access) at the exclusion of others (approaches, content, structures, strategies, teaching methods). The implication was that the inclusion of SWDs is simply a function of where they are educated. The researcher noted this unspoken understanding as synonymous with mainstreaming or a student's physical location. Equally, directors’ conceptions of context tended more toward factors affecting the learning behaviors of SWDs (conditions, value judgments, and services). These differing treatments raised a critical clarification not addressed in most original research, equating the meaning of inclusion with placement (Nilholm & Göransson, 2017).

Fostering Relationships

Participants spoke more confidently about fostering relationships in a disability-inclusive education environment. Some shifted the focus to why they should foster relationships without explaining how. From analysis, two themes emerged:

- Effective Communication
- Team Building and Engagement.

One participant (P3) whose response did not address the prompt was coded as not applicable and excluded from analysis.

Effective Communication

For a rural special education director who grew up and attended school in the same district she now serves, “the relationship aspect has always been fairly easy” (D2). Familiarity is key in her district, and what draws people in. “About 10 to 15 teachers in our district were my teachers. So I already have a relationship with them in that aspect. There are probably another five to 10 that I also went to school with here” (D2). When working with teachers, she focuses on communication structures that sustain and reinforce social ties to build a sense of belonging and strengthen relationships.

> I usually help moderate because communication can be challenging between personalities. Suppose I know someone personally or from school, or they're my teacher. In that case, I usually have some background knowledge and can communicate and foster that relationship between them (D2).

The principal from the same district reaffirmed her director’s commitment to effective communication as a key consideration for implementation of disability-inclusive frameworks. “I communicate with parents a lot,” and “I ask teachers to do the same so we have that parent piece as well” (P2). Put another way, the D3 expanded her advocacy for communication to fostering relationships to “not being afraid to have conversations with parents and stakeholder groups.” She added as an extra detail/tip:

> Communication and taking extra time to talk to people has to be prioritized. If parents and teachers know and trust you, they’re far more willing to do what you ask them to do.

> When we realize that the inclusion piece is the students and the parents, it starts working much better (D3).

D1 and D4 made comments corresponding to the underlying aspect of listening to effectively foster connections.

> It's about teachers and support staff feeling heard, following through, supporting, and creating that level of collegiality at the site level. We're all on the same team. And then from an administrative level, being able to make sure that staff feels that you're accessible, that you work together with teams when they struggle, that you listen and follow through. Those relationships can drive or completely sink any efforts when working in a large organization or group setting. When it comes to inclusion, you're talking about teachers having to potentially do things that aren't most comfortable to them or outside the norm of the way they've done something for 35 years. Moving in this area requires strong relationships, reciprocal respect, and understanding. Without it, most efforts fail (D1).

D4 values and practices listening as a first step to reaching compromise and establishing trust.

> One thing I know and have learned is that you have to listen to the needs of everybody. That doesn't mean you have to meet the needs of everybody, but you can't just tell people; you have to listen and pay attention. You have to develop a rapport. You don't have to be friends, but you have to understand where they're coming from and where you're coming from and find common ground. I came in having all these great ideas about what we could do. I didn't have the history, so I stepped on a lot of toes because I didn't listen. The same is true when you work with an individual student. They might call you into an IEP team meeting, and they're looking to you to make choices, to make decisions, to give

> them answers. And your answers can make or break what's going to happen in that meeting. So, carefully listen to where they have been and what they have done, and find common ground. What is the parent asking? What are the student's needs? That's what inclusion is, figure out where they're at, where you can push, and where you can give. You can't force, but you can compromise. It's about developing trust and finding that avenue to help others understand where I'm coming from. That can be a challenge (D4).

Team Building and Engagement

Another pair of directors and a principal turned their comments toward facilitating individuals and teams in education, from children and their parents to teachers, other administrators and support staff, to community members, to create, develop, and influence relationships in a disability-inclusive education environment. D5 credited his superintendent. "He's phenomenal at creating teams. We have a district level team," that meets weekly and, "operates as a really good professional learning community." In between his district commitments, he attends "dang near every special education building team meeting" and is involved in various professional development endeavors at the building level. As needed, he also guides coalition meetings at the building level. "This notion of all means all together," he added, noting, from his inclusive interpretation, "there's no side leadership meetings going on."

Thinking about her efforts to create relationships between students and teachers, P4 spoke confidently about her utilization of interdisciplinary teams. Her teacher teams, who share students, meet weekly. "They meet with case managers, counselors, and administrators during that time. It allows them to build more knowledge about the student and work on those relationships with those students if they need to." Just as students receive targeted academic support during advisory, she believes teachers should also be creating relationships with students

that are not centered around academics. As for student-to-student relationships, she was absolute in her appraisal: “We always ensure that students are involved in all aspects of our school.” She cited arrangements allowing the successful use of trained students to facilitate physical and social skills with autism:

> We have a couple of different things that we do to develop student relationships in an inclusive environment, especially for our students who have a higher level of need. We have an inclusive P.E. class that pairs gen ed. peers with students who qualify for our autism program. We call them peer helpers. It’s one-to-one, and they do P.E. together every day. During their enhancement period, they work with the students on social skills (P4).

Summary of Responses: Fostering Relationships

The ability to engage with stakeholders at a high level, and to convey opinions and ideas constructively and diplomatically is critical. Effective communication and team building skills were also regarded by participants to be essential for successfully fostering relationships in a disability-inclusive education environment. Several messages from participants that did not co-occur were sufficiently different and distinguished from the groups above within this summary.

Statements from P1 and P5 were not supported by corresponding comments from other interviewees. An excerpt from P1 is illustrative of her pedagogical posture and interaction with students.

> In classrooms and at lunchtime, I talk to them and don't treat them differently than other students. I'm nice and kind. I'm always with the kids, saying hi, and hanging out at lunchtime or recess. Making it through their classrooms, talking to them, holding conversations, and giving them compliments is how I build relationships with them. You

> have to coach and teach them as well. So whether they're a gen. ed. or a special ed. kiddo, it's my job to teach them right from wrong (P1).

D3 feels that fostering relationships is about "being visible in schools, general ed. classrooms, special ed. classrooms, professional learning communities." P5 only briefly touched on being present for his principals:

> I think by letting them know that I'm there for support, and going in and helping as much as I can. I really try to help them with the resources, tools, and training. I'm like, just know that I'm there. We're here together to support them (P5).

Professional Standards

Participants were more inclined to associate behavior, disability, or test performance with standards for placement in more restrictive settings rather than a student's needs. The researcher identified no themes. One principal stated that she has no role in determining the LRE for her students. In contrast, only one director's response referenced the IEP as a driver of placement and content for the curriculum.

P1 reminds her teachers that evaluation for determining the LRE for SWDs is a process. "There are steps. There are programs and protocols, so we have to make sure that all of those things get done. It's not zero to 60. It's step by step." P2 said, "I'm not the one that gets to determine [the] least restrictive environment. That solely lies with the special education teacher and director. I don't make that decision." P3 was caught off guard by the inquiry and asked, "Oh, jeez, like our teaching standards? Other than just using our data," he admitted, "I can't think of standards." After reconsidering, he came up with a fundamental insight. "We definitely want to use our teams, you know, get input from them," but again confessed, "I don't know." P5 thought

about it before he, too, countered with a question and answer: “A specific standard? No.” Uninterrupted, he persisted,

> Our district mission is ‘all students learn at high levels.’ With that in mind, what does that look like in our classrooms? Do we have time set aside in the schedule to support core instruction and help students with Tier 3 [interventions] (P5)?

In a lengthy tribute to equity, D1 preferred his district’s collective “obligation to support all learners” without ever touching on any foundational principles for supporting said learners or, furthermore, determining where that support will come from.

> Our job is to ensure that all students are given equitable opportunities. That’s the foundation of our work. We have to be equity-focused, making sure that we're structuring and providing learning opportunities that are meaningful and engaging. We're going to have more kids demonstrate content standard mastery over time by being more open and flexible with our learning environments and how we structure our lessons to be more adaptable and engaging to the kids we serve. Focusing on that work is important, and you can do that through your evaluative process, your goal setting with teachers, and then just in the way that you help support them. Almost every professional practice in California, whether a teacher's professional practices or administrator's focuses on providing equitable and meaningful learning opportunities (D1).

D2 chose to concentrate on accountability in preference to her district’s approach for placement of SWDs. Consistent with the participants previously mentioned, her discourse misaddresses the prompt.

> Every person in the building has a responsibility to children with disabilities, whether as a paraprofessional or gen. ed. teacher, that special ed. teacher, or the recess duty; they all

> have different roles and are accountable for their actions and interactions. I would find it important to me. Our goal is to be student-focused, and that means being their voice at times and being their advocate. I feel like we've all stepped into that role very easily as far as making sure others are accountable for advocating for that student (D2).

P4 mistook student eligibility for student placement, describing a method ("Discrepancy Model") no longer used exclusively in schools to identify students with special educational needs. It is essentially a way to capture and compare a student's scores on different types of tests, and the supposed 'standard' for determining the LRE for SWDs in P4s school. She explains,

> When we look at the least restrictive environment for our students, we look at their assessment scores and standard deviation data. Are they within one standard deviation of their peers? They definitely should be in inclusion. But if they're two or more, they might need a more restrictive environment. We also have students whose test scores show that they're two standard deviations away, but they can be in inclusion with proper support. So we look at the test scores first (P4).

D4 informed the researcher that the "least restrictive environment is a super wishy-washy thing, just so you know." She found it a coincidence that she had only recently received official correspondence about "things to consider when you're talking about [the] least restrictive environment." Coming closer than other participants to stipulating standards, she observed LRE: "It's not necessarily the amount of time that you're in special ed. It's not necessarily the location of where you're at. It's a combination of all of those things." She then proceeded to bemoan the lack of "professional standards out there," asserting there are only "some technical assistance papers that the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) and the Center for Exceptional Children (CEC) put out. They put out some guidance and articles and professional

papers around what is [the] least restrictive environment, but it's a very wishy-washy kind of thing," she repeated. "I don't have a place that I go for guidance."

Finally, D3 conversed more about obstacles to placing students than standards, namely teachers. They "get in our way," she said.

> It's important that we place those students in classrooms that we know the teachers understand and can handle those issues. They know how to use peers to support those students with disabilities and can see the bigger picture. We are pretty selective as we hand-select their teachers and build their inclusive schedules (D3).

The only participant who responded to the prompt directly, and addressed all aspects of it, was D5. Suggesting first that the general standard for determining the LRE for SWDs is "super vague," he referred to the IEP as the criterion of the IDEA's education delivery system for SWDs and for ensuring the delivery of a FAPE. Using the IEP to drive student placement, he poses the following questions to inform his assessment of a student's LRE: What are the present levels of performance? What is the data on the previous goals? If it's an initial [evaluation], what are our standardized tests, and what are our observations? What is the classroom telling us? What is the behavior? "Those things guide us to LRE determination and probably a dozen more."

Summary of Responses: Professional Standards

Analysis revealed significant differences between participants in their consideration of professional standards when determining the LRE for SWDs. Six out of 10 participants, including four principals, failed to identify any standards they employ in establishing the LRE. Inconsistencies among administrators regarding the LRE in their schools and districts were not unexpected given the lack of clear language in the IDEA. Uncertainty in determining an

appropriate LRE has remained a significant obstacle since its inception in 1975 (Alquraini, 2013).

Supportive or Complimentary Means

The culminating question from the interview protocol (Appendix D) for analysis in this study asked the participants to tell how their special education director(s) or principals support or complement their efforts to ensure disability-inclusive education environments in their district or school. Two themes emerged from the responses, one from each role group. Principals: Accessibility and Communication; Directors: Pushback.

Perceptions of Principals. As demonstrated by the preceding narrative content extracted from the protocol Appendix D), principals scattered their answers to this question across categories. The most ubiquitous topic that arose from principal responses was accessibility and communication. Those directors described by principals as accessible (n = 3) routinely meet face-to-face with their principals. P5 applauded her director for attending weekly special education team meetings in her building.

> We have a special ed. department meeting every Wednesday with our special ed. team. That's the nurse, the occupational therapist, physical therapist, speech, all of the special ed. teachers, and the consulting teacher. He comes to that every week. He is involved. He comes in and goes into the special ed. classrooms or goes in and visits with the special ed. teachers (P5).

P3 also had high praise for his director, who "brings us up to speed each month" and is "in our schools a lot."

With accessibility, principals regarded communication as equally valuable. Whenever P1 has a question, she can email, call, or text her director anytime. "Sometimes it's at 10 p.m.

because that's when we're working, and he is very good about responding and helping me through a situation." P3 is appreciative of the relationship his director has built for the same reason. "I feel like I can call her anytime if I have questions." D5 will "call often and say how are things going? Is there anything you need to know." P2 complemented her director in a similar vein. "I work really closely with the special education director. She's an integral piece of our program. We have a great staff, and she's a piece of that."

The provision of resources surfaced as a topic for P4 and P5. D4 supports her principals' efforts by writing "inclusive practices grants." P4 says, "they do most of the heavy lifting on getting the grants and working with those processes." Her district also assigns "a teacher on special assignment" to each elementary, middle, and high school "as an expert to make recommendations on student placement."

> They come out, and they'll do training for our staff. And so when we think about the support from the district office, they also talk about [how] we need to be looking at that least restrictive environment. They're looking at the disproportionality data. They give us that data for our schools and compare it to the state. But that's, I think, the key is they help us with the grants for the inclusive practices. So those practices, and with the ed. specialist, who can come out and work with our teams and support them with the needs of each building (P4).

P5 shared the following anecdote to shed light on the profile of her director:

> Last year we had two behavior kids that were on IEPs. We just said you know what, this is hard [and] we need some support [and] we got the support. We got a para that split between those two students and had a one-on-one in certain content areas. It was the

> difference between [those students] being able to stay in that class and work or being disruptive and being kicked out of the class.

Noting her director's hands-on approach, P5 says her director will even step in as needed and run IEP meetings. P3 also portrayed her director working a great deal in schools with regular and special ed. teachers. One principal thinks her director is "extremely knowledgeable," but her district "could do a better job with training our newbies in special education. I'm going to be honest," she said. "I don't want to sound bad about our district, but I'm aware of no professional development" (P1).

Perceptions of Directors. Overall, directors didn't speak to principals' supportive or complementary efforts. They countered more readily by relating how they support principals, helping them to break free of a traditional mindset. Though sympathetic to the amount of work that must be accomplished at the building level, most directors (n = 4) expressed annoyance with principals about outdated approaches and aversion to best practices for ensuring disability-inclusive education environments in their districts. "It's a love-hate relationship," sighed D1.

> Some [principals] are a little bit tougher than others. I think it's them being open-minded and appreciative and knowing that the work we're trying to engage in is good for kids. If a site administrator is having an issue or there are concerns, they know they can reach out to me. We're able to have conversations where we're not bruising egos or coming at people but working through challenges. I think there's a level of mutual respect that is developed over time. We're all on the same page. I understand and appreciate the lens that they're coming from, and we can work to do what's best for kids. There's an understanding that we're all trying to do what's best for kids (D1).

D3 shared almost the same outlook towards principals as D1 and responded in kind about how they support or complement her efforts:

> Some do, some don't. I try to do a little bit of professional development at every principals' meeting. I've talked to principals about being that gatekeeper, but that's been difficult because principals have a hard time evaluating the level of intervention that students receive through supports in the regular classroom (D3).

To say that an "intervention was done with fidelity," she contends, requires "more time" and patience than she thinks they are willing to give. She works with principals to differentiate between students who need more from their regular education classroom and those "who truly have a disability." The biggest obstacles she encounters are principals' "own mindsets and ideas of where kids should be." When she says, "this kid is low, so we're going to figure out how to support him," principals have a tough time being creative with their schedules. Only when she teaches them why and how do they "seem to be able to progress." But again, she reiterates, "Principals are tricky."

To express that she felt the same way, D4 shrugged: "It varies." Only she was more forgiving.

> When I was in school, you either had the special ed. classroom or you didn't. I think many of our administrators grew up that way, and now we're having new administrators who've seen it differently come in. They experienced it differently, and their schooling has taught them differently. So there's certainly a shift in how administrators are working with us. They are taking into account building schedules to ensure that all students have access to core, which wasn't the case for a long time (D4).

Coincidentally, D4's district is working with John Krownapple, who specializes in professional and organizational learning and development in inclusion, equity, and social justice, but not as they pertain to SWDs. "What better opportunity to talk about inclusion in terms of disabilities?" she asked, but she wasn't asking. "As we talk about inclusivity for all students, our principals are becoming more open because we can make that connection for them."

When D2 was hired, she encountered "a lot of bad blood." Given the "leeway" to decide how to address the situation and "do special education" how she "would like to see it run," she "brought the principal and staff together." Now that she has established "good working relationships" and a "common language," she can provide procedural and situational guidance that considers child-specific factors. She recalled the value of having "a very supportive director." From her perspective, he did "a lot of things that others didn't agree with, but worked." This observation taught her "about trying new things."

Once more, and with the fewest amount of words, D5 had the most to say about how his principals support his efforts to ensure disability-inclusive education environments in his district:

> All of our principals attend their weekly special education team meetings. I would also say that we've been to the same trainings, we've had the same discussions and so that helps a lot. It's not me just coming back from LRP (National Institute on Legal Issues of Educating Individuals with Disabilities) and telling them hey, this is what you guys need to be doing. It's an all hands on deck thing (D5).

D5's construal of follow-through on common professional development opportunities was not supported by comments from other participants.

Summary of Responses: Supportive or Complimentary Means

Across the interview, it was a common thread among principals who described their directors as accessible that both meet face-to-face on a monthly or even weekly basis, depending on the district's size. Directors were similarly consistent in their responses but not in reciprocal praise of building administrators' supportive or complementary role. By comparison, their self-acclaimed productivity on behalf of principals was at the forefront of their response. They attributed insufficient support from principals to a static or traditional mindset.

Review

This qualitative descriptive study aimed to identify and describe principals' and special education directors' perceptions of their roles and the associated competencies for addressing the implementation of disability-inclusive education in districts and schools. The study's significance is grounded in its consideration of the connection between district-level competency, skill requirements, and professional learning that determine the readiness of school principals. Qualitative data were obtained from interviews conducted by the researcher with special education directors and principals. Participant responses were compared to assess district and school leadership's skills, knowledge, and attitudes toward promoting the development of disability-inclusive education. Findings were presented as they applied to a representable sampling of competencies from the theoretical framework, and a description of the interview data was provided.

Chapter V

Discussion

Introduction

In this qualitative descriptive study, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with special education director and principal pairs to identify and give an account of their perceptions of their roles and the associated competencies for addressing the implementation of disability-inclusive education in districts and schools. Sider and Maich (2022) categorized three domains and 14 competencies “which are particularly important for principals to foster in relationship to supporting students with special education needs in inclusive schools” (p. 23). With permission (Appendix E), the researcher applied their framework to interview questions to elicit more focused responses from participants and to bridge the gaps between corresponding interpretations of competency that emerged in data analysis. This chapter describes the results, highlights the study's limitations, and identifies potential avenues for further research.

Summary of the Results

Discussed within this chapter are two significant findings that were identified during the interviews. First, not all question categories are supported by themes (e.g., professional standards), and some themes derived from qualitative analysis are incompatible with the question category from which they originated (e.g., the themes associated with participants’ knowledge of legal requirements and context). Secondly, the themes for the current analysis served more as indicators of participants' familiarity with special education terminology rather than a true understanding of its current usage. Participants were more focused on using words they heard in the questions, rather than considering the context or purpose of the situation. The data analysis

revealed a pattern of "word repetition" without a complete comprehension of the words' meaning in relation to the subject matter being discussed.

Disability-Inclusive Education Understanding

Two challenges for any educator are, first, learning the ever-evolving vocabulary of the field and, second, developing meaningful methods for its integration and application. The schism within the public school system between special and regular education necessitates using clear and common terminology (Anthony-Higley, 2019). The data within this study demonstrates a lack of identity between participants' language and understanding of the subject matter. There's no way to discuss about disability-inclusive education apart from referencing jargon like FAPE, IEP, and LRE. However, the repetitive stream of familiar words and phrases used by participants to express their understanding of the subject matter overwhelmed the meaning of those words and phrases as represented by the researcher.

Participants were first asked to define disability-inclusive education practices to assess their comprehension of disability-inclusive education. Although placement is a fundamental aspect of disability-inclusive practices, participants' definitions demonstrate a near absolute emphasis on a student's location to the neglect of their access to "curriculum, instruction, and peers with needed supports" (Theoharis & Causton, 2014, p. 83). Members of both participant groups were also careful to consider the severity of a student's disability as an acceptable reason to isolate and prohibit access to general education programs and activities. Principals and special education directors defined disability-inclusive practices primarily as those that pertain to the general education classroom or setting and support children with mild-to-moderate disabilities, exclusive of those with severe disabilities.

Research Question 1

What competencies do special education directors and principals perceive essential to implementing and supporting disability-inclusive education services in districts and schools?

Language hindered the researcher's understanding of participants' perceptions of disability-inclusive competency rather than moving it forward. An appropriate measure of progress toward implementing policy is transforming abstracted labels into meaningful protocols for education practitioners. Special education directors' and principals' inability to articulate their own requirements reveals either a lack of linguistic skill or a broader issue – the gap between words and the reality they represent. Determining which capabilities are essential is meaningless without first knowing the thing that is needed. Part of the problem in linking words like *inclusivity* and *collaboration* to their meanings is they are not indistinguishable from the environment they are used to portray. Many participants were good at remembering to use key terms from the questions in their responses. It was similarly easy to find examples of respondents mimicking knowledge to disguise a lack of understanding. Supportive elements such as advocacy and access were asserted frequently as guiding concepts, but they then skirted around the consequences and requirements of these starting points.

When discussing developing and implementing disability-inclusive education programs, participants did not mention the need to understand the nuances of disability nor make their professed efforts to address disability-inclusive education reflect guiding principles such as equity, safety, leadership, or empowerment. Participants offered only anecdotes devoid of probative value. The inclusion of SWDs may be happening, but it is more sentimental than substantial. The promotional push is not proportional to the unmet needs of disabled learners and

the available supports. There is also a disparity between the professed administrative acceptance of disability-inclusive principles and organizational responses. Special education directors and principals seem more willing to take steps than their local education authorities (LEAs) are to support them. A vital element of that difference is leadership culture, specifically the professional and organizational separation between educational leadership and teaching and learning.

Organizational Impediments to Implementing an Effective Culture of Disability-Inclusive Leadership

From an organizational perspective, data provided by study subjects implied three common impediments to implementing and supporting disability-inclusive education: limited resources (namely personnel), resistance from regular education teachers, and lack of accountability. Dedicating robust resources, hiring people who will implement a strategy and drive change, and holding people accountable are self-explanatory solutions but only if addressing the status quo becomes a priority. If effective disability-inclusive leadership is truly a priority, then accountability must be assigned. What participants didn't say, but the researcher observed to be accurate, especially for principals, was that they are afraid of saying or doing the wrong thing. School administrators can't be held accountable for improving disability-inclusive education if they don't know what actions to take.

What Is Needed and How to Approach Communicating the Work

For successful implementation of best practices, it is important for the district leadership team to have adequate resources and a well-planned strategy. School leaders must be attuned to the needs expressed by teachers and prioritize support where it is most needed. Disability inclusion should be a top priority for the district as a whole, with district leaders serving as

agents of change for equity and inclusion, while holding others accountable. To foster disability-inclusive leadership, school principals and teachers require adequate training, shared language, and clear expectations.

In light of the information furnished in the preceding paragraph, it appears that feasible measures that could potentially amend the situation in the future may include the following steps:

1. Ensure that the district leadership team is adequately resourced and has a strategy in place to apply these resources effectively using best practices.
2. Encourage individual school leaders to actively listen to the needs of teachers and prioritize disability inclusion district wide.
3. Make disability inclusion a district-wide priority, with district leaders serving as change agents for disability equity and inclusion.
4. Hold subordinates accountable for promoting disability equity and inclusion.
5. Provide training and opportunities for school principals and teachers to learn disability-inclusive leadership skills, common language, and clear expectations.

These steps can help to improve the situation and create a more inclusive environment for SWDs.

Research Question 2

How do special education directors and principals perceive select competencies related to implementing and supporting disability-inclusive education environments in districts and schools?

Four competencies were selected from Sider and Maich's (2022) framework for inclusive school leaders for use in the study: legal requirements, contextual knowledge, fostering relationships, and professional standards. These competencies were designated as a general level

of assessment on how participants can transition from current practice and education standards to future practices and formatted below as Level 3 sub-headings of Research Question 2. To implement and support educational models "which are more in line with the educational needs of students and appropriate to social demands" (Alonso-Sáez & Arandia-Loroño, 2017, as cited in Sánchez-Ramírez et al., 2022, p. 426), there must be a transition from teaching-focused models to learning-centered models, along with strategies to empower school leaders and principals with the skills needed to enhance student learning outcomes. This change in the education system is particularly crucial, as it has the potential to decrease the unequal identification of students in special education programs, and "focuses first and foremost on improved educational results and functional outcomes for SWDs, rather than emphasizing procedural requirements only" (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2016). Outcomes for SWDs are influenced markedly by how well they are taught, and instruction is "a more important issue in special education than *Where* it is happening" (Bateman et al., 2015, p. 448). The effect of place on student learning outcomes is smaller than instruction (Bateman et al., 2015).

Legal Requirements

The most looming competency, knowledge of federal and state administrative legal requirements, may be the least apprehended. Building- and district-level leaders in this study acknowledged their tendency to rely more on alternative sources of legal expertise than their ability to make decisions related to legally mandated services and accommodations for SWDs. Their legal conclusions could have been more logical and consistent with the equitable concepts underlying special education law, and they sometimes contradicted their own pledges. Many scholars trace the sources for this void to inadequate training. The present research considers

training and supervision of principals to be important factors, but also proposes that accountability has the potential to resolve the issue of competency.

It is far less disconcerting for public education administrators to ascribe their legal inadequacies to the privation of pre-service training, for which they have only passive responsibility, than to their capacities as leaders, for which they are directly accountable. It is apparent from responses to this study that both leadership groups are unaccustomed to explaining and justifying their actions based on sound professional knowledge and transparent, logical and replicable decision-making. Principals take their lead from the priorities and objectives communicated (or not communicated) by their LEA. Prioritizing legal compliance with repeatable protocols and tasks such as new precedent developments or legal updates, would improve the ability to assess competency and to identify and address ongoing needs of SWDs in a/the district.

Contextual Knowledge

Many children with special educational needs can benefit from mainstream classrooms. Many school districts also run special classes or have units determined by disability for eligible students. There are autism units, behavior units, and functional skills units. Excluding contextual factors from placement criteria ensures that students who qualify for special or related services are categorized according to their disability. The effort to fit SWDs into a system of one-off accommodations has been the focus of special education for decades. This practice could extend to principals who place students in these more restrictive settings. When collecting data to develop a student's IEP, principals may also be limiting consideration of contextual and local factors because either their experience or training has caused them to deemphasize or ignore the individual circumstances of students beyond an LEA's means to control. The logic here is that

we remove the things we can't control. Some contextual factors could also be deemed off-limits. Regardless of which variables can or cannot be controlled or considered, they nonetheless impact a student's education and can therefore inform the creation of conditions and services tied to support.

All but one participant in this study responded to the essential contextual knowledge question by requesting that the researcher explain what they were being asked. In other words, the term "contextual knowledge" did not evoke any associations with situations and events, nor did participants connect it with the task or goal of placement. Incorporating essential contextual knowledge holds the potential for mitigating the effects of external influences on achieving performance goals. No matter whether one tends more toward the idea of a contextual approach to placement, the fact that participants could not discuss it without the researcher first explaining it is crucial to the core question of competency and goes to their ability to implement and support disability-inclusive education environments in schools.

Fostering Relationships

While school districts have an obligation to set the expectations for a disability-inclusive education culture, special education directors and principals should not underestimate their influence on fostering relationships and building trust. It was recognized that adopting a disability-inclusive leadership approach that promotes trust through actions, consists of fostering relationships through open communication and team building skills. Representative comments from the sample agreed that it is also critical to evaluate how one's management style impacts team dynamics and promotes mutual respect. Another key takeaway was that a disability-inclusive culture is built upon self-directed teams and getting tools in practitioners' hands. Thus, members of both leadership groups recognized their responsibility for setting the vision and

strategy, connecting special educators and related servers to resources, and reinforcing accountability. The sense of that responsibility enables the IEP team to take ownership then and make decisions about placement provision and service type.

Effective Communication. An inclusive culture for SWDs requires open communication and transparency to develop trusting relationships. Though building administrators can create trust by facilitating conversations, the critical message from this study is that their capacity to perform specific actions in terms of communication, training, and development of skills associated with disability-inclusive programs are more likely to promote sustainable practices. Principals can show staff their support by adopting an open-door policy and being available with regular hours to listen and attend IEP meetings. With the increasing use of virtual communications, practicing interpersonal skills is a worthwhile investment. So too is the ability to navigate difficult conversations around disability-inclusive learning, including what it is, what it looks like in action, and how one can be more mindful and deliberate to make education at school more inclusive of SWDs.

Communication can't just be idle chatter when it concerns leadership capability. It needs to be actively and constantly reinforced. Communicating is vital to providing support such as hiring special education teaching staff and aides, professional services such as speech language pathologists and counselors, and specialized programs and assistive technology to meet students' needs and enhance their quality of education. Communication is more than a buzzword. It must happen and can't just be delivered by special education directors. It must also come from principals.

Team Building Skills. To begin with, perspectives on teamwork and the importance of team building were limited. The prevailing presumption was that simply holding meetings is

enough. But team building is more than just a meeting (or a PLC). In the current context, it is recognizing "that relationships are fundamentally important to the successes of all students" and actively working "to foster professional relationships that model acceptance and inclusion" (as cited in Sider & Maich, 2022, p. 24). Using team building skills to foster relationships can increase loyalty and engagement and more importantly, create a culture that values collaboration. Leaders at every level should promote disability-inclusive competence as a priority. Acceptance and inclusion are modeled both internally and externally, through both position and relationships. Obliging special education directors to develop and implement plans and processes to ensure compliance and alignment of services and goals for SWDs would help tremendously to improve consistency and enhance the capacity of principals to manage resources, provide increased situational awareness of and service to SWDs across the education landscape.

Professional Standards

One of the greatest challenges school leaders face is "navigating the grey areas that govern the rights of SWDs to receive the 'appropriate' educational and related services essential for them to progress academically" (as cited in Barsano, 2017). The ambiguity surrounding what LRE really means and how it applies to SWDs was a source of confusion, resulting in a variety of interpretations from participants who struggled to construe the term "standards." Regarding their work to support all students, ethical standards were not identified by participants in this study. These include trust, respect, integrity, and care in their work (Sider & Maich, 2022).

Though both groups of participants at the district and building levels agreed on the importance of providing access for SWDs to the general education classroom, there was no real consensus on how to provide further opportunities for SWDs to gain the skills necessary for academic success. Administrative apathy and attitudes play a prominent part in preventing the

implementation and support of disability-inclusive education environments in districts and schools. The message that tradition persists through public education and relates to the present was prevalent in responses.

Finally, training in ethics and disability-inclusive principles is imperative. Learning how personal values are reflections of leadership should be incorporated into professional learning activities as well. Incorporating effective models that focus on not just participation, but learning may provide the tools necessary to understand how SWDs are included as equals in the learning community. Leaders' perceptions and the role those perceptions play continue as systemic barriers to inclusion for SWDs.

Research Question 3

What types of professional development do special education directors provide for principals to develop disability-inclusive educational leadership competency?

In the interviews with school principals, the provision of professional learning to develop disability-inclusive leadership competency by their special education directors was not mentioned. The principals only expressed praise for the accessibility provided by their district-level counterparts, limited to routine assembly. This suggests that the subject of disability-inclusive leadership development was not given much consideration by the principals. Again, the construal of weekly or monthly team meetings as professional development needs to be revised. Meetings are not professional development. Professional development grows from collaboration between directors and principals emphasizing services received to increase student achievement. Developing competency warrants significant time laying the groundwork, planning processes, and obtaining basic skills before implementation. Support throughout the stages of implementation must be ongoing and continuous to be effective in stimulating growth, change,

and progress. Improving inclusion for SWDs revolves around the professional development of instructional leaders. Principals would profit from ongoing professional development specific to working with teachers and the ambiguous aspects of merging general and special education for the benefit of all students.

Professional development for principals should be ongoing and incorporated into a principal's regular schedule. It should also take place on the job with the support and assistance of colleagues, mentors, and the special education director. Given educational leaders' overall unfamiliarity with disability-inclusive education, principal participants did not have the requisite knowledge to inform the researcher about their practice. However, the researcher recognized from their responses that principals are not receiving the professional development and support they need.

Conclusion

Both principals and special education directors would readily agree on the importance of ensuring access to the general curriculum by providing SWDs the right to the same state, district, and school programs as those provided to students without disabilities. But then again, the analysis yielded no accurate indication of expertise for implementing and supporting the necessary practices and initiatives. As evidenced by educational leaders' documented unfamiliarity with the IDEA, all school principals are not fully aware and knowledgeable about its nuances. Since it was first enacted in 1975, the IDEA's vague language has resulted in unequal educational benefits at the local level. The interpretation of the provisions in IDEA, such as the definition of a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE), the amount of service time, and the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE), is left to the discretion of Local Education Agencies (LEAs). Many of these agencies have delegated this responsibility to school principals, resulting

in a chain of delegation. This practice can lead to arbitrary and even discriminatory enforcement of the law. The author is concerned that this approach to implementation may result in unequal treatment of SWDs.

The term "vagueness" in relation to the IDEA can have both positive and negative consequences. At best, such broad flexibility allows LEAs to consider factors specific to a particular student or situation that could not be stated in a rigid rule. At worst, an underspecified standard may effectively delegate important choices to LEAs that are less open to scrutiny and supervision and where lack of competency may play a more significant role. To put it succinctly, conceptual confusion characterizing the field impedes its development.

Recommendations for Further Research

Suggestions for further study include training in collaborative practices to uncover possible values and assumptions that work against the preparation of competent disability-inclusive educational leaders. The need for collaborative practices continues to allude school leaders, and future research may lend insight into specific competencies that describe the necessary skills, knowledge, and attitudes related to the oversight of disability-inclusive education. Another suggestion concerns the impact of collaboration between districts and schools on reaching consensus solutions for professional growth. Special education directors and principals must be careful not to allow personal bias or perceptions to develop into systemic barriers. A final area recommended for research would be allied with leaders' lack of exposure during pre-service preparation. A lack of available research makes this area ripe for needed pertinent information.

Implications for Professional Practice

The compelling insight from this study is the need to convert an overarching commitment to change into a framework of accountability for special education directors and principals that works. In the context of public education, beyond having a simple disability-inclusive strategy, it must be aligned to an accountable commitment by leadership at the district level. If there is no accountability, there is no measurement. And if something is not measured, the message is that it doesn't matter. So why do school districts avoid measuring their leaders' commitment and effectiveness regarding the inclusion of SWDs? "There is too much overload and baggage on the current change journey" (Fullan, 2010, p. 16), and the role expectations of principals have "become too complex" (Fullan, 2014, p. 5). Until district leaders are clear that their fundamental purpose is to ensure high levels of learning for all students, efforts to align policies, practices, and procedures limit district initiatives, and articulate the role expectations of principals will be misguided.

The ever-increasing challenges and expectations placed on the principal as the "ultimately accountable person" (Fullan, 2014, p. 6) have rendered the role of the principal a job of fiction. Special education directors can support principals in their work by shifting from external training (workshops and courses) to job-embedded learning. Some leaders are better equipped than others but developing the ability to lead change effectively can be learned. Disability-inclusive leadership challenges special education directors and principals daily to show that they mean what they say instead of just talking about it. Being the building or district leader is an opportunity to create results-driven special education systems and practices, redesign collaborative general and special education systems and supports, and enhance current systems and goals.

The current education landscape needs to place more emphasis on principal development. With the right guidance, support, and encouragement from district leaders, principals can elevate educational results and outcomes for SWDs in all competency domains. This study highlights the urgent need for development, to ensure competency in school leadership. To achieve this, special education directors must establish clear and evidence-based criteria for competency, making it the central focus of in-service training.

However, the implementation of special education initiatives presents a major challenge for school principals, particularly due to a lack of resources, comprehension, and stakeholder support. Principals often struggle to grasp the complexities of the special education vernacular, hindering their ability to effectively implement initiatives. This challenge is exacerbated by the lack of support from teachers and district leadership. The successful implementation of these initiatives requires not only a strong understanding of the special education vernacular but also adequate resources and the buy-in and support of all involved stakeholders.

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Appendix A

Percentage of SWDs Served Inside General Education Classrooms

	Less than 40 percent	40-79 percent	80 percent or more
1989	24.9	37.5	31.7
1990	25.0	36.4	33.1
1994	22.4	28.5	44.8
1995	21.5	28.5	45.7
1996	21.4	28.3	46.1
1997	20.4	28.8	46.8
1998	20.0	29.9	46.0
1999	20.3	29.8	45.9
2000	19.5	29.8	46.5
2001	19.2	28.5	48.2
2002	19.0	28.7	48.2
2003	18.5	27.7	49.9
2004	17.9	26.5	51.5
2005	16.7	25.1	54.2
2006	16.4	23.8	54.8
2007	15.4	22.4	56.8
2008	14.9	21.4	58.5
2009	14.6	20.7	59.4
2010	14.2	20.0	60.5
2011	14.0	19.8	61.1

2012	13.9	19.7	61.2
2013	13.8	19.4	61.8
2014	13.7	18.9	62.2
2015	13.6	18.7	62.5
2016	13.4	18.6	62.9
2017	13.3	18.3	63.4
2018	13.1	18.0	64.0
2019	12.8	17.5	64.8

Note. Adapted from U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2021). *Digest of Education Statistics* (NCES 2021-009). Table 204.60. Public Domain.

Appendix B

Email for Initial Contact

Hi <Participant's Name>,

My name is Andy Jensen. <Colleague's Name>, a colleague, indicated that you would be willing to participate in a Zoom interview as part of a research study to examine the essential competencies for effective leadership of inclusive education for students with disabilities. As a <Special Education Director/Principal>, you are in an ideal position to provide valuable first-hand information and I would very much appreciate your thoughts and perspectives.

The interview is informal and takes between 20-30 minutes. Your responses to the questions will be kept confidential.

If you are willing to participate, let me know a day and time that suits your schedule, and I will be available. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to ask.

Again, I am ever so grateful for your time and consideration.

Thank you! Andy Jensen
(XXX) XXX-XXXX

Appendix C

Email to Set Up Participant Interviews

Hello again, <Participant's Name>,

Thank you so much for your time and willingness to participate in an interview to further explore your insights into how <special education directors/school principals> support inclusion of students with disabilities in schools. To that end, I am sending you a link to our Zoom meeting scheduled for <Day>, <Month> XX, 2022, at X:XX a.m./p.m. Pacific/Mountain time.

Once again, all your responses will be kept strictly confidential, and your name or other identifying information will be removed from the data. Also, your participation is voluntary, and you may refuse to answer any questions you do not wish to answer.

If you have any questions, you may contact me at XXX-XXX-XXXX.

Andy Jensen

Appendix D

Interview Protocol

1) How many years have you been a special education director/principal?
    a. To Question 2.

2) How do you define disability-inclusive education practices?
    a. To Question 3.

3) What is the most important element in your role in developing disability-inclusive education competency in your district/school?
    a. To Question 4, 5, 6, or 7, depending on response to Question 2.

4) What communication skill(s) is/are essential to implement and support disability-inclusive education in your district/school?
    a. To Question 8.

5) What type(s) of professional learning do you provide to develop/improve disability-inclusive leadership competency in your district/school?
    a. To Question 8.

6) What advocacy and program development skill(s) is/are essential to implement and support disability-inclusive education in your district/school?
    a. To Question 8.

7) What collaboration skill(s) is/are essential to implement and support disability-inclusive education in your district/school?
    a. To Question 8.

8) What level of knowledge of legal requirements do you need to implement and support disability-inclusive education in your district/school?
    a. To Question 9.

9) What level of contextual knowledge do you perceive as essential to implementing and supporting disability-inclusive education in your district/school?
    a. To Question 10.

10) How do you foster relationships in a disability-inclusive educational environment?
    a. To Question 11.

11) What professional standards do you consider when determining LRE for SWDs?
    a. To Question 12.

12) How do(es) your special education director(s)/principal(s) support(s) or compliment your efforts to ensure disability-inclusive education for all learners in your district/school(s)?

Appendix E

Email for Permission to Reprint

Hi Andy,

I've attached the competency framework we have worked on. It will be published in a book in early 2022 but may provide you with some ideas.

Thanks.

Steve