AN EXPLORATION OF INCLUSIVE LEADERSHIP
PRACTICES IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

By
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To my loving husband, David Elie, thank you for your unwavering support, belief in me, and the encouragement that propelled me forward on this journey with your love and prayers. I love you, God’s Perfect Provision for me! To our sweet arrows, David, Abigail, Gabrielle, and Isabelle, mommy loves you!
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At the same time that legislative mandates and accountability measures are imposed on schools and districts related to the academic performance of all students, including those with disabilities (SWD), an increasing number of SWD are placed in general education settings. This shift in practice calls for more attention regarding how leaders and other school stakeholders can best support SWD in a more inclusive setting. In this study, I examined the perceptions of elementary school principals, general education teachers, and special education teachers in Florida regarding the inclusion of SWD in general education classrooms. Through one-on-one semi-structured interviews, data were collected and analyzed using thematic analysis. The interviews revealed four common themes: meeting the needs of all students, providing professional learning opportunities, fostering collaborative relationships, and promoting teacher autonomy with accountability. Analysis of the data provided insights into the perceived effective leadership practices employed by principals to support general education teachers and special education teachers in serving SWD to contribute to a more inclusive school environment in elementary schools. The study also highlights
implications, suggests further areas of research, and emphasizes the potential of the findings to promote inclusive practices and bridge the academic and opportunity gaps for students with disabilities when accessing the general education curriculum.

KEY WORDS: Inclusive, Inclusive practices, Inclusion, Principals, General education teachers, Special education teachers, Students with disabilities.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

From 1990 to 2015, there was a significant increase in the proportion of students with disabilities (SWD) who received at least 80% of their academic services during regular school hours in an inclusive educational setting, rising from 34% to over 70% (Williamson et al., 2020). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004 mandated that all SWD be educated in the least restrictive environment (LRE), emphasizing inclusion in general education classrooms to the greatest extent possible (McLeskey & Waldron, 2011). Subsequently, there has been a gradual change in focus, shifting from ensuring equal access and placement of SWD in general education settings to emphasizing the performance and academic outcomes of SWD. This transition can be traced from the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (EAHCA), which primarily aimed at providing educational access for SWD, to the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2002, which sought to enhance academic achievements for all students, including those with disabilities.

Following the implementation of the NCLB Act in 2002, schools were now responsible for ensuring that all students, including those with disabilities, met grade-level standards and made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) (McLeskey & Waldon, 2015; Patterson et al., 2000). The shift recognized the importance of not only ensuring access to instruction in these classrooms but also focusing on the quality of education and support provided to SWD within those settings (Pierson & Howell, 2013). As schools faced increased accountability due to various mandates aimed at evaluating students’ performance, there has been added pressure on school leaders to enhance
the level of inclusion for SWD in general education classrooms (Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013).

According to Crawford et al. (2006), school leaders face a challenge when it comes to implementing federally mandated inclusion and the participation of SWD in standardized assessments. The National Council of Disability stated in 2008 that school administrators and teachers expressed concerns about being held responsible for the poor performance of SWD, and they believed that it was unrealistic for these students to meet the high standards of standardized assessments. Despite these concerns, many schools have taken proactive measures to create an inclusive environment where SWD are educated alongside their non-disabled peers (DeMatthews et al., 2020). Adopting an inclusion model, these schools strived to ensure that all students receive a high-quality education and are welcomed, valued, and included in learning alongside their non-disabled peers within a general education classroom (Lord & Hutchinson, 2007; Williamson et al., 2020).

As mentioned previously, NCLB placed the responsibility on school districts and principals to establish high academic expectations for all students (DiPaola et al., 2004). NCLB mandated that educational programs in schools incorporate rigorous curriculum, standards-based instruction, and elevated expectations for all students, including those with disabilities and other subgroups (DiPaola et al., 2004). Moreover, NCLB required school leaders to disaggregate data into various subgroups to monitor their performance on standardized tests. These subgroups encompassed SWD, students with limited English proficiency (LEP), students from racial/minority groups, and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds (DiPaola et al., 2004).
Statement of the Problem

Throughout the years, there has been progress in federal mandates and changes in special education legislation, which have led to increased inclusion of SWD in general education classrooms for a significant portion of the school day (McLeskey et al., 2012). While there is research on inclusive education, limited research exists regarding the successful implementation of inclusive environments for SWD, including those ensuring positive academic outcomes and a high-quality education (Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013; McLeskey & Waldron, 2011; Praisner, 2003). Wakeman et al. (2006) argued the role of principals extended beyond operational management and required them to be instructional leaders as well. As principals embrace their instructional leadership role, they are expected to support teachers and establish a culture and environment that fosters ample opportunities for all students to thrive (Wakeman et al., 2006). Hence, there is a need for research to investigate the effective leadership practices utilized by principals and how these leadership practices are perceived by teachers to support an inclusive environment for student achievement.

Scholars widely agree on the crucial roles of school principals and teachers in establishing successful inclusive environments. Moreover, principals should possess in-depth knowledge of the needs of SWD and special education, enabling them to effectively guide both general education and special education teachers in supporting SWD within the framework of inclusion (Wakeman et al., 2006). Numerous studies have demonstrated a positive relationship between principal leadership and student achievement (Hallinger et al., 1996; Khanyi & Naidoo, 2020; Leithwood, 1994; Leithwood et al., 2008; Neufeld, 2014). Moreover, both general education teachers and
special education teachers have responsibilities in ensuring that SWD receive the necessary academic support within a general education setting.

General education teachers often encountered numerous challenges when it came to teaching SWD in general education settings. These challenges included feeling ill-prepared in their pedagogical skills to effectively instruct SWD, lacking sufficient support from administrators, and feeling overwhelmed in meeting the needs of SWD in their classrooms (Pearce & Forlin, 2005). When teachers feel unsupported, overwhelmed, and inadequately prepared, it can negatively impact the quality of education SWD receive. Bettini et al. (2017) emphasized the significant influence that teachers have on student achievement outcomes. They highlighted the importance of all students, including those with disabilities, receiving adequate and high-quality instruction from effective teachers. McLeskey and Waldron (2011) argued that the focus should be on promoting effective instructional practices within inclusive environments for SWD, rather than solely concentrating on the placement or setting in which they are educated.

Principals play a vital role as instructional leaders within schools, providing teachers with various forms of support, processes, and structures to effectively address the needs of SWD (McLeskey & Waldron, 2015). Research by McLeskey and Waldron (2015) revealed that 70% of general education teachers felt lacking in the necessary knowledge to effectively support SWD in inclusive classrooms. DiPaola et al. (2004) discovered that when principals prioritize instructional practices, offer ongoing professional development, and provide strong support for special education, there is a likelihood of improved outcomes for SWD and those at risk. The study also emphasized
the importance of state and local school districts in offering professional development or professional learning opportunities for school leaders and educators, focusing on changes in regulations, new legislative actions, and resources related to special education programs and inclusive practices. This enabled teachers to be better equipped in assisting SWD within general education settings.

**Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to explore how principals, general education teachers, and special education teachers perceive principals’ effective leadership practices to support SWD in an inclusive environment in elementary schools. The objective for this research includes the following:

1. To identify and describe effective practices that principals employ to support an inclusive environment in their school.

2. To identify general and special education teachers’ differential considerations regarding their principal's inclusive leadership practices.

**Research Questions**

The following research questions explore effective practices in the implementation of an inclusive environment in elementary schools:

RQ 1: What do school administrators perceive as effective practices in the implementation of inclusionary leadership practices in elementary schools?

RQ 2: What do general education teachers perceive as effective practices in the implementation of inclusionary leadership practices in elementary schools?

RQ 3: What do special education teachers perceive as effective practices in the implementation of inclusionary leadership practices in elementary schools?
Methods

The primary objective of this study was to identify and describe practices utilized by principals who led inclusive schools. By doing so, this study aimed to provide insights to others on how these effective leadership practices can support inclusive education for SWD in a general education setting and contribute to improved academic achievement for all students, including SWD who spend 80% or more of their time in a general education classroom in an elementary school. Semi-structured interviews were utilized to gather participants' perspectives. A qualitative inquiry approach was adopted, allowing for the emergence of themes and important information from the interview data. The study employed a thematic analysis to uncover and examine themes that emerged from the responses and perspectives of the participants, including principals, general education teachers, and special education teachers.

This analysis offered a deeper understanding of the diverse viewpoints regarding the perceived effective practices within an inclusive environment.

Definition of Terms

To provide clarity of terminology in this study, the following terms are defined:

Disabilities. According to Public Law 108-446, a child with a disability can have an impairment that could include but is not limited to hearing, intellectual, physical, visual, language and may need special education and related services (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).

Every Student Succeed Act (ESSA). A law signed by former President Obama in 2015 that ensures equity for disadvantaged and high need students, requires students to be taught at high academic standards in preparation for college and career,
and annual statewide assessments are administered that measure students’ progress towards on grade level standards (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).

**Inclusion.** Providing all students including SWD with access and equitable opportunities to receive academic services with related supports in a general education setting with their non-disabled peers (Francisco et al., 2020).

**Individualized Education Plan (IEP).** A written statement that is developed, reviewed, and revised for each child that has a disability and serves as a guide that supports the child through the delivery of special education services (U.S. Department of Education, 2017).

**Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).** A law that allows children with a disability to have appropriate and free access to public education (U.S. Department of Education, 2019).

**Least Restricted Environment (LRE).** Children with disabilities are educated with children who are not disabled in a regular class with the support of supplementary aids and services (U.S. Department of Education, 2019).

**School Accountability.** The process where schools are evaluated based on school performance and student performance measures through the federal administrations’ education policies (Figlio & Loeb, 2011).

**School Administrator.** A person who has leadership qualities at a district or school level, which could include but are not limited to a principal, assistant principal, or director.
**Special Education.** Instruction provided to students with a disability at no cost to caregivers to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability including instruction in a classroom, hospital, or home (U.S. Department of Education, 2017).

**Assumptions**

Three assumptions made in this study were that participants believed that SWD should be educated in the LRE, participants had experience with inclusive education, and participants were truthful in their responses.

**Summary**

In Chapter 1 of this dissertation, I introduced the study, presented the statement of the problem, outlined the purpose, and formulated the research questions. Additionally, a list of terms and definitions was provided to assist readers in navigating the study. I also stated the assumptions made in the study. The subsequent chapters of this dissertation are organized as follows: Chapter 2 consists of a comprehensive literature review, Chapter 3 provides an overview of the research methodology, Chapter 4 presents the interpretations of the findings, and finally, Chapter 5 includes the conclusion, implications of the findings, and recommendations for further research.
Chapter 2 provides a comprehensive review of scholarly research pertaining to the support provided to students with disabilities (SWD) who receive at least 80% or more of their instructional time in general education settings. The literature review encompassed various aspects including special education legislation, federal mandates, inclusive education, the drawbacks and benefits of inclusion, inclusive leadership, supportive inclusive practices, and the theoretical framework. In developing these topics, this literature helps to describe the effective leadership practices that could assist school leaders in establishing a culture conducive to inclusive environments.

Overview of Special Education Legislation

According to Datnow and Castellano (2001), education reform served as a catalyst for transforming educational practices, necessitating both restructuring and cultural change. In order to ensure equitable access to quality education, particularly for SWD, several federal mandates have been established. Beginning in the 1960s, various court cases and subsequent legislation safeguarded the educational rights of SWD, guaranteeing their entitlement to a free and appropriate education (FAPE) within public schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2020).

To safeguard the educational rights of SWD and promote inclusive education, several additional mandates were implemented. The initial legislation was Public Law 94-142, commonly known as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA). This law mandated that school districts receive federal funding to ensure the provision of FAPE to all students, with the financial burden falling on the public schools. Subsequently, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was introduced...
through multiple reauthorizations in 1990, 1997, and 2004. IDEA required school districts to provide the necessary services, in line with FAPE, to meet the needs of SWD in the least restrictive environment (LRE) to the maximum extent possible (U.S. Department of Education, 2019; Yell, 2006).

Furthermore, various educational mandates have undergone revisions to guarantee equitable access and deliver high-quality education to all students. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965, a pivotal legislation for students, has experienced multiple revisions and was reauthorized in 1994 and 2001. It underwent a name change to the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act and was subsequently reauthorized as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), signed by President Obama on December 10, 2015 (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). The primary objective of ESEA was to provide grants to school districts who served low-income students, federal funding for textbooks and library materials, provide support for special education centers, as well as give scholarships for low-income college students. This law also offered federal grants to state educational agencies with the goal of enhancing the quality of elementary and secondary education (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).

During the reauthorization of ESEA to NCLB, one of the key requirements imposed on states was the development of assessments to evaluate students’ proficiency in core skills, along with the establishment of high standards and expectations for grade-level proficiency (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). Additionally, NCLB necessitated the disaggregation of data into various subgroups to monitor their performance on standardized tests. These subgroups encompassed SWD,
students with limited English proficiency (LEP), students from racial/minority groups, and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds (DiPaola et al., 2004).

As stated by the U.S. Department of Education (2019), LRE referred to the inclusion of children with disabilities in regular classes alongside non-disabled peers with the support of supplementary aids and services. However, if the nature or severity of the disability hindered their education in a regular classroom, and supplementary aids were insufficient, placement in a separate special education setting may be considered. The LRE mandate also acknowledged that students with severe disabilities may require specialized settings that cannot be adequately addressed in a general education environment, even with supplementary aids (McLeskey & Waldron, 2011).

While the concept of LRE is generally supported by scholars, there were practitioners who held differing views on its interpretation and implementation (McLeskey et al., 2012). Some practitioners argued that placement decisions for SWD should prioritize access to general education curriculum and socialization with peers, while others emphasized the importance of LRE in providing effective services that enhance student learning outcomes (Williamson et al., 2020; McLeskey et al., 2012).

Special education legislation has led to a shift in focus towards ensuring that SWD had access to the curriculum and were part of the accountability system with standardized assessments. Below is a compilation of federal mandates and descriptions, in chronological order, that have been enacted into law to safeguard the education of SWD within a general education setting.

**Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA).** ESEA was enacted into law in 1965 by President Lyndon B. Johnson, and the law offered grants to school
districts serving low-income students as well as grants for school textbooks and library books (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). U.S. Department of Education (n.d.) emphasized that ESEA provided grants to state educational agencies to help improve the quality of elementary and secondary education. McGuinn (2015) stated “to claim their share of a growing pot of federal education funds, states have had to agree to comply with a wide array of federal policy mandates” (p. 77).

**Education for All Handicapped Children Act.** In 1975, Congress enacted the Education for all Handicapped Children Act or Public Law 94-142, also known as EAHCA, which was signed into law by President Gerald Ford and provided protection for the rights of meeting the individual needs of SWD (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). According to the U.S. Department of Education (2022), prior to EAHCA, many children with disabilities were not provided schooling that offered them an opportunity to learn. In U.S. schools, only one in five children with disabilities were allowed the opportunity to learn due to laws that excluded certain SWD (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). The EAHCA law guaranteed SWD access to a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) in the LRE (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).

**Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.** The 1975 EHA law enacted was changed to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in a 1990 reauthorization and was most recently reauthorized in 2004. This law mandates that SWD are provided a FAPE nationwide, and it also issued regulations to address the implementation of the law (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). Furthermore, IDEA governs how state and public agencies provide SWD with early intervention and other related services needed by more than 7.5 million children with disabilities (U.S.
Department of Education, n.d.). According to the U.S. Department of Education (n.d.), the revised regulations over time have included provisions for access to the general education curriculum to children with disabilities, related services for children from birth through the age five years old, as well as including them in accountability measures for achievement.

The reauthorization of IDEA in 2004 led to the launch of the Response to Intervention (RTI) model, which addressed three key components: child find, eligibility, and FAPE (Zirkel, 2015). The concept of the RTI model encompasses students being provided with effective and research-based intervention in either academics or behavior. These interventions elicit either a responsive or non-responsive outcome from students. The data generated from this process is then utilized by a multi-disciplinary team to make informed decisions based on the intervention’s implementation (VanDerHeyden et al., 2007; Zirkel, 2015). Furthermore, the RTI model can serve as a preventive measure attempt or as a means to determine eligibility for special education services. According to Zirkel (2015), child find under IDEA focuses on identifying, locating, and evaluating eligible students with a suspected concern or disability. Within a school district, the RTI model can be used with academics, behavior, or social skills, falling under the broader scope of the Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS). While educators often use RTI and MTSS interchangeably, it is worth mentioning that overtime MTSS emerged after the RTI model. It serves as a method to proactively identify students at risk of learning difficulties, offer timely interventions for those students who don’t exhibit a positive response to initial interventions, and assess eligibility for special education services (Linan-Thompson et al., 2022).
According to Zirkel (2015), teachers play a crucial role as gatekeepers in the child find process, where they identify potential red flags in a child's behavioral or academic development that may indicate eligibility for special education under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). This prompts teachers to refer the child to the school or district for further screening or evaluation. The next component involves determining the child's eligibility by assessing whether they meet the classification criteria under IDEA and determining if there is a need for special education services. Finally, it is important to ensure that, once in special education programs, students receive Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE), including factors such as the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) and other appropriate remedies. The role of MTSS/RTI model is to determine if students need additional assistance or instruction and to monitor their progress (Linan-Thompson et al., 2022).

No Child Left Behind Act. In 2002, President George W. Bush signed into law the No Child Left Behind Act, which mandated schools monitor and achieve certain benchmarks to achieve adequate yearly progress (AYP) in reading and math on standardized assessments to receive federal funding (U.S. Department of Education, 2002; Powell et al., 2009). According to the U.S. Department of Education (2002), NCLB included increased accountability for school districts and states, increased school choice for parents to select for their child, provided more flexibility with dollars allocated for states and local educational agencies (LEAs), and emphasized improvement in reading for younger students. Included in the accountability measures, assessment results were broken down (or disaggregated) by poverty, race, ethnicity, disability, and limited English proficiency to ensure that no child was left behind (U.S. Department of
Education, 2002). Schools that failed to meet AYP were subjected to school improvement plans that included corrective action and possible restructuring to help schools meet or exceed AYP goals (U.S. Department of Education, 2002).

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). According to the U.S. Department of Education (n.d.), President Barak Obama in 2015 signed into law the ESSA, which included provisions that promoted student success in schools by:

1. Providing equity for disadvantaged and high-need students
2. Preparing students to be college and career ready
3. Ensured that information is shared with educators, students, and families on student’s progress through annual standardized assessments
4. Provided access to families to high-quality preschool
5. Mandated high expectations and action that would be taken to provide a positive outcome in the lowest-performing schools, where students are not making progress

ESSA also provided provisions for SWD to have access to a well-rounded and high-quality education, which held to high academic standards to prepare them to be successful in college and careers (Tomasello & Brand, 2018). A policy update reported by Parsi and Case (2016) emphasized that ESSA is key in ensuring academic success for SWD. Since more than 60% of SWD are spending 80% or more of their day in general education classrooms, ESSA opens the door for implementing systematic change to address the needs of diverse learning in a one-size-fits all approach (Parsi & Case, 2016).

Parsi and Case (2016) reported the following components are key to helping all students, including SWD, with rigorous content as well as preparing them to be college and career ready: educator capacity, personalized learning, and interventions with evidence-based strategies, high expectations that SWD can learn, providing assessments that are appropriate, and being part of the accountability of performance.
Inclusive Education

Alongside legislative mandates and accountability measures in education, the implementation of inclusion in schools has generated both critics and proponents. Inclusion refers to the integration of both SWD and non-disabled students in a single educational setting where they actively participate and contribute to all aspects of the educational experience, ensuring that no one is marginalized (Braunsteiner & Mariano-Lapidus, 2014). Inclusion involves adopting a school-wide approach that fosters a culture of inclusive practices, guided by a growth mindset and high expectations that all students can achieve (Braunsteiner & Mariano-Lapidus, 2014).

The implementation of inclusion in schools necessitated ensuring equitable access to education, fostering positive attitudes among staff and school leaders, and embracing the diversity associated with serving diverse learners. The laws enacted to safeguard students’ educational rights have also empowered parents, educational advocates, teachers, and school leaders to acquire the necessary knowledge to develop appropriate educational plans for SWD. Allday et al. (2013) highlighted the importance of principals, general education teachers, and special education teachers being well-versed in strategies and resources to effectively teach SWD within an inclusive environment.

To foster inclusivity within a school environment, a comprehensive approach involves collaboration between school leaders and teachers, ensuring adherence to relevant laws that safeguard student rights, and implementing effective practices that support teachers in making a positive impact on student achievement.

Conflicting Definitions of Inclusion. Various researchers held different perspectives regarding the definition of inclusion or what it means to be inclusive. While federal laws mandated the education of SWD in general education settings, the specific
terms "inclusion" or "inclusive" were not explicitly mentioned in IDEA 2004 (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2013). Ainscow (2007) emphasized that inclusive education can encompass different interpretations, ranging from integrating SWD into general education classrooms to being a social construct utilized by policymakers and communities to address diversity in educational settings.

Francisco et al. (2020) stated that the National Center in Educational Restructuring and Inclusion (NCERI) defined inclusion as providing all students, including students with mild to severe disabilities, effective and equitable educational services with the support of supplementary aids. IDEA 2004 set the premise for providing SWD to be educated alongside their peers in the LRE, and Busby et al. (2012) asserted that LRE is also referred to as inclusion. According to Francisco et al. (2020), “Globally, the term ‘inclusion’ was used in the special education context for the first time in the Salamanca Statement in 1994, wherein it was explicitly stated that the integration of children with disabilities could be possible through inclusive schools” (p. 2). Developing a clear understanding of inclusion and its support within the classroom is an initial and essential step for school leaders to foster an inclusive environment.

**Drawbacks of Inclusion.** The literature presented in this section addresses the barriers that may impede the effective implementation of inclusion in schools, such as teachers’ insufficient preparation, a limited mindset regarding inclusion, and a perceived lack of commitment towards its implementation. Researchers reported that many teachers do not feel they are adequately prepared to meet the needs of SWD within an inclusion model (Burstein et al., 2004; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996; Tapasak & Walther-Thomas, 1999; Waldron et al., 2011). DeMatthews et al. (2020) underscored that teachers and
principal preparation programs at the college level may not provide adequate resources to prepare potential educators to teach and support SWD. Scruggs and Mastropieri (1996) conducted a survey that asked questions of general education teachers and their willingness to teach SWD. Out of 2,193 teachers who were surveyed from nine surveys and six states, 1,170 (53.4%) of general education teachers expressed their willingness to educate SWD (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996). Additionally, Praisner (2003) found that 20% of elementary school principals had a positive attitude about inclusion.

Conversely, not all teachers embraced a positive attitude and mindset towards an inclusive environment for SWD (Monsen et al., 2014). Sailor and Roger (2005) stated:

The problem with a general-classroom-based model is that it doesn’t seem credible to the general education teacher, whose job is usually seen as moving students as uniformly as possible through the curriculum. Students whose disabilities impede them from progressing at the expected rate and who as result, fall whole grade levels behind their classmates on various components of the curriculum seem to belong elsewhere. (p. 504)

Previous studies have stressed that school principals and teachers frequently voice their apprehensions when it comes to implementing inclusive practices for SWD as well as those without disabilities. The successful transition towards increased inclusion typically requires a strong sense of commitment and dedicated effort (Leithwood & Sun, 2012). According to DeMatthews (2015), the actions taken at the school level often fail to align with the expectations set forth by federal mandates such as IDEA.

Critics of both IDEA and inclusion have highlighted numerous barriers faced by stakeholders, including insufficient funding and resources, rigid classifications mandated by the law for SWD, teachers’ limited knowledge of various aspects such as race, ethnicity, and disability types, and the additional educational mandates (DeMatthews, 2015; Sleeter, 2010). Despite significant progress in promoting inclusive practices in
schools, McLeskey and Waldron (2011) argued that achieving high academic outcomes for SWD has not been as successful. Katsiyannis et al. (2007) further contended that even when SWD are provided with necessary accommodations, many still encounter challenges in performing well on state standardized assessments or graduating from high school.

**Benefits of Inclusion.** Despite differing viewpoints on inclusion, researchers have highlighted the advantages of including SWD in general education settings. Inclusive environments offered opportunities for SWD to develop positive social relationships, engage in grade-appropriate curriculum, and experience growth in social, emotional, and cognitive domains (Hunt et al., 1996; Kurth & Mastergeorge, 2010; Waldron & McLeskey, 1998). Cole et al. (2004) emphasized when SWD are placed in general education classrooms, they are held to the same rigorous standards as their non-disabled peers. Furthermore, Burstein et al. (2004) suggested that effective inclusive schools fostered collaboration between general education and special education teachers to provide comprehensive services to all students, not just those with disabilities.

Moreover, Khaleel et al. (2021) highlighted the significance of resources and facilities in determining the effectiveness and success of inclusive schools. The availability of appropriate devices and resources for SWD within general education classrooms is essential to support their learning and meet their individual needs. Neglecting these crucial resources can have a negative impact on their learning outcomes and overall progress (Khaleel et al., 2021). In the following section, the focus shifts to the role of principals in fostering inclusivity through their leadership approach. The implementation of inclusion school-wide can yield various benefits and positive outcomes.
Inclusive Leadership

Legislative mandates, such as NCLB, IDEA, and ESSA, have heightened the level of accountability imposed on school principals (Billingsley et al., 2022; DeMatthews, 2015; Garrison-Wade et al., 2007; McLeskey & Waldron, 2011, 2015). According to Billingsley et al. (2022), the unique characteristics of each school, including its community, conditions, and other factors, contributed to the distinct way it operates. As key figures within their schools, principals played a crucial role in overseeing daily operations, ensuring the safety and security of the school, and empowering teachers to facilitate effective teaching and student learning (Grissom et al., 2021). Their leadership is essential in maintaining the functioning of the school environment. Khaleel et al. (2021) underscored the significant responsibility of principals in guaranteeing the efficiency of school systems. They play a vital role in establishing and nurturing relationships with the community, as well as implementing well-founded educational policies with precision and accuracy. Principals bear the weight of ensuring that the school operates effectively and that all stakeholders, including students, teachers, parents, and the wider community, are engaged in a productive educational environment.

In their pursuit of fostering a more inclusive environment for all students, school leaders need to be prepared to actively engage in educational reform. By implementing effective leadership practices to support teachers, they can facilitate improved academic outcomes for students. McLeskey and Waldron (2015) identified three essential components that an effective inclusive school must possess under the leadership of the principal. These components included robust and active principal leadership to foster a shared commitment among teachers, ongoing progress monitoring to track student advancement, and learner-centered professional learning aimed at enhancing instructional
practices. Moreover, DeMatthews et al. (2020) emphasized that "principals play a critical role in creating effective inclusive schools for SWD around the world" (p. 550). School leaders must demonstrate unwavering commitment to embedding inclusivity as an integral part of the school culture, ensuring sustained and meaningful change.

Principals play a vital role in leading school-wide transformations with the aim of cultivating an inclusive environment for SWD. They are instrumental in providing guidance and support to teachers, enabling them to effectively address the diverse needs of all students. Through their leadership, principals facilitate a culture of inclusion and ensure that necessary resources and strategies are in place to meet the educational requirements of every student (Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013; Pazey & Cole, 2012; McLeskey et al., 2012; McLeskey & Waldron, 2002; Waldron et al., 2011; Salisbury, 2006). Khaleel et al. (2021) emphasized, "Principals also act as role models who improve the ethical and professional growth of teachers and other professional staff" (p. 1). Principals’ leadership influence is paramount within a school to leverage needed changed toward having a more inclusive and effective school setting for all students (DiPaola et al., 2004; Ishimaru & Galloway, 2014).

Implementing a more inclusive environment where teachers and students are supported is not something that is implemented without thoughtful and strategic preparation. For example, Kavale and Forness (2000) reported that inclusion takes careful consideration and planning as well as having both administration and staff with the right attitude, accommodations, and support. The commitment and dedication necessary to make inclusive schools successful is set by the values shared by both school administrators and teachers (McLeskey & Waldron, 2015). When principals have the right
attitude and mindset along with strong core values related to inclusion and student outcomes, this becomes part of the vision for their schools (McLeskey & Waldron, 2015). DeMatthews (2015) synthesized findings from various research studies and identified the leadership practices that contributed to the effectiveness and inclusivity of a school. These practices were enacted by principals who exhibited the following characteristics:

1. Welcomed all students
2. Supported faculty and teachers in embracing the mindset of teaching all students as part of their teaching responsibilities
3. Established processes and put them in place for teachers to work collaboratively to create goals, track students’ data, and create an action plan to meet the needs of all students, including SWD
4. Utilized appropriate resources to meet the needs of all students

Therefore, principals must possess multifaceted leadership skills to address the operational requirements of their schools while also ensuring that all students are achieving their educational goals. As the number of SWD in public school classrooms continues to increase, it is crucial for principals to be well-prepared in order to effectively support teachers in promoting the success of all students, including both those with disabilities and those without (Bon et al., 2017). The role of a principal is vital and indispensable when it comes to enhancing teaching and learning outcomes. Schulze and Boscardin (2018) noted, “Special education leadership is an educational field bound by specific laws involving vision and collaboration” (p. 4). Research evidence suggests that principals acting as catalysts for change have the capacity to foster transformation and promote a more inclusive environment. For example, principals can develop a trusting and supportive relationship, include teachers in shared decision making, provide time for teacher collaboration and planning, and engage in professional learning communities.
Furthermore, equipping teachers with relevant professional learning opportunities to enhance their capacity in employing effective strategies and utilizing appropriate resources to teach SWD is a critical way in which principals can support teachers. DiPaola et al. (2004) found when principals focused on instructional practices, ongoing professional learning, and strong support for special education, the outcomes for SWD and at-risk students were likely to improve. DiPaola et al. (2004) also highlighted that at both the state and local levels, school districts needed to provide school leaders and educators with professional development and training on changes in regulations, new legislative actions, and resources related to special education programs and inclusive practices to better equip teachers to help SWD in general education setting. DiPaola et al. (2004) asserted that principals who possess competent leadership skills can hold a variety of components of the school together as well as hold people accountable in order to achieve a common goal. A skillful principal will ensure that their school is focused on academic goals for all students, SWD included (DiPaola et al., 2004). Salisbury (2006) summarized: “Principals who are actively engaged in developing inclusive schools can offer the field authentic perspectives about both the process of changing school cultures and practices and the challenges that others may encounter” (p. 71). Overall, there are components that school leaders can implement to support their teachers to make inclusive education successful school wide.

Principals who have demonstrated a track record of fostering a school-wide culture that embraces inclusivity are recognized for their effective implementation of leadership
actions to achieve desired outcomes. Billingsley et al. (2022) stated effective principals who create and maintain a high-performing inclusive school environment are considered to have knowledge of special education policies and implement practices and conditions to improve, support, and build professional capacity of stakeholders to meet the needs of all students. Billingsley et al. (2022) conducted peer-reviewed case studies that examined and outlined the initiatives undertaken by elementary school principals to facilitate the inclusion of SWD in their respective schools.

The case studies conducted in this research encompassed elementary schools in the United States, spanning the years 1995 to 2020. Billingsley et al. (2022) found from these case studies five principal actions that supported inclusive schools: (1) principals voiced their commitment about inclusive school to their stakeholders, which included teachers, parents, and other school community members; (2) principals restructured their school to support an inclusive environment such as providing a working definition of what and how inclusive look at the school, creating problem solving teams that consisted of teachers and parents to address concerns; (3) principals focused on building capacity with their staff to support inclusion such as ensuring that both teachers and teacher assistants were equipped to teach all types of students, including SWD, by providing professional learning opportunities and focusing on hiring and retaining the right staff; (4) principals placed emphasis on collaboration and providing effective instruction through supporting both general education and special education teachers; such as having general education and special education teachers engaged in team planning and co-teaching to discuss and collaboratively address academic and
behavioral needs; and lastly (5) principals utilized ongoing progress monitoring data to monitor inclusive outcomes and make the necessary adjustments.

Researchers identified specific principal dispositions and administrative practices that fostered a positive, inclusive culture at their respective schools, including embracing diversity, promoting collaboration, ensuring equity, and valuing all students (Salisbury, 2006). However, recent federal legislation such as NCLB, the 2004 reauthorization of IDEA, and ESSA, have placed substantial expectations on principals as educational leaders. Their role now entailed ensuring that all students, including those with disabilities, met rigorous academic and performance standards (Schulze & Boscardin, 2018). Principals must adopt an active approach in their leadership role to effectively support special education programs within their schools (Patterson et al., 2000). According to Patterson et al. (2000), it is crucial for principals to demonstrate effective leadership and possess the necessary knowledge, skills, strategies, and attitudes to provide strong leadership for special education programs in their schools.

Hence, principals are required to be versatile leaders capable of addressing the operational requirements of their schools while ensuring the attainment of achievement goals for all students. However, given the increasing population of SWD in public school classrooms, it is crucial for principals to be adequately prepared in order to support teachers in fostering the success of both SWD and students without disabilities (Bon et al., 2017). DeMatthews et al. (2020) emphasized that a principal’s role in leading a school within the public education system is not perfect; however, there has been great effort put forth to deploy resources, research, educator preparation, and appropriate funding to advance inclusive education.
When specific actions are carried out by principals, these effective practices can successfully cultivate a culture of inclusive leadership that extends across the entire school.

**Supportive Inclusive Practices for Students with Disabilities**

School leaders encounter the task of ensuring that their schools have a dedicated team of teachers who will effectively work towards the school's goals and vision to enhance student achievement. Darling-Hammond (2003) wrote, “Probably the most important thing a school administrator at the school or district level can do to improve student achievement is to attract, retain, and support the continued learning of well-prepared and committed teachers” (p. 2). The impact of teachers can be instrumental in driving significant student achievement, particularly when instruction is delivered by highly qualified educators (Bettini et al., 2017; Darling-Hammond, 2003). Since the inception of NCLB, all schools are required to hire teachers who are “highly qualified” (Darling-Hammond, 2003). While retaining teachers in the teaching profession is increasingly challenging, their role remains crucial for the academic success of all students, including those with disabilities (Quinn & Andrews, 2004; Stanulis & Floden, 2009). The number teachers who have quit after their first year of teaching has been as high as 15%, and the numbers who leave the profession within five years of teaching is as high as 50% (Billingsley & Bettini, 2019; Billingsley et al., 2004; Stanulis & Floden, 2009; Whitaker, 2000).

General education teachers encounter significant challenges in implementing inclusion, including a lack of confidence in their pedagogical skills, insufficient support from administrators, and feelings of being overwhelmed when it comes to supporting SWD in their classrooms (Garrison-Wade et al., 2007; Pearce & Forlin, 2005). According to the
U.S. Department of Education (2017) there is a continuum of alternative placements for services that range from most restrictive to the least restrictive, including hospitals, residential facilities, homebound environments, special schools, special education classrooms, and general education classrooms. Panel A of Figure 1 illustrates the understanding of the least restrictive setting to the most restrictive setting of LRE (Fuchs et al., 2010).

Note: Based on Fuchs et al., 2010, General Education in the Conventional Continuum of Special Education Placements and Services Panel A

Figure 1-1. General Education in the Conventional Continuum of Special Education Placements and Services

Teachers play an important role in the success or failure of implementing inclusive practices in the classroom. Ryan (2009) revealed when teachers embraced and were receptive to inclusive practices within their classroom, they were inclined to adjust their classroom learning environment to meet the needs of all students, such as providing high-quality instruction, conducting frequent progress monitoring, as well as
increased collaboration with teachers and parents. Grieve (2009) argued that teachers need to have a commitment and the right mindset towards implementing inclusive practices in the classroom. I identified three groups of teachers based on how teachers receive inclusive practices in the classroom: (1) teachers who implemented inclusive practices with adequate support; (2) teachers who did not consider inclusive practices to be beneficial to students and also viewed inclusion as being detrimental to students who did not have a disability in the class; and (3) teachers who considered students with social, emotional, and/or behavioral difficulties needed more adequate support than an inclusion class can provide. The level of support that teachers receive in effectively serving SWD is directly influenced by the leadership support they receive.

**Quality of Instruction.** According to Cochran-Smith (2003), there is consensus among policymakers, educators, researchers, and other stakeholders that the quality of teaching plays a crucial role in student learning and achievement. McLeskey and Waldron (2011) argued that the effectiveness of inclusion in improving the academic outcomes of students with disabilities relied on the delivery of high-quality instruction. Brownell et al. (2009) revealed that a teacher who delivers high-quality instruction does so with a high level of specialized skills related to behavior management, decoding practice, engaging, and explicit. High-quality instruction is not limited to staffing highly qualified teachers, several components to high quality instruction include how students are grouped, the instructional delivery and design, independent worked assigned to students, and effective progress monitoring measures implemented (McLeskey & Waldron, 2011).
Collaboration. Collaboration among educators is essential for school reform and improvement as they work together towards a common goal of ensuring success for all students (Brownell et al., 2006). Brownell and colleagues (2006) asserted: “the assumption is that when teachers work together to achieve a common vision, they will be able to change their instructional practices” (p. 169). Tschannen-Moran (2001) emphasized that having a strong relationship with the basis of trust, teamwork, and collaboration between each other is an important element in implementing a new initiative or carrying out a vision. Extant literature emphasized that teacher collaboration between general education and special education teachers has been proven to be very effective in improving academic outcomes for SWD (McLaughlin & Nolet, 2004).

Both teachers and school leadership play critical roles in achieving inclusion within schools, as they work together to foster a culture of inclusiveness throughout classrooms and the entire school (Zembylas, 2010). Billingsley et al. (2019) posited that teachers should be afforded the opportunities of high-leverage practices that include collaboration with other professionals, the ability to organize and facilitate meetings with other stakeholders such as families, as well as collaborate with families to support the home-school relationship. Garrison-Wade et al. (2007) conducted a qualitative study of preparing administrators with the capacity to improve instruction for all students and wanted to find out what strategies were most helpful to achieve this task. The research findings indicated that certain strategies, such as offering professional development, facilitating effective communication, and promoting collaboration between teachers and school administrators were beneficial in supporting teachers with inclusive practices (Garrison-Wade et al., 2007).
Principals bear the responsibility of fostering collaborative efforts aimed at supporting the academic progress and success of all students. Collaboration between teachers can be accomplished through many forms, such as a school, a grade level, across grade levels, by department, or even one-on-one (Desimone, 2009; McLeskey et al., 2012). What makes the most effective form of teacher learning is the structure and frequency of the interactions (Desimone, 2009).

In a school that has an environment where collaboration and mentoring is encouraged, it makes a difference to both new and veteran teachers on how effective they can be. Mathews et al. (2017) emphasized that teachers see their colleagues as examples or role models on how to implement effective instructional strategies, how to deliver instruction, and how to communicate effectively to form their own instructional expectations of their role. When teachers learn and collaborate on effective practices with one another, they become better at what they do, and teacher collaboration will improve the schools’ capability to cultivate high expectations and student achievement (Rimpola, 2014). Collaboration plays a great role among teachers and their peers as part of a best practice when implementing action towards an inclusive environment.

**Theoretical Framework**

This study is grounded in the Unified Framework, a theoretical framework developed by Hitt and Tucker (2016). The Unified Framework integrates extensive research on principal leadership, providing a comprehensive model for understanding effective leadership practices that contribute to school effectiveness. According to this theory, school leaders can strategically focus their leadership efforts on implementing effective practices that positively influence school effectiveness and student achievement (Hitt & Tucker, 2016). Hitt and Tucker (2016) stated:
With a more comprehensive, robust framework of effective leader practices, researchers have an analytical tool for further examination of the elements, and combinations of elements, that contribute to more vibrant school environments, greater student engagement, and improved student learning. By blending together the cumulative knowledge about leader practices, we are able to build a stronger understanding of what leaders do, how to support their ongoing development and how to assess it more validly. (p. 563)

Hitt and Tucker (2016) combined the frameworks from three pioneering studies in educational leadership: Leithwood’s (2012) Ontario Leadership Framework (OLF), which identified five domains and 21 dimensions; Murphy and colleagues’ (2006) Learning-Centered Leadership Framework (LCL) identified eight domains and 31 dimensions; and Sebring and colleagues’ (2006) Essential Supports Framework (ESF), which identified five domains and 16 dimensions. Hitt and Tucker (2016) synthesized three frameworks, which consisted of effective leadership practices from 56 empirical research studies. They then grouped 28 practices and found five overarching domains (i.e., the Unified Framework). The five overarching domains related to leadership practices are reflected in Table 1.

Table 1-1. Hitt and Tucker’s Systematic Review of Key Leaders Practices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domains of Leadership Practices</th>
<th>Practices Principals identified as being Effective Practices to Support Inclusive Schools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Establishing and conveying the vision</td>
<td>Meeting the needs of all students with two subthemes: Vision conveyed with clarity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitating a high-quality learning experience for students</td>
<td>Providing high-quality instruction to SWD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building Professional Capacity</td>
<td>Providing professional learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creating a supportive organization for learning</td>
<td>Fostering collaborative relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connecting with external partners</td>
<td>Did not emerge as a theme from my study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Promoting teacher autonomy accountability</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


For the current study, Hitt and Tucker’s (2016) Unified Framework and Billingsley et al. (2022) “Principal Actions in Effective Inclusive Schools: A Review of Elementary Case Studies” helped to conceptualize and describe how school leaders can effectively
support general education teachers and special education teachers when implementing an inclusive model in schools to support SWD. Supplementing this framework is Billingsley and colleagues’ (2022) work articulating inclusive leadership practices.

Table 1-2. Hitt and Tucker’s Unified Framework and Principal Actions in Effective Inclusive Schools: A Review of Elementary Case Studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Establishing and conveying the vision</td>
<td>Developing practices aligned with a shared mission, purpose, and vision.</td>
<td>Shared their commitment to an inclusive school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitating a high-quality learning experience for students</td>
<td>Actively and directly developing quality instructional programs.</td>
<td>Redesigned the school for inclusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building professional capacity</td>
<td>Establishing the process to develop the capacity for teaching and learning.</td>
<td>Increased capacity for inclusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creating a supportive organization for learning</td>
<td>Establishing a culture where individuals feel included, supported, and valued.</td>
<td>Supported professional collaboration and effective instruction.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connecting with external partners</td>
<td>Building relationships with family, school, and community stakeholders as a partnership.</td>
<td>Principals monitored inclusive practices as well as student outcomes through comparison of data against non-SWD</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Establishing and Conveying the Vision. Principals as school leaders have the monumental task of having to put on both their operational hats and instructional hats. However, as leaders fill their role as change agents, having a vision and goal(s) can have a significant impact on student learning (Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Robinson et al.,
2008). Hallinger & Heck (1996) stated that having clearly defined goals allow principals to make decisions on staffing needs, instructional program implementation, resource allocation, and other school activities.

For the purpose of this research, I focused primarily on communicating a shared vision and goals to key stakeholders through articulating, modeling, and holding individuals accountable. These practices can include how the principal articulates a vision of inclusion of all students and access to high quality instruction. Part of principals’ actions of conveying the vision and sharing their commitment with others is that principals voiced their commitments openly to parents, teachers, and other community stakeholders (Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013; McLeskey et al., 2012; Waldron et al., 2011). In the case study conducted, principals who shared with stakeholders their commitment to inclusion also identified concerns about the lack of inclusive opportunities and challenged any assumptions or beliefs (Billingsley et al, 2022).

Hitt and Tucker (2016) also mentioned how critical it is for principals to model for teachers the aspirations of their commitment to inclusive practices. Hitt and Tucker (2016) emphasized this point by stating, “modeling demonstrates for teachers what it is that they are expected to be doing” (p. 547). Oftentimes, verbal or written communication conveying the vision to others is more convenient; however, leading by example and allowing teachers to experience and see the desired change in action can be more effective (Hallinger, 2003; Hitt & Tucker, 2016).

Additionally, DeMatthews et al. (2020) emphasized that principals cannot simply announce or articulate their vision to their staff; however, they must work collaboratively to develop the vision that way staff can get a sense of buy-in in the process. Billingsley
and Banks (2019) described in case studies the importance of principals establishing and conveying a vision towards an inclusive vision to include the following: outlining the problems with segregating groups of students and conveying the rationale for inclusion; articulating the importance of inclusion for both SWD and students without disabilities; soliciting ideas, raising questions, from other stakeholders; finding ways to problem-solve to address possible resistance towards inclusion; and sharing how inclusion efforts can be sustained. It is equally important for principals to form a support team that will support the principal’s vision on a more inclusive environment, and this could include but is not limited to general education teachers, special education teachers, school psychologist, parents, and other stakeholders (DeMatthews et al., 2020; DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2013).

**Building Professional Capacity.** In order for schools to thrive and attain sustainability in improvement efforts, they cannot rest solely on the shoulders of the principal. Building professional capacity is necessary to maintain the link to school improvement by providing benefits for learning, influencing, and supporting learning to other stakeholders who play a pivotal role in improving students’ learning (Stoll, 2009). When principals turn their attention to developing teachers and themselves, instructional improvements can be made (Hitt & Tucker, 2016). When teachers take part in sharing and analyzing their work and engaging in professional learning communities, schools are strengthened through this form of capacity building (Stoll, 2009). Building trust between principals and teachers is also an element within building professional capacity in the Unified Framework. Establishing trust between faculty, principals, students, and
parents is also linked to school improvement, a positive climate, and student achievement (Sun & Leithwood, 2015).

A vital responsibility of principals as inclusive leaders is to ensure that teachers are prepared to teach a diverse group of learners with disabilities (Billingsley et al., 2022). There are also several ways in which principals can build professional capacity at their school, including prioritizing teacher recruitment and retention, supporting both general education and special education teachers, and providing professional development (PD) (Billingsley et al., 2022). Billingsley et al. (2022) emphasized that effective principals did not wait on teachers to approach them requesting PD but through progress monitoring, observation, and establishing school priorities, they created conditions and provided PD or professional learning opportunities to support inclusion for teachers.

Principals can also encourage professional learning communities with groups of teachers across grade levels to support the ongoing opportunities for teachers to learn from one another, sharing best practices, addressing challenges and concerns, and reviewing student data to drive their instruction (Billingsley et al., 2022; McLeskey et al., 2012). Having teachers engaged in PLCs can improve their classroom practices (Blanton & Perez, 2011). When principals create conditions for teachers to learn from one another through teacher collaboration, PLCs, and PD, it can also help build teacher leadership so teachers could be proactive problem solvers through the instructional challenges that arise (Billingsley et al., 2022).

According to Hitt and Tucker’s (2016) Unified Framework, the leadership actions of a school leader within this domain focus on building professional capacity through
building trust, providing opportunities for professional learning and development, and creating spaces and opportunities from professional development to practice. Professional development is key to ensure teachers can deliver the appropriate academic engagement delivered to SWD in the LRE (Billingsley et al., 2019). When teachers have the necessary knowledge, strategies, and support to effectively teach SWD in an inclusive environment, their attitudes are likely to change (DeMatthews et al., 2020).

**Creating a Supportive Organization for Learning.** Establishing a supportive environment for learning is imperative for people to be successful in the job they are tasked with. Just as it is important that teachers build relationships and create a supportive environment conducive for learning for their students, the same is true for principals to create a supportive learning environment for teachers (Hitt & Tucker, 2016). Hitt and Tucker (2016) highlighted the importance of principals who modeled relationship-building and created a supportive and conducive environment for their staff’s professional growth. Such principals are likely to witness improved classroom performance, stronger teacher collaboration, and enhanced student outcomes. Principals also play an important role in integrating special education teachers within the instructional culture by providing a system of support for special education teachers. The link principals can use to manage these systems of support can include professional learning communities, targeted professional development across grade levels or departments, co-teaching, and having a school-university partnership (Waldron & Redd, 2011). Additionally, part of creating a supportive organization for learning includes leaders having the ability to identify practices that can be employed to help
teachers yield great benefits for both the teacher and the organization (Hitt & Tucker, 2016). Hitt and Tucker (2016) emphasized the only way that leaders can identify and help teachers reach this goal is to involve them in creating the organizational culture, in some of the decision making, and in establishing a positive and trusting relationship.

When principals are engaged in creating a supportive learning organization for teachers, this can assist in supporting an inclusive environment. Creating a supportive organization for learning consists of including teachers as part of the process (Billingsley et al., 2022). For example, one principal recruited at least one teacher for every grade level who supported the development of an inclusive model. The principal employed a strategic approach by handpicking specific teachers to contribute to the development of the plan. This involved forming school teams to make informed decisions regarding the inclusion of SWD in general education classrooms. Additionally, the principal collaborated with both general education and special education teachers to review student data, leading to revisions of IEPs in line with new placements. Furthermore, schedules were adjusted to facilitate collaboration, co-planning, and co-teaching among teachers (Billingsley et al., 2022).

It is crucial that principals make every effort to create a supportive organization for learning that not only supports inclusive practices for students but also for teachers (DeMatthews et al., 2020). Additional examples on how principals can create a support organization for learning can include developing a plan on what inclusion will look like in the school with a shared collaboration, assigning special education teachers to grade level teams for planning collaboration efforts with general education teachers, as well as
adjusting the master schedule to allow common planning among teachers (general and special education teachers) (Billingsley & Banks, 2019).

**Facilitating a High-Quality Learning Experience for Students.** Facilitating a high-quality experience for students can only come when school leaders and teachers are engaged in what those components entail. There are five elements of facilitating high-quality learning experience for students: (a) maintaining safety and orderliness; (b) personalizing the environment to reflect students’ backgrounds; (c) developing and monitoring curricular program; (d) developing and monitoring instructional program, and (e) developing and monitoring assessment program.

Hitt and Tucker (2016) asserted that the work principals do is multifaceted and understanding as well as having a firm handle on curriculum, instruction, and assessment, which is necessary to be able to provide all students with the high-quality learning experience in the classroom. Principals are not only responsible for the operational needs of a school, but they must also be actively involved in teaching and learning for both teachers and students. Principals actively engaged in ensuring a high-quality learning experience is implemented for all students conduct classroom observations on a regular basis, provide timely feedback to teachers, and articulate their clearly articulate their expectations for teacher practice (Murphy et al., 2006). Cruickshank (2017) stated: “if school principals focus more of their influence on improving the quality of teaching and learning in their school, then they are likely to have a far greater influence on student outcomes” (p. 117).

When principals facilitate a high-quality learning experience for SWD, they can make substantial academic gains (McLeskey & Waldron, 2011). High-quality instruction
for SWDs entailed research-based intensive instruction with a targeted focus on small group instruction, providing explicit instruction on high-leverage skills, and exposing SWD with guided instruction and modeling to ensure students are reaching mastery on skills (Fletcher & Vaughn, 2009; McLeskey & Waldron, 2011; Murphey et al., 2006). Part of facilitating a high-quality learning experience for students is also providing high-quality professional development. For instance, Cochran-Smith (2003) posited that providing high-quality professional development would improve content knowledge for teachers that is aligned to state standards and improve instructional strategies that are scientifically research based.

Enabling high-quality learning experiences for SWD involves several key components. These include offering professional learning opportunities for teachers, implementing research-based instructional methods that incorporate a range of strategies, and actively engaging principals in supporting both teachers and students.

**Connecting with External Partners.** Hitt and Tucker (2016) stated effective leaders should make it a point to establish relationships between the home, school, and community. When parents are encouraged to become partners in their child’s education, the perception is that parents feel welcomed, included, and valued as part of the educational process (Sun & Leithwood, 2015). Connecting with external partners focuses on three key components: (1) building productive relationships with families and communities; (2) engaging families and community in collaborative processes to strengthen student learning; and (3) anchoring schools in the community (Hitt & Tucker, 2016). Finding ways to include parents and other external partners in schools on a regular and ongoing basis is key to support students (Hitt & Tucker, 2016).
DeMatthews et al. (2020) emphasized that principals who are effective in creating a more inclusive environment recognize the importance of the school-family relationship for SWD. In connecting with external partners principals can work with both families and teachers to gain a better perspective and find ways to build trust and cultivate a relationship (DeMatthews et al., 2020). DeMatthews et al. stated, “Engaging families and the community in collaborative processes is also an essential leadership practice for inclusive schools” (2020, p. 547). When principals create partnerships between external partners to better support a more inclusive environment, it promotes collaboration and success academically and socially (Goldman & Burke, 2017).

**Summary**

In summary, developing a school-wide approach to implement inclusive practices in schools is undoubtedly necessary for school districts to create opportunities to produce positive outcomes for teacher support and student achievement. By providing all students, including students with mild disabilities, with access to equitable opportunities in a general education classroom, positive outcomes can be achieved both academically and socially (DiPaola et al., 2004). Given the fact that 80% of students are receiving their academic services within a school day in the LRE (Williamson et al., 2020), it is for this reason that school principals need to be well-equipped and work collaboratively to develop inclusive practices that have a direct impact on SWD.

This review examined the literature on legislative mandates that propelled the discussion and implementation of the rights of SWD, supports for general education and special education teachers, principal and teacher preparation for inclusive education and practices, and how inclusion is defined as well as the benefits and drawbacks of
inclusion. Literature was also reviewed on the role of the principal as an instructional leader and the role of general education teachers and special education teachers.

Chapters 1 and 2 also discussed how special education mandates and school accountability laws affect school leadership in creating an inclusive environment for SWD. Chapter 3 describes the research methodology used to explore the perception of principals, general education teachers, and special education teachers on the inclusive practices implemented in an elementary school.
CHAPTER 3
METHODOLOGY

This study aimed to investigate the perspectives of elementary principals, general education teachers, and special education teachers regarding inclusive leadership practices in elementary schools. The significance of this research stems from the increasing number of SWD being educated in general education classrooms (McLeskey & Waldron, 2015). Both general education and special education teachers bear the responsibility of instructing all students, including SWD, who are also subject to high-stakes testing (Bettini et al., 2016). Principals play a crucial role in creating working conditions that enable teachers to enhance instructional strategies for equitable achievement in general education and facilitate inclusive education for students (Bettini et al., 2016.) Therefore, it is essential to gain an understanding of the perceived effective leadership practices utilized by elementary school principals to support general education teachers and special education teachers in implementing an inclusive environment.

In this study, the interview guide was developed to explore the firsthand experiences of elementary school principals, general education teachers, and special education teachers in relation to inclusive leadership practices. The study also sought to analyze and compare the perspectives of these stakeholders to gain insights into their distinct viewpoints on inclusionary leadership practices in education.

**Purpose of the Study**

The intent of this research was to gain an understanding in effective leadership practices employed by principals that support the inclusion model as well as understand what both general education and special education teachers perceived as effective
practices that principals employ to support them. Researchers have acknowledged that principals, general education teachers, and special education teachers are all vital in the implementation, improvement, and success of an inclusive environment (DeMatthews et al., 2020; McLeskey & Waldron, 2015; Salisbury, 2006; Williamson et al., 2020).

Gaining an understanding of the effective practices and strategies employed by principals in implementing an inclusion model to support their teachers is essential for identifying effective and inclusive approaches in other schools. McLeskey et al. (2012) underscored the significance of determining the success factors for implementing an inclusion model amidst the multiple demands faced by school principals.

**Research Questions**

The following research questions were addressed in this qualitative study:

1. What do school administrators perceive as effective practices in the implementation of inclusionary leadership practices in elementary schools?

2. What do general education teachers perceive as effective practices in the implementation of inclusionary leadership practices in elementary schools?

3. What do special education teachers perceive as effective practices in the implementation of inclusionary leadership practices in elementary schools?

**Significance of the Study**

The enrollment of SWD in general education classrooms has been steadily rising due to federal and legislative requirements (Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013; McLeskey & Waldron, 2015). In light of this, principals must go beyond their role as operational managers and become effective instructional leaders who can support and guide all programs. While principals may be more comfortable with general education settings, the increasing presence of SWD necessitates their familiarity and proficiency in leading special education programs. It is crucial for principals to stay updated on current special
education issues and laws to ensure that SWD receive the appropriate services and support (Wakeman, 2006). Neglecting this responsibility can have serious consequences for principals, as litigation cases related to special education services have become more prevalent (Louis & Robinson, 2012). Therefore, principals must prioritize their knowledge and understanding of special education to ensure that the needs of all students are adequately addressed.

Furthermore, this study emphasized the importance of providing strategies to support both general education teachers and special education teachers in effectively serving SWD who specifically spend 80% or more of instructional time in a general education class within an inclusion model. By offering teacher support, fostering an inclusive culture, and promoting collaboration among teachers, positive student outcomes can be achieved. Professional learning opportunities for teachers play a significant role in improving the quality of instruction within an inclusion model for SWD (Bettini et al., 2016; Desimone, 2011; McLeskey & Waldron, 2015). The findings of this study can help to identify effective practices that principals can implement to support teachers and students, benefitting policymakers, teachers, parents, and school leaders in achieving positive student outcomes and success.

Research Design

In this study, a qualitative research approach was employed to explore the perceptions of elementary school principals, general education teachers, and special education teachers regarding effective leadership practices that support an inclusive environment. Participants were invited to participate through various means, including email, text messages, face-to-face invitations, and phone calls. Schools were selected based on the following criteria: meeting the federal percent of points index with ESSA
proficiency percentage for the SWD subgroup, an elementary school, and school grade on the Florida Standards Assessments (FSA) using data from the 2021-2022 academic year. There was a total of 60 schools that met the criteria. A semi-structured interview consisting of 19 open-ended questions related to perceived effective practices in supporting inclusionary leadership practices was conducted using Zoom videoconferencing. A thematic analysis approach was utilized to analyze the interview responses provided by the participants.

**Setting**

This study specifically targeted elementary school principals, general education teachers, and special education teachers within a large school district located in the southeastern United States. The school district is situated in a sizable suburban community. The student population in the district exhibits racial diversity, with 34% identifying as White, 28% identifying as Black, and 31% identifying as Hispanic (Table 3). As per the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2021), the school district comprised a total of 331 schools, including elementary, middle, high, combination schools, centers, charter, and technical schools. Among these, there were 135 elementary public schools. The overall student enrollment in the district was 256,037 students with 36,745 students having an Individualized Education Plan (IEP).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Percentage %</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>34%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>28%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hispanic or Latino</td>
<td>31%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>4%</td>
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<tr>
<td>American Indian/Alaskan Native</td>
<td>0%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hawaiian &amp; Other Pacific Islander</td>
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<tr>
<td>Some other race alone</td>
<td>1%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Two or more races</td>
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Sampling

During the process of selecting schools, I sought to identify elementary schools that matched specific criteria. I sought schools that received school grade letters A, B, or C in areas that may not typically be categorized as affluent. These schools were also required to demonstrate a consistent track record of achieving standardized assessment goals for SWD. Specifically, their ESSA SWD subgroup had to surpass the 41% threshold on the federal percent of points index. The intention behind choosing such schools was to gather insights and viewpoints from a diverse range of educational settings that have effectively implemented inclusive practices. To identify such schools, I employed resources accessible from the Florida Department of Education website (Florida Department of Education, 2022). The website comprehensively listed all schools within the county, presenting their respective school grades as well as the federal percent of points index attributed to SWD subgroups for the 2021-2022 school year. Through this resource, I successfully identified the schools that aligned with the specified criteria.

As a result, I was able to identify a total of at least 60 public elementary schools that met the criteria of achieving the federal percent of points index above 41% at the time of data collection. Furthermore, in an effort to pinpoint schools implementing exemplary inclusionary leadership practices, a recruitment letter was sent to the ESE director via email requesting assistance in identifying suitable schools. Regrettably, no response was received.
Nevertheless, I refined my selection approach and proceeded to choose six principals whom I contacted via email and invited them to participate in this study. Two principals responded and were subsequently interviewed.

**Selection of Participants**

The study involved a total of six participants, comprising two principals, two general education teachers, and two special education teachers from two different public elementary schools. The deliberate selection of a small sample size enabled a focused and in-depth exploration of the participants’ perspectives without overwhelming the research process. This approach allowed for the collection of rich and detailed information from each participant.

The initial intent to collaborate with the district’s ESE director to identify a list of elementary schools within the district that had a track record of implementing inclusionary practices for SWD was unsuccessful due to the ESE director being non-responsive. The selection process considered standardized assessment data from the Florida Standardized Assessment (FSA) for the 2021-2022 academic year, specifically, schools where SWD achieved or exceeded their proficiency goals as mandated by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) (i.e., above 41%). For schools to attain their ESSA objectives across different subgroups, exceeding a federal percent of points index of 41% is crucial. To establish a baseline, I examined schools that reached a minimum of 42%. Elite Elementary accomplished a 49% in their SWD subgroup and secured an A-grade for the 2021-2022 academic year, catering to students from pre-k to 5th grade. Meanwhile, Providence Elementary achieved 42% in their SWD subgroup and received a C-grade for the same school year, serving pre-k to 5th grade students as well. Both school are Title I schools and also host a self-contained autism spectrum disorder
(ASD) cluster; however, the primary focus was on SWD with mild to moderate learning disabilities, who received instruction in a general education classroom for 80% or more of the time.

After selecting the sampled schools, invitations were extended to the principals, requesting their voluntary participation in the study. Collaborative efforts were then made with the principals to identify a general education teacher and a special education teacher from their school who met the criteria for participation. The criteria included being employed in a public school district, having experience teaching SWD, and having SWD in their general education classes for at least 80% or more of the instructional time. The principals were instrumental in selecting participants who aligned with the vision and values of the study. I communicated with each principal, providing them with a clear focus: I asked them to pinpoint educators within their school who had demonstrated exceptional effectiveness in working with students with disabilities, substantiated by their corresponding standardized test score data for SWD. Once I clarified my criteria, the principals promptly and decisively identified teachers who were highly suitable for inclusion in my study.

The data collection process began with interviewing the principals. Following the interviews with the principals, they provided a list of names of potential general and special education teachers for further interviews. The teachers were contacted via email and provided with a recruitment letter that outlined the purpose of the study and invited them to participate. Once the teachers agreed to voluntarily participate in the study, an informed consent form was sent to the interested teachers, and once received, the interview dates were scheduled followed by a Zoom link for the meeting.
For the interviews conducted via Zoom, the participants were provided with a Zoom link to join at the scheduled interview time. Prior to starting the interviews, an introduction was read from the interview protocol, and the participants were informed about the recording of the interview. Consent for recording was obtained from the participants, and the interviews commenced. In the case of the face-to-face interview with the one principal, a meeting was arranged at a school other than their own due to convenience of a meeting date and time between myself and participant. A voice recorder app on a cell phone was used to record the interview after reading the introduction from the principal interview protocol.

Although four teachers initially met the criteria for participation, one teacher did not respond to the scheduling of the interview despite accepting the invitation to participate. As a result, another name was requested from one of the principals from their school, and a replacement teacher was identified, bringing the total number of participating teachers to four. Throughout the process, both the principals and teachers demonstrated willingness and eagerness to contribute their perspectives to the study, which greatly enriched the research findings.

Data Collection

Thematic analysis relies heavily on interviews as a means of data collection. As described by Lochmiller (2021), thematic analysis involves exploring, synthesizing, and providing in-depth descriptions of participants' recollections that are deemed valuable. In this study, I conducted a total of six individual interviews using a semi-structured approach, employing open-ended questions to gather comprehensive and detailed narratives about the participants' personal experiences and perceptions of the best inclusionary practices implemented at their respective schools.
The interview questions were developed by aligning them with the key leader practices identified in Hitt and Tucker's (2016) “Systematic Review of Key Leader Practices Found to Influence Student Achievement: A Unified Framework.” After the completion of the interviews, the collected data was transcribed using the electronic website, Rev.com, that converted the recorded audio to text and was subsequently subjected to coding for analysis.

After obtaining approval from the University of Florida Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the school district, a computer-generated letter was sent to the principals, general education teachers, and special education teachers at a selected public school district, inviting them to participate voluntarily in the study. The consent form provided to participants outlined the voluntary nature of their involvement and ensured the protection of their rights during and after the data collection process. Prior to their participation, an email was sent explaining the study's purpose, providing information about myself, and clarifying the role of the University of Florida in the study.

The consent form provided comprehensive information to the participants, including details about the selection process, the research's objectives, and the potential benefits of their participation. Participants were informed about any potential risks associated with the study, reassured that their personal information would remain confidential, and guaranteed that their real names would not be used. They were given pseudonyms to protect their identities. Participants were given the freedom to choose whether to volunteer for the study, decline to participate, or join the study and later withdraw if they wished to do so.
I employed interview protocols specific to each research question (Appendices G, H, and I). One-on-one interviews were conducted, with each interview lasting approximately 25-60 minutes, and a sample interview transcript can be found in Appendix J. The duration of the principal interviews varied, with one lasting 30 minutes and another extending to 60 minutes. Interviews with general education teachers were all 30 minutes in length, while interviews with special education teachers ranged from 25 to 27 minutes. To ensure accuracy, the interviews were recorded using both an electronic phone device and Zoom videoconferencing. Prior to the interviews, participants were informed about the recording and provided their consent. Immediately after each interview, transcription of the recorded interviews was carried out to maintain the integrity of the data.

For the qualitative research, a semi-structured interview format was employed. The interview questions were developed using an interview protocol that aligned with the research questions. As described by Merriam and Tisdell (2016), a semi-structured interview involves qualitative investigation with open-ended questions that are less rigidly structured and allow for flexibility in wording. This approach enables respondents to express their thoughts freely and allows for the emergence of new ideas related to the topic of study.

The semi-structured interview questions used with school principals, general education teachers, and special education teachers were organized into five categories which included: demographic information, experience, knowledge, tasks, and perception and opinion questions (Appendix G). The content of the questions was grounded using Hitt and Tucker’s Theoretical Framework (2016). There are five essential key domains
that look at the characteristics of an effective leader related to establishing and conveying the vision, facilitating a high-quality learning experience for students, building professional capacity, creating a supportive organization for learning, and connecting with external partners (Hitt & Tucker, 2016). Questions were designed to elicit information about the effective practices of principals and teachers with the inclusion model in schools. Similar questions were used with teachers to identify, describe, and understand how principals’ responses are indicative or reflective of the school’s effective practices related with the implementation of an inclusion model in their school.

Patton (2002) emphasized that interviews allow researchers to ask questions that may not observe respondents’ feelings, intentions, or thoughts but instead understand other people’s perspective. Notes were also taken during the interviews to assist with formulating follow up questions, which is called probing (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 122).

Data Analysis

To ensure comprehensive data analysis of the participants’ interview responses, a thematic analysis approach was employed. Lochmiller (2021) described thematic analysis as a method of identifying recurring patterns and developing overarching themes or statements. The aim was to gather responses from six participants, including two principals, two general education teachers, and two special education teachers.

Due to the small sample size, it was important to gather comprehensive and high-quality information from each participant. The analysis focused on identifying themes, subthemes, meanings, and recurring patterns that emerged from the participants’ responses. The approach employed for this analysis was thematic and aimed to provide a descriptive and explanatory account based on the participants’ own
words and perspectives (Lochmiller, 2021). Coding practices were also utilized to
generate the themes that emerged, and these will be discussed further in the study.

Braun and Clarke (2006) stated thematic analysis is used to identify, analyze,
and report themes to describe detailed and rich data collected. In the initial phase, I
immersed myself in the data by thoroughly reading it multiple times to gain familiarity.
Through this process, I generated codes that captured the essence of the information
collected. Subsequently, I reviewed these codes and identified recurring patterns, which
allowed me to assign names to the emerging themes. To support the themes, I located
specific examples and quotes from the interviews that aligned with each theme. This
systematic approach helped to organize and make sense of the data, providing a
comprehensive snapshot of the research findings.

To effectively manage and analyze the collected data, I utilized both a Word
document and an Excel spreadsheet. These tools allowed me to organize, categorize,
and classify the data systematically. The Word document served as a repository for
research documentation and notes, while the Excel spreadsheet facilitated the coding
process by providing a structured format for data entry and organization. I was able to
assign a code next to the line from the interviews and I gave each participant a tab on
the Excel spreadsheet. The combined use of these tools enabled me to efficiently
handle and prepare the data for further analysis.

After organizing the transcriptions and notes, the next step involved analyzing the
collected information. For this qualitative research, I employed traditional coding and
thematic techniques to examine the feedback. To begin the analysis, I carefully read
through the transcribed interviews multiple times, ensuring a thorough understanding of
the data. During the coding process, I identified recurring and common information within the responses. I categorized this information to capture the recurring themes expressed by the participants. As described by Lochmiller (2021), coding in qualitative research typically involves three elements: codes, categories, and themes generated by myself. Codes were assigned to specific lines or segments of the participants' transcriptions, capturing the essence of the content. Subsequently, a master code list was created based on the developed codes, facilitating the identification of similarities and patterns across the transcriptions.

The subsequent stage involved identifying common themes that corresponded to the research questions. As Creswell (2013) suggested, themes in qualitative research are overarching units that emerge from the codes and contribute to a comprehensive concept. Through this process, patterns, categories, and themes were identified, aligning them with the research questions. Lastly, I conducted a final review of the transcripts to validate the established themes and ensure their alignment with the data derived from the analysis as suggested by Saldaña (2013).

**Trustworthiness**

When addressing trustworthiness in a qualitative study, researchers can employ various strategies. Trustworthiness is a crucial aspect that ensures ethical research practices, instils confidence in the presented data, and guarantees the quality of the study's interpretation (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this study, I focused on three approaches to establish trustworthiness: credibility, triangulation, and transferability, as outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985).

**Credibility.** Ensuring credibility is a fundamental aspect of establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research, as it enables researchers to demonstrate the
accuracy and reliability of their findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) emphasized that the researcher’s training, experience, and intellectual rigor play a vital role in determining the credibility of a qualitative research study. The use of credibility as a criterion for establishing trustworthiness can manifest in various ways (Williams & Morrow, 2009). In this study, I supported the credibility approach through the implementation of different strategies, including triangulation, member checks/respondent validation, and active engagement in data collection (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

This study employed a thematic analysis approach, utilizing one-on-one interviews with each participant and employing semi-structured, open-ended questions. By adhering to the thematic analysis approach, this study demonstrated dependability. To ensure the dependability of the data, audio recordings were utilized to accurately transcribe the interview responses. Additionally, the recorded notes served as a log, further enhancing the dependability of the study.

**Triangulation.** Merriam and Tisdell (2016) defined triangulation as the use of multiple sources of data and methods to validate emerging findings. In this study, the triangulation of sources strategy was employed by gathering data from two different schools and interviewing elementary school principals, general education teachers, and special education teachers in the same school. Yin (2009) found that establishing credibility and trustworthiness is strengthened when researchers are able to triangulate their findings and support them with multiple sources, such as multiple stakeholders within one school.
**Transferability.** Transferability was another criterion utilized in this study to ensure trustworthiness. Transferability refers to the ability to generalize findings beyond the specific context of the study (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), strategies can be employed to enhance the possibility of transferring the results of a qualitative study to another setting. In this study, firsthand accounts from participants regarding their perceptions of inclusionary practices in their schools were used. It can be assumed that the findings of this study may be applicable in other school settings, indicating transferability. Additionally, establishing authenticity was another aspect considered. Considering that the findings describe the perceptions of school leaders and teachers, it is reasonable to suggest that they could have an impact on other school leaders and teachers, further supporting the transferability of the findings.

**Positionality Statement**

Revealing my positionality through a positionality statement contributes to the authenticity and transparency of the research (Creswell, 2013). In this study, the research was conducted as part of a doctoral dissertation while serving as an elementary school principal in a public school district in Florida. As a principal, my role encompassed not only operational leadership but also instructional leadership, supporting all teachers and students for academic success. In my school, we have a cluster for students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and students with IEPs who received instruction in a general education classroom, either partially or exclusively, alongside their peers without disabilities. My responsibility involved providing support to both general education and special education teachers to ensure the success of all students in the classroom.
The motivation behind this research stemmed from my professional convictions. I firmly believe that implementing effective leadership practices within a school to foster a supportive and inclusive environment benefits both general and special education teachers, leading to successful outcomes for students. I have observed instances where general education teachers faced challenges in working with SWD in their classrooms due to inadequate support or lack of necessary tools to facilitate teacher and student success, both in the classroom and on standardized assessments. However, I have also witnessed students with IEPs excel in a general education classroom and achieve proficiency scores on standardized assessments. Therefore, I am committed to ensuring that no students are left behind due to any disability that can be supported in the classroom. I believe, as a principal, to have an effective and inclusive school environment, which requires vision, shared commitment, and providing the necessary support to empower both teachers and students.

The goal of this research was to motivate school leaders and teachers to embrace effective leadership practices that provide support to both general education and special education teachers, ultimately leading to positive outcomes in student achievement.

**Limitations of the Study**

The following limitations were presented in this study:

1. The use of purposive sampling may limit the generalizability of the findings, as it was focused on obtaining data from participants who were most frequently engaged in inclusionary practices.

2. The selection of participants was based on schools that were known for their success with SWD, as indicated by their reputation and performance on standardized state assessments.
3. The study was conducted in a specific context, involving principals, general education teachers, and special education teachers from two elementary schools within a single school district. Therefore, the findings may not be representative of other school settings or grade levels.

4. The semi-structured interview questions used in the study may have allowed for different interpretations from the participants, potentially leading to variation in the responses and findings.

Summary

This study aimed to explore the perspectives of school administrators, general education teachers, and special education teachers regarding effective leadership practices in the implementation of inclusive practices within elementary schools. A qualitative approach, specifically employing thematic analysis, was utilized. Prior to commencing the study, approval from the University of Florida Institutional Review Board (IRB) was obtained to ensure adherence to ethical guidelines.

Following approval, recruitment letters were sent via email to the ESE director, principals, general education teachers, and special education teachers. Subsequently, one-on-one interviews were conducted with each participant using a semi-structured format and open-ended questions. Participants were fully informed about the research purpose, and their voluntary consent was obtained. The interviews were conducted either face to face or via Zoom and, with consent, recorded, transcribed, and subjected to coding and theme identification.

Finally, the analysis focused on identifying recurring patterns and themes within the participants' perceptions that aligned with the research questions.
CHAPTER 4
FINDINGS

The goal of this study was to identify, describe, and understand effective inclusive practices employed by elementary school principals. Participants in this study provided responses to 19 semi-structured and open-ended questions through one-on-one interviews. The interview guide was structured to answer the following research questions:

1. What do school administrators perceive as the effective practices in the implementation of inclusionary leadership practices in elementary schools?
2. What do general education teachers perceive as the effective practices in the implementation of inclusionary leadership practices in elementary schools?
3. What do special education teachers perceive as the effective practices in the implementation of inclusionary leadership practices in elementary schools?

These research questions were structured into an interview protocol taken from Hitt and Tucker’s “Systematic Review of Key Leader Practices Found to Influence Student Achievement: A Unified Framework” (2016) and literature from Billingsley et al. (2022), which allowed for each participant to describe their perception freely. Interview protocols can be found in Appendix G.

The analysis of the responses and theme development produced four themes contributing to leadership practices to support teachers in implementing effective inclusive practices for SWD. Chapter 4 presents the findings of two elementary school principals, two general education teachers, and two special education teachers from two elementary schools. The following themes listed emerged from interviews:

Theme 1: Meeting the Needs of All Students
Theme 2: Providing Professional Learning Opportunities
Theme 3: Fostering Collaborative Relationships
Theme 4: Promoting Teacher Autonomy with Accountability
Chapter 4 is presented with each theme accompanied by explanations and quotes from participants to describe and illustrate how inclusive practices were implemented to support SWD in a general education setting.

**Meeting the Needs of All Students**

A key theme to emerge from interviews with study participants was the importance of meeting the needs of all students. Within this theme, I differentiated between two sub-themes: (1) vision conveyed with clarity and (2) providing high-quality instruction to SWD.

**Vision Conveyed with Clarity.** For the school leaders in this study, a first step in meeting the needs of all students was to convey a clear vision aimed towards inclusivity. This perspective was conveyed in many of the interviews conducted; however, there was a good description captured by Jeremiah, the principal from Elite Elementary:

> While your kicker might not be the quarterback and the status that the quarterback carries, he has to feel that he’s just as an integral part of that team as the quarterback. Even though technically speaking he’s not. But that’s what you’re supposed to do as an administrator. Everybody is supposed to feel like that star quarterback or your running back or your receiver. Those that get the touchdown and the accolades, you don’t forget your linemen. You don’t forget your defensive line. So it’s the same way that I go about it as far as inclusivity is concerned.

Principal Jeremiah pointed to his belief that it takes everyone on the team to make inclusive work school-wide. He shared this example, “I think I look at it as a team and you have head coaches, you got assistant and your players. Your players all have to feel that they contribute.” This quote emphasized his perspective that every team member should be made to feel valued no matter what role they are in.
Elsy, the principal from Providence Elementary, shared Principal Jeremiah’s sentiment and summarized her vision from a leadership standpoint as ensuring she adequately equipped teachers to meet the needs of all students. Principal Elsy remarked, “we all have our different needs and it’s our job as a school to provide them whether they’re ESE or not.” Principal Elsy also attested conveying her vision to her staff was a leadership practice she felt allowed her to support both students and teachers.

The shared vision of both schools emphasized the importance of fostering an inclusive environment for SWD. It was recognized that this vision cannot be simply proclaimed but requires a collaborative effort over time to create an inclusive environment for all students.

Many of the teachers agreed regarding how their principals conveyed and modeled their vision of what it meant to meet the needs of all students, especially SWD. This was best captured by Joy, a general education teacher from Elite Elementary:

In general, he wanted all the students to succeed. No matter where they were at, if they were level one, level two, our principal wanted them to succeed, to feel accomplished. That was our goal and he always brought it up.

Joy expressed how her principal incorporated inclusion within his vision, as well as articulated it, modeled it, shared it with stakeholders, and held teachers accountable for how all students learned in the classroom.

Jasmine, a general education teacher at Providence Elementary, further elaborated on this concept by highlighting her principal’s vision. According to Jasmine, the principal aimed to foster the independence of SWD and ensured they had equal
access to the curriculum while still receiving the necessary accommodations outlined in their Individualized Education Plans (IEPs).

Jasmine shared an example of a student with a disability who began by spending less than 80% of the time in her class. When their time was increased to more than 80% in her class, the student was able to function and keep up with everything her general education students did. She confidently shared how her principal articulated how she wanted all students to be independent so when they moved beyond a self-contained class they were equipped with the knowledge and resources they needed to achieve in a general education class (and beyond).

As the teachers discussed how their principals conveyed their vision to their school and staff, it became apparent that teachers were clear about what their principals’ expectations were for all students regardless of disability. Jordan, a special education teacher from Elite Elementary, expressed this when she described her principal’s vision of her school was to ensure that as a school they close the gaps with all students and help them be successful “as best as they can.” Like Jordan, Joy expressed how her principal allowed teachers to voice their thoughts and opinions on what teachers could do or needed to help close the gap for students’ learning, including SWD.

It was evident that principals and teachers alike were consistent on how conveying a vision with clarity was important in order to meet the needs of all students. Thus, a vision of inclusive school leadership was a foundational leadership practice for the principals in this study.
Providing High-Quality Instruction for All Students

An additional element to meeting the needs of students emerged through the second sub-theme—providing high-quality instruction for all students. In listening to the responses from participants, there was a consistent message that motivated principals to move to a more inclusive environment for their schools. Part of moving to a more inclusive environment was ensuring teachers provided high-quality instruction for all students in all settings. Principals Jeremiah and Elsy emphasized how they felt it was important that both general education and special education teachers created learning conditions oriented around high-quality instruction. There were a few ways in which both principals in their leadership practice took steps to ensure high-quality instruction for all students were provided in all classrooms.

An approach that was implemented involved maximizing the inclusion of SWD in general education settings, as long as they were capable of benefiting from such an environment. Principal Jeremiah stated he strategically placed his best teachers with his most fragile students. He stated, “the kids that need the most support are getting the best services.” Alternatively, Principal Elsy also strategically used teacher placement to ensure high-quality instruction for all students. However, she added another layer to it by addressing how important it was that SWD in a general education setting received their accommodations and interventions. Principal Elsy remarked, “if they need some extra assistance in math or reading, we use that so that they feel that they have some help.” Principal Elsy emphasized the importance of continuous training and ongoing staff development for teachers. This training focused on equipping them with the necessary knowledge and skills to effectively implement accommodations and interventions for students, ultimately ensuring high-quality instruction and meeting the
needs of all students. Rachel described how her principal supported her and her colleagues by granting them opportunities to participate in trainings and engage in professional learning opportunities, such as professional learning communities (PLCs), with colleagues on the same grade level. This point will be further elaborated upon in the following section.

To implement an inclusive model, another strategy involved incorporating research-based programs and interventions within general education settings. While both schools maintained self-contained special education classes, teachers in those classes remained dedicated to their respective students. However, the principals strategically utilized their special education teachers and teacher assistants. One principal, for instance, assigned a special education teacher along with a paraprofessional (teacher assistant) to a general education class where students spent 80% or more of their day. This additional support was aimed at assisting the students within the general education setting. Both the special education support teacher and paraprofessional supported the teachers and students by conducting small group instruction, differentiated instruction, and worked as another teacher-led center to either reteach, remediate, or enrich. Both special education and general education teachers also worked collaboratively to support students struggling academically in a general education setting. As a general education teacher, Jasmine described this experience,

There’s an aide that comes with the special education teacher assigned to my class. She pulls a small group for math. When we do math, I teach the whole group. She pulls a small group and then she pulls them in a small group for reading as well. And whatever, I’m teaching, she kind of like reteaches it with them.

Furthermore, Rachel, a special education teacher, mentioned that her principal assigned paraprofessionals to provide additional support to teachers in the classroom,
particularly when working with SWD. The insights shared by Jasmine and Rachel served as concrete examples that reinforced the principals’ commitment to leveraging both teachers and paraprofessionals in delivering high-quality instruction within general education classes, thereby supporting the diverse needs of all students. The study findings indicated that both school leaders and teachers recognized the strategic significance of providing high-quality instruction to SWD within a general education setting.

**High-Quality Instruction Conclusion**

There was a clear consensus between administrators and teachers that meeting the needs of all students required two important components, a clear vision and high-quality instructional opportunities for all students. Participants described how these leadership practices helped support SWD in a general education setting. The principals and teachers in this study felt these two elements were formative in making a more inclusive environment to meet the needs of all students through exposure to the appropriate rigor in the curriculum and teachers creating conditions for success through planning, collaborating, and providing a varied learning experience.

**Providing Professional Learning Opportunities**

Study participants emphasized the crucial role of meaningful and relevant professional learning opportunities in ensuring high-quality instruction within an inclusive environment for all students.

Providing professional learning opportunities to teachers was a contributing leadership practice that both principals implemented to support a more inclusive school. Interview responses revealed from principals and teachers that professional learning was aimed to improve classroom practices for both students with and without
disabilities. Respondents described various forms of professional learning, which led to
the emergence of two subthemes: formal professional learning and informal
professional learning.

**Formal Professional Learning**

Formal professional learning constituted specific trainings principals wanted
teachers to receive. Principal Elsy affirmed the importance and necessity of providing
teachers with the necessary support and professional learning to enable their success
in working with students. While Principal Elsy acknowledged the provision of various
professional learning opportunities, including curriculum training and opportunities for
sharing effective practices, she expressed a desire for a greater number of general
education teachers to hold certifications or endorsements in exceptional student
education. She believed that an increased presence of certified general education
teachers with an endorsement would contribute to fostering a more inclusive classroom
environment. Nevertheless, Principal Elsy ensured that the professional learning
provided to her staff addressed a wide range of areas, such as individual teacher
needs, curriculum knowledge, planning, classroom management, and instructional
strategies, among others.

Moreover, the formal professional learning opportunities offered to her staff were
carefully aligned with the goals and policies of both her school and district. Principal
Elsy explained how she collaborated with the district’s academic departments,
specifically the reading and math departments, to bring in experts in those content
areas to provide professional learning sessions for her staff. These sessions were
designed to support the implementation of the new reading and math curriculum,
ensuring that her staff had the necessary knowledge and skills to effectively teach these subjects. Principal Elsy best conveyed her point by expressing this:

> We did a lot this year with our new programs, but we did a lot this year with benchmarks and with math. So those were our two focuses. We did science for fifth grade. And again, it's not just for students with disabilities because I always feel like the training, what's good for one kid is good for all kids. And the strategies they teach to use with your ESE kids or with your ELL kids, they're just good teaching strategies. I don't separate it that this is just for your ESE kids, but we did a lot with the departments reaching out.

Principal Elsy aligned her vision ensuring her teachers received sufficient training by collaborating with her district's academic department to provide professional learning. She acknowledged the challenges her teachers faced in math instruction and proactively reached out for support. Principal Elsy stated, “I know math just came out and they did a whole thing because we’re struggling.” By implementing necessary measures and supports at her school, she emphasized the benefits of equipping teachers to effectively meet the needs of all learners, including SWD.

Although Principal Elsy noted professional learning provided by the district’s academic department was given to all teachers for all students, she did not differentiate formal professional learning with a focus on SWD. She generalized the professional learning for all teachers and all students based on her response, “and again, it's not just for SWD because I always feel like the training, what's good for one kid is good for all kids. And the strategies they teach to use with your ESE kids or with your ELL kids, they're just good teaching strategies.”

Correspondingly, Principal Jeremiah described the importance of professional learning and explained how he determined the professional learning that he needed to provide to his staff. Principal Jeremiah shared that the first thing he did when deciding
what professional learning to provide his staff was to conduct a needs assessment. He stated, “so when you do a needs assessment, you want to go ahead and monitor what it is that most of them want.” He noted how he felt classroom teachers were experiencing more students with more diverse learning needs, and teachers needed to be well prepared to handle these diverse learning needs with all students. He also described how he conducted his needs assessment with his staff, asking what they felt they needed in conjunction with using school/class/class achievement data to see what needed to be improved or strengthened and adhering to district aligned curriculum expectations. Principal Jeremiah best explained this,

> We can give them a menu of suggestions, and you should also put others. Because if those others are aligned with benchmark assessment and what we’re doing with Benchmark Advance for testing, how the chapter test or whatever the case is, whatever their concerns are, if people are talking about that, then we need to go ahead and sit at the table and figure out what we can do.

Principal Jeremiah emphasized the significance of conducting a needs assessment as a valuable means to identify the professional learning needs of all teachers.

Both administrators recognized the crucial role of professional learning in improving teachers’ pedagogy and classroom practices to effectively meet the needs of students. They also discussed the systems and structures they implemented to ensure teachers had access to the necessary professional learning opportunities for achieving this goal.

**Informal Professional Learning**

Informal professional learning was described as training through sharing best practices among peers, coaching support from instructional coaches, and involvement in school learning communities. In the study, teachers described how engaging in
formal professional learning not only helped them improve their instructional practices to meet the needs of students but also highlighted the significance of informal professional learning opportunities that were not necessarily traditional lecture approach. The teachers expressed that they availed themselves not only of formal professional learning provided at their school, but they also highlighted how their participation in informal professional learning at their school was just as valuable. They emphasized that their school did provide the necessary professional learning they needed, but they expressed their trust in their principal’s vision of empowering teachers to go above and beyond in meeting students’ needs. Jordan exemplified this sentiment by stating,

That was something that I personally liked because my population of kids, sometimes sitting down at a table and doing work on paper is not always conducive and it’s not always going to be productive. So that was something that I thoroughly enjoyed. And I feel like they made it an engaging training to show that learning can also be engaging for the students. It doesn’t always have to be on the computer, open up your book. It can be something fun, which I think that’s important. And ESE students a lot of times are not our traditional learning. Their traditional learning styles are not always paper and pencil, and things like that. They need to move around, they need to do it so they can understand it. So those things are definitely important.

Jordan expressed how she benefited from her seeking out professional learning, not only based on what her students needed but what she felt she needed to help her students be successful as well. Similarly, Joy shared how she understood the importance of her principal providing professional learning opportunities in school, but she also reveled in her own self-initiated professional learning. She articulated it this way,

I also took, what was it? It was about equity professional development. I believe it was last year. I took that because I wanted to learn about the diversity. It was based on diversity and why certain groups of minorities were not being taught the same way other groups were. So I attended that
because I wanted to learn how I can reach them with another type of strategy.

Arguably, Jasmine did not hesitate to voice that, during the school year, she did not feel there was enough time to participate in all the staff development she felt she wanted. She stated, “there’s just no time in the school year to get it in right now and to be present in the classroom and not have to worry about all this other stuff.” With that, Jasmine felt it was important that she also took professional learning that the district offered or that her instructional coaches and principal suggested to take during the summer in addition to during the school year.

The importance of professional learning and its various ways within educational settings became evident through the interviews conducted with principals and teachers. One aspect that surfaced during the interviews was the belief held by both principals and teachers that professional learning extended beyond formal training conducted by district employees. They emphasized that professional learning can also occur within the school, facilitated by experts within the building, such as other teachers and instructional coaches. The principals took time to emphasize the importance of cultivating a culture where staff members felt comfortable and open enough to share their best practices with one another. Providing dedicated time during common planning or after school was identified as crucial for fostering an inclusive environment with their schools.

Principals and teachers asserted that professional learning took place in various forms through diverse methods on their campuses. Rachel, a special education teacher, expressed her preference for being part of a collaborative professional learning community (PLC) where she found the most value in hearing her colleagues’
perspectives on instruction, sharing effective strategies, and modeling practices for other teachers. Jordan also shared her positive experience with in-house professional learning sessions with her colleagues, which she shares as an example, preparing students for standardized testing by exposing them to specific question stems. Jordan stated,

> Then the PLCs, I know one PLC a while back, it was just the questioning format for the questions that the kids would look at. What question stems do we think that they needed to work on, and what question stems were they already familiar with that they will ultimately be successful with? That way when they were in the classroom, we would know, okay, let's focus on this particular kind of questions formats because they're not understanding them. And these are what our population of students needs to focus on because these are the questions that they're going to get and these are the questions that they're having problems with.

Specifically, Jordan explained her SWD were not exempt from taking standardized assessments. Despite receiving extra support and implementing accommodations, there were instances when they required additional assistance in comprehending and answering assessment questions or concepts. Jordan provided an example where her colleagues, during a PLC session, shared strategies for implementing skills with SWD. She successfully applied these strategies in her own classroom, specifically with her SWD. This sharing of best practices extended to both general and special education teachers as informal professional learning.

In the same manner, Principal Jeremiah shared how his school’s in-house professional learning was done by his special education coaches, ESE specialists, and reading or math coach for the teachers. He stated, “they do the trainings, not only do they do trainings for the teachers, they actually, in the cluster specifically, our ESE specialist meets every two months with parents and has somebody coming in to work with the parents, because it’s not just a school thing. This is a community.” Principal
Jeremiah made clear that informal professional learning within the school also included parents, and he encouraged this for both staff and stakeholders through articulating the importance of including everyone to meet the needs of students.

**Professional Learning Conclusion**

The emphasis by administrators and teachers on engaging in professional learning has resulted in an understanding of the importance of what it means to improve their professional practice. Providing professional learning allowed teachers to hone their craft, collaborate with their colleagues, and learn from each other by sharing best practices. Professional learning is a leadership practice both principals used to implement an inclusive environment with their teachers at their school. Teachers correspondingly felt that professional learning provided to teachers by teachers or coaches allowed them to improve their instructional practice while supporting students in an inclusive environment.

The participants’ responses made it clear that professional learning, whether formal or informal, held significant importance. In particular, the in-school training conducted by fellow teachers was valued for their collaborative nature, allowing teachers to engage in meaningful discussions and learn from one another. Interestingly, teachers’ responses suggested a perception that informal professional learning may have been of higher quality than the more formal professional learning.

**Fostering Collaborative Relationships**

An important leadership practice that most leaders recognize is necessary for effective classroom instruction and student support is fostering positive collaborative relationships within a school. The next emerging theme observed in the interviews revolved around fostering collaborative relationships. Each respondent mentioned
collaborative relationships were a big part of their school’s culture, and the success of their school related to inclusivity. Both principals perceived that cultivating a collaborative culture necessitated not only verbal communication but also the integration of dedicated time carved out for teachers to engage in collaborative activities.

Principal Jeremiah exemplified the concept discussed in the interviews by describing how he facilitated dedicated time for collaboration through the incorporation of common planning periods in the teachers’ schedule. As the master scheduler at his school, he ensured that teachers within the same grade level had at the very least, designated common planning time embedded in their schedules.

Conversely, Principal Elsy made a point of mentioning that common planning was already integrated into the school’s master schedule prior to her assuming the role of principal, and she saw no need to alter this practice. Both principals held the perspective that effective planning by teachers and providing them with dedicated collaboration time were an ongoing component for an inclusive school.

The participants’ experiences of collaborative relationships were facilitated through active participation in weekly team meetings, both within and outside regular school hours, active involvement in professional learning activities, and sharing of best practices. Joy explained:

Yeah, when we have our PLCs or when we have our grade level meetings, they’re there and we ask them. We share with them our resources. Because I know sometimes they might not have them, so we share, "Okay, listen, this is what we’re doing. Do you need a copy of this? Hey, listen, we found this video. Do you want me to send you the link? Or do you have something that we can use with our kids?" And we share everything, our resources, strategies with each other.

The participants highlighted the correlation between collaborative relationships and common planning, emphasizing the importance of coming together to discuss and
address specific needs of students as a team. For example, principals and teachers admitted special education teachers and general education teachers did not meet in silos. A special education teacher was attached to a grade level with a general education teacher for the purpose of having discussions through planning and supporting the classrooms whether students had an IEP or not.

Principals shared how fostering collaborative relationships served as a leadership practice that was important and imperative to making an inclusive environment effective. Both principals at their respective schools met on a regular basis, sitting in on different grade level team meetings or PLC meetings with both general education and special education teachers. Furthermore, they ensured that special education teachers were assigned to their specific grade levels, emphasizing the expectation for their involvement in planning and collaboration. Principal Elsy encouraged each grade level to share lesson plans, share best practices, provide feedback, discuss data, and make decisions based on data being discussed for both students with and without disabilities. Principal Jeremiah also remarked:

They're not separated. We meet together and the biggest thing is you meet during PLCs, you meet during PD, you meet during common planning time that I set up. And every week somebody is meeting and having those discussions and will have either support or administration sitting with them to address any areas of concerns or anything that's going on. So to me, the communication is full.

Principal Jeremiah acknowledged that his school had not set up collaboration for vertical alignment but wanted to make a way to work towards that in the future. While interviews highlighted positive perspectives regarding how collaboration efforts enhanced and enriched teachers’ knowledge base, it was reported that some teachers also engaged in meetings with their peers even outside of their contractual obligations.
Jasmine revealed that her and her team, with special education teachers included, regularly met every week and on certain occasions, and some chose to remain afterward to further collaborate on sharing best practices, reviewing students’ data, reviewing IEPs, and making instructional adjustments for upcoming lessons and groups of students.

The supportive dynamic between general education and special education teachers in the school’s culture was further exemplified by their collaborative efforts in addressing the needs of SWD. Rachel highlighted her role in providing support to SWD alongside her general education colleagues. They would convene to plan lessons, have discussions about the specific group of students and review the students’ IEP goals. Rachel best summarized her collaborative efforts with the following statement:

I do like how my school does, especially at this point right now, I like how I push in for math and reading. Because what I noticed last year, I was an ESSER teacher last year, so that was my first year as an ESE support facilitator. So it's pretty similar except for the IEPs. I don't know if it's because of COVID or if they just need the extra time with it, but phonics is such an important factor with my students with special needs. Collaborating with the general education teacher is helpful when I'm in the classroom with her and the students.

Jordan also provided an example of how the collaboration between general education and special education teachers manifested in practice:

Well, when we're having our meetings, definitely we're having those open-ended conversations with myself, the ESE team, and the general education teachers to see what are we doing that's coordinating to what they're doing in the classroom, how is that working, and what can we do together to make that kid successful?

Teachers provided instances of inclusive collaboration, where everyone was involved and shared a common goal of supporting SWD.
Finally, teachers expressed that collaboration occurred in a variety of ways, whether through planned weekly meetings, impromptu or unplanned meetings, or even through IEP meetings with different support staff members. Jasmine shared:

I want to say that we do it through their IEP meetings, through the meetings we have with that. We mark down what if they're meeting their goals at the time. I work very closely with the ESE teacher. So whatever I'm doing in the classroom or whatever she’s doing, we’re piggybacking on each other and I'm more closely with her so we can make sure that they're at least trying to meet their goals. This is his goal, this is what we need to do to get there. And I'm not going to lie to you, sometimes it's hard. Sometimes they just don't get those goals.

It was apparent that fostering a collaborative relationship among both general and special education teachers positively influenced the implementation of an inclusive environment within both schools. There was a culture established where collaboration was the norm among teachers.

**Collaborative Relationships Conclusion**

Both principals indicated they were deliberate and strategic on ensuring both their general education teachers and special education teachers had the time to plan together as a team for the benefit of all students. It was evident that common planning was reported as a critical factor for improving teacher practice through collaborative efforts. Teachers described how they engaged in collaborating with one another, not only within their designated contractual obligation but also outside of it, whenever necessary. Providing teachers with adequate time to foster positive and collaborative relationships was deemed crucial in effectively serving all students. Witnessing the collaboration between general education and special education teachers as they discussed students’ IEP goals and worked together to support SWD in a shared setting was truly enlightening. Principals and teachers alike discussed the task of having two
individuals with distinct roles providing support to the same group of students, but the collaborative efforts demonstrated the potential for effective teamwork and enhanced student outcomes.

In conclusion, the interviews revealed both principals and teachers acknowledged collaborative relationships as a collective endeavor, contributing to the personal and professional growth of both educators and students.

**Promoting Teacher Autonomy with Accountability**

The study revealed a final theme through interviews with participants, which focused on promoting teacher autonomy while maintaining accountability. The responses of principals to various questions indicated the presence of similar leadership practices implemented in their respective schools. Principal Jeremiah and Principal Elsy described their leadership practice granting teachers a degree of autonomy while also ensuring accountability. While they adopted a top-down approach, they emphasized how they promoted and empowered their teachers to make data-informed decisions based on student outcomes. Principal Jeremiah’s experience served as an illustrative example of striking the right balance between autonomy and accountability with this point:

> I think the biggest thing is I’m hands off until I need to have my hands on, but they love the autonomy, but they also understand that it comes with accountability. So as long as they’re producing, I’m very fine with that.

Principal Jeremiah emphasized that a significant aspect of fostering teacher autonomy involved granting teachers the authority to make classroom-level decisions. For instance, teachers have the freedom to choose appropriate supplemental resources to support student learning in their classes. Principal Jeremiah shared when teachers came to him with a request such as ordering materials, he purchased it for them, and
also monitored the achievement data for performance through progress monitoring, which will be discussed later. Additionally, he mentioned that although he allowed for teacher autonomy, he established school-wide non-negotiables:

Bell ringers had to happen in every subject, reading, math and science. You have to start with these 15-minute little bell ringers that are cyclical to all the standards that are being addressed and that you’re addressing all the time. That has to happen. Small group instruction, it’s a must. It’s predicated, it’s simple. You need to have three groups, minimally. The teacher, independent work, a computer assisted program, whether it’s i-Ready, whether it’s IXL, whatever it is that you feel meet the need.

Promoting teacher autonomy was a leadership practice demonstrated by Principal Jeremiah. He emphasized the importance of granting teachers autonomy and allowing them to make data-informed decisions and classroom-level choices. At the same time, he also established school-wide non-negotiables to ensure the consistent implementation of essential practices.

Teachers further expressed a sense of empowerment in their teaching practice, describing how they were granted the freedom to make decisions aimed at better supporting students in the classroom. Jordan specifically highlighted the support she received from her principal in this regard:

They always just ask us like, "Hey, what do you need? What do you need? What do the kids need? How are the kids doing?" And just open-ended conversation, "What do you need? What’s going to work?"

Similarly, Jasmine remarked, "she really does take into consideration how the teachers feel about stuff. Listen, it's not working for you. If it's not working for you, let me know and we'll figure something else out." While promoting teacher autonomy, both principals also engaged in classroom observations and offered feedback based on their observations. Joy described what this looked like in her class coming from her principal:
When the AP or the principal walks in, they walk around, they ask the students questions like, what are you learning today? What is that activity? What is the purpose of this activity? They really don't talk to us. They just let us do our teaching. And then when we meet with them after the observation, they give critical feedback like, "Oh, listen, I really liked how you did this." Or if they didn't, "Okay, why did you do this?" If they don't like something, why did you do this instead of this? Or why were you using that instead of that? So they would give us feedback and be like, "Oh, okay, next time maybe tie it into this standard or maybe use this resources instead of that." But during the observation, they don't really address us, they let us do our thing. But they mainly address the kids to ask them if they know what they're doing, what the purpose of the activity is.

Teachers gained confidence in their instructional practices by implementing strategies and resources they believed would support student success with their SWD, exercising their autonomy. Even during classroom observations conducted by principals, feedback was provided, and an open dialogue was encouraged to address any confusion or lack of understanding about the instructional approaches used in the classroom.

Principal Elsy expressed a shared viewpoint when she emphasized the importance of open communication among her teachers. She encouraged her teachers to express any concerns, seek assistance, or provide feedback if they encountered any challenges or required support. While principals expressed their primary inclination towards avoiding the micromanagement of teachers, classroom observations were conducted to monitor and assess teacher performance in a non-threatening manner.

Teachers unanimously conveyed that, despite classroom walkthroughs conducted, their principal consistently ensured the presence of good teaching practices in the classroom. Jasmine pointed out her experience with her principal, stating, “If she comes in and she doesn't see something or she says, "How does this work?" She gives me a chance to explain it.” Teachers are granted autonomy in implementing
As previously mentioned, an additional aspect in which teachers are given autonomy was determining the professional learning they require for their professional growth and development. This served as an example of how teachers have the freedom to shape their own learning experience for the good of the school. The consensus among principals and teachers is that this fosters a sense of community, ownership, respect, collegiality, and trust.

The final aspect of granting teacher autonomy pertained to teacher accountability, particularly in relation to ongoing progress monitoring. Each teacher interviewed emphasized the continuous use of data to monitor student progress, engaged in data discussions with administrators, and consistently tracked student outcomes. Principals declared data provided a glimpse of what was taking place in the classroom. Joy shared what her principal stated when it came to data, "Joy, keep doing what you're doing." I'm like, "Okay." All he cares about is that data. He goes, "Just make sure those kids are making progress" I'm like, "No problem. You got it."

Principals maintained diligent monitoring of the achievement data, and as long as the data demonstrated an upward trend, ongoing discussion revolved around how the data will be used to inform decision-making at the teacher, class, and school levels. One principal provided insight into the conversations held regarding student data and teacher accountability with his teachers:

I have to go ahead and share data with them. There were teachers that I had in fifth grade that when we spoke about the data, they saw that they were not moving scholars in the direction they should have moved. We have conversations, honest dialogue.
This quote highlighted the importance of engaging in courageous and honest conversations when student outcomes were not yielding positive results.

Apart from utilizing assessment data, classroom observation, and discussions among colleagues, no other forms of data were discussed, such as Response to Intervention (RtI) data or Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) data, or employed to monitor student outcomes. This is not to say that they did not use this data but that it was not specifically mentioned in any of the interviews. Nonetheless, all respondents unanimously agreed that teacher autonomy granted a certain level of freedom in teaching and decision-making, benefiting both teachers and students. They also acknowledged the accountability that comes with autonomy, particularly in monitoring student outcomes and engaging in conversations about effective practices. Data played a crucial role, serving not only as a topic of discussion but also as a basis for instructional decisions and resource allocation to support teachers and students.

**Teacher Autonomy Conclusion**

Each participant expressed a strong belief in the importance of granting teacher autonomy while recognizing the accompanying accountability through progress monitoring. Teachers valued the freedom from micromanagement by their principals and appreciated the encouragement to voice their needs for instructional support, ultimately contributing to the overall success of their students.

**Summary**

To summarize, Chapter 4 highlighted several key emerging themes that contributed to the establishment of an inclusive culture within educational setting. The first theme of meeting the needs of all students underscores the importance of catering to the diverse requirements of learners, including those with disabilities, and ensuring
equal access to education. This theme aligned with the principles of inclusive education, which emphasized providing appropriate support and accommodations to promote the academic of all students.

The second theme, providing professional learning opportunities, played a critical role in equipping educators with the knowledge and skills necessary to effectively address the needs of diverse learners. By offering ongoing training and support, principals described how they empowered teachers to implement evidence-based instructional practices, adapt their teaching methods, and employed inclusive strategies that promoted student engagement and success.

The third theme, fostering collaborative relationships, emphasized the significance of establishing a culture of collaboration and shared responsibility among all stakeholders. Effective collaboration involved active participation in team meetings, engaging in professional learning communities, and promoting the exchange of best practices. By working together, teachers, principals, and other school staff pooled their expertise, shared resources, and collectively addressed the individual needs of students, including those with disabilities.

Granting teacher autonomy with accountability, the final theme, acknowledged the importance of empowering teachers to make informed decisions about their instructional practices. This autonomy allowed educators to tailor their teaching methods to meet the specific needs of their students. However, accountability ensured that these decisions were aligned with established school-wide goals, standards, and non-negotiables. This balance between autonomy and accountability supported the creation of a cohesive and inclusive educational environment.
Chapter 5 will build upon these themes, providing a comprehensive summary of the research findings and their implications for further research, educational practice, and policy development. By highlighting the significance of meeting student needs, providing professional learning, fostering collaboration, and promoting teacher autonomy with accountability, the study will offer valuable insights into creating inclusive schools and advancing inclusive education initiatives.
CHAPTER 5
SUMMARY, IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH, FURTHER RESEARCH

Summary

General education teachers face numerous obstacles when including SWD in general education settings. These challenges encompass a lack of confidence in their pedagogical skills, insufficient support from administrators, and a sense of being overwhelmed when supporting SWD in their classrooms (Pearce & Forlin, 2005).

Extensive research exists on the challenges and implications of inclusive schools for SWD. There is abundant research available on effective practices and effectiveness of schools implementing inclusive practices (Bettini et al., 2017; Billingsley et al., 2022; McLeskey et al., 2014). This study aimed to explore the positive and supportive practices and processes that facilitate the implementation of an inclusive school environment, as perceived by principals, general education teachers, and special education teachers.

This study was centered on two purposes: to identify and describe effective practices that principals employ to support inclusion at their school and to identify the differential considerations between general education teachers and special education teachers when implementing instructional strategies in their classrooms for SWD. This study centered on gathering insights and perspectives from six participants: two principals, two general education teachers, and two special education teachers. The following research questions guided the participants responses throughout this study:

RQ 1: What do school administrators perceive as effective practices in the implementation of inclusionary leadership practices in elementary schools?
RQ 2: What do general education teachers perceive as effective practices in the implementation of inclusionary leadership practices in elementary schools?

RQ 3: What do special education teachers perceive as effective practices in the implementation of inclusionary leadership practices in elementary schools?

In Chapter 5, I provide a comprehensive summary of the study and interpretation of the findings. I will conclude by discussing the research implications, suggesting further exploration of practice and policy.

A qualitative methodology was employed to gather data, analyze the findings, and establish the following research objectives as the guiding principles for the study. A purposive sampling design was employed to select two schools that demonstrated significant efforts in implementing leadership practices for fostering an inclusive environment, while having their SWD subgroup achieve 42% or higher in the ESSA subgroup on standardized assessments. The sample comprised of two elementary school principals who willingly participated in the study. Additionally, I requested that principals identify one general education teacher and one special education teacher from their respective schools who worked well with SWD, and these teachers were also interviewed as part of the study. Each participant was presented with a series of 19 semi-structured, open-ended questions during the administration of the study.

Through the analysis of study data, four prominent themes emerged: (1) meeting the needs of all students, (2) providing professional learning, (3) fostering collaborative relationships, and (4) promoting teacher autonomy with accountability. Among the four emerging themes, two of them further branched out into subthemes, which are described below. Meeting the needs of all students encompassed two subthemes: vision conveyed with clarity and providing high-quality instruction for all students.
Similarly, providing professional learning opportunities also yielded two subthemes: formal professional learning and informal professional learning. I describe each of them in turn.

**Findings and Interpretation of Findings**

**Finding 1: Meeting the Needs of All Students.**

Participants ardently discussed the impact of meeting the needs of all students both with and without disabilities. Principals emphasized that their leadership practice in this area involved effectively communicating their vision to all stakeholders, emphasizing the importance of meeting students' needs and providing high-quality instruction to all students, regardless of their learning abilities. Teachers also shared their insights on how this translated into their teaching practices, highlighting strategies employed to meet the diverse needs of their learners. Each participant expressed their perspectives, citing specific examples and how their school fostered a more inclusive school environment to meet the needs of students.

**Interpretation of the Findings.** Literature supports the need for both school leaders and teachers to meet the needs of all students especially when dealing with SWD in a general education setting. According to McLeskey and Waldron (2011), educational requirements have grown stronger over time in order to ensure that SWD are educated alongside their peers without disabilities in general education classrooms. The aim is to provide them with equal access to the curriculum. Significant advancements have been achieved in meeting the diverse needs of students within an inclusive environment, where they spend more than 80% of their day in a general education classroom (McLeskey et al., 2011). In their study, Billingsley et al. (2022) emphasized in the “Principal Actions in Effective Inclusive Schools: A Review of
Elementary Case Studies,” an effective leadership practice was crucial to ensure SWD are included when supporting students. They also highlighted that prior to the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA), the states and schools had the authority to deny SWD access to general education in public schools.

Ongoing research has focused on investigating the endeavors of principals in establishing a more inclusive school, aiming to address the diverse needs of all students (DeMatthews, 2015). There has been research in the field of inclusive education that has uncovered various key attributes of an inclusive school that effectively caters to the needs of all students while maintaining high performance. These characteristics include creating an environment that welcomes every student, fostering a staff that wholeheartedly embraces the mission and vision of teaching all students, implementing systems and structures to monitor students’ progress and utilize resources efficiently, and demonstrating flexibility to support teachers in meeting the diverse needs of their students (DeMatthews, 2015).

Both schools in the current study worked to address the needs of all their students by clearly communicating their vision and ensuring that teachers delivered high-quality instruction to every student, including SWD. Hitt and Tucker (2016) identified several leadership domains through their research synthesis, and one of the initial domains highlighted was the effective communication of a vision. This domain was consistently emphasized throughout the study as a crucial step in meeting the needs of all students. Billingsley and Banks (2019) elucidated the significance of principals taking the lead in establishing an inclusive vision as a vital factor in fostering an inclusive school environment.
Principals and teachers effectively conveyed the vision of creating an inclusive environment and provided concrete examples of how this vision translated into their instructional practices for both general education students and SWD. Researchers have identified several ways in which principals can support their schools in sustaining an inclusive environment. These include fostering a shared vision, creating collaborative structures, and providing professional learning opportunities (DeMatthews et al., 2020; Hitt & Tucker, 2016; Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013; Salisbury & McGregor, 2002). Schools that have successfully implemented inclusive models have demonstrated the active involvement of principals in these practices.

Moreover, Hitt and Tucker (2016) identified an additional crucial aspect of leadership in fostering an inclusive school: providing high-quality instruction for all students. Participants in this study not only effectively articulated their school's vision and its translation into classroom support for students but also shared their commitment to delivering high-quality instruction. This entailed reflecting on their school's progress and mission toward inclusivity. Principals employed a leadership practice of creating optimal learning conditions centered around high-quality instruction. This included strategically assigning their most capable teachers to work with students who needed additional support, ensuring that SWD had access to the general education curriculum while meeting their individualized accommodations outlined in their Individualized Education Program (IEP).

**Finding 2: Providing Professional Learning Opportunities.**

During discussions about the significance of professional learning in fostering an effective inclusive school environment, participants consistently recognized the value of refining their skills and receiving the necessary support to benefit all students. Both
principals and teachers elaborated on the various types of professional learning opportunities provided to them. In addition, some teachers shared their proactive approach of seeking external professional learning opportunities to enhance their expertise in meeting the diverse needs of both SWD and general education students.

This theme encompassed two subthemes related to professional learning: formal professional learning and informal professional learning. Participants recognized the significance of formal professional learning offered by their school or district. However, there was a prevalent appreciation for the quality and value of informal professional learning provided internally by colleagues within their school. Participants expressed the need to seek external professional learning opportunities that specifically catered to their individual needs, aligning with their school's vision of meeting the diverse needs of all students.

**Interpretation of the Findings.** In line with literature on professional learning, McLeskey and Waldron (2015) asserted it is crucial for schools to carefully plan professional learning opportunities that support teachers in developing the necessary skills to enhance their instructional practice. Principals echoed this view, emphasizing that professional learning should aim to improve teaching practices for teachers in order to support all students, including SWD. McLeskey and Waldron (2015) emphasized the importance of teacher-directed professional learning that promotes active collaboration and participation, such as observation, feedback, coaching, and planning. Teachers in the study shared their engagement in both formal and informal professional learning offered by their school leadership and colleagues.
Participants highlighted the value of informal professional learning in enhancing their effectiveness in the classroom. They shared examples of engaging in activities such as sharing best practices, seeking guidance from instructional coaches, collaborating with team leaders and grade-level colleagues, and consulting with ESE specialists to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary for success. Hodkinson (2009) posited that teachers need not only knowledge, comprehension, and skills to work with diverse learners, but also access to resources, including the expertise of specialists and colleagues they closely collaborate with.

Participants emphasized the collaborative nature of professional learning in equipping teachers with knowledge and understanding to meet the needs of all learners. They emphasized that professional learning was a collective effort involving both general education and special education teachers, fostering conversations, learning, and support. The participants highlighted the diverse forms in which professional learning took place, recognizing the value it brought in improving teacher practices. The literature emphasizes the significance of school leaders and teachers learning together, creating spaces and communities that support adult learning (DeMatthews et al., 2020; Hitt & Tucker, 2016; McLeskey & Waldron, 2015). The participants also shared their involvement in professional learning communities (PLCs) where they could exchange best practices, lesson plans, and discuss achievement data, all aimed at enhancing their practice to better meet their students' needs.

Moreover, participants were engaged in professional learning that was tailored to meet both the school's overall needs and the specific needs of individual teachers in an effort to address the diverse needs of students. This practice aligned with findings
supported in the literature (Billingsley et al., 2022; DeMatthews et al., 2020; Hitt & Tucker, 2016; McLeskey et al., 2012; McLeskey & Waldron, 2015) that highlighted the importance of customized professional learning approaches for effective inclusive education.

Furthermore, findings from other studies (Bettini et al., 2016; Desimone, 2011; Hitt & Tucker, 2016; Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013) indicated that professional learning opportunities can be supported by grade level or content level meetings, study groups, sharing best practices, while incorporating embedded learning opportunities such as coaching to support adult learners. The findings from participants in this study further reinforced the notion of diverse professional learning approaches implemented in their schools, with specific focus on enhancing teacher practice for both SWD and students without disabilities, fostering a more inclusive educational environment.

**Finding 3: Fostering Collaborative Relationships.**

Through collaborative efforts at both schools, general education and special education teachers actively engaged in collaboration as part of the inclusion initiatives. Teachers expressed their appreciation for valuable resources and collaborative support they received from one another. Principals emphasized the significance of creating dedicated time for collaboration among teachers, both in general education and special education, a key leadership practice.

The strong camaraderie among the teachers, driven by their shared commitment to improving instructional practices, was apparent in their descriptions and examples. Teacher participants expressed how collaboration was not limited to scheduled meetings but also took place informally and spontaneously. They demonstrated a
proactive approach, seeking opportunities to meet whenever they felt it was necessary, and found great value in these impromptu collaborative interactions.

Principals emphasized the significance of integrating special education teachers into grade-level and general education teacher planning. Participants recognized the interconnectedness of their roles and the value of collaboration, as they often worked together to support the same students. Rather than viewing themselves as separate entities, they acknowledged the benefits of joining forces and working collaboratively.

**Interpretation of the Findings.** DeMatthews et al. (2020) underscored the importance of school leaders in establishing collaborative cultures that encompass all staff takes responsibility for teaching and supporting SWD, thereby ensuring high-quality instruction for all students. Creating collaborative relationships was identified as another strategy to support an inclusive environment in both schools, allowing teachers to work together towards a common vision. Existing literature supports this idea, highlighting the importance of collaborative efforts among teachers, particularly in improving inclusion for SWD in general education classrooms (Brownell et al., 2006). Brownell et al. (2006) further emphasized that one of the primary goals of teachers learning and working together is the expectation of positive changes in their instructional practices.

Several studies highlighted the advantages of collaborative efforts among teachers, with Monsen et al. (2014) emphasizing that collaboration between general education and special education teachers is essential for successful inclusive practices. Principals further emphasized the importance of fostering collaborative relationships as a leadership practice to realize the vision of an inclusive environment. Providing
teachers with dedicated time, conducive conditions, and a supportive structure for collaboration was identified as crucial in supporting both teachers and students. This notion is supported by several researchers who emphasized the need for principals to create a supportive learning environment that facilitates teacher collaboration (DeMatthews et al., 2020; Hitt & Tucker, 2016; Monsen et al., 2014).

Principals demonstrated a clear recognition of the importance of collaborative planning among teachers to address the academic and behavioral needs of SWD. During interviews, principals expressed their commitment to this goal by highlighting the practice of inclusive planning sessions involving both special education and general education teachers. Notably, there were few instances mentioned where teachers expressed opposition or reluctance to collaborate. On the contrary, many teachers displayed a willingness to go above and beyond their contractual obligations and engage in collaborative meetings.

Principals facilitated collaboration efforts by providing additional support for general education teachers who had SWD present in their classes 80% or more of the time. This support came in the form of assigning both a special education teacher and a paraprofessional to assist in a general education classroom and support the students. Within these classrooms, teachers implemented various strategies such as conducting small group activities, differentiating instruction, and ensuring access to the general education curriculum while also addressing the accommodations specified in the students’ Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). The presence of multiple adults in the classroom promoted inclusivity, and it was essential for teachers to have dedicated time for collaboration. This practice aligns with the definition of inclusive practice.
outlined by Katz and Sugden (2013), where both general education and special education teachers take shared responsibility for the education of all students.

Principals shared examples on how they actively engaged with both general education teachers and special education teachers, seeking their input, and taking their concerns and thoughts into consideration to meet their respective needs. This collaborative approach aligns with research findings that highlight the importance of fostering collaborative relationships as crucial component of effective inclusion in schools (Billingsley et al., 2022; DeMatthews et al., 2020; Hitt & Tucker, 2016).

Finding 4: Promoting Teacher Autonomy with Accountability.

The final theme highlighted participants’ experiences with teacher autonomy and the trust established between school leaders and teachers in the classroom. Participants expressed that their administrators refrained from excessive scrutiny or micromanagement of classroom instruction. There was a sense of trust between administrators and teachers regarding their ability to effectively teach students. While principals allowed for autonomy, they emphasized the importance of alignment with the school and district goals and non-negotiables. Classroom observations and feedback played a crucial role in this process, facilitating a two-way exchange between principals and teachers. Principals recognized the significance of fostering teacher autonomy, enabling teachers to make informed decisions at the classroom level regarding instructional delivery, and the use of supplemental resources. The absence of any mention or discussion regarding teachers’ lack of buy-in to the school leader’s vision can be interpreted as an indication that the majority of teachers embraced and supported the shared vision. The fact that the vision was effectively communicated to various members of the team, including team leaders, support staff, and instructional
coaches, suggests a high level of buy-in and alignment with the school's vision among the staff.

Principals openly discussed how teachers would approach them to seek approval for purchasing classroom resources that would enhance student learning, and they willingly supported these requests due to the established trust and autonomy. However, while emphasizing teacher autonomy, both principals and teachers acknowledged the importance of accountability, which involved monitoring achievement data at both the school and classroom levels. As voiced by numerous educators in their interviews, data served as the driving force behind all aspects of teaching and learning. Both principals and teachers concurred that data played a pivotal role in overseeing students’ achievement and also shaping instructional strategies. The primary gauge of accountability for schools was the Florida Standards Assessment (FSA), administered annually in the spring to students in grades three through five and encompassing reading, mathematics, writing in fourth and fifth grades, and science for fifth graders. Teachers engaged in instruction in line with the state standards and closely aligned with the FSA.

Although the FSA is administered toward the close of the academic year, both principals and teachers disclosed that they also conducted district and school assessments meticulously mapped to the FSA standards. These assessments were employed as tools for tracking progress and tailoring instruction that catered to students’ requirements in preparation for the FSA. Principals and teachers engaged in data discussions, during which they analyzed the data’s trajectory. Positive trends
encouraged the continuation of effective practices while also fostering the exchange of insights among colleagues.

Principals established non-negotiables to align with the school’s vision and expectations. Once these non-negotiables were in place, principals granted teachers autonomy while still monitoring their classrooms through observations and providing feedback. Student achievement data from classroom walkthroughs, assessments, and other forms of progress monitoring were also monitored. Additionally, data chats between teachers and principals were conducted to discuss student progress and the impact of instructional practices on all students, including those with and without disabilities.

**Interpretation of the Findings.** Teacher autonomy was highlighted as a leadership practice implemented by principals to cultivate inclusivity in their schools. Trust and understanding between principals and teachers were crucial in translating this autonomy into effective instruction and student support. DeMatthews (2015) supports this notion by emphasizing the importance of distributed leadership, where there is an expectation of trust and pre-planning in the actions taken by both principals and teachers.

Teacher participants expressed their comfort in approaching principals to request necessary resources for their students and classrooms. This aligns with the findings of Cambrun and Han (2009), who emphasized that an improved teacher-administrator relationship fosters a sense of inclusion and involvement in decision-making processes. When teachers feel included and supported, they are more likely to embrace the school’s vision and feel at ease approaching administrators with questions or concerns.
Researchers have emphasized that effective leaders recognize the value of shared and distributive leadership in fostering a sense of community and collaboration. This approach moves away from individual focus or specific roles and encourages teachers to work together, thereby enhancing their commitment to the organization and ultimately improving student outcomes (Cambrun & Han, 2009; DeMatthews, 2015; Hitt & Tucker, 2016; Spillane, 2012). The finding of teacher autonomy further supports the notion that when teachers are given some level of authority and responsibility, it positively impacts the overall well-being of the organization, or in this case, the school (Murphy et al., 2006).

Participants highlighted their ability to implement resources and support students according to their principals' expectations, aligning with the concept of planning ahead emphasized by DeMatthews (2015). Spillane (2012) further discussed the notion of a person-plus model, where principals remain the primary leaders but strategically empower capable and knowledgeable teachers to exercise autonomy in managing tasks and assignments without constant supervision. Through interviews, it became evident that when principals fostered teacher autonomy, teachers were more engaged in collaboration, committed to implementing the principals' vision, and dedicated to meeting the diverse needs of all students.

Monitoring student achievement data and holding teachers accountable for progress were integral aspects of promoting an inclusive environment through teacher autonomy. The selection of the two schools for the study was influenced by their successful attainment of ESSA goals, specifically a subgroup achievement rate of 42% or higher for SWD. Both principals emphasized the significance of student achievement
data and the monitoring of both teacher and student performance. Study participants actively utilized data to inform instructional practices and improve the delivery of instruction by teachers.

Teachers also shared their experiences of principals using data as a basis for discussions to ensure positive student outcomes. When data indicated areas of concern, collaborative discussions were initiated to identify strategies and support needed for both teachers and students. Literature supports the importance of developing and monitoring assessments to measure student progress and make necessary adjustments in the classroom (Hitt & Tucker, 2016; Murphy et al., 2006). Principals actively engaged in conversations with teachers through both formal and informal communication channels. These findings align with the research by Billingsley et al. (2022), who emphasized the role of principals in monitoring student outcomes through effective communication, comparing the performance of SWD to state assessments, and making necessary adjustments as needed.

Schools utilize progress monitoring as a means to track students’ academic progress, anticipate performance on standardized assessments, and assess teacher effectiveness (Buck & Torgeson, 2003; Hintze & Silberglitt, 2005). Participants emphasized the central role of data in the school’s vision, teacher planning, and professional learning. Waldron et al. (2011) emphasized the significance of progress monitoring as a key leadership practice that enables school leaders to monitor progress, identify individual needs, and make necessary adjustments to provide support. Participants highlighted their use of data to inform instruction and make necessary adjustments to their lessons and teaching practices.
While Hitt and Tucker (2016) highlighted the five domains of leadership practice, including establishing and communicating the vision, facilitating a high-quality learning experience, building professional capacity, creating a supportive organization for learning, and connecting with external partners, this study did not extensively explore the latter two domains. While the interview protocols briefly touched upon these domains, there was insufficient information to develop a substantial theme around them.

**Research Implications**

Based on the review of existing literature and the findings of this study, a strong emphasis is placed on the advantages of inclusive education and school-wide practices that benefit all students. These findings have several implications for the implementation of inclusive practices in schools, requiring effective leadership and the collaboration of both general education and special education teachers. The study’s objective was to describe and explore effective practices of inclusive education in elementary schools, highlighting the importance of addressing the needs of all students, providing professional learning opportunities, fostering collaborative relationships, and promoting teacher autonomy while ensuring accountability. The participants demonstrated a clear understanding of and commitment to the vision set forth by their school leaders, recognizing the essential nature of collaborative efforts to meet the diverse needs of learners within the general education context, including SWD.

This research yielded a limited number of themes that provide some insight into the perceptions of principals and teachers regarding effective inclusive practices in their schools. However, it is important to note that the conclusions drawn from this study may not be applicable to other educational communities outside of the specific county where the research was conducted. The unique characteristics and dynamics of different
communities can significantly impact the findings and may result in different conclusions.

However, there were several implications that may be of interest to stakeholders seeking to implement effective inclusive practices for SWD. The interviews revealed that effective school leadership played a crucial role in the successful implementation of inclusionary practices and meeting the diverse needs of students. This involved two key aspects: clearly conveying the vision and ensuring the delivery of high-quality instruction. By prioritizing these aspects, school leaders were able to shape a culture of inclusivity among teachers and staff members. It was essential for teachers to provide equitable access to general education curriculum and strategies for SWD, which necessitated collaborative efforts between general education and special education teachers. Both schools recognized the significance of working together to provide high-quality instruction to all students, regardless of their abilities.

Another important implication relates to the provision of professional opportunities to support teachers in effectively meeting the needs of all students, including those with disabilities. The professional learning provided to teachers played a crucial role in enhancing their instructional practices, ultimately benefiting student outcomes. It was crucial for both general education and special education teachers to actively engage in various professional learning opportunities, both formal and informal, to continuously enhance their knowledge and skills in promoting inclusive education. By equipping teachers with the necessary tools and strategies, they were better prepared to create inclusive learning environments that catered to the diverse needs of all students.
Building collaborative relationships with colleagues was identified as a crucial factor in promoting an inclusive environment. The study highlighted the importance of teacher autonomy, balanced with accountability, in advancing inclusive practices. However, the specific timing of professional learning sessions throughout the year was not addressed in the research. Further investigation is recommended to explore whether these sessions were scheduled at the beginning of the year or offered on an as-needed basis throughout the academic year. Understanding the timing and frequency of professional learning opportunities can provide valuable insights into their effectiveness and impact on inclusive education practices.

Further implications exist for principal preparation programs concerning the implementation of inclusive approaches in elementary schools serving SWD. Principal preparation programs play a key role in furnishing aspiring leaders with comprehensive knowledge in inclusive education (DeMatthews et al., 2020). This encompasses a deep understanding of diverse disabilities, their implications on learning, and the application of evidence-based strategies to effectively support SWD. Furthermore, principal preparation programs should extend beyond mere theoretical instruction and incorporate professional skills, knowledge, and experiences to equip future leaders for the range of challenges and opportunities they might encounter (DiPaola, 2004).

For principals to have the ability to build school-wide changes and strategies to address challenges in implementing inclusive education, principals need specific knowledge and training about inclusive education (Salisbury, 2006). Additionally, DiPaola et al. (2004) emphasized that dedicated advocates for all students are needed to effectively fulfill the lofty goal of school reform to ensure that no child is truly left
behind and that students are afforded the appropriate educational opportunities. According to DiPaola et al., “Without capable instructional leaders as dedicated advocates for students and teachers and skillful community builders, current reform efforts will fail and NCLB’s ambitious goals will not be achieved” (2004, p. 8).

Additionally, implications for school districts can ensure that principals are suitably equipped to proficiently oversee inclusive schools. Collaborating with local colleges or universities to develop specialized courses or workshops facilitated by experts in the field could prove to be beneficial. These offerings would ensure a foundation in the most current research-based practices for supporting SWD. Moreover, districts could also institute mentorship and coaching initiatives, pairing new principals with experienced colleagues who have effectively led or currently lead inclusive schools. This guidance would provide invaluable insights and direction to new leaders navigating the intricacies of inclusive education with SWD. Nonetheless, district policies should align their principal preparation programs with their overarching goals and priorities. This alignment could serve as vital in ensuring leaders comprehend the districts’ commitment to inclusion of SWD and the implementation of inclusive practices within educational institutions.

In conclusion, the culmination of effective leadership of elementary school principals in inclusive practices for SWD played a pivotal role in the accomplishment of a successful implementation. Principal preparation programs can potentially equip principals with the requisite understanding of inclusive education, coupled with strategies to adeptly oversee an inclusive school environment that fosters support for all students, particularly SWD. Finally, school districts could enhance collaboration to forge
a more robust partnership between school district and colleges and universities, integrating components of inclusive education into principal preparation curriculum and experiences.

**Further Research**

Based on the findings of this qualitative research, several recommendations can be proposed for future research in practice and policy. First, it is suggested that future studies involve a broader range of staff members in the process of creating the vision for inclusivity within schools, rather than solely relying on the school principal. This collaborative approach can help ensure that diverse perspectives and experiences are considered, leading to a more comprehensive and inclusive vision.

Additional studies could be conducted to explore the timing and scheduling of professional learning opportunities throughout the year. This research could investigate whether schools have a structured calendar or schedule in place for offering professional learning to teachers or if it is provided on an as-needed basis. Understanding the timing and frequency of professional learning sessions can provide insights into how schools effectively support teachers in their ongoing professional growth and development.

Moreover, future research could focus on assessing the effectiveness of implementing inclusive practices in schools and its impact on student outcomes. This research could explore various indicators of school efficacy in relation to inclusive education. Participants in the study highlighted the perceived effective leadership practices employed by principals that supported teachers for creating an effective inclusive school. To further enhance accountability for SWD and promote progress towards inclusive education, it would be beneficial to track this student subgroup
through ongoing progress monitoring data throughout the academic year. This would provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of inclusive practices and their influence on student achievement and growth.

Lastly, in the literature review and interview protocols, two domains from Hitt and Tucker (2016) framework were explored but did not emerge as significant themes or focal points among the participants. Although questions were asked from the domain establishing and conveying the vision but the focus on communication of inclusive efforts to stakeholders, including staff, parents, and the community, limited evidence was found regarding the communication and enforcement of the vision with parents and the community. While there were indications of effective communication and shared vision among staff, both school principals and teachers expressed uncertainty about how the vision was communicated to parents and the community, except for periodic updates during monthly meetings. Therefore, further research could investigate how school leaders effectively communicate their vision and create a shared understanding that encompasses not only staff but also parents and the community.

Hitt and Tucker (2016) identified the second area of focus as professional capacity development, whereas Billingsley et al. (2022) centered their attention on teacher recruitment and retention. Nevertheless, there was a lack of substantial conversation regarding the potential of teacher hiring and retention as effective leadership strategies for fostering inclusivity within schools. While some principals mentioned the strategic placement of teachers and the preference for hiring individuals with dual certification in general and special education, this viewpoint was limited and shared by both principals and teachers.
Further research could explore how the hiring and retention of teachers can be utilized as a leadership practice to support teachers in fostering an inclusive environment. This research could provide school leaders with a clearer understanding of the strategies and implementation methods involved in promoting inclusivity through hiring and retention practices.

**Conclusion**

In order to investigate and gain a more comprehensive understanding of the principals’ and teachers’ perspectives on effective inclusionary practices in general education settings for SWD, this study focused on elementary principals, general education teachers, and special education teachers. Principals play a crucial role in not only overseeing the operational aspects of the school but also serving as instructional leaders, ensuring that the needs of every child, regardless of their abilities or disabilities, are met.

Based on the perspectives of principals and teachers, the implementation of effective practices in inclusive education involved four key themes: addressing the diverse needs of all students, offering professional learning opportunities, fostering collaborative relationships, and promoting teacher autonomy while maintaining accountability.

All the implemented practices highlighted in this study contributed to the commitment of creating inclusive environments for SWD in general education settings. Both school principals and teachers demonstrated a strong dedication to following the inclusive vision and fostering inclusive practices within their schools and classrooms.
RESEARCH PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Study Title: An Exploration of Inclusive Leadership Practices in Elementary Schools

Person(s) conducting the research: Priscille Elie, Doctoral Candidate, Educational Leadership and Administration

Christopher Redding, Ph.D.

Purpose of the research study:
The purpose of the study is to explore and understand elementary school principals’, general education teachers’, and special education teachers’ perceptions of effective practices that support the enactment of inclusionary practices in a school.

What you will be asked to do in the study:
If you agree to participate, you will participate in a semi-structured interview. You will be asked to discuss your experience regarding how best to enact inclusionary practices for students with disabilities.

Time required:
The expected time is between 30 and 90 minutes.

Risks and benefits:
There are no risks or direct benefits for you for participating in this study. The benefits to other school stakeholders, including policymakers and other researchers, include increased knowledge of how elementary school principals use effective inclusionary practices to support teachers and the achievement of students with disabilities.

Confidentiality:
Your identity will be kept confidential to the extent provided by law. Your information will be assigned a code number, and the list connecting your name to this number will be stored. Any written or published documents, such as reports or journal articles, will not include any names, school district, school, or any other identifying information.

Compensation: There will be no compensation provided for this study.

Source(s) of funding for the research: There is no funding source for this study.
May the researcher(s) benefit from the research?

We may benefit professionally if the results of the study are presented at meetings or in scientific journals.

Withdrawal from the study:

You are free to withdraw your consent and to stop participating in this study at any time without consequence. You can decline to answer any question you don’t wish to answer. Should you withdraw, your information will be discarded and will not be included in the study. The researcher cannot withdraw you from the study.

If you wish to discuss the information above or any discomforts you may experience, please ask questions now or contact one of the research team members listed at the top of this form.

If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research subject, please contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB02) office (University of Florida; PO Box 100173; Gainesville, FL 32610; (352) 392-0433 or irb2@ufl.edu.)

Agreement:

I have read the procedure described above. I voluntarily agree to participate in the procedure and I have received a copy of this description.

________________________________________________
Participant Name

________________________________________________  ______________
Participant Signature  Date

________________________________________________
Name of Person obtaining informed consent

________________________________________________  ______________
Signature of Person obtaining informed consent  Date
## APPENDIX B
### IRB APPROVAL

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**Principal Investigator:** Priscille Elie

**Protocol Title:** *An Exploration of Inclusive Leadership Practices in Elementary Schools*

**Current Approval Dates:**
- February 7, 2023 – February 6, 2024

**Original Approval Dates:**
- February 7, 2023 – February 6, 2024

**Approved Change Requests:**

**Approved Renewals:**

**Approval is granted to contact the principal at:**
- All Elementary Schools (See attached)

**Approval Notes:**
Per the Common Rule, requests to change any aspect of the research process or informed consent procedure must be submitted to this IRB for approval before the change is implemented. A Change Request must also be completed for instruments or protocols not developed at the time of review.

**PARTICIPATION IS VOLUNTARY:** Participation in this research is strictly voluntary. To assist school-based staff in their decision to participate, present this Certificate to the principal and outline the research activities to be conducted at their school. Based on this information, each principal would then make a decision to participate or not.

**DATA REQUESTS:** Applicants are responsible for costs incurred for data requested from the District’s Data Warehouse. Fees ($100/hr.) are based on the time required by staff to build data files. Data requests for approved projects should be directed to [redacted].

**SECURITY PROTOCOL:** All researchers must complete security protocol to receive a Security ID Badge before entering a school or sponsored school event, or having contact with staff, students, or parents under any circumstances. Researchers not completing these procedures before visiting a school site will have their IRB approval suspended.

**CONTACT INFORMATION:** School-based or District staff with questions about this Certificate may contact IRB staff at [redacted].

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**Signature of IRB Chair:**

Adam P. Arasusi, Ed.S

**Date:**

February 7, 2023

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*If researchers are unable to complete the approved research by the annual expiration date, a Renewal Request must be submitted one month prior to the expiration date. Research not completed within the timeframe specified in the protocol approved on the original Research Request will require re-approval by participating schools and staff.*
**APPENDIX C**

**CONFLICT OF INTEREST FORM**

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**Conflict of Interest Disclosure Form**

If the IRB determines that a conflict exists that could influence the research or jeopardize the well-being of subjects, the IRB may require additional information about the conflict, may require that the conflict be resolved before the research is approved, and/or may require that the conflict be disclosed to the subject in the Informed Consent document. A separate Conflict of Interest Disclosure form is required for each principal investigator and other key personnel.

Principal Investigator Name: Priscille Elie  
IRB#: 16747

Company/University Name: University of Florida

Title of Research Project: An Exploration of Inclusive Leadership Practices in Elementary Schools

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Key Personnel Submitting this Form (print): Priscille Elie

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**NOTE:** "immediate family" refers to spouse, children, parent, in-laws and siblings.

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<td>1. I, or a member of my immediate family, own(s) equity (stock ownership, stock options, convertible note(s), or other ownership interest in any amount) in the company or other legal entity whose drug, procedure, technique, device, or software I am testing (the &quot;Company&quot;).</td>
<td>☐</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. The Company holds patent rights to inventions created by me or a member of my immediate family.</td>
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<td>3. I, or a member of my immediate family, hold(s) a position of senior management officer, or director of the Company.</td>
<td>☐</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I, or a member of my immediate family, am/is a scientific advisor or consultant to the Company and I or a member of my immediate family receive(s) payments from the Company (including direct payments, honoraria, and all other forms of compensation.)</td>
<td>☐</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. If a device, technique, software, or procedure involved in the research is marketed, I, or a member of my immediate family, may be entitled to royalty income or income from the sale of the product.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. I, or a member of my immediate family have/has any other financial interest that may appear to conflict with the protection of subjects or which should be disclosed to subjects in order to secure informed consent.</td>
<td>☐</td>
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</table>

If YES to any item, include an explanation of the conflict for the IRB's consideration on a separate sheet.

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I certify that the information on this form is accurate to the best of my knowledge.

Priscille Elie  
Signature of Principal Investigator or Key Personnel  
12-11-2022  
Date

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IRB & Research Review Process - SAR Rev. 6.5.18
Conflict of Interest Disclosure Form
Dear Director of Exceptional Student Education of Broward County Public Schools,

My name is Priscille Elie and I am currently a doctoral candidate in the Leadership in Educational Administration program at the University of Florida. I am recruiting research participants as part of my dissertation. The purpose of the study is to explore elementary school principals' and what they perceive as the most effective practices that support inclusionary practices in elementary schools. It is my intention this study will provide guidance for further research in helping principals implement important practices to support teachers teaching students with disabilities in general education setting to help students perform successfully academically.

I am requesting permission and support from your department to assist in identifying qualified elementary school principals in your school district to participate in my interview research study. Specifically, I am requesting if your department could provide me with a list of elementary school principals to participate in this research that make decisions about special education programming and principals who oversee successfully inclusive schools. In accessing the list, an invitation e-mail and follow-up invitation e-mail will be provided to the identified principal to participate in the study.

For a school to be considered successfully inclusive, there must be a high rate of inclusion of students with disabilities and strong academic assessment data. Successful inclusion will refer to the school that educate the majority of students with disabilities in a general education setting for more than 80% of the school day. The students with disabilities must be provided with appropriate supports and accommodations to ensure academic progress is being made in the general education setting. Strong academic assessment data will refer to state standardized assessment scores for each school meeting or exceeding the state average.

The interview should take no more than one hour to complete. Principals may complete the interview all at once or in segments, whichever is most convenient for them. No information from the interviews will identify the principals, schools, or the school district. The results of this study will remain confidential and will only be used for this study. There are no risks or harms of any kind for participating in this study.

If you have any concerns about the research, please feel free to contact me, Priscille Elie: Principal Investigator, Dr. Christopher Redding: Dissertation Chair, or the Institutional Review Board. I can be reached by phone at [redacted] or by e-mail at pelie@ufl.edu Dr. Christopher Redding can be reached by phone at [redacted] or by e-mail at c.redding@coe.ufl.edu. The Institutional Review Board can be reached by phone at (352) 392-0433 or by e-mail at irb2@ufl.edu.

Thank you in advance for helping me to complete my dissertation study.
Educationally yours,
Priscille Elie
Dear Fellow Elementary School Principals:

My name is Priscille Elie and I am currently a doctoral candidate in the Leadership in Educational Administration program at the University of Florida. I am recruiting research participants as part of my dissertation. The purpose of the study is to explore what elementary school principals perceive as the most effective practices that support inclusionary practices in elementary schools. It is my intention this study will provide guidance for further research in helping principals implement important practices to support teachers teaching students with disabilities in general education setting to help students perform successfully academically.

I am inviting you to be part of this study because you are currently an elementary school principal. My qualitative study will include interview questions designed to understand your experiences leading and supporting teachers who teach students with disabilities in a general education setting in Broward County Public Schools. I obtained your name and email address through Exceptional Student Education department within your school district as well as looking at your school's previous year's standardized assessment data with your students with disabilities subgroup. Participation would take place in a combination of face-to-face, videoconferencing, or telephone interview format. The duration of the interviews would be between 30-45 minutes. I am also asking if you could help me identify teachers to interview that could also add to my research. If you agree, I will ask you for their contact information for me to reach out.

I will take steps to preserve participant confidentiality, including identifying participants by a random identification number and removing identifying details in interview transcripts, however, federal regulatory agencies and the University of Florida Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves research studies) may inspect and copy records pertaining to this research. There are no known risks from being in this study and you will not benefit personally. However, I hope that others may benefit in the future from what we learn as a result of this study. All interview responses that I receive will be treated confidentially and will be stored and secured.

Your participation in this research study is completely voluntary. If you decide not to be in this study, or if you stop participating at any time, you will not be penalized or lose any benefits for which you are otherwise entitled. You can decline to answer any question you don't wish to answer.

If you have any questions, concerns, you may contact me at the number below. Thank you in advance for your consideration!

Educationally,

Priscille Elie Doctoral Candidate-University of Florida Elie, pelie@ufl.edu

Dr. Christopher Redding Assistant Professor-Educational Leadership College of Education-University of Florida 352-273-4472 c.redding@coe.ufl.edu
APPENDIX F
TEACHER RECRUITMENT LETTER

Dear Teacher:

My name is Priscille Elie and I am currently a doctoral candidate in the Leadership in Educational Administration program at the University of Florida. I am recruiting research participants as part of my dissertation. The purpose of the study is to explore elementary school principals’ and what they perceive as the most effective practices that support inclusionary practices in elementary schools. Additionally, I want to explore what teachers perceive are the most important practices their principals use to support inclusionary practices. It is my intention this study will provide guidance for further research in helping principals implement important practices to support teachers teaching students with disabilities in general education setting to help students perform successfully academically.

Your school was identified based on the recommendation by the director of Exceptional Student Education from your district as being a school which serves at least 80% of its special education student population in a general education setting. Additionally, your name was recommended by your school principal as a good candidate to interview for my study.

I am inviting you to be part of this study because you are currently an elementary school teacher who teach students with disabilities in a general education setting or is a special education teacher. My qualitative study will include interview questions designed to understand your experiences leading and supporting teachers who teach students with disabilities in a general education setting and special education setting within your school district. Participation would take place in a combination of face to face, videoconferencing, or telephone interview format. The duration of the interviews would be between 30-45 minutes.

I will take steps to preserve participant confidentiality, including identifying participants by a random identification number and removing identifying details in interview transcripts, however, federal regulatory agencies and the University of Florida Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves research studies) may inspect and copy records pertaining to this research. There are no known risks from being in this study and you will not benefit personally. However, I hope that others may benefit in the future from what we learn as a result of this study. All interview responses that I receive will be treated confidentially and will be stored and secured. Your participation in this research study is completely voluntary. If you decide not to be in this study, or if you stop participating at any time, you will not be penalized or lose any benefits for which you are otherwise entitled. You can decline to answer any question you don’t wish to answer.

If you have any questions, concerns, you may contact me at the number below. Thank you in advance for your participation!

Educationally,

Priscille Elie Doctoral Candidate-University of Florida pelie@ufl.edu

Dr. Christopher Redding Assistant Professor-Educational Leadership College of Education-University of Florida c.redding@coe.ufl.edu
APPENDIX G
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS: SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

Interviewer Preamble
[Create a warm and friendly environment to put interviewee at ease.]

My name is Priscille Elie, and I am a doctoral candidate at the University of Florida. I am conducting interviews to understand what school stakeholders perceive as the most effective practices in the implementation of inclusionary practices in elementary schools. I want to understand your perspective about your school because we value your insights. There are no right or wrong answers.

Because it is so important for us to learn what you genuinely feel and think, these discussions will be confidential. Your name and other identifying information will never be shared or connected with any documentation or reports that come out of this discussion—no one who reads these would be able to connect your comments to you.

To make sure we capture what you have to say, we will take notes. We will also be audio recording this discussion to accurately capture your perspective. The digital audio recording will be transcribed with no names attached to your dialogue and will not be shared with anyone in the school or district. The written transcription will be sent to you so that you may verify it for accuracy. Again, any written or published documents, such as reports or journal articles, will not include your name, school district, school, or any other identifying information. Before we start, I would like to ask you to sign this Consent to Participate document that outlines what I have just described to you. It states that you can withdraw from this research project at any time. Now, as we proceed with our discussion, please let me know if you would rather not answer a particular question or if you would like me to turn off the recorder at any time.

Do you have any questions?
Yes [Answer questions.]
No Okay then with your permission, let’s begin.

[Turn on recorder. State: “This is _____________ (your name), talking with participant ___ (their code) date, and school code number.”]

Background information
Personal
1. How long have you been a principal at this school?
2. What is your teaching or educational background/experience prior to becoming a principal?
   a. Possible probe: How prepared did you feel leading both general and special education program when you first became a principal?
3. What challenging assumptions related to creating an inclusive school for students with disabilities did you have?

Knowledge
4. What does inclusive mean to you?
   a. Possible probe: What does it look like at your school?
b. Possible probe: How would you describe inclusive leadership to a new leader?

Vision

5. How would you describe your vision for the school?
   a. Possible probe: Did you work with other school staff to develop this vision? If so, how?
   b. Possible probe: Who did you include to develop this vision? How were they selected?

6. In what ways is the inclusion of students with disabilities incorporated into the vision?
   a. Possible probe: How do you articulate the vision to parents, teachers, and other community members?
   b. Possible probe: How do you model for teachers to see and experience the change you convey in action?

High-quality learning experience

7. What are the ways in which you support teachers to provide a high-quality learning experience for students with disabilities?
   a. Possible probe: How do you ensure that teachers enact research-based intensive instruction?

8. How is inclusion connected to other school improvement goals or initiatives in your school?
   a. Possible probe: What does that look like in the classroom? Or the school?

9. What role do classroom observations play in this process?
   a. Possible probe: Do they help to articulate your expectations for the instruction of students with disabilities? How so?
   b. Possible probe: Do they give you the opportunity to provide instructional feedback? How so?

Building Professional Capacity

10. Describe the ways you support general education and special education teachers to teach students with disabilities in a general education class.
    a. Possible probe: Do you provide professional development? If so, can you describe what type of professional development is provided?

11. How have you increased teacher capacity around inclusive teaching and learning?
    a. Possible probe: What does that look like for general education teachers?
    b. Possible probe: Could you provide a specific example?
    c. Possible probe: What does that look like for special education teachers?
    d. Possible prob: Could you provide a specific example?
    e. Possible probe: What does that look like for new teachers?
    f. Possible probe: Could you provide a specific example?
12. In what ways do you monitor professional development and ensuring inclusive practices in the classroom?
   a. Possible probe: What does that look like?

Creating a Supportive Organization for learning

13. How do you promote inclusive processes in decision-making for teachers?
   a. Possible probe: Are general education teachers involved in decision-making? How?
   b. Possible probe: Are special education teachers involved in decision-making? How?

14. Describe the ways you foster collaboration between general education teachers and special education teachers?

Connecting With External Partners

15. How do you collaborate with families to make inclusive education work at your school?
   a. Possible probe: What systems have you put in place to encourage continual parent involvement with inclusive education?

16. How do you collaborate with community partners to make inclusive education work at your school?
   a. Possible probe: What systems have you put in place to encourage continual community engagement with inclusive education?

Successful Inclusive Practices

17. What are some examples of the benefits of an inclusion model in your school for students with disabilities in a general education setting?

18. What successful inclusive practices have you implemented in your school to achieve positive results for student outcomes for students with disabilities?

19. Is there any other information you feel you would like to add that you did not get a chance to share that would benefit my research?
APPENDIX H
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS: GENERAL EDUCATION TEACHERS

[Create a warm and friendly environment to put interviewee at ease.]

My name is Priscille Elie. and I am a doctoral candidate at the University of Florida. I am conducting interviews to understand what school stakeholders perceive as the most effective practices in the implementation of inclusionary practices in elementary schools. I want to understand your perspective about your school because we value your insights. There are no right or wrong answers.

Because it is so important for us to learn what you genuinely feel and think, these discussions will be confidential. Your name and other identifying information will never be shared or connected with any documentation or reports that come out of this discussion—no one who reads these would be able to connect your comments to you.

To make sure we capture what you have to say, we will take notes. We will also be audio recording this discussion to accurately capture your perspective. The digital audio recording will be transcribed with no names attached to your dialogue and will not be shared with anyone in the school or district. The written transcription will be sent to you so that you may verify it for accuracy. Again, any written or published documents, such as reports or journal articles, will not include your name, school district, school, or any other identifying information. Before we start, I would like to ask you to sign this Consent to Participate document that outlines what I have just described to you. It states that you can withdraw from this research project at any time. Now, as we proceed with our discussion, please let me know if you would rather not answer a particular question or if you would like me to turn off the recorder at any time.

Do you have any questions?

Yes  [Answer questions.]

No  Okay then with your permission, let’s begin.

[Turn on recorder. State: “This is __________________ (your name), talking with participant ___ (their code) date, and school code number.”]

Demographic information

Personal

1. How long have you been a teacher at your school?

2. What is your teaching or educational background?

Knowledge

3. How knowledgeable are you about special education program requirements?
   a. Possible probe: How prepared did you feel teaching inclusion?

4. What does inclusive mean to you?
   a. Possible probe: What does it look like at your school?
**Vision**

5. How would you describe the vision for the school?
   a. Possible probe: Does your principal work with any staff to develop this vision?
   b. Possible probe: How were the staff selected?

6. In what ways is the inclusion of students with disabilities incorporated into the vision?

**High-quality learning experience**

7. How are teachers supported to provide a high-quality learning experience for students with disabilities?
   a. Possible probe: How does the principal ensure that teachers enact research-based intensive instruction?

8. How is inclusion connected to other school improvement goals or initiatives in your school?
   a. Possible probe: What does that look like in the classroom? Or the school?

9. What role do classroom observations play in this process?
   a. Possible probe: Does your principal provide instructional feedback on the classroom walkthroughs?
   b. Possible probe: Do they give you the opportunity to provide instructional feedback? What does that look like?
   c. Possible probe: What do you do with the feedback from the classroom walkthrough that your principal provides?

**Building Professional Capacity**

10. Describe the ways general education and special education teachers are supported to teach students with disabilities in a general education class.
    a. Possible probe: Do you attend professional development? If so, can you describe what type of professional development is provided?

11. How does your principal increase teacher capacity around inclusive teaching and learning?
    a. Possible probe: What does that look like for general education teachers?
    b. Possible probe: Can you provide an example?
    c. Possible probe: What does that look like for special education teachers?
    d. Possible probe: Can you provide an example?
    e. Possible probe: What does that look like for new teachers?
    f. Possible probe: Can you provide an example?

12. How does your principal monitor professional development and ensuring inclusive practices in the classroom is aligned to the school’s vision and expectation?
    a. Possible probe: What does that look like?
Creating a Supportive Organization for learning

13. How does your principal promote inclusive processes in decision-making for teachers?
   a. Possible probe: Are special education teachers involved in decision-making? How?
   b. Possible probe: Are general education teachers involved in decision-making? How?

Connecting With External Partners

14. What does collaboration between general education teachers and special education teachers look like towards inclusion?
   a. Possible probes: Is there team planning? Co-teaching? PLC? What does that look like?

15. How do you collaborate with families to make inclusive education work at your school?

16. How do you collaborate with community partners to make inclusive education work at your school?

Successful Inclusive Practices

17. What are some examples of the benefits of an inclusion model in your school for students with disabilities in a general education setting?

18. What successful inclusive practices have you implemented in your school to achieve positive results for student outcomes for students with disabilities?

19. Is there any other information you feel you would like to add that you did not get a chance to share that would benefit my research?
APPENDIX I
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS: SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS

[Create a warm and friendly environment to put interviewee at ease.]

My name is Priscille Elie. and I am a doctoral candidate at the University of Florida. I am conducting interviews to understand what school stakeholders perceive as the most effective practices in the implementation of inclusionary practices in elementary schools. I want to understand your perspective about your school because we value your insights. There are no right or wrong answers.

Because it is so important for us to learn what you genuinely feel and think, these discussions will be confidential. Your name and other identifying information will never be shared or connected with any documentation or reports that come out of this discussion—no one who reads these would be able to connect your comments to you.

To make sure we capture what you have to say, we will take notes. We will also be audio recording this discussion to accurately capture your perspective. The digital audio recording will be transcribed with no names attached to your dialogue and will not be shared with anyone in the school or district. The written transcription will be sent to you so that you may verify it for accuracy. Again, any written or published documents, such as reports or journal articles, will not include your name, school district, school, or any other identifying information. Before we start, I would like to ask you to sign this Consent to Participate document that outlines what I have just described to you. It states that you can withdraw from this research project at any time. Now, as we proceed with our discussion, please let me know if you would rather not answer a particular question or if you would like me to turn off the recorder at any time.

Do you have any questions?

Yes [Answer questions.]

No  Okay then with your permission, let’s begin.

Demographic information

Personal

1. How long have you been a special education teacher at your school?

2. What is your teaching or educational background?

Knowledge

3. How knowledgeable are you about special education program requirements?
   a. Possible probe: with disabilities? Legislative mandates?
   b. Possible probe: How prepared did you feel teaching inclusion?

4. What does inclusive mean to you?
   a. Possible probe: What does it look like at your school?
**Vision**

5. How would you describe the vision for the school?
   a. Possible probe: Does your principal work with any staff to develop this vision?
   b. Possible probe: How were the staff selected?

6. In what ways is the inclusion of students with disabilities incorporated into the vision?

**High-quality learning experience**

7. How are special education teachers supported to provide a high-quality learning experience for students with disabilities?
   a. Possible probe: Does the principal ensure that special education teachers enact research-based intensive instruction? If so, how?

8. How is inclusion connected to other school improvement goals or initiatives in your school?
   a. Possible probe: What does that look like in the classroom? Or the school?

9. What role do classroom observations play in this process?
   a. Possible probe: Does your principal provide instructional feedback on the classroom walkthroughs?
   b. Possible probe: Do they give you the opportunity to provide instructional feedback? What does that look like?
   c. Possible probe: What do you do with the feedback from the classroom walkthrough that your principal provides?

**Building Professional Capacity**

10. Describe the ways general education and special education teachers are supported to teach students with disabilities in a general education class.
   a. Possible probe: Do you attend professional development? If so, can you describe what type of professional development is provided?

11. How does your principal increase teacher capacity around inclusive teaching and learning?
   a. Possible probe: What does that look like for general education teachers?
   b. Possible probe: Can you provide an example?
   c. Possible probe: What does that look like for special education teachers?
   d. Possible probe: Can you provide an example?
   e. Possible probe: What does that look like for new teachers?
   f. Possible probe: Can you provide an example?

12. How does your principal monitor professional development and ensuring inclusive practices in the classroom is aligned to the school’s vision and expectation?
   a. Possible probe: What does that look like?

**Creating a Supportive Organization for learning**

13. How does your principal promote inclusive processes in decision-making for teachers?
   a. Possible probe: Are general education teachers involved in decision-making? If so, how?
b. Possible probe: Are special education teachers involved in decision-making? If so, how?

c. Possible probe: Are parents involved in decision-making? How?

d. Possible probe: Are other members of the school community involved? How?

14. What does collaboration between general education teachers and special education teachers look like towards inclusion?

**Connecting With External Partners**

15. How do you collaborate with families to make inclusive education work at your school?

16. How do you collaborate with community partners to make inclusive education work at your school?

**Successful Inclusive Practices**

17. What are some examples of the benefits of an inclusion model in your school for students with disabilities in a general education setting?

18. What successful inclusive practices have you implemented in your school to achieve positive results for student outcomes for students with disabilities?

19. Is there any other information you feel you would like to add that you did not get a chance to share that would benefit my research?
APPENDIX J
INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT SAMPLE

Speaker 2:
Well, the teachers, something that I do for all my teachers is I always, usually the first week of school meet with them and say, "Hey, these are the ESE students that you have in your class." Provide them with the IEP at a glance. And then kind of give them some background on the kid, "Okay, this one has a behavior problem. This one is one that usually is not going to speak up. So they need a little bit more like, hey, pull you to the side kind of thing." Just giving the teachers background information on the students that I know personally because I've been working with them for a while. And then also the teachers will also say, "Well, okay, this is what we are experiencing in the classroom. Is that something that you're experiencing in a small group setting?" Just having that communication really open and making sure that we're both on the same page when it comes to the ultimate goal of our ESE kids.

Speaker 1:
Okay. And do you attend professional development? If so, can you describe what type of professional development is provided?

Speaker 2:
The most recent one I went to was the Art... Something Arts. Turnaround Arts was the one that I went to recently at school. That was something that I personally liked because my population of kids, sometimes sitting down at a table and doing work on paper is not always conducive and it's not always going to be productive. So that was something that I thoroughly enjoyed. And I feel like they made it an engaging training to show that learning can also be engaging for the students. It doesn't always have to be go on the computer, open up your book. It can be something fun, which I think that's important. And ESE students a lot of times are not our traditional learning. Their traditional learning styles are not always paper and pencil, and things like that. They need to move around, they need to do it so they can understand it. So those things are definitely important.

Speaker 1:
Okay. And how does your principal increase teacher capacity around inclusive teaching and learning?

Speaker 2:
I think he will always make sure to choose teachers that he know could best support the students, and that we're going to make sure that the students were moving and the students were really getting that support that they needed.

Speaker 1:
And what does that look like for a gen ed teacher?
Speaker 2:
So a lot of times, like I said, the conversation will be had beforehand at the beginning of the school year with the support staff. Like, "Okay, this child's going to this grade level. Who do we think is going to bring out the best in them and provide the best support for them?" And then moving on from there, like I said, collaboratively working with the teachers and giving them that background knowledge on the student and sharing some of the what works best from our experience with the kids. That was really a big thing.

Speaker 1:
And what would you say that, and it may be the same too, what does that look like for a special education teacher?

Speaker 2:
For me, it is always making my kids feel successful because when they come to me sometime in the classroom, it might be, the gap might be very large and not always, it can be discouraging for them. So making the kids just feel successful in the sense that, hey, I am learning something. I am good at something, I'm going to be successful at something. And then making sure and letting them know that all of this ultimately is what they're going to take back to their classroom. And they may not see it right now, but it's a stepping stone that everything is a stepping stone in learning, and you have to start somewhere. So even though what you're doing may not be what you're doing in the classroom, it is going to help you get to where you need to be.

Speaker 1:
Okay. And how does your principal monitor professional development and ensuring that the practices that are in the classroom are aligned to the school's vision and the expectations?

Speaker 2:
Well, data was a big thing. Always data, data, data. So he definitely was big on that keeping track or saying, "Hey, these are the bubble kids, these are the kids that we need to move." Making sure that the kids were getting the support was definitely a big thing.

Speaker 1:
Okay. And what did he do? So you guys had data chats, what else did you guys do?

Speaker 2:
Then the PLCs, I know one PLC a while back, it was just the questioning format for the questions that the kids would look at. What question stems do we think that they needed to work on, and what question stems were they already familiar with that they will ultimately be successful with? That way when they were in the classroom, we would know, okay, let's focus on this particular kind of questions formats because they're not understanding them. And these are what our population of students needs to focus on.
because these are the questions that they’re going to get and these are the questions that they’re having problems with.


National Center for Education Statistics. (2020). Common core of data: District directory information. Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/districtsearch/district_detail.asp?Search=1&details=1&Ins tName=broward&DistrictType=1&DistrictType=2&DistrictType=3&DistrictType=4&DistrictType=5&DistrictType=6&DistrictType=7&DistrictType=8&NumOfStudentsRange=more&NumOfSchoolsRange=more&ID2=1200180


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Priscille Elie was born in Brooklyn, New York, to Haitian parents, but grew up in Orlando, Florida. After graduating from Valencia Community College, she moved to South Florida and attended Nova Southeastern University and earned a bachelor’s degree in elementary education in 2004. Priscille’s commitment to learning then led her to pursue further studies. She successfully completed a master’s degree in reading and an education specialist degree in educational leadership, both from Nova Southeastern University. Throughout her academic journey, Priscille also actively engaged in various roles within the field of education. She served as an elementary teacher, where she shared her passion for teaching and inspired young minds. Later, she took on the role of a literacy coach, guiding and empowering others to promote literacy among students. After completing her district’s leadership preparation program, she became an assistant principal before being appointed as an elementary school principal in 2019. Continuing her pursuit of personal and professional growth, Priscille seized the opportunity to join the Leadership in Educational Administration Doctoral (LEAD) program at the University of Florida in the same year. Her dedication and hard work culminated in being awarded her Ed.D. in educational leadership in 2023, signifying a significant achievement in her academic and career journey. Outside her academic and professional life, Priscille finds joy and fulfillment in her role as a wife and mother. She has been happily married for 14 years and is blessed with four beautiful children – a son and three daughters. Her family holds a special place in her heart, and she relishes spending quality time with them.

Priscille’s interests and activities are diverse and enriching. She actively participates in ministry work at her local church, of which she has been a member of for 14 years, particularly taking on the responsibility of the Vacation Bible School (VBS) as
the VBS director. Additionally, she nurtures her love for reading, maintains her fitness through regular workouts, and showcases her creativity by hosting events like weddings, baby showers, and other gatherings.