PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP IN SPECIAL EDUCATION PROGRAMMING: QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY TO FOSTERING INCLUSIVE PRACTICES

A Dissertation

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Educational Leadership

Sam Houston State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

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by

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May, 2021

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my family, who have all inspired and supported me in many ways throughout this journey and in life. To my parents, thank you for the sacrifices you made and for loving me unconditionally. There was not a parenting book in the world that could have prepared you for my eccentricity. To my two sons, Ethan and Preston – I love you more than all the stars in the sky. You both inspire me every day to be the best version of myself and allow me to see my true purpose in life! Lastly, to my ex-husband Teddy – thank you for your patience and flexibility during this endeavor. Without your support with the boys, being a supermom, full-time working, and full-time dissertating would have been impossible.

ABSTRACT

Lê, Ann H., *Principal leadership in special education programming: Qualitative case study to fostering inclusive practices*. Doctor of Education (Educational Leadership), May, 2021, Sam Houston State University, Huntsville, Texas.

In this study, I explored selected elementary school principals in Texas regarding their perceptions toward the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom. Principals today serve as educational leaders who are responsible for leading all educational activities in their school, including specialized programs designed to meet the educational needs of specific groups of students (e.g., SPED). Despite the awareness of these school leaders' responsibility in ensuring that each child is learning, principal preparation programs focus very little on targeting responsibilities in leading SPED programming. A holistic analysis of multiple sources of information (e.g., documents, archival record reviews, and interviews) provided rich insight into the context of the case, whereas a multiple-case approach provided insight to the analysis within-case and cross-case. The multiple-case qualitative study was utilized to investigate how selected principals (a) perceived their level of knowledge and training from their principal preparation programs and subsequent support from their school district in leading SPED programming, (b) defined inclusive practices for students with disabilities, and (c) fostered a culture of inclusion with equity for the educational success of students with disabilities. This study centered around two case studies where one of the participants had formal training in SPED programming (e.g., holds a master's degree in SPED, former special education teacher), and the other participant did not have formal training in SPED programming. My intent was to uncover any similarities and/or differences in the purposefully selected school principals' perceptions as they related to

SPED programming on their respective campuses. The analysis of the data gathered in this study supported the lack of preparation in SPED programming in principal preparation programs and there is a dearth of courses in special education in principal preparation programs. Through the data examined and the analyses performed, implications to the current field were reviewed. To examine this topic further, areas of future research were recommended. The findings of this study may assist in the promotion of inclusive practices for students with disabilities to increase access to the general education curriculum, which is important in the efforts to close the academic and opportunity gap.

KEY WORDS: Special education, Texas, Principals, Certification, Instructional leaders, Disabilities, Principal preparatory programs

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my deepest and sincerest gratitude to those who have provided me with much inspiration, guidance, cooperation, and tolerance throughout this dissertation research. The root of my passion and dedication towards equity and equality for individuals with disabilities began when I was 6 years old. I became a big sister to the most vibrant and positive little brother – Dan the Man. He has continued to be the light in everyone's darkness, bringing laughter, warmth, and positivity to all who encounter him. More importantly, he lives life through a lens that we could only wish the rest of the world would – never letting anything get in the way of what makes him happy. He refuses to let his disability hinder his living life to the fullest potential, even when he only has use of a quarter of his body. He inspires me every day to help and advocate for families and individuals with disabilities.

I would like to acknowledge and appreciate my dissertation chair, Dr. Peggy Holzweiss. Her ability to guide, mentor, and coach me throughout the dissertation process spoke volumes about how much she believed in me and how invested she was to see me succeed. Never did I feel like she was too busy for me because she always made sure to match my pace, and boy was I persistent and focused. She always provided meaningful recommendations for edits that helped me to think beyond the surface and inspired me to dig deeper. You have truly made me become a better researcher, writer, and educator.

I would also like to acknowledge my dissertation committee members, Dr. Julie Combs and Dr. Janene Hemmen. Thank you both for being amazing leaders. Your guidance during my research was immeasurable. Bouncing off ideas and talking through

my thought process felt as if I was sitting at the feet of Socrates as he articulately described concepts and foci for this dissertation. Your knowledge and experiences in K-12 and principal leadership have helped to fill in the gaps of my research and guided me in asking more targeted questions for rich, thick data.

I am grateful to the participants in this study who freely gave their time and energy to contribute to my research. Each participant demonstrated such passion and excitement for the research and about their role as a school principal. Their honesty and willingness to share their experiences provided thorough, rich data from which developed the themes described in my dissertation research through their perceptions.

Lastly, to my SHSU doctoral cohort (C40) – Heather, Alexis, Kenny, Shukella, Tim, Chastity, Alan, Bart, Martha, Letty, Dion, and Gaylon – thank you for broadening my views regarding public education and the camaraderie you all have bestowed to me. We have traveled through this journey together, holding each other up when necessary, comforting when necessary, and demanding when necessary. Without our frequent discussions and vast support during the 3-year process, this study would not have been as meaningful.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Understanding historical proceedings allow stakeholders to recognize the present state of the educational system in order to work towards a better future. As Spanish philosopher George Santayana once said, "those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it." In education, history discloses that before the 1970s, students with disabilities were commonly provided with services and support in an isolated setting and were denied access to public schools (Rudd, 2002).

The public mindset concerning disabilities has transformed over the last century through scientific improvements, increased morality of humans, and efforts of reformers in the United States who persist in advocating for the rights and opportunities for individuals with disabilities (Frost & Kersten, 2011). Prior to the civil rights movement, private residential centers separated from the general public served as rehabilitation programs for individuals with disabilities (Wright & Wright, 2006). These care facilities were the traditional practices prior to the civil rights movement due to the public mindset that individuals with disabilities could not benefit from general education (Bartlett, Etscheidt & Weisenstein, 2007).

Increased federal mandates have supported inclusive education for students with disabilities and increased access to the general education curriculum. As principals are held accountable for all educational activities in their school, the charge for the awareness of their leadership duties to the special education (SPED) programming remains of utmost importance. To what extent are principals being prepared to lead SPED programming?

Background of Study

Prior to the Education of All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, Bateman and Bateman (2014) stated that segregation existed for children with disabilities because society viewed these children as not being able to benefit from the general education. The passage of Public Law 94-142 (i.e., the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975) brought about changes to improve and secure rights for families and students with disabilities. Further efforts were made through the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2002, the Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Act (IDEA) of 2004, and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015. Federal mandates were authorized to improve the commitment of the federal government in safeguarding equal educational access and opportunity for disproportionate students (e.g., poor and disadvantaged) and in providing high-level instruction to these students (Bateman & Bateman, 2014).

Presently, public schools are held to a greater degree of standards in educating students with disabilities and safeguarding those students in effective access to the general education curriculum (Brandes, McWhirter, Haring, Crowson, & Millsap, 2012). School principals are charged in leading collaborative and instructional decisions for all educators and students (e.g., general education and SPED). For students with disabilities, these decisions are discussed and determined through the Individual Education Program (IEP) meetings, which are conducted at least once a year. Therefore, principals who lack foundational knowledge in SPED programming and instructional practices are situated in a problematic position of decision-making, which these leaders may not be equipped to handle.

Principal Preparation Programs. Christensen, Williamson, Robertson, and Hunter (2013) suggested that most principal training programs in the United States focus very little on preparing aspiring instructional leaders to lead students with disabilities. Researchers (e.g., Davidson & Algozzine, 2002; Lasky & Karge, 2006; Militello, Schimmel, & Everwein, 2009) have also suggested that principals who are not provided with sufficient preparation or training in SPED law have difficulty in safeguarding quality programming and instructional practices for students with disabilities. Therefore, these instructional leaders (i.e., principals) may start their new leadership role with a gap in training and preparation for leading students with disabilities.

Principal candidates. Texas school principals were the focus of the study; therefore, Texas principal preparation programs were reviewed. According to the Texas Education Agency (TEA), candidates must meet the five requirements to obtain a principal certificate: (a) hold a master's degree from an accredited university, (b) hold a valid classroom teaching certificate, (c) have two years of creditable teaching experience as a classroom teacher, (d) successfully complete an approved principal educator preparation program (EPP), and (e) successfully complete the required exam.

Redesigned principal certification standards. TEA recently redesigned Texas' principal certification standards and corresponding certification examinations given the needs of the schools and communities, as well as the developing role of the principal as an instructional leader. TEA worked with relevant stakeholders (e.g., principal preparation program faculty members and active principals) to develop a new test framework aligned with the new standards of Texas Principal Evaluation and Support System (T-PESS), and new test instruments to certify Texas principals. The redesigned

exams focus on a principal's role as an instructional leader and reflect some of the skills that are crucial for beginning principals to be effective. With the redesigning of Texas' principal certification standards, aspiring principals would need to pass the new TExES (268) Principal as Instructional Leader certification exam and complete the TExES (368) Performance Assessment for School Leaders (PASL) assessment to obtain a standard principal certification starting on September 1, 2019 (TEA, 2019a).

According to Texas Administrative Code (TAC), each EPP must provide a minimum of 160 clock-hours of practicum (TAC 228.35.e.8) and an additional 200 clock-hours of training that is directly aligned to the educator standards for the applicable certification class (TAC 228.35.c). Principal preparation programs in Texas have continued to reduce the required number of hours for certification and with the recent redesign of the program, the focus on principals leading instruction remains absent of any specific mention of working with students who receive SPED services (TAC 241.15). However, the standards required for certification do state that the principal as an instructional leader "analyzes the curriculum to ensure that teachers align content across grades and that curricular scopes and sequences meet the particular needs of their diverse student populations" (TAC 241.15.c.7).

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore selected elementary school principals in Texas and their perceptions toward the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom. The outcomes from this study might assist stakeholders to transform educational practices that promote the positive implementation of inclusion practices, enhance the learning environment of students with disabilities, and help to better prepare school leaders for inclusion programs.

Influences of Principal Leadership. Principal leadership is essential for positive change to transpire in the educational setting and greatly influences the success of students with disabilities and SPED programming. Highly effective principals can improve the accomplishment of all students (Branch, Hanushek, & Rivkin, 2013). Given that students with disabilities need to overcome the barriers related to their identified disabilities, the leadership of school principals becomes even more crucial.

Students with disabilities need more than effective teachers. Branch et al. (2013) stated that teachers have a direct influence on only the students within their classroom, whereas the school principal impacts the global school setting. The influence of a school principal is indirect as these leaders do not directly work with students. Principals influence these outcomes through the hiring and dismissal of teachers, providing needed professional development in areas where teachers need to grow, and using data to drive the instructional practices of all students. SPED knowledge is critical for legal and equity issues. Without understanding of SPED programming and SPED law, principals risk violating federal laws related to the rights of individuals with disabilities (IDEA, 2004). Appropriate implementation of federal mandates is important because the consequences of not doing so could lead to due process hearings and violation of a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) for students receiving services and support through SPED programming. With knowledge in how to build an equitable education, principals could foster educational systems that accept inclusiveness and encourage acceptance of all students (DiPaola et al., 2004).

Problem Statement

For more than a decade, NCLB (2002) has served as the national education law that mandated transformation in the school system to close the achievement gaps in students. The 2002 law is a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and calls attention to four pillars upheld in the bill: accountability, flexibility, research-based education, and parent options (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). The existing federal mandate for accountability stresses that disadvantaged students (e.g., students served under programs such as SPED, section 504, Bilingual, and English as a second language) achieve academic proficiency. This accountability ensures that all students, regardless of socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, primary spoken language, high-mobility rate, or disabilities, are provided with a nondiscriminatory and appropriate opportunity to acquire quality education.

The current educational mandate weighs heavily upon outcome-driven accountability. This approach necessitates an instructional leader who has evolved from a traditional leadership role that focused on managing a building and being a disciplinarian (Brown, 2006; Praisner, 2003). In today's educational climate, principals serve as educational leaders who are responsible for leading all educational activities in their school, including specialized programs designed to meet the educational needs of specific groups of students (e.g., SPED, Bilingual, and ESL). In order to meet state and federal mandates and safeguard student progress towards the rigorous Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS), principals must oversee and implement these on-site programs with fidelity.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) of 2004 has a strong preference for inclusive education and encourages districts to increase access and opportunity for students with disabilities into the general education setting. The principal's leadership greatly determines the levels of success or failure of SPED programming; however, these educational leaders must comply and adhere to the guidance and dictation of federal, state, and local education regulations and decision-making.

Previous related educational research (Cline, 1981; Fullan, 2002; Hallinger & Heck, 1998) centered around the principal's role in school improvement and effectiveness. Current research that focuses on the role of the educational leader in regard to SPED is lacking. Despite the awareness of these school leaders' responsibility in ensuring that each child is learning, principal preparation programs focus very little on targeting responsibilities in leading SPED programming (Praisner, 2003; Scruggs, Mastropieri, & McDuffie, 2007).

The broad dilemma is that inclusive practices and the educational success of students with disabilities are influenced by the mindsets of the educational leader. The specific dilemma that guided this research centers around the heightened leadership obligations of school principals without sufficient preparation and training to provide this inclusive education for students with disabilities in the general education classroom (Harris, 2009). Principal preparation programs do not fully prepare these leaders for inclusive practices of students with disabilities in the general education classrooms (Praisner, 2003; Scruggs et al, 2007). A divide also exists among the understanding of SPED programming and the practices of providing the services these students need for

success. Services have been conceptualized as a location (e.g., where a child learns) rather than focusing on the inclusive instructional practice. The IEP committee team may establish the location of a child's placement; however, the extent of services and programs accessible for that placement in the least restrictive environment (LRE) was regulated by the school principal (Wright & Wright, 2006).

Purpose of the Study

Using Shapiro and Stefkovich's (2016) ethic of the profession and model for students' best interests and Rawls' (1971) social justice theory as a conceptual model, I explored selected Texas elementary principals' perceptions toward the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom. Inclusive practices are instructional approaches that acknowledge student diversity through the facilitation of equal access to curricular content to all students and providing meaningful participation in educational activities (DeMatthews, 2015). Several key factors have been identified in literature as best practices for inclusive education. Some researchers emphasized collaboration such as between general education and SPED teachers (Katz & Sugden, 2013) or with experts on a range of disabilities such as educational diagnosticians and SPED directors (Hallinger & Heck, 2010). Additionally, the scholars defined best practices for inclusive education as having ownership in educating all students (Katz & Sugden, 2013), principals safeguarding instructional time from interruptions, promotion of curricular differentiation and adaptations, and facilitation for teacher growth through professional development opportunities and feedback (Lee, Smith, Perry, & Smylie, 1999).

Under IDEA (2004), SPED services must provide the supports that will enable all learners to achieve success in the general curriculum whenever possible. Therefore, there is a need for a mind-shift to work towards ownership in educating all students. Students who are served in SPED are general education students first. Special education is a service, not a placement (IDEA, 2004).

A qualitative case study was determined to be appropriate for this study. The focus of this study was on human behavior and the perceptions toward the inclusion of the selected participants. Therefore, a quantitative study would not have been appropriate as explicit, numerically driven data would not have been able to answer the questions posed in this study. The outcomes from this study might assist stakeholders to transform educational practices that promote the positive implementation of inclusion practices, enhance the learning environment of students with disabilities, and help to better prepare school leaders for inclusion programs.

Significance of the Study

Since the passing of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (1975), the role of a principal in the area of SPED has evolved. Principals and districts are responsible for the provision of FAPE, including any accommodations and modifications determined to be necessary for students with disabilities to progress and be afforded a meaningful educational benefit, regardless of the cost (IDEA, 2004). In the U.S. legal system, judicial rulings play a critical role in governing the interpretation of a specific law (i.e., case law). A number of landmark cases that have shaped SPED implementation and the precedents these cases have created are important factors that drive the need for principals to be well-informed in SPED.

In *Brown v. Board of Education (1954)*, the U.S. court ruled that separate but equal educational facilities were a violation of the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. This case consequently afforded the constitutional foundation for guardians of children with disabilities and other stakeholders to lobby for equal educational opportunities for all children whether they are typically developing and had disabilities. The first direct case of SPED was through the *Board of Education of Hendrick Hudson Central School District v. Rowley (1982)*. The opinion of the court stated that an IEP must be reasonably determined for a student with a disability to obtain an educational benefit and that the school district was not obligated to provide every service required to maximize a student's potential. More recently, in *Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District (2017)*, the court declared that students with disabilities must be afforded an IEP that is substantially more than the *de minimus* benefit. Through this ruling, schools had to establish their assurance of educating students with disabilities was as important as educating generally developing students through creating IEPs that were appropriately ambitious.

Principals are crucial in building a culture of inclusiveness and fostering teacher leadership, team learning, and self-governance (Rea, McLaughlin, & Walther-Thomas, 2002). In a sample of 33 schools that included students with disabilities participating in school activities, administrative leadership was discovered to be the most important predictor of positive attitudes regarding inclusion among teachers (Villa, Thousand, Meyers, & Nevin, 1996). Although Valesky and Hirth (1992) had expressed concerns over a quarter of a century ago that states needed to include more SPED courses in administrative training programs, there remains a gap in preparing administrators to use

social justice leadership appropriately to advance the inclusion of all students (Pazey & Cole, 2013). Without the foundational knowledge and understanding of SPED programming and SPED laws, educational leaders are at risk of legal and equality issues (DiPaola, Tschannen-Moran, & Walther-Thomas, 2004). Strader (2007) reported that the most litigated area in education that school leaders face pivots around SPED.

The principal's leadership greatly determines the levels of success or failure of SPED programming. Therefore, the mindset of these educational leaders may positively or negatively affect inclusive practices because other staff members' acceptance of inclusion can either be hindered or motivated by their school principal's approach towards inclusive practice. The present study was designed to explore the perceptions and needs of current elementary school principals who serve SPED programs in their school. The outcomes from this research study may assist in the promotion of inclusive practices for students with disabilities to increase access to the general education curriculum, which is important in the efforts to close the academic and opportunity gap. Notwithstanding adapted technology and research-based approaches, students with disabilities are not making the academic gains that would be expected and their performance evidenced valid cause for concern for students with disabilities, given the importance of postsecondary education (Lê & Slate, 2020).

By closing the academic and opportunity gaps, students with disabilities and society would be impacted. Improved academic success for students with disabilities contributed to improved behaviors, increased level of engagement in school activities, improved high school completion rates, and higher rates of college attendance (Cole, Waldron, & Majd, 2004; Kemp & Carter, 2005). Students with disabilities also

demonstrated social-emotional growth, such as an increased network of typically developing peers, improved social skills, improved self-esteem, and decreased levels of loneliness (Helmstetter, Peck, & Giangreco, 1994; Krank, Moon, & Render, 2002; Peck, Donaldson, & Pezzoli, 1990). Economically, closing these gaps increased employment rate and job-skill levels for improved postsecondary outcomes (Rea et al., 2002).

Through the outcomes of this study, I hoped to add to the existing literature by identifying strategies principals can use when addressing the challenges of state and federal programs on SPED. SPED directors, guardians, students with disabilities, and SPED teachers are impacted by the effectiveness of principals' implementation of IDEA (2004). Identifying the challenges school principals face as effective leaders of SPED laws and practices remain essential for SPED directors to be able to provide targeted and purposeful training to remediate these challenges (Boscardin, 2005).

Research Questions

Through this study, my intent was to explore selected elementary school principals in Texas and their perceptions toward the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom. For this study, the following research questions were addressed:

1. How do selected principals perceive their level of knowledge and training from their principal preparation programs and subsequent support from their school district in leading SPED programming?
2. How do selected principals define inclusive practices for students with disabilities?

3. How do selected principals foster a culture of inclusion with equity for the educational success of students with disabilities?

These research questions positioned the school principal's perceptions toward educating students with disabilities that were inclusive rather than exclusive. These research questions concentrated on the influence of the principal's understanding of SPED issues and matters. The level of proficiency and comprehension in the legal expectations of SPED programming is vital for principals to lead a school that successfully meets the needs of a differentiated student population.

Conceptual Framework

Present federal procedures have transformed leadership practices in educational institutes and steered educational leaders into an age of shared accountability for the educational implementation of all students, including those individuals with unique needs (e.g., identified disabilities, second language, etc.). The conceptual framework of this study was grounded on two educational scaffolds to guide educational leaders towards ethical practices and decision-making in education: (a) Shapiro and Stefkovich's (2016) ethic of the profession and model for student's best interests, and (b) Rawls' (1971) social justice theory.

Student's Best Interest. The model for student's best interest is the framework used by educational leaders to lead in moral decision-making and where ethical dilemmas are examined (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016). This model comprises of a vigorous application on the fundamental disposition of the three R's: (a) the student's specific *rights* within the educational system, (b) the *responsibilities* to others (e.g., staff and students) for a collective interest, and (c) the mutual *respect* regarding other's values and

dignity. Application of these conceptualizations ground the framework developed by Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016) highlighting the principled paradigms of justice, care, critique, and profession (Frick, Faircloth, & Little, 2013). This framework concedes ethical positions exclusive to the vocation of educational leadership and substantiates the ethical facet of the career to promoting educational success in all students by serving in student's best interest. A concise understanding of these conceptual perspectives operates as a milieu for ethical and moral leadership.

Ethic of justice. Ethic of justice centers on the ethical concept of "individual rights, due process, freedom, equality, and responsibility" (Frick et al., 2013, p. 213). This paradigm involves the legal and democratic practices respected by the public where two concepts were identified. The first was that the individual's needs are placed beyond the needs of the public, in which the justification for surpassing individual rights for social justice becomes dependent on humanitarian reasons (Starratt, 1994). Secondly, the needs of the collective whole are placed before those of the individual; therefore, the responsibility to educate individuals on appropriate behaviors in a particular setting (e.g., school, community, etc.) is placed on the public entity (Starratt, 1994).

The court often will not force limits or constraints onto the school and bestows policymaking duties to be handled by the school board of the respective school districts. This proceeding may create inconsistencies within the educational system across the country; however, in this manner, communities are able to respond to their own individual needs. When the court system does intervene to enforce regulations on school communities (e.g., racial segregation), utilizing ethical principles as a guide to challenge

these laws become imperative to ensure that all individuals (e.g., parent, student, teacher, administrator, school community member) are treated with equality.

Ethic of care. Ethic of care is rooted in the notion of deep admiration and love for others. Noddings (1992) expressed to minimize the competitive disposition of the present educational system, the essential goal of caring ought to transcend that of achievement. For disadvantaged students (e.g., low socioeconomic status), the presence of logic and feelings can assist in strengthening the leadership virtues of those students (Noddings, 1992). The act of caring serves as an indication that there are people who believe in the students and are invested in their success. For educational leaders, the ethic of care allows educators to move toward solving disagreements through teamwork, which serves to improve the school environment and boost collective abilities.

Ethic of critique. Ethic of critique focuses on "competing interests, power, the nature and structure of bureaucracy, the influence and force of language, and redress for institutionalize injustice" (Frick et al., 2013, p. 214). The ethic of critique seeks to oppose societal procedures and beliefs by questioning and examining the disproportions within society pushing us to consider alternatives to the status quo.

Ethic of the profession. Ethic of the profession is the focal point of this study and addresses the best interest model in relation to "rights, responsibility, and respect" (Frick et al., 2013, p. 216). Educational leaders are presumed to have their own subjective moral code. Professional educational institutes have recently fostered codes for the teaching profession; however, these codes often function to regulate educators as they are collective in nature. Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016) postulated that the development of an individual moral code should be based on former experiences and their own

accomplishments. With this individual moral code and that of the professional code, an ethical toolkit is conceived and should be utilized when making decisions in the best interest of the student. Educational leaders are oftentimes faced with difficult situations where these leaders must choose between their own personal moral code and their professional code. Four common code discords identified include (a) between individual code and the professional code; (b) within professional codes; (c) of professional codes among educational leaders due to their own interpretations; and (d) among educational leader's professional code and expectancies and code of community (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016).

Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016) argued that by employing the ethical paradigm approach in investigating complicated and distinct concerns, educators will be more capable to perceive the whole picture and be less inclined by their own views and misrepresentative falsehoods. Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016) also stressed the importance for educational leaders in using competing paradigms to assess educational predicaments, which allows these leaders to remain objective and to be able to broadly analyze others' viewpoints. No one paradigm is more superior to the others; however, individuals who frequently employ their personal principled toolkit when presented with situations of inequality permit their personal growth (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016).

The conceptualization of the paradigms that center on student's best interest is not philosophical in the sense that the notions result from any single principle or a specific component of logic (Starratt, 1994)). Instead, the belief of student's best interest is extensive and transpires from the ethic of the profession while deriving notions from the

other ethical paradigms (Starratt, 1994). Starratt (1994) described these links in this manner:

> Each ethic needs the very strong connections embedded in the other: the ethics of justice needs a profound commitment to the dignity of the individual person; the ethics of caring needs the larger attention to social order and fairness if it is to avoid an entirely idiosyncratic involvement in social policy; the ethics of critique requires an ethic of caring if it is to avoid the cynical and depressing ravings of the habitual malcontent; the ethics of justice requires the profound social analysis of the ethics of critique in order to move beyond the naïve fine-tuning of social arrangements in a social system with inequities built into the very structures by which justice is supposed to be measured. (p. 55)

Social Justice Leadership. Educational leadership styles and interrelated leadership theories offer a locus point for stakeholders and educational reformers to comprehend methods in which these concepts have been established, are expressed, and are occasionally challenged in educational situations. Currently, the educational system is faced with an immense growth of socially and culturally diverse students enrolling in a public educational setting. The need for educational leaders to obtain ethical preparation and knowledge has become critical to meet the needs of all students. Skills needed in order to acclimate to student diversities, identify social gaps, and counter gender and ethnic biases are vital standpoints in preparing administrative leaders.

Social justice leadership is a philosophy that brings into line the values, purpose, manners, constructs, and practices of the individual and the group (Dugan, 2017). This type of leadership is exemplified in the theories of transformation embodied by the

concepts of three leadership styles (i.e., servant, transformational, and principle-centered). Readers are guided to reference Table 1 for the three leadership styles that embodied social justice leadership, according to Dugan (2017).

Table 1

Leadership Styles Embodied in Social Justice Leadership

Leadership Styles	Characteristics
Servant Leadership	Desire to serve, emotional intelligence, moral maturity, prosocial identity, core self-evaluation, and low narcissism
Transformational Leadership	Idealized inspiration, inspiring purpose, customized reflection, and logical encouragement
Principle-centered Leadership	Personal character, competence, and commitment to natural law principles

Note. Social justice leadership is exemplified in the theories of transformation embodied by the concepts of three leadership styles.

Development of social justice. The notion of social justice dates back far into history to the times of renowned philosophers such as Marx, Rawls, Plato, Aquinas, Aristotle, and Locke (Turhan, 2010). This research study is grounded on Rawls' (1971) liberal ideology of social justice, which will be applied to the examination of each principal's leadership role in SPED programming. Rawls (1971) framed a theoretical belief that centered on an individual's right to pursue his or her own way of life so long as the individual remained respectful to the rights of others. This conceptual framework of social justice upholds two main principles: (a) people have the right to be treated as an individual and have the right to decide his or her own moral code, and (b) all members of society are to be treated with equality and have equal opportunities to pursue his or her

aspirations. Should inequalities remain after given a fair and equal opportunity, the least advantaged should receive favored treatment in order to establish equity (Rawls, 1971).

Social justice in leadership. The behaviors of educational leaders (e.g., school principals) safeguard the school climate in terms of social justice. Educational institutes are occupied by students and staff members with diverse backgrounds (e.g., race, gender, ethnicity, and needs); therefore, cultivating social justice is necessary and a critical charge for the educational leader. Turhan (2010) explained,

> Leadership for social justice includes the facilitation of moral dialogue that strives for high academic achievement and affirming relationships with students from all backgrounds and ability levels as well as keeping one's epistemological awareness, value orientation, and practice toward social justice; It has also been characterized as fighting and altering institutionalized inequities, discrimination, and injustices that benefit few students and harm many more. (pp. 1359-1360)

Through social justice leadership, educational leaders can create a school that embraces all students.

Definition of Key Terms

The major concept central to understanding this study is the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA), which is the federal law that governs the provision of SPED services. According to the U.S. Department of Education, the purpose of IDEA is to make available a *free appropriate public education* (FAPE) for eligible children with disabilities and to ensure SPED and related services to those eligible children designed to meet their unique needs and prepare them for further education, employment, and independent living. The law also serves to protect the rights of children with disabilities

and the guardians of such children and to guarantee that educators and guardians have the needed tools to improve educational outcomes for children with disabilities.

Additionally, the concepts of FAPE and the *least restrictive environment* (LRE) are important in many areas of concern that arise with SPED programming. The concept of FAPE refers to SPED services and supports that are provided for free, or at no cost to the guardian, at public expense for students identified with disabilities under SPED criteria in public or private school settings where that student can make meaningful progress (IDEA, 2004). Historically, prior to Public Law 94-142 of 1975, public schools could refuse to educate children who required more than the curriculum that was offered to general students. During those times, should a student need additional equipment to meet their physical needs or a behavior plan to address challenging behaviors, then parents were informed that the family was accountable for providing these tools or accommodations. Under IDEA (2004), LRE must be considered; this indicates that students with disabilities are educated with non-disabled students to the maximum extent appropriate to meet his or her needs and is unable to benefit from education with non-disabled students to any greater extent. Additionally, LRE ensures that students are not removed from the general education environment unless they cannot make progress there, even with supports and services provided in that setting [20 United States Code (U.S.C.) Sec. 1412(a)(5)(A); 34 Code of Federal Regulations (C.F.R.) Sec. 300.114].

Inclusive education is sometimes referred to as inclusion (i.e., partial-inclusion or full-inclusion). Contrary to the educational model of mainstreaming or integration, inclusive education focuses on the right of the student to access the general education curriculum and the duty of the school to provide this access to the student. The

conception of inclusion is vital to this study. However, defining inclusion is a political disposition (DeMatthews, 2015). Inclusive education encompasses more than placing a student in the general education classroom. Creating an inclusive school necessitates the distribution of available resources to sanction the growth of nondiscriminatory and quality education to all students and bring forth a school climate of equality and social justice (DeMatthews, 2015). Ainscow (2005) stated:

> …the aim of inclusive education is to eliminate social exclusion that is a consequence of attitudes and responses to diversity in race, social class, ethnicity, religion, gender and ability…As such, it starts from the belief that education is a basic human right and the foundation for a more just society. (p. 109)

IDEA (2004) has a strong inclination towards inclusive education through the least restrictive environment. In order to ensure equality among students, administrative leaders should pursue a more socially just school climate through social justice leadership. This leadership drives administrative leaders to review the expectations of school and community, recognize biased procedures, utilize democratic practices to engage disadvantaged groups, and promote culturally appropriate methods to create a school that embraces all students (DeMatthews, 2015). In order for school principals to recognize biased procedures, these educational leaders need to remember that students who are served in SPED are general education students first. Therefore, when analyzing procedures and the decision-making process, school principals need to consider if the procedure or decision in question would be the same if the situation was for a general education student. Students with disabilities are general education students who may require additional support and services.

Additional key terms are referenced in this study. *Individualized education program* (IEP) is the educational plan developed specifically for a student with disabilities. This plan is reviewed annually with the required members of the IEP team (e.g., local education agency representative, general education teacher, SPED teacher, educational diagnostician, and parent). During the IEP meeting, the team discusses the student's progress and present levels of academic and functional performance; these data are used to drive the development of appropriate new annual goals and determine the levels and types of supports and services (e.g., accommodations and modifications) in order for that student to access the general education curriculum or to work toward academic and independent goals (IDEA, 2004).

A s*tudent with a disability* refers to a child aged 3 to 21 years old who meets specific Federal eligibility criteria (i.e., has both a disability and educational need for SPED services) under one or more of the following federal disability codes: auditory impairment (AI), autism (AU), deaf-blindness (DB), emotional disturbance (ED), intellectual disability (ID) (formerly called mental retardation), multiple disabilities (MD), orthopedic impairment (OI), other health impairment (OHI), learning disability (LD), speech impairment (SI), traumatic brain injury (TBI), visual impairment (VI), and non-categorical early childhood (NCEC) (IDEA, 2004).

Educator Preparation Programs (EPP) are designed to provide coursework and training to prepare candidates for educator certification and ensure the candidate will be effective in the classroom. According to TEA, educators must meet high standards and be well prepared to teach in Texas classrooms. Therefore, TEA provides guidelines to

ensure that the state's EPPs are high-quality establishments that recruit and prepare competent candidates to meet the needs of all learners in Texas classrooms.

Limitations and Delimitations

The scope of this study was delimited to two Texas elementary school principals who voluntarily consented to participate and disclose information regarding their background, training, experiences, and beliefs on SPED. Delimitations lessen the scope of the study by denoting what is not incorporated in the study (Creswell, 2005). The delimitation in the study was restricted to the responses of these elementary school principals who were purposefully selected. This study was restricted to the efforts of responses from these two participants who were selected by me through the recommendations of the district's research department. Due to the present research being narrowly focused on two principals, the findings will not be transferable to other contexts. Issues that were unrelated to the purpose of the study that may have arisen during this research were not scrutinized.

A random sampling of participants is not a common practice for qualitative research studies. Thus, the findings of this study may reflect a social bias; the participants may have offered data that positioned himself or herself from a positive standpoint. The focus of this study was on selected elementary school principals' perceptions toward the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom. The data from the study was obtained through means (e.g., interviews) that were subjective in nature. The interpretations of the received information could have been influenced by the degree of involvement of the researcher. The qualitative

researcher is the prime instrument to the study; therefore, caution must be taken to be aware of his or her biases (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

Although the results of this study were not directly relevant to the educational systems of other states, the design and implications derived from this study may encourage future research in improving outcomes of SPED programming through continual analysis of their respective principal preparation programs. This study was limited to principals of one school district located near south Texas and at the elementary school level; therefore, the findings may not be applicable to other principals, which may affect the transferability of the outcomes. Due to the interpretative nature of qualitative research, I identified my personal interests and biases as data were analyzed.

Assumptions

Several assumptions existed in this study. For the purpose of this study, the following four assumptions were made. First, elementary school principals in Texas were willing to participate in the research study. Second, provided with the assurance of confidentiality, principals would honestly respond to the interview questions, which impacted the accuracy and validity of the study. The responses reflected the perceptions and training of the selected participants. Thirdly, the assumption that principals' perceptions toward the inclusion of students with disabilities would influence how principals made determinations for inclusive practices for students with disabilities. Finally, the assumption that selected principals would be able to contribute a personal perspective of his or her level of preparation in SPED and believed in the responsibility and accountability to the educational growth of all students (i.e., general education and students with disabilities).

Summary

Public schooling has been greatly influenced by the changes in SPED laws and regulations. By attending to the insufficiencies of principal preparation programs, I aspire to alleviate the obligation on educational leaders. The need to ensure adequate training of these professionals is critical, as educational ruling continues to expand the positions and accountabilities of these school leaders. The areas include the establishment of instructional leadership for teachers, the prevention of due process (e.g., lawsuits) and subsequent financial liabilities, and most critically the education of all students (e.g., general education and students with disabilities).

Organization of the Study

Chapter I focuses on the background of the study, problem statement, purpose of the study, significance of the study, research questions, conceptual framework, definition of key terms, limitations and delimitations, and assumptions of this study. Chapter II addresses the literature relevant to these topics and the conceptual framework that guided this study. Chapter III expresses the method proposed to investigate these topics, along with the research design, context of the study, participant selection, data collection, instrumentation, procedures, role of the researcher, trustworthiness and credibility, and data analysis of this study. Chapter IV will be a presentation and analysis of data collected through multiple sources of information (e.g., documents, archival record reviews, and comprehensive interviews). Chapter V will be a venue for discussion, implication, and recommendation of the analysis of the data for future research.

CHAPTER II

Review of Literature

To better understand the importance of the role of a school principal, there is a need to first examine the evolution of inclusive education, responsibilities of the school principal, and SPED programming from a historical lens. Through these lenses, factors that influence the decision-making of these educational leaders, which lead to the success of fostering an inclusive educational culture, can be identified. The literature review will then proceed to illustrate the need for these leaders to understand SPED programming and SPED regulations, the importance of developing an inclusive culture, and the need for change in the principal preparation programming.

Evolution of Inclusion

To comprehend the present-day implications of inclusion, one must first understand the history and evolution of education for students with disabilities. Prior to the civil rights movement, delinquency prevention programs existed as the dawn of SPED programming in the form of private residential facilities segregated from the general population (Wright & Wright, 2006). Although these care facilities provided the basic needs (e.g., food, shelter, medical care) to survive, little to no support (e.g., evaluations, services, education) was provided for children with disabilities to thrive (Bartlett, Etscheidt & Weisenstein, 2007).

Families and advocacy organizations began to rally against the nation's public-school system to seek equal rights and opportunities for students with severe and profound disabilities (Hehir & Latus, 1974). State laws of those times allowed school districts to deny students with disabilities entry into public schools (Jasper, 2000).

Although some students who had mild disabilities could attend school regularly, these students were not provided with appropriate support (e.g., accommodations, modification); therefore, dropping out was common (Connelly, 1992).

Pivotal Case Law for Special Education

The federal court has helped to support inclusivity in education for students with disabilities. Several landmark cases have shaped SPED implementation and the precedents these cases have created are important factors that drive the need for principals to be well-informed in SPED. During the 1950s, the civil rights movement became the indirect catalyst that was needed to drive the equality of educational placements and rights for students with disabilities (Jasper, 2000). Although the civil rights movement was to condemn racial segregation, the movement was the first time in U.S. history that the notion of inclusion was inaugurated (Hine, 1985). Readers are guided to Table 2 for a brief overview of pivotal case laws that helped to shape SPED. More details of each case law will be provided following the table.

Table 2

Pivotal Case Law in Special Education

Case Law	Year
Brown v. Board of Education	1954
The Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Citizens v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania	1972
Mills v. Board of Education	1972
Board of Education of Hendrick Hudson Central School District v. Rowley, 458 U.S. 176	1982
Sacramento City Unified School District v. Rachel Holland	1994
Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District	2017

Note. Several landmark cases have shaped SPED implementation and the precedents these cases have created are important factors that drive the need for principals to be well-informed in SPED.

***Brown v. Board of Education*.** Through *Brown v. Board of Education (1954)*, Supreme Court Chief Justice Earl Warren ruled that separate but equal educational facilities were a violation of the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. Although the case centered on the educational conditions of African American children, the ruling of this case consequently afforded the constitutional foundation for guardians of children with disabilities and other stakeholders to lobby for equal educational opportunities for all children. Although education may not be a fundamental right under the Constitution, education was an important aspect of society and was therefore protected under the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment (Wright & Wright, 2006). Through the ruling of this case, segregation (e.g., racial, disabilities) had

negative stigmatization and resulted in unfair learning opportunities for students (Jasper, 2000).

Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Citizens v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Almost 20 years after *Brown v. Board of Education (1954)*, many schools continued to exclude children with disabilities from public schools. In *Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Citizens v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania (1972)*, the advocacy group (i.e., PARC) filed suit against the state of Pennsylvania. Under the state of Pennsylvania, there existed a law in which schools could prohibit students from being educated if these children reached the age of eight but had a mental age of five. The state reasoned that these students were a burden to the classroom environment, but PARC argued these students could benefit from free education and exclusion would be an infringement of the Equal Protection class of the Fourteenth Amendment (Frost & Kersten, 2011). PARC argued these children with intellectual disabilities would be able to develop skills in the area of self-care through inclusion in public schooling. District Court Judge Masterson ruled the existing Pennsylvania law was unconstitutional and the state had a duty to provide free public education to all children regardless of their disability.

Mills v. Board of Education. *Mills v. Board of Education (1972)*, similarly to the *Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Citizens v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania (1972)*, had a pivotal effect by safeguarding equal access to public education for children with disabilities. In this case, seven students with differing disabilities (e.g., orthopedic impairment, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, epilepsy) were excluded from public educational access and services that could have addressed the needs that resulted from

their categorized disabilities. The court noted that insufficiencies in the school system, whether due to deficient funds or inadequate administration, could not be permitted to impact more weightily on students with disabilities. The court also ruled that if funding was the issue, then the school board would need to do their best to allocate the needed funds to ensure that no child was denied the opportunity to benefit from public education (Horrocks, White, & Roberts, 2008).

Board of Education of Hendrick Hudson Central School District v. Rowley. *Board of Education of Hendrick Hudson Central School District v. Rowley (1982)* was the first direct case of SPED decided by the Supreme Court. Justice William H. Rehnquist delivered the opinion of the court stating that an IEP must be reasonably determined for a student with disabilities to obtain educational benefit. The court ruled that the school administrators were permitted to determine what is required to satisfy the individual needs of a student with disabilities and that the school district was not obligated to provide every service compulsory to maximize a student's potential.

Sacramento City Unified School District v. Rachel Holland. In *Sacramento City Unified School District v. Rachel Holland (1994),* an increase in inclusivity for students with moderate intellectual disabilities was attained. The case centered around an 11-year old female student with an intellectual quotient of 44 standard score, or moderate intellectual disability, who was recommended to an education in a segregated SPED classroom for all academic areas. The student only attended general education classes for nonacademic activities. Through this case, the court established the legal framework for the provision of inclusive education. Namely, the court implemented the four-factor rule when establishing appropriate placements for students with disabilities: (a) educational

benefit (i.e., general education classroom with supplementary aids and services versus the educational benefit of SPED classroom; (b) nonacademic benefit (e.g., social skills, communications skills, self-confidence) from placement in a regular class; (c) effect on the teacher and children in the regular class; and (d) cost.

Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District. More recently, in *Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District (2017)*, the Supreme Court Chief Justice John G. Roberts decreed that students with disabilities must be afforded an IEP that is considerably more than the *de minimus* benefit. In *Board of Education of Hendrick Hudson Central School District v. Rowley (1982)*, the court declared that reasonably calculated IEPs would allow students with disabilities to be integrated into the classroom and make progress in the grade levels. Through *Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District (2017)*, schools now had to demonstrate their commitment to educating students with disabilities was as vital as educating typically developing students through developing IEPs that were appropriately ambitious.

Public Law

To comprehend the struggles today for children with disabilities, an examination into the history and practices correlated with public schools and SPED is needed. Through the progression of public education and SPED and the effects of several landmark discrimination cases, the conditions compelled Congress to enact Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965. Readers are directed to Table 3 for pivotal public law that has helped to shape the implementation of SPED programming today. More details of each public law will be provided following the table.

Table 3

Provisions to Educational Laws by Year

Provisions	Year
Civil Rights Act	1964
Elementary and Secondary Education Act	1965
Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act	1973
Education for All Handicapped Children Act	1975
National Commission on Excellence in Education	1983
Individuals with Disabilities Education Act	1997
No Child Left Behind Act	2002
Individuals with Disabilities Education Act	2004
Every Student Succeeds Act	2015

Note. Increased changes to the public education system were charged with every new bill that was passed with the goal to close the achievement gaps in all students.

Elementary and Secondary Education Act. President Lyndon B. Johnson believed in providing educational opportunity to all children. He signed into law the ESEA (1965), a civil rights law that provided new funding to school districts serving low-income learners, government funding for textbooks and library books, SPED center funding, and scholarship opportunities for low-income college students (Thomas, & Brady, 2005). Furthermore, the law furnished state education agencies with federal grants to increase the quality of elementary and secondary education.

Public Law 94-142: The Education for All Handicapped Children Act. Public Law 94-142 became the first federal law requiring school districts that were provided

with federal funding to afford FAPE to all students at the expense of the public. Public Law 94-142 is also referenced as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) of 1975. Through the implementation of EAHCA (1975), a system of legal checks and balances were developed to safeguard the rights of children with disabilities and their parents, as well as ensuring that students with disabilities had access to education and due process of law. School districts, for the first time, had to provide students with disabilities (a) a range of services at public expense, (b) evaluations and individualized services and support to meet the student's specific needs, (c) support in the LRE, (d) FAPE, and (e) rights to due process (Jasper, 2004; Sacks, 2001). The concept of mainstreaming was thus established, resulting in more students with disabilities being served in the general education classrooms rather than segregated classrooms. The Act served as the foundation of SPED programming.

National Commission on Excellence in Education. In the fall of 1981, the Secretary of Education created the National Commission on Excellence in Education and the charge was to audit the quality of the U.S. educational system. The Commission's focus was on (a) assessing the quality of public and private schools' teaching and learning; (b) assessing the educational system of the U.S. compared to the educational system of other developed nations; (c) examining the relationship of student achievement in secondary school to the admission requirements of higher education; (d) distinguishing educational programs that developed remarkable learner achievement in higher education; (e) evaluating the extent to which key social and educational transformations have influenced the achievement of learners; and (f) identifying the factors that must be

conquered in order to achieve the level of excellence in education (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983).

The result of the study produced the manuscript *A Nation at Risk*. Four important aspects (i.e., curriculum; expectations of a learner's comprehension and capabilities; effective use of time on schoolwork; and quality of teachers) were identified as to the reasons for the decline of the educational performance in the U.S. educational system. Reform to the U.S. educational system was pressed in order to restore the country's commitment to education. The publication of *A Nation at Risk* was ruminated to be a historic event in modern U.S. educational history (Howey, 1983).

No Child Left Behind. An update to the ESEA (1965) was enacted under the presidency of George W. Bush in 2002. NCLB (2002) rose out of trepidation that the U.S. educational system was no longer globally competitive and sought to increase the role of the government in holding educational institutions accountable for the academic growth of all students. Aligned with the interest of this research, NCLB (2002) focused on improved academic performances of particular groups of students (e.g., English learners, students with disabilities, low-income, minorities). States did not have to follow the guidelines of NCLB (2002); however, if the states chose to opt out, then their schools were in jeopardy of losing Title I federal funding.

Under NCLB (2002), states must assess learners in grade levels 3 through 8 in the subject areas of reading and mathematics, and once in the high school level. Following the state assessments, the outcomes must be reported for both the student population as a whole and for specific student subgroups (e.g., English learners, students with disabilities, low-income, ethnicity/race). Voltz and Collins (2010) remarked that NCLB

(2002) held schools accountable for the performances of students served under SPED by requiring schools to narrow the gap in state assessment scores between students with IEPs and students without IEPs. By the 2013-2014 school year, NCLB (2002) required states to bring all students to the level of proficiency; however, the cut-off deadline had passed by early 2015, and no states had registered 100 percent of students over the proficiency mark (Voltz & Collins, 2010).

Educational institutions were monitored toward the proficiency goal through *adequate yearly progress* (AYP), or annual achievement targets. The cornerstone of NCLB (2002) was to guarantee that striving educational institutes continually make progress by holding teachers and administrators accountable. Each state demonstrated improvement by setting goals for the schools (e.g., improve the graduation rate, absenteeism, performances in standardized tests) and then reaching AYP toward those goals. Consequences for schools missing AYP under NCLB (2002) are described in Table 4.

Table 4

Consequences for Schools Missing AYP Under NCLB by Years

Years missed AYP	Consequences	Defined
1 year	None	No consequences
2 consecutive years	Choice	The school must allow their students to transfer to a higher-performing school in the district
3 consecutive years	Supplemental education services	The school must offer free tutoring; 10 percent of Title I funding is set aside to subsidize for the tutoring services
Beyond 3 consecutive years	State interventions	States can shut down the school, transform the school into charter schools, take over the school, or other turnaround strategies

Note. The cornerstone of NCLB was to guarantee that striving educational institutes continually make progress by holding teachers and administrators accountable.

Failure to Meet AYP. According to NCLB (2002), there were no repercussions for schools that struggled to make one year of AYP. However, for two successive years, a school that did not achieve state targets was designated a School in Need of Improvement (SINI), which meant the school would receive additional help to improve (NCLB, 2002). The SINI schools were compelled to develop a two-year improvement plan and local education agencies (LEA) would then need to assist in the development and implementation of this two-year improvement plan (NCLB, 2002). Students of these SINI schools were also provided with *choice*, which allowed students to transfer and be provided with transportation within the district to another school that is not designated as

SINI (NCLB, 2002). Continued failure to meeting AYP in the third year and beyond resulted in additional mandates for improvement.

Importance to SPED. Students who are supported through SPED are guaranteed by IDEA (2004) at least an annual review of the educational programming by the ARD/IEP committee. An IEP is developed to ensure equal access and opportunity to general education for the student with disability. The ARD/IEP committee meetings end with the school administrator providing the following assurances by IDEA (2004):

> …assures that removal of students with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only if the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily. (34 CFR §300.114(2)(ii))
>
> …assures that each student with a disability participates in nonacademic and extracurricular services and activities, including meals, and recess periods, with nondisabled students to the maximum extent appropriate to the needs of the student. (34 CFR §300.117)
>
> …assures that to the maximum extent appropriate, students with disabilities, including students in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with students who are nondisabled. (34 CFR § 300.114(2)(i))

The developed IEP can include all the required components (e.g., annual goals, accommodations, modifications, schedule of service); every timeline can be met; and parents can be, without protest, afforded every due process right. However, even when schools follow every regulation but fail to meet AYP, the academic gains of students with disabilities are greatly impacted and the effectiveness of their IEP are diminished.

NCLB (2002) stated that all students must be included in the accountability system and that each subgroup of students (e.g., ethnicity/race, economically disadvantaged, limited English proficiency, SPED) must make AYP for the school to make AYP. Therefore, the achievement scores of students with disabilities directly contribute towards the overall rating of the school. Should the SPED subgroup not make adequate progress over time, then the school will be labeled as Needs Improvement.

Wentzel and Ramani (2016) discussed how attaching consequences to outcomes of student testing performance was to help motivate teachers, students, and parents. However, despite the vision of NCLB (2002), accountability ratings of schools decreased, more schools were considered failing, and decreased motivation in teachers and students were observed (Ravitch, 2013; Wentzel & Ramani, 2016). With the heightened pressure for schools to meet yearly AYP, the shift towards assessments impacted the quality of instructional practices. This negative impact pushed schools to *teach to the test*, which caused the narrowing of curriculum; tied the position of the teacher to the outcomes of their student; removed teaching in other disciplines (e.g., arts, humanities, public speaking); and focused only on subject areas being tested (Ravitch, 2013).

Due to the emphasis of accountability, many school principals are situated in a difficult position. School leaders and educators may have limited training or experience in SPED, yet they are being held accountable for ensuring that students with disabilities make academic progress (Ravitch, 2013; Robinson & Aronica, 2016; Wentzel & Ramani, 2016). General education and SPED is a unified system of education rather than two parallel systems (McLeskey et al, 2014). Inclusive practices and the educational success of students with disabilities are influenced by the mindsets of the school principal.

Therefore, without sufficient preparation and training, school principals lack the knowledge and skills to align the student's IEP to general education curriculum for academic progress (Harris, 2009; Praisner, 2003; Scruggs et al, 2007).

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. IDEA was signed in 1997 to ensure that all children with disabilities were provided with FAPE to target the student's unique needs towards academic and functional success in the educational setting, as well as prepare them for postsecondary endeavors (e.g., higher education, vocational training, and independent living). Preceding IDEA, millions of children with disabilities were denied appropriate access to public education (Connor & Ferri, 2007; Kafka, 2009). Many of these children were deprived of admission into public school completely, while others were stationed in segregated classrooms, or in regular classrooms without suitable support for their unique needs (Katsiyannis, Yell, & Bradley, 2001; Martin, Martin, & Terman, 1996; U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Through the implementation of IDEA (1997), the academic expectations and accountability for the nation's children with disabilities were reinforced and the disparity between the two curriculums (i.e., what children with disabilities were afforded, what was provided to the general population) became a focal point for alignment.

Reauthorization of IDEA. Since 1975, Congress has repeatedly revised and changed the SPED statute. In reauthorizing IDEA (2004), Congress intensified the emphasis on accountability and improved outcomes by stressing literacy, early intervention, and research-based curriculum by ensuring highly qualified SPED teachers. The designate of *highly qualified* teachers were set through the provisions of NCLB (2002), in which all teachers of core academic subjects were to have (a) at least a

bachelor's degree; (b) full state certification; and (c) exhibited proficiency in the core academic subject area assigned (NCLB, 2002). The core academic subjects were identified as English, reading or language arts, mathematics, science, foreign languages, civics and government, economics, arts, history and geography (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). For SPED teachers under IDEA (2004), highly qualified meant that the teachers be dually certified in SPED and in the core academic subject area assigned.

Two purposes were served through the reauthorization of IDEA (2004). The first purpose was to afford educational programming that met the unique needs of children with disabilities and to prepare these children for a pathway after primary and secondary education (e.g., higher education, employment, independent living). The second purpose was to safeguard the rights of the child with a disability and their guardian. An issue with the overrepresentation of students served under SPED in specific populations (e.g., African American) has persisted resulting in increased efforts to prevent mislabeling of SPED and the high dropout rates among minority children with disabilities (IDEA, 2004). Four sections comprise IDEA (2004) and are noted as Part A, B, C, and D.

Part A: General Provisions, Definitions, and Other Issues. Part A comprised the essential foundation for the remainder of the Act by defining the terms utilized in the Act and the basis of the establishment of the Office of Special Education Programs that oversee the implementation of IDEA (IDEA, 2004).

Part B: Assistance for Education of All Children with Disabilities. Part B disseminated the educational procedures for school-aged children (i.e., three years to 21years of age) in compliance with the legal requirements that states educate students with disabilities (Martin et al., 1996). Financial support for the state and school districts

was provided by IDEA; however, the stipulation was the state and district's compliance to the six key tenets set out by IDEA (2004): (a) FAPE; (b) *Child Find*, where schools must find all children from birth through the age of 21 and provide an evaluation on the child in areas of suspected disability and who may be entitled to SPED services; (c) development of an IEP; (d) provide services and support in LRE; (e) family participation and involvement in the development of the IEP; and (f) family's right to due process (Kastiyannis, Yell, & Bradley, 2001; Turnbull, Huerta, Stowe, Weldon, & Schrandt, 2009).

Part C: Infants and Toddlers with Disabilities. Part C of IDEA (2004) provided procedures regarding the services and support for families with children from birth through two years of age who may have disabilities. In Texas, the Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) provides services and support to families with children under the age of three who have developmental delays, disabilities, or certain medical diagnoses that may impact the child's development (Zigler, 2000). Through ECI, families learn how to help their child learn and grow as an individualized family service plan (IFSP) is created to help prepare the child to eventually transition into formal education through identified intervention areas and goals (IDEA, 2004).

Part D: National Activities to Improve Education of Children with Disabilities. The concluding section of IDEA (2004) expressed national actions that would be performed to increase the education of children with disabilities. The actions incorporated grants that would target the improvements in the educational and transitioning service for students with disabilities and resources to aid programs and activities that had a positive impact on children with disabilities (IDEA, 2004).

Every Student Succeeds Act. In 2015, under the presidency of Barack Obama, the ESSA (2015) was passed and opened increased opportunities for how the success of learners and educational institutes is delineated by U.S. public education. This Act replaces NCLB (2002) and the shift postulates that states have a greater obligation for constructing their accountability systems and establishing the needed supports and interventions for schools and districts (ESSA, 2015). Where NCLB (2002) functioned mainly on standardized test scores, ESSA (2015) moved towards a more universal methodology to accountability by promoting the use of multiple measures of school and student success (ESSA, 2015). Key provisions of ESSA (2015) include (a) restructured accountability system with a focus on meaningful learning, proficiently trained and dedicated educators, and meaningful resources that empower both learning and teaching (ESSA, 2015). Through the guidelines of ESSA (2015), the accountability status undergoes continuous appraisal and development that guide analysis of the problem and corrective action at the local level and then supported by the state.

College-Readiness Rate for Students in Special Education

Although school principals indirectly work to improve student success (e.g., hiring quality teachers, providing professional development, approving funds for resources and programs), their influences help to prepare students with disabilities for postsecondary vocation or education. The demand for postsecondary education is vital as the U.S. economy shifts from modern trades to careers that necessitate an understanding of skills and knowledge learned through formal education (Carnevale & Desrochers, 2003). Many young adults do not have the level of reading and mathematics skills that are needed for a postsecondary vocation or education (Barnes & Slate, 2014). The U.S.

Bureau of Labor Statistics (2016) predicted that through the year 2026, an estimated 37% of new jobs will require individuals to hold some level of postsecondary or vocational education.

Bromberg and Theokas (2016) reported on a study conducted by The Education Trust, in which only 8% of all U.S. high school graduates were reported to be prepared adequately for the rigor of college and work. The authors highlighted the over-prioritized symbolism of a high school diploma instead of fostering a strong knowledge base for the graduate's life after high school. A high school diploma is not enough for one to succeed in today's economy (Sheninger & Murray, 2017).

Over the span of the last one half-century, federal and state legislation have demonstrated the importance of college readiness through ever-changing provisions to the educational laws. Increased changes to the public education system were charged with every new bill that was passed with the goal to close the achievement gaps in all students. Readers are redirected to Table 2 for these notable provisions.

Detailed in much of the literature by other researchers (e.g., Barnes & Slate, 2014; Chandler, Slate, Moore, & Barnes, 2014; Hooker & Brand, 2010; Roderick, Nagaoka, & Coca, 2009; Sirin, 2005) was the lack of college-readiness and academic preparedness. These researchers conducted empirical investigations to determine the degree to which economic status, gender, and ethnicity/race influence the rate of college-readiness for students. Barnes and Slate (2014) investigated the college-readiness rates of Black, Hispanic, and White high school graduates in Texas, regardless of other demographic factors (e.g., disabilities). Across a 3-year timespan, Barnes and Slate (2014) contended that the college-readiness rates of high school graduates in Texas continue to be a

concern as the rate of college-readiness remains low. Specifically, the college-readiness rates of White students were higher than the college-readiness rates of Black and Hispanic students in reading, mathematics, and in both subjects (Barnes & Slate, 2014). The overrepresentation of minority students (e.g., Blacks, Hispanics) in SPED has been a growing area of concern that impacts the academic growth and postsecondary plans for these students. Black students identified with disabilities were reported to be subjected to lower expectations by the teachers, have dropout rates of 33.7%, and were twice as likely as White students to be educated in a more restrictive environment (Jordan, 2005).

More directly related to the current study, Chandler et al. (2014) and Holden and Slate (2016) investigated the college-readiness rates of students with disabilities. Chandler et al. (2014) posited that students in SPED had higher college-readiness rates in reading than Limited English Proficient students, but lower college-readiness rates in mathematics. When the researchers analyzed college-readiness rates as a function of high school size for students in SPED, Holden and Slate (2016) positioned that college-readiness rates in reading, mathematics, and in both subjects for students in SPED were highest in large-size schools and were lowest in small-size schools. The outcomes of the Holden and Slate (2016) and Chandler et al. (2014) investigations strengthened the continued presence of an academic gap for students in SPED as a crucial issue in their level of college-readiness.

Lê and Slate (2020) discussed college-readiness rates in reading, mathematics, and in both subjects for Texas high school students with disabilities. Using archival data from the TEA Texas Academic Performance Report (TAPR) for the 2014-2015 and 2015-2016 school years, college-readiness rates were examined through inferential

statistical procedures. The differences in the college-readiness rates of these students between the 2014-2015 and 2015-2016 school years were not statistically significant. The average college-readiness rates for students in SPED remained unaffected amid the two school years. Of importance, the college-readiness rates of these students were very low, in which the percentages ranged from a low of 6.91% to a high of only 14.13% (Lê & Slate, 2020).

In the 3-year study performed by Barnes and Slate (2014), college readiness rates ranged from 44.76% to 53.91% in reading, 48.16% to 54.08% in mathematics, and 31.11% to 42.81% in both subjects for Black, Hispanic, and White high school graduates in Texas. As reflected in Lê and Slate (2020), only about 14% of students in SPED were college-ready in reading, about 9% in mathematics, and about 7% in both subjects. The results from the study marked real cause for concern for students with disabilities, given the importance of postsecondary education. These statistics indicated that almost 90% of students with disabilities were not prepared for college. Additionally, the results remained comparatively unchanged in all three areas (i.e., reading, mathematics, and in both subjects) indicating little to no progress for students with disabilities occurred despite the increased demands of accountability for all students.

Developing Inclusive School Cultures

IDEA (2004) has made a notable impact on the justice of providing instruction and access to students with disabilities. However, disproportionality in the identification and placement of certain groups (e.g., African American students) continues to be an issue (DeMatthews, 2015). Utilizing a *sensemaking* model, an educational leader's past experience, their set standards, and their principles can guide them to be more social

justice-minded and strive to eliminate the inequalities of programming and placement of students with disabilities. Through this sensemaking model, educational leaders consciously utilize the information they obtain to shape and make sense of the decisions that are needed (DeMatthews, 2015).

DeMatthews (2015) examined the impact and approach of an elementary school principal regarding her leadership with the inclusion of her students with disabilities using sensemaking. In this study, the researcher focused on one first-year principal of a high-poverty urban public elementary school who demonstrated a commitment to inclusion, understood the inequalities brought on by race and class, and recognized that change was needed. The school was identified as having a prominent population of African American students and was further under scrutiny with litigations for their SPED programming. A four-part process was applied across two academic school years to gather the data for the qualitative case study: (a) frequent interviews with the principal to examine her efforts (e.g., challenges and success) for inclusion, (b) brief interviews with other staff members to gain knowledge of the school framework, (c) observations in the school setting (e.g., supporting teachers in the classroom, SPED meetings, conferences with parents, and team meetings with grade-level teachers) to explore the principal's leadership position, and (d) review of school and district records (e.g., meeting agendas, memos and policy statements from district, and training presentations for staff members including the principal [DeMatthews, 2015]). Although the principal was inspired to support change and comprehended the withstanding influence when students were provided with insufficient and isolated education, her negative experiences (e.g., teacher

resistance, reviewing inappropriate development of IEPs) constrained her abilities to be effective as a leader for SPED programming.

The findings from the DeMatthews (2015) study can be noted as short-term and long-term progress. In one academic year, the principal was able to provide more inclusion for students by fostering proficiencies, addressing insufficiencies in the perception of staff members, and establishing additional support systems for the students. However, the long-term effects were not so promising. Although more inclusion was provided for the students with disabilities, the rate of teacher growth in their capacity did not keep up with the change. Teachers were still resistant, some were burnt out, and the principal was asked to resign after the second year, which was the end of the research timeframe.

DeMatthews (2015) concluded that an educational leader can possess a perspective oriented to social justice and nevertheless struggle with issues of validity due to the limitations of the principal in his or her experience, proficiency, and confidence. Additional support from community resources should have been pursued by the principal. However, DeMatthews (2015) conveyed barriers the principal had little control over that were created by the district such as the district's longstanding continuance of segregation, lack of guidance for implementing the inclusive model, and failure to recruit and train quality teachers.

The objective of inclusive education is to eradicate marginalization that results from mindsets and reactions to diversity in ethnicity/race, socioeconomic status, religious beliefs, gender, and ability (Ainscow, 2005). Inclusion is the paradigm that children with disabilities are educated more effectively with their typically developing peers. Well

before the EAHCA (1975) was passed, the discourse as to whether students are better educated in a segregated or integrated setting persisted. Where inclusion is effectively implemented, both typically developing and disabled students progress (Katz & Sugden, 2013).

Positive academic impact was identified for students with disabilities and the academic performance of typically developing students showed little to no decrease in the inclusion classroom (Staub & Peck, 1995). Students with disabilities who were taught in inclusive classrooms earned higher academic performances and obtained higher results on standardized tests than students with disabilities who were placed in segregated classrooms (Rea et al., 2002). Children with disabilities who were taught alongside their classmates were able to observe more typical social behaviors and were exposed to questions and responses that supported their comprehension of the grade-level curriculum (Rea et al., 2002). Students with severe disabilities exhibited improved academic performance through engagement with typically developing learners in an inclusive setting, established more meaningful social skills in relation to their peers, and had strengthened communication skills (Downing & Pekham-Hardin, 2007; Hunt, Soto, Maier, & Doering, 2003; Katz & Mirenda, 2002; Katz & Sugden, 2013).

Typically developing peers benefited from the inclusion of their disabled peers. An educational setting that fosters an awareness of different abilities among learners enables all learners to be contributing members of their school community (Agosta, Graetz, Mastropieri, & Scruggs, 2004). Typically developing students also exhibited increased communication and leadership skills and portrayed a more positive regard for disabilities (Bunch & Valeo, 2004; Cole et al., 2004; Kalambouka, Farrell, Dyson, &

Kaplan, 2007). Sackstein (2015) noted that SPED referrals for suspected disabilities transpired due to educators utilizing instructional methodologies that were one size fits all where all students were perceived to learn at the same pace. More appropriate identification of SPED could be possible if educators moved toward a more differentiated methodology aligned to the various learning styles of learners (Sackstein, 2015).

There is a lack of a well-defined, universal definition of inclusion; therefore, educational leaders did not have a firm foundation of policy and effective implementation (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010). Leaders successfully developed an inclusive culture through the incorporation of shared vision, command high expectations, and allocate accountability for shared leadership (Muijs et al. 2010). McLeskey, Waldron, and Redd (2014) defined inclusion as a unified system of education rather than two parallel systems that are supported by learners, educators, and administrators. For successful educational integration, there is a necessity of increased professional development for educators, a mind-shift in ownership in educating students, and a positive collaboration of general education and SPED teachers (Katz & Sugden, 2013).

The leadership approach of principals often defaulted to the delegation of responsibilities to another administrator (e.g., assistant principal) when the duty involved students with disabilities (Bays & Crockett, 2007). The academic and functional needs for students within this special grouping are so diverging that the principal should have a firm understanding of the uniqueness in the students' abilities in order to provide students with disabilities an opportunity to succeed in the general education curriculum (Hehir, 2005). The increased responsibilities of principals as instructional leaders created obstacles to be an expert in all of the SPED factors; therefore, principals would benefit

from collaboration with individuals who are experts in the full range of disabilities (Hallinger & Heck, 2010).

For a principal to be an instructional leader of an inclusive school, the principal must foster a shared vision, a school-wide commitment, and a professional community of educators who shares in the ownership of all students (Polat, 2011). Leadership domains (i.e., academic excellence, high-quality teaching, progress monitoring, teaching and learning environment, and professional development opportunities) were identified in the study performed by Billingsley, McLeskey, and Crockett (2014), which supported the development of inclusive classrooms. To ensure that learners were distinctly cognizant of the criteria of academic excellence, the principal had set high objectives for achievement, safeguarded instructional time from disturbances, monitored student functioning, organized professional development opportunities, and provided feedback on teaching and learning (Lee et al., 1999).

The prevalence of low expectations for the academic achievement of students with disabilities has contributed to injudicious efforts to shield these students (Jorgensen, 2005). By prohibiting students with disabilities from general education courses, educators consequently hinder and limit these students' postsecondary aspirations. In order to counter these outcomes, principals need to ensure training is available to bring more awareness of the potentials of students with disabilities and how to encourage grade-level achievement for all students (Billingsley et al., 2014). To safeguard instructional time, principals need to provide classroom teachers with support in establishing behavioral expectations and consequences. When students spend more time focusing on learning rather than being disciplined, the rate of achievement is higher

(Polat, 2011). Principals as instructional leaders must also ensure educators are implementing research-based instructional practices, and students are actively monitored beyond the scope of state-mandated (i.e., STAAR assessments) accountability systems (Lee et al., 1999). Data are an integral part of decision-making in teaching.

Positive working and learning environments are also vital for developing inclusive education. All teachers (i.e., general education and SPED) need to be allotted uninterrupted time and space to collaborate with one another to align instructional plans to state standards and analyze data for progress monitoring (Furney, Hasazi, Clark-Keefe, & Hartnett, 2003). The role of the principal is to safeguard teachers from non-instructional activities and provide professional development that is most directly connected to student achievement (Vannest & Hagan-Burke, 2010). Brownell, Billingsley, McLeskey, and Sindelar (2012) postulated that teachers will put new ideas presented at professional development sessions into practice if leaders provide sufficient time for them to discuss the content, and the teachers see an alignment with their beliefs to and motivation for the content.

Balancing Needs of Student Groups. The ethic of the profession and its model for student best interest is the theoretical framework used by some educational leaders to lead them in making moral decisions grounded on justice, care, critique, and profession (Frick, Faircloth, & Little, 2013). The ethic of justice focuses on the ethical concept of "individual rights, due process, freedom, equality, and responsibility" (Frick et al., 2013, p. 213). The ethic of care is rooted in the notion of deep admiration and love for others, while the ethic of critique focuses on "competing interests, power, the nature and structure of bureaucracy, the influence and force of language, and redress for

institutionalize injustice" (Frick et al., 2013, p. 214). The ethic of the profession is the focal point of the study and addresses the *best interest* model in relation to "rights, responsibility, and respect" (Frick et al., 2013, p. 216).

Frick et al. (2013) explored principals' perceptions and evidence of moral reasoning regarding their decision-making when faced with issues of the individual SPED student's best interest versus the collective best interest of all students. Thirteen principals from elementary schools across Oklahoma were selected for this research. Two direct interviews were performed to gain insight (a) to how principals balanced SPED programming needs with general education programming needs, (b) whether principals used a guiding principle to assist with decision-making, and (c) to how moral decisions for SPED programming were managed (Frick et al., 2013).

A qualitative-naturalistic process of inquiry was utilized. The first interview served as the control stimulus to help define the best interest through questioning with a prepared scenario vignette, whereas the second interview was to gain data regarding principals' personal reflection and was used as the baseline for comparison. After the initial preparation and data analysis, the researchers discovered that all contributors were devoted to the achievement of all students and accepted the responsibility of student outcomes by pushing teachers to problem solve and be held accountable to student outcomes (Frick et al., 2013). Evidence of tension between making decisions in the best interest for the individual and the collective whole was revealed; however, participants noted that best interest should entail students' wellbeing, their opportunity to an education, and their access to a setting appropriate for learning (Frick et al., 2013). Most of the principals in the study reported that one child should not negatively affect the

learning of the whole class, and therefore, full inclusion may not be the best programming for some students with disabilities.

Frick et al. (2013) discovered that 12 of the 13 principals chose the best interest of the group over the individual student. Whereas, one principal stated that students with disabilities have distinctive educational needs, therefore, the focus should be on the child in order to meet his or her individual needs (Frick et al., 2013). Educational leaders should continue to work toward delineating the notion of equality and equity. Including all students with disabilities into the general education classroom could increase basic equality (e.g., being physically present in the general classroom); however, this equality may not be ethical as some students may be functionally prohibited from appropriate academic access due to deficits related to their disabilities. Therefore, Frick et al. (2013) suggested that educational leaders struggle with their role as an administrator and their moral responsibilities in meeting the best interest of the student versus the best interest of the general classroom population. Working towards equity may necessitate unequal treatment on the individual but crucial to ensure fair educational programming in the best interest of that student to meet their academic and functional needs.

Frick et al. (2013) indicated a distinct discrepancy between the best interest of one student versus the whole group, and the participants' definition of best interest did not reflect that of the ethic of the profession's model (Frick et al., 2013). All participants conveyed a moral standpoint beyond that of a professional responsibility where they were considerate of the students' needs, voicing valid concern, and taking on the duty for parental relationships (Frick et al., 2013). The researchers concluded that although federal, state, and local policies mandated the education be provided in the least

restrictive environment for students with disabilities, there remains a lack of concrete moral and ethical guidance for educational leaders in the pursuit of individual and collective best interests.

Evolution of Principal Role in Special Education

In the past, the principal's responsibility was to maintain the school grounds and regulate behavioral issues (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003). The ruling made in *Brown v. Board of Education (1954)* set the groundwork for the EAHCA (1975) mandating access to FAPE for all children with disabilities. Prior to this federal law, about one million American children with disabilities were denied support from the public-school system (Connor & Ferri, 2007; Kafka, 2009). Accordingly, the role of the principal transformed around the 1970s into a role of leadership charged with the promotion of high expectations for learning and collaboration (Brookover, 1982).

The amplified emphasis on accountability has sparked a renewed interest in leadership in education. Leadership in instruction entails deep collaboration between the educational leader and teachers through developing the practices of the teacher to increase student learning. Keenoy (2012) concluded SPED was affected by the educational leader’s ability to facilitate the collaboration between general education and SPED educators, thus ensuring students with disabilities were provided with access to an education in the LRE. Further, the educational leaders were able to promote the effectiveness of all teachers.

During the 20th century, school principals began to serve the roles of instructional leaders and developers of inclusive school culture (Brieve, 1972; Peterson & Deal, 1998). With increased initiatives and pressure to provide FAPE, general education and SPED no longer were viewed as separate programs, but rather, the two worlds were slowly

merging into a single system to educate all children (Burrello & Sage, 1979). Entering the 21st century, an improvement in the role of the principal in SPED programs was called for to help ensure that students with disabilities received specially designed instructions in all areas of education, including academics and functional skills in their LRE (IDEA, 2004). To achieve this goal, these educational leaders needed to focus on SPED classrooms, instruction, and instructors. Lasky and Karge (2006) surveyed 205 participants and discovered 75% of the educational leaders reported they were spending more time in SPED areas than they had before. Nevertheless, school leaders who provided a supportive environment to students and staff positively influenced the academic performances for students with disabilities (DiPaola et al., 2004; DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; Praisner, 2003). Educators and their leaders understood the advantages of being knowledgeable in SPED programming; however, effectively developing for this new component of their leadership role was less clearly expressed (McHatton, Boyer, Shaunessey, & Terry, 2010).

Principalship has become a position that is more intricate, time-consuming, and pivotal than ever (Billingsley et al., 2014; Frick et al., 2013; Knapp, Copeland, & Talbert, 2003). A study led by the Institute for Educational Leadership in 2000 depicted the essence of the state of principalship of the past:

> Being an effective building manager used to be good enough. For the past century, principals mostly were expected to comply with district-level edicts, address personnel issues, order supplies, balance program budgets, keep hallways and playgrounds safe, put out fires that threatened tranquil public relations, and make sure that busing and meal services were operating smoothly. And principals

still need to do all those things. But now they must do more. (Usdan, McCloud, & Podmostko, 2000, p. 2)

Perception of leadership roles in inclusive education. Numerous studies have been conducted to examine the school principal's perceptions of inclusive education (Ball & Green, 2014; Horrocks et al., 2008; Praisner, 2003). Principals with a positive perspective of inclusion were more likely to place students in general education classrooms (Horrocks et al., 2008). Additionally, Ball and Green (2014) analyzed the opinion of 138 school administrators who worked at public schools located in the southeastern part of the United States and, by self-reported polls, most respondents indicated a lack of SPED training and experience which correlated with their unfavorable perceptions of integration for students with disabilities. The less SPED preparation and experience the school leaders received, the less inclusive education these leaders were tolerant of (Ball & Green, 2014). Five hundred seventy-one principals completed a survey about their perception of inclusive practices for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder, and Horrocks et al. (2008) noted the educators who had previous experience with students with autism and who had positive experiences of inclusion perceived inclusive education more favorably.

Roberts and Guerra (2017) focused on how to improve school leaders' effectiveness in leading SPED programming by analyzing the educational leaders' perception of their SPED knowledge (i.e., legal, foundational, and contextual) as gained through their principal preparatory programs. The study included 84 principals selected from predominantly Hispanic elementary, middle, and high school campuses located in 37 school districts along the border of Texas and Mexico. Principals completed the Role

of Principals with Special Education Teacher Survey electronically. Although information was obtained regarding principals' demographics, frequency of engagement in leadership behaviors with SPED staff members, and their perception of their roles with SPED programming, Roberts and Guerra (2017) focused on the principals' perception of knowledge in SPED programming and their suggestions for improvement for future preparatory programs (Roberts & Guerra, 2017).

Roberts and Guerra (2017) reported that principals believed they were less experienced in (a) SPED legal knowledge as outlined in the Texas Administrative Code, (b) foundational knowledge regarding the role of guardians in developing IEPs, and (c) contextual knowledge involving the construct of SPED curriculum. Principals rated greater adequacy in IDEA, SPED placement process as guided by the district, and state learning standards for students with disabilities (Roberts & Guerra, 2017). Roberts and Guerra (2017) concluded that appropriate programming was needed to address the needs of multicultural students with disabilities, and integration of multicultural education and Universal Design for Learning knowledge was vital to principal preparatory programs to increase accessibility to all students (Roberts & Guerra, 2017).

Roderick and Jung (2012) identified and compared the views of SPED teachers and school site administrators concerning supportive leadership behaviors. Ninety-five participants were selected for this study: 35 school site administrators, 59 SPED teachers, and one was undeclared to his or her role across 15 Grade 6 to 12 secondary schools located in a suburban area of southern California during the 2008 to 2009 school year (Roderick & Jung, 2012). Participants were emailed a modified Administrative Support Survey focusing on 52 leadership behaviors in the emotional, instrumental, instructional,

and technical domains. The researchers indicated there were differences in perspectives regarding leadership behaviors with SPED teachers and administrators, mainly in the emotional domain. Administrators focused on performing frequent observations, being attentive to teacher's classroom behaviors, and providing criticism for improvement; whereas teachers held greater importance in being supported during direct interactions with parents or other staff members (Roderick & Jung, 2012).

Instrumentally, Roderick and Jung (2011) reported that both teachers' and administrator groups' perceptions did not diverge and both groups held the same level of value to identified leadership behaviors involving teachers' planning time, being informed, and being provided with appropriate tools and supplies for instructions. Instructionally, administrators perceived their role was to provide additional instructional techniques to improve teaching and assist with struggling learners, helping teachers to determine when and in what manner to teach particular concepts, and assisting them with writing lesson plans were valuable; however, teachers did not report the same sentiment (Roderick & Jung, 2012).

Regarding the technical domain, administrators perceived higher value in providing reliable feedback about IEPs, progress reports, and monitoring to ensure federal and state guidelines were followed (Roderick & Jung, 2012). The researchers established that leadership behavior as perceived by the administrators and SPED teachers varied due to the different focus and responsibilities of their job description. Administrators must handle many responsibilities in all aspects of education due to accountability factors, whereas teachers focus on instructional strategies in the classroom.

Principalship

Through NCLB (2002), legislatures commanded transformation in the school system to close the achievement gaps in students. The national education law called attention to four pillars upheld in the bill to ensure that disadvantaged students (e.g., students served under programs such as SPED, section 504, Bilingual, and English as a second language) achieve academic proficiency: accountability, flexibility, research-based education, and parent options (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). Although a new bill (ESSA of 2015) has been adopted in place of NCLB (2002), the focus continues to remain on the quality of public education.

The principal serves a vital role in leading and instituting change in education. His or her accomplishments as an educational leader influences the outcome of effective teachers, academic achievement of learners, and implementation of school programs. Good principals are the key to the success of the campus (Branch et al., 2013). With more accountability expectations for school districts, the principal's obligation and knowledge in effectively providing instructional leadership to SPED programming has become progressively critical (Frost & Kersten, 2011).

Perception of preparation. As the position of the principal has evolved over the 20th century, IDEA (2004) has delineated more SPED duties to the principal. A competent and inclusive school principal can lead to the improved academic performance of students; however, there appears to be a lack of adequate training in developing equity awareness in principals in the area of SPED (Davidson & Algozzine, 2002; Garrison-Wade et al., 2007; Styron & LeMire, 2009). Many aspiring principals successfully complete the principal preparation programs; however, these individuals do so without

confidence in their abilities to lead SPED (Davidson & Algozzine, 2002; DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; Styron & LeMire, 2009). The perception of a principal to their preparation program is of great importance because competence leads to confidence. Regardless of the setting or age-group, the foundational knowledge gained can impact the ability to handle difficult situations.

Many researchers (e.g., Davidson & Algozzine, 2002; DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; Garrison-Wade, Sobel, & Fulmer, 2007; Styron & LeMire, 2009) place importance on how principal preparation programs guide aspiring principals in leading SPED services and supporting students with disabilities. Garrison-Wade et al. (2007) surveyed principals on their perceptions regarding how to prepare for SPED duties and discovered that 40% lacked knowledge of SPED legislation, 28% believed they were inexperienced in helping SPED staff, and 28% were unfamiliar with SPED programs.

Similarly, Davidson and Algozzine (2002) investigated beginning principals' perceptions and levels of SPED knowledge in the areas of understanding the policies and procedures of IDEA, need for SPED training, and satisfaction with the provided training in SPED. More than one half of participants (53.3%) reported having limited knowledge of the policies and procedures of IDEA, 47.5% of participants reported an average need for SPED training for administrators, and 46.7% of participants appraised the level of satisfaction with SPED training as below or well below standard. Davidson and Algozzine (2002) observed that female participants ranked their comprehension of SPED law higher than males; however, males scored higher in this area when provided with situational-based statements on SPED law.

Styron and LeMire (2009) examined the satisfaction of principals with their preparation programs, and whether rates of satisfaction varied in alternative administrative preparation programs. A majority (77%) of the respondents agreed that the alternative programs prepared aspiring principals with educational issues in the areas of academic achievement in learners, management of the school, and communication (Styron & LeMire, 2009). However, only 56% responded that the alternative preparation programs addressed SPED issues (Styron & LeMire, 2009).

Garrison-Wade et al. (2007) identified essential skills for effective leadership in SPED for principals: (a) meaningful comprehension of differentiated instruction, (b) professional development support for staff, (c) continual coaching, (d) colleague to colleague collaboration, and (e) commitment to answering parent questions and concerns related to SPED. Congruent with other researchers (e.g., Davidson & Algozzine, 2002; DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003), Styron and LeMire (2009) recommended more training of SPED programming and SPED law in administrative preparation programs. A deep understanding of SPED law can lead to effective leadership; presumed understanding can lead to fractured and misguided leadership (Davidson & Algozzine, 2002).

Frost and Kersten (2011) investigated principals' comprehension of SPED programming and the perception of their leadership role with SPED teachers. Only 25% of the participants reported to be SPED certified. Areas that were investigated through this study included the principal's insight of SPED matters in the legal, foundational, and contextual facets; rate at which the principals were involved in explicit instructional leadership activities with SPED teachers; and the principals' view of their responsibility

with SPED teachers. The participants' involvement was reported to be highest in areas of hiring staff members, performing classroom observations, and completing formal evaluations of SPED teachers (Frost & Kersten, 2011). Whereas, the participants' lowest involvement was in being present for annual professional development for legal SPED issues, supervising the alignment of IEP to state learning standards, and developing program improvement to meet the needs of students with disabilities (Frost & Kersten, 2011). Frost and Kersten (2011) concluded that principals who had additional supports (e.g., assistant principals, SPED coordinator, or lead teachers) on campus were able to share in the responsibility of administrative duties and conveyed greater knowledge in all areas surveyed than those who had no additional support.

The researchers' analysis of their data indicated that the principals who were SPED certified were better equipped and had more understanding and involvement to be able to support the SPED programming and their teachers (Frost & Kersten, 2011). Those without SPED certification were engaged in instructional leadership behaviors of students who are served in SPED but did not possess the proper conception of SPED instructional methods and approaches to be effective. Without adequate levels of understanding in SPED, Wakeman, Browder, Flowers, and Ahlgrim-Delzell (2006) reported principals had lower expectations for students with disabilities, accepted instructional practices that were not aligned to the general curriculum, and exhibited a lack of responsibility for low performing students on high stakes testing. The principal's main role was established to be that of administrative support, overseeing student instruction and learning, and distributing resources to appropriate divisions. Principals attempted to share the burden of administrative responsibilities of the campus by

delegating certain charges to other staff members. Although this delegation of duties may cause the principal to be less involved with SPED teachers and build awareness of SPED issues that may arise, principals with additional support had a longer tenure that provided more prospects for growth in SPED knowledge and experiences (Frost & Kersten, 2011).

Lynch (2016) sought to gain insight on how the leader's absence of order and self-conveyed capacities may sway their competence in distinguishing effectual teaching and exercise instructional guidance for middle school students with disabilities in rural areas. Direct interviews resulted in two themes: (a) defining effective instruction for students with disabilities and (b) practices to ensure differentiated instruction (Lynch, 2016). The study presented evidence that rural principals had limited understanding of evidence-based instructional strategies needed for effective instruction for students with disabilities (Lynch, 2016). Principals defined effective instruction as an inexplicit method of delivery of (a) differentiated instruction, (b) collaborative joint-learners, (c) active engagement, and (d) consideration on instruction rather than producing a concrete definition as effective education is an instructive belief of many instructional approaches.

Furthermore, Lynch (2016) identified that principals viewed what effective instruction was not (e.g., teachers instructing only students who will succeed or reaching the end of a textbook) and that students with disabilities were instructed in inclusive classrooms, pullout classrooms, and grouped by abilities to meet their needs based on their disabilities. Principals made certain that educators were working with effective instructional strategies with students with disabilities by the method of checks and balances through classroom observations and reviewing submitted lesson plans (Lynch,

2016). Principals in the study reported having limited SPED coursework in their respective principal preparatory programs and often attended IEP meetings but did not perceive themselves as experts to SPED matters (Lynch, 2016). Educators who were interviewed stated that they believed principals should have no role as the instructional leader of SPED programming and more professional development opportunities should be considered to bridge the disparity between educators and principals (Lynch, 2016). As principals and teachers attend separate professional development courses with differing focal points (e.g., principals on administrative duties, and teachers on instructional duties), efforts should be made to provide joint opportunities for both groups to better serve a common cause for the SPED population.

The perception of a principal to their preparation program impacts the leader's ability to make decisions and handle situations that are difficult. Many educational leaders serving in the role of a principal lacked the competency and understanding needed in the area of SPED. Much of the data disclosed that principals are not adequately equipped to address the needs of students enrolled in SPED programs (Davidson & Algozzine, 2002; Frost & Kersten, 2011; Garrison-Wade et al., 2007; Lynch, 2016; Pazey & Cole, 2013; Styron & LeMire, 2009). Wakeman et al., (2006) revealed a relationship between the knowledge a principal possesses and their professional practice. A principal's involvement in SPED programming was increased when the principal possessed a higher level of knowledge of SPED (Wakeman et al., 2006). Without the necessary level of understanding in SPED, lower expectations, unaligned instructional practices, and lack of responsibility for low performing students on high stakes testing were reported (Wakeman et al., 2006).

Addressing the need for principal preparation programs. In order to emphasize the body of knowledge deemed necessary by principals, DiPaola and Walther-Thomas (2003) postulated that principal preparation programs must encompass training in the behavioral and academic challenges that are impacted by each of the 13 areas of disabilities identified by IDEA (2004), including opportunities to comprehend and develop research-based practices (Bateman & Bateman, 2014). Many SPED researchers (Bateman & Bateman, 2014; Burrello, Lashley, & Beatty, 2001) recognize the impact of a principal's leadership and the outcomes of students. There exists a gap in the curriculum of principal preparation programs and the need to include more content in SPED. As principals move towards serving as an instructional leader for all students, these educational leaders have a duty to expand their knowledge bank in SPED to be cognizant of ethical decision-making to meet the differentiated needs of all students (Boscardin, 2005; DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2003; Frick et al., 2013).

The school principal is in a position to influence the culture of inclusive education, drive of the educators, and success of the students, irrespective of demographic factors such as ethnicity/race or socioeconomic level (Peterson & Deal, 1998). However, basic content courses related to working with students with disabilities and inclusive practices are generally included in other programs (e.g., Educational Psychology and Special Education) rather than Educational Administration and Leadership programs that prepare principals (Lyons, 2016). Lyons (2016) analyzed the viewpoints of principals regarding their needs in preparing for their leadership responsibilities in an inclusive school. By identifying the insufficiencies of their preservice education, the researcher concentrated on enhancing leadership in SPED

programming the provisional class (Lyons, 2016). Two focus groups were established to gain insight of essential behaviors and skills that are needed for effective leadership. The researcher discovered that specific courses addressing leadership in inclusive education were valuable and essential to building capacity for service delivery, understanding the IEP process, ensuring effective implementation of the RTI process, and facilitating positive changes in the school (Lyons, 2016). The pilot leadership course was established to concentrate on the disproportion in leadership preparatory programs and served to inform leaders that school change entailed a leader knowing not only what needs to be done but also how to approach doing what is needed for social justice of inclusive education.

The Texas Principal Standards

Most principal training programs in the United States focus very little on preparing and planning aspiring instructional leaders to lead students with disabilities (Christensen et al., 2013). Principals who are not provided with adequate preparation or training in SPED programming and law struggle in ensuring quality programming and instructional practices for students with disabilities (Davidson & Algozzine, 2002; Lasky & Karge, 2006; Militello, Schimmel, & Everwein, 2009). Texas Education Agency (TEA) recently redesigned Texas' principal certification standards; therefore, a review of these new standards is important to understanding the impact the preparation of these aspiring leaders has on SPED programming.

The Texas Principal Standards were developed in accordance with Chapter 149 of the Texas Administrative Code (TAC) to assist in the continual evaluation of the effectiveness of school leaders. According to these standards, principals in Texas must

adhere to the five standards: (a) instructional leadership, (b) human capital, (c) executive leadership, (d) school culture, and (e) strategic operations to improve teacher and student outcomes (Texas Principal Evaluation and Support System, 2019). A brief overview of the five principal standards will help to detail the many roles and responsibilities these school principals have, which support the purpose of the current research in pursuit of appropriate preparation to SPED issues in order to effectively lead inclusive practices.

Standard 1. The principal as an instructional leader must safeguard high-quality instruction to all students by prioritizing student achievement. Based on the principal's preparation and research of best practices, these school leaders develop the definition and guidelines of what the high-quality instructions embody and how these instructions will be implemented. These instructions need to be aligned to state standards, and continually be monitored through classroom observations and participating in team meetings. These efforts will aid in pinpointing areas of instructional practices that may need to be improved. Indicators in meeting this standard include (a) rigorous and aligned curriculum and assessment, (b) effective instructional practices, (c) data-driven instruction and interventions, and (e) maximize learning for all students (Texas Principal Evaluation and Support System, 2019).

Standard 2. The principal strategically focuses on the treatment of his or her staff members as these individuals are valuable resources and investments to the success of the campus. Human capital issues focus on the growth, promotion, and guidance of the staff members to ensure high-quality educators in all classrooms. Principals should be selective in the hiring process and selecting those individuals who possess the skills that match the needs of the school and whose vision aligns with the vision of the school.

Through frequent observations and constructive feedback, school leaders can promote a working environment conducive to personal and professional learning. Indicators in meeting this standard include (a) targeted selection, placement, and retention; (b) tailored development, feedback, and coaching; (c) staff collaboration and leadership; and (d) systematic evaluation and supervision (Texas Principal Evaluation and Support System, 2019).

Standard 3. The principal as an executive leader must maintain a personal responsibility to the success of his or her campus by modeling a consistent focus on the quest for educational excellence. This leadership characteristic also helps to motivate the community and inspire staff members to continue to improve and be open to learn and grow from his or her mistakes. The principal must take charge to improve student outcomes by analyzing the data and reflecting on the implementation of instructional practices that may not have been as successful to make changes. Organizational health is vital to the growth of a school campus in this case. Therefore, the principal's leadership and his or her communication ability are vital in the school's productivity, quality of instruction, and student outcomes. Indicators in meeting this standard include (a) resiliency and change management, (b) commitment to ongoing learning, (c) communication and interpersonal skills, and (d) ethical behavior (Texas Principal Evaluation and Support System, 2019).

Standard 4. The principal drives the growth of student outcomes and expectations by leveraging the school's culture. He or she is charged in establishing and upholding a shared vision and culture of high expectations with all staff members and students served on the campus. This vision becomes the foundation for decision-making

and prioritizing school issues that may arise. Students are able to build social-emotional skills as well as academic skills when school leaders are able to be consistent in their expectations and provide constructive feedback for a positive learning environment. Indicators in meeting this standard include (a) shared vision of high achievement, (b) culture of high expectations, (c) intentional family and community engagement, (d) safe school environment, and (e) discipline (Texas Principal Evaluation and Support System, 2019).

Standard 5. The principal establishes and tracks goals that are aligned to the school's vision for continual improvement of the effectiveness of teachers and outcomes of the student. Through strategic operations, the principal evaluates the presenting needs of the campus to identify priorities that need to be targeted and develop strategies to address those areas of need. The principal is charged with purposeful allocating of resources and developing year-long, as well as daily, calendars for ensuring opportunities for teacher collaboration and data review to capitalize on instructional time. Indicators in meeting this standard include (a) strategic planning, (b) maximized learning time, (c) tactical resource management, and (d) policy implementation and advocacy (Texas Principal Evaluation and Support System, 2019).

The Texas Principal Standards were developed to provide a broad guide for school leaders to cultivate school efficiency, enhance learner achievements, and improve the effectiveness of their leadership. The standards required for certification do state that the principal as an instructional leader "analyzes the curriculum to ensure that teachers align content across grades and that curricular scopes and sequences meet the particular needs of their diverse student populations" (TAC 241.15.c.7). However, the focus

remains vague in the direct implication towards educating students who receive SPED services. Under IDEA (2004), SPED services must provide the supports that will enable all learners to achieve success in the general curriculum whenever possible. As such, school principals need to remember that students who are served in SPED are general education students first. A mind-shift is also needed in accepting education as a unified system rather than two separate and parallel systems (McLeskey et al., 2014). Readers are guided to Table 5 for a brief synopsis of how SPED programming are embedded in the Texas Principal Standards.

Table 5

Texas Principal Standards and SPED

Standards	Definition	SPED Implications
1: Instructional leadership	Ensure *every* student receives high-quality instruction	Provide rigorous and aligned curriculum and assessment; effective instructional practices; data-driven instruction and interventions; and maximize learning to *all* students, including students with disabilities.
2: Human capital	Ensure high-quality teachers and staff are in every classroom throughout the school; to improve teacher effectiveness and student outcomes	Equal focus on the growth, promotion, and guidance of general education and special education staff members.
3: Executive leadership	Model a consistent focus and personal responsibility for improving student outcomes	Take charge to improve the outcomes of *all* students by analyzing data and reflecting on the implementation of instructional practices that may need changes
4: School culture	Establish and implementing a shared vision and culture of high expectations for *all* staff and students	Students with disabilities, along with their general education peers, build social-emotional skills and academic skills through leader's consistency in expectations and constructive feedback for a positive learning environment

Standards	Definition	SPED Implications
5: Strategic operations	Outline and track clear goals, targets, and strategies aligned to a school vision that continuously improves teacher effectiveness and student outcomes	Leader evaluates the needs of the campus for continual improvement of the effectiveness of teachers and outcomes of *all* students, including those with disabilities, with purposeful allocating of resources and developing calendars for ensuring opportunities for teacher collaboration and data review to capitalize on instructional time

Note. A brief synopsis of how SPED programming are embedded in the Texas Principal Standards.

Principal Preparatory Programs

The overarching methodology for preparing principals is to move from a theoretical basis to a more realistic implementation paradigm in order to increase the efficacy of principals as instructional leaders (Acker-Hocevar, Cruz-Janzen, & Wilson, 2009). Special education receives little attention in the curriculum in preparing future principals and is usually integrated into special programs (e.g., Bilingual) or is focused on legal aspects of SPED. A principal's responsibility is multifaceted and extensive. Therefore, potential principals should encompass appropriate comprehension, proficiencies, and outlooks to prepare themselves for their leadership role in not only general education but also inclusive practices and SPED programming (Lyons, 2016). Consequently, an examination of principal preparatory programs in the state where this research occurred was necessary to address the effectiveness of principal leadership.

Texas school principals were the focus of the study; therefore, Texas principal preparation programs were reviewed. In Texas, candidates must meet the five requirements to obtain a principal certificate: (a) hold a master's degree from an accredited university, (b) hold a valid classroom teaching certificate, (c) have two years of creditable teaching experience as a classroom teacher, (d) successfully complete an approved principal EPP, and (e) successfully complete the required exam. In Texas, individuals seeking an educator certification must pass comprehensive exams to ensure the prerequisite content and professional knowledge and skills are obtained for entry-level positions in Texas public schools at any grade level from EC to 12, according to TAC §230.21(a). Educators become certified in content areas (e.g., generalist, special education, mathematics, English language arts, science, etc.) and grade level bands (i.e., EC-6, EC-12, 4-8, 6-12, 7-12, 8-12), where the number corresponds to the grade level and EC indicates early childhood.

As reviewed in Chapter I, TEA had recently redesigned Texas' principal certification standards and corresponding certification exams for aspiring principals as an instructional leader. The redesigned exams focus on a principal's role as an instructional leader and reflect some of the skills that are crucial for beginning principals to be effective. With the redesigning of Texas' principal certification standards, aspiring principals would need to pass the new TExES (268) Principal as Instructional Leader certification exam and complete the TExES (368) Performance Assessment for School Leaders (PASL) assessment to obtain a standard principal certification starting on September 1, 2019 (TEA, 2019a).

Using TEA's database of approved principal education preparation programs in the state, a search was performed to locate accredited sites that offered alternative, post-baccalaureate, and traditional routes for aspiring principals. The Principal (EC-12) preparation program, which adhered to the former Texas principal standards, revealed 80 accredited sites. The Principal as Instructional Leader (EC-12) preparation program, which adheres to the redesigned Texas principal standards, revealed 33 accredited sites. For this study, the results from Principal as Instructional Leader (EC-12) was utilized because the results from that grouping reflected accredited sites that were prepared to train aspiring principals using the new test framework (i.e., T-PESS) and test instruments (i.e., TExES Principal 268 and PASL 368).

A review of the coursework required for a principal certification in the state of Texas serves to aid in the understanding of the foundational knowledge and training that is provided to aspiring school principals. Being approved as appropriate principal EPPs, the coursework provided by these accredited sites were deemed to meet TEA guidelines. Therefore, a study of the randomly selected sites should provide a generalized finding to the larger population. The 33 accredited sites TEA provided were in alphabetical order; these names were manually inputted in the same order into an online research randomizer tool (Randomizer.org) that assisted in selecting a random sample of three sites for the purpose of studying the required coursework in the respective principal preparation program. The random sample selected the following three accredited sites: (1) Lamar University, (2) Sam Houston State University, and (3) Sul Ross State University. Readers are guided to Table 6 for a brief program breakdown of a certification only pathway of the randomly selected sites for accredited principal preparation programs in

Texas. The method of data collection was a review of publicly available websites. Readers should be cautioned of the limitation that the websites might not have been updated or correct at the time the study was performed.

Table 6

Certification Only Pathway of Selected Accredited Principal Preparation Programs

Selected Accredited Sites	Delivery Method	Program Length	Type of SPED course	Practicum Hours Required
Lamar University	Online	18 credit hours	N/A	300 clock hours
Sam Houston State University	Online and classroom-based	24 credit hours	Integrated	160 clock hours
Sul Ross State University	Online	27 credit hours	Integrated	160 clock hours

Note. Brief program breakdown of a certification only pathway of the randomly selected sites for accredited principal preparation programs in Texas.

Lamar University. A review of the required coursework for Lamar University's principal certification program was performed. The program certification in Principal Education is delivered through online methods in as little as nine months and requires 18 credit hours for completion. According to Lamar University (n.d.), the required courses include Fundamentals of Leadership, Leadership for Accountability, School Law, Human Resource Management, Instructional Leadership, and Internship in Administration. Through this coursework, aspiring principals receive training in fundamental leadership theories to cultivate the foundational skills needed to construct communities that support learning for all students, investigate the state accountability system, legal and ethical interpretation of laws and statues, develop the human resources to support the learning and the school's instructional vision, develop techniques for enhancing instruction and learning through the research-based methods, and an internship period with a required

total of 300 practicum hours. No specific coursework was designated to address the needs of SPED populations specifically.

Sam Houston State University. A review of the required coursework for Sam Houston State University's (SHSU) principal certification program was performed. The principal certification program at Sam Houston State University is delivered through online and classroom-based methods and requires 24 credit hours. According to SHSU, the required courses include Administration and Organization of Public Schools, Federal State Local School Law, Special Populations and Special Programs, Principal Practicum/Internship, Campus Business Management, Role of Principal in School Administration, and Advancing Educational Leadership (Sam Houston State University, 2019). Through this coursework, aspiring principals receive training in the fundamental undertakings of educational management, the legal foundation of school control, special programs (e.g., SPED, Bilingual, ESL, etc.), basic campus accounting and budgetary functions, organization and evaluation, research-based instruction and leadership knowledge and skills, and field experience. This university offers one course specifically on special programs. However, the SPED program is integrated within this course along with other programs such as compensatory education, bilingual education, English as second language education, adult and continuing education, and vocational and technical education.

Sul Ross State University. Although TEA recognized this university as preparing aspiring principals according to the updated certification standards, the coursework was outdated in the areas of appraisal and universal design. In November of 2018, TEA presented Sul Ross State University's Educational Leadership Program-Alpine with a

new certificate, replacing the old principal certificate with the *Principal as Instructional Leader* (Sul Ross State University, 2019). This update permitted Sul Ross to continue the principal preparation program beyond 2019. Accordingly, Sul Ross aligned TEA specifications for the new principal certification program by establishing nine pillar assignments that reflect the newly revised principal standards of the 85th Texas Legislature.

A review of the required coursework for Sul Ross State University's principal certification program was performed. The program requires a minimum of 27 credit hours for completion. According to Sul Ross State University (2019), the required courses include: School Law, Introduction to School Administration, Educational Research II, Curriculum, Instruction & Assessment, Instructional Leadership: Planning, Implementation & Monitoring of the Instructional Program, School Support Services, Practicum I, Practicum II, Practicum III, Educational Leadership for Principals, and Special Populations and Programs. There is a required minimum of 160 clock hours of internship. Sul Ross State University provides one integrated course that includes the SPED program.

Readers are guided to Table 7 for a brief alignment of the coursework required by selected accredited principal preparation programs by Principal Standards. A brief comparison of the course description was performed to match the course names to the comparable Principal Standards.

Table 7

Alignment of Coursework by Principal Standards

Selected Accredited Sites	Standard 1: Instructional Leadership	Standard 2: Human Capital	Standard 3: Executive Leadership	Standard 4: School Culture
Lamar University	Instructional Leadership	Human Resource Management; School Law	Leadership for Accountability	Fundamentals of Leadership
Sam Houston State University	Advancing Educational Leadership	Campus Business Management; Federal State Local School Law	Role of Principal in School Administration	Admin and Org of Public Schools; Special Populations and Special Program
Sul Ross State University	Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment; Instructional Leadership; & Educational Research II	School Support Services; School Law	Educational Leadership for Principals	Intro to School Administration; Special Populations and Programs

Note. A brief alignment of the coursework required by selected accredited principal preparation programs by Principal Standards.

Courses offered at all three accredited sites (i.e., Lamar University, Sam Houston State University, and Sul Ross State University) aligned with the five updated Texas Principal Standards (i.e., instructional leadership, human capital, executive leadership, school culture, and strategic operations). The quality and depth of the instruction of the courses offered at each of these campuses were not scrutinized. Of note, knowledge and understanding of each separate coursework enhances the aspiring principal's collective ability to apply the learned skills across all Principal Standards. Standard 5 does not

appear on the table as all courses provided an account for the success of the principal's strategic operations.

Although all three sites were accredited by TEA in preparing aspiring principals as instructional leaders, only two of the three sites provided a coursework to address the needs of SPED populations. Both Sam Houston State University and Sul Ross State University provided one integrated course, while Lamar University did not provide any specific coursework related to SPED. Readers should be cautioned of the limitation that the website might not have been updated or correct at the time the study was performed. Concern for the general inconsistency of related training in accredited principal EPPs in Texas is supported by the results of this review. The primary implication of these results is that, in spite of increased accountability for all students, there is little to no coverage of SPED coursework in the principal preparation programs that were reviewed to prepare aspiring principals in leading SPED programs, including instructional practices, assessments, and legal matters.

Conclusion

Nearly 1.3 million students do not graduate from high school each year (Hooker & Brand, 2010). Approximately 6% of school-age students between the ages of 13 to 16 have a learning disability (Milsom & Dietz, 2009). The lack of college-readiness has spanned over many decades (Chandler et al., 2014) but little research has been conducted regarding students in SPED. The results from the study performed by Lê and Slate (2020) indicated an overall lack of college-readiness in Texas for students in SPED. Despite the intensified accountability for all students driven by educational provisions,

the present state educational system fails to prepare students in SPED for postsecondary career and education.

History discloses that children with disabilities have suffered from physical and educational segregation because state laws prior to the civil rights movement allowed school districts to deny students with disabilities access to general education curriculum and entry into public schools (Jasper, 2000). Inclusion is the paradigm that children with disabilities are educated more effectively with their typically developing peers. The purpose of inclusive education is to eliminate marginalization that results from mindsets and reactions to diversity in ethnicity/race, socioeconomic status, religious beliefs, gender, and ability (Ainscow, 2005). Students with disabilities who were taught in inclusive classrooms earned higher academic performances and developed more typical social behaviors than when taught in a segregated classroom (Rea et al., 2002). The prevalence of low expectations for the academic achievement of students with disabilities has contributed to injudicious efforts to shield these students (Jorgensen, 2005). By prohibiting students with disabilities from general education courses, educators consequently hinder and limit these students' postsecondary aspirations. Several landmark cases and pivotal laws that helped to shape SPED implementation were presented in this chapter, and the precedents these cases have created are important factors that drive the need for principals to be well-informed in SPED.

Many researchers (e.g., Davidson & Algozzine, 2002; DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; Garrison-Wade, Sobel, & Fulmer, 2007; Styron & LeMire, 2009) have indicated the importance of how principal preparation programs guide aspiring principals in leading SPED services and supporting students with disabilities. There exists a gap in

the curriculum of principal preparation programs and the need to include more content in SPED. More graduate coursework related to SPED programming should be incorporated into preparatory programs for future principals as researchers have noted that principals had minimal SPED training before taking on the administrative role (Frost & Kersten, 2011; Lynch, 2016; Lyons, 2016). As principals move towards serving as an instructional leader for all students, these educational leaders have a duty to expand their knowledge in SPED to be cognizant of ethical decision-making to meet the differentiated needs of all students (Boscardin, 2005; DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2003; Frick et al., 2013). Principal preparation programs have a duty to provide these educational leaders the knowledge and training to be effective implementers of SPED programming and instructional practices to ensure academic growth in students with disabilities, which impacts the accountability ratings of the school.

Researchers have analyzed the leadership role of principals towards instruction and programming for students with disabilities from diverse viewpoints to establish the effectiveness of principal preparatory programs in providing the essential knowledge and skills to equip them for their role (DeMatthews, 2015; Frick et al., 2013; Frost & Kersten, 2011; Lynch, 2016; Lyons, 2016; Roberts & Guerra, 2017; Roderick & Jung, 2012). In the study performed by DeMatthews (2015), the principal understood the enduring impact when students receive inadequate and segregated education, and she was also motivated to promote change. However, her negative experiences (e.g., teacher resistance, reviewing inappropriate development of IEPs) constrained her abilities to be an effective leader as she focused more on the issues that she was comfortable with and delegated the responsibility of overseeing SPED programming onto others (DeMatthews,

2015). The perception of a principal to their preparation program impacts their ability to make decisions and handle situations that are difficult.

Through this literature review, important factors have been presented that affect the principal's leadership skills with SPED programming. Educational leadership is vital for implementing inclusive practices for the academic success of all students. The focus of this qualitative research study was to explore selected Texas elementary principals' perceptions toward the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom in order to promote inclusive practices for the educational success of students with disabilities.

Little research has been performed in the area of SPED programming and instructional practices as they relate to administrative preparation programs for aspiring school principals. The outcomes from this study might assist stakeholders to transform educational practices that promote the positive implementation of inclusion practices, enhance the learning environment of students with disabilities, and help to better prepare school leaders for inclusion programs. Chapter III will describe the research design for this qualitative study to examine how selected principals (a) perceived their level of knowledge and training from their principal preparation programs and subsequent support from their school district in leading SPED programming, (b) defined inclusive practices for students with disabilities, and (c) fostered a culture of inclusion with equity for the educational success of students with disabilities.

CHAPTER III

Method

The current educational climate focuses on high-stakes accountability that impacts the recruitment and retainment of effective educational leaders (O'Neill, 2015). These educational leaders play an essential role in safeguarding a school climate and culture for inclusive, quality education (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; McLaughlin, 2008). However, a well-defined delineation cannot be concluded as to why some principals are more effective at inclusive school reform while others are not.

The primary purpose of this study was to understand the essence of the issue regarding principals' perceptions toward inclusive practices for the educational success of students with disabilities. A holistic analysis of multiple sources of information (e.g., documents, archival record reviews, and interviews) provided rich insight into the context of the case, whereas a multiple-case approach provided insight to the analysis within-case and cross-case. Through the purposeful selection of the participants, I was able to set the boundaries for the study. The use of direct semi-structured interviews and a review of records provided a holistic approach to target the problem of the study.

This chapter describes the qualitative method that was utilized to investigate how selected principals (a) perceived their level of knowledge and training from their principal preparation programs and subsequent support from their school district in leading SPED programming, (b) defined inclusive practices for students with disabilities, and (c) fostered a culture of inclusion with equity for the educational success of students with disabilities. The outcomes from this research might assist stakeholders to transform educational practices that promote the positive implementation of inclusion practices,

enhance the learning environment of students with disabilities, and help to better prepare school leaders for inclusion programs.

Qualitative research is one of two major research methodologies in social science. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), qualitative research design focuses on narrative research, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnographies, and case studies. The qualitative research method is a process of analysis that is structured to comprehend a social or humanistic predicament from more than one standpoint (Creswell, 2018). This type of research method requires the exploration of the issue in a natural setting and encompasses the creation of a holistic representation of the problem (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Therefore, this study utilized multiple sources of information (e.g., documents, archival record reviews, and comprehensive interviews) with selected elementary school principals to gain rich, thick data about the efforts these leaders made towards inclusive practices. Descriptive analyses of the participants' stories were conducted to determine how these leaders perceived their level of knowledge and training from their principal preparation programs and subsequent support from their school district in leading SPED programming and fostered a culture of inclusion with equity for the educational success of students with disabilities. This chapter presents the (a) research design, (b) context of the study, (c) participant selection, (d) data collection, (e) instrumentation, (f) procedures, (g) role of the researcher, (h) trustworthiness and credibility, and (i) data analysis.

Research Design

Through this research, I intended to seek an understanding of human experiences and to discover common relationships among the selected cases (Runkel, 1990; von Wright, 1971). The focus was to understand the complexity of the selected cases and to

provide insight to deepen the understanding of a larger issue (Stake, 1995). Qualitative research is an inquiry method that is interpretive at the core and depends on the researcher to devote a sustained amount of time with the participant (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The purpose of this study was to explore selected elementary school principals in Texas and their perceptions toward the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom; therefore, a multiple-case qualitative study approach was used. As this study was a multiple case study research, I had to overcome issues regarding the limitation of available resources, selection of cases, and cross-case analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2017). In pursuing a multiple case study, I determined the number of cases that needed to be studied and established a rationale for how the cases was be selected to successfully target the problem of the study.

The focus of this study was on human behavior and the perceptions toward inclusive practices from the selected participants. Through first-person accounts of these school principals' experiences, meaning was identified through data collection, transcription of the data, and analysis from the interviews performed. Detailed, in-depth data collection from multiple sources of data were used to address the research questions.

The research questions that guided this study were as follows:

1. How do selected principals perceive their level of knowledge and training from their principal preparation programs and subsequent support from their school district in leading SPED programming?

2. How do selected principals define inclusive practices for students with disabilities?

3. How do selected principals foster a culture of inclusion with equity for the educational success of students with disabilities?

Chapter II presented the literature that was used to frame the problem of this study. The research questions presented were addressed through the development of themes and categories into patterns from the analysis of the data obtained. Through the examination of the summary of interpretations, readers gain insight by reflecting on the elements and descriptions that was presented in this case studies research. Although the purpose of this study was not to provide a generalization, Stake (1995) referred to this assertion as a *naturalistic generalization* - "the learning process through which we individually acquire concepts and information" (p. 86). Data obtained through this case study research provided qualitative insight into the impact of selected principals' perceptions toward the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom.

Context of the Study

The study was performed in a large school district located in Texas. Specific criteria were set to guide the selection of the school district: (a) a large school district serving urban, suburban, and rural communities; (b) an overall school rating by Texas Education Agency (TEA) of B or higher; (c) evidence of target goals for reading and mathematics domain were met for students receiving special education (SPED) services; and (d) was within reasonable traveling distance (i.e., within 40 miles from the place of residence) for me to be able to perform the research. These criteria helped me to reduce influencing factors such as the lack of diversity in student population, funding and resource limitations common in smaller school districts, and the selected principals'

limited exposure to leading SPED programs with students who have a wide range of disabilities. State and local policymakers often preferred large schools for cost-effective purposes; thereby, larger school districts are financially more ready and able to provide resources and staff allocations that impact the success of inclusive education (Howley, 2000). DeMatthews (2015) conveyed barriers the principal had little control over that were created by the district (e.g., the longstanding continuance of segregation, lack of guidance for implementing the inclusive model, failure to recruit and train quality teachers). Through my purposeful selection of the site for this study, I hoped to reduce the possibilities of these identified barriers impacting the selected principal's decision-making process toward inclusive practices for students with disabilities.

The Texas school district selected for this qualitative research was established in the early 1930s and had more than 60,000 enrolled students for the 2018-2019 school year (TEA, 2019b). According to TEA (2019b) database, the overall school rating for the 2018-2019 school year for this school district was a scaled score of 89 or B rating. The rating indicates that this school district earned a recognized performance for encouraging high academic achievement and/or appropriate academic growth for most students. This performance level shows how well the school district prepared students for success, both in school and after high school in college, a career, or the military (TEA, 2019b). The overall performance rating score is calculated through the school district's performance in three domains: (a) student achievement, (b) school progress, and (c) closing the gaps (TEA, 2019b).

The school district's score of a B in the student achievement domain indicated that students are meeting grade-level expectations at the end of the school year (TEA,

2019b). Following the mandate of NCLB (2002) regarding school accountability, the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) assessments are used as a measure to determine whether schools are working to narrow the academic gap between students with IEPs and students without IEPs. The school district's score of an A in the school progress domain indicated that students are improving in their performance on the STAAR test when comparing the current year to that of the previous year (TEA, 2019). Texas' percentage for school progress was measured at 69% in this subdomain, while the school district obtained a score of 85 out of 100 (TEA, 2019). These data help to support my decision in selecting this school district by the district's efforts to improve the academic success of all students.

The school district's score of a B in the closing the gaps domain indicated that different populations of students in a district are performing above state goals in the areas of reading and mathematics (TEA, 2019). The state goal for each student group was set based on the statewide average for the percentage of students in that group who gained a year academically during the 2016–2017 school year (TEA, 2019b). For the grade-level performance subdomain, the school district met the target goal with 100% in all student populations (TEA, 2019b). Readers are guided to view Table 8 for data that is directly related to this study regarding closing the gap domain target and outcome for specific student groups in the areas of reading and mathematics.

Table 8

Percentage of Goals Met by Student Groups

Student Groups	Reading (Target/Outcome)	Mathematics (Target/Outcomes)
All Students	44/56 (goal met)	46/58 (goal met)
Students Receiving Special Education Services	19/25 (goal met)	23/31 (goal met)
Students Formerly Receiving Special Education Services	36/45 (goal met)	44/56 (goal met)

Note. Data directly related to this study regarding closing the gap target and outcome rates for whether the student group met grade-level performance goals in reading and mathematics (TEA, 2019b).

Of the 116,245 enrolled students across 91 campuses, 18.2% were African American; 44.3% were Hispanic; 24.8% were White; 0.8% were American Indian; 9.3% were Asian; 0.1% were Pacific Islander; and 2.5% were two or more races (TEA, 2018). According to the Texas Academic Performance Reports (TAPR), the school district served 9,261 students with disabilities (TEA, 2018). The TAPR uses five categories of primary disability: (a) students with intellectual disabilities (e.g., intellectual disability, learning disability, traumatic brain injury); (b) students with physical disabilities (i.e., orthopedic impairment, auditory impairment, visual impairment, deaf-blind, speech impairment); (c) students with autism, (d) students with behavioral disabilities (i.e., other health impairment, emotional disturbance); and (e) students with non-categorical early childhood. Readers are directed to Table 9 for the breakdown of the types of primary

disabilities the district serves from the 9,261 students with disabilities and the Texas percentage rates, as reported by TEA (2018).

Table 9

Students with Disabilities by Type of Primary Disability

Type of Primary Disability	District Percentage Rate	Texas Percentage Rate
Intellectual Disabilities	37.00%	43.30%
Physical Disabilities	25.80%	21.90%
Autism	15.50%	13.20%
Behavioral Disabilities	19.90%	20.30%
Non-Categorical Early Childhood	1.80%	1.40%

Note. Breakdown of the types of primary disabilities the district serves from the 9,261 students with disabilities, as reported by TEA (2018).

Participant Selection

According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), a population used for research is a group of individuals with a defining characteristic that sets them apart from other groups. The participants in this study were practicing elementary school principals employed by the selected Texas public-school district who were responsible for SPED programs and teachers within their schools. The results of this study were based on the data records and interviews related to the participants who opted to be included in the research.

Geographically, Texas consists of a large population of urban, suburban, and rural school districts. TEA database, which is publicly accessible with open access data, provided a list of 1022 school districts in the state of Texas. Each school district has a website where elementary schools are listed, and the email addresses of superintendents

are available. For the purpose of this qualitative study, a purposive sample of participants and the site was determined to be appropriate to help understand the problem and address the research questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Qualitative research does not typically involve random sampling or large numbers of participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). I set certain criteria for the selection of participants of this study. Selected participants must be active elementary school principals at their campus for at least three school years. Having three years of experience at the same campus allowed the principal the time and opportunity for changes the principals may have implemented to be established at the campus instead of being a new principal still learning about the staff and students. The campus of the selected participants must have at least one SPED program (e.g., resource, developmental, life skills, structured learning lab, Preschool Program for Children with Disability), and the participants must have had gone through a TEA accredited principal preparation program.

Efforts were made to initially select two active elementary school principals to participate in this study. This study centered around two case studies where one of the participants had formal training in SPED programming (e.g., holds a master's degree in SPED, former special education teacher), and the other participant did not have formal training in SPED programming. The school principal is charged with safeguarding a school climate and culture for inclusive, quality education for all students, including students with disabilities (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; McLaughlin, 2008). However, due to the lack of a well-defined delineation as to why some principals are more effective at inclusive school reform while others are not, I sought to study two

different types of principals. My intent was to uncover any similarities and/or differences in the purposefully selected school principals' perceptions as they related to SPED programming on their respective campuses. If two principals were not enough to reach data saturation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), up to four additional participants would have been recruited to further contribute to the understanding of the study. The small sample sizes were recommended in qualitative research due to the depth of information that was explored (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

In the age of technology, emailing provides many benefits: (a) quick access, (b) readability, (c) cost-effectiveness, (d) immediate data-availability, and (e) convenience to both the researcher and the participants. Therefore, an emailed invitation was sent to the selected participants explaining the purpose of the study as well as the measures that would be taken to protect the confidentiality of those participants. Requirements of the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) were also included in the emailed introductory letter to allow full disclosure of the intent of the study to the participants and to ensure that the study was assessed for potential risks to the participants. Identifying factors (e.g., participant names, residing campus, age, gender, etc.) were not requested or used in the study to ensure confidentiality.

Data Collection

A review of relevant documents and records (e.g., archival data, respective programming components, SPED scores) provided a holistic view of factors that may contribute to the rationale and validation towards inclusive practices. These documents included a SPED report of the instructional arrangement (IA) codes for the total population of students served in the SPED program on the respective campus and a

review of the campus's academic performance according to the TAPR reports. The instructional arrangement report was only used to understand the degree to which the students were removed from the general education setting (e.g., IA of 40 indicated that all instructions were provided in the general education setting, IA of 44 indicated that more than 60% of instructional time was in a special education setting). The IA report did not contain any specific student data to be able to identify individual students.

Interviews with the participants were also utilized to expand on the data already gathered through other means. Interviews occurred through virtual conferencing using ZOOM in consideration to the declaration of a public health emergency of international concern and a declaration of a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO); the declaration of a public health emergency and then a national emergency by the U.S. government; the declaration of a local state of disaster due to a public health emergency in the surrounding cities/counties, and a declaration of a state of disaster in all counties by the Governor of Texas. Social distancing and health precaution measures remained in place due to the current COVID-19 pandemic and the need to take all necessary steps to protect the health of individuals. These interviews were conducted using a semi-structured line of questioning that was open-ended to elicit views and perspectives from the participants as they related to the problem of the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). With understanding and being respectful to the time-consuming nature of interviews, interviews were scheduled to be no more than 60 minutes in length. Interviews were audio-recorded to ensure that I captured the information correctly. The recording was transcribed to then go through the coding phase of the research where I extracted themes and subthemes.

Instrumentation

As the researcher of this study, I was the primary instrument for collecting and analyzing data and utilized a self-developed interview protocol (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The interview protocol was used during direct sessions with the participants. Basic information was recorded to assist with organizing the database during the research. The date, time, and location of the interview were noted. Due to confidentiality, a pseudonym was created and used throughout the duration of the research. I introduced myself and stated the purpose of the study. The previously signed consent to participate in the study was presented to the interviewee and confirmation was obtained that he or she still voluntarily wished to be a participant of the study and agreed to be recorded. The general structure of the interview was explained, and there was time for the participant to ask questions before the interview began. To ease the participant in the interview, opening questions were asked (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Several special education and content questions were posed during the interview to deconstruct the central phenomenon into smaller facets (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The interview ended with the assurance of confidentiality. Readers are directed to Appendix B for the interview protocol that was used.

Procedures

After obtaining approval for the proposed study from my doctoral dissertation committee, I submitted an application to the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and requested permission to collect the data needed for the research process to commence. All potential researchers for the selected district were also required to obtain prior approval from the district for any data collection. The application to conduct

research in the selected district, including the request for access to contact potential participants, was submitted after receipt of the university's IRB approval.

Following the criteria set within my proposed research, the district fielded 10 campus principals as potential participants. These 10 potential participants received an emailed invitation directly from the district explaining the purpose of the study, as well as the measures that would be taken to protect the confidentiality of those participants. A follow-up email was conducted a few days later to include the consent form to participate in the study; only two campus principals returned a signed consent for participation.

I first began my data collection by reviewing relevant documents and records (e.g., archival data, respective programming components, IA coding report, SPED scores per TAPR and TEA reports) that the district's research department helped me to obtain. These records provided me with a baseline to the current standing of SPED programming on the campus and the degree to which students were educated in the least restrictive environment (LRE). Furthermore, these data helped to guide components of the interviewing process.

The data collection process then led to a scheduled interview with the selected participants. I performed the interviews after the records review to follow-up on any questions I may have developed. Before the interview began, I explained the informed consent that was previously signed by the selected participant to participate in the study. I confirmed the participants' continued voluntary participation of the study and the agreement to be audio-recorded. The general structure of the interview was explained, and there was time for the participant to ask questions before the interview began. The interview was audio-recorded and later transcribed and coded for analysis.

During the final stages of the data collection and analysis process, I checked the accuracy of the findings by triangulation, member checking, clarification of biases, and peer debriefing methods. These validity strategies helped me to ensure the credibility, trustworthiness, and authenticity of the study. The member checking strategy required a follow-up session with the selected participants. Specific descriptions of the semi-polished findings were presented back to the selected participants to provide an opportunity for them to make final comments or clarifications on the findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Role of the Researcher

The nature of a qualitative research method is interpretative; therefore, my role in the study was to be a key instrument in eliciting meaning from the participants' accounts (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The use of a personalized protocol that I developed was used to target and find meaning to the posed research questions through individualized interpretation. However, there were biases and issues in a qualitative research study.

My educational background includes Texas teacher certification in SPED, a master's degree in SPED, and Texas certification as an Educational Diagnostician, among other credentials. I have also taken and passed the redesigned Texas Principal as Instructional Leader TExES 268 certification exam. These credentials support my strong knowledge of teaching and instructing, SPED programming, and SPED laws in Texas. My experiences (e.g., programming, instructional practices, legal rulings and issues, the impact of disabilities on an individual's functioning ability and access) are rich and extensive in working with children and adults with disabilities within districts, as well as in the community setting. The motivation for improved outcomes for individuals with

disabilities was what drove this study. My past experiences gained from working with all types of disabilities across different settings, culture and ethnicity/race, socioeconomic status, and other demographics potentially shaped the interpretations drawn from this study.

Despite the awareness of school leaders' responsibility in ensuring that each child is learning, principals completed their administrative preparation program with limited knowledge and understanding in leading SPED programming (Praisner, 2003; Scruggs, Mastropieri, & McDuffie, 2007). There are also misconceptions between SPED programming and the practices of providing the services these students need for success. Services have been conceptualized as a location (e.g., where a child learns) rather than focusing on the service that is provided for inclusive instructional practice. Special education is a service, not a placement (IDEA, 2004).

Across Texas, schools and districts make determinations for a student's educational programming through an ARD/IEP committee meeting. The ARD/IEP committee may establish the location of a child's placement; however, the extent of services and programs accessible for that placement in the least restrictive environment (LRE) is regulated by the school principal (Wright & Wright, 2006). Having worked at the elementary school level for seven years and at the secondary school level for two years, I have witnessed common practices of school principals agreeing to decisions for a student with disabilities that were more aligned with the needs of the school rather than the needs of the student. Examples of these include, but are not limited to: (a) placement of a student with an intellectual disability into a self-contained SPED classroom based solely on the disability eligibility rather than individualized need; (b) creating a master

schedule where all students with disabilities are served in a specific general education teacher's classroom rather than distributing the students across the grade-level teachers; and (c) providing uniformed interventions or simply watering down the expectations.

Being knowledgeable in SPED laws and understanding how SPED programming should be implemented, witnessing many of these common practices (e.g., violation of LRE, lack of individualized educational programming) potentially provided biases for this study. My hope was to gather data on the current practices of the selected site and selected participants without imposing my own beliefs and opinions on the responses that were provided. Therefore, when personal biases arose, I practiced reflexive thinking through memos I kept during the research process. Reflexivity allowed me to reflect on how my role, background, and experiences provided biases and potentially shaped the direction of the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The cases were selected within a school district that I was not employed at or had a connection to. This decision was made to reduce compromising my role as a researcher and the participants. Recognizing and bracketing my views and beliefs helped me to lessen the influences of researcher biases (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). As a researcher, I tried to disconnect my own lived experiences from that of the selected participants as I collected data for this study.

Trustworthiness and Credibility

The purpose of qualitative research is to gain an understanding of a critical concern that is identified by the researcher (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Through the exploration, analysis, and interpretation process of the study, there arisen a need to address issues in the trustworthiness and credibility of the data. In qualitative research,

the researcher is the instrument and the concepts being studied do not follow established metrics (Saldaña, 2016). In quantitative research studies, researchers seek validity and reliability in the findings of the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Alternatively, qualitative researchers seek to establish the trustworthiness of the study, or the degree of confidence in the findings to ensure the quality of a study (Saldaña, 2016). In addressing credibility for this study, I attempted to demonstrate the truth value, or the true picture, of the phenomenon under investigation (Saldaña, 2016).

To maintain subjectivity in the interpretation process, I ensured the processes of triangulation, member checking, clarifying biases, and peer debriefing were exercised. The triangulation process provided assurance that the interpretations were not discounted or overgeneralized by cross-checking the data for authentication. The use of member checking throughout the study ensured that my account of the data was accurately reflected in the participant's narrative in order to align the interpretation appropriately. The use of a peer debriefer allowed a level of scrutiny of the findings to assist in identifying areas of the study that needed to be readdressed due to gaps, biases, or insufficient data.

Triangulation, or cross-checking, of data is a method to ensure the convergence of data from all aspects of the investigated phenomenon (Breitmayer & Knafl, 1993). I examined the evidence from multiple sources (e.g., record review, interview) to build themes and identify discrepant information that needed to be readdressed. When themes were developed through the convergence of several sources of data, the triangulation process added validity by overcoming the intrinsic biases and issues that typically followed single method research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The use of member checking helped to determine the accuracy of the findings. This method assumed that participants had the capability to identify their experiences in the research findings (Lincoln, Guba, & Pilotta, 1985). For this study, the findings were presented back, as explained in the procedures section of this dissertation, to the participant and they were charged in informing the researcher of the accuracy of the results as presented to them.

The key to efficient and successful research lies in the researcher's ability to overcome his or her bias (i.e., sophistication bias, adrenaline bias, and quantification bias) and to work through those obstacles to build a cohesive and coherent research study (Lencioni, 2012). Lencioni (2012) discussed the need for the researcher to perform continual self-reflection throughout the study to overcome his or her personal bias, and to ensure the responses from the participants are true to his or her own perspective and free from the researcher's influence (i.e., sophistication bias). Lencioni (2012) also noted the need for the researcher to perform self-checks to make sure that his or her desire and enthusiasm for the phenomenon does not overshadow or become overbearing to the participant (i.e., adrenaline bias), and that the research involves more than one variable and is a whole system that works together for the outcome (i.e., quantification bias).

To overcome my biases, I performed continual self-reflection throughout the study to address my personal bias and practice reflexivity to clarify any bias with the selected participants to allow openness and honesty. I limited discussions of my personal experiences but reflected on how these past experiences shaped my interpretation. The self-reflection also ensured the responses from the selected participants were free from my influence and that my enthusiasm for the phenomenon did not overshadow the

selected participants' perspectives. I also piloted the interview questions with several experienced principals to ensure the questions were both appropriate and effective for the purpose of the study.

Lastly, the final study went through a peer debriefing. Although a peer debriefing may bring out the reviewer's own bias, the determination was made that this validity strategy would enhance the accuracy of the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Dr. Janene Hemmen, one of my dissertation committee members, was asked to serve as the peer debriefer and she was able to review the study and pose questions that may assist in the research being clearer and more relevant to other individuals. Dr. Hemmen has a working knowledge of leadership in schools that was beneficial during the analysis process of this research. This method of ensuring credibility was furthermore helpful in identifying any gaps or questions that remained, as well as to test whether the data addressed the research questions successfully.

The consistency of the research (i.e., reliability) was determined and documented through the use of the interview protocol and the procedures used in coding the data. By following these set procedures, other qualitative researchers would be able to follow the steps to check for the stability in the findings. Through documentation of the steps in the procedure section of this study, checking my transcripts for evidence of any apparent mistakes made during the transcribing process, and continually comparing my definitions of codes to the data to ensure the meaning of the codes do not change during the coding process were strategies I used to ensure the approaches in this study were stable and reliable (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Data Analysis

The data analysis process for this qualitative study was a concurrent task of data gathering and data analysis. As linguistic and visual material from the interviews and record reviews were received, the cataloging and scrutiny of the data were concomitantly made to elicit statements about implicit and explicit facets and constructs of meaning-making (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In qualitative research, the researcher begins by developing questions that would help with deriving an in-depth inquiry of the problem of the study, and also use his or her personal notations (e.g., interview notes, memos, comments) taken across the multiple settings of the study (e.g., document review, interviews) to encourage critical reasoning about the data and how the cumulation of data would be coded to create themes for the findings (Bogdan & Biklen, 2011).

Bogdan and Biklen (2011) stated that not every data or lead can be pursued. In contrast to a quantitative study where efforts to preserve and reconstruct data is the norm, a qualitative study is used by researchers to focus on narrowing and limiting some data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). To identify themes, categories, patterns, or responses to the research questions, I first organized and prepared the data for analysis. This task was accomplished through the process of transcribing the interview sessions, typing up personal notations that were made, and sorting through the documents that were reviewed (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

During the interview process, with the selected participants' permission, I recorded the session using two methods: (a) the recording feature embedded in Zoom as the primary, and (b) a hand-held Olympus digital voice recorder WS-852 model as the secondary recording device. To ensure confidentiality during the interview process for

the participants, I disabled the video functionality to the recording feature embedded in Zoom to rely solely on the audio recorded. The purpose of two methods was to ensure a backup recording was available should either one of the recordings failed to pick up the selected participant's responses due to extraneous factors (e.g., distance from recording). The recordings were then transcribed into a Microsoft Word document. All the data collected (e.g., record review, interview notes, transcription) were organized and prepared for the coding process. The data analysis process was a concurrent task of data gathering and data analysis. Therefore, while I was reviewing records and SPED reports, I was making notes that were included in the interview process. While I was interviewing the selected participants, I was also analyzing data that were collected earlier in the data collection process. Thus, initial coding began with the records review process then moved into the interview as the final data analysis step.

The overall impression of the data helped me to conceptualize the information into codes. The process of coding involved categorizing the data and assigning a word to represent the idea (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Saldaña, 2016). Although Creswell and Creswell (2018) noted the labor-intensive and time-consuming nature of hand-coding, I opted to hand code the data received rather than use a computer program. This decision was made to ensure that I gained an in-depth understanding of the responses from the participants as I was repeatedly reviewing the data rather than have a computer-based program transcribe the data for me. The process of coding then led to the development of themes and descriptions.

The hand-coded product was organized by the intended responses to the posed research questions. During the interview process, several content questions were

presented to attempt to deconstruct the overarching phenomenon (e.g., research questions). The transcripts were first read for patterns and units of meaning (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Saldaña, 2016). Then, the transcript selections and their assigned codes were transferred into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. The use of a computer-based program (e.g., Microsoft Excel) was helpful for analyzing, storing, and locating the qualitative data. As the analysis process of the data progressed, coding proceeded through rounds of the first cycle, second cycle, and third cycle coding, as applicable (Saldaña, 2016). Creswell and Creswell (2018) discussed the importance of keeping a codebook that was separate from the database of codes. The purpose was to log definitions for the developed codes, serve as a bank for the codes, and offer examples the selected participants quoted during the data collection process (Saldaña, 2016).

Qualitative research involves the researcher using his or her own judgment to construct interpretations of the data. Several measures were implicated in the interpretation process: (a) summarized the global outcome, (b) evaluated the results to existing literature, (c) examined the researcher's respective opinion of the finding, (d) asserted the limitations of the study, and (e) proposed areas for future research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). To meet these steps, I posed research questions that targeted the purpose of this study, presented a review of literature in Chapter II that guided this study, identified the limitations of the study in Chapter I, and presented the interpretations and recommendations for future research respective of my opinion of the findings from the study.

Summary

This chapter provided an overview of the (a) research design, (b) context of the study, (c) participant selection, (d) data collection, (e) instrumentation, (f) procedures, (g) role of the researcher, (h) trustworthiness and credibility, and (i) data analysis. This qualitative research study utilized multiple sources of information (e.g., documents, archival record reviews, and comprehensive interviews) with selected elementary school principals to gain rich, thick data about the efforts these leaders made towards inclusive practices. Descriptive analyses of the participants' stories were conducted to determine how these leaders perceived their level of knowledge and training from their principal preparation programs and subsequent support from their school district in leading SPED programming and fostered a culture of inclusion with equity for the educational success of students with disabilities. Chapter IV will present the analysis of the data obtained through the research study. Chapter V will present discussions, implications, and recommendations in relation to the research questions and for practice.

CHAPTER IV

Presentation and Analysis of Data

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore selected elementary school principals in Texas and their perceptions toward the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom. Little research has been performed in the area of special education (SPED) programming and instructional practices as they relate to administrative preparation programs for aspiring school principals. Therefore, a holistic analysis of multiple sources of information (e.g., documents, archival record reviews, and interviews) were used to explore the perceptions of selected educational leaders towards inclusive practices.

Chapter IV will present the findings of the two elementary school principals who participated in the qualitative research study. To structure the presentation of these results, this chapter is divided into three main sections: (a) demographics of participants, (b) findings by research questions, and (c) themes that were developed. The chapter concludes with a final summary of the presentation and analysis of data. The research questions that guided this study were as follows:

1. How do selected principals perceive their level of knowledge and training from their principal preparation programs and subsequent support from their school district in leading SPED programming?

2. How do selected principals define inclusive practices for students with disabilities?

3. How do selected principals foster a culture of inclusion with equity for the educational success of students with disabilities?

These research questions were expanded into an interview protocol that permitted the participants to delineate how they acquired the knowledge and skills regarding special education, explicate their beliefs of equity and inclusive practices for students with disabilities, and describe the supports they received in creating an inclusive culture. Readers are directed to Appendix B for the interview protocol.

Demographics

Through this research, I intended to seek an understanding of human experiences and to discover common relationships among the selected cases (Runkel, 1990; von Wright, 1971). Efforts were made to initially select two active elementary school principals to participate in this study. If two principals were not enough to reach data saturation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), up to four additional participants would have been recruited to further contribute to the understanding of the study. However, following the criteria set within my proposed research, the district fielded only 10 campus principals as potential participants and of the 10, only two campus principals returned a signed consent for participation. The district further informed me that there were no more available participants should I need more.

Aligning to the criteria I set, the two participants were practicing elementary school principals employed by the selected Texas public-school district who were responsible for SPED programs and teachers within their schools. Both participants served as the building principal at their respective campus for at least three school years. Having three years of experience at the same campus allowed the time and opportunity

for changes the principals may have implemented to be established at the campus instead of being a new principal still learning about the staff and students.

Due to the lack of a well-defined delineation as to why some principals are more effective at inclusive school reform while others are not, I sought to study two different types of principals to uncover any similarities and/or differences in perceptions as they related to SPED programming on their respective campuses. Therefore, the study centered around one participant with formal training in SPED programming (e.g., holds a master's degree in SPED or Texas educator certification in SPED) and one participant without the formal SPED training.

The small sample size was recommended in qualitative research due to the depth of information that was explored (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In the effort to gain a deeper sense of the participants' contextual implications and a more reflective understanding of the research questions, this study placed an emphasis on data quality rather than data saturation. As Morse (1995) expressed,

> The *quantity* of data in a category is not theoretically important to the process of saturation. Richness of data is derived from detailed description, not the number of times something is stated…It is often the infrequent gem that puts other data into perspective, that becomes the central key to understanding the data and for developing the model. It is the *implicit* that is interesting. (p. 148)

COVID-19. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, modifications were also made to my data collection process prior to IRB approval for my research to begin. A holistic analysis of multiple sources of information (e.g., documents, direct observations, archival record reviews, and interviews) was attempted to be able to provide rich insight into the

context of the cases. The use of direct observations (i.e., one classroom observation; one admission, review, and dismissal (ARD) meeting observation) was voided from the research study due to social distancing guidelines. These qualitative observations would have been able to provide data related to behaviors and activities the participants engaged in while working with students with disabilities, teachers, and/or instructional practices. Utilizing a complete observer role where I would have performed the observations and taken notes on the role of the principal (e.g., decision-making process) without any participation (Creswell & Poth, 2017) would have allowed me to gain first-hand experience with the participants, record information as the observation was performed, and identify any unusual details that may not have been easily identified through any other methods (e.g., review of document or interviews).

The district considered the use of conducting direct observations and in-person interviews on campus, but rejected these options to best ensure the health and safety of the students and staff members due to recommendations from the state and local health authorities regarding the containment and mitigation of COVID-19. The district considered the declaration of a public health emergency of international concern and a declaration of a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO); the declaration of a public health emergency and then a national emergency by the U.S. government; the declaration of a local state of disaster due to a public health emergency in the cities/counties of the school district and a declaration of a state of disaster in all counties by the Governor of Texas.

Changes that were requested for research approval included the removal of direct observations (i.e., classroom, ARD/IEP meeting), in-person interviews, and video-

recordings. Therefore, my data collection process was modified to utilize only records review and virtual interviews (e.g., ZOOM conferencing) that would be audio-recorded only. With these updates, the district and IRB concluded that these were acceptable methods of data collection and approved my research.

Each participant was posed with demographic-related questions. The purpose was to gain background information on each participant. Care was taken so as not to compromise the participant's identity or break confidentiality. Demographic information also provides context for the collected data in this study, which allowed me, as the researcher, to describe the participants and improve the analysis of the data.

Both participants are well-matched in terms of the demographic data collected. Both participants have been on their respective campuses and served in the role of a campus principal for the same number of years. Two core differences are noted: (a) one participant had formal SPED certification, while the other did not; and (b) one spent a few more years in the classroom teaching, while the other spent a few more years leading as an assistant principal. Readers are guided to Table 10 for an overview of the demographic data collected for each participant.

Table 10

Demographic Data by Participants

Demographics	Diane	Edina
Gender	Female	Female
Ethnicity/Race	Caucasian	Caucasian
Highest Degree of Education	Master of Education	Master of Education
Formal Special Education Training/Certification	No	Yes
Number of years in education	28	27
Number of years at the current campus	6	6
Number of years as a school principal	6	6
Number of years as an assistant principal	8	5
Number of years as a teacher	14	16

Note. Names used are pseudonyms due to confidentiality.

In the following sections, I have integrated the interviews with the context for the individual elementary schools and included direct quotes from the participants to better illustrate how each respective school functions with special education. Participant A is presented first, followed by Participant B. Pseudonyms have been assigned to each participant for confidentiality purposes.

Participant A. Diane is currently an elementary school principal who began her career in education in the early 1990s as a certified educator. Diane's Texas educator certifications included Elementary Reading (Grades 1-8) and Elementary Self-Contained (Grades 1-8). In Texas, individuals seeking an educator certification must pass

comprehensive exams to ensure the prerequisite content and professional knowledge and skills are obtained for entry-level positions in Texas public schools, according to TAC §230.21(a). Educators become certified in content areas (e.g., generalist, special education, mathematics, English language arts, reading, self-contained, etc.) and grade level bands (e.g., EC-6, EC-12, 1-8, 4-8, 6-12), where the number corresponds to the grade level. According to 19 TAC Chapter 231, self-contained is defined as a class in which one teacher teaches all or most subjects to one class of students.

In total, Diane has 28 years of experience in education, all within the selected district of this study. Prior to becoming a principal, Diane served as a classroom teacher in the third, fourth, and fifth grade levels and then later as an instructional specialist. In total, she had 14 years of experience as a teacher. She completed her principal preparation program and obtained her principal certification in 2005, where she later accepted an assistant principal position. She served as an assistant principal for eight years before she was named principal of the elementary school where she currently leads.

Regarding formal education, Diane obtained a Bachelor of Science degree in interdisciplinary studies at an accredited 4-year institution located in south Texas. During her undergraduate years, she focused on academic knowledge and becoming equipped with a multitude of skills to handle complex information and solve real-world problems. She later earned a Master of Education degree in educational leadership and her principal certification through a 2-year online program at an accredited university located in the eastern part of Texas. Diane does not have any formal special education training or certification.

Site Demographics. Diane's elementary school was established in the early 1980s. Texas Academic Performance Report (TAPR) data were reviewed for this elementary school for 2016-2017, 2017-2018, and 2018-2019 school years for contextual information. There has been a slight decline in total student enrollment in the three school years that were reviewed. Contrastingly, there was a steady increase in student enrollment in special education programs within these three school years. Readers are directed to Table 11 for comparative data for total student enrollment and special education student enrollment by school years at the elementary school where Diane is principal.

Table 11

Student Enrollment Data by School Years at Diane's Elementary School

School Year	Total Student Enrollment	Student Enrollment in Special Education Programs	Percentage of Special Education
2016-2017	944	96	10%
2017-2018	879	105	12%
2018-2019	864	115	13%

The grade levels that participated in the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) included third, fourth, and fifth grades. The subject areas assessed included reading, mathematics, writing, and science. The TAPR data for the 2016-2017 and 2018-2019 school years for this elementary school were reviewed. The following tables illustrate the percentage of students who passed (i.e., At Approaches Grade Level or Above) the STAAR assessment for each respective subject areas (i.e., All Subjects,

Reading, Mathematics, Writing, and Science) as compared to state and district passing percentages.

Table 12 provides the readers with information regarding the percentage passed in all subjects by administration year at Diane's elementary school. The fluctuation of percentages passed for SPED and the campus were comparable, while the percentages passed in the district remained relatively stable, and the state had a slight improvement. The campus percentage passed was relatively aligned to the state percentages. Students in SPED who participated in STAAR demonstrated a lack of mastery of the grade-level curriculum in Texas and underperformed by a large degree. In 2019, the SPED population underperformed by at least 29 points, as evidenced by the campus passing rate.

Table 12

Percentage Passed in All Subjects by Administration Year at Diane's Elementary School

Administration Year	Special Education	Campus	District	State
2016	51%	77%	83%	75%
2017	47%	72%	83%	75%
2018	52%	79%	83%	77%
2019	46%	75%	84%	78%

Table 13 offers the readers with information regarding the percentage passed in reading by administration year at Diane's elementary school. The variation of percentages passed for SPED and the campus were comparable, while the percentages passed in the district remained relatively unchanged, and the state had slight progress. The campus percentage passed was relatively aligned to the state percentages. Students

in SPED who participated in STAAR for the reading subject demonstrated a lack of mastery of the grade-level curriculum in Texas and underperformed by a large degree. In 2019, the SPED population underperformed by at least 31 points, as evidenced by the state passing rate.

Table 13

Percentage Passed in Reading by Administration Year at Diane's Elementary School

Administration Year	Special Education	Campus	District	State
2016	47%	75%	82%	73%
2017	53%	69%	81%	72%
2018	41%	77%	81%	74%
2019	44%	78%	82%	75%

Table 14 guides readers with information regarding the percentage passed in mathematics by administration year at Diane's elementary school. The discrepancy of percentages passed for special education and the campus were comparable, while the percentages passed in the district and state showed steady progress. The campus percentage passed was relatively aligned to the state percentages. Students in SPED who participated in STAAR for the mathematics subject demonstrated a lack of mastery of the grade-level curriculum in Texas and underperformed by a large degree. In 2019, the SPED population underperformed by at least 20 points, as evidenced by the campus passing rate.

Table 14

Percentage Passed in Mathematics by Administration Year at Diane's Elementary School

Administration Year	Special Education	Campus	District	State
2016	53%	78%	83%	76%
2017	47%	76%	86%	79%
2018	71%	85%	86%	81%
2019	56%	76%	86%	82%

Table 15 provides readers with information regarding the percentage passed in writing by administration year at Diane's elementary school. The box in Table 15 denoted with the asterisk (*) symbol indicates the results were masked due to small numbers of student participation in order to protect student confidentiality. The campus percentage passed was relatively aligned to the state percentages. Students in SPED who participated in STAAR for the writing subject demonstrated a lack of mastery of the grade-level curriculum in Texas and underperformed by a large degree. In 2019, the SPED population underperformed by at least 31 points, as evidenced by the campus passing rate.

Table 15

Percentage Passed in Writing by Administration Year at Diane's Elementary School

Administration Year	Special Education	Campus	District	State
2016	*	66%	76%	69%
2017	43%	58%	73%	67%
2018	36%	63%	71%	66%
2019	30%	61%	74%	68%

Table 16 offers readers with information regarding the percentage passed in science by administration year at Diane's elementary school. In 2016, the campus passing percentage exceeded the passing rate of the district and the state. The passing rate for the SPED population in 2016 was slightly below the passing rate for the state. However, in 2017, while the district and state passing rate remained unchanged, the campus had a 10% drop in passing rate from the 2016 administration year. The SPED population similarly plummeted; however, SPED fell nearly half of where the population had performed in 2016. Students in SPED who participated in STAAR for the science subject demonstrated a lack of mastery of the grade-level curriculum in Texas and underperformed by a large degree. In 2019, the SPED population underperformed by at least 36 points, as evidenced by the campus passing rate.

Table 16

Percentage Passed in Science by Administration Year at Diane's Elementary School

Administration Year	Special Education	Campus	District	State
2016	71%	90%	88%	79%
2017	36%	80%	88%	79%
2018	38%	84%	88%	80%
2019	42%	78%	90%	81%

The data from Tables 12, 13, 14, 15, and 16 were indicative of the persistent lack of mastery to the grade-level curriculum in Texas in all subjects, reading, mathematics, writing, and science, for students who were supported through SPED programming. The underperformance of these students when compared to the performances of the whole campus, district, and state was alarming. Across the four STAAR administration years (i.e., 2016, 2017, 2018, and 2019), the state-level performances showed growth with increased passing percentages in all subjects, reading, mathematics, writing, and science; scores ranged from a low of 66% to a high of 82%. Across the four STAAR administration years (i.e., 2016, 2017, 2018, and 2019), the district level performances showed growth with increased passing percentages in all subjects, reading, mathematics, writing, and science; scores ranged from a low of 71% to a high of 90%. The district's performance surpassed that of the state at each administered year across all areas assessed.

Diane's campus performance showed unstable performances across the four STAAR administration years, which resembled a see-saw effect. The passing percentage rate was high during the even years (i.e., 2016, 2018) and dropped during the odd years

(i.e., 2017, 2019). This seesaw effect was evident for the SPED population as well; however, scores for the SPED population ranged from a low of 30% to a high of 71%. The academic gap for the SPED population is unmistakable across all subjects, reading, mathematics, writing, and science when compared to the campus, district, and state. In 2019, the SPED population underperformed in all subjects by at least 29 points, in reading by at least 31 points, in mathematics by at least 20 points, in writing by at least 31 points, and in science by at least 36 points.

Diane's campus showed performances that could potentially reach the target level of the state if provided with more intense interventions. However, the SPED population demonstrated underachievement by a large degree. More needs to be done to help students in SPED to reach grade-level mastery in all content areas.

Special Education. Special education is personalized to meet the needs of students with disabilities. The range of SPED services and support can be provided in diverse ways and different settings. Understanding more about who is being served in SPED programs at Diane's elementary school, including the types of impairment and instructional arrangements, helped to provide a richer context for the collected data in this study and improve the analysis of the data.

Of the 864 total enrolled students, 24% were African American; 51% were Hispanic; 14% were White; 2% were American Indian; 7% were Asian; and 2% were two or more races (TEA, 2018). According to the 2018-2019 TAPR data, the elementary school served 115 students with disabilities (TEA, 2018). As stated in Chapter III, the TAPR uses five categories of primary disability: (a) students with intellectual disabilities (e.g., intellectual disability, learning disability, traumatic brain injury); (b) students with

physical disabilities (i.e., orthopedic impairment, auditory impairment, visual impairment, deaf-blind, speech impairment); (c) students with autism, (d) students with behavioral disabilities (i.e., other health impairment, emotional disturbance); and (e) students with non-categorical early childhood. Readers are directed to Table 17 for the breakdown of the types of primary disabilities Diane's campus served from the 115 students with disabilities and the Texas percentage rates, as reported by TEA (2018).

Table 17

Students with Disabilities by Type of Primary Disability at Diane's Elementary School

Type of Primary Disability	Campus Percentage Rate	District Percentage Rate	Texas Percentage Rate
Intellectual Disabilities	20%	37%	42%
Physical Disabilities	57%	26%	22%
Autism	11%	15%	14%
Behavioral Disabilities	9%	20%	21%
Non-Categorical Early Childhood	4%	2%	1%

According to the data from Table 17, a majority of students at Diane's elementary school were identified with a physical disability as their primary eligibility category for SPED. Students identified with a physical disability may have an orthopedic impairment (OI), auditory impairment (AI), visual impairment (VI), deaf-blindness (DB), or speech impairment (SI). The data, unfortunately, did not breakdown the campus percentage for physical disabilities into specific percentages for OI, AI, VI, DB, or SI categories. However, in Table 18, the data did show that 39% of students in SPED had an

instructional arrangement (IA) code of 00, which represented those who only qualified as a student with a speech impairment. This correlation is important because a majority of students in SPED had an IA code of 00 and the majority of the students in SPED had a physical disability as their primary eligibility, which means we could presume that the predominant physical disability at Diane's elementary school could be speech impairment.

Table 18

Instructional Arrangement Codes for Students with Disabilities at Diane's Elementary School

Instructional Arrangement (IA) Codes	Description	Campus Percentage Rate
00	No instructional setting (such as Speech Therapy)	39%
40	Mainstream	26%
41	Resource Room/Services (less than 21%)	12%
42	Resource Room/Services (at least 21% and less than 50%)	6%
43	Self-Contained, Mild/Moderate/Severe, Regular Campus At Least 50% and No More than 60%	2%
44	Self-Contained, Mild/Moderate/Severe, Regular Campus More than 60%	13%
45	Full-Time Early Childhood Special Education Setting (appropriate only for students 3 – 5 years of age)	2%

Students who have a speech impairment as their primary disability do not typically have a secondary disability eligibility (e.g., intellectual disability, autism). According to IDEA (2004), students who qualify with another eligibility category (e.g., intellectual disability, autism) with the speech impairment, then the speech impairment

becomes the secondary disability and the primary disability would be the disability that adversely impacts the student in a higher degree. For example, should a student be found eligible through a full and individual SPED evaluation for an intellectual disability and a speech impairment, then the student's profoundly low cognitive functioning and deficits in adaptive behavior skills would more adversely affect the child's educational performance. Therefore, the primary disability would be an intellectual disability and the secondary disability would be the speech impairment. These statements also support the presumption that students at Diane's elementary school who are categorized under the physical disabilities in Table 17 could very well be "speech-only" students.

The high percentage of physical disabilities at this elementary school diverged drastically from the percentage of physical disabilities at the district and state levels. The differences in the district and state were nearly half that of the campus. Corresponding to the data in Table 17, the TAPR data for the district during the 2018-2019 school year was reviewed. The participating district had a little less than 100 campuses (e.g., elementary, middle, high school, and special program facilities), in which more than half of those campuses were elementary schools. The high percentage of physical disabilities (e.g., speech impairment) at Diane's campus could be due to the fact that the campus is an elementary campus, whereas the district and state percentages that were reported included all school levels (e.g., elementary, middle, high school, and special program facilities) cumulatively. Students identified with a speech impairment only are more common at the elementary levels because elementary schools provide services to students as young as age three and learning disabilities do not become apparent until later grade levels after

students have already been provided with adequate opportunities for learning with their grade-level peers.

The district and state percentages of students with intellectual disabilities (e.g., intellectual disability, learning disability) were more dominant than the percentages at Diane's elementary level. In Texas, children are not required by law to attend kindergarten (TEA, 2018); therefore, students may enter first grade with varying abilities when compared to their same-aged peers. Some children may have attended kindergarten; therefore, received instruction that may not have been provided to those children who may not have attended kindergarten. Academic gaps become more evident as students enter higher grade levels after appropriate learning opportunities were provided with fidelity.

The SPED report of the instructional arrangement (IA) codes and disability codes were requested from the selected district of this study. The IA codes are utilized by school districts to authenticate the instructional setting for attendance purposes. Students who are supported through SPED programs must have an IA code, which is noted in the student's ARD or IEP documents. The IA report was used in this study to understand the degree to which the students were removed from the general education setting (e.g., IA of 40 indicated that all instructions were provided in the general education setting, IA of 45 indicated that all instructions were provided in the special education setting). The IA report did not contain any specific student data to be able to identify individual students.

For Diane's elementary school, 26% of students with disabilities received all their education in the general education setting (i.e., IA = 40), 18% received their education in both the general education and special education setting (i.e., IA = 41; IA = 42), and 17%

were self-contained in the special education setting (i.e., IA = 43; IA = 44; IA = 45) for their education. Students with an IA code of 00 represents those who only qualified as a student with a speech impairment. These students receive all their instructions in the general education setting but may be pulled out of their classes to receive speech therapy for the identified speech impairment.

The IA data for Diane's school indicated that roughly one-quarter of students in SPED was provided with full inclusive education where the students were not removed for any amount of time during the school day for services and support through SPED programs. Less than one-quarter of students in SPED were provided with some inclusive education; however, these students were removed from the education environment of their non-disabled peers and general education instructional time to receive SPED services and support. Less than one-quarter of students in SPED were provided with little to no inclusive education and spend the majority to all of their school day in a self-contained classroom. These data represent the least restrictive environment for students with disabilities as determined by the ARD/IEP committee. Only about a quarter of students with disabilities receive full inclusion in the general education classroom alongside their non-disabled peers. Readers are guided to Table 18 for the instructional arrangement codes for students with disabilities at Diane's elementary school.

Through the review of public-accessible data from the district and the interview session with Diane, I was able to obtain contextual data about the continuum of services that are available to support students in SPED. Diane's elementary school serves three SPED programs: (a) in-class support/resource, (b) Learning in Functional Environments (LIFE), and (c) Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE). A continuum of inclusive

instructional models (e.g., support facilitator, co-teach, resource) is provided to support students with disabilities in the general education classroom. The in-class support (ICS)/resource program utilizes a variety of service providers (e.g., general education teacher, SPED teachers, SPED paraprofessionals) and fosters a shared partnership in the academic success of all students.

The LIFE skills program provides academic and non-academic instruction and training at the functional and/or prerequisite skills level to meet the needs of students with severe disabilities. Prerequisite skills refer to the basic contents a student must attain prior to being able to work on more complex ones. The goal of the program is to increase participation and maximize student independence. The LIFE skills program affords structured opportunities for social and academic interaction between students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers in order to promote socialization. Students who participate in the LIFE skills program often access the grade-level curriculum through prerequisite skills, or the essence of the curriculum, due to their low to very low cognitive and adaptive behavior functioning levels. For example, non-disabled peers may be learning how to make purchases or calculating change with money, whereas students with disabilities who are working on prerequisite skills may be learning how to identify the value of coins using real coins and matching them from an array of two or three choices.

Historically in Texas, children aged three through five who are found eligible for SPED services may be served in Preschool Programs for Children with Disabilities (PPCD). However, during the 2019-2020 school year, the district began to phase out the PPCD term for ECSE in an attempt to align with the nationally recognized language. The

use of ECSE also helped to promote the understanding that SPED is a service that is delivered in the least restrictive environment (LRE) rather than a location where the service is provided. ECSE is a continuum of services with a curriculum that focuses on thinking and perception skills; language development; self-help; fine and gross motor; and social and emotional skills.

Services and support. Specifically, Diane's elementary school has three SPED teachers who provide ICS and resource support, two SPED teachers who teach in the LIFE skills classrooms, and two ECSE teachers where one teacher provides support as a pull out service model (e.g., in a SPED classroom) and the other teacher provides support as a push-in service model (e.g., within the general education classroom). During the interview, Diana reported that these programs have always resided on the campus, but there have been changes in the past year. Diane's elementary school previously served a Spanish ECSE in the form of a dual language transition (DLT) program. This program provided a continuum of services for children aged three through five who were identified with disabilities and whose dominant language was Spanish in efforts to support both development and dual language growth. Due to the high percentage of the SPED population, the district made the decision to relocate the DLT ECSE program to another campus and provide this campus with an additional SPED teacher for ICS for the 2020-2021 school year.

During the interview, Diana was asked about training or preparation that was offered to her by the district regarding SPED programs. She communicated that the principals in the district all attend principal meetings called roundtables and there were curriculum meetings that were offered. SPED coordinators and directors typically made

an appearance to discuss specific updates in SPED; however, Diane did not recall being provided with any specific training. She further shared that within the district, there were only two campuses that had the Spanish ECSE program. During roundtables, she would attempt to discuss with other principals the progress of the program, but disclosed that:

> A lot of assistant principals and principals didn't even know what it was. It was always dumbfounding to me because I would talk to my group and they were asking what it was, and I would say 'how do you not know what that is'? So, I think there's some sort of gap, to not even… everybody knowing what programs are available.

According to Diane, the types of SPED programs that campuses served were determined by the district. Information regarding programs are typically "need to know," as expressed by Diane when she attempted to ask questions regarding a program that was not necessarily available on all campuses in the district. This left Diane with limited ability to collaborate with other principals in the district when she had questions or concerns with the DLT ECSE program. Her leadership peers did not possess the foundational knowledge of the DLT ECSE program; therefore, were not able to help Diane with problem-solving specific dual language and disability issues. Rather, her peers may have been able to provide her with generic strategies and advice that would be effective and appropriate for the monolingual ECSE program, but students with disabilities recommended to the DLT ECSE program have more specialized needs (e.g., dual language).

Students in SPED. During the interview, Diana was asked to describe the students who received SPED services and support, and where these students received their

instruction a majority of the day. For students who are identified with learning disabilities, Diane shared that the ARD/IEP committee of this campus tries to make recommendations and decisions to provide SPED services and support outside of the resource classroom as much as possible. Through the review of public-accessible data from the district and the interview session with Diane, I learned that the purpose of a collaborative or ICS model was to help students with disabilities develop as a desegregated member of the general classroom without the interference and disintegration of removal from the classroom for analogous services.

According to Diane, students who receive services and support in the resource classroom typically perform three or more grade levels behind their non-disabled peers. She shared that:

> …[resource] is the last resort… We try to really stick to the 3 years behind … um… before putting them in there…resource just pushes them farther and farther behind… they're missing their lessons in class…so, we really look at the minimal minutes. Kids who have 90 minutes for language arts are really… the lowest of the low. They would not get much out of the general lessons…

Through this account, Diane believes that all students ultimately benefit from the comprehensive range of instructional opportunities that a classroom with two instructional providers can offer. Per IDEA (2004), students with disabilities are to be educated in the LRE and learning alongside non-disabled peers to the maximum extent possible.

> Special education services should be delivered in regular education classes (not special classes, separate schooling, or other removal from the regular ed

> environment) except "when the nature or severity of the disability of the 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(a)(5)]

Through Diane's leadership, the ARD/IEP committee at her elementary school considers the individual student with disabilities and the provisions that must be made in order for the student to be successful in the general education classroom. However, Diana further conveyed that sometimes, the LRE of a student in SPED is not the general education classroom. The general education classroom environment may have factors (e.g., distractions, noise level, large class size, student cognitive abilities) which negatively impact (e.g., student shut down, escalated behaviors, further widening the academic gap) students with disabilities.

According to Diane, for students in ECSE, most are provided with full inclusion in the general education prekindergarten (PreK) or kindergarten classroom. There are only one or two students who demonstrate a need for some pull-out services and support within the SPED classroom to work on critical skills areas. In the inclusive PreK or kindergarten classrooms, there are three adults (i.e., PreK/Kindergarten teacher, ECSE teacher, ECSE paraprofessional) who support all the learning of all students.

According to Diane, for students in the LIFE skills, most are provided with services and support in the special education setting due to their demonstrated needs in academic and non-academic areas at the functional and prerequisite level. However, these students also participate in general education large group (e.g., art, music, physical education) with their grade-level peers who do not have disabilities, as determined by the ARD/IEP committee. There are a few students this school year (2020-2021) provided

with a continuum of services through both LIFE skills and resource. The majority of the support for these few students are within the LIFE skills classroom, but specific content was determined by the ARD/IEP committee to be provided through resource support. Diane shared that the decision to provide services across two different programs is:

> …pretty unusual… and some district coordinators are trying to figure out why… but we do try to provide least restrictive as much as possible. It's interesting. My first year as a principal, I went to a week-long training at Harvard for new aspiring leaders. That was one of my biggest takeaways. One of the professors talked about getting kids out of resource. How the damage can never catch up. And that really REALLY stuck with me. There are some kids obviously who need that. But as much as possible, to get them out of there so they're exposed to grade-level content.

The workshop provided by Harvard University was memorable for Diane when she was named the principal of her elementary school. Through the weeklong institute, she acquired the tools and techniques that were needed to help her navigate into her new leadership role with conviction in order to steer the school toward excellence. The experience moved Diane to address common leadership challenges to improve the instruction of *all* students, including students with disabilities. Diane returned to her elementary campus after the workshop with the mindset to provide SPED services and support, as much as possible, outside of the resource classroom. The Harvard workshop helped Diane in fostering a culture of improvement and collaboration and leveraging time and resources to maximize student achievement.

Teachers and SPED. During the interview, Diana was asked to describe the teachers who support students in SPED (i.e., general education and special education teachers) and the teaching models that are used. According to Diane, the teaching model at this elementary campus for students with disabilities is described as a fluid, continuum of an inclusive instructional model that provides strong supports for both the general education and SPED teachers. The principal, prior to hiring teachers, always informs the candidates that when administrators, parents, or district staff enter a classroom with SPED support, those stakeholders should not be able to identify which students are in SPED and which students are not. Everybody should be doing everything, and every adult should be working with students whether through a small group, direct teaching, or preparing support materials to ensure good first teaching.

When asked to describe the planning times allotted to all teachers, Diane shared that general education teachers have vertical (i.e., grade level) and horizontal (i.e., content area) planning times. The ICS/resource teachers plan every Friday with the instructional specialists of the content area to at least get the overviews and current skills the general education teachers are teaching in their classrooms. According to Diane, the ECSE teachers plan with the PreK and kindergarten teachers every week; however, the LIFE skills teachers remain "pretty isolated."

Diane was asked to describe the types of support or system of support that was available for teachers. When teachers need additional support, Diane reported that general education teachers typically would seek help from the student's assigned case manager, educational diagnostician, or the assistant principal (AP) assigned to that grade level. Both instructional specialists on the campus are former SPED teachers, and one

instructional specialist is also serving as the campus's behavioral interventionist. There are many support systems on the campus-level before district intervention is needed or sought.

The interview with Diane moved into talking about the campus performances as evidenced by the TAPR data depicted in Tables 12, 13, 14, 15, and 16. When asked how the TAPR and IA data reports influenced the instructional practices and decisions that were made for students with disabilities on her campus, Diane mentioned that several factors may have caused depressed performances overall on the campus but especially for students in SPED. Overall, the campus performances in the state-wide assessment had dropped in all areas, including the SPED population. Of significance, Diane shared that:

> Our SPED numbers were scary… they have been scary. I talked to [coordinator] about… there was one teacher in particular who needed a little more…heavier coaching. And so, definitely SPED has been on the radar… ever since I've been here. Um, but I do feel like... last year we did put the heat on this one teacher. Part of it is just… resource is just a little bit… loosey-goosey, as far as doing what you can to fill in the gaps. I feel like there was a lot of not so intentional time…

Three factors were identified in Diane's account of the performances on the STAAR assessments for students in SPED: (a) ineffective teacher, (b) resource intervention, and (c) intentional time. Diane had to provide heavier coaching to a teacher who supported students in SPED because teacher quality has a lasting effect on student performance. Diane believes that the effectiveness of a teacher has the largest impact on student learning than any other factor. The inconsistent implementation of academic interventions for students in SPED impacts the student's ability to generalized skills that

were taught and their preparedness for life after high school (e.g., college, career). As previously reported by Diane, even when appropriate identification or evaluation is performed, the services and support following the ARD/IEP committee decisions must be provided with fidelity by the teachers to ensure students with disabilities are prepared to meet grade-level expectations. Lastly, Diane talked about the intentional time factor impacting student performance on STAAR. Diane expressed that when teachers are not intentional with their time, then teaching and learning become unintentional as well. Teachers who are purposeful with instructional time, Diane communicated, understand what and why they are doing what they are doing in the classroom in order to guide their students to deeper understanding and knowledge in academics. Teachers need to make use of every minute of their class time. Losing one or two minutes at the start of class and at the end of class may not seem like a big deal, but minutes add up. Eventually, those lost minutes accumulate into hours of lost instructional time by the end of the school year.

The campus, as mentioned prior, had a very high percentage of the SPED population. Diane proudly recounted that the educational diagnostician has remained a constant figure since before Diane became the principal of the elementary school, which ensured the consistency in the identification and evaluation for SPED programming, planning, and eligibility. However, she also conveyed that even when appropriate identification or evaluation is performed, the services and support following the ARD/IEP committee decisions must be provided with fidelity by the teachers to ensure students with disabilities are prepared to meet grade-level expectations.

When asked to provide clarification to the factors that may impact the outcomes of state assessments for the SPED population, Diane discussed the intensity of the needs of students with disabilities and their academic success:

> Our actual numbers are so high. The numbers of special ed kids; I called [district] and was really vocal in the Spring that something's gotta give. It's too much. I always joke about this school being built on an Indian burial ground. I don't know where they come from, but we have some serious special ed kids. Even our psychologist… said y'all have some crazy numbers but they're all legit. But they [district] listened and that's how we lost the DLT program… so we can focus more on the kids that we do have.

Diane discussed teachers and administrators developing stress over the high caseload of students in SPED at her elementary level. The high numbers and the intensity of the needs of students in SPED led her to reach out to assessment professionals (e.g., licensed specialist in school psychology) and the district for help and assurance that students were identified appropriately.

Participant B. Edina is currently an elementary school principal who began her career in education in the early 1980s as a certified educator for Special Education (Grades PK-12), Elementary Self-Contained (Grades 1-8), and English as a Second Language (Grades PK-12). Edina's Texas educator certifications in SPED and English as a Second Language (ESL) assured that she mastered the content and professional knowledge and skills to teach diverse students (e.g., students with disabilities, bilingual students). According to 19 TAC Chapter 231, self-contained is defined as a class in which one teacher teaches all or most subjects to one class of students.

In total, she has 27 years of experience in education across several large cities in the state of Texas. Although Edina began her career in education almost a decade prior to Diane, both Edina and Diane have comparable total years of experience in education. Edina disclosed that she taught for a few years then took a position outside of education for six years before returning to the teaching profession.

Prior to becoming a principal, Edina served as a classroom teacher for 16 years; six years in a private school for middle school students with learning disabilities and 10 years in the selected district of this study. She completed her principal preparation program and obtained her principal certification in 2009, where she later accepted an assistant principal position in the selected district of this study. She served as an assistant principal for five years before she was named principal of the elementary school where she currently leads.

Regarding formal education, Edina obtained a Bachelor of Science degree in Curriculum and Instruction at an accredited 4-year institution located in the eastern part of Texas. She later earned a Master of Education through a 2-year online program at an accredited university located in central Texas, while also completing her principal certification. Edina does have formal special education training; she obtained her undergraduate degree and Texas educator certification in special education.

Site Demographics. Edina's elementary school was established in the early 1990s. The TAPR data were reviewed for this elementary school for 2016-2017, 2017-2018, and 2018-2019 school years for contextual information. There has been a slight decline in total student enrollment in the three school years that were reviewed.

Contrastingly, there was an increase in student enrollment in special education programs from the 2016-2017 school year to the 2018-2019 school year.

Unlike Diane's elementary school, the percentage of students in SPED at Edina's elementary school from 2016-2017 and 2017-2018 remained stable at 10%. Even though the total student enrollment decreased during those two school years at Edina's school, so did the student enrollment in SPED programs. During the 2018-2019 school year, Edina's elementary school showed a disproportionate change; student enrollment in SPED largely increased. In contrast, the percentage of students in SPED at Diane's school steadily increased each of the reviewed school years. Readers are guided to Table 19 for comparative data for total student enrollment and special education student enrollment by school years at the elementary school where Edina is principal.

Table 19

Student Enrollment Data by School Years at Edina's Elementary School

School Year	Total Student Enrollment	Student Enrollment in Special Education Programs	Percentage of Special Education
2016-2017	925	90	10%
2017-2018	879	85	10%
2018-2019	857	104	12%

The grade levels that participated in the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) included third, fourth, and fifth grades. The subject areas assessed included reading, mathematics, writing, and science. The TAPR data for the 2016-2017 and 2018-2019 school years for this elementary school were reviewed. The following tables illustrate the percentage of students who passed (i.e., At Approaches Grade Level

or Above) the STAAR assessment for each respective subject areas (i.e., All Subjects, Reading, Mathematics, Writing, and Science) as compared to state and district passing percentages.

Table 20 provides readers with information regarding the percentage passed in all subjects by administration year at Edina's elementary school. The fluctuation of percentages passed for SPED was not comparable to the performances of other students on the campus. The campus, district, and state percentages remained relatively stable. The campus percentage passed was relatively aligned to the state percentages. Students in SPED who participated in STAAR demonstrated a lack of mastery of the grade-level curriculum in Texas and underperformed by a large degree. In 2019, the SPED population underperformed by at least 25 points, as evidenced by the campus and state passing rate.

Table 20

Percentage Passed in All Subjects by Administration Year at Edina's Elementary School

Administration Year	Special Education	Campus	District	State
2016	51%	79%	83%	75%
2017	75%	79%	83%	75%
2018	63%	80%	83%	77%
2019	53%	78%	84%	78%

Table 21 offers readers with information regarding the percentage passed in reading by administration year at Edina's elementary school. Students in SPED demonstrated unstable performances in reading. The campus's performance showed slight regression through the four administrations, while the percentages passed in the

district remained relatively unchanged, and the state had slight progress. The campus percentage passed was relatively aligned to the district percentages. Students in SPED who participated in STAAR for the reading subject demonstrated a lack of mastery of the grade-level curriculum in Texas and underperformed by a large degree. In 2019, the SPED population underperformed by at least 18 points, as evidenced by the state passing rate.

Table 21

Percentage Passed in Reading by Administration Year at Edina's Elementary School

Administration Year	Special Education	Campus	District	State
2016	50%	82%	82%	73%
2017	76%	78%	81%	72%
2018	60%	79%	81%	74%
2019	57%	80%	82%	75%

Table 22 guides readers with information regarding the percentage passed in mathematics by administration year at Edina's elementary school. Students in SPED demonstrated unstable performances in mathematics. The campus's performance showed slight progress, then in the last administration, there was a 4% regression. The percentages passed in the district and state showed steady progress. Students in SPED who participated in STAAR for the mathematics subject demonstrated a lack of mastery of the grade-level curriculum in Texas and underperformed by a large degree. In 2019, the SPED population underperformed by at least 28 points, as evidenced by the campus passing rate.

Table 22

Percentage Passed in Mathematics by Administration Year at Edina's Elementary School

Administration Year	Special Education	Campus	District	State
2016	56%	80%	83%	76%
2017	73%	80%	86%	79%
2018	63%	83%	86%	81%
2019	51%	79%	86%	82%

Table 23 provides readers with information regarding the percentage passed in writing by administration year at Edina's elementary school. The box in Table 23 denoted with the asterisk (*) symbol indicates the results were masked due to small numbers of student participation in order to protect student confidentiality. The performances on the Writing STAAR assessment for students in SPED revealed a large regression in the mastery of grade-level standards. The campus, district, and state performances demonstrated fluctuating performances. In 2017, the percentage passed for students in SPED was higher than the percentage passed for the campus, district, and state. However, the percentage passed for students in SPED in the three following administrations alarmingly plummeted to a large degree. The performances of the SPED population fell 46 points from the 2017 administration to the 2019 administration. The campus percentage passed was relatively aligned to the state percentages. Students in SPED who participated in STAAR for the writing subject demonstrated a lack of mastery of the grade-level curriculum in Texas and underperformed by a large degree. In 2019, the SPED population underperformed by at least 29 points, as evidenced by the campus passing rate.

Table 23

Percentage Passed in Writing by Administration Year at Edina's Elementary School

Administration Year	Special Education	Campus	District	State
2016	*	69%	76%	69%
2017	82%	72%	73%	67%
2018	64%	66%	71%	66%
2019	36%	65%	74%	68%

Table 24 offers readers with information regarding the percentage passed in science by administration year at Edina's elementary school. Students in SPED demonstrated unstable performances in science. The percentages passed in the district and state showed steady progress, while the percentage passed on the campus showed a seesaw type trend. SPED underperformed when compared to the campus, district, and state. The campus percentage passed was relatively aligned to the state percentages. Students in SPED who participated in STAAR for the science subject demonstrated a lack of mastery of the grade-level curriculum in Texas and underperformed by a large degree. In 2019, the SPED population underperformed by at least 21 points, as evidenced by the state passing rate.

Table 24

Percentage Passed in Science by Administration Year at Edina's Elementary School

Administration Year	Special Education	Campus	District	State
2016	67%	81%	88%	79%
2017	75%	83%	88%	79%
2018	69%	81%	88%	80%
2019	60%	84%	90%	81%

The data from Tables 20, 21, 22, 23, and 24 were indicative of the persistent lack of mastery to the grade-level curriculum in Texas in all subjects, reading, mathematics, writing, and science, for students who were supported through SPED programming. The underperformance of these students when compared to the performances of the whole campus, district, and state was alarming. As previously reported, across the four STAAR administration years (i.e., 2016, 2017, 2018, and 2019), the state-level performances showed growth with passing percentages that ranged from a low of 66% to a high of 82%. With scores that ranged from a low of 71% to a high of 90%, the district's performance surpassed that of the state at each administered year across all areas assessed.

Similar to Diane's campus performances, Edina's campus also showed unstable performances across the four STAAR administration years; however, the performances did not resemble a see-saw effect. Rather, the fluctuation was unpredictable. In all subjects and mathematics, the campus showed steady growth in the first three years (i.e., 2016, 2017, 2018) then dropped in passing percentage during the 2019 administration. In reading, the campus started off high then dropped in performance in 2017 followed by

steady growth. In writing, the campus showed growth from 2016 to 2017 but declined in performance for the next two years (i.e., 2018, 2019). Finally, the campus performance in science mimicked the seesaw effect but with higher performance in odd years (i.e., 2017, 2019) and lower performances during even years (i.e., 2016, 2018).

The academic gap for the SPED population is distinctive across all subjects, reading, mathematics, writing, and science when compared to the campus, district, and state. Scores for the SPED population ranged from a low of 36% to a high of 82%. Unexpectedly, the passing percentage for the SPED population was highest across the board in 2017 than in the other three administered years. The SPED population performed relatively close to the performance of the campus during 2017 and even outperformed the campus, district, and state-level in writing during that year.

In 2019, the SPED population underperformed in all subjects by at least 25 points, in reading by at least 18 points, in mathematics by at least 28 points, in writing by at least 29 points, and in science by at least 21 points. The academic gap of Edina's campus was not as wide as the academic gap seen in Diane's campus. Unlike Diane's, Edina's campus showed performances that surpassed that of the state level and potentially could reach the target level of the district should more intense interventions were provided. However, the SPED population at Edina's campus demonstrated underachievement by a large degree. Parallel to Diane's campus, more needs to be done to help students in SPED to reach grade-level mastery in all content areas.

Special Education. Special education is not a "one-size-fits-all." Students with disabilities are afforded with tailored educational programming through a range of SPED services and support. A brief overview of the types of impairment and instructional

arrangements at Edina's elementary school will provide readers with more understanding of the students who are being served in SPED programs. These data will provide a meaningful context for the collected data in this study and enhance the analysis of the data.

Of the 857 total enrolled students, 16% were African American; 53% were Hispanic; 10% were White; 1% were American Indian; 18% were Asian; and 2% were two or more races (TEA, 2018). According to the 2018-2019 TAPR data, the elementary school served 104 students with disabilities (TEA, 2018). Readers are directed to Table 25 for the breakdown of the types of primary disabilities Edina's campus served from the 104 students with disabilities and the Texas percentage rates, as reported by TEA (2018).

Table 25

Students with Disabilities by Type of Primary Disability at Edina's Elementary School

Type of Primary Disability	Campus Percentage Rate	District Percentage Rate	Texas Percentage Rate
Intellectual Disabilities	25%	37%	42%
Physical Disabilities	44%	26%	22%
Autism	**	15%	14%
Behavioral Disabilities	15%	20%	21%
Non-Categorical Early Childhood	*	2%	1%

Note. Box with (*) indicates results were masked due to small numbers to protect student confidentiality. Box with (**) indicates results were masked due to being the second smallest disability group to protect student confidentiality.

According to the data from Table 25, the majority of students at Edina's elementary school were identified with a physical disability as their primary eligibility category for SPED. Students identified with a physical disability may have an orthopedic impairment (OI), auditory impairment (AI), visual impairment (VI), deaf-blindness (DB), or speech impairment (SI). The data, unfortunately, did not breakdown the campus percentage for physical disabilities into specific percentages for OI, AI, VI, DB, or SI categories. However, parallel to Diane's elementary school, Table 26 data did show that 38% of students in SPED had an instructional arrangement (IA) code of 00, which represented those who only qualified as a student with a speech impairment. Again, this correlation is important because a majority of students in SPED at Edina's school had an IA code of 00, and a majority of the students in SPED at Edina's school had a physical disability as their primary eligibility, which means we could, like in Diane's case, presume that the predominate physical disability at Edina's elementary school could also be speech impairment.

Similar to Diane's school, the high percentage of physical disabilities at Edina's elementary school differed drastically from the percentage of physical disabilities at the district and state levels. However, unlike Diane's the differences at the district and state levels were more than half that of Edina's campus. Both Diane's and Edina's are elementary schools. The district and state percentages that were reported included all school levels (e.g., elementary, middle, high school, and special program facilities) cumulatively. As previously mentioned, students identified with a speech impairment only are more common at the elementary levels because elementary schools provide services to students as young as age three, and learning disabilities do not typically

become obvious until later grade levels after students have been provided with adequate opportunities for learning with their grade-level peers.

The district and state percentages of students with intellectual disabilities (e.g., intellectual disability, learning disability) were more dominant than the percentages at Edina's elementary level. Students at the first-grade level may demonstrate contrasting academic abilities because children are not required by law to attend kindergarten in Texas (TEA, 2018). Academic gaps become more evident as students enter higher grade levels after appropriate learning opportunities were provided with fidelity.

The SPED report of the instructional arrangement (IA) codes and disability codes were requested from the selected district of this study. As stated previously, the IA codes are utilized by school districts to validate the instructional setting for attendance purposes in order to understand the degree to which students are removed from the general education setting. The IA report did not contain any specific student data to be able to identify individual students. The IA report was used in this study to understand the degree to which the students were removed from the general education setting.

For Edina's elementary school, 24% of students with disabilities received all their education in the general education setting (i.e., IA = 40), 19% received their education in both the general education and special education setting (i.e., IA = 41; IA = 42), and 18% were self-contained in the special education setting (i.e., IA = 44; IA = 45) for their education. Students with an IA code of 00 represents those who only qualified as a student with a speech impairment. These students receive all their instructions in the general education setting but may be pulled out of their classes to receive speech therapy for the identified speech impairment.

The IA data for Edina's school, similar to Diane's elementary school, indicated that roughly one-quarter of students in SPED was provided with full inclusive education where the students were not removed for any amount of time during the school day for services and support through SPED programs. Less than one-quarter of students in SPED were provided with some inclusive education; however, these students were removed from the education environment of their non-disabled peers and general education instructional time to receive SPED services and support. Less than one-quarter of students in SPED were provided with little to no inclusive education and spend the majority to all of their school day in a self-contained classroom. These data represent the least restrictive environment for students with disabilities as determined by the ARD/IEP committee. Similar to the IA data from Diane's elementary school, only about a quarter of students with disabilities receive full inclusion in the general education classroom alongside their non-disabled peers. Readers are guided to Table 26 for the instructional arrangement codes for students with disabilities at Edina's elementary school.

Table 26

Instructional Arrangement Codes for Students with Disabilities at Edina's Elementary School

Instructional Arrangement (IA) Codes	Description	Campus Percentage Rate
00	No instructional setting (such as Speech Therapy)	38%
40	Mainstream	24%
41	Resource Room/Services (less than 21%)	6%
42	Resource Room/Services (at least 21% and less than 50%)	13%
43	Self-Contained, Mild/Moderate/Severe, Regular Campus At Least 50% and No More than 60%	0%
44	Self-Contained, Mild/Moderate/Severe, Regular Campus More than 60%	14%
45	Full-Time Early Childhood Special Education Setting (appropriate only for students 3 – 5 years of age)	4%

Services and support. Through the review of public-accessible data from the district and the interview session with Edina, I was able to obtain contextual data about the continuum of services that are available to support students in SPED. Analogous to Diane's elementary school, Edina's elementary school serves three SPED programs: (a) in-class support/resource, (b) Learning in Functional Environments (LIFE), and (c) Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE). A continuum of inclusive instructional models (e.g., support facilitator, co-teach, resource) is provided to support students with disabilities in the general education classroom. The in-class support (ICS)/resource program utilizes a variety of service providers (e.g., general education teacher, SPED

teachers, SPED paraprofessionals) and fosters a shared partnership in the academic success of all students.

Specifically, Edina's elementary campus has three SPED teachers who provide ICS and resource support, three LIFE skills classrooms, monolingual ECSE, and DLT ECSE classrooms. As mentioned prior, the DLT program provides Spanish speaking children aged three through five with dual language transition services, while providing a continuum of services to support both development and language growth. Edina's elementary campus is one of the few campuses in the district to have this DLT program.

During the interview, Edina shared that these programs have always resided on the campus, but there have been changes in the past year. The campus moved from having four LIFE skills classrooms to only three. The district made the determination for this change by placing more LIFE skills programs on more campuses, so students no longer had to access services that were away from their home campus.

Students in SPED. During the interview, Edina was asked to describe the students who received SPED services and support, and where these students received their instruction the majority of the day. Edina reported that the majority of the students at her elementary school are identified with physical disabilities (i.e., orthopedic impairment, auditory impairment, visual impairment, deaf-blind, speech impairment). In previous years, the campus had a few medically fragile students who have since graduated to the middle school. Currently, there are no medically fragile students who are enrolled but the campus is awaiting an ARD/IEP meeting that has been scheduled for the possible enrollment of an ECSE student identified as medically fragile. A large number of students are considered speech-only according to Edina; some are recommended to the

ECSE program, while some receive walk-in speech services and do not attend school. Additionally, she shared:

> So, almost every child in PPCD have speech services, as well as those in LIFE skills. But we have a large number of kids in the general population that are speech. Then, we have I believe… maybe 7 or 8 walk-ins… who are maybe either homeschooled? And we have 3-year-olds who maybe did not qualify for ECSE…

Edina's statements supported the data from Table 25 and Table 26 regarding students with an IA code of 00 and the predominance of students at the campus who have physical disabilities. Many students at Edina's school qualified as a student with a speech impairment, and some do not have an instructional arrangement because they are either homeschooled or receive walk-in speech services.

Regardless of the identified disability label, Edina shared that she and her assistant principals worked hard to provide students with services and support in the LRE. During the interview, Edina stated:

> That's really important to me; really important to my APs. It's kind of our culture here. While at the same time, there are those kiddos who need the kind of instruction that they are not going to get in the general education classroom; we have a handful of kids who the resource teacher is the teacher of record. But what we try to schedule is that they never miss the direct teach from the classroom teacher and that any pull out of ICS happens after the direct teach from the classroom teacher.

The culture Edina mentioned includes the beliefs, perceptions, relationships, and mindsets that shape and influence every aspect of how the elementary school functions. Parallel to Diane's interview response, Edina believes that students should be educated in the LRE and learning alongside non-disabled peers to the maximum extent possible. Similar to Diane, Edina understands that the LRE of some students in SPED may not be the general education classroom. However, she further explained that in those situations, the students will always be provided with the direct, initial instruction of a concept alongside their non-disabled peers then receive the individualized services and support as determined by the ARD/IEP committee after the direct teaching.

Teachers and SPED. During the interview, Edina was asked to describe the teachers who support students in SPED (i.e., general education and special education teachers) and the teaching models that are used. According to Edina, the campus has been in the top 10% of the district for the high number of SPED populations for as long as she has been principal. All three SPED teachers for the 2020-2021 school year are brand new to the campus and the district. However, they are all experienced in SPED instructional practices and processes. The administrators have not had to spend a lot of time coaching and teaching these new SPED teachers the basics, as they have had to do in the past. The additional allocation for a third SPED teacher has impacted student learning as it has allowed the resource teachers to provide some of those ICS that prior to this year were provided by a paraprofessional. A paraprofessional works under the guidance of a certified teacher and may or may not be certified as a teacher themselves. The campus has arranged for the SPED teachers to provide support intentionally by the content area. One resource teacher provides ICS/resource only for English Language

Arts, one resource teacher provides ICS/resource only for Mathematics, and one providing mostly ICS for both English Language Arts and Mathematics.

When asked to describe the planning times allotted to all teachers, Edina shared that regular planning times for SPED teachers are not necessarily lined up with the rest of the school's planning time due to the need for these teachers to maximize opportunities to provide instruction and interventions in the classrooms. However, the campus does offer vertical planning every three weeks but SPED teachers mostly work with the instructional specialists of the content areas to make sure the SPED teachers are on track with content and curriculum that is being implemented in the general education classrooms. All teachers, whether general education or SPED, attend the same district training throughout the school year.

Edina was asked to describe the types of support or system of support that are available for teachers. She communicated that there are mandatory and optional training for all staff members and teachers throughout the school year, but the district provides thorough in-service training the first three weeks prior to the beginning of the school year. This school year, she shared, has been a little bit different due to the late start of the school year due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The SPED paraprofessionals at this elementary campus have provided support to the campus and the students for the last three years. Edina reported that this consistency allowed these support staff to provide reliable and uniform instructional support for students in SPED, as well as being able to learn the students based on their preferences, strengths, and needs in order to provide the supports that are needed. The knowledge and experience these staff members bring are vital to the success of the students in SPED. SPED paraprofessionals support student

independence, autonomy, and peer relationships; support preparation and implementation of daily lessons; assist students with clarification, organization of assignments, and time management; and help with data collection that are vital for making recommendations during ARD/IEP meetings.

Similar to Diane's report, when teachers need additional support, Edina reported that general education teachers typically would seek help from the student's assigned case manager, educational diagnostician, or the assistant principal (AP) assigned to that grade level. Edina mentioned that most challenges on the campus come in the form of behavioral support for students with disabilities. There are many support systems on the campus-level before district intervention is requested. Edina shared:

> …There was a student last year… ended up… sent him to AB [Adaptive Behavior]. We went through the plan. I'm very well versed with that. I believe in let's figure it out as best we can on our own. I'm not just going to go 'I have a hard kid let's call the district' that's not me. That's not anybody that I hire, as far as leadership goes. Because of my background, I don't feel like we have to ask for it as much. It's not that I don't trust them or anything like that. It's just, we try to handle our own stuff. And then, if we run out... exhausted all our efforts, which includes student service plan A, plan B, and I reach out… then support is there.

Edina has a SPED certification and has taught as a SPED teacher. She was confident when she discussed how her SPED background allows her to be a competent leader in problem-solving situations that center around the SPED population. Through her leadership, the leadership team (e.g., APs, instructional specialists, behavior interventionist) work to handle problems "in house" until all resources and efforts have

been exhausted. This approach is similar to how decisions and recommendations are made during the ARD/IEP meetings; different options and interventions are considered, implemented, and data becomes available for analysis to determine effectiveness towards student success. This approach signifies to the district that the campus has reached a point where they need higher-level support.

The interview with Edina moved into talking about the campus performances as evidenced by the TAPR data depicted in Tables 20, 21, 22, 23, and 24. When asked how the TAPR and IA data reports influenced the instructional practices and decisions that were made for students with disabilities on her campus, Edina mentioned that several factors may have impacted the overall performances of the campus and SPED population. Overall, the campus performances in the state-wide assessment have dropped in all areas, including the SPED population. Of significance, Edina shared that the SPED teachers prior to the 2020-2021 school year:

> …weren't dedicated. They wanted to be diags, they wanted to be this or that, so there was always that focus of 'what am I doing next' and wanting their kids to look really good on paper. I'm not saying they lied! … I felt like we weren't always getting an accurate view of what the kids really were because they saw it as a reflection of them versus where the kid was.

Edina conferred about her staff always looking ahead to what the future holds for them in terms of professional advancement, which in turn resulted in less focus from them on student data collection. She feels that the diminished focus has led teachers to not apply the same keenness towards the student's IEP progress; data were still being collected as required, but in the attempt to maintain continual mastery towards the IEP goals and

objectives for the student, the interpretation of the data may have become more lax than intended. She explained that because student performances are tied to the teacher's end of the year summative performance report, student failure to master IEP goals and objectives would be an indication of the teacher's ineffectiveness. However, the skewed data impact more than what is on the paper. Since a student's IEP is determined chiefly through data and the overall campus makes decisions based on data, distorted and erroneous data lead to the campus not being able to target true student needs. Precise data, however damaging, are crucial for school leaders to make determinations and address problematic areas. Without an understanding of what the true problem is, no amount of intervention will be effective.

Edina further added to the discussion regarding how the 2020-2021 school year has started off:

> But I am really hopeful that we will begin to see some of our kids make SOME progress on the stupid test…I'm very hopeful. I really like this team… they are much more…they chose to be here… this is what they want to do. They are not on their way somewhere else or just going from school to school. They are looking for a school-home. They have taken ownership of their kids as the case manager right away. Communicating beautifully with the general education teachers. Already providing resources to the general education teachers. And those are all the things we are doing; what my interventionists are doing for my at-risk kids, what my bilingual supports are doing for my bilingual kids. I'd like to think it's everywhere, but I know that it's not; even though special ed is pulled

> apart and they need some different things, they are just as important to us as everybody else.

Edina highlighted differences in the staff members from her previous years to those she has hired for this school year. She has noted remarkable changes that are already apparent, including desire, passion, and collaboration. She is hopeful that these changes will improve student performances this school year.

The campus, as mentioned prior, had a very high percentage of the SPED population, especially with four LIFE skills classrooms on one campus, and:

> I think there's a big sign that flies here that subliminally says 'bring me all your children.' It's very unusual for a school to have four LIFE skills units, and it's just between our school and one other one. That's it… it's not like I have 4-5 other schools feeding into here.

Parallel to Diane's account, Edina discussed teachers and administrators who stressed over the high caseload of students in SPED at her elementary level. Edina further narrated that the educational diagnostician had not remained a constant figure, which impacted the consistency in the identification and evaluation for SPED programming, planning, and eligibility. Edina described the situation as "diagnostician hell." Since Edina had become principal for this elementary campus, she has had over five diagnosticians, with one school year (2017-2018) being a "revolving door" for diagnosticians to just provide a "warm body." Edina shared:

> …we had three diags doing all the work… very discombobulated. Diags don't test all the same. We had three people testing - initial SPED, eligibility, they qualified differently. There was an old man, sweet as can be, but he was testing

> PreK and PPCD kids and he was a high school diag who has never worked with little ones! In 2018-2019, one of the best diags I have ever worked with in my entire career... She diagnosed a lot more SPED dyslexia kids than we ever had before. That even changed since she left last year.

Edina had no control over the hiring of educational diagnosticians. The placement of these professionals was determined by the district. In the six years that Edina has been principal, she has had many educational diagnosticians working on her campus. What resonated from Edina's account of this factor was the inconsistency in the evaluation and identifications of SPED services and support. Although educational diagnosticians follow certain guidelines from IDEA (2004) and the district when evaluating and determining eligibility, there is an interpretative component that relies on how these assessment professionals decipher the raw data that are obtained through formal and informal sources.

Edina's story about the "old man" who only had experience as a high school educational diagnostician and testing children who were aged three to five on her campus was important. This educational diagnostician, although certified and qualified in SPED assessments, had little to no prior experience with working with children at that age. This factor equated to him having little to no foundational knowledge in understanding the qualitative factors that are crucial for SPED assessments in young children (e.g., developmental milestones, age-appropriate skills, behavioral strategies).

When asked to provide clarification to the factors that may impact the outcomes of state assessments for the SPED population, Edina conveyed the lack of collaboration between the SPED teachers and general ed teachers. She was also forced to reassign

SPED programming to her other AP because the AP who was assigned to oversee SPED made "some huge mistakes." A follow-up phone call was scheduled with Edina, where she provided further clarification on these mistakes:

> As an administrator, you're ultimately responsible for making sure that the students are receiving the services that were agreed upon during an IEP. There's a case manager, there's a teacher… but overall, the admins are responsible for it. And there was, a couple years ago… problems with STAAR… STAAR Alt 2 for our LIFE skills kids were not administered properly… and there were even some kids who were not tested. So, that was one BIG thing. And then, the last straw that kind of broke the camel's back for me was that same staff person… around February, a resource teacher had come off maternity leave. She had taken off a huge amount of time. And she said 'here's the case manager list I was given. Here's the schedule I was given' and it was that time of year where all the case managers were having to go through and review for all the kiddos on their caseload. Well, there was a name on there she had never seen. So, it was an IEP that happened in the very beginning, during the first week of school… and long story short, this kid never received that hour of math resource. The student had in class support but that happened by chance because there was another SPED student in that classroom and the paraprofessional… helped both students. The child's name was never put on the [master] schedule…or case manager list. Everybody has some blame in this… AP never caught the mistake.

Proper determination of the state assessment STAAR is important because the assessment is aligned to knowledge and skills identified in the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills

(TEKS). Results of the STAAR performances are accountability measures to determine if students mastered the grade-level TEKS. All students need to be provided with opportunities to participate in the STAAR assessments. TEA has developed the STAAR Alternate 2 assessment to meet the federal requirements for participation in state assessments for students who have significant cognitive disabilities, receive SPED services, and meet the eligibility criteria. According to 19 TAC §101.27(b):

> To be eligible to participate in STAAR Alternate 2, the ARD/IEP committee must respond 'yes' to five eligibility criteria… and provide a statement of why the student cannot participate in the general assessment (STAAR) with or without allowable accommodations, and why the alternate assessment is appropriate for the student [for each criterion].
>
> 1. Does the student have a significant cognitive disability?
>
> 2. Does the student require specialized supports to access the grade-level curriculum and environment?
>
> 3. Does the student require intensive, individualized instruction in a variety of instructional settings?
>
> 4. Does the student access and participate in the grade-level TEKS through prerequisite skills?
>
> 5. The decision to administer STAAR Alternate 2 is NOT based on a student's racial or economic background; English learner status; excessive or extended absences; location of service delivery; anticipated disruptive behavior or emotional distress; or low performance on past state assessments. (34 Code of

Federal Regulations (CFR) §300.320(a)(6) and 19 Texas Administrative Code (TAC)§89.1055)

In Edina's situation, the AP violated STAAR participation decisions; some students in SPED did not participate in STAAR assessments, while some were provided the STAAR Alt 2 test without the proper check of the eligibility criteria. The AP may have violated STAAR Alternate 2 participation by basing the decisions on federal accountability requirements. The federal accountability requirements limit the number of students taking an alternate assessment who can be counted as proficient in Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) performance calculations. In this regard, student failure through STAAR Alternate 2 may not impact the overall percentage rate of the campus.

Edina further shared that the campus resulted in providing compensatory services for the student who was overlooked by the AP. These services were educational services that were provided to make up for skills that were lost because the campus did not provide the services required by the IEP. Although Edina acknowledged that the general education teacher, the SPED teacher, and the AP had some blame for overlooking the student, the ultimate responsibility is on the administrator. Edina shared that after the first big mistake with the STAAR testing issue, Edina took over the duties to oversee the SPED programming for LIFE skills and sent the AP to receive more training.

The following school year, Edina handed the SPED duties back to the same AP; however, the second big issue with the overlooked student occurred. Other smaller issues surfaced, such as students in SPED were placed in one general education class, and instead of having students attend lunch with their respective grade-level peers, the LIFE skills students in kindergarten to second-grade LIFE skills jointly went to first-grade

lunch. Edina shared that was not beneficial for any student because "students in SPED need to be with their non-disabled peers of the same age and grade" for socio-emotional growth. Edina conveyed "it was the impetus for her [the AP] to retire… it ended up good for us because she retired at the end of last year."

Findings by Research Questions

In this next section of Chapter IV, the participants' responses were analyzed by research questions. Through a multiple-case approach, responses from each participant provided insight within-case and cross-case. Data related to the individual component cases were analyzed first, then comparisons were made across the two cases to determine if there were any similarities and/or differences since one participant did not have formal SPED training and one did. Within each research question section, an overview of what the research question was will be presented, followed by Diane's and Edina's individual accounts. Then a cross-case analysis will wrap up the findings respective to each research question.

Findings for Research Question 1. Both Diane and Edina were presented with interview questions regarding how each participant perceived their level of knowledge and training from their principal preparation programs and subsequent support from their school district in leading SPED programming. Questions posed included how knowledgeable they each felt today about SPED programming (e.g., identification of disabilities, instructional practices, accommodations/modifications, law); how prepared they each felt when they initially assumed the role in leading both general education and SPED programs as a building principal; and initial challenges they each faced as a new building principal regarding SPED. The discussion then led to each of their principal

preparation programs, how the programs addressed leadership in SPED programming, and whether they felt the program provided adequate coverage.

Participant A. Diane expressed a minimal level of knowledge and training from her principal preparation program. She stated:

> That was a long time ago, but I think that there was one whole course for special ed… and a lot of what was covered was… the legal class… the law class. The basics… legally, fundamentally… the decisions you make. I had that.

With only being provided with legal cases to study in her principal preparation program, she was left ill-prepared to be the instructional leader for students with disabilities and the teachers who support these students. However, she did report that she received some subsequent support from the school district regarding SPED programming. Although the support from the district was more helpful than her principal preparation program, Diane conveyed that isolated alone, neither the principal preparation program nor the district support would have been enough:

> I felt mostly prepared. Pretty prepared. I don't think the principal preparation necessarily did that, but I think real-world experiences… living it and going to IEPs, talking to parents… I think, in conjunction with district support… I don't think one or the other would have done it. But together, I felt more prepared. It's always the testing stuff that's so hard… but that changes all the time, so I don't know if they…would cover something like that. Maybe… I don't know about specific content, but more focus on some of the programs. Maybe if they covered some of the intervention programs. That's more information that would be good to know... interventions maybe.

Diane realized that when she first obtained an administrative role as an assistant principal, she did not really know much about the instructional piece of SPED. She learned while "on the job" the responsibilities of an administrator to SPED and from there began building her knowledge bank through attending ARD/IEP meetings, getting to know the needs of students with disabilities, and collaborating with teachers, parents, and related service providers. Furthermore:

> In general, I feel pretty strong now about it [SPED]. I felt more strong when I was an assistant principal because I was in all the IEP meetings. And all the testing decisions… I'm a little bit out of the loop. But yes, I get the overall training… but they [APs] are the ones living it in, every single staffing and every single IEP. Do I feel prepared now? Yes. Do I sit in IEPs? Yes. But, I think… I know what I'm doing. I know the law. But as far as the nitty-gritty details, I'm not living it daily as I did before as an AP. I got rusty. Before, I could rattle off everything. Now, I have to pull out the ARD agenda. But I can still recite the assurances! [Began citing first two assurances]

Diane conveyed that the information on SPED laws did not help her, but rather she learned more through having to oversee SPED as an administrator and working through the decision-making during ARD/IEP meetings with teachers and parents. However, since becoming a school principal, Diane reported that she does not attend as many ARD/IEP meetings, which leaves her "out of practice."

Diane faced some initial challenges when she became principal at her elementary school, which shaped how she directed the SPED programs soon after:

> Right when I got the job, there were speech problems… as far as speech pathologists. One was on maternity… and then there was kind of a problem with the diag and the speech path. There was kind of an ongoing feud, so more personnel type issues. Getting the right people in the right seat is important. But speech has been a problem since I've been here because we have such a giant population…Now my one speech path has been here the whole time but as far as the other, we have had a lot in six years… a LOT! So, there's no consistency in speech.

This factor was important for Diane to point out because students with a speech impairment are the predominant disability, either primary or secondary disability, at her elementary school. With the noted inconsistency to the speech pathologist, providing therapy and interventions to students becomes difficult because the skills are taught by different speech pathologists. The fluctuating approaches and lessons impact not only obtaining appropriate speech skills but also the ability for students to adequately access their academic instructions in the classroom such as verbal participation during oral discussions.

Diane sought district support when challenges became apparent; however, the solutions the district provided were often not as impactful as Diane hoped:

> The coordinator of speech… she was always sending out… bodies… I mean, we have always had bodies, but I don't know if it's necessarily the BEST bodies. Just the … all the changes for the kids. It's like 'hey, I'm your speech teacher today'… we have people filling in for maternity… we had contract workers coming in. There were some kids that …I felt sure … their speech experience

> wasn't as good as it should have been. It's really bad. Now, we have two full-time positions, which is really good. And the one that has been here a long time... longer than me. The other one is the SLP assistant… she seems to me …like she's going to stay. So, I hope so… she's pregnant! So, she might not… I don't know. Right now, we have two bodies. At least, they are two consistent bodies.

Diane perceived her level of knowledge and training from her principal preparation program as rudimentary with a focus only on the legal aspects of SPED. She perceived her level of knowledge and training from the later support from the school district as more targeted towards the district vision of SPED but still lacking on the practical application within the classrooms. She recognized that most of her knowledge and training in leading in SPED programming came from intricacies of real-world experiences. At the current moment as a school principal, Diana did add that she felt "pretty prepared" but felt she was now "out of practice" as she no longer "lives it daily like when I was an assistant principal." With all the roles and responsibilities of being a school principal, she has delegated SPED duties to her assistant principals and only attends ARD/IEP meetings when they are contentious.

Participant B. Edina comically conveyed a negligible level of knowledge and training from her principal preparation program. She stated:

> They didn't. [laughs loudly] I'm sure we had a legal class… maybe? Barely… okay, we had a legal class. I'm sure we studied some legal cases. But as far as being an instructional leader in SPED… really the focus was on general population. I would answer all the questions in the class if it was a special ed thing. It was a terrible program. It was their [the accredited program's] very first

> year… their VERY first year. So, it was…there were three of us from [district] and we were the mature ones… the over 25-30… we kind of just taught ourselves. I think the program has improved since. What I love was the cohort. But there was a first-year teacher in my class. No classroom experience... Dumbest thing I ever heard in my life. How can a first-year teacher even… I talked to her since… she can't even remember one thing that she learned. But I love the cohort… being with the same people twice a week … for two years... I loved that… we got new professors. Some of the professors were horrible, but a handful were really good… I still keep in contact with them... but today, principals either… I would not want to say that they don't care about special ed… but they either have a passion for it and making sure that those kids are getting everything and more that they need… versus the ones that just… only want the advanced placement kids to handle and just take care of…

With her Texas educator certification in SPED and her SPED teaching experience, Edina served as the expert to her classmates when she was in her principal preparation program. The accredited program she attended was in their first year and did very little to prepare her in SPED; she had her previous experience and knowledge that accounted for her degree of reading for leading in SPED programming. She relayed that the legal class provided to her in the program was not practical in preparing anyone to be an instructional leader in SPED. Edina believes that the level of passion a principal has for SPED impacts the quality of SPED programming.

When Edina was asked what she would have hoped was provided in her principal preparation program, she disclosed:

> I think I would have liked…uh…some training in administrating IEPs and that role. Because APs are just kind of thrown into that… you get to a school and everyone just assumes you know how to do it. Of course, that's the same with everything in education, you know? It's the only industry I know of that on your first day you are judged the same way as a 12-year teacher. You're evaluated on the same system as a 12-year teacher. This would be a really good question for principals who didn't have special ed. I think probably… and also…not knowing all of the instructional …trends and movements in the area. I felt really unprepared for all the new interventions that were out there… that were being provided. I'll tell you, as an AP, I learned more about PPCD. That was my training for PPCD. That was a program I had never worked with, and my teachers for PPCD… that on the job training… with two of the finest teachers I have ever served and worked with. That's where I learned… I had never even worked with little kids… they scare me. As an AP, at first, I didn't even know how to go to PreK or kinder. Those kids scare the… out of me. Fifth grade was the lowest grade I ever taught.

Although Edina had her prior experiences and background in SPED, there were some areas she was still learning, such as PPCD as she had noted. Her instructional experiences were in the upper-grade levels, so when she became a school principal at the elementary level, she partnered with experts in the field. She expressed a lack of solid skills in her role in facilitating ARD/IEP meetings. Without mentioning district support, she opted to learn "on the job" and through practical application, while getting to know the needs of students with disabilities, and collaborating with teachers, parents, and

related service providers. In regards to how she perceived her overall knowledge level, she articulated confidently:

> I feel VERY knowledgeable. I mean, I can always learn something new. I'm not saying I don't think… when it comes to the field of education, there's always something new to learn … and I… I still do IEPs for… some of the kids… where we have advocates… for really difficult parents. So, I feel… very up to date. OMG… my SPED background… working as a SPED teacher... really helped! I have plenty of training as a teacher and I've gone through the whole… you know, from complete pull out, to co-teaching, and in class support. I was always the classroom teacher with the SPED kids.

Edina was very confident in the words she spoke regarding her knowledge level and the tone in which those words were spoken resonated with such conviction. However, she was also aware that there is always room to grow in the field of education. Unlike Diane, Edina stated that she was "very up to date."

Edina also faced some initial challenges when she became principal at her elementary school, which shaped how she guided the SPED programs soon after:

> So, when I got here, the principal who had been here prior to me…did all the LIFE skills… all of the PPCD… so, I had two APs who had never worked with the special ed population. Which I thought was… unfair to the APs. Um…especially if they ever wanted to move on to be a principal. Now, neither one of them did… but, kind of their lack of experience… in those programs… So, the first thing I did… we switched that when I got here. And one of them, I put them over LIFE skills and one of them over PPCD. And I just oversaw that. I

> was just surprised at the lack of experience that they have been given. Allowed to do. I felt like that handicapped the whole school. It's good for everyone on the leadership team to have that experience. And you have to learn all the ins and outs of each program…

Edina asserted the importance of assistant principals being given the opportunities to gain authentic, real-world experiences with SPED programming while serving in that administrative role. She acknowledged how little impact principal preparation programs had towards preparing emerging principals in their role in leading SPED programming. Unless the principal has had some prior SPED knowledge or experience, Edina affirmed that without the opportunity as an assistant principal, leading SPED programming as a new principal would be "very difficult and confusing."

When asked if Edina sought district support when challenges became apparent, she reported that she "just did my own thing… that's a principal's prerogative." Edina felt that with her SPED background, she was more than qualified and able to address SPED issues. As the instructional leader for her elementary school, the "principal's prerogative" allowed her free-range to make decisions she felt was in the best interest of her campus, students, and staff.

Edina perceived her level of knowledge and training from her principal preparation program as negligible with a focus only on the legal aspects of SPED. She perceived her level of knowledge and training from the later support from the school district as more maintenance through routine monthly principal meetings meant to provide "information dump" and left for the principal to bring back to campus. She acknowledged that most of her knowledge and training in leading in SPED programming

came from her prior SPED background and experiences as a SPED teacher. At the current moment as a school principal, Edina did add that she felt "very prepared" and felt "very up to date" as she continues to share in the responsibilities for SPED programming with her assistant principals.

Cross-case Analysis. The knowledge and training both Diane and Edina gained from their respective principal preparation programs were reported as merely cursory knowledge; nothing applicable towards instructional leadership in SPED programming. Both participants felt their programs providing just a legal course did little to prepare them for the roles and responsibilities of a principal leading in SPED. Both Diane and Edina mentioned, on some level, the need for assistant principals to have opportunities to gain experience with SPED through ARD/IEP meetings and working with the students, teachers, and families. This experience would provide the practical knowledge and skills that would be valuable to new campus principals.

While Diane sought specific support from the district when challenges emerged, Edina opted to problem-solve the challenges "in-house" with her leadership team. With Diane not having any formal training or certification in SPED, she had limited foundational knowledge to draw from to address challenges in SPED without additional support from the district. With Edina having formal training and certification in SPED, she felt confident when challenges in SPED emerged and did not seek district support as frequently as most principals she knew.

Without prior experience in SPED, learning "on the job" while serving as an assistant principal, Diane expressed that she felt "pretty prepared" but also voiced how "out of practice" she now has become. She opted to delegate SPED duties to her

assistant principals when she became principal. Edina believed that the level of passion a principal has for SPED impacts the quality of SPED programming. With prior experience teaching in SPED, Edina expressed that she felt "very prepared" and "very up to date" as she continues to share in the responsibilities for SPED programming with her assistant principals.

Findings for Research Question 2. Both Diane and Edina were presented with interview questions about how they defined inclusive practices for students with disabilities. Questions posed included how each participant saw their role as an instructional leader for SPED programming, what each participant felt their teachers (i.e., general education and SPED) needed from their principals, and what factors or characteristics they each believed were evidence of inclusive education/practices for students with disabilities.

Participant A. For Diane, inclusive practices for students with disabilities meant that she needed to uphold the responsibility to be the leader who ensured equitable education for all students:

> I set high expectations for everybody. And so, I would say the same thing there [for SPED]. That doesn't change. We still need to have high expectations for all kids… all teachers … one of the things we started doing last year, we started doing formal coaching. And we did that as well for the special ed teachers. Each classroom has a playbook… we had a sports theme last year… and anybody who comes in…leaves specific feedback in there. With the goal setting, they will say what they are working on. So, with their appraiser, they'll come up with their

> goal… and so that information is in their playbook … and so everybody that comes in, will be giving feedback on that. So, as an instructional leader, I do that.

To be an instructional leader for SPED programming, Diane felt that she needed to start at the top with her staff to develop an equitable school culture by providing the same high expectations across both general education and SPED teachers. She guided and modeled the process of providing specific feedback through peers and administrators as a method for targeted coaching for all instructional staff. Diane wanted to foster an inclusive culture among the staff to build the belief that inclusive culture benefitted all – teachers and students:

> I go into each class… I'm offering feedback specifically to… all teachers but including special education. But there…that's when I didn't feel like I had enough information… that's when I called in the coordinator so that I could be that instructional leader… to have more information of the interventions …and have more information about what the class should look like. I wanted to be knowledgeable enough so I can be an effective coach. I was not a resource teacher…so I don't know exactly what it's supposed to look like … so I still ask.

To be an instructional leader for SPED programming, Diane believed she also needed to ensure that she had the appropriate knowledge to support her SPED teachers and the SPED programs. Diane, without formal SPED training or certification, understood her limitations, so she made sure to reach out to the district for support "to be knowledgeable enough so I can be an effective coach."

When asked what specifically she thought SPED teachers and general education teachers needed from her as an instructional leader, Diane pondered for a bit and then replied:

> Both need support and high expectations. Special ed, they need… um, that's an interesting question. I never really thought about it that way… Special ed teachers, they need grace. I don't even understand how you teach three different grade levels at the same time. So, maybe the grace, extra support, acknowledgement for all the outside… IEP writing, goals, preparation for IEPs… acknowledgement that they're doing that… having to work with teachers… they need me to encourage that because they got to be a team to work together to talk with their general ed teachers. These are some deep questions…

Diane recognized the difficult tasks SPED teachers have when required to not only understand but instruct students across multiple grade levels. While general education teachers are typically assigned to one grade level each contract year, the SPED teachers at Diane's campus must provide instructional support and direct instruction to students across many grade levels. For ECSE teachers, they were instructional support for PreK and kindergarten. For LIFE skills, they were providing modified or alternate curriculums across first grade to fifth-grade levels. For ICS/resource teachers, they were providing instructional support for students in first grade to fifth-grade levels within the general education classrooms, resource classrooms, or both. In addition to instructional duties, the SPED teachers were also charged with tasks related to student IEPs (e.g., data collection, goal writing, ARD/IEP preparations).

Diana reported on a different type of support that she thought the general education teachers needed from her as an instructional leader:

> One thing that I do… me and my assistant principals… we all take turns to sitting in on plannings. Show that support there too... so, we're knowledgeable about what's happening …with the planning… getting a temperature… climate… listening to them. Hanging out with them … being able to see stress levels. In order to support them as well. They deserve for us to know about the curriculum… so we can support them.

For Diane, she discussed administrative presence during general education teachers' planning time. This allowed administrators to provide moral support and being informed of how lessons were planned and implemented. Unlike the SPED teachers, Diane conferred more about instructional support for general education teachers, while there was sympathetic support for SPED teachers. Diane was candidly more comfortable and understood what needed to be done and expected in the general education classrooms than she did with SPED programming.

Regarding factors or characteristics that Diane believed were evidence of inclusive education or practices for students with disabilities, she deliberated:

> Well, it's kind of like what I talked about earlier where um… the teachers and the paras should be working with everybody, so the kids are physically with everybody else… not pulled out to the side… not pulled out to another room. Supposed to have… ICS time, so actually… placement of kids… we could be looking at discipline data too… if the kids are in the right place… perhaps not

> all… but, perhaps some discipline has gone down with the… right place … with the right support.

Diane believed in creating a culture of inclusion and that meant that all students, regardless of the presence of a disability, benefitted from being in the general education classroom. She worked to operationalize this inclusive culture by analyzing data and setting the expectations that all teachers and paraprofessionals work together to support the academic success of every student.

Diane saw her role as an instructional leader as the primary method for developing an inclusive culture. Diane recognized the benefit for the whole campus and society in working towards an inclusive culture. She believed her staff had to believe in inclusion to be able to foster inclusive practices within the classrooms with the students. She felt teachers and staff could make or break the development of a culture of inclusion. Diane shared the types of support she felt the SPED teachers and general education teachers needed from her. Diane cited shared accountability, collaboration, high expectations, and equitable learning opportunities as characteristics of inclusive education or practices.

Participant B. For Edina, inclusive practices for students with disabilities meant that she had the primary responsibility to be the leader who ensured equitable education for all students:

> I think it is my responsibility. Like I told you, one of my APs made some HUGE mistakes. Well, with those… they were reported to the district. They were reported as my mistakes. So, not only is it… you know making sure we are

> providing everything like we should… but you're also responsible for… perceive… monitoring what adults are doing… who work with those kiddos.

Edina worked to lead through shared responsibilities; however, due to mistakes one of her APs made, she realized that ultimately any mistake was also her mistake. Through those lessons, Edina learned that she needed to know what was going on with everything that happened on her campus. Edina had the formal SPED training and certification that neither of her APs had.

When asked what specifically she thought SPED teachers needed from her as an instructional leader, Edina conveyed:

> Support … to feel like… they're not…you know, in the back closet… one thing I hate about [campus]…it works, but…you know… the little hallway… it kind of reminds me of the old days… you know, where SPED was in one part of the building. But totally works because those LIFE skills need those little classrooms that have the kitchens in them and … it works, but it also bothers me. The rooms are smaller… the rooms can't be used for anything BUT special ed programs because they're so small. I opened it up when I got here. All the doors didn't have any windows on them. I did as much as I could … to get some windows. First of all, that protects the teachers. I don't really like the set up, but it really would be hard to cram a classroom in there… wouldn't be enough. You can tell that's how the building was built. I mean, it'll be… 30 years old in 2022?

Edina, with her SPED background and experience, recognized the evolution of SPED programming from 30 years ago to today. She also acknowledged the sense of "isolation" SPED teachers often felt and how these teachers were "forgotten" when

discussing instructions. Edina displayed a sense of protectiveness towards SPED programs. Like Diane, Edina worked hard to develop this inclusive culture among her staff, so that this culture can be fostered with the students.

When asked what specifically she thought general education teachers needed from her as an instructional leader, Edina expressed:

> So, we try very hard… at the beginning of the year and throughout the year… to provide training for the general education teachers …because they get mad… being responsible for tracking data, reading IEP paperwork that hardly make sense to the people who wrote it… and general ed… not used to all the legality… I think… we, me and the APs, and the resource teachers… those of us who are well-versed in special ed… it's our job to make them feel comfortable, to help them to understand, and to find… good, effective and easy ways to track data, so I can get accurate data. We won't be getting… something the teacher does at the last minute… right before staffing… we provide training throughout the year… reminders on what you're supposed to be doing. I have the APs check… all of our data are kept online now… which is great because we go on and look at any time.

For Edina, she discussed specific support that was delivered to the general education teachers regarding SPED programming, teachers, and students. Edina discussed how at the beginning of the year, general education teachers who had students in SPED enrolled in their classes were provided individual student files. The student files included the level of support, IEP goals, accommodations and modifications, and behavior information. Edina, her APs, SPED teachers, and the general education teachers broke

out into small groups and every piece of the student's IEP was reviewed and discussed. The goal was to ensure that all teachers understand what, how, when, and where the SPED services and support were provided to the student with disabilities. Edina shared that proper implementation of SPED programming relied heavily on the understanding of the individualized educational programming.

Regarding factors or characteristics that Edina believed were evidence of inclusive education or practices for students with disabilities, she reflected:

> Inclusive education would be that we aren't having to talk about how our special ed kids fit in with everybody else. Right?!... So, there's nothing that we do here that everybody doesn't do. So, we aren't going to Genius Hour right now…because of what's going on [COVID-19]. But, a lot of schools when they do their Genius Hour… they send their SPED kids to resource during that time. Their LIFE skills kids never participate. To me… during Genius Hour, all of our kids participate in it… our LIFE skills kids get to pick and go do the things that they were interested in and their teachers thought they would be successful at. The ones who they were comfortable sending out into the building, even with a para…they ran …clubs… counted the money… they are all… we look to see …ok this kid behaviorally is going to need support…

For Edina, inclusive practices included having the same opportunities as their non-disabled peers and being able to be a part of everything other students are doing. "There should not be a separation of SPED kids versus the general education kids." The least restrictive environment assurance states "to the maximum extent appropriate" with "appropriate aids and supports." Therefore, Edina proceeded to share:

> The LIFE skills kids eat… go to lunch and recess and large group with all the rest of the kids their age. That was another thing I had to change when I got here. They were bundling the kids…like, K-2 might go to first grade lunch…well… like why?... those aren't their like peers? So, again… a lot of decisions are made in special ed… to make the scheduling easier. But our job isn't to make things easier for us. Our job is to make things better for the kids. So, sometimes a second grader has to eat and go to large with the first graders… and there's no other way for that to happen…that's still better than them not going.

For Edina, inclusive practices extend to nonacademic times of the school day as well. She compellingly declared that "our job isn't to make things easier for us. Our job is to make things better for the kids." This statement played well into the notion of providing equitable opportunities and inclusive practices because students learn from their nondisabled peers. By "bundling" students together to have lunch, for example, with other students in a different grade level would be to deny students the opportunity to benefit from age-appropriate social and behavior skills. COVID-19 pandemic brought about challenges for Edina:

> I will tell you though… it's interesting, with this COVID… our LS teachers have wanted to go back to the old way… where they are in their room 24/7 keeping their kids away from everybody… and I had to say 'is this about the kids or y'all? Y'all have no medically fragile children… so, they don't need to be separated.' And it was exactly… it was the teachers… not wanting to be out and about… mixing. Under the guise of protecting our babies… they may snot and spit more than the rest of them…but they're not medically fragile.

As reported in her interview, inclusive practices also meant that she needed to remind and guide teachers, as well as hold them accountable for the academic success of all students.

Edina saw her role as an instructional leader as the primary mode for developing an inclusive culture. With her SPED experience and background, Edina understood the benefit for the whole campus and society in working towards an inclusive culture. Like Diane, she also believed that her staff had to believe in inclusion to be able to foster inclusive practices within the classrooms with the students. Edina shared the types of support she felt the SPED teachers and general education teachers needed from her. Edina alluded to shared accountability, being knowledgeable, collaboration, and equitable learning opportunities as characteristics of inclusive education or practices.

Cross-case Analysis. Diane and Edina were both presented with interview questions about how they defined inclusive practices for students with disabilities. Corroborating each other's stance, both participants reported that they believed their role as an instructional leader was the primary manner for developing an inclusive culture. Furthermore, they both believed that their staff had to believe in inclusive education to be able to foster inclusive practices within the classrooms with the students.

With Diane not having any formal training or certification in SPED, she had limited foundational knowledge to draw from to address challenges in SPED without additional support from the district. When asked about supports she thought her teachers needed from her, Diane conferred more about instructional support for general education teachers, while there was sympathetic support for SPED teachers. Diane was candidly more comfortable and understood what needed to be done and expected in the general education classrooms than she did with SPED programming. Diane understood her

limitations with SPED, so she reached out to the district for support to gain an understanding of what SPED services, support, and classrooms were expected to look like. Her support for general education teachers came more readily to her. Due to her lack of SPED understanding, she inadvertently may have created a 'silo effect' - general education teachers charged with teaching the curriculum, SPED teachers accommodated or modified the curriculum, and administrators doing what they can to support.

With Edina having formal training and certification in SPED, she had practical knowledge to draw from to address challenges in SPED. Edina was aware of the sense of "isolation" SPED teachers often felt and how these teachers were "forgotten" when discussing instructions. She sought to protect SPED programs and the teachers. Unlike Diane, Edina proactively pursued SPED training to her general education teachers with the goal to ensure that all teachers understand what, how, when, and where the SPED services and support were provided to the student with disabilities. Edina shared that proper implementation of SPED programming relied heavily on the understanding of the individualized educational programming.

In defining inclusive practices, both Diane and Edina cited shared accountability, collaboration, and equitable learning opportunities as characteristics of inclusive education or practices. Diane further mentioned high expectations as a characteristic of inclusive education or practices. Edina added that a characteristic of inclusive education or practices was also about being knowledgeable.

Findings for Research Question 3. Both Diane and Edina were presented with interview questions about how they fostered a culture of inclusion with equity for the educational success of students with disabilities. Questions posed included how

decisions were made for students with disabilities and factors each participant considered when making determinations on teacher assignment for a student with a disability. The discussion then led to how each participant learned to be a builder of an inclusive culture, and the benefits they each encountered for students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms and for typically developing peers (i.e., students without disabilities) in inclusive classrooms. Next, each participant discussed the challenges they each encountered with fostering a culture of inclusion with equity for the educational success of students with disabilities and the processes they each took when weighing the needs of the individual student versus the collective whole when making decisions. Lastly, each participant shared factors they considered when determinations to provide services and support for a student in SPED in a more restrictive environment (e.g., removal of students with disabilities from their general education peers/class) were necessitated.

Participant A. The staffings are pre-ARD/IEP meetings where staff members meet to analyze the available data and propose recommendations for a student's upcoming ARD/IEP meeting. When Diane was asked how decisions were made for students with disabilities on her campus, she discussed the use of data that were analyzed during staffings:

> Data. The teachers are all collecting data. That information is brought to staffings. That's how decisions are made. If they're not successful, I want to look at why they are not successful… do we need to add any supports so that they are successful or just continue the goal? If they're not being successful…with behaviors…is the placement correct…so lots of data going on there.

Having data-driven decisions was important methods for making sound decisions for Diane. Diane urged teachers to apply an analytical mindset substantiated by actual data, rather than relying on their intuition or observations alone.

Furthering the discussion on decision making, Diane was asked about factors she considered for teacher assignment each year for a student with a disability. She shared:

> Like our little first grader, we were talking about… we knew in the spring [the year before] that his teacher was going to be [teacher name]. We definitely looked at personalities …to see what the best fit would be. But also, we have a really great first year teacher, but she had a really rough year. And so, not just taking what's best for the kid into consideration but giving the teacher a break too. Recognizing that it was a rough one… and that she needed a vacation from behaviors. We have very little turnover. Which I am happy to report. We have, of course some naturals…few transfers… whatever… but not… we only have one brand new teacher… When I got her, we had a lot of baby teachers, which was wonderful. I hired a lot of young, brand spanking new teachers. But now… I realize we have to have a good balance … try to keep our people happy.

Highlighting both teacher needs and student needs, Diane mentioned that successful classrooms involved ensuring that her teachers were happy and not overworked. She believed in balancing the workload, so should a teacher have a difficult caseload one year, then she would redistribute some other duties "off her plate." She also considered the personalities of the student and teacher to ensure there would not be inadvertent clashes because "maximum learning comes from the development of positive relationships within the classroom."

The discussion then led to how Diane learned to be a builder of an inclusive culture, and the benefits they each encountered for students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms and for typically developing peers (i.e., students without disabilities) in inclusive classrooms. Diane narrated a story from back in her teaching days where she was a general education teacher teaching alongside a SPED teacher to support student learning:

> When I was at [a different elementary campus in the district] for 8 years… we were co-teachers together. She was my special ed teacher and I was the general ed teacher. It was back in the day… the 'glory day of special ed' where I had her half of the day in my classroom. So, hand in hand, we both were doing everything. I mean, every time I see her now, we laugh and say, 'those were the good ole days.' Those kids, there were some needy kids, but they were in there all day every day with us… with her… and so, they were able to be successful because they had that support… and… I don't think there was resource at that time. They were in there… that was back in the day… content mastery…

Diane credited her past teaching experiences for how she learned to be a builder of an inclusive culture. She discussed how teaching alongside a SPED co-teacher allowed her to witness instructional practices and approaches for students with disabilities. Together, Diane and her SPED co-teacher supported each other and the students towards academic success. She then disclosed:

> … my own son was in special ed at the same school with me. And, um… I'll never forget. My mom, when he was in second grade, she went to a grandparent's day and she came back and she was, 'what the hell is wrong with that class?' I

> was… 'What? What do you mean?' She goes 'it's like the SPED halls!' I was like 'oh my god, you're right!' They had completely um… downloaded that class. I mean, it was like… it was… you probably know what sweat hogs are, do you? From that show…Welcome Back Kotter… and it was called the sweat hogs. It was the 'special class.' It was very VERY special. It was a general ed class, but also, I mean… it was pretty bad for my mom… who's a grandmother and loves everybody to come back and go 'oooh, this is no good.' So, you gotta share the wealth… you know, so there's some role models in there too. And it didn't sound like in that class there was… So, as a mom and a teacher… standpoint… equal access … and, um…positive role models.

As a parent to a child with special needs, Diane became a builder towards an inclusive culture by listening to her mother when a different perspective was shared with her about how her own child's learning environment may not have been ideal. Completely unaware until that point, Diane did not suspect any problems in her child's educational environment. Then, she realized her child, like other students with disabilities, would benefit from having equal access and positive role models through inclusive classrooms.

Moreover, Diane perceived benefits for the non-disabled peers as well:

> …compassion and patience. And you have the natural kids'… instincts… mother hen takeover. In general, we had some kids… that… I'll never forget… we had this kid… he's a fifth grader…fourth grader now. That was his treat. That, at recess, was to go over to the LIFE skills kids. You know, and there was a group of them… and they chose to go do this… and so that…that is a good reminder for kids… to be in there.

As an administrator, Diane felt proud and comforted to know that students were demonstrating acceptance and inclusion towards students with disabilities. She shared that LIFE skills students were often self-contained in their classrooms and only participated in non-academic (e.g., PE, art, music, lunch, recess) activities. However, these opportunities were vital to the social and emotional growth of all students. For students with disabilities, opportunities to build age-appropriate social skills. For non-disabled peers, opportunities to build compassion, patience, and acceptance.

Diane discussed some challenges she faced with fostering a culture of inclusion with equity for the educational success of students with disabilities. Recollecting on a recent event, Diane described a situation with a teacher:

> As a matter of fact… today, I was walking in first grade and… exactly what happened… the special first grader… he's the only one on our radar right now because all the really naughty ones are at home [due to COVID]… I can't understand it but… I looked at her [the teacher] and said, 'where is he?' because he wasn't in there and she said 'he's walking with a para… I'm not going to lie, it's really really hard… it's really really hard…and you know…and he's taking away from the other kids.' So, I think every year, we've got some really tough kids in classrooms where… I know the teachers believe that it's best for them to be in there but there's a cost too.

Diane's account of challenges centered mostly around behavioral difficulties in students with disabilities. When behaviors escalate to a severe level, Diane shared that the student in crisis was given a "cool down" or break and removed from the environment with a support staff member. Diane shared how general education teachers were overwhelmed

with attempts to "maintain a conducive learning environment for all students," while considering the needs of students with disabilities. Diane discussed weighing the needs of the whole classroom versus the needs of the individual student:

> With the screaming… we've got one or two screamers. Screaming in an open area… 16 classes right there and you know… can hear it… interrupts learning… so yea, I mean… I'm not going to say it's rosy… that everybody believes that… but sure, there's consequences… that was my concern… um, when we talked about doing the hybrid learning that we have right now… I said, 'what if something crazy happens in the classroom and it's online and the parents can see that?' I was worried about FERPA and confidentiality. And a chair goes flying… or something. Thankfully, nothing has happened like that. Um, that's a very real possibility… that can stir up some parents as well. And what [district lawyer] said, 'parents are allowed to…normally, to come visit a classroom so they might see those things… we aren't breaking any law'… but, this whole online thing kind of opens that up a little bit.

Diane conveyed the belief that her teachers understood and believed that all students would benefit from a general education classroom. However, Diane also acknowledged that when presented behaviors (e.g., physical aggression, verbal aggression, disruptions) of a student reaches the "tipping point of the scale" then the overall learning experience for all students becomes impacted. Diane voiced that these factors could lead to parental complaints and fear of violating confidentiality.

In discussing how Diane weighed decision-making for the needs of the individual student versus the collective whole, she referenced a recent case:

> When he was in kindergarten last year…and he's a sweet boy…it's just he's a beautiful example of what we are talking about. He was not special ed then, but he was working his way… he spent a lot of time in DMC. Just because even with someone sitting there in the classroom trying to redirect, it's still… jumping off the desk, completely disrupting… you have to use some common sense. Where, it's impacting everybody…for a long time…every day…he's gotta be taken out. But that's where… that tells us that… placement is not right. That's what we were working on … to get the support so he can be in the right setting… for him. But yea, no… and it's tricky.

Diane highlighted that low-level classroom disruption (e.g., giggling, daydreaming, talking) is a part of everyday life in classrooms. However, chronic, prolonged, and persistent high-level disruptions (e.g., throwing furniture, screaming) not only become issues of safety, but learning becomes disrupted for all in the classroom. Disruptive students impact the ability of the educator to teach proficiently because "it takes away a lot of the teacher's time and energy" and often results in the teacher stopping the lesson for the entire classroom.

According to the district student code of conduct handbook, conduct violation may result in a student being suspended or placed in a discipline management class (DMC). Diane solemnly discussed the situation with this particular first-grade student who spent most of his kindergarten school year in DMC due to the consistently violent and disruptive behaviors in the regular classroom. In an attempt to provide support within the classroom, Diane assigned a staff member to sit in the kindergarten classroom with him so that he could be redirected without having to miss instructional time or

disrupt the learning of others. However, this attempt, although with the best intentions for all in the environment, was unsuccessful. Therefore, other options were considered, which led to a referral for SPED evaluation. Diane demonstrated the use of utilizing resources and personnel to address issues in the least restrictive environment, considered and attempted other interventions and options (e.g., redirect, additional support staff, removal), and using data to drive the need for SPED referral. Furthermore, she added:

> …we also were talking about him. He came into my office yesterday. And, I gave him a sticker. He had a really good day, so I gave him a sticker and it said 'WOW'. I asked, 'so what does that say' and he had no idea what it said. He couldn't even get the 'W' sound out. And, um… so we were doing a mini phonics lesson and rhyming words with him. He couldn't do anything and so I asked my instructional specialist… I said 'are they pulling kids for SGRI yet' you know the reading intervention. 'Are they pulling kids yet?' She said, 'I think so' and I said 'how come he's not in there? How come he's not in there?' She said, 'I can tell you why…' and I could probably tell you why too. I'm sure they said, no he's not going in there because he's… he'll distract the other kids. Well, he might… but at least we try. You know, and I said… what's going to happen is this poor baby… he missed most of kindergarten because he was in DMC. Then we lost 25% of the school year [due to COVID]. Now, he's in first grade but he can't get this intervention because of behavior. 'EEK'…We need to at least try because now he's a six…seven-year-old who doesn't have any letter or sounds… you know, so…sometimes you have to look at individual… at least try, you know…and not say, nope not going to do it because of behavior.

Diane shared the same sentiment as the Secretary of Education Arne Duncan back in 2010 regarding the impact of students in DMC and the increased academic achievement gap for those students. Disconnection from school begins early in the elementary school years and "turns motivated students into high school dropouts."

As reported by Diane, there "has to be a better way." Students who disrupt the learning of others are sent to DMC but prolonged removal from the general education classroom impacted the learning of the individual student. In Diane's account, the removal of this first-grade student from his classroom allowed the learning of his classmates to continue; however, jeopardized his own learning. As previously stated, Texas does not mandate for students to be enrolled in kindergarten. However, he was enrolled and missed out on a good chunk of learning opportunities and may have developed the disconnection from school due to being placed in DMC so often. Clearly, he is academically behind due to his behavior that warranted removal from the educational setting. Interventions are necessary to remediate these deficits in grapheme and phonemic awareness due to his behaviors, which impacted his learning opportunities in the educational setting. However, he is currently unable to participate in the small group reading intervention (SGRI) due to the "possibility of his behavior disrupting the learning of others." Like Diane stated "we have to at least try" otherwise this particular student will continue to fall further behind from his grade-level peers.

Lastly, Diane was asked to share factors that she considered when determinations to provide services and support for a student in SPED were needed to be in a more restrictive environment. With the previous example of the first-grade student, she indicated that:

> Well, I think when we have followed all of the steps… we've put everything in place … um, with fidelity… not just saying yea we tried that we tried that… but really, did we have… the visual schedule, did we have the reminders… the paper reminders…did we have the timer... you know, the whatever. Are we really doing everything we said we were going to do? Um, at that point… and we've…the district coaches have come out. At that point yea… and we've had to do like um… not AB [adaptive behavior] but… DMC too... with kids… where they have to earn their way out of there… finding a program… a placement so that they're successful...

Diane summarized that after utilizing all available campus resources, attempting all interventions and strategies with fidelity, recruiting the support of the district, and exhausting all the possible tools then the multiple sources of data would become the driving tool for the campus leadership team to consider a more restrictive placement. Learning is important for all students so when a student in SPED is consistently struggling with the use of all these resources, tools, and support then Diane articulated that "maybe the placement is wrong and the placement has to be right so they can learn too."

Crediting her past teaching experiences instructing alongside a SPED co-teacher and as a parent to a child with special needs, Diane learned to foster a culture of inclusion with equity for the educational success of students with disabilities. Diane became a builder towards an inclusive culture by listening to her mother when a different perspective was shared with her about how her own child's learning environment may not have been ideal. Teaching alongside a SPED co-teacher allowed her to witness

instructional practices and approaches for students with disabilities. Having data-driven decisions were important methods for making sound decisions for Diane, rather than relying on intuition or observations alone. Diane believed in "the whole picture" of not only considering the child's needs but also her staff needs. Diane believed that inclusive classrooms benefitted both disabled students and non-disabled peers, especially in the areas of socio-emotional growth. Children eventually grow into adults. With the opportunity to learn from each other as children, they may impact how their society will be in the future.

Participant B. When Edina was questioned about how decisions were made for students with disabilities on her campus, she conveyed:

> If it's not a re-eval year, then of course we won't have that… diagnostic testing. So, we use district data… we rely very heavily for our kids who are… who are getting significant services – which would be like… resource… district assessments, formal and informal assessments, teacher's running records. A lot of times, we will send the APs in to do some observations on their own. I think we just kind of do what everybody else does, but really, I expect to see it in writing. We are not all of a sudden going to talk off the top of our heads about what's going on… don't tell me this kid is not making any progress without bringing something to look at. You have to be able to substantiate and support your… what your gut is telling you… what your head is telling you. There has to be… some data aligned with that. Now, with that being said… there's value in the gut. You know, a teacher who…is experienced… working with special ed kids…we can take that gut along with the formal and informal data.

Unlike Diane, Edina shared specific delineation of types of data that she considered during decision-making processes, distinguishing data for re-evaluation years and non-evaluation years. That is not to say that Diane does not rely on those data, but that with Edina's SPED background, she was able to be more specific as the "SPED lingo" comes more naturally to her. Edina also mentioned sending her APs into the classroom to gather informal, qualitative data to help support decision-making. Understanding that no one knows more about what goes on in the classroom but the teacher, Edina values the teacher's intuition or gut instincts. However valuable that information is, Edina expects teachers to "have data to support those instincts."

Furthering the discussion on decision making, Edina was asked about factors she considered for teacher assignment each year for a student with a disability. She shared:

> That's the thing… I can point to every teacher in this building who I feel like I know I would feel very comfortable putting SPED kids in their classrooms. It's also extra workload. It goes back to the whole thing of why do the best teachers always get the most work? So, um… one of my APs has done a great job at cultivating…especially at the area of PPCD…Kindergarten… teachers and getting them …training them… working them along. You have… know which ones of your teachers are much better at working with … they can take a kid who's on-level and push him up… but they really don't possess that ability to start way down here and get him… does that make sense?

Edina considered how several teachers had exemplary instructional records, but some did not possess the skills to teach on the level of the student should the student function below a certain threshold. Like Diane, Edina believed in balancing the workload for

teachers. Edina discussed that often times good workers received more work because they were capable. However, proficient employees should not be "punished with more work" and:

> It's a catch-22… I mean… there's some teachers who end up with the sped kids every year… now some of them love it and would be mad if we took them away from them… they love those kids…that's their passion. But it is challenging… on a certain grade level, there may be only one good teacher that we feel like is the right spot… so, we try to at least lighten their load on some other thing. I don't like them all crammed up in one room… I don't think that's best instructional placement. It makes it easier to make a schedule… that was an issue when I got here too… they don't have to all be in the same classroom… and giving three teachers two to three SPED kids is much different than giving one teacher nine special ed… so that's where we try to work. But I also have to protect the kids. I'm not going to put them into a room that I know…is not… not that they don't care… but that's not going to be the place where they will grow. Catch 22.

Similar to Diane's account, Edina highlighted those successful classrooms involved ensuring the needs of both the student and the teachers are considered. Edina has some teachers on her campus who want to have the SPED population because they are passionate about helping all students achieve. For other grade-levels, when minimal teachers were able to support the SPED population in their classrooms, then Edina tries to take other duties "off their plate." She referenced the situation as a "catch-22" where the dilemma is trapped by two contradictory conditions. On one hand, there are teachers who

excel in certain tasks (e.g., instructing at-risk students, dual-language students, students in SPED) but Edina found the task difficult in assigning all at-risk students and students with disabilities to those teachers. On the other hand, placing the students with disabilities in another teacher's classroom, who may not have "the best track record" for these student populations, may not be the best environment for student growth.

The discussion then led to how Edina learned to be a builder of an inclusive culture and the benefits she encountered for students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms and for typically developing peers (i.e., students without disabilities) in inclusive classrooms. Edina claimed:

> I think that's just… that's just who I am. I don't know if it's my special ed background …my ministry background… I just… I don't ever want to work somewhere where we're not being inclusive. Like, this doesn't necessarily…directly deal with special ed… but…like my library…there's hardly any Black children in this building but there were… every book… was to have a black kid… and the books didn't look like my kids here. So, that has changed over the years… I have provided those… we have some Muslim students here and the library… we bought books about a girl getting her hibab …habib… a story about this girl when she turned this age and she got her hibab... habib… I don't want to say it wrong… just seeing their eyes open… I try to hire people… people on the leadership team looks like the school. I mean… I have three bilingual people on my leadership team… up until this year, I had an Asian person on my team… we have a big Vietnamese population… I try to …I mean I don't… don't hire people just because… I'm going to hire you because your Vietnamese… or

> Black… but I do look for that. I have two men on my team… so, that's just how I run my life. I… married… in an interracial marriage… I don't know…that's just who I am. They look around and see their future selves and their future.

Edina credited her overall way of life for how she learned to be a builder of an inclusive culture. From her experiences as a SPED teacher, her work in ministry, and in her personal life, she has always strived to be inclusive. As an administrator, she promoted inclusive education by ensuring that the school library was filled with books that included acceptance in diversity. She also sought to hire staff members with diverse backgrounds.

As Edina stated, students "look around and see their future selves and their future" when they see teachers who share their identities and looked like them. Students benefit both academically and emotionally; a classroom led by a teacher who these children can relate to can also be "a place to heal" and be provided with "an opportunity to unravel a few of the systemic inequalities that have penetrated the system."

In regard to the benefits she encountered for students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms, Edina affirmed:

> Well, they're getting the same… the same opportunities for growth as the rest of them AND they're learning from those other students. You know… perfect example is a couple years ago I had one… in self-contained fifth grade classroom. A new kid moved in… he was SPED… it was the only place I could put him that was going to make it work. He passed STAAR for the first time ever in his life! Well, that was because everyone around him was challenging him and the teacher… now granted, one of the finest teachers I ever seen… but we worked really hard. We don't have 'that's the low class' or 'that's the high class' because

> kids need… the experience... they need to be learning… they need to be challenged by their peers. Um, that sort of thing.

Simply stated, Edina believed that students with disabilities who are provided with inclusive classrooms received equal access, learning opportunities, and growth potential. In addition to improved academic success, students with disabilities are able to build stronger relationships with non-disabled students.

Regarding the benefits she encountered for typically developing peers (i.e., students without disabilities) in inclusive classrooms, Edina asserted:

> … we have some kids who have been in LIFE skills since first grade, but they're known throughout the building. I think children need to see… be able to be used to… get over the staring at what may look weird… you know we have one of the sweetest little boys… his head is about this big. He has this teeny teeny teeny tiny head… and the sweetest boy you will ever meet. So, that I am hoping… they've grown up with these children…. They may look different…or act different… so hopefully in public places, they aren't staring at those kids. Make it to middle school and they're remembering them from elementary school… and standing beside them when somebody is picking on them. When I grew, there weren't any special ed kids. If there were, they were like in a broom closet… they weren't in the regular classrooms. For my age, they weren't even in school… so, any severely disabled kids…you know, would not have been in a school… would have stayed home or something. So, it's come a long way…but I still think there's a long way to go.

Non-disabled students got the chance in inclusive classrooms to learn alongside those who were different from them, which helped them to build acceptance and understanding. Edina and her administrative team worked hard to facilitate these opportunities inside the classroom and outside the classrooms. The hope was for these non-disabled students to be able to defend and advocate for their disabled peers should the situation arise when they all move on to middle school. As the principal, Edina felt honored and heartened to know that students were demonstrating acceptance and inclusion towards students with disabilities.

Edina was questioned about how she weighed decision-making for the needs of the individual student versus the collective whole. She addressed that:

> I think that's a decision we have to make every day for every kid. You know, um… certain kids at certain points in their lives have greater needs. So, we work on that the best we can. I can't allow one child's behavior to completely ruin the learning environment for the others… but then we have resources in place… to be working with that kid alongside. I think…we've walked away from social skills development and all that in [district] a lot…and so we have kind of brought that back in here. We've had some challenges last couple of years. Some very behavioral… very violent… very volatile students… and we had to step way back with them. We are talking about very basic… social skills, emotional regulation, all of that. So, that can't all happen in the classroom because then no one would learn.

Edina shared that she constantly has to weigh the needs of one for the needs of many each and every day. Every action, every thought; everything requires for her to consider

the impact of all parties involved. Similarly stated by Diane, Edina voiced that chronic, prolonged, and persistent high-level disruptions not only become issues of safety, but learning becomes disrupted for all in the classroom. Edina's accounts of challenges have also centered mostly around behavioral difficulties in students with disabilities. For her, providing those needed social skills instructions for the student must happen outside of the classroom and slowly allowing the student to integrate back when those skills are generalized:

> It's very hard. We have… I can think of one student here… everybody in the building knows him… and do I think he needs to be in the general ed classroom? Absolutely because he's soooo smart. But his autism and the behaviors that go with that… make it… so hard for the kids in the classroom to learn. I know general ed parents…knew the screaming happen… you're just having to balance that all the time. How do I… make sure he's with his general ed peers… getting the same education… and how am I making sure that those other kids' education is not getting cut short… because we're always spending time with that kid. We provide a lot of in class support for that… leadership team provides a lot of support for that… so if that kid needs to be taken out and taking a break… he gets what he needs while everybody else continues to learn.

Edina remarked that weighing the decisions for the best interest of the collective whole or the individual student is always going to be a difficult task. Essentially, she inferred that when she makes these decisions, she appears to be "taking sides" but again the situation is a catch-22. Furthermore, she added:

> But if the teachers… they need to learn how to deal with those behaviors in the general ed classroom… everybody suffers. I'm a SPED person! But I thought… NO! His specific needs… like the one kiddo I'm thinking of… that's not more important than 22 other kids in the classroom. It's important… but it's not MORE important. So, it's a hard balance. We can say 'inclusion for all' but mmmm that's not always… the best. I don't know if it's always best for a group of fourth graders to watch a student cry like a baby when he breaks down. I don't think that's good for either side. No learning… losing instructional time… not understanding what's going on over here… yea… it's a huge balance… and goes back to being able to pick the right teachers. Because the right teacher… can get thing out of kids… that the teacher next door would swear weren't possible.

Edina believes that teachers need to have more accountability for managing behaviors in their classrooms. Having an administrator coming into the classroom frequently to intervene often sends the wrong signals to other children and other staff members. Edina remarked how even with her SPED background, she understood the importance of both the individual student's needs and the needs of the rest of the classroom and noted that inclusive education may not be applicable to all.

Lastly, Edina was asked to share factors that she considered when determinations to provide services and support for a student in SPED was needed to be in a more restrictive environment. Edina positioned that:

> For certain, it won't be the first time we've had the conversation with the parent. That's very unfair to the parent…to the child. I think that sometimes… depends on the parent… I always feel so bad when it goes so easy because I really… think

> the parents didn't get it… until the services start. Um, but sometimes… first of all, the parent has to know that you care about the kid… that you're in it for them… I start every IEP meeting… before we get into it… asking the parent to tell us about the last year… tell us the successes you've seen at school… at home… tell us the things you're most proud of about your child… tell us the things that you want us to work on … because I don't like when parents just kind of listen to all of us vomit all our information about their kid and nobody asks the parent 'what do you think?' Other than 'is this okay with you?' Of course, they're going to probably say yes because you're the expert… so I think you have to have… build that relationship.

Unlike Diane, Edina focused on parental involvement during the majority of answering this interview question. She believes in authentic parent input beyond the yes and no types of responses. She shared that in most ARD/IEP meetings, school staff members of the committee are the ones who dominate the discussions regarding the student's educational programming. By law, parents/guardians are equal members of the ARD/IEP team. The school may be experts about SPED programming, but parents are "the expert on the child" but:

> Sometimes, it's just tough love too… like ok… it's 'I want you to come up, and I need you to observe.' You know, parents who don't have other kiddos or… they think they know what second graders can do… they need to come into the second grade classroom and see what second grade class can really do. 'Here's your student's work… here's an average… low average second grader's work… tell me what you notice?' I think we have to educate to parents… there's not enough

> time built into the system to do that as well as I would like it to be… but we have to be very intentional with that.

Edina supports parental involvement, but she also mentioned "educating the parent" as a means for parents to understand that their child may not be performing where the grade-level peers are. Edina expressed how some data came in the form of observations within a regular grade-level classroom and student work samples where parents were able to see how their child's work compares to other grade-level peers with and without SPED support. These data are crucial for both the parent and the school staff to determine where the gaps are and what needs to be done to address those gaps:

> I have uh…a kiddo I'm working with right now… the parents are divorced… but it's very contentious… they hate each other… so dad hired an advocate… I was like UGH… it's like such a bad word… nobody likes an advocate… but I'm telling you… this dang woman… was sooo good… that I thought this is what every IEP should be like. Because she was truly there for the student. She did have a preconceived notion that everybody in the public school doesn't give a rat's rear about SPED kids. She and I had a little power play in the beginning because I was asserting me being in charge… and you know… I don't have to speak to you if I don't want to… she was so fabulous because she represented the child… she talked to the other parent even though she wasn't being paid to… because she knew it was the right thing… and helped… the dad who paid her to be there… made him to get off his stupid phone and pay attention. I thought 'see that is what it should be like.' That the…process should be like. Somebody who is well-versed about what is going on... who wants what's best for the kid also…

> and for the parents… to feel like someone is on their side. Since the system won't ever be that way… we have to provide that for them. We do. We have to be that… we have to advocate for parents too… and not see the parents as …they're not the enemy…they're not a pain. That's their baby and they need a whole lot more… a lot more information before we ask to make a huge change.

SPED advocates are sometimes hired by the parent or guardian to work on behalf of a student to help the family with understanding and participating in the SPED processes. School administrators may be wary when notified that an advocate will be attending ARD/IEP meetings with the family because this puts them "on the defense." However, in Edina's case, the advocate served in a role that was solely for the best interest of the child even when the parents could not be on the same side. Edina was very impressed and delighted to be able to work together (e.g., home and school) productively and positively to discuss the recommendations that will support the student's success in school. A child's success is magnified through collaboration and teamwork from the home environment and the school environment. Moreover, Edina narrated a current situation where determinations for a more restrictive environment was needed but the parents were against:

> … this parent that we are working with right now… it's horrible… we are very reticent about putting anyone in LS… but this child was in PPCD… the district's policy…not policy but stance… is that the kids always go into first grade… right…kind of like we need to send them there until they fail, and then we'll put them in LIFE skills. So we got to first grade… we were recommending LIFE skills… we were… and the parents fought it… the advocate fought it…but what

> they put in place for this year… certainly we didn't put in place for virtual learning… but it's going to all work out in the end… because the parents are now seeing visually what is happening in the classroom… what their kiddo is not able to do… how many people are having to deal with their child… because they didn't want LIFE skills… so we ended up basically…the child LITERALLY, has somebody with them all day long. Either a SPED teacher… para… behavior interventionist… But you know, she came up to talk to me yesterday… I was told something happened in class… I said, 'school's going on …where's [student]?' The mom said 'Oh, I let her take a nap'… I told her, see the rest of second grade… they're not taking naps right now…

The district believes that all students should be given an opportunity to demonstrate success when moving out of the PPCD or ECSE program. The program is designated for three to five-year-old students with disabilities and often has anywhere from two to five adults in the classroom. Some of these students move into the first-grade classroom successfully with minimal support. However, some students who required extensive supports (e.g., one on one assistance, modified curriculum, hand on hand support) in ECSE struggle within the general education classroom even with supplementary aids and services.

The system is "somewhat flawed with a wait to fail model" even when data existed to make the recommendation for the student to transition smoothly from ECSE to LIFE skills. In the case that Edina shared, the parent and their advocate fought against the recommendation now that the student is in the second grade. Edina shared that due to COVID and the parent opted for the student to be an online learner, the parent is visually

able to see what her child's second-grade classroom is like and how the child's performance and level of support is in relation to typical second graders. As noted by Edina, she had to point out to the mom that other second-graders are not able to take naps during class, so she should not be either.

Crediting her overall way of life from her experiences as a SPED teacher, her work in ministry, and in her personal life, Edina learned to foster a culture of inclusion with equity for the educational success of students with disabilities. Edina became a builder towards an inclusive culture by working to provide diversity in the books the children had access to and hiring staff members with diverse backgrounds because students could "look around and see their future selves and their future."

Edina shared specific delineation of types of data that she considered during decision-making processes, distinguishing data for re-evaluation years and non-evaluation years. Quantitative and qualitative data were equally crucial to understanding the needs of the whole student. Edina believed that inclusive classrooms benefitted both disabled students and non-disabled peers, especially in the areas of socio-emotional growth. In addition to improved academic success, students with disabilities were able to build stronger relationships with non-disabled students. Non-disabled students in inclusive classrooms learn alongside those who were different from them, which helped them to build acceptance and understanding. Edina remarked how even with her SPED background, she understood the importance of both the individual student's needs and the needs of the rest of the classroom.

Cross-case Analysis. Diane and Edina were both presented with interview questions about how they fostered a culture of inclusion with equity for the educational

success of students with disabilities. Both participants recapped their prior teaching experiences and factors of their personal lives as contributing factors. For Diane, those factors were her instructing alongside a SPED co-teacher and her as a parent to a child with special needs. For Edina, those factors were her experiences as a SPED teacher, her work in ministry, and in her personal life being in an interracial marriage. Both participants discussed the use of hard, measurable data, rather than the reliance on intuition or observations alone. Both Diane and Edina believed in considering the needs of both the staff and the students, and that inclusive classrooms benefitted both disabled students and non-disabled students. Regardless of the formal SPED training or certification, Diane and Edina both understood the importance of the individual student's needs and the needs of the rest of the classroom. Both participants remarked that the task of weighing those needs is difficult and one that is made every day. Decisions made in the best interest of the student versus the best interest of the collective whole is a catch 22 enigma.

Themes

In this next section of Chapter IV, the themes that were developed will be revealed. Interviews conducted through Zoom conferencing and document reviews were used as data collection methods. The data were coded and then organized into themes, which were supported by the two elementary principals' responses. With alignment to the research questions, rich, descriptive data from the interview transcripts, combined with a document review, allowed for a thorough analysis of the data. The conceptual framework of Shapiro and Stefkovich's (2016) ethic of the profession and model for

student's best interests and Rawls' (1971) social justice theory were also considered when analyzing the data.

Diane and Edina were presented with interview questions regarding how each participant perceived their level of knowledge and training from their principal preparation programs and subsequent support from their school district in leading SPED programming; how they defined inclusive practices for students with disabilities; and how they fostered a culture of inclusion with equity for the educational success of students with disabilities. Table 27 offers the readers a summary of the themes that were developed for each research question with definition and example statements.

Table 27

Developed Themes by Research Questions

Research Question	Theme	Definition	Example Statements
1	Just the law	Basic training and knowledge; covered just legal cases. Program provided one SPED law course/legal cases.	I think there was one whole course for special ed… covered in the legal class/the law class… basic legally, fundamentally, the decisions you make...
2	Collaboration	Everyone working together; no division	Teachers and the paras should be working with everybody, so the kids are physically with everybody else… not pulled out to the side… not pulled out to another room.
2	Equal access and participation	Equal access and participation even if student need some support; with grade level peers; kids physically with everyone	Inclusive education would be that we are not having to talk about how our SPED kids fit in with everybody else. Right? So, there is nothing that we do here that everybody does not do.

Research Question	Theme	Definition	Example Statements
3	Data-driven decision-making	Use of multiple sources of data to drive decisions that are made	Diagnostic testing, district data… formal & informal assessments, teacher running records… APs do some observations on their own… must be able to substantiate and support what your gut is telling you… what your head is telling you. There must be…some data aligned with that.
3	Prior teaching / work experience	Previous knowledge and experience gained from within the work-field	I don't know if it's my special ed background … my ministry background… um, I just… I don't ever want to work somewhere where we're not being inclusive.
3	Personal / family experience	Previous knowledge and experience gained from life outside of workplace; family experiences	I'll never forget grandparent's day… my mom came back, and she was, "what the hell is wrong with that class?... it's like the SPED halls!" It was a general ed class, but it was pretty bad for my mom, who's a grandmother and loves everybody to come back and go "oooh, this is no good." So, you gotta share the wealth… so there's some role models in there too… and it didn't sound like in that class there was.

Themes for Research Question 1. Data for how each participant perceived their level of knowledge and training from their principal preparation programs and subsequent support from their school district in leading SPED programming led to distinctive themes for Diane and Edina. Diane did not have formal SPED training or certification, while Edina did have formal SPED training and certification. A central theme both Diane and Edina shared was *just the law*. Each participant's preparedness by their respective principal preparation program entailed the enrollment into one law course that covered all educational legal cases, which incorporated some that were related to

SPED, but most were general education law cases (e.g., attendance, transportation, discipline). Both Diane and Edina reported there was no training on being an instructional leader for SPED programming. Rather, both participants reported taking a course on legal cases and issues that centered around education, including SPED issues.

The central themes for Diane, who did not have formal SPED training, were *textbook knowledgeable* and *stronger SPED knowledge prior to the principalship*. During the interview process, Diane's behavior towards the interview questions was jolly but her responses appeared cautious. After each question posed, Diane would take time to ponder a response and at one point, she even responded with "let me just make something up." The data suggested that Diane had a very basic textbook or foundational knowledge of SPED programming and appeared to want to provide an "appropriate" response. Her careful responses were very "by the book" and always hit just the surface of the question instead of elaborating into more details. Diane also felt her SPED knowledge was stronger prior to her principalship (i.e., when she was an assistant principal). She reported she had practical SPED knowledge but was out of practice now that she was a principal:

> I felt more strong when I was an assistant principal because I was in all the IEP meetings... and all the testing decisions. I'm a little bit out of the loop… [APs] living it in every single staffing and every single IEP. I know the law but as far as the nitty gritty details, I'm not living it daily as I did. I get rusty… before I could rattle off everything…

She delegated SPED duties (e.g., regular ARD/IEPs, staffings) to her assistant principals unless there was a difficult case that could not be resolved by her APs. As a current

principal, Diane believed that her ability to lead in SPED programming was due to the combined support of her principal preparation program and the continued support from the district. She reported that "I don't think one or the other would have done it. But together…"

The central themes for Edina were *confidently knowledgeable* and *actively growing*. During the interview process, Edina's behavior towards the interview questions was excited and confident. Edina was quick to respond after each question was posed and delved deeper into explaining her responses. The data suggested that Edina's formal SPED training and certification provided her with a strong knowledge base to apply towards SPED programming questions and concerns. Her quick and witty responses were coupled by the conviction in every word she spoke:

> I feel VERY knowledgeable. I feel very up to date. OMG… my SPED background… working as a SPED teacher... really helped! I have plenty of training as a teacher and I've gone through the whole… complete pull out, to co-teaching, and in-class support. I was always the classroom teacher with the SPED kids…

Edina did not feel like her SPED knowledge wavered when she became a principal. Rather, she reported that although she had strong knowledge, "there's always room to grow… I can always learn something new… when it comes to the field of education, there's always something new to learn…"

For Research Question 1, commonalities and differences in responses from Diane and Edina were noted. Both Diane and Edina reported they both received a brief one-semester course on legal cases and issues that centered around education, including

SPED issues. Neither participants received training on being an instructional leader for SPED programming. With just cursory knowledge, both participants were aware of what not to do and what to avoid legally; however, little was done to prepare principals in leading SPED programming through the principal preparation programs. With Diane not having any formal training or certification in SPED, she had limited foundational knowledge to draw from to address challenges in SPED without additional support from the district. With Edina having formal training and certification in SPED, she felt confident when challenges in SPED emerged and did not seek district support as frequently as most principals she knew. These findings could have led to how Diane and Edina chose to lead in SPED programming specifically for their campuses. Diane, with no formal SPED training, sought specific support from the district when challenges emerged, while Edina opted to problem-solve the challenges "in-house" with her leadership team.

Themes for Research Question 2. Data for how each participant defined inclusive practices for students with disabilities led to consistent themes although Diane did not have formal SPED training, while Edina did. The central themes that both Diane and Edina shared were *collaboration* and *equal access and participation*. For collaboration, Diane and Edina shared that "everyone works together" and there was "no division." Inclusive practices meant that the focus is on "all students and all teachers… not special education… not general education." There was an emphasis from both participants regarding general education teachers and SPED teachers working together as a cohesive unit rather than parallel entities in the same classroom; "the teachers and the paras should be working with everybody."

The second theme that developed through both Diane's and Edina's responses was *equal access and participation*. Some factors that were consistently shared included being provided with the same academic and nonacademic opportunities as the grade-level peers. Diane shared "kids are physically with everybody else … not pulled out to the side… not pulled out to another room." Edina emphasized that "inclusive education would be that we aren't having to talk about how our special ed kids fit in with everybody else… there's nothing that we do here that everybody doesn't do." Diane and Edina both communicated the importance of minimizing the segregation so as to allow age- and grade-appropriate growth in students with disabilities to "maximum extent possible."

Both Diane and Edina had comparable years of experience in the selected district for this study, as well as analogous years of principalship. These factors helped to align the learning opportunities of each participant in their leadership role. Through the analysis of both participants' data, the theme development for Research Question 2 across both participants was consistent and cohesive. This cohesiveness serves as an indication that the district did an effective job of ensuring that principals were on the same page in regard to defining inclusive practices for students with disabilities and adhering to federal disability laws.

The determinations made for the educational programming for students with disabilities must be made in accordance with Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004. Under IDEA (2004), the *least restrictive environment* (LRE) must be considered; students with disabilities are educated with non-disabled students to the maximum extent appropriate to meet his or her needs and is unable to benefit from

education with non-disabled students to any greater extent. Additionally, LRE ensures that students are not removed from the general education environment unless they cannot make progress there, even with supports and services provided in that setting [20 United States Code (U.S.C.) Sec. 1412(a)(5)(A); 34 Code of Federal Regulations (C.F.R.) Sec. 300.114]. Special education is a service, not a placement (IDEA, 2004). Therefore, the disability of a student should not determine where the child learns, but rather how the school should support the child's learning.

Through the findings, both principals believed that inclusion benefitted all students, which benefitted the culture of the whole campus. Both Diane and Edina practiced comparable measures of shared accountability, collaboration, and equitable learning opportunities to provide inclusive education for students with disabilities in hopes to address SPED issues and concerns on their campuses.

Themes for Research Question 3. Data for how each participant fostered a culture of inclusion with equity for the educational success of students with disabilities led to unified themes for Diane and Edina. Although Diane did not have formal SPED training or certification and Edina did, the central themes developed were interconnected. Three central themes were developed for Research Question 3: *data-driven decision-making*, *prior teaching/work experience*, and *personal/family experience*.

The first central theme both Diane and Edina shared was *data-driven decision-making*. Each participant saw their role as an instructional leader as the central means of fostering a culture of inclusion. Both Diane and Edina reported the need to use multiple sources of data to drive decisions and ensure equity and equality. Although Diane and Edina both indicated the need for data-driven decisions, the key difference was Diane's

responses remained surface-level and very textbook: “Data… the teachers are all collecting data. That information is brought to staffings. That’s how decisions are made.” Without formal SPED training or certification, Diane’s responses were limited to the foundational understanding of SPED programming that was provided to her by her principal preparation program and district guidance. For Edina, she also indicated the need for data to drive decision-making. However, her responses were more in-depth and detailed. She broke down her responses into specific data (e.g., formal diagnostic assessment, teacher running records) and when these data were considered (e.g., SPED triennial or reevaluation years): “If it’s not a re-eval year, then of course we won’t have that diagnostic testing…district assessments, formal and informal assessments, teacher’s running records… APs do some observations on their own.” Both participants’ reliance of data to drive decisions are aligned to the current Texas Principal Standard 3. Diane and Edina modeled a consistent focus and personal responsibility for improving student outcomes by analyzing data and reflecting on the implementation of instructional practices that may need changes.

The second central theme both Diane and Edina shared was *prior teaching/work experience*. For Diane, the prior teaching experience came from the previous knowledge and experience gained from being a teacher and working with SPED teachers in her classroom. Diane recounted the “glory days… of content mastery” where she had a “SPED teacher in the classroom for half of the day in my classroom.” The SPED teacher helped students who were struggling, while she taught the classroom. “I don’t think there was resource at that time.” Diane described the very beginning stages of inclusion in education during the early 1990s. For Edina, the prior teaching/work experience came

from the previous knowledge and experience gained from being a SPED teacher and ministry work for the underprivileged. Edina reported "that's just who I am… I don't ever want to work somewhere where we're not being inclusive." The passion and dedication she presented towards individuals with disabilities were evident through the words she spoke, the manner in which she spoke them, and the deeply rooted stories she narrated.

Both participants gained practical experiences in the field that led to their personalized approaches to fostering inclusive practices. The experiences gained shaped each participants' perspective on inclusion. As aligned to the current Texas Principal Standard 4, students with disabilities, along with their general education peers, can then be provided with the opportunity to build social-emotional skills and academic skills through each leader's consistency in expectations and constructive feedback for a positive learning environment. Through each of the participant's report of their prior teaching/work experiences, the focus was less of how to get students in SPED programs to learn, but more all-inclusive and how to get all students to learn.

The third central theme both Diane and Edina shared was *personal/family experience*. For Diane, her knowledge and experience gained from being a mom to a child with special needs helped her to foster a culture of inclusion. Diane shared that her child was enrolled in the same elementary school where she worked as a general education classroom teacher. Although she had a special needs child, she was too close to the "situation" that she did not pick up on issues in her own child's educational setting. Diane became a builder towards an inclusive culture by listening to her mother who voiced concerns after a grandparent's day event. Diane then learned about how her own

child's learning environment may not have been ideal. Completely unaware until that point, Diane did not suspect any problems in her child's educational environment. Then, she realized her child, like other students with disabilities, would benefit from having equal access and positive role models through inclusive classrooms. For Edina, she disclosed that she lived her life with "openness and understanding" through her everyday personal life. Her personal beliefs for life was inclusion, "that's just how I run my life. I married… in an interracial marriage… that's just who I am."

Both participants gained practical experiences in their personal lives that led to their personalized approaches to fostering inclusive practices. For Diane, with experience as a mother to a child with disabilities, she learned to view the educational setting of other children with disabilities in the same manner she view her own child's learning environment to ensure placement was conducive to equitable learning. For Edina, her work in ministry and her interracial marriage, she learned to view individuals through the lens of abilities rather than disabilities, and through the lens of inclusion rather than segregation. For SPED on Edina's campus, these lenses help to foster acceptance and collaboration for the culture and growth of the whole-child and whole-school. Regardless of the formal SPED training or certification, Diane and Edina both understood the importance of the individual student's needs and the needs of the rest of the classroom. Both participants remarked that the task of weighing those needs is difficult and one that is made every day. Decisions made in the best interest of the student versus the best interest of the collective whole is a catch 22 enigma, but ones that must be weighed continuously in order to ensure equity for all, including students with disabilities.

Through the development of these themes, both Diane and Edina shared their beliefs and focus on the growth of the "whole child." Inclusive education, as Edina shared, "starts with the staff… students will not believe in themselves until the staff believes in them first." Similarly, Diane shared that "the culture will not change until the perception of students with disabilities change." As previously stated, students with disabilities are general education students first. All students have different needs (e.g., academic, behavior, language), but the focus should be on the "whole child" so progress is possible.

As aligned to the current Texas Principal Standard 4, the leader must focus on school culture by establishing and implementing a shared vision and culture of high expectations for all staff and students. Some elementary school principals believe that if all students served in SPED were allocated in the same content teacher, then SPED support and services could be provided more authentically rather than having the SPED teachers move around to multiple classrooms. However, as described by Diane and Edina, when all students with disabilities were placed in the same general education classroom, this created problems that were far greater than intended: (a) difficulty in implementing the *individualized* educational program developed for each student with an IEP, (b) increased behavior issues that caused more disruptions to instruction, and (c) the diminished opportunity for students with disabilities to build on appropriate social skills from their general education peers. When the number of students with disabilities is similar to the number of general education students in the classroom, the learning environment is no longer the LRE. However, placing students with disabilities in the

same classroom is often common practice among principals to alleviate difficulties with developing the master schedule and staffing allocations.

Three central themes were developed for Research Question 3: *data-driven decision-making*, *prior teaching/work experience*, and *personal/family experience*. Both Diane and Edina modeled a consistent focus and personal responsibility for improving student outcomes by analyzing data and reflecting on the implementation of instructional practices that may need changes. Both participants reportedly gained practical experiences in the field and in their personal lives that led to their individualized approaches to fostering inclusive practices and provided students with disabilities with the opportunity to build social-emotional skills and academic skills. However, Edina has more SPED experience and understanding than Diane through her direct formal SPED training and certification and SPED teaching experiences. This one difference may play out more beneficially for Edina's campus in terms to fostering a culture of inclusion with equity for the educational success of students with disabilities.

Although both Diane and Edina reported that they believed their role as an instructional leader was the primary manner for developing an inclusive culture and both developed comparable definitions of inclusive practices, these facets are theoretical in nature. Edina's level of SPED knowledge and understanding helped her to move from a theoretical base to application approach for SPED issues as she had the functional knowledge to draw from to address challenges in SPED. With Diane not having any formal training or certification in SPED, she had limited foundational knowledge to draw from to address challenges in SPED without additional support from the district.

Furthermore, Diane was candidly more comfortable and understood what needed to be done and expected in the general education classrooms than she did with SPED programming. Her support for general education teachers came more readily to her. Whereas Edina was aware of the sense of "isolation" SPED teachers often felt and how these teachers were "forgotten" when discussing instructions. She sought to protect SPED programs and the teachers. Fostering a culture of inclusion with equity for the educational success of students with disabilities included supporting all teachers. Due to Edina's level of SPED knowledge and understanding, she proactively sought to provide SPED training to all her general education teachers with the goal to ensure that all teachers understand what, how, when, and where the SPED services and support were provided to the student with disabilities.

Without formal SPED training or certification, Diane wrapped up her interview by stating that she felt that she had a little bit of an advantage because of her teaching experience with the SPED co-teacher and the "mommy experience" of having a child with a disability. Additionally, she shared that "it would be more difficult if you didn't have any experience at all to drop from; that definitely impacted my perception for sure."

With formal SPED training and certification, Edina exhibited more confidence and delved deeper into SPED aspects than Diane could. During the interviewing process, Edina shared her final thoughts about preparedness for leading in SPED programming:

> This all starts way before your principalship. General… regular teachers and the teacher programs… I do not believe prepare the general ed teachers for what they're going to face in the classroom. In many areas… but especially in the area of SPED. I think general ed teachers get a bad rep sometimes. It's not that they

> don't care or don't want to do… that's zip training. And you really can't train somebody the first few weeks before school starts. 'Oh, by the way, you're going to have SPED kids... let me tell you quickly what an IEP, Bob, Jack, ABC, IDEA'… it's a whole new language. I think it starts there and doesn't get any better unless you specifically… you know, unless you're trying to get your Masters in SPED… and the problem starts in education at the very beginning of teacher experience because that's who we all are… that's where we got our start.

Both Diane and Edina relayed the importance of gaining SPED experience prior to the principalship. Both participants reported those experiences were predominantly available during assistant principalship when attending ARD/IEP meetings and getting to know the students and their parents. The "on the job training" helped to solidify inclusive practices because the focus moves from SPED programming as an isolated entity to the academic success of all students.

Summary

The research presented and analyzed in Chapter IV revealed how Diane and Edina perceived their level of knowledge and training from their principal preparation programs and subsequent support from their school district in leading SPED programming; their definition of inclusive practices for students with disabilities; and their approach to fostering a culture of inclusion with equity for the educational success of students with disabilities. First, I presented demographic data of each participant to provide rich and thick contextual data for the study. Then, the data collected and analyzed for each research question were presented to provide readers with descriptions of the case studies.

Through a multiple-case approach, responses from each participant provided insight within-case and cross-case. Data related to the individual component cases were analyzed first, then comparisons were made across the two cases to determine if there were any similarities and/or differences since one participant did not have formal SPED training and one did. Themes emerged to answer the research questions regarding principals as instructional leaders of SPED programming. Chapter V will synthesize the themes into a comprehensive description of the case studies, as well as discuss the implications and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER V

Discussion, Implications, and Recommendations

Overview

Students with disabilities have historically been provided with educational services and support in segregated settings and denied equitable access to grade-level curriculums (Rudd, 2002). The passing of several federal mandates helped to bring improvement to the commitment of the federal government in safeguarding equal educational access and opportunity for disproportionate students (e.g., poor and disadvantaged) and in providing high-level instruction to these students (Bateman & Bateman, 2014). Previous related educational research (Cline, 1981; Fullan, 2002; Hallinger & Heck, 1998) centered around the principal's role in school improvement and effectiveness. Current research that focuses on the role of the educational leader in regard to SPED is lacking. The broad dilemma is that inclusive practices and the educational success of students with disabilities are influenced by the mindsets of the educational leader. The specific dilemma that guided this research centers around the heightened leadership obligations of school principals without sufficient preparation and training to provide this inclusive education for students with disabilities in the general education classroom (Harris, 2009).

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore selected elementary school principals in Texas and their perceptions toward the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom. A holistic analysis of multiple sources of information (e.g., documents, archival record reviews, and interviews) provided rich insight into the context of the case, whereas a multiple-case approach provided insight to

the analysis within-case and cross-case. The multiple-case qualitative study was utilized to investigate how selected principals (a) perceived their level of knowledge and training from their principal preparation programs and subsequent support from their school district in leading SPED programming, (b) defined inclusive practices for students with disabilities, and (c) fostered a culture of inclusion with equity for the educational success of students with disabilities. This study centered around two case studies where one of the participants had formal training in SPED programming (e.g., holds a master's degree in SPED, former special education teacher), and the other participant did not have formal training in SPED programming. My intent was to uncover any similarities and/or differences in the purposefully selected school principals' perceptions as they related to SPED programming on their respective campuses.

Chapter V serves as a venue for discussions, implications, and recommendations from the analysis of the data presented in Chapter IV. This final chapter is divided into several sections: (a) discussions of the findings in relation to the research questions, (b) connections with existing literature, (c) connection with framework, (d) implications for policy and practice, and (e) recommendations for future research. A final summary will conclude the research study.

Discussion of the Findings in Relation to the Research Questions

Data were collected from two active elementary school principals, employed by the selected Texas public school district, who were responsible for SPED programming within their schools. Each participant answered demographic questions in order to enhance the contextual evidence for each participant. Both participants were well-matched in terms of the demographic data collected. Both participants had been on their

respective campuses and served in the role of a campus principal for the same number of years. Two core differences were noted: (a) one participant had formal SPED certification, while the other did not; and (b) one spent a few more years in the classroom teaching, while the other spent a few more years leading as an assistant principal.

The three research questions for this study were investigated to gain an understanding of how each participant acquired the knowledge and skills regarding SPED programming, explained their beliefs of equity and inclusive practices for students with disabilities, and described the supports they received in creating an inclusive culture. Through a multiple-case approach, responses from each participant provided insight within-case and cross-case. Data related to the individual component cases were analyzed first, then comparisons were made across the two cases to determine if there were any similarities and/or differences. The following section provides an overview of the findings for each research question.

Research Question 1. The participants were presented with interview questions regarding how each perceived knowledge and training from their principal preparation programs and subsequent support from their school district in leading SPED programming. The central themes for Diane, who did not have formal SPED training, were *textbook knowledgeable* and *stronger SPED knowledge prior to the principalship*. Without the formal training or certification in SPED, Diane had limited foundational knowledge to draw from to address challenges in SPED without additional support from the district. Her responses to interview questions were very “by the book” and always hit just the surface of the question instead of elaborating into more details. Diane believed

that her ability to lead in SPED programming was due to the combined support of her principal preparation program and the continued support from the district.

The central themes for Edina were *confidently knowledgeable* and *actively growing*. With the formal training and certification in SPED, Edina felt confident when challenges in SPED emerged and did not seek district support as frequently as most principals she knew. Her formal SPED training and certification provided a strong knowledge base for her to apply towards SPED programming. Edina did not feel like her SPED knowledge wavered when she became a principal and believed that the level of passion a principal has for SPED impacts the quality of SPED programming.

The central theme both Diane and Edina shared was *just the law*. The knowledge and training both Diane and Edina gained from their respective principal preparation programs were reported as merely cursory knowledge; nothing applicable towards instructional leadership in SPED programming. Each participant's preparedness by their respective principal preparation program entailed the enrollment into one law course that covered all educational legal cases (e.g., attendance, transportation, discipline, and SPED). With just cursory knowledge, both participants were aware of what not to do and what to avoid legally; however, little was done to prepare principals in leading SPED programming through the principal preparation programs.

While both participants reported their levels of knowledge and training from their principal preparation programs and subsequent support from the school district in leading SPED programming to be basic, there were noted behavioral differences in the responses gained from the interviews with Diane and Edina. Diane exhibited more carefulness when responding to interview questions than Edina. Furthermore, Diane sought out

district support more frequently, while Edina made campus-based executive decisions using her SPED knowledge. These behavioral results may have influenced their school's performances under their leadership.

In referencing back to the demographic tables presented in Chapter IV for Diane's and Edina's campus, the state assessment performances for SPED populations were shared for each respective participants' campus as compared to the rest of the campus, district, and state. Of the four STAAR testing administration years (i.e., 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019) reviewed, SPED performances were consistently lower each administration at Diane's campus than Edina's in all subjects (Tables 12 and 20), in reading (Tables 13 and 21), and in writing (Tables 15 and 23). Although this study is not tasked in determining the causal effects of SPED performances, Edina's confidence in leading SPED programming on her campus could have impacted the instructional practices provided to students in SPED programs.

Frost and Kersten (2011) noted from their study that principals who were SPED certified were better equipped and had more understanding and involvement to be able to support the SPED programming and their teachers. Those without SPED certification were engaged in instructional leadership behaviors of students who are served in SPED but did not possess the proper conception of SPED instructional methods and approaches to be effective (Frost & Kersten, 2011). Without adequate levels of understanding in SPED, Wakeman et al., (2006) reported principals had lower expectations for students with disabilities, accepted instructional practices that were not aligned to the general curriculum, and exhibited a lack of responsibility for low performing students on high stakes testing. Supportive of the existing research of Hehir (2005), principals should

have a firm understanding of the uniqueness in the students' abilities in order to provide students with disabilities an opportunity to succeed in the general education curriculum. These researchers (e.g., Frost & Kersten, 2011; Hehir, 2005; Wakeman et al., 2006) note characteristics of principal's behavior differences that could impacted student performances; however, there are many factors (e.g., mobility rate, migrant factors, policy changes) that may have led to the SPED outcomes as evidenced on the STAAR assessments.

Research Question 2. The participants were presented with interview questions about how they defined inclusive practices for students with disabilities. The central themes that both Diane and Edina shared were *collaboration* and *equal access and participation*. There was an emphasis from both participants regarding general education teachers and SPED teachers working together as a cohesive unit rather than parallel entities in the same classroom. Diane and Edina both communicated the importance of minimizing the segregation to allow age- and grade-appropriate growth in students with disabilities to the "maximum extent possible."

Through the findings, both principals believed that inclusion benefitted all students, which benefitted the culture of the whole campus. Both Diane and Edina had comparable years of experience in the selected district for this study, as well as analogous years of principalship. These factors helped to align the learning opportunities of each participant in their leadership role. Through each of the participants' teaching and personal experiences, Diane and Edina both demonstrated that they personally valued inclusion. Both participants reported that they believed their role as an instructional leader was the primary manner for developing an inclusive culture. Additionally, they

both believed that their staff had to believe in inclusive education to foster inclusive practices within the classrooms with the students.

The objective of inclusive education is to eradicate marginalization that results from mindsets and reactions to diversity in ethnicity/race, socioeconomic status, religious beliefs, gender, and ability (Ainscow, 2005). Inclusion is the paradigm that children with disabilities are educated more effectively with their typically developing peers. The challenge is that inclusion is described within a framework for practice with indistinct boundaries, which excludes a precise definition of inclusion. Under IDEA (2004), SPED services must provide the supports that will enable all learners to achieve success in the general curriculum whenever possible; however, educational leaders are left with the vagueness of the federal guidelines by which inclusion has been advocated and articulated.

Both Diane and Edina established their definitions of what inclusive education was and set into motion ways to foster inclusive practices with their staff. Although their definitions were aligned, the difference was in their self-efficacy, or level of confidence, in leading SPED programming. In contrast to Diane, with Edina having formal training and certification in SPED, her level of confidence positively impacted her ability to execute needed courses of action for students in SPED programs. Her theoretical and practical knowledge base for SPED programs guided her to go beyond Diane's "teachers and the paras should be working with everybody so the kids are physically with everybody else" to "equal access and participation even if they need some support." Student learning moves beyond working on different activities in one setting to working on the same activity with support in one setting. Equality does not equal sameness.

For student learning, educational leaders must understand what to do for inclusive education and how to foster this. Inclusive education goes beyond placement decisions. Inclusion involves services and supports to enable student learning; maybe this is how the role of a school principal began to evolve over the years into the role of an instructional leader. To be effective as an instructional leader, principals must have a strong grasp of evidence-based practices within both the general and special education content. Based on the results of this study, Edina demonstrated the self-efficacy and SPED expertise needed to grasp the challenges of inclusion for students with disabilities. However, where Edina presented with strengths in SPED programs, Diane presented strengths in general education content and understood her limitations with SPED, so she was self-motivated to seek out help where she needed. Even without the formal SPED training, Diane demonstrated ownership in educating all students and was an active principal who understood that students who are served in SPED are general education students first.

Research Question 3. The participants were presented with interview questions about how they fostered a culture of inclusion with equity for the educational success of students with disabilities. Through the development of the themes for Research Question 3, both Diane and Edina shared their beliefs and focus on the growth of the "whole child." These beliefs included data-driven decision-making, prior teaching/work experience, and personal/family experience.

The first central theme both Diane and Edina shared was *data-driven decision-making*. Both Diane and Edina reported the need to use multiple sources of data to drive decisions and ensure equity and equality, which are aligned to the current Texas Principal Standard 3: modeling a consistent focus and personal responsibility for improving student

outcomes by analyzing data and reflecting on the implementation of instructional practices that may need changes (Texas Principal Evaluation and Support System, 2019).

The second central theme both Diane and Edina shared was *prior teaching/work experience*. Both participants gained practical experiences in the field that led to their personalized approaches to fostering inclusive practices. The experiences shaped each participants' perspective on inclusion. Through each of the participant's reports of their prior teaching/work experiences, the focus was less on how to get students in SPED programs to learn, but more all-inclusive and how to get all students to learn.

The third central theme both Diane and Edina shared was *personal/family experience*. Both participants gained practical experiences in their personal lives that led to their personalized approaches to fostering inclusive practices. Regardless of the formal SPED training or certification, Diane and Edina both understood the importance of the individual student's needs and the needs of the rest of the classroom. Both participants remarked that the task of weighing those needs was difficult and one that is made every day. Decisions made in the best interest of the student versus the best interest of the collective whole is the battle between equality and equity. In the pursuit of safeguarding equality, or even-handed treatment, we do not consider student-specific circumstances or characteristics such as disabilities. In the pursuit of equity, some students could be treated unequally to equalize the disparities in student-specific needs, abilities, and other perplexing factors (e.g., disabilities). However difficult, weighing the needs of the student and those of the collective whole must be continuously performed in order to ensure equity for all, including students with disabilities.

Inclusive education, as Edina shared, “starts with the staff… students will not believe in themselves until the staff believes in them first.” Similarly, Diane shared that “the culture will not change until the perception of students with disabilities change.” Both Diane and Edina believed in considering the needs of both the staff and the students, and that inclusive classrooms benefitted both disabled students and non-disabled students. For students with disabilities, both reported benefits of equal access to the grade-level curriculum and learning opportunities, as well as having age- and grade-appropriate role models to build stronger relationships. For non-disabled peers, both reported benefits of building compassion, patience, and acceptance.

Diane, who represented a school principal with no prior training or certification in SPED, was candidly more comfortable and understood what needed to be done and expected in the general education classrooms than she did with SPED programming. Her support for general education teachers came more readily to her. Diane understood her limitations with SPED, so she reached out to the district for support to gain an understanding of what SPED services, support, and classrooms were expected to look like. Due to her lack of SPED understanding, she inadvertently may have created a ‘silo effect’ - general education teachers charged with teaching the curriculum, SPED teachers accommodated or modified the curriculum, and administrators doing what they can to support.

Edina, who represented a school principal with formal SPED training and certification, was aware of the sense of “isolation” SPED teachers often felt and how these teachers were “forgotten” when discussing instructions. She sought to protect SPED programs and the teachers. Fostering a culture of inclusion with equity for the

educational success of students with disabilities included supporting all teachers. Due to Edina's level of SPED knowledge and understanding, she proactively sought to provide SPED training to all her general education teachers with the goal to ensure that all teachers understand what, how, when, and where the SPED services and support were provided to the student with disabilities.

Diane and Edina had different approaches to supporting their teachers while fostering inclusive practices on their campuses. Although both reported through Research Question 2 that inclusive practices were defined theoretically as *collaboration* and *equal access and participation*, Diane and Edina applied those notions differently. For Diane, collaboration meant that students with disabilities were "physically in the general education classroom" and "everyone is working." Her teachers provided the support that was legally necessitated through the student's IEPs; however, without her own confidence and knowledge in SPED, she relied on the assistance of the district and her teachers to do what needed to be done for the students, which could have led to the 'silo-effect' mentioned previously. For Edina, she proactively trained all her teachers to understand and be able to implement the IEPs, as well as understanding their students by strengths and needs. These proactive steps helped Edina to foster positive practices within the classroom to improve campus performances.

During the interview process, neither participant explicitly responded to questions regarding *how* they weighed the needs of the individual student versus the collective whole when making decisions. Rather, each participant indicated in some manner an acute dissimilarity between the best interest of a student and the best interest of students as a collective whole. Fostering a culture of inclusion with equity for the educational

success of students with disabilities depends heavily on educational leaders being able to balance these two important priorities: the learning needs of one student and the learning needs of all students. In the confines of an institutionalized school setting, Diane and Edina both must consider the best interests of each and every student every day. Both principals acknowledged that the best interests of these two groups (i.e., individual, collective whole) varied based on the context and circumstance of the situation.

Given the intricacy of the educational system today, school leaders must be skilled in balancing the opposing pressures that transpire from the challenges to meet the best interest of individual students, as well as the best interest of all students. Although not explicitly expressed, both Diane and Edina relayed the difficulties in ensuring equality versus equity. Including all students with disabilities in the general education classroom could increase basic equality (e.g., being physically present in the general classroom); however, this equality may not be ethical as some students may be functionally prohibited from appropriate academic access due to deficits related to their disabilities. Working towards equity may necessitate unequal treatment on the individual but crucial to ensure fair educational programming in the best interest of that student to meet their academic and functional needs. The moral and ethical work of educational leaders entails a strong duty in facing the conflicts between equality and equity (McLaughlin, 2008).

Connections with Existing Literature

The literature review illustrated the need for educational leaders to understand SPED programming and SPED regulations. The existing literature, along with the findings from this study, also clarified the importance of developing an inclusive culture

and the need for change in the principal preparation programs. The results of this study were consistent with existing literature but also poses possible areas for future research.

A major theme identified in addressing how participants perceived their level of knowledge and training from their principal preparation programs was *just the law*. Previously acknowledged, several landmark cases have shaped SPED implementation and have supported inclusive practices in education for students with disabilities. Although the law was a theme in this study, the participants spoke of the law being a major focus of their principal preparation program. The identification of this theme is rather unsurprising considering much of the literature regarding SPED is driven by legal cases and federal mandates [e.g., Brown v. Board of Education (1954), Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District (2017), No Child Left Behind (2002), Voltz and Collins (2010)]. For example, through the rulings in *Sacramento City Unified School District v. Rachel Holland (1994)*, the court established the legal framework for the provision of inclusive education due to students with severe disabilities being academically segregated from the general education classrooms. Followed by researchers such as Voltz and Collins (2010), who studied how schools adhered to the mandates of NCLB (2002) regarding the inclusion of SPED performances in the accountability ratings of the school in order to narrow the gap in state assessment scores between students with IEPs and students without IEPs. School principals find themselves in difficult positions due to the emphasis on accountability because of their limited training or experience in SPED (Ravitch, 2013; Robinson & Aronica, 2016; Wentzel & Ramani, 2016).

Diane, who represented a school principal with no prior training or certification in SPED, was candidly more comfortable and understood what needed to be done in the

general education classrooms than she did with SPED programming. She reported to be "out of practice" and only "pretty knowledgeable" in the area of SPED due to delegating SPED duties to her assistant principals (AP) with the themes of *textbook knowledgeable* and *stronger SPED knowledge prior to the principalship*. This finding confirmed the existing research of Bays and Crockett (2007) where the leadership approach of principals often defaulted to the delegation of responsibilities to another administrator when the duty involved students with disabilities. Whereas Edina reported to be *confidently knowledgeable* and *actively growing* by her continued involvement in SPED programming when she assumed the principal role at her campus instead of delegating all of the SPED duties to her APs. Supportive of the existing research of Hehir (2005), principals should have a firm understanding of the uniqueness in the students' abilities in order to provide students with disabilities an opportunity to succeed in the general education curriculum.

As evidenced in the data gathered for this study, without the formal training or certification in SPED, Diane had limited foundational knowledge to draw from to address challenges in SPED without additional support from the district, while Edina's formal SPED training and certification provided a strong knowledge base for her to apply towards SPED programming questions and concerns. This finding confirmed the existing research analysis of Frost and Kersten (2011) who indicated that principals who were SPED certified were better equipped and had more understanding and involvement to be able to support the SPED programming and their teachers. Furthermore, Wakeman et al., (2006) revealed a relationship between the knowledge principals possessed and their professional practice. A principal's involvement in SPED programming was increased

when the principal possessed a higher level of knowledge of SPED (Wakeman et al., 2006).

The difference observed from this study was the level of confidence in the participants' abilities, which translated into how much the participants relied on the school district for support. Diane understood her limitations with SPED, so she reached out to the district for support more than Edina to gain an understanding of what SPED services, support, and classrooms were expected to look like. Although the participants shared comparable principles and perceptions about inclusion, desired their teachers to share those principles and perceptions, and understood the law around SPED, the participant without formal SPED training or certification did exhibit some limitations in her approach with high-stakes decision-making for students with disabilities. Diane shared during her interviews that she often sought out district support because she "didn't feel like I had enough information… I wanted to be knowledgeable enough so I can be an effective coach." Without a strong foundation in SPED, Diane was often unable to solve problems on her own and/or did not know how.

There are many factors (e.g., constant changes in SPED rulings, personality differences) that could have also influenced Diane's approach to seeking district support. However, there are potential legal ramifications when principals are unable to address issues in SPED quickly. The process and time spent waiting for district support could delay instructional access for a student with disability, which then further impacts the academic success of students in SPED programs. Adding to this notion, Edina's confidence in leading SPED programming on her campus could have impacted the instructional practices provided to students in SPED programs. Although Edina's

campus reported higher student performance in all subjects for the SPED population than Diane's campus, this study, as previously stated, is not tasked in determining the causal effects of SPED performances.

Due to her lack of SPED understanding, Diane inadvertently may have created a 'silo effect' - general education teachers charged with teaching the curriculum, SPED teachers accommodated or modified the curriculum, and administrators doing what they can to support. There was a lack of evidence to vertical (e.g., across content areas) and/or horizontal (e.g., across grade-levels) alignment of the curriculum across general education and special education. Little research exists regarding this "separation" of responsibilities within the general education classroom for K-12 public schools; however, undoubtedly this separation is a common practice in classrooms. Overwhelmed by the increased accountability and teacher workload, the "divide and conquer" approach seems to be the easiest for educators to "stick to their role." However, this approach contradicts the existing literature and current findings for *collaboration* and *equal access and participation*. As stated by Edina, "our job [as educators] isn't to make things easier for us. Our job is to make things better for the kids."

Connection with Framework

The conceptual framework of this study was grounded on two educational scaffolds to guide educational leaders towards ethical practices and decision-making in education: (a) Shapiro and Stefkovich's (2016) ethic of the profession and model for student's best interests, and (b) Rawls' (1971) social justice theory. Shapiro and Stefkovich's (2016) framework operates as a milieu for ethical and moral leadership in promoting the educational success of all students by serving in the student's best interest.

The ethic of the profession was the focal point of this study and addressed the student's best interest model in relation to the fundamental disposition of the three R's: (a) the student's specific *rights* within the educational system, (b) the *responsibilities* to others (e.g., staff and students) for a collective interest, and (c) the mutual *respect* regarding other's values and dignity.

Present federal procedures have transformed leadership practices in educational institutes and steered educational leaders into an age of shared accountability for the educational implementation of all students, including those individuals with unique needs (e.g., identified disabilities, second language, etc.). Educational leaders struggle with their role as an administrator and their moral responsibilities in meeting the best interest of the student versus the best interest of the general classroom population (Frick et al., 2013). Working towards equity may necessitate unequal treatment on the individual but is crucial to ensuring fair educational programming in the best interest of that student to meet their academic and functional needs.

As reported by both Diane and Edina, weighing the needs of an individual student and that of the collective whole is a difficult task and one that is made every day - a battle of equality versus equity. Diane and Edina both conveyed a moral standpoint beyond that of a professional responsibility where they were considerate of the students' needs, voicing valid concern, and taking on the duty for parental relationships. Both participants reported accounts of challenges that centered mostly around behavioral difficulties in students with disabilities in the general education classrooms. Chronic, prolonged, and persistent high-level disruptions not only became issues of safety, but learning became disrupted for all students in the classroom. In accordance with IDEA (2004), should the

student with disabilities continue to be seated in the general education classroom while behavioral outbursts persist, interrupting the learning of the rest of the classroom? Or should the student with disabilities be removed from their inclusive general education classroom and be denied full access to grade-level TEKS with their non-disabled peers to preserve the education of the rest of the classroom? The moral rigidity concerning the best instructional interest of students in SPED leads to the continued dilemma of how educational leaders balance between the equal and equitable treatment of students.

As Diane and Edina recounted their own stories about working with students and faculty at their elementary schools, both provided many examples of the conflicting position of "taking sides" of the student or the whole class. In the confines of an institutionalized school setting, both Diane and Edina conceded that the best interests of these two groups (i.e., individual, collective whole) varied based on the context and circumstance of the situation. Based on a systematic reflection of my own established practices in the field of education, this contextual and circumstantial viewpoint does not refute Shapiro and Stefkovich's (2016) model for student's best interests. Rather, this finding enhances an unforeseen facet to the moral issue of individualism as opposed to collectivism in the educational settings.

Since *Brown v. Board of Education (1954)*, social justice and education have been intricately connected. Social justice leadership is a philosophy that brings into line the values, purpose, manners, constructs, and practices of the individual and the group (Dugan, 2017). Rawls' (1971) liberal ideology of social justice was applied to the examination of each principal's leadership role in SPED programming. This conceptual framework of social justice upholds two main principles: (a) people have the right to be

treated as an individual and have the right to decide his or her own moral code, and (b) all members of society are to be treated with equality and have equal opportunities to pursue his or her aspirations.

The concept of social justice was originally linked with matters of ethnicity/race, socioeconomic status, and gender. Today, education includes matters of disabilities as a social construct that is often tied to negative social connotations, which leads to discriminatory learning opportunities for students with disabilities. In abiding by the principles of social justice, Diane and Edina embraced the belief that inclusive educational practices lead to positive outcomes for all students, including those with disabilities.

For Diane and Edina, both demonstrated behaviors (e.g., data-driven decision-making, weighing the needs of individual students and the collective whole, inclusive efforts) that safeguarded the school climate in terms of social justice. Aligned with Turhan (2010), Diane and Edina both facilitated high expectations in their staff and students and cultivated positive relationships to foster inclusive practices on their campus in order to counter institutionalized inequities, discrimination, and injustices. The data gathered from both educational leaders provided evidence that they worked hard to build a school culture that embraced all students. Both participants gained practical experiences in their personal and professional lives that led to their personalized approaches to fostering inclusive practices. Democratic decision-making was utilized rather than authoritative, hierarchical structures of the past. Both participants distributed responsibilities to their assistant principals and fostered a common vision and commitment to serve all students.

The focus on social justice in education is imperative. However, without the necessary training in SPED programming and SPED laws, there could be detrimental effects (e.g., disregard to issues of disability, inequality). The emphasis for educational leaders to be prepared to address inequalities in schools has been noted by several researchers (DiPaola, Tschannen-Moran, & Walther-Thomas, 2004; Pazey & Cole, 2013). However, where is the fundamental priority for postsecondary institutions or principal preparatory programs to provide aspiring educators and educational leaders with the needed training to meet the learning needs of students in marginalized groups (e.g., disabilities) when there is little to no content in the instructional approaches for these students?

Implications for Policy and Practice

Through the literature review and the findings from this study, there is an emphasis that all students benefit from inclusive education and practices. This study demonstrated several implications for policy and practice. For principal preparation programs, there is a need for more training and support in SPED programming beyond the legal aspects, and more targeted coursework is needed to assist aspiring school principals to be a leader in the instructional practices for students with disabilities. For additional knowledge and experience, both participants expressed the need for assistant principals to have opportunities to gain experience with SPED through ARD/IEP meetings and working with the students, teachers, and families. This experience would provide the practical knowledge and skills that would be valuable to new campus principals. There also needs to be a strong support system from the district and through collaboration with behavior interventionists to ensure that appropriate behavioral

strategies are implemented according to the student's behavior intervention plan or functional behavior assessment.

Both general education and SPED teachers need to gain an understanding of each other's content and curriculum, considering the increased accountability of students with disabilities and move towards inclusive education. Also, targeted SPED training should be incorporated in beginning of the year professional development where general education teachers who have students in SPED enrolled in their classes receive specific SPED training to ensure that all teachers understand what, how, when, and where the SPED services and support were provided to the student with disabilities.

Leadership Coaching as a Tool for Creating Inclusive Schools. For the district, campus principals should also be provided with leadership coaching from either a veteran principal or superintendent in the same manner that teachers are provided with coaching from their principals. The previous research studies (Davidson & Algozzine, 2002; Lasky & Karge, 2006; Militello, Schimmel, & Everwein, 2009) and analyzed data from this study underscored that new administrators are often underprepared in the field of special education. Principals who lack foundational knowledge in SPED programming and instructional practices are situated in a problematic position of decision-making, which these leaders may not be equipped to handle. Coaching from veteran principals or superintendents with strong knowledge and experiences in dealing with difficult situations (e.g., special education) may guide new administrators to understand their role and assist in decision-making in high stakes situations.

In this study, Diane exhibited surface learning of SPED programs, where she was able to lead in SPED programs but required some support from the district and other staff

members to be an effective leader. On the other hand, Edina exhibited a deep learning of SPED programs through her formal SPED training, certification, and teaching experiences in the field. Through her self-efficacy and SPED background, Edina reported she was more than qualified and able to address SPED issues; she did not seek outside support for campus-issues and applied the principal's prerogative to make decisions she felt were in the best interest of her campus, students, and staff. Edina's campus performance for the SPED population was more elevated than that of Diane's. Edina's deep understanding of SPED could have impacted the instructional practices provided to students in SPED programs, which could have impacted student mastery of grade-level TEKS, as seen through the SPED performances in the STAAR assessments.

Educator Training in Special Education. TEA should require more SPED training for not only aspiring school leaders but also those who want to enter the field of education. Education today has drastically changed; no longer are the days of separate schools for students with disabilities. Therefore, as communicated by Edina, "the problem starts in education at the very beginning of teacher experience because that's who we all are; that's where we got our start." TEA recently redesigned Texas' principal certification standards and corresponding certification examinations given the needs of the schools and communities, as well as the developing role of the principal as an instructional leader. However, with the redesign, nothing was changed to the area of preparing principals for instructional leadership in SPED. As TEA is in the process of redesigning the teacher certification program, they should consider the need for future educators to be well-informed and prepared in their role for students with disabilities. Districts should also continue to provide additional SPED training to counter the lack of

adequate training from the principal preparation programs. These additional trainings should include more than surface reiterations of policies and procedures; practical and functional approaches to disseminating SPED topics and issues would be beneficial for principals to gain authentic understanding to bring back to their campus for implementation.

Shared Responsibilities to Build Experience. To increase inclusive practices in schools, principals need continued growth in the area of SPED programming. In this study, the two principals discussed the importance of gaining SPED experience prior to the principalship. Both participants reported those experiences were predominantly available during assistant principalship when attending ARD/IEP meetings and getting to know the students and their parents. The "on the job training" helped to solidify inclusive practices because the focus moved from SPED programming as an isolated entity to the academic success of all students.

Principalship has become a position that is more intricate, time-consuming, and pivotal than ever (Billingsley et al., 2014; Frick et al., 2013; Knapp, Copeland, & Talbert, 2003). Today's school leaders have a multitude of roles and responsibilities that make being an expert in all things challenging. A good practice that is recommended for the schools is to incorporate shared responsibilities in facilitating ARD/IEP meetings in order to not only divide and conquer but also to gain the needed experience in working with SPED programs. Another good practice is to include discussions of ARD/IEP meeting outcomes during leadership team meetings to collaborate and problem-solve as a team.

Edina came into the principal position at her campus where the previous principal took on all issues related to SPED programs including ARD/IEP meetings on her own

and voided the learning opportunities for her assistant principals in gaining those experiences. Given the little impact that principal preparation programs had towards preparing emerging principals in their role in leading SPED programming and the inability for her APs to gain on the job experiences, Edina reported that should her APs move into a principal role in the future, they would be in a very problematic situation serving as an instructional leader for SPED without any experience in the SPED field.

Principal Preparation in Special Education. Special education in the United States has evolved drastically through the progression of public education and the effects of several landmark discrimination cases. Due to increased demands of academic accountability for students with disabilities and the promotion of educating students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment (IDEA, 2004), school principals must learn to develop a school culture supportive of students with disabilities. Regrettably, through the accounts of Diane's and Edina's interviews and in Chapter II literature review, the SPED content of principal preparation programs has not changed much beyond including a course of educational laws in the principal preparation programs. This disconnect concerning training and practice is a real cause for concern. As education continues to evolve and SPED programming continues to transform, how can stakeholders demand educational leaders to be effective instructional leaders of today's educational system when the preparation programs are still preparing them for the role of the principal of yesteryears?

There is a distinct need for school principal preparation in the area of SPED programming in terms of instructional and inclusive practices. There have been ongoing legal cases rationalizing the inclusion of more training for the area of SPED in principal

preparation programs. While one additional course would not resolve the challenge of safeguarding social justice for students with disabilities entirely, the course could activate an examination on SPED programming and legislation that could take precedence to a more inclusive culture for public education. Aspiring principals should be exposed to current literature focused on SPED topics, conduct research related to instructional interventions, and participate in focus sessions with other leaders to share experiences with the challenges and successes in implementing instructional practices in SPED programming.

For principal preparation programs, more targeted coursework needs to be included to assist aspiring school principals to be a leader in the instructional practices for students with disabilities. The curriculum needs to be more than legal cases that are integrated with other educational domains (e.g., transportation, nutrition) and learning acronyms. The knowledge and training both Diane and Edina gained from their respective principal preparation programs were reported as merely cursory knowledge; nothing applicable towards instructional leadership in SPED programming. Practical field experiences should mandate ARD/IEP attendance, problem-solve SPED programming issues with a multidisciplinary team, and investigate SPED evaluation reports (i.e., Full and Individual Evaluations) and the implications those results have to academic abilities. With Diane not having any formal training or certification in SPED, she had limited foundational knowledge to draw from to address challenges in SPED without additional support from the district. Diane realized that when she first obtained an administrative role as an assistant principal, she did not really know much about the instructional piece of SPED. She learned while “on the job” the responsibilities of an

administrator to SPED and from there began building her knowledge bank through attending ARD/IEP meetings, getting to know the needs of students with disabilities, and collaborating with teachers, parents, and related service providers. Diane conveyed that the information on SPED laws she received in her principal preparation program did not help her meet the needs of her students in SPED, but rather she learned more through having to oversee SPED as an administrator and working through the decision-making during ARD/IEP meetings with teachers and parents. Therefore, principal preparation programs need to consider a restructure; move away from the traditional approach focused on the theoretical grounds of the principal to an operational approach that is focused on the instructional leadership role.

A frequent area of concern around SPED, which was discussed during Diane's and Edina's interviews, was on handling discipline for students with disabilities. Collaboration with behavior interventionists and SPED coordinators can ensure that appropriate behavioral strategies are implemented according to the student's behavior intervention plan or functional behavior assessment. Students with behavioral disabilities often have specific antecedents or triggers that escalates their negative behaviors. Just like other educational programming recommendations stated in a student's IEP, educators need to ensure that the student's specific behavior needs are addressed appropriately. Diane shared how general education teachers were overwhelmed with attempts to "maintain a conducive learning environment for all students," while considering the needs of students with disabilities. Diane also acknowledged that when presented behaviors (e.g., physical aggression, verbal aggression, disruptions) of a student reaches the "tipping point of the scale" then the overall learning experience for all students

becomes impacted. The educational access and learning opportunities for all students are impacted when principals are limited in the knowledge and district support for the behavioral and emotional needs of students with disabilities. The legal constraints affecting student discipline, procedural safeguards, and due process may result in administrative actions that neglect the specific nature of the student's disability in context to the student's offense. Therefore, the lack of such consideration counters the objective envisioned for educational leaders towards social justice schools. Continued efforts should therefore be made to increase collaborative efforts with experts in the areas of disabilities, such as educational diagnosticians, behavioral specialists, and SPED coordinators. These efforts could assist the campus in requesting additional assessments (e.g., functional behavioral assessment, behavior intervention plan) to ensure that student specific needs are considered as they relate to the disability.

Redefine High-Quality Educators. Moreover, through collaboration and the ownership of all students, including those in SPED, both general education and SPED teachers need to gain an understanding of each other's content and curriculum. As shared by Edina, inclusive practices need to begin early in teacher preparation programs. General education teachers need more understanding and knowledge on how to implement accommodations and SPED teachers need to be able to fully understand the general education content they support their students in. This notion is supported by Diane's inadvertent creation of a 'silo-effect' on her campus where general education teachers provided direct teaching within the general education classroom and the SPED teachers provided accommodations, modifications, and monitored behaviors. In this manner, the SPED staff members serve more as a supportive, secondary role to students

rather than an inclusive, collaborative role. The theme of collaboration developed in defining inclusive practices extends beyond the student body to include school staff members as well.

As passed by NCLB (2002), all SPED teachers needed to be highly qualified, meaning they were dually certified in SPED and in the core general education academic subject area assigned. General education teachers should have to be certified in SPED as well, considering the increased accountability of students with disabilities and move towards inclusive education. Students who are served by SPED programming are general education students first. Special education is a service, not a placement (IDEA, 2004). Therefore, if IDEA (2004) holds that students with disabilities are general education students first, then why do SPED teachers need to be dually certified to understand general education content in order to be effective teachers for students with disabilities, but general education teachers are not required to understand SPED content when these students are general education students first? Simply allowing space for students with disabilities in the general education classroom so they have opportunities to interact with their nondisabled peers does not mean that these students are provided with the services and support that are needed for success. Inclusion should be viewed as a unified system of education rather than two parallel systems. For successful educational integration, there is a necessity for increased professional development for educators, a mind-shift in ownership in educating students, and a positive collaboration of general education and SPED teachers.

Edina had the right idea; at the beginning of the year, general education teachers who have students in SPED enrolled in their classes were provided individual student

files. The student files included the level of support, IEP goals, accommodations and modifications, and behavior information. Edina, her APs, SPED teachers, and the general education teachers broke out into small groups and every piece of the student's IEP was reviewed and discussed. The goal was to ensure that all teachers understand what, how, when, and where the SPED services and support were provided to the student with disabilities. Edina shared that proper implementation of SPED programming relied heavily on the understanding of the individualized educational programming. If this practice were provided at all campuses, general education teachers would be more prepared and equipped in meeting the needs of students in SPED programs. As supported by Edina, general education teachers are not prepared enough for what they are going to face in the classroom, especially in the area of SPED. Combined with the difficulties in understanding the lingo of the IEPs, the multitude of acronyms used in SPED can become overwhelming. However, in alleviating some of the anxiety and uncertainty at the beginning of the year with teachers, students benefit. Teachers who understand their student's specific needs are able to be more effective and instruct purposefully for students with disabilities.

As previously mentioned, in the same manner that teachers are provided with coaching from their principals, campus principals should also be provided with leadership coaching from either a veteran principal or superintendent. Diane shared that to develop an equitable school culture, she needed to provide the same high expectations across both general education and SPED teachers. She guided and modeled the process of providing specific feedback through peers and administrators as a method for targeted coaching for all instructional staff. Diane wanted to foster an inclusive culture among the staff to build

the belief that inclusive culture benefitted all – teachers and students. In the same sense, the same high expectations should be projected to all campuses in the district. Diane's finding mentioned that she did not have support for a SPED program that was available at her campus but not across other campuses in the district. She found herself lacking in support to successfully run the program. Coaching and mentoring should be provided for new principals and for principals who have unique programs on their campus to ensure student and campus success.

The findings of this study are supportive of inclusive education benefiting both disabled and non-disabled students. School principals need to be prepared for SPED programming through more targeted coursework in leading and instructional practices for SPED programming. Both general education and SPED teachers need to have a better understanding of their counterparts, and principals should be provided with coaching and mentoring in the same manner in which these principals support their teachers on their campus.

Recommendations for Future Research

Based on the results of this qualitative case study, several recommendations can be made for future research. First, for principal preparation programs, future research should continue to monitor the effectiveness of principal preparatory programs and determine what program modifications and accommodations are needed to ensure the continual growth of principal's leadership skills and behaviors to meet the unique needs of students with disabilities. This monitoring for continued growth of the program can be achieved through further qualitative studies that include more participants and focused on specific SPED programming areas (e.g., interventions, eligibility, modifications)

administrators feel they need support with. Further quantitative studies could also be performed using modeling that would tease out the impact that a principal has on the SPED achievement of students. These data could assist school districts to provide more targeted support for actively serving school principals or the development of more content in principal preparation programs regarding SPED programming.

Second, future research should be conducted to extend on the exploration of principal preparation programs in Texas that was previewed in Chapter I to further aid in the understanding of the foundational knowledge and training that is provided to aspiring school principals. For my study, only three randomly selected accredited sites were reviewed to provide a brief baseline for my exploration of principal perceptions toward the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom. Three sites are not enough to make a generalization of the quality and content of Texas principal preparation programs, and only represent about 10% of the accredited sites in Texas. Furthermore, a purposeful sampling rather than random sampling may be helpful to explore whether the quality of the preparation program depends on school-specific factors (e.g., size, type, format).

Third, future research should be conducted to explore the teacher's perception of the campus principal's role in special education. In exploring the teacher's perception, data can be gathered to enhance understanding of specific teacher needs in terms of principal support and/or understanding. Teachers are charged with direct instructional outcomes for students on the campus. Considering the increased accountability of students with disabilities and move towards inclusive education, teacher workload has

also increased. In order for principals to be effective instructional leaders, they must have an understanding of what their teachers need and want from their principals.

Lastly, future research could be replicated with more participants and include direct observations. Due to COVID-19, these factors were eliminated from the study in order to adhere to the health and safety guidelines. A larger sample size could help to identify other factors that impact principals fostering inclusive education and allow the researcher to reach data saturation. Qualitative observations could provide data related to behaviors and activities the participants engage in while working with students with disabilities, teachers, and/or instructional practices. This approach would allow the researcher to gain first-hand experience with the participant, record information as the observation was performed, and identify any unusual details that may not be easily identified through any other methods (e.g., review of document or interviews). The observational sessions should focus on the principal and the decision-making process rather than on specific student details.

Conclusion

To gain a richer understanding of how to better prepare principals for effective leadership of special education programs in today's educational system, I explored selected elementary school principals in Texas regarding their perceptions toward the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom. The current educational mandate weighs heavily upon outcome-driven accountability, which necessitates an educational leader who has evolved from the traditional managerial role to the role focused on instructional leadership. Principals today serve as educational leaders who are responsible for leading all educational activities in their school, including

specialized programs designed to meet the educational needs of specific groups of students (e.g., SPED). Despite the awareness of these school leaders' responsibility in ensuring that each child is learning, principal preparation programs focus very little on targeting responsibilities in leading SPED programming (Praisner, 2003; Scruggs, Mastropieri, & McDuffie, 2007).

Principals are crucial in building a culture of inclusiveness and fostering teacher leadership, team learning, and self-governance (Rea, McLaughlin, & Walther-Thomas, 2002). Valesky and Hirth (1992) expressed concerns over a quarter of a century ago and urged states to include more SPED courses in administrative training programs. Presently, there continues to be a gap in preparing administrators to use social justice leadership appropriately to advance the inclusion of all students. Without the foundational knowledge and understanding of SPED programming and SPED laws, educational leaders are at risk of legal and equality issues (DiPaola, Tschannen-Moran, & Walther-Thomas, 2004).

The principal's leadership greatly determines the levels of success or failure of SPED programming. Therefore, the mindset of these educational leaders may positively or negatively affect inclusive practices because other staff members' acceptance of inclusion can either be hindered or motivated by their school principal's approach towards inclusive practice. This qualitative case study was designed to explore the perceptions and needs of current elementary school principals who serve SPED programs in their schools.

The analysis of the data gathered in this study supported the lack of preparation in SPED programming in principal preparation programs and there is a dearth of courses in

special education in principal preparation programs. However, the data also suggested that the more knowledge a principal had in the area of special education (e.g. Edina), the more able the educational leader would be in handling high stakes decision-making for SPED programming without continued eliciting of district support, which may delay the process of resolving issues and delay student's access to appropriate learning opportunities.

Through the data examined and the analyses performed, implications to the current field were reviewed. To examine this topic further, areas of future research were recommended. The findings of this study may assist in the promotion of inclusive practices for students with disabilities to increase access to the general education curriculum, which is important in the efforts to close the academic and opportunity gap. Through the outcomes of this study, I hope to add to the existing literature and promote further research to improve the academic and functional outcomes of students with disabilities. Identifying the challenges school principals face as effective leaders of SPED laws and practices may assist school districts and SPED directors to be able to provide targeted and purposeful training to remediate these challenges.

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APPENDIX A

IRB Approval Notice

Sam Houston
STATE UNIVERSITY
A Member of The Texas State University System

Date: Sep 28, 2020 2:55 PM CDT

TO: Ann Le Peggy Holzweiss
FROM: SHSU IRB
PROJECT TITLE: Principal Leadership in Special Education
PROTOCOL #: IRB-2019-345
SUBMISSION TYPE: Initial
ACTION: Approved
DECISION DATE: September 28, 2020
ADMINISTRATIVE CHECK-IN DATE: September 28, 2021
EXPEDITED REVIEW CATEGORY: 6. Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.
7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Restart 2020 (COVID-19 update): The IRB has released specific guidelines for easing or transitioning existing IRB-approved studies or any new study subject to IRB oversight to in-person data collection. Please be advised, before ANY in-person data collection can begin, you must have IRB approval specifically for the conduct of this type of research. Please see the IRB response page for COVID-19 here.

ATTENTION RESEARCHERS! Effective Monday, July 27, 2020, the IRB has revised its online office hours to 12-2 on Zoom Monday through Thursday. These will be permanent office hours. To access Zoom during the IRB's office hours, click here. Just in case, here is the meeting ID: 712-632-8951. **SEE YOU ON ZOOM FROM 12-2 MONDAY-THURSDAY!**

Greetings,

The above-referenced submission has been reviewed by the IRB and it has been Approved. This study received expedited review, and the IRB determined that a renewal submission is needed, but only in the form of an administrative check-in submission. You will receive an email notification on the anniversary of this study approval, which will be on September 28, 2021. This study approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

Since Cayuse IRB does not currently possess the ability to provide a "stamp of approval" on any recruitment or consent documentation, it is the strong recommendation of this office to please include the following approval language in the footer of those recruitment and consent documents: IRB-2019-345/September 28, 2020/September 28, 2021.

Modifications: Please note that any revision to previously approved materials must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please submit a Modification Submission through Cayuse IRB for this procedure.

Incidents: All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office. Please submit an Incident Submission through Cayuse IRB for this procedure. All Department of Health and Human Services and sponsor reporting requirements should also be followed.

Study Administrative Check-In: Based on the risks, this project does require a renewal in the form of an Administrative Check-In procedure. This means you are required to administratively check in with the IRB on an annual basis. September 28, 2021 is the anniversary of the review of your protocol. **To get started with your next Administrative Check-In procedure, you will submit a Renewal Submission through Cayuse IRB. A reminder email will be sent to you on the anniversary of your most recent approval of** *Principal Leadership in Special Education.*

Please note that all research records should be retained for a minimum of three years after the completion of the project. If you have any questions, please contact the Sharla Miles at 936-294-4875 or irb@shsu.edu. Please include your protocol number in all correspondence with this committee.

Sincerely,

Chase Young, Ph.D.
Chair, IRB
Hannah R. Gerber, Ph.D.
Co-Chair, IRB

APPENDIX B

Interview Questions

Purpose: To explore selected elementary school principals in Texas and their perceptions toward the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom.

Research questions:

1. How do selected principals **perceive their level of knowledge and training** from their principal preparation programs and subsequent support from their school district in leading SPED programming?
2. How do selected principals **define inclusive practices** for students with disabilities?
3. How do selected principals **foster a culture of inclusion** with equity for the educational success of students with disabilities?

Interview date/time:
Interview duration:
Interviewer: Ann H. Lê
Interviewee: [*pseudonym*]
Signed consent obtained: Y/N
Consent verified at interview: Y/N

Introduction:

- Thank you so much for your time and contribution to my dissertation research.
- I will try to keep this interview to the 60 minutes as you had provided consent to honor and respect your time.
- Explain format - begin with demographic questions, then go into special education content questions, personal experiences, and then to the targeted research questions.
- Do you have any questions before we begin?

Demographic questions:

Formal Special Education Training/Certification?

Number of years in education:

Number of years at the current campus:

Number of years as a school principal:

Number of years as an assistant principal:

Number of years as a teacher:

SPED content questions:

1. What types of special education programs are supported on your campus?

   Follow up: Have these programs always resided on your campus or have there been recent changes (e.g., addition/move)? (based on district-level decisions?)

2. Can you tell me about the students in special education? (open-ended)

   Follow up: Where do they receive their instruction the majority of the day – general education or special education classrooms?

3. Can you tell me about the teachers, both special education and general education?

   Follow up: How would you describe the teaching model?

   Follow up: How are the planning times set up for teachers?

   Follow up: What types of support or system of support are available for teachers (both SPED and general education)?

4. Based on the TAPR and IA data reports, how do these results influence instructional practices and decisions that are made for students with disabilities?

5. Do you receive support from the district? How?

   Follow up: What types of support - academic, behavior, or both?

   Follow up: How is the support initiated? How is the district notified of the requested help?

   Follow up: How often does the campus reach out for district support?

"I would like to shift topics slightly and ask you about your personal experiences."

Personal questions:

- What is your favorite part of the day?
- When you come to work, what is one or two things you look forward to the most?
- What accredited university or center did you attend to obtain your principal certification?

Targeted questions:

1. How knowledgeable do you feel today about SPED programming (e.g., identification of disabilities, instructional practices, accommodations/modifications, law)?

   Follow up: How prepared did you feel to assume the role in leading both general and special education programs when you first became a building principal?

   Follow up: What were some of the initial challenges you faced as a new building principal regarding special education?

   Follow up: How were/are you supported in overcoming these challenges (e.g., district, colleagues, self)?

2. Tell me about how your principal preparation program addressed leadership in special education programming?

   Follow up: Do you feel that the program provided adequate coverage? Why or why not?

   Follow up: Are there areas of special education you wished you had more training in while in your principal preparation program? What? Why?

3. How do you see your role as an instructional leader for special education programming?

   Follow up: What do you think SPED teachers need from their principals?

   Follow up: What do you think general education teachers need from their principals about SPED?

4. How are decisions made for students with disabilities?

   Follow up: What data are used for decision-making for students in SPED?

   Follow up: How do you ensure decisions/recommendations are data-driven? Individualized?

   Follow up: What other factors do you need to consider to make SPED decisions?

   Follow up: What challenges have you encountered when making SPED decisions?

   Follow up: What factors, if any, do you consider or use to determine the teacher assignment for a student with a disability?

5. What factors or characteristics do you believe are evidence of inclusive education/practices for students with disabilities?

   Follow up: What does a successful inclusive classroom look like to you? (when you perform walk-throughs or observations, data, etc…)

   Follow up: How did you come to identify these factors as evidence of inclusive practices?

6. How have you learned to be a builder of an inclusive culture? Explain.

   Follow up: What benefits have you encountered for students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms?

   Follow up: What benefits have you encountered for typically developing peers (i.e., students without disabilities) in inclusive classrooms?

   Follow up: What challenges have you encountered with fostering a culture of inclusion with equity for the educational success of students with disabilities?

   Follow up: How do you weigh the needs of the individual student versus the collective whole when making decisions?

   Follow up: When decisions are made to provide services and support for a student in SPED in a more restrictive environment (e.g., removal of students with disabilities from their general education peers/class), what factors are used, or justifications are made for this determination?

7. Is there any other information you feel would be beneficial to the study?

Closing: Thank them, assure confidentiality, and ask if follow up is possible if needed? Can send them an abstract of the final study if requested.

APPENDIX C

Introductory Email

Sam Houston State University

MEMBER THE TEXAS STATE UNIVERSITY SYSTEM

EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

Dear _____,

Thank you for your time and effort in reading this introductory letter. My name is Ann H. Lê and I am a doctoral candidate of the Educational Leadership program at Sam Houston State University. I am currently working on my dissertation titled "Principal leadership in special education programming: A qualitative case study to fostering inclusive practices". The purpose of this letter is to request your participation in my study.

The primary purpose of this study is to understand the essence of the issue regarding principals' perceptions toward inclusive practices for the educational success of students with disabilities. The study will encompass a holistic analysis of multiple sources of information (e.g., archival record review (TAPR) and direct interviews). The total estimated time for the study will be 1.5 hours during the Fall 2020 semester. Participation in this study is strictly voluntary and confidentiality of your participation will be exercised at all times.

Should you be interested and willing to contribute to the current research, please reply back to this encrypted email. A consent form will then be provided to you via a follow-up encrypted email. Should you wish to be contacted via phone, please let me know. Should you have any questions or concerns regarding the research study, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Thank you,

Ann H. Lê

SHSU Doctoral Candidate

APPENDIX D

Sam Houston State University
Consent for Participation in Research

KEY INFORMATION FOR Principal Leadership in Special Education Programming: A Qualitative Case Study to Fostering Inclusive Practices

You are being asked to be a participant in a research study about Texas elementary principals' decision-making toward inclusive practices for students with disabilities. You have been asked to participate in the research because you are an active elementary school principal in a large school district in Texas; you have been serving at their campus for at least three school years; your campus has at least one special education (SPED) program (e.g., resource, developmental, life skills, structured learning lab, Preschool Program for Children with Disability); and you have gone through a TEA accredited principal preparation program and may be eligible to participate. I am conducting this research under the direction of Dr. Peggy Holzweiss, Sam Houston State University Associate Professor, Department of Educational Leadership.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE, PROCEDURES, AND DURATION OF THE STUDY?

The purpose of this study is to explore selected Texas elementary principals' perceptions toward the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom.

The participant will be asked to provide a SPED generated report of the instructional arrangement codes for the campus for the records data review component of the research. The participant will be asked to participate in an approximately 60-minute interview (e.g., face to face or virtual) session that will be recorded. Finally, the participant will be asked to participate in the transcript review and to comment on the preliminary findings.

By doing this study, we hope to learn about how you perceive your level of knowledge and training from your principal preparation program and subsequent support from your school district in leading SPED programming; how you define inclusive practices for students with disabilities; and how you foster a culture of inclusion with equity for the educational success of students with disabilities to help identify challenges you may have faced as effective leaders of SPED laws and practices. Your participation in this research will last about two hours in total across a two-month span in Fall 2020.

WHAT ARE REASONS YOU MIGHT CHOOSE TO VOLUNTEER FOR THIS STUDY?

Through the outcomes of this study, I hope to identify strategies principals can use when addressing the challenges of state and federal programs on special education. Special education directors, guardians, students with disabilities, and special education teachers are impacted by the effectiveness of principals' implementation of IDEA (2004). Identifying

the challenges school principals face as effective leaders of SPED laws and practices remain essential for SPED directors to be able to provide targeted and purposeful training to remediate these challenges. The participant will not receive any direct benefits from their participation. However, participants may gain insight into their past and current experiences as a result of participating in the interview processes, and their contributions to the study may help influence future academic and functional success for all students.

For a complete description of benefits, refer to the Detailed Consent.

WHAT ARE REASONS YOU MIGHT CHOOSE NOT TO VOLUNTEER FOR THIS STUDY?

Special education can cause some concern due to policy and legal implications, so privacy is needed when discussing educational practices.

For a complete description of risks, refer to the Detailed Consent.

DO YOU HAVE TO TAKE PART IN THE STUDY?
If you decide to take part in the study, it should be because you really want to volunteer. You will not lose any services, benefits, or rights you would normally have if you choose not to volunteer.

WHAT IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS, SUGGESTIONS OR CONCERNS?
The person in charge of this study is Ann H. Lê of the Sam Houston State University Department of Educational Leadership who is working under the supervision of Dr. Peggy Holzweiss. If you have questions, suggestions, or concerns regarding this study or you want to withdraw from the study, her contact information is: Ann H. Lê (ahl007@shsu.edu) and Dr. Peggy Holzweiss (pholzweiss@shsu.edu). If you have any questions, suggestions or concerns about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs – Sharla Miles at 936-294-4875 or e-mail ORSP at sharla_miles@shsu.edu.

Sam Houston State University

Consent for Participation in Research

DETAILED CONSENT Principal Leadership in Special Education Programming: A Qualitative Case Study to Fostering Inclusive Practices

Informed Consent

My name is Ann H. Lê, and I am a Doctoral candidate of the Educational Leadership program at Sam Houston State University. I would like to take this opportunity to invite you to participate in a research study of Texas elementary school principals' perceptions toward the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom. I am conducting this research under the direction of Dr. Peggy Holzweiss, Sam Houston State University Associate Professor, Department of Educational Leadership. We hope that data from this research will identify strategies principals can use when addressing the challenges of state and federal programs on SPED. You have been asked to participate in the research because you are an active elementary school principal in a large school district in Texas; you have been serving at their campus for at least three school years; your campus has at least one special education (SPED) program (e.g., resource, developmental, life skills, structured learning lab, Preschool Program for Children with Disability); and you have gone through a TEA accredited principal preparation program.

The research is relatively straightforward, and we do not expect the research to pose any risk to any of the volunteer participants. If you consent to participate in this research, you will be asked to participate in records review/produce reports (e.g., PEIMS, TAPR, IA codes) for data review, 60-minute interview (e.g., virtually by ZOOM conferencing) session, and to comment on the preliminary findings. Any data obtained from you will only be used for the purpose of coding into themes for qualitative, multiple case study analysis. Under no circumstances will you or any other participants who participated in this research be identified. In addition, your data will remain confidential.

This research will require about two hours of your time. Participants will not be paid or otherwise compensated for their participation in this project. The interview will be

performed one-on-one at the location of the participant's choosing (privately) virtually through ZOOM (password needed to enter meeting). The interview will be audio-recorded to ensure participant's responses are documented and transcribed correctly. Participants will be able to review the audio-recording, and destruction of recording will occur 3 years after the project is completed.

Your participation in this research is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which the subject is otherwise entitled, and the subject may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which the subject is otherwise entitled. If you have any questions, please feel free to ask me using the contact information below. If you are interested, the results of this study will be available at the conclusion of the project.

If you have any questions about this research, please feel free to contact me, Ann H. Lê or Dr. Peggy Holzweiss. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as research participants, please contact Sharla Miles, Office of Research and Sponsored Programs, using her contact information below.

Ann H. Lê SHSU Educational Leadership Sam Houston State University Huntsville, TX 77341 Phone: (281) 866-4003 E-mail: ahl007@shsu.edu	Dr. Peggy Holzweiss SHSU Educational Leadership Sam Houston State University Huntsville, TX 77341 Phone: (936) 294-1147 E-mail: pholzweiss@shsu.edu	Sharla Miles Office of Research and Sponsored Programs Sam Houston State University Huntsville, TX 77341 Phone: (936) 294-4875 Email: irb@shsu.edu

☐ I understand the above and consent to participate.

☐ I do not wish to participate in the current study.

AUDIO/VIDEO RECORDING RELEASE CONSENT

As part of this project, an audio/video recording will be made of you during your participation in this research project for transcription purposes only. This is completely voluntary. In any use of the audio/video recording, your name will not be identified. Participants will be able to review the audio-recording and destruction of recording will occur 3 years after the project is completed. You may request to stop the recording at any time or to erase any portion of your recording.

☐ I consent to participate in the audio/video recording activities.

☐ I do not wish to participate in the audio/video recording activities.

Your signature below indicates that you have read the information in this document. Your signature also indicates that you agree to be in the study and have been informed that you are able to change your mind and withdraw your consent to participate at any time.

_____

Participant's Name (please print)

_____ _____

Signature of Participant Date

_____ _____

Signature of Researcher Date

VITA

Ann H. Lê

Education

Doctor of Education (Ed.D) in Educational Leadership and Principal as Instructional Leader Certification, Sam Houston State University, Huntsville, TX.

Master of Education (M.Ed) Special Education and Educational Diagnostician Certification, Sam Houston State University, Huntsville, TX.

Bachelor of Science (B.S.) Neuroscience, Pre-Law and Pre-Medicine, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

Professional Licensure

Principal as Instructional Leader (EC-12)
Educational Diagnostician (Grades EC-12)
Special Education (Grades EC-12)
Texas Educator Generalist (Grades EC-6)
English as a Second Language (Grades EC-12)
Social and Behavioral Research Certification (CITI)
Certified Level 1 Google Educator
Advancing Education Leadership (AEL)
Texas Teacher Evaluation and Support System (T-TESS)

Teaching & Administrative Experience

Sam Houston State University (Huntsville, Texas)
- Graduate representative for Southwest Educational Research Association (SERA)
- Department of Educational Leadership Facebook administrator
- Doctoral research assistant

Klein Independent School District (Houston, Texas)
- Evaluation and ARD specialist / Educational diagnostician
- Vietnamese translator & interpreter
- Specialized Autism FIE evaluation review team member
- Site supervisor / Mentor to educational diagnostician practicum students
- Special education leadership committee team leader

Cypress-Fairbanks Independent School District (Cypress, Texas)
- Educational diagnostician (RDSPD/NWHCC) - deaf education
- Mentor for new educational diagnosticians
- Vietnamese translator & interpreter
- Administrative team member
- Bilingual appraisal staff

Tomball Independent School District (Tomball, Texas)
Special education teacher - PPCD Bilingual / Visually impaired
Special education teacher – Developmental / Life Skills (K – 4)
District translator & interpreter - Vietnamese
Educational diagnostician practicum student / Intern
Grade 6 science / social studies (G/T) student-teacher

Publications

Lê, A. & Slate, J. R. (2020). Stagnant and low college-readiness rates for students in special education: Real cause for concern in Texas. In J. R. Slate (Ed.), *Exemplars of conducting archival data analysis: A collection of K-12 and higher education studies* (pp. 29-41). Hauppauge, NY: Nova Science Publishers.

Le, A. (2018). Understanding the educational impact for children with DiGeorge syndrome: A brief overview. *The DiaLog, 47*(1), 7-12.

Le, A. (2017). Approaches to assessing the second language learners: Assessing students whose native language is Vietnamese. *The DiaLog, 46*(1), 5-8.

Le, A., & Pinto, P. (2016). The impact of CHC theory to the identification of learning disability. *The DiaLog, 45*(2), 11-14.

Program Evaluations

Lê, A. (2019, November). *Special education service model: Program evaluation*. Program evaluation report prepared for Klein Independent School District department of special education, Houston, TX.

Presentations

Lê, A. (2021, February). *Special Education Service Model: A Program Evaluation*. Research presenter for the 44th annual meeting of the Southwest Educational Research Association (SERA) in TX.

Lê, A. (2021, February). *A Brief Analysis of Special Education Content in Texas Principal Preparatory Programs*. Research presenter for the 44th annual meeting of the Southwest Educational Research Association (SERA) in TX.

Lê, A. (2020, October). *Special Education Services and Support: In a Virtual World.* Professional development session for Klein Cain High School in Klein ISD, Houston, TX.

Skidmore, S., Combs, J. & Lê, A. (2020, September). *How to Submit a Proposal for a Research Conference and What to Expect if Accepted*. Workshop for Sam Houston State University, Huntsville, TX.

Lê, A. (2020, August). *SPED 101*. Professional development session for Klein Cain High School in Klein ISD, Houston, TX.

Lê, A. (2020, February). *Principal Leadership in Special Education Programming: Qualitative Case Study to Fostering Inclusive Practices.* Research presenter for the 43rd annual meeting of the Southwest Educational Research Association (SERA) in Arlington, TX.

Lê, A. (2019, September). *College-readiness rate differences for students in special education in Texas over time: Should we be concerned?.* Research presenter for the Graduate Research Exchange (GRE) of the Texas Council of Professors of Educational Administration (TCPEA) conference held in conjunction with TASA/TASB Convention in Dallas, TX.

Lê, A. (2019, May 24). *Critical role of school principals in leading special education programming.* Radio show interview with B Woodford and E Quiles of KZSU 90.1 Stanford University radio.

Lê, A. (2018, November). *Medical diagnoses and special education services.* Professional development session for Hamilton Elementary School in Cypress-Fairbanks ISD, Cypress, TX.

Lê, A. (2018, October). *Parent-teacher conference and special education mindset.* Professional development session for Hamilton Elementary School in Cypress-Fairbanks ISD, Cypress, TX.

Lê, A. (2018, September). *IEP etiquette.* Professional development session for Hamilton Elementary School in Cypress-Fairbanks ISD, Cypress, TX.

Lê, A. (2017, August). *Cultural and linguistic consideration when assessing Vietnamese students*. Seminar speaker and presenter for Cypress-Fairbanks ISD, Cypress, TX.

Lê, A. (2017, April). *Effective practices to accessing the general education curriculum for students with disabilities*. Snapshot Professional Development Session at Region 4 ESC, Houston, TX.

Lê, A., & Pinto, P. (2016, February). *Changing the world, one child at a time – Career path in education*. Seminar presenter for 30th Annual Career & Education Day for Houston Hispanic Forum at George R. Brown Convention Center, Houston, TX.

Lê, A. (2015, September). *Classrooms that foster growth in language.* Seminar presenter for the Sam Houston State University's Joan Prouty Conference, Huntsville, TX.

Lê, A., & Belcher, S. (2015, April). *The impact of CHC theory to the identification of learning disability.* Poster presentation for Texas Educational Diagnosticians' Association (TEDA) Conference, Galveston, TX.

Awards

Southwest Educational Research Association (SERA) 2021 Dean's Award for Exceptional Graduate Student Research
Sam Houston State University graduate representative for SERA Leadership Council
Educational Leadership Award
Eleanor Smith and Charles Garrett Endowment
Randy Pollard Family Endowment
Dr. Genevieve H. Brown and Dr. Beverly J. Irby Endowment
Arleigh B. Templeton Endowment
A+ Teacher of the Year, Nominee

Memberships

Texas Educational Diagnostician's Association (TEDA)
HonorSociety.org National Organization
Hou-Met Chapter of Texas Educational Diagnostician Association
Texas Council of Professors of Educational Administration (TCPEA)
Textbook & Academic Authors Association (TAA)
Southwest Educational Research Association (SERA)