

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION FOR PRESCHOOL-12th GRADE STUDENTS WITH
LOW INCIDENCE DISABILITIES:
A CASE STUDY OF STATE LEADERS' PERCEPTIONS

by

Charles William Kemp

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this holistic single-case study was to examine the state leaders' perceptions of the readiness for public schools to implement inclusive education for students with low incidence disabilities. The adult learning theory (Knowles, 1990), the sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986), and the implementation science framework (Blasé, Van Dyke, Fixsen, Duda, Horner, & Sugai, 2009) provided the theoretical framework for this study. The study, set in a Midwestern state, sought to understand from state-level leaders' perspectives the readiness for and the roadblocks to implementation of inclusive education for students with low incidence disabilities. The data for this study was derived through individual interviews with eight supervisors of the educational support teams, a focus group of five state-level leaders, and an examination of site documents from a Midwestern state. I followed Saldaña's (2013) data analysis approach of coding and theme naming in order to understand the phenomenon of inclusive education from state leader's perspectives. An analysis of the state-level leaders' perceptions of inclusive education revealed the following themes: a) change the conversation, b) change the culture, and c) change the system. The findings revealed that some districts already practice inclusive education for some students, but most districts struggle to include students with high incidence disabilities, much less students with low incidence disabilities. State-level leaders also believe that preservice teachers are not prepared to face the challenges of diverse needs in today's classrooms. Additionally, state-level leaders perceive that inclusive practices happen where district and building leadership support exists. The greatest roadblock to implementation of inclusive practices is adult attitudes. Lastly, state-level leaders perceive the need to cast a vision for inclusive education for all students regardless of disabilities.

Keywords: inclusive education, low incidence disabilities, state leaders, perception

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to all students with disabilities, but especially those children with low incidence disabilities, who deserve to be educated in their neighborhood schools alongside their typically developing peers, and experience every learning opportunity possible. May I remember that what is done to the *least of these* is done to Jesus.

I also dedicate this work to my lovely wife, Sue, of more than 36 years. She has been my greatest cheerleader, the yard worker, the repair person, and my constant encouragement throughout this entire journey. Without her ongoing support, her prayers during writer's block, her reassurance that I could finish, and her deep, unfailing love for me, this work would never have been possible. She gave of herself many times over so that I could have time to study and time to write. Her professional commitment and constant support on a daily basis to students with low incidence disabilities serves as a model for others who would serve this population.

This work is also dedicated to my four daughters, all of whom have taken up the torch of life-long learning that was modeled to them throughout their childhood and have continued to grow academically. I could not be more proud of each of you for your accomplishments. To my two granddaughters, my deepest desire for you is to follow Jesus with your life, and secondly, to develop a love for learning that you will carry throughout life.

I also dedicate this work to my parents who only expected me to do my best in school, though at times I know they knew school was difficult for me. I hope you find this to be some of my best work yet, and makes you proud of my efforts.

Last, this work is dedicated to those dear friends who have gone on before me, and now stand among the great cloud of witnesses. Each of your lives impacted my life in ways you cannot know. The times we shared together, spurred me to persevere to the end of this journey.

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First, I want to acknowledge all of the students with disabilities who have taught me so much about life, learning, and perseverance. Time and again, you have shown me what happens when I presume competence in you. I am grateful for the lessons.

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To those doctoral students who have traveled this journey with me, I can never thank you enough for the prayers, texts, emails, and support through this journey. God brings people who intersect our lives and we are forever changed. Each of you intersected my life and I am so thankful for each of you.

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Finally, I want to acknowledge my heavenly Father. I am humbled by what You have allowed me to accomplish in this work and I pray it will be used to change the lives of children, since You care for each of them deeply (Matthew 19:14).

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List of Abbreviations

Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (EAHCA)

Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 (HEOA)

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 (IDEA)

Individualized Education Program (IEP)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Intellectual Disability (ID)

Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)

National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center (NSTTAC)

No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP)

Response to Intervention (RTI)

Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Inclusive education is the practice of students with disabilities being educated in the general education classroom alongside their typically developing peers. Inclusive education is not a new concept to the education profession. When the Education for All Handicapped Children Act [EAHCA] (1975) passed, sometimes referred to as PL 94-142, it guaranteed a free and appropriate education for all children with disabilities with services designed to meet unique needs. In addition, EAHCA provided rights to parents and children with disabilities, provided guidance to states about how to meet the needs of children with disabilities, and provided assurance of quality programs for children with disabilities.

Since the passage of EAHCA, schools have been grappling with how to provide for the needs of students with disabilities. Debate, concerning where to serve students with low incidence disabilities like autism, sensory disabilities, and multiple disabilities, continues among school personnel, parents, and advocacy groups (Ball & Green, 2014). Opponents of inclusive education legislation believe special education is just that, special education; therefore, children with disabilities should be receiving education in a special place. Proponents of inclusive education argue the law is clear and that these populations should be educated alongside typically developing peers (Ball & Green, 2014; DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2013; Grima-Farrell, Bain, & McDonagh, 2011).

Teachers' and principals' perceptions of inclusive education, though varied in terms of support for and opposition toward, can be found in the literature (Ball & Green, 2014; McGhie-Richmond, Irvine, Loreman, Cizman, & Lupart, 2013; Ryan, 2010; Valeo, 2008). In fact, Grima-Farrell et al. (2011) cited the need to bridge the research-to-practice gap concerning

inclusive education practices. Two large gaps exist in the current inclusive education literature. First, the need exists to gain greater insight about the training and experience, attitudes, and perceptions regarding inclusion of both general and special education teachers and the leaders of those two groups of teachers (Ball & Green, 2014). Second, there is a need for qualitative research to examine the perceptions of leaders at all levels, particularly district and state-level leaders, regarding the inclusive education practices of students with low incidence disabilities (Horrocks, White, & Roberts, 2008; Lyons, 2012; McGhie-Richmond et al., 2013; Ryan, 2010; Waldron, McLeskey, & Redd, 2011). Other related gaps in the literature call for school leaders to understand the professional development needs of school staff about inclusive education (Gable, Tonelson, Sheth, Wilson, & Park, 2012; Hoppey & McLeskey, 2010) and the need for institutions of higher education to understand pre-service teacher preparation for inclusive education (Fuchs, 2009-2010). This study will explore the perceptions of state leaders about the readiness of school districts to practice inclusive education for students with low incidence disabilities.

This first chapter of the study provides a background to the problem, the problem statement, the purpose statement, and the five research questions addressed in the study. The next sections include a research plan, the delimitations for the study, the terms and definitions pertinent to the study, and a chapter summary.

Background

Legislation guiding the education of students with disabilities has been in place for nearly 40 years with the establishment of Public Law 94-142, known as the Education of All Handicapped Children Act (1975). While the law gave hope to parents of children with disabilities, its intent was to provide clarity for schools (EAHCA, 1975). Subsequent legislation

known as the Individual with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA] (2004) mandated that students with disabilities are to be educated in their local neighborhood school, alongside their typically developing peers, and provided access to the general education curriculum using the aids and supports needed to do so. However, the reality is, nationally, in 2010, only about 35% of the students with disabilities were served in the general education classroom more than 79% of the day (U.S. Department of Education, 2013).

Perceptions of inclusive education differ among teachers and school leaders. Teachers' perceptions of inclusive education, well documented in the literature, are mostly positive (Fuchs, 2009-2010; McGhie-Richmond et al., 2013; Valeo, 2008). Those who practice inclusive education generally have positive views, a desire for strong administrative support, and a need for additional training and effective strategies to meet the needs of this population (Fuchs, 2009-2010; McGhie-Richmond et al., 2013; Valeo, 2008).

Principal-level perceptions of inclusive education, also well supported in the literature, are mostly positive (Ball & Green, 2014; Hoppey & McLeskey, 2010; Horrocks et al., 2008; Ryan, 2010; Waldron et al., 2011). Horrocks et al. (2008) found that principals with positive inclusive education experiences correlated with a more positive attitude toward the practice of inclusive education for students with autism. Praisner's (2003) seminal work on the attitudes of principals toward inclusion stated, the "more positive the experiences with students with disabilities the more those principals chose less restrictive environments. This relationship was found for all of the disability categories including serious emotional disturbance and autism" (p. 142). McLeskey, Waldron, and Redd (2014) reported that principals who promote inclusion, develop plans to not only include students with disabilities and gifted students, but also plans to ensure success for every student. The need exists for a strong culture for and shared

commitment to inclusive education by both faculty and administration if schools are to implement inclusive education (Hoppey & McLeskey, 2010; Horrocks et al., 2008; Waldron et al., 2011). Finally, although noted previously, Horrocks et al., (2008) found positive attitudes of principals towards inclusion, he also discovered that the longer a principal had served at a school, the less chance for inclusive practices existed.

Little evidence of district-level studies of inclusive education exists in the research. DeMatthews and Mawhinney (2013) and Ryndak, Reardon, Benner, and Ward (2007) found three needs at the district level for successful inclusive education, (a) strong support from every level of leadership, (b) on-going professional development, and (c) the encouragement to start slow and build inclusive education practices across the district. Ryndak et al. (2007), in their longitudinal study of one district's journey of inclusive education, found that to "accomplish this [inclusive education across the district], changes must occur and be embedded in every aspect of services, from policy to practice" (p. 244).

Lacking in the literature are perceptions of state-level leaders about inclusive education. This study sought to examine those perceptions, particularly about district readiness and will explore supports needed from the state-level to meet the goals set forth by the state for more inclusive education practices.

Situation to Self

I serve as the supervisor of special education in a small, Appalachian city school system of two elementary buildings and one combined junior high and high school building. Part of my motivation to conduct this study lies in the fact that most school systems in my area are utilizing self-contained units to meet the educational needs of students with low incidence disabilities. Approaching this study from an ontological, social constructivist perspective, where "multiple

realities are constructed through our lived experiences and interactions with others” (Creswell, 2013, p. 36), my goal is “to rely as much as possible on the participants’ views of the situation” (pp. 24-25). It will be my task to report “different perspectives as themes develop in the findings” (p. 21).

Problem Statement

Many districts in this Midwestern state are not meeting the goal of 62.3% of the percentage of students with disabilities served in the general education classroom at least 80% of the school day, as set by the department of education (Midwestern State Department of Education, 2014). Some districts practice inclusive education; however, nearly 35% of the districts in this state did not meet the goal of least restrictive environment (LRE) for students with disabilities (Midwestern State Department of Education, 2014). Understanding state leaders’ perceptions of current inclusive practices in local districts, having insight into the roadblocks that exist in districts that prevent more inclusive education practices (Honig & Venkateswaran, 2012), and being cognizant of the professional development and other support needs that exist in districts (Hoppey & McLeskey, 2010) may help state leaders promote more inclusive education practices across the state. The problem is little research exists concerning state leaders’ perceptions of inclusive education practices in this setting. Further research is needed to understand the role that state leaders play in promoting inclusive education practices in districts and schools (Ball & Green, 2014; DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2013; Hoppey & McLeskey, 2010; Huberman, Navro, & Parrish, 2012; Ryan, 2010).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this holistic single-case study was to examine the state leaders’ perceptions concerning the readiness for public schools to implement inclusive education for

students with low incidence disabilities. Readiness for statewide systemic change is defined as the plan that addresses the implementation drivers of competency, organization, and leadership (Blasé et al., 2009; Fixsen, Naoom, Blasé, Friedman, & Wallace, 2005). One theory guiding this study is Knowles (1970/1990) adult learning theory, or what Knowles referred to as andragogy. Andragogy is “the art and science of helping adults learn” (Knowles, 1970, p. 38). The adult learning theory provides the framework to understand how the life experiences and knowledge of state educational leaders can be used to make connections to the implementation drivers. The implementation drivers lead to a statewide plan for the practice of inclusive education for all students, particularly those with low incidence disabilities. The sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986) is the second theory that helps frame this study. Vygotsky (1978) posited children learn more “under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (p. 86) than could be learned on their own. A student with disabilities learning alongside more capable peers promotes a picture of inclusive education. The last theory that frames this study is the implementation science framework developed by Blasé et al. (2009) and Fixsen et al. (2005). Although Blasé et al. (2009) and Fixsen et al. (2005) developed this framework for multiple purposes, one use of it is to provide the structure to implement the statewide systemic change needed for inclusive education for all students, particularly those with low incidence disabilities, to become a reality (Sailor & McCart, 2014).

Significance of the Study

This study seeks to add to the literature on inclusive education, particularly from the state-level leaders’ viewpoint concerning district readiness to practice inclusive education for students with low incidence disabilities. For the purpose of this study, inclusive education of students with low incidence disabilities is defined as membership and participation in general

education classroom instruction, learning general education curriculum content, and utilizing communication equal to typical peers (Jorgensen, McSheehan, & Sonnenmeier, 2010).

DeMatthews, and Mawhinney (2013) recommended further research to determine what districts should do to prepare for, promote, and practice inclusive education. The importance of this subject concerns the requirement of the Office of Special Education Programs at the U.S.

Department of Education for states to increase more inclusive settings for students of all disabilities and to decrease the number of students with disabilities placed in secluded settings (Kurth, Morningstar, & Kozleski, 2014; Marks, Kurth, & Pirtle, 2013; Ryndak et al., 2014).

Careful planning by neighborhood schools must take place to receive students with low incidence disabilities rather than just reduce or completely do away with separate schools or alternative settings (DeMatthews & Mawhinney). Likewise, Ryndak et al. (2007) found districts must “provide the resources and support to do what is required for each school to be successful as they join the change efforts, then build on their success” (p. 244).

In this Midwestern state, the setting for this study, the Department of Education is responsible to design and rollout professional development. The Department, by legislative mandate, must use regional education support groups to provide this professional development and technical assistance to districts. These regional groups are called State Education Support Groups. The work of these groups has two purposes. First, the State Education Support Groups provide assistance to districts to meet federal and state compliance issues regarding special education. Second, the State Education Support Groups provide guidance to school districts concerning ways to close the achievement gap between typically developing students and students with disabilities. To accomplish this work, the State Education Support Groups utilize specialists who work directly with assigned districts and schools, particularly those identified as

high need, based upon achievement and other data, by the Midwestern Department of Education. The supervisor of each State Education Support Group oversees the work of the specialists. The supervisors and specialists are responsible to meet regularly with district and building leadership that consists of administrators, teachers, parents, and other service personnel. The scope of work of the State Education Support Groups involves providing differentiated, tiered professional development, and technical assistance that focuses on improved student achievement and changes in adult practices and behaviors. The work also involves providing professional development and technical assistance to ensure districts meet federal and state guidelines regarding students with disabilities. Last, the work involves delivering professional development and technical assistance to districts around multi-tiered systems of support to meet the academic, behavioral, and social-emotional needs of all learners.

Moreover, the executive and deputy executive managers of the Offices of School Preparedness, School Improvement, and Special Needs are responsible to oversee the work of the State Education Support Groups. Monthly meetings of the managers of the Offices of School Preparedness, School Improvement, and Special Needs, and the supervisors of the State Education Support Groups take place. These meetings provide opportunity for the supervisors to discuss district progress toward state developed goals and afford the managers time to instruct the supervisors concerning changes from a state and federal perspective.

Further, since nearly 35% of the districts in this state did not meet the goal (62.3%) of the percentage of students who receive services in the general education classroom at least 80% of the day, this study will seek to examine three areas of significance in inclusive education (Midwestern State Department of Education, 2014). First, the study will examine state leaders' perceptions of district readiness for inclusive education. Next, the roadblocks to meeting the goal

will be explored. Finally, the study will clarify the support needed for more districts to meet this goal. Therefore, understanding the perceptions of state-level leaders about inclusive education for students with low incidence disabilities is an imperative this study seeks to address.

Research Questions

This holistic single-case study sought to understand the perceptions of state-level leaders concerning the readiness of public schools to practice inclusive education for students with low incidence disabilities. The theoretical framework of this study, built around the adult learning theory (Knowles, 1970, 1990), the sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986), and the implementation science framework (Blasé et al., 2009; Fixsen, et al., 2005) has served to develop all aspects of this study including the research questions.

The following questions guided this study:

1. What are state-level leaders' perceptions of district readiness for inclusive education for students with low incidence disabilities?

Hoppey and McLeskey (2010) and Waldron et al., (2011) found leaders were key to effective implementation of inclusive education practices. Not only must school culture change to facilitate inclusive practices, but schools that successfully practice inclusive education have professional learning communities that embrace change and the implementation of practices that meet the needs of all students (Hoppey & McLeskey, 2010). Raskin and Stewart (2012, April) examined school superintendents' perceptions of district readiness to implement school reform. Raskin and Stewart reported that nearly 80% ($N = 212$) of the superintendents stated their districts had the knowledge of strategies and the leadership skills needed to implement school reform initiatives. Wahlstrom, Louis, Leithwood, and Anderson (2010) suggested state educational agency leaders have taken on a new role that focuses on growth, development, and

school improvement, all with the goal of improved student achievement. It is possible that inclusive education could be viewed as a means for greater student achievement.

Knowles (1970, 1990) adult learning theory provided a theoretical framework for this research question. Hoppey and McLeskey (2010) spoke of successful inclusive schools having professional learning communities (PLCs). The collective experience of these PLCs becomes the catalyst to pursue further learning in order to bring about needed change that promotes inclusive education for all students. The adults, in the school community, work to learn new ways of providing quality educational experiences for all learners.

2. From a state-level leader's perspective, what is needed in preservice programs that would support general and special education teacher readiness concerning inclusive education for students with low incidence disabilities?

One of the challenges to the implementation of inclusive education is teacher preparation and readiness to support such initiatives. Fuchs (2009-2010) found that teachers "voiced serious concern about their insufficient pre-service preparation . . . [stating] the 'one required course' in special education for general educators was 'worthless'" (p. 34). The need to improve efforts to prepare teachers and other school personnel to "address the academic, social, and behavioral needs" of students with low incidence disabilities is imperative (Gable et al., 2012, p. 514).

The adult learning theory (Knowles, 1970, 1990) provided the theoretical support for this research question. Knowles spoke of the internal motivation that drives learning for the adult. As pre-service teachers understand the need to not simply know characteristics about students with disabilities, but more importantly, how to provide for the educational needs of these students, the motivation to understand how to meet the needs of these students pushes these new teachers to be well prepared to meet the challenges they may face. Allday, Neilson-Gatti, and

Hudson (2013) spoke of the need among pre-service teachers, during their preparation, for applied experience in the field with students with disabilities. Knowles suggested life's experiences help orientate the learning and leads to further learning.

3. From a state-level leader's perspective, how do current practices in districts promote inclusive education for students with low incidence disabilities?

Understanding current practices concerning inclusive education is necessary to apprehend the size of the task that exists if schools are to become more inclusive. Huberman, Navro, and Parrish (2012) implicated that given the tremendous amount of federal, state, and local dollars being spent on the education of students with disabilities, having a better understanding of how successful districts practice inclusive education may help inform other districts of what can be done at their sites.

Vygotsky's (1978, 1986) sociocultural theory provided a theoretical framework for this research question. As state leaders understand current practices in districts concerning inclusive practices for students with low incidence disabilities, there exists opportunities to learn from more competent others. Vygotsky believed the opportunity to work with more competent others concerning processes and functions, promoted learning and brought about change.

4. What are state-level leaders' perceptions of the roadblocks in local districts that prevent districts from preparing for and practicing inclusive education for students with low incidence disabilities?

Honig and Venkateswaran (2012) posited there are "implementation curbs" (p. 8) that prevent school districts from employing inclusive practices. Studying those roadblocks toward implementation may provide the catalyst needed by districts to provide better inclusive settings for this population.

The implementation science framework (Blasé et al., 2009; Fixsen et al., 2005) provided the theoretical framework for this research question. Fixsen, Blasé, Horner, Sims, and Sugai (2013) spoke of change being full of challenges. Understanding the roadblocks to inclusive education for students with low incidence disabilities will provide opportunity for leaders at all levels to seek ways to overcome these barriers. Fixsen, Blasé, Horner, et al. (2013) suggested the implementation science framework provides the structure needed to implement and sustain such change.

5. What additional resources do state-level leaders believe might be necessary for districts in order for inclusive educational practices to take place for students with low incidence disabilities?

Research found the implementation of inclusive education will require resources and support at each school (Drame & Frattura, 2011; Ryndak, Reardon, Benner, & Ward, 2007; Waldron et al., 2011). Some of these resources and supports include district-wide data systems that measure the progress of all students, clear grading policies, increased use of assistive technology and augmentative communication devices, time for collaboration and planning, and materials adapted for multi-levels of learners that address the same content. The identification of these and other resources in districts that practice inclusive education could be helpful for aspiring districts.

The implementation science framework (Fixsen, Blasé, Horner, et al., 2013; Fixsen, Blasé, Metz, et al., 2013) provided the theoretical framework for this research question. Fixsen, Blasé, Horner, et al. (2013) and Fixsen, Blasé, Metz, et al. (2013) suggested it would take strong leadership teams, the development of policy and financial structures, regular follow-up regarding implementation, and on-going communication to facilitate the change needed in schools for the

inclusion of student with disabilities. The more state leaders understand districts' needs, the greater the opportunity for inclusive education for students with low incidence disabilities to become a reality.

Research Plan

This qualitative, holistic single-case study examined the perceptions of state leaders concerning district readiness to implement inclusive education for students with low incidence disabilities. Yin (2011) defines a case as a “bounded entity” that “serves as the unit of analysis in a case study” (p. 6). For this study, the case is bound to the leaders of education at the Midwestern State Department of Education who provide oversight of and leadership to the State Education Support Groups. A case study design fits this study since its intent is to understand a real-life phenomenon in depth (Yin, 2009). Yin (2011) and Patton (2002) both agree that qualitative research often focuses in depth on small samples, and can involve just a single individual ($N = 1$). This study utilized purposeful, criterion-selected participants that included eight supervisors of State Education Support Groups, and a focus group of five executive managers and deputy executive managers of state-level offices within the Midwestern Department of Education. “Purposeful sampling focuses on selecting information-rich cases whose study will illuminate the questions under study” (Patton, 2002, p. 230). Individual interviews with eight state-level supervisors, a focus group discussion with five state-level educational leaders, and the review of pertinent documents such as meeting notes, agendas, and meeting handouts about current inclusive educational practices provided the data for this study. I followed Saldaña's (2013) data analysis approach of coding and theme naming in order to understand the phenomenon of inclusive education for students with low incidence disabilities from state leader's perspectives.

Delimitations

Delimitations are the restrictions imposed on the study that may limit the trustworthiness of the study (Joyner, Rouse, & Glatthorn, 2013; Levy & Ellis, 2011). The delimitations of this study include participant selection, setting selection, and methodology. First, participant selection delimits the study in that only supervisors of State Education Support Groups were sampled as interviewee participants and while these supervisors are state-level leaders, they are not directly working in a school district. As such, depending on the length of time removed from district and building level work, these supervisors may not completely understand the particulars of district and building level realities. Second, the selection of a Midwestern, United States perspective for the setting delimits this study in that the findings may not be transferrable to other areas of the country.

Definitions

1. *Evidence-based practices* – practices supported by empirical research that use research designs that infer causality and research designs that validate student outcomes (Cook & Cook, 2013).
2. *Inclusive education* – students with disabilities being educated in their neighborhood schools, in the general education classroom alongside their same-aged peers, provided instruction in grade-level content, with high expectations for achievement, and using communication commensurate with their peers (Jorgensen, McSheehan, & Sonnenmeier, 2010; Shurr & Bouck, 2013).
3. *Inclusive education of students with low incidence disabilities* - membership and participation of students with severe intellectual disabilities, multiple disabilities, autism, or sensory disabilities like deaf-blindness (Giangreco, 2000) in general education

classroom instruction, learning general education curriculum content, and utilizing communication equal to typical peers (Jorgensen, McSheehan, & Sonnenmeier, 2010).

4. *Individualized Education Program* – A written plan for a student with a disability, developed by the IEP team that includes the parent and (a) clearly defines the student's present levels of academic and functional performance, (b) states the goals and objectives of the student's educational program to enable participation in, and make progress in the general education curriculum, (c) delineates decisions about educational placement, (d) provides specially designed instruction guidelines, accommodations and modifications, as well as any related services, (e) outlines postsecondary transition needs for students ages 16 years old or older, (f) states how student will participate in State and districtwide assessments, and (g) provides direction regarding periodic reports of progress to parents (Gartin & Murdick, 2005; Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004; Yell, Rogers, & Rogers, 1998).
5. *Least dangerous assumption* – the mindset that in the absence of data to support otherwise, the least dangerous assumption holds students with disabilities are competent and able to learn, because to assume otherwise could be more dangerous and cause greater harm, provide fewer opportunities, and lessen the likelihood the student can function in the adult world (Donnellen, 1984).
6. *Low incidence disabilities* – students with severe intellectual disabilities, multiple disabilities, autism, or sensory disabilities like deaf-blindness (Giangreco, 2000).
7. *Paraprofessional* – usually non-degreed professionals who often receive training from school districts, and are responsible to provide support to students to improve academic achievement, provide response to intervention supports particularly in reading and math,

offer assistance to students with behavioral issues, and manage learning centers in the classrooms (Ashbaker & Morgan, 2012; McKenzie, 2011; Stockall, 2014; Washburn-Moses et al., 2013).

8. *Presumed competence* – the mindset that presumes students with disabilities are competent and can learn the general education curriculum when given the proper aids and supports to do so (Jorgensen, McSheehan, & Sonnenmeier, 2010).
9. *Response to intervention* – a multi-tiered approach to interventions for students who struggle behaviorally, academically, or both, whereby teachers gather baseline information about student progress, provide evidence-based interventions and supports with fidelity, and progress monitor to ensure student makes progress toward program expectations (Berkeley, Bender, Gregg Peaster, & Saunders, 2009; Hughes & Dexter, 2011; Odom, Buysse, & Soukakou, 2011).
10. *Silos in special education* – the idea of special education being separate from general education. Self-contained classrooms specially designed for students with disabilities stand apart from classrooms for students without disabilities (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Stecker, 2010).
11. *Universal design for learning* – providing the opportunity for students to use multiple means of representation, expression, and engagement to demonstrate what they know and to promote learning (Edyburn, 2005). The reduction of the ‘one size fits all’ approach to curriculum and teaching with the focus of designing lessons and instructional practices that meet the needs of all learners, including those with disabilities (Edyburn, 2005).

Summary

The debate concerning the educational placement of students with disabilities continues, in spite of federal legislation (Ball & Green, 2014). The Education of Handicapped Children Act (1975) and subsequent legislation, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA] (2004) outlined major changes regarding the education of students with disabilities. Least restrictive environment was one principle of IDEA that ensured students with disabilities were educated alongside their typical peers to the maximum extent possible (Katsiyannis, Yell, & Bradley, 2001). Federal guidelines require schools to report annually the least restrictive environment data, but data continues to indicate that far too many students with disabilities do not receive services in the general education setting alongside typically developing peers (U. S. Department of Education, 2013). The perceptions of principals and teachers about inclusive education are well documented in the literature, albeit perceptions include both criticism of and support for the practice (Ball & Green, 2014; McGhie-Richmond et al., 2013; Ryan, 2010; Valeo, 2008). The gap in the literature is the perception of state-level leaders and their understanding of the readiness for schools to practice inclusive education for all students (Ball & Green, 2014; DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2013; Hoppey & McLeskey, 2010; Huberman, Navro, & Parrish, 2012; Ryan, 2010). This case study examined the perceptions of state leaders concerning the readiness of schools to provide instruction for students with low incidence disabilities in the general education classroom.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

This review of the literature first provides theoretical and implementation frameworks for the study. Second, a discussion of the historical background of the education of students with disabilities follows. Some critical thinking about inclusive education, the current perceptions of preschool-12 inclusion, the effect of inclusive education, and potential supports to make inclusive education a reality conclude the chapter.

Theoretical Framework

The adult learning theory developed by Knowles (1990), and the sociocultural theory advanced by Vygotsky (1978, 1986), serve as the theoretical framework for this study. Each provide perspectives about how people learn, in this case adults, and offer ideas for how the theories find application to the profession and my study. Additionally, the implementation science framework (Blasé et al., 2009) provides a structure for systemic change.

Adult Learning Theory

Knowles (1970) theory of adult learning, sometimes called andragogy, has stood as the model for how adults learn (Holton, Swanson, & Naquin, 2001). Knowles defined andragogy as “the art and science of helping adults learn” (p. 38). McGrath (2009) defined andragogy as “a scientific discipline that studies everything related to learning and teaching which would bring adults to their full degree of humanness” (p. 102). Knowles (1990) theory is premised on five assumptions:

- adult learners need to know why they need to learn something before effort will be spent learning it,
- self-direction in adult learners is positioned on the adult learner’s self-concept,

- often a life experience becomes the catalyst for adults to pursue learning,
- life's experiences help orientate the adult learner that leads to increased learning, and
- internal motivation drives learning for adult learners.

Knowles posited adults approach the learning environment with a set of experiences unique to each individual and those experiences effect how the person learns. Andragogy assumes the student (adult) has a bank of knowledge and life experiences from which to draw when in the learning environment (McGrath, 2009).

Sociocultural Theory

Understanding that adults use their life experiences for increased learning (Knowles, 1990) connects with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory in that learners connect what is known, to understand and acquire information about the unknown (Gindis, 1999). The sociocultural theory premises that humans learn from each other. The learning is often accomplished through scaffolding, which is the building from simple to more complex in idea development, by taking what is known to teach what is unknown, and through modeling of particular behaviors and functions (Gindis, 1999).

Berk and Winsler (1995) defined scaffolding as the "changing quality of support over a teaching session, in which a more skilled partner adjusts the assistance he...provides to fit the child's current level of performance" (p. 171). Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976), in their seminal work concerning the instructional strategy of tutoring, spoke of the process [scaffolding] the adult or other competent learner uses to limit the difficulty of required tasks until a student was able to successfully accomplish smaller parts of the greater task. Wood et al., (1976) stated tutoring often "involves a kind of 'scaffolding' process that enables a child

or novice to solve a problem, carry out a task or achieve a goal which would be beyond his unassisted efforts” (p. 90).

Vygotsky (1978), in his observations of children formulated that “learning and development are interrelated from the child’s very first day of life” (p. 84). He believed children “develop an entire repository of skills” (p. 84) through the imitation of speech and other activities from adults. Vygotsky (1986) stated, “with assistance, every child can do more than he can by himself” (p.187) and is only limited by his own level of development. Through observation, Vygotsky believed children interacting with each other through language and play actually shaped thinking (Jaramillo, 1996). He believed that when children interacted with each other using objects and materials, cognitive development was one result (Jaramillo, 1996). Vygotsky (1978) posited “learning should be matched in some manner with the child’s developmental level” (p. 85).

The zone of proximal development, described by Vygotsky (1978) as a “new and exceptionally important concept” (p. 85) provides understanding about how children learn. Vygotsky defined two levels of development associated with the zone of proximal development. First, a child’s actual development level, is the level of mental development as measured using a battery of tests (Vygotsky, 1978). The second level called the zone of proximal development is defined as “the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (p. 86). In other words, children come to a learning situation with a certain level of understanding, but with the right support and direction can move to a higher level of understanding (Gallimore & Tharp, as cited in Moll, 1990; Gindis, 1999; Jaramillo, 1996).

The adult and sometimes even a more competent peer can help the child move from where she is to a greater understanding of the information discussed (Jaramillo, 1996; Moll, 1990).

Vygotsky (1978) posited that children imitate many activities “that go well beyond the limits of their own capabilities” and “are capable of doing much more in collective activity or under the guidance of adults” (p. 88). In itself, this fact has little significance; however, the fact has great importance concerning the relation between learning and development in children (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky noted that historically, the use of tests to determine mental development provided education with a point of reference “whose limits it should not exceed. This procedure oriented learning toward yesterday’s development, toward developmental stages already completed” (p. 89). Never was this thinking more evident than in the teaching of students with disabilities. Vygotsky explained that research had established that students with disabilities were not capable of abstract thinking, thus received more concrete, hands-on learning opportunities. Interestingly, experience with this population of students seemed to indicate otherwise. Vygotsky claimed,

it turned out that a teaching system based solely on concreteness—one that eliminated from teaching everything associated with abstract thinking—not only failed to help retarded children overcome their innate handicaps but also reinforced their handicaps by accustoming children exclusively to concrete thinking and thus suppressing the rudiments of any abstract thought that such children still have. (p. 89)

In light of this claim, Vygotsky stated that since students with disabilities will “never achieve well-elaborated forms of abstract thought” (p. 89) on their own, schools should provide this population of students with every opportunity to work with abstract thinking and to use concrete thinking as a means to do so.

Implementation Science Framework

Access to the general curriculum for all students is going to take more than just tinkering along the edges to fix the issue; “a true systems change effort is needed” (Sailor, 2008, p. 256). Jackson, Ryndak, and Wehmeyer (2008) stressed that the educational field could clearly benefit from research to facilitate the changes needed for schools to move from self-contained services to an inclusive model to serve the needs of all students. Lessons from the emerging field of implementation science framework research may help schools make this changeover (Mazzotti, Test, & Mustian, 2014).

Research suggested that the implementation science framework is one of the supports that could make inclusive education a reality for students with low incidence disabilities (Blasé et al., 2009; Fixsen, Blasé, Horner, et al., 2013; Metz & Bartley, 2012). The framework consists of four stages:

- exploration – identifying the need for change, researching interventions that could provide solutions, creating readiness for change, and determining to move to next stage or not,
- installation – identifying both financial and human resources necessary for implementation and developing the competency of key stakeholders to ensure fidelity,
- initial implementation – using data to assess implementation, employing problem solving skills, and addressing barriers to implementation, and
- full implementation – supporting the new way of work and certifying the new way of work is integrated at all levels across the system.

These stages are not linear, but often overlap, and interconnect with each other (Fixsen, Blasé, Horner, et al., 2013; Metz & Bartley, 2012). Sustainability is built into each stage (Fixsen, Blasé, Horner, et al., 2013).

Three implementation drivers guide the work of the implementation science framework (Metz & Bartley, 2012). First, leadership is the vehicle that provides direction and vision for the work of systemic change as well as the support for resource allocation that enables the other two drivers' functionality (Blasé et al., 2009; Fixsen, Blasé, Horner, et al., 2013). Leadership, in this case is not a position, but rather a function that includes vision, management, coordination, and facilitative administration (Fixsen, Blasé, Horner, et al., 2013). Second, the driver of organizational environment is the mechanism to create and sustain hospitable organizational and systems environments for effective educational services (Blasé et al., 2009). This driver includes the decision support data system, information, materials, tools, resources, and feedback (Fixsen, Blasé, Horner, et al., 2013). The focus is to create 'host' environments that make for easier implementation (Blasé et al., 2009). Last, the driver of competency is the mechanism that helps to develop, improve, and sustain the implementation of interventions that influence the academic lives of children (Fixsen, Blasé, Horner, et al., 2013). These mechanisms include selection, training, and coaching. This driver focuses on the competencies to implement the practices with fidelity (Fixsen, Blasé, Horner, et al., 2013).

The implementation science framework begins with the implementation of evidence-based programs using teams of educators (Fixsen, Blasé, Metz, & Van Dyke, 2013b). The implementation team helps teachers understand the new ways in which the organization will conduct its work. The teams are responsible for ensuring the evidence-based interventions happen and produce the desired outcomes (Fixsen, Blasé, Metz, et al., 2013). Additionally, state

and district leaders develop policies and funding structures that support the work of implementation (Fixsen, Blasé, Metz, et al., 2013). Furthermore, regular follow-up and on-going communication at all levels allows for the understanding of what is working and what is hindering the efforts toward implementation (Fixsen, Blasé, Metz, et al., 2013).

Application of the Theories

The adult learning theory (Knowles, 1990) relates to this study since adults “are motivated to devote energy to learn something to the extent that they perceive that it will help them perform tasks or deal with problems that they confront in their life situations” (p. 62). The wealth of knowledge and unique experiences of the adults provide opportunity for learning and the pursuit of change.

Vygotsky’s (1986) theory fits well with the premises of inclusion; particularly when pairing a student with a disability with a more competent peer. In this way, greater learning takes place. “In the Vygotsky framework, children are capable of far more competent performance when they have proper assistance (scaffolded learning) from adults” (Jaramillo, 1996, p. 134). Likewise, Vygotsky believed the peer group to be an “effective means of mediation and a powerful facilitator in forming the higher psychological function in children with disabilities” (Gindis, 1999, p. 338). Moreover, Vygotsky’s (1978) zone of proximal development utilized in inclusive education settings for students with low incidence disabilities allows opportunity for these students to not only practice what they already know, but provides opportunities for this population to work with more competent others concerning processes and functions that are in a state of formation, or just beginning to mature and develop. Vygotsky termed these functions as “buds” or “flowers” of development (p. 86). This is key since as Courtade, Spooner, Browder, and Jimenez (2012) stated, “we do not yet know the potential

students [with severe disabilities] have to learn more complex academic content or how they may use it in their lives” (p. 4).

Inclusive education is the vehicle to provide the levels of supports and services needed for students with disabilities to receive their education in the general education classroom alongside their same age peers (Downing, 2008; Gindis, 1999). Gindis (1999) stated, “Vygotsky expressed firm conviction that only a truly differentiated learning environment can fully develop the higher psychological functions and overall personality of a child with a disability” (p. 338).

Fixsen, Blasé, Horner, et al. (2013) suggested “comprehensive change is fraught with risks” (p. 4) and state management teams must be ready to face the challenges and “surprises that inevitably emerge from the change process” (p. 4). Moreover, Fixsen, Blasé, Horner, et al. (2013) posited without the help from strong state-led leadership teams, “the current system will overwhelm virtually any attempts to use new evidence-based programs or other innovative ways of work” (p. 224).

Sailor (2008) spoke of the need for a systems change effort in order for all students, regardless of ability, to have access to the general education curriculum. Fixsen, Blasé, Horner, and Sugai (2009) stressed the need for educational systems to “scale up” (p. 2) the implementation of strategies that facilitate organizational change and produce transformation of the system. Fixsen et al. (2009) defined scaling up as “having enough of something so that it is useful to individuals and to society” (p. 2). Scaling up is the process of moving an organization to the place where best practices are no longer seen as “exemplars” but as “typical” (p. 2). Fixsen et al. (2009) hypothesized an organization has scaled up when at least 60% of the organization has implemented the practice with fidelity and shows evidence of student achievement. For this level of implementation to occur regarding inclusive education for

students with low incidence disabilities, it will require state-level leadership in several ways. First, state-level leaders will work to facilitate policy change and resource allocation. Next, these leaders will work to provide the professional development and technical assistance to districts that support the change. Third, state-level leaders will monitor initial implementation and provide guidance and correction where needed. Last, the leaders will build capacity across the state for full implementation.

Related Literature

The related literature includes many angles since the inclusion of students with low incidence disabilities is multifaceted. First, the literature review provides a brief history of special education that supports the need for quality programming for students with disabilities. Second, the research offers strategies for successful inclusion with the belief that this population of students is usually capable of far more than given credit. Lastly, the literature around the perceptions of principals, teachers, and other support personnel provide the foundation for the study.

History of the Education of Students with Disabilities

Historically, students with low incidence disabilities did not even attend public schools (LaNear & Frattura, 2007; Martin, Martin, & Terman, 1996). Even after compulsory education laws were in effect, states found ways to exclude students with disabilities (Martin et al., 1996; Yell, Rogers, & Rogers, 1998). The decision for a student with a disability to attend and stay in school fell to school officials who more often than not excluded students who were ‘feeble-minded’ or ‘mentally deficient’ and who, because of intellectual ability were not able to profit from formal education (LaNear & Frattura, 2007; Yell et al., 1998). It was not until the late 1960s and early 1970s when most states had passed legislation that students with disabilities

would find access to public education (Yell et al., 1998). However, this access came at a cost; the cost of exclusion and separation (LaNear & Frattura, 2007; Martin et al., 1996).

The exclusion of students with disabilities dates to the early 1890s when a Massachusetts Supreme Court ruled children who could not benefit from instruction could be expelled from school (Yell et al., 1998). Forty years later, a court in Ohio ruled schools could prohibit certain students (Yell et al., 1998). During the 1950s and 1960s, other state courts would rule in favor of schools to exclude students who might be disruptive or have limited intelligence (Martin et al., 1996; Yell et al., 1998). The federal legislation of the 1960s and early 1970s provided necessary dollars for the specific training of teachers of the deaf, mental retardation and other disabilities, but the federal funding “ultimately solidified the practice of encouraging and developing separate training programs for special education teachers apart from regular education teachers” argued LaNear and Frattura (2007, p. 99).

The Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s became the catalyst of change for not only minorities, but also people with disabilities. The United States Supreme Court decision in the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka [Brown]* (1954) provided equal access opportunities for minorities. *Brown* would later be used in other court decisions to provide access for students with disabilities (LaNear & Frattura, 2007). The Fourteenth Amendment guarantee of equal protection that was argued in *Brown* would also serve as the basis in at least two other landmark cases regarding the education of students with disabilities. In the *Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children [PARC] v. Pennsylvania* (1972) and the District of Columbia *Mills v. Board of Education [Mills]* (1972) cases, the Fourteenth Amendment served to provide equal access for student with intellectual disabilities in Pennsylvania, and the 18,000 students with a variety of disabilities in D.C. (LaNear & Frattura, 2007; Yell et al., 1998).

The U. S. Constitution makes education the responsibility of state government. Though education is a state responsibility, it would take federal legislation to ensure a quality education for students with disabilities (Yell et al., 1998). The passage of P. L. 94-142, the Education for all Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (EAHCA) was the comprehensive legislation that provided federal dollars to states to help them educate students with disabilities. Public law 94-142 guaranteed that students with disabilities (a) received a free education; (b) be provided an appropriate education; (c) be educated in the least restrictive environment; (d) are evaluated using nondiscriminatory testing, identification, and placement procedures; and (e) be afforded procedural due process that includes parental participation (Yell et al., 1998). With the legislation of P. L. 94-142, the education of students with disabilities became federally controlled (Yell et al., 1998).

Historically, some students with disabilities were mainstreamed into the general education classroom. Mainstreaming was the practice of students with disabilities receiving instruction in the general education classroom according to their cognitive ability and skills, and only during specific periods (Higbee, Katz, & Schultz, 2010). Bender, Vail, and Scott (1995) studied teachers' attitudes toward mainstreaming during the time when mainstreaming was popular practice. They found that over one-third of the 127 participants indicated a relative lack of support for mainstreaming. Furthermore, attitudes toward mainstreaming correlated positively with the number of courses taken concerning students with disabilities; teachers with more positive attitudes also had more coursework hours (Bender et al., 1995).

Today, students with disabilities have the guarantee of a free, appropriate, public education (FAPE) through the legislation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 (IDEA). As a result, many students with mild and moderate disabilities are attending class

alongside their same-aged peers in the general education classroom (Office of Special Education Programs, 2008). However, schools struggle to practice inclusive education for students with low incidence disabilities (Ryndak, Reardon, Benner, & Ward, 2007). Downing (2008) suggested this struggle continues due to a fear of the unknown about what might happen or might have to happen if students with low incidence disabilities are included in the general classroom. She proposed a “fundamental change in attitude is the basic step that must occur before educating all students together successfully” (p. 13). Downing stated, “the focus must shift from an impairment orientation to an ability orientation” (p. 13). Perhaps, this shift in focus is what Jorgensen, McSheehan, and Sonnenmeier (2007) called “presumed competence” (p. 248) when working with students with disabilities.

Policy and Practice of LRE for Students with Low Incidence Disabilities

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004) requires states to develop a State Performance Plan (SPP). The SPP outlines measureable, and rigorous performance goals that evaluate the implementation of IDEA around 20 specific indicators. The indicators are organized as either “compliance” or “results” indicators. Compliance indicators require 100% compliance, while each state sets its own targets for results indicators. Indicator 5, a results indicator, centers on how well states address least restrictive environment. Least restrictive environment data gets reported in three categories:

- Category A percentage equals the number of children with IEPs served inside the regular classroom 80% or more of the day divided by the total number of students aged 6 through 21 years with IEPs times 100.

- Category B percentage equals the number of children with IEPs served inside the regular classroom less than 40% of the day divided by the total number of students aged 6 through 21 years with IEPs times 100.
- Category C percentage equals the number of children with IEPs served in separate schools, residential facilities, or homebound/hospital placements divided by the total number of students aged 6 through 21 years with IEPs times 100. (IDEA, 2004)

The SPPs include targets for increasing Category A placements and decreasing Category B and C placements (Marks et al., 2013).

Marks et al. (2013) found, in their study of six southwestern states, that “states with the highest LRE placement rates at baseline proposed minimal changes, whereas states with low LRE rates at baseline tended to propose more rigorous changes” (p. 211). The data for their study was publically available and did not provide a measure of the quality of services provided to children in these placements (Marks et al., 2013). Marks et al. noted little change in the reduction of students placed in more restrictive environments. Further, Marks et al. suggested that, first, “Federal initiatives, especially those that are left to states to determine benchmarks and indicators of success, must be carefully monitored to ensure that the targets are adequately identified” (p. 215). Second, target setting requires follow-up involvement with state and local policymakers (Marks et al., 2013). Third, the need for LRE placement research continues, in order to inform public policy (Marks et al., 2013). Then, Marks et al. noted the “qualitative difference in student experiences in segregated and inclusive placements, and a benefit to students in inclusive placements” (p. 216) and the need for states to not only monitor placement data, but also the quality of services in the LRE settings. Last, Marks et al. suggested the need

exists for a “reasonable percentage threshold for students with disabilities within each placement category” (p. 216).

The LRE is a place where students with disabilities can receive instruction and related services, and still be educated in the general education classroom to the greatest extent possible. Sometimes IEP teams struggle to make LRE decisions depending upon which ideology the team follows (Marx et al., 2014). Marx et al. noted two opposing ideologies: (a) LRE is always the general education setting, and (b) LRE is where the child’s needs can be met. Marx et al, suggested four strategies for IEP teams to guide the LRE decision

- Understand case law—Federal and circuit court decisions provide guidance and direction
- Use a checklist of guiding questions—the questions provide assistance concerning IDEA least restrictive environment requirements
- Start with general education—regardless of child’s disability label, strengths and weaknesses
- Special education is a service, not a place – the use of supplemental aids and related services provided in the general education classroom is considered before more restrictive settings

These four strategies can help teams make placement decisions that meet students’ needs.

“The segregation of students on the basis of disability has historically rested on the assumptions that some students cannot learn in or benefit from participation in a regular classroom” (Kurth et al., 2014). McLesky, Landers, Williamson, and Hoppey (2012) reported students with high incidence disabilities, the category that includes learning disabilities, other health impairments, emotional disabilities, and speech and language disorders, are more likely to

spend the majority of the day in the general education classroom. A positive trend exists for these students concerning LRE placement in the general education classroom (McLesky et al.). Conversely, for students with low incidence disabilities, those students with autism, multiple disabilities, and other severe disabilities that require significant supports, the LRE trend is less positive (Ryndak et al., 2014). “Students, who are traditionally at greatest risk of exclusion, those with low incidence disability labels, are more likely to be placed in the most restrictive placements” (Kurth et al., 2014, p. 236). Kurth et al. found little research exists that supports the benefits of segregated settings for these students. However, current research exists (Browder, Spooner, Ahlgrim-DeLzell, Harris, & Wakeman, 2008; Hudson, Browder, & Wood, 2013; Spooner, Knight, Browder, Jimenez, & DiBiase, 2011) that supports these students with significant disabilities can learn grade-level academic content in the general education classroom.

Least Dangerous Assumption and Presumed Competence

Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) described the ‘Pygmalion effect,’ sometimes referred to as the self-fulfilling prophecy, in their seminal study concerning the effect of teacher expectations on student intellectual ability. The self-fulfilling prophecy is the idea that teachers actually get from students what they expect. In their classic study, Rosenthal and Jacobson found if teachers were told beforehand that there were bright students in the classroom that generally students performed better than expected. Likewise, “This ‘Pygmalion effect’ suggests that when optimistic expectations are communicated from teachers to students they may have a demonstrable impact on student motivation and learning” (Jorgensen et al., 2007, p. 250). As stated above, Jorgensen et al. used the terminology of “presumed competence” (p. 248). Here, Jorgensen et al. suggested teachers should not look at the disability, the label associated with it,

or even the history they may have heard about the student, but rather accept the student into the classroom with an attitude of presumed competence on the student's part. Downing (2008) supported this attitude when she stated, "stressing the student's strengths and the similarities among all children will do much to demystify the disability and enhance the possibility of inclusion" (p. 243). Finally, Jackson et al. (2008) suggested that teachers begin with the idea students with disabilities can achieve at levels equal to their typical peers rather than believing the student's disability label defines ability and precludes achievement at levels equal to peers.

Historically, some have argued that students with low incidence disabilities cannot possibly function in the general education classroom (Hosp & Reschly, 2002). Hosp and Reschly found students with lower IQs and lower achievement spent far less time in the general education classroom, and stated "intuitively, this is expected [since] students who have more severe difficulties need more intense, individualized instruction" (p. 234) thus justifying, in the minds of these authors, the need for pull-out services from a special education teacher.

Jorgensen et al. (2010) suggested that some people operate under the assumptions that (a) intelligence is something that can be reliably measured, (b) it can be determined who has an intellectual disability (ID) and who does not, (c) students with IDs cannot learn much general education content, and (d) when unsure of what students know, understand, can learn, or have something to say, presume they do not and probably never will. Jorgensen et al. (2007) argued it is not known what students with disabilities are capable of doing in the general education classroom until the opportunity to show otherwise is provided. Donnellan (1984) articulated the criterion of the "least dangerous assumption" that posits (a) schools should have expectations for all students to achieve to high levels, (b) with the lack of conclusive data to support that students with low incidence disabilities cannot achieve to high levels, and (c) with the array of supports

and services available to students with disabilities, educators, therefore, should make the assumption these students can achieve since this would be the least dangerous assumption. Further, educators should have the attitude that “the least dangerous assumption is to presume a student is competent to learn and communicate about the general education curriculum, and to design educational programs and supports based upon that assumption” (Jorgensen et al., 2010, p. 49).

The mindset that the least dangerous assumption is to presume competence results in academic progress for students with complex learning needs (Jorgensen et al., 2010). However, it is not enough that this population of students is just ‘in’ the general education classroom. Smith and Tyler (2011) posited rather, a truly inclusive setting is one where teachers are adequately skilled to implement research-based practices and are supported by school administration. Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) observed three changes regarding inclusive pedagogy. First, a shift in focus from simply providing additional supports for those students with identified needs to a learning-for-all attitude toward teaching and learning is necessary. Second, there must be a rejection of preconceived mindsets about ability or lack of when considering what students can accomplish. Third, the staff must recognize the importance of working with teams of people who respect the needs and worthiness of each individual and their value to the overall classroom community. Doyle and Giangreco (2013) discovered teachers who presume competence about their students with significant disabilities operate on the assumption these students are “curious and capable of learning interesting content” (p. 63). Further, these teachers believed “all students have untapped capabilities to learn” and with help from teachers, the students can “unleash their creative potential” (p. 63).

Presuming competence and providing opportunity for inclusive education for all students affords a foundation for future inclusion (Downing, 2008) and opens postsecondary education opportunities for students. Mazzotti, Test, and Mustian, (2014) and Bouck (2012) found inclusion in general education classrooms was a predictor for post-secondary outcomes regarding education, employment and independent living. Using this mindset of presumed competence, Causton-Theoharis, Ashby, and DeClouette (2009) found that not only should educators operate on the assumption that all students, “regardless of perceived abilities or disabilities” (p. 90) be entitled to inclusive higher education, but parents also saw for the first time, their children attaining to high levels even at the post-secondary level. One parent of a college student with a disability stated, “my god, I knew it [the ability to learn] was in her. We never saw it so clearly” (p. 96) while another participant stated, “it’s like you have to change what you do and think about all people with disabilities. Now we have to presume competence. It is just criminal if we don’t” (p. 96). Lastly, studies that examined inclusive education programs for college students with intellectual disabilities found students of this population “have a great capacity to learn and adapt to adult life” and they work hard to overcome the attitudes and beliefs about what they can or cannot do (Jones & Goble, 2012; Ross, Marcell, Williams, & Carlson, 2013).

McLeskey, Waldron, and Redd (2014) found that highly effective, inclusive schools have high expectations for all students and refuse to accede less than high achievement from every student. Jorgensen et al. (2010) concluded that effective inclusion happens when teachers operate under the mindset of presumed competence and least dangerous assumption. The benefits of inclusive practices include improved learning of academic content, greater socialization among typical peers, and fewer behavior referrals (Jorgensen et al., 2010).

A case study research supporting presumed competence. Previous research by Ryndak, Morrison, and Sommerstein (1999), in their seven year case study of a young woman, found quite different results when presumed competence is practiced. The young lady first experienced a decade of schooling in a self-contained environment, then she experienced schooling in an inclusive setting both in later years of public school and even into college (Ryndak et al., 1999). The move to an inclusive setting brought about changes in her instructional content, in her delivery of services and instruction, and in her social and learning behaviors (Ryndak et al., 1999). Ryndak et al., noted inclusion with her typically developing peers, higher performance expectations, and the recognition of inappropriate social behavior were some of the variables that seemed to facilitate academic and behavioral achievements. “Participation in general education activities resulted in realistic, yet higher performance expectations” (p. 13). Recurring failure had been the pattern for this young woman, during the years of self-contained special education classes, therefore, she initially displayed resistance to the work presented in the inclusive setting (Ryndak et al., 1999). However, once the student experienced consistent success through adaptations, modifications, and accommodations in the inclusive setting, meaningful participation, often at independent levels, occurred regularly even at the college level (Ryndak et al., 1999).

Follow up research conducted by Ryndak, Ward, Alper, Montgomery, and Storch (2010) provided insight into the long-term outcomes of inclusive education. The same young lady from the Ryndak et al. (1999) study was one of the participants for the Ryndak, Ward, Alper, Montgomery et al. (2010) study; however, here Ryndak, Ward, Alper, Montgomery et al. (2010) made the comparison to a young man who years ago had been in the same self-contained settings as the young lady. Using artifacts and interviews, Ryndak, Ward, Alper, Montgomery et al.

(2010) learned the young man continued in a self-contained setting throughout his schooling years. The young lady, on the other hand, had been included in the general education classroom during her later high school years and even into college.

Ryndak, Ward, Alper, Montgomery et al. (2010) described the participants as follows. At the beginning of the study, the young woman was 15 years old and was described as having multiple handicaps. She used speech that was only intelligible to those who knew her well, she read on a 2nd grade level and used math at a 3rd grade level. The young man was 16 years of age and identified as having cognitive disabilities, though the school described him as having mild to moderate disabilities. He read on a 2nd grade level, performed 3rd grade level math, used speech intelligible to family and peers, and performed appropriate social interactions.

Four years post-secondary, the lives of the two participants were quite different. The young man lived at home with parents, had lost several jobs, worked in a sheltered workshop, had little natural supports other than family, had difficulties in the community, and only used functional literacy when necessary (Ryndak, Ward, Alper, Montgomery et al., 2010). In comparison, the young lady lived alone in an apartment, had held part time job in the court system for three years, had an extensive natural support system, exhibited coping skills to deal with difficult situations, and used literacy skills at work and in daily living (Ryndak, Ward, Alper, Montgomery et al., 2010).

Ryndak, Ward, Alper, Montgomery et al. (2010) concluded that while no one factor contributes to more positive post-secondary outcomes, the practice of inclusive education for students with significant disabilities may lead to more positive post-secondary outcomes.

Ryndak, Ward, Alper, Storch, and Montgomery (2010) and Ryndak, Alper, Hughes, and

McDonnell (2012) found similar results concerning the long-term outcomes of inclusive educational settings for students with significant disabilities.

Presumed competence at the college level. Presumed competence found support in other literature as well. Causton-Theoharis et al. (2009) conducted a study based upon the “assumption that all students regardless of perceived abilities or disabilities, should be entitled to higher education with peers without disabilities” (p. 3) and determined access to higher education is “both entirely possible and the right of all” (p. 3). Ross et al. (2013) posited the understanding gained from students with disabilities should help to develop and implement postsecondary inclusive settings whereby this population gains a degree that ultimately improves employment and independent living opportunities for them. Other studies found that students with intellectual and low incidence disabilities have a lot to teach others concerning what students with disabilities can and cannot do when people assume there is a competence (Jones & Goble, 2012; Ross et al., 2013). Indeed, Ross et al., (2013) found these students have a great capacity to learn and adapt to the challenges of adult life. We can learn much from their acts of bravery as they fight the odds against them and break down attitudes and beliefs about what persons with intellectual disabilities can or cannot do. (p. 348)

Inclusive Education Defined

Realizing questions still exist about definitions, attitudes, and preparedness to implement inclusive practices, a warranted need for a definition of inclusive education exists. Ryndak, Jackson, and Billingsley (1999) found that no clear definition of the term inclusion existed among nearly 50 participants. With that in mind, Ryndak et al. (2007), having completed a

seven-year longitudinal study of one district's journey toward inclusion, offered these components toward a definition:

- placement of all students with disabilities in age appropriate general education classes in schools they would attend if they did not have a disability for most or all of each school day, resulting in natural proportions;
- all students with and without disabilities receiving instruction and learning together during the same academic and nonacademic general education activities within general education settings and throughout the school community;
- supports, services, and modifications related to curriculum and instruction occur within general education settings and the school community, ensuring effective instruction of meaningful content for all students with and without disabilities;
- all classmates with and without disabilities share a sense of belonging and equal membership in general education activities and settings; and
- educational teams collaboratively plan, implement, and evaluate instruction that is embedded within general education activities and settings for each student. (p. 230)

Additionally, Ryndak et al. found the majority of respondents incorporated concepts about a systemic philosophy or belief system about inclusive education that permeates the educational system and a blending of general and special education into one unified system. This definition incorporates the intentions of IDEA and offers direction for districts wishing to move forward with inclusive practices.

Jorgensen et al. (2010) defined inclusive education for students with low incidence disabilities as membership and participation in general education classroom instruction, learning general education curriculum content, and utilizing communication commensurate to typical

peers. Jorgensen et al. proposed the need for collaborative teaming and administrative leadership for the successful implementation of inclusive education for students of this population.

Moreover, the emphasis on high expectations, in the general education classroom, for students with disabilities makes education more effective for these students (Jorgensen et al., 2010).

Inclusive Education Strategies

The term inclusive education is predicated on the idea that all students regardless of ability or disability attend their neighborhood school, participate with their typically developing peers in the same classroom and have full access to the same curriculum (Obiakor, Harris, Mutua, Rotatori, & Algozzine, 2012; Ryndak et al., 2007; Valeo, 2008).

How school systems define and practice inclusion education is critical to the implementation of the requirements of IDEA (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2013; Oyler, 2011; Ryndak et al., 2007). “The integration of instruction, assessment and classroom management into a school-wide reform plan to meet the diverse needs of students is needed to ensure accessibility” (Grima-Farrell, Bain, & McDonagh, 2011). Proponents of inclusion hold the view that students with disabilities “benefit, both academically and socially, when provided opportunities to interact, learn, and share with their non-disabled peers” (Ball & Green, 2014, p. 58). However, some systems still see general and special as separate (Horrocks, White, & Roberts, 2008) and therefore, oppose inclusive practices and view special education “as a specialized service provided to students with disabilities outside of the general education classroom (Ball & Green, 2014, p. 58). Because of this dichotomy, questions still exist about the attitudes and preparedness of school leaders and teachers alike (Horrocks et al., 2008).

Obstacles to Implementation of Inclusive Education

Obstacles exist to implementing inclusion that consist of a dearth of research on the inclusion of students with complex needs and low incidence disabilities (Gable et al., 2012), and the unpreparedness of teachers, leaders, and students alike (Gable et al., 2012; McGhie-Richmond et al., 2013; Valeo, 2008) .

Little research available. The scarcity of empirical research for this population is troubling (Gable et al., 2012). In fact, Ryndak et al. (2007), found not only is there a lack of substantial research about the effects of inclusion for students with low incidence disabilities, there exists little research “...on systemic efforts to facilitate change that encourages inclusive educational services for students with severe disabilities in a school or district” (p. 229). In other words, sufficient studies do not exist in the literature to even explore the use of and success with including students with low incidence disabilities.

Not surprisingly then, there exists little research concerning evidence-based practices with this population (Shurr & Bouck, 2013). Grima-Farrell et al., 2011) referred to this as the research-to-practice gap. “The minimal research based on instructional content is particularly troubling as it leaves a gap for directing the educational opportunities and experiences for this population” (Shurr & Bouck, 2013, p. 85).

Teachers are not prepared. Historically, students with severe intellectual or behavior disabilities made little academic progress. One cause could be that neither the general nor special educator has been prepared to serve these populations adequately (Gable et al., 2012). So strong is this cause, one general education teacher “wanted the principal to find another teacher for these students” (Valeo, 2008, p.12).

This lack of preparation leads to confusion about the various roles of both the general and special education teacher (Valeo, 2008). Some teachers questioned who should have responsibility for students with special needs in general education classrooms (Valeo, 2008). Among many secondary teachers, the inclusive classroom was a place where the child was fit to the environment and the students in these inclusive settings were expected to be like everyone else (McGhie-Richmond et al., 2013). Secondary teachers stated that the inclusive classroom does not change; the students are the ones who need to adapt to the classroom so that everyone can “maintain a certain level” (p. 212). Valeo noted elevated levels of frustration for both the general and special education teacher because of the students with severe needs in their rooms. Valeo remarked,

Both teachers (general and special) appeared to see a time-bomb effect of students not being able to meet the demands of the regular curriculum. They (teachers) see themselves as caught in a curriculum-driven system and faced with students who did not have the personal or academic resources to keep pace with their more able peers academically. (p. 10)

For this reason, Valeo stated the current research “had not shed clear light on the relationship that needs to exist between” (p. 15) the general education and special education teachers for inclusion to be successful for all students.

Leaders are not prepared. Research has well-documented the importance of leadership support during times of change (Fullan, 2001). In schools, the principal is often the one responsible for the oversight of school reform at the building level. “For inclusion to be successful, the principal needs to foster a climate in which the school embraces the success and achievement of all students” (Horrocks et al., 2008, p. 1463). Yet, many principals find

themselves unprepared to meet the diverse needs of students with low incidence disabilities. In reality, Ball and Green (2014) found a significant negative relationship between principals' attitudes toward inclusion and the amount of education and involvement with students with disabilities. Further, this correlation suggests education and experience of administrators directly relate to attitudes about inclusion (Ball & Green, 2014). Additionally, as with teachers, school leaders with many years of experience were less likely to have positive attitudes toward inclusive educational practices (Ball & Green, 2014; Horrocks et al., 2008; McGhie-Richmond et al., 2013).

Paraprofessionals are not prepared. With the increase of students with disabilities receiving instruction in the general education classroom, also came the increase in the usage of paraprofessionals. Washburn-Moses, Chun, and Kaldenberg (2013) reported that in 2010 more than 726,600 paraprofessionals were working in public schools nationwide, compared to approximately 473,000 certified special education teachers. Furthermore, the work of these paraprofessionals had changed (Giangreco, Suter, & Doyle, 2010).

Giangreco et al. (2010), in a review of literature regarding paraprofessionals in inclusive schools, found paraprofessionals' roles have changed considerably in the last decade. Complicating the issue, the role of the paraprofessional is debated by school personnel, especially concerning the depth of and type of work paraprofessionals provide to students with disabilities (Giangreco, Broer, & Suter, 2011; McGrath, Johns, & Mathur, 2010). No longer are the jobs of paraprofessionals merely clerical in nature (Giangreco et al., 2010). Rather, the role of paraprofessional now entails working with small groups of students for reading instruction, providing response to intervention (RTI) support to struggling students, directing learning

centers, and offering support with assistive technologies (Ashbaker & Morgan, 2012; McKenzie, 2011; Stockall, 2014; Washburn-Moses et al., 2013).

The paraprofessional, as part of the inclusive education team, has multiple roles in the classroom. These roles, though many, include interacting with all of the students, not only those with disabilities in the classroom. Other paraprofessional duties include assisting students who use augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) devices; providing instructional supports to students as directed by the supervising teacher; strengthening the use of technology; and creating educational materials that meet the needs of the students per the supervising teacher in the classroom (Jorgensen, McSheehan, & Sonnenmeier, 2010).

This change in roles can be problematic since too often the least trained interventionist is assigned to work with students with the most complex needs (Giangreco et al., 2011; Rispoli, Neely, Lang, & Ganz (2011). Further complicating the use of paraprofessionals are the demands of parents for a paraprofessional for their child (Giangreco, Doyle, & Suter, 2012). Research suggested a negative correlation between support and academic achievement for students with disabilities when they receive support from paraprofessionals (McGrath et al., 2010; Webster et al., 2010). One reason for the negative correlation could be due to the amount of time this population spends with the paraprofessional (McGrath et al., 2010).

A major change came for paraprofessionals with the passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) that specifically stated paraprofessionals must have a two-year degree or the equivalent, or pass a state approved examination to function as a paraprofessional (NCLB, 2002). Still, in all of this change, paraprofessionals find themselves woefully unprepared for the tasks assigned to them by the supervisor teacher (McGrath et al., 2010; Rispoli et al., 2011; Webster, Blatchfort, & Russell, 2013). Logan and Wimer (2013) examined teacher attitudes about inclusion and

found that paraprofessionals often lack content knowledge. Having little to no formal training, many paraprofessionals stated their ‘life experiences’ were often what carried them in their jobs (Washburn-Moses et al., 2013). Paraprofessionals stated their need for training in areas of conflict management, managing severe behaviors, and accommodating learners with special needs (Washburn-Moses et al., 2013). In a study of nearly 30 paraprofessionals, 64% of them stated the need for on-going professional development that provided an understanding of the population of students typically served in order to meet the changing needs of those students (Liston, Nevin, & Malian, 2009).

Inclusive Education and Transition to Post-secondary Education

While K-12 public schools continue to struggle to provide high quality education to students with disabilities in least restrictive environments, a new dilemma has arisen; students with disabilities are entering college at higher rates than ever before and are expecting to complete full-degree programs (Leyser, Greenberger, Sharoni, & Vogel, 2011). Raue and Lewis (2011) found an estimated 707,000 students with disabilities enrolled in degree-granting postsecondary institutions. This phenomenon changed the student makeup of college classrooms and created a need for college professors to look at students with disabilities differently. In itself, this is no small feat, since as Seo and Chen (2009) found, “when perceived as a central characteristic, being disabled tends to eclipse an individual’s other personal characteristics. In other words, when viewed as the sole representation of an individual, disability inadvertently projects an undesirable image that overshadows all other characteristics” (p. 3).

Test, Mazzotti, Mustian, Fowler, Kortering, and Kohler (2009) examined evidence-based transition predictors for postsecondary outcomes for students with disabilities. Inclusion in the general education classroom, with high expectations for achievement, was the most common

predictor of success (Test et al., 2009). Additionally, the National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center (NSTTAC) identified 16 evidence-based predictors of post-school employment, education, and independent living success from the correlational research and found inclusion for all types of disabilities, in general education classrooms, at the high school level, had correlations to all three areas of post-secondary transition (Test, Fowler, Kohler, & Kortering, 2010). Further, Test et al. (2009) found in a review of 22 studies, the most common predictor for positive post-school outcomes was that students with disabilities who were included in the general education classroom were more likely to engage in post-secondary education, live independently, and have gainful employment. Similar results were confirmed by Landmark, Ju, and Zhang (2010) in a literature review of 29 studies, where they found students with disabilities who experienced inclusive education in the general education classroom were more likely to encounter better post-school outcomes.

Postsecondary transition planning. Postsecondary transition planning is a required component of the Individual Education Program for students with disabilities as outlined in IDEA 2004 (IDEA, 2004; Neubert & Leconte, 2013). Beginning at age 14, school teams must address postsecondary goals of education/training, employment, and independent living (IDEA, 2004; Williams-Diehm, & Benz, 2008). Problematically, schools do not seem to have embraced this fully by ensuring quality plans for transition exist, as noted by Griffin, McMillian, and Hodapp (2010). They found that only 26% of parents reported seeing a transition plan for their child, while another 53% reported their child's IEP having no plan.

Test et al., (2009) suggested that to improve post-secondary outcomes for students with disabilities, state and local education agencies should ensure students have opportunity to experience inclusion in the general education classroom, paid employment/work experience,

functional living skills, and support. Test et al. found these four predictors correlate with positive post-school outcomes for students with disabilities regarding education, independent living, and employment.

Post high school outcomes. Students with disabilities, particularly those with intellectual and low incidence disabilities often do not live productive lives post high school (Bouck, 2012; Taylor & Seltzer, 2011). The National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 data indicated only 28% of students with intellectual disabilities were enrolled in any kind of postsecondary training and then only have a completion rate of approximately 40% (Newman et al., 2011; Ryan, 2014). Neubert and Leconte (2013) found outcomes have improved some, but still are not adequate for successful adulthood.

Benefits of post-secondary education. Students who participate in postsecondary programs demonstrated growth in the areas of work, independent living, social and recreational skills, and education (Ross et al., 2013; Thoma et al., 2011). Test et al., (2009) stated when IEPs reflect participation in the general education classroom, vocational education, paid employment opportunities, and suggest career awareness undertakings, the likelihood of obtaining a post-secondary education increases for students with disabilities.

Independent living. Some postsecondary college programs have the primary purpose to help transition students with disabilities to adult life (Kelley & Westling, 2013; Westling, Kelley, Cain, & Prohn, 2013). In these programs, students often live on campus and “interact on a daily basis with their same age peers to learn skills necessary for successful daily living” (Kelley & Westling, 2013, p. 68). Many of these students enjoy very typical activities like going to church, eating out, going to movies, and spending time with family and friends (Westling et al., 2013). Ross et al. (2013) found one of the measures of success for the students with disabilities who

graduated from college is the ability to manage their finances independently, pay for their own living expenses, maneuver around the city, and find involvement in community events.

Social adjustment. Westling et al. (2013) examined the benefits of inclusive college settings for students with intellectual disabilities. They found the majority of students surveyed agreed that inclusive college classrooms provided benefit for all students. Westling et al. suggested that the practice of inclusive education in high school for students with intellectual disabilities continue since the experience seemed to have positive effects on students with and without disabilities at the college level. Inclusive programs at college provide the vehicle for students with disabilities to purposefully interact with typical same age peers and produce students who become productive members of society who live independently, participate socially and operate civically (Kelley & Westling, 2013; Ross et al., 2013).

Inclusive Programs at College Level

Students with intellectual disabilities reported the residential college experience helped them mature and learn how to handle stressful situations, increased personal growth and life skills, and improved independence skills necessary in the adult world (Ryan, 2014; Kelley & Westling, 2013). Currently, three types of postsecondary college programs serve students with disabilities that include separate models, mixed models, and inclusive-individualized models (Thoma et al., 2011; Westling et al., 2013). Separate models have existed for more than 40 years and seek to serve students with disabilities to provide employment skills but do not provide college education (Westling et al., 2013). Mixed model programs are those that provide some educational experiences on college campuses, typically community colleges, but also provide training opportunities in other settings as well (Westling et al., 2013). In this model, students are usually not participating in degree programs. Finally, the inclusive model, the newest type,

surfaced to provide the supports students with disabilities needed for them to transition to colleges. “This model is primarily student-centered, identifying students’ strengths, interests, and the supports that are needed to participate within fully inclusive postsecondary educational settings (Westling et al., 2013).

More and more programs are available for students with disabilities to enter college and have the supports needed to be successful. These programs showed some perceived benefits to the students with disabilities, to college classmates, and to college faculty (Causton-Theoharis et al., 2009; Griffin et al., 2010; Westling et al., 2013

Students with disabilities. One young lady, with intellectual disabilities, reported that being in a college English classroom with a great professor was like getting the best gift ever and being able to open it again and again. “It’s a magical gift that no one can ever take away from me for a long time” (Ryan, 2014, p. 26). Students reported they received care and support at college (Causton-Theoharis et al., 2009; Kelley & Westling, 2013). For the first time, the college students with disabilities begin to identify themselves as learners (Causton-Theoharis et al., 2009). Kelley and Westling (2013) found students with disabilities reported their inclusive college experience was the first time to “have social networks beyond their families or persons paid to be with them” (p. 71).

College students. Not only do the students with disabilities benefit from inclusive college classrooms, but their college classmates benefit as well (Causton-Theoharis et al., 2009). These classmates are often experiencing inclusion for the first time and report the experience had an effect (Causton-Theoharis et al., 2009). One student reported, “now I really understand more about people with disabilities and it’s not that they can’t learn it’s just that they learn differently and at a different pace” (p. 97). Kelley and Westling (2013) found the inclusive setting provided

opportunity for future professionals to “have an opportunity to apply what they learn in the classroom and connect research to practice by using effective strategies” (p. 71) with their classmates of disability.

Kelley and Westling (2013) found the inclusive college classroom provided the vehicle for students without disabilities to acquire a more positive view of students with disabilities and allowed them to see the students with disabilities as productive and valued citizens in society. Moreover, one student without disability had the following reflective thought,

I will be honest, before [this class] I tried to avoid people with disabilities. It’s not that I felt any different about them. I knew they were human just like everyone else in the world. I wasn’t scared or disgusted by them. I just wasn’t sure how to act. I didn’t want to say or do the wrong thing. Taking this class has made me realize that I can be myself around people with disabilities. (Kelley & Westling, 2013, p. 71)

From experiences like this, friendships have developed (Kelley & Westling, 2013; Ross et al., 2013; Ryan, 2014).

Professors. “A university faculty member, who supports a student with disabilities in her science classroom, when asked about . . . the experiences, [stated], ‘there are lots and lots of positives . . . her [student] just being able to have a chance to think and get engaged about these topics’” was a positive result (Causton-Theoharis et al., 2009, p. 98). Sprong, Dallas, and Upton (2014) discovered university professors had favorable attitudes toward providing students with disabilities with needed accommodations in the inclusive college classroom. These same professors allowed multiple means of representation of work and practiced inclusive lecture strategies (Sprong et al., 2014). Lombardi, Murray, and Gerdes (2011) found similar results in their study of college professor attitudes toward inclusive instruction. Causton-Theoharis et al.

(2009) further noted that education professors saw the inclusive college classroom as an opportunity to “walk the talk,” to “practice what they preach,” and to model inclusive practices for preservice teachers.

Preparing Pre-service Teachers for Inclusive Education

The NCLB (2002) educational reform initiative requires highly qualified teachers for all students, students with disabilities included, in order to meet students’ needs. Recall that Valeo (2008) posited that both regular and special education teachers do not feel well prepared to teach students with complex needs. Smith and Tyler (2011) spoke of equipping education professionals with necessary skills and knowledge. They postured today’s educators “must possess more skills than their predecessors if supportive and responsive educational environments are ever to be achieved” (p. 326). Yet, across the US, “the quality of the nation’s teachers has been the subject of sharp critiques, and so have many preparation programs” (National Research Council, 2010, p. 7). Further, when addressing educational reform, too often teacher preparation program get “treated as an afterthought in discussions of improving the public education system” (p. 7).

Smith and Tyler (2011) presented three challenges in preparing today’s teachers to meet the educational needs of all students. First, the issue of how to prepare teachers to work in inclusive settings remains elusive. Jordan, Schwartz, and McGhie-Richmond (2009) concurred that “little is known about how skills for effective inclusion are developed” in pre-service teachers (p. 535). Second, there continues to be an inadequate amount of competent pre-service teachers who are confident they know how to educate students with disabilities (Smith & Tyler, 2011). Berry (2010) found new teachers showed support for inclusive education, wanted to be effective, and desired to treat students fairly, but lacked experience and confidence in themselves

to meet their goals. Gehrke and Cocchiarella (2013) discovered pre-service general and special education teachers demonstrated confidence in their knowledge of inclusion from a theoretical perspective, but they were not as consistent and definite in their ability to recognize inclusion in their field experiences. Third, new understanding of effective teaching practices causes difficulty for pre-service preparation programs to keep abreast with the changes (Smith & Tyler, 2011). Teacher preparation programs already filled with coursework requirements, struggle to find ways to add new coursework that instruct new teachers how to use these new strategies. McCray and Alvarez McHatton (2011) found the “solution rests in infusing content in the general education program of study” (p. 145). New strategies must find place in already taught coursework.

The issue of limited opportunities for colleges to add needed coursework is already problematic (Harvey, Yssel, Bauserman, & Merbler, 2010; McCray & Alvarez McHatton, 2011). Harvey et al. (2010) reported, based upon a national sample of 124 institutions of higher education pre-service programs, the need to “coordinate course requirements, provide more faculty awareness of special education and collaboration, and offer more experiences with special education for pre-service teachers” (pg. 31). Although, Taylor and Ringlaben (2012) found that a special education survey course improves pre-service teachers’ “knowledge and attitudes about adapting their teaching for students with disabilities” (p. 21), this may not be enough. Ryndak et al. (2012) reported most pre-service programs only require one, two, or three credit hour course concerning diverse learners. Allday et al. (2013) learned that nearly 20% of the 109 universities examined did not offer any credit hours concerning the characteristics of students with disabilities for pre-service elementary teachers. Moreover, when addressing the issue of inclusion in pre-service programs, 73 (67%) of the 109 universities did not offer a course on the subject (Allday et al., 2013). When coursework concerning inclusion was offered, it

accounted for less than 2% of the total coursework for future elementary educators (Allday et al., 2013). Similarly, Ryndak et al. (2012) found most preservice preparation programs offer only one course concerning meeting the needs of all students. Further, coursework devoted to collaboration between general and special education teachers represented less than 0.3% of total coursework; 101 (93%) of the universities offered no coursework specific to collaboration (Allday et al., 2013). Harvey et al. (2010) confirmed the need for coursework around collaboration among regular and special education pre-service teachers. Uncertainty exists concerning the ideal numbers of hours future teachers need concerning inclusion (Allday et al., 2013). Therefore, Allday et al. suggested that “perhaps the answer is not necessarily more classes, but also applied experiences in the fieldwork in inclusive classrooms with students with disabilities” (p. 308).

The gap between theory and practice concerning inclusive education finds support in other studies (Florian & Linklater, 2010; Gehrke & Cocchiarella, 2013). Ryndak et al. 2012) suggested all too often, pre-service teachers receive most of their experience in non-inclusive settings with little or no exposure to students with disabilities. Burton and Pace (2009) discovered the need to incorporate a focused field experience for their pre-service candidates if a theoretical knowledge of inclusion was going to have practical application. Burton and Pace, in their three-year case study, examined pre-service teacher attitudes about teaching mathematics in inclusive classrooms. At the end of year one, participants indicated no change in attitudes toward teaching mathematics and teaching mathematics to students with disabilities, and no change in self-perceived efficacy to teach mathematics to students with disabilities (Burton & Pace, 2009). Positive trends were reported at the end of year two concerning the teaching of mathematics and greater self-efficacy regarding teaching mathematics to students with

disabilities (Burton & Pace, 2009). In year three, a focused field experience yielded qualitative data that indicated positive changes in attitudes toward teaching mathematics to students with disabilities and the confidence levels of the pre-service teachers. Burton and Pace reported that candidates commented the field experience provided insight into the difficulties that special education students have in class (Burton & Pace, 2009). Burton and Pace concluded when pre-service classroom knowledge and a focused field experience are integrated, pre-service candidates report “increased positive attitudes and a greater sense of self-efficacy” (p. 114).

Summary

A review of the literature reveals schools are struggling to understand, define, and implement inclusive education practices, particularly for students with low incidence disabilities (Grima-Farrell et al., 2011). What we know about the perceptions of inclusive education typically comes from teachers’ or principals’ perspectives, and those vary in opposition toward or support for inclusive education (Ball & Green, 2014; Fuchs, 2009-2010; Hoppey & McLeskey, 2010; Horrocks et al., 2008; McGhie-Richmond et al., 2013; Ryan, 2010; Valeo, 2008; Waldron et al., 2011). Further, what we know, is that despite decades of research and practice, inclusive education continues to be the exception for students with intellectual disabilities’ particularly at the high school level (Doyle & Giangreco, 2013). The literature is also clear that the training about, experience with, and attitudes towards inclusive education all have a part in how inclusive practices are implemented in schools and districts (Ball & Green, 2014; DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2013; Valeo, 2008).

One missing link in the literature is the perception of state leaders concerning the readiness for schools to practice inclusive education for students with low incidence disabilities (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2013; Ryndak et al., 2007). This study will seek to examine the

perceptions of state leaders regarding inclusive education practices for students with low incidence disabilities.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

This holistic single-case study examined the perceptions of state-level educational leaders concerning the readiness for statewide systemic change toward more inclusive settings for students with complex needs and low incidence disabilities. This chapter begins with a discussion of the study's design model, and its relevance to the type of study under investigation, followed by the research questions for the study. I then describe the setting, the participants, the procedures, and data collection techniques to include individual interviews, a focus group, and document review, to understand the phenomenon under study. In this study, all identifiable information associated with the setting, participants, and the names of offices and participants' titles was changed to pseudonyms in order to protect the confidentiality of the setting and the participants. Further, discussions in this chapter include a personal biography of the researcher, the data analysis process, trustworthiness, and conclude with the ethical considerations of the study and a chapter summary.

Design

This study employed a holistic single-case design approach. Case study is fitting for this research since "the case study is used in many situations, to contribute to our knowledge of individual, group, organizational, social, political, and related phenomena" (Yin, 2009, p. 7). Gall, Gall, and Borg (2007) defined phenomenon as the "various sensations, perceptions, and ideations that appear in consciousness when the self focuses attention on an object" (p. 495). The phenomenon for this study is inclusive education, particularly for students with low incidence disabilities. The "unique strength" (Yin, 2009, p. 11) of case study is that the design allows me to gather and analyze evidence from diverse perspectives that will include interviews, a focus group, and documents.

Yin (2009) defined case study from two perspectives: (a) the scope of the study, and (b) the technical definition of case study. First, considering the scope of the study, Yin declared case study is an empirical inquiry that

- investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when
- the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident (p. 18).

Second, since the points noted above are true, Yin posited the technical aspect of case study inquiry

- copes with the technically distinctive situation in which there will be many more variables of interest than data points, and as one result
- relies on multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulation fashion, and as another result
- benefits from the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis (p. 18).

Moreover, Yin asserted the case study “allows investigators to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events” (p. 4). Finally, Stake (1995) declared the case of study must be a “well-bounded, specific, complex, and functioning” entity and “not a generality” (pp. 1-2).

This holistic, single-case approach addressed the perceptions of leaders (the case) within the bounded context of being a state-level educational leader. This study examined the phenomenon of inclusive education, particularly for students with low incidence disabilities. The examination of this phenomenon is from the perspective of state-level leaders who serve with the Midwestern Department of Education. The Midwestern Department of Education and its State Education Support Groups is the real-life context of this study. The rich data from

individual interviews, a focus group discussion, and the investigation of documents provided the multiple sources of evidence needed for triangulation of data concerning the phenomenon.

Research Questions

The following questions guided this holistic, single-case study that examined state-level leaders' perceptions concerning inclusive education for students with low incidence disabilities:

1. What are state-level leaders' perceptions of district readiness concerning inclusive education for students with low incidence disabilities?
2. From a state-level leader's perspective, what is needed in preservice programs that would support general and special education teacher readiness concerning inclusive education for students with low incidence disabilities?
3. From a state-level leader's perspective, how do current practices in districts promote inclusive education for students with low incidence disabilities?
4. What are state-level leaders' perceptions of the roadblocks in local districts that prevent districts from preparing for and practicing inclusive education for student with low incidence disabilities?
5. What additional resources do state-level leaders believe might be necessary for districts in order for inclusive educational practices to take place for students with low incidence disabilities?

Setting

In this Midwestern state, counties are grouped together to form educational support zones. Zones are grouped into quadrants. Each zone, led by a supervisor and staffed by specialists, delivers professional development and technical support to schools throughout its

zone, particularly in the areas of school improvement initiatives. The supervisors of these zones were the interviewee participants for this study.

This state was chosen since least restrictive environment data for the state indicates a large number of students with disabilities still receive their education in settings other than the general education classroom. As part of requirements of the federal Office of Special Education Programs (2014), states must annually report LRE data. This Midwestern state breaks school-age LRE data into three categories: (a) LRE A is the percentage of students with disabilities served in the general education classroom at least 80% of the day; goal being at least 62.3%, (b) LRE B is the percentage of students with disabilities served in the general education classroom less than 40% of the day; goal being no more than 11.2%, and (c) LRE C is the percentage of students with disabilities served in separate schools; goal being no more than 3.2%. Based upon these state-set goals (Kurth et al., 2014) of the Midwestern State Department of Education, districts reported LRE data for the 2012-2013 and 2013-2014 school years as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Least Restrictive Environment Data for Two Most Recent Years

LRE Category	<u>2012-2013</u>		<u>2013-2014</u>	
	Percentage of Districts that Met Indicator	Number of Districts	Percentage of Districts that Met Indicator	Number of Districts
A	65.1	627	68.7	652
B	27.3	191	71.6	680
C	.05	51	63.5	603

Note. Districts with fewer than 10 students [$n = < 10$ students] in any category did not report. It should be noted that in 2012-2013, 99 districts did not report data for LRE A, 510 districts did not report data for LRE B, and 700 districts did not report data for LRE C. Comparatively, 64 districts did not report data for LRE A, B, and C for the 2013-2014 school year.

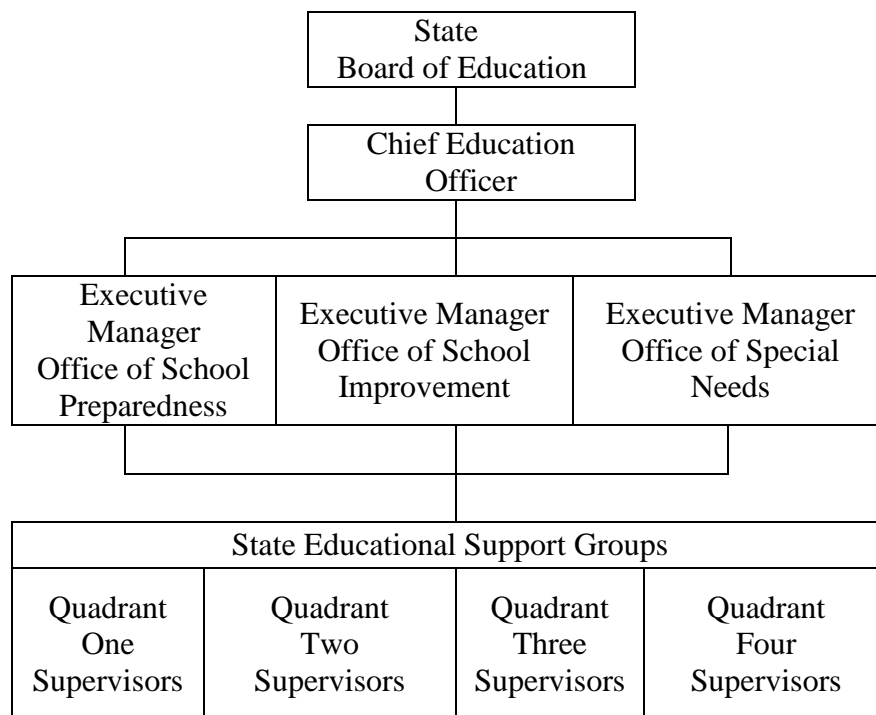
Source: Midwestern Department of Education, 2015

The Midwestern State Department of Education (in its efforts to support students with disabilities) has an office dedicated to helping school districts meet the needs of students with disabilities. This office (known as the Office of Special Needs) has an executive manager who directs the work of the office with the support of various staff members, whose diversified duties address the needs and questions of school districts throughout the state. It is this office that provides partial oversight to the work of the State Educational Support Groups. The executive managers of two other offices, the Office of School Preparedness and the Office of School Improvement also provide oversight to the work of the State Educational Support Groups.

Participants

Since this study examined state leaders' perceptions of inclusive education of students with low incidence disabilities, all participants met the criteria of being a state-level leader. Creswell (2013) referred to this as purposeful, criterion sampling. Two sets of participants were identified; a participant group of eight interviewees selected from the sixteen supervisors of the State Educational Support Groups, and a focus group of five participants who serve as executive or deputy executive managers of the Offices of School Preparedness, School Improvement, and Special Needs. Figure 1 shows the hierarchy of leadership positions in the Midwestern State Department of Education and the fact the State Education Support Group supervisors report to the executive managers of the Offices of School Preparedness, School Improvement and Special Needs. This sample size is fitting since "a hallmark of a good qualitative case study is that it presents an in-depth understanding of the case" (Creswell, 2013, p. 98). "The logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry" (Patton, 2002, p. 230).

Figure 1. Hierarchy of Leadership at Midwestern Department of Education



Source: R. Smith (personal communication, March 4, 2015)

The interviewee participants were selected from the pool of sixteen supervisors of the State Educational Support Groups across the state. The sampling criteria established for the selection of interview participants for this study is that each interviewee must serve as a supervisor of a state educational support group in this state and must have served in that capacity for more than one year. This time frame provides opportunity for experience at the state-level. Each must hold a Master's degree and have had at least three years of classroom teaching experience. In addition, the supervisor must have served in a leadership position at the district or building level.

The purpose for the selection of the supervisors of the State Education Support Group as participants for the individual interviews finds support in the work of Fixsen et al. (2009).

Leaders at this level of state education agencies are responsible to support school districts by providing the professional development and technical assistance needed to implement the changes required by the Department of Education. This level of leadership works directly with district and building leadership to “develop the competencies of educators and the capabilities of school and district organizations so that effective changes can be made in education practices with students and necessary changes can be made in system functioning” (Fixsen et al., 2009, p. 10).

The focus group participants were selected using similar purposeful, criterion sampling (Creswell, 2013). Focus group participants must serve as an executive manager or executive deputy manager within one of the Offices of Special Education, School Preparedness, or School Improvement and have at least a Master’s degree. Each of the focus group participants must have had at least three years of classroom teaching experience and must have had at least three years of building or district level leadership experience. It should be noted that just before data collection began for this study, the executive manager of the Office of School Improvement took a leave of absence from the department in order to finish a doctoral program; a replacement was not named. This resulted in a reduction of the proposed number of focus group participants from six to the five who actually took part in this study.

The purpose for the selection of the executive and deputy executive managers of the Offices of School Preparedness, School Improvement, and Special Needs for the focus group participants finds support in the work of Fixsen et al. (2009). Leaders at this level of state education agencies are responsible to provide leadership and policy support that enables change

in the system (Fixsen et al., 2009). This level of leadership makes decisions about policy, regulations, and system changes, and works to align the components of the education system to make room for and support the new ways of work that are part of the scale up endeavor (Fixsen et al., 2009). Further, these leaders offer guidance and support to leaders who serve closer to the state's school districts.

Procedures

In order to conduct this study, I first identified “gatekeepers” (Gall et al., 2007) who granted permission for the study; Gall et al. referred to this as gaining entry. I understood Liberty University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) required a signed letter granting permission for the study. Some initial groundwork for this step took place and the main gatekeeper, the Executive Manager of the Office of Special Needs in the state reviewed my proposal and offered her support for the study. Then, I secured IRB approval from Liberty University (see Appendix A).

After I secured IRB approval for the study, I conducted a pilot study that included one individual interview and one focus group with a minimum of three participants. I used the same interview and focus group questions created for use in the actual study (see Appendix F and G). The pilot study provided direction in two areas: (a) “conceptual clarification for the research design” and (b) an opportunity to “develop relevant lines of questions” (Yin, 2009, p. 92). In addition, the pilot study provided opportunity for me to develop my interview skills and further ensure the questions will garner the information needed to understand the phenomenon more fully. I selected the participants for this pilot, purposefully, from a professional organization that specializes in the field of professional development and technical assistance regarding services for students with low incidence disabilities to schools internationally. Pilot participants included

four women who hold various positions within the organization. Each of them have at least 15 years of experience in the educational field, each hold at least a Master's degree in education, and each provide technical assistance, professional development, and leadership development to school districts throughout this Midwestern state. The pilot provided opportunity for practitioners to answer my questions and talk about the value of the questions to the study in general from their perspective. The pilot focus group gave me opportunity to learn how to take copious notes when two or more people were talking and provided the opportunity to see how ideas from one person elicited more ideas among the group.

After I completed the pilot study, I selected the participants for the study. A purposeful, criterion sampling was used to identify the participants for this study (Creswell, 2013). Participants must be state-level leaders in order to participate. I recruited participants by sending an email to all potential supervisors of the State Education Support Groups (see Appendix B) and all potential executive managers and executive deputy managers in the offices of special education, preparedness, and improvement (see Appendix D) with basic information about the study and a request for demographic information. The demographic information included highest degree held, years in current position, years of experience as a classroom teacher, building leader, and district leader, the number of years removed from the district level, and types of districts served in the supervisor's zone. This demographic data guided the selection of actual participants and provided some of the rich, thick description of the participants. First, from the recruitment responses, two supervisors from each quadrant, for a total of eight, were selected to participate as interviewees in the study. Secondly, from the recruitment responses, six managers were selected as focus group participants in the study. Selection was based upon least number of years removed from district level and type of districts served in supervisor's

zone. A lesser number of years removed from the district potentially provide greater insight in district readiness to practice inclusive education for students with low incidence disabilities. The type of districts served criteria seeks to provide diversity of district demographics and provide insight into district needs accordingly. It was important to have participants who served rural, urban, and suburban districts since levels of readiness may differ according to district typology. The focus group participants were selected based upon least number of years removed from district level leadership. Interviewee and focus group participants were notified via email of their selection for the study. Individual and different consent forms were provided to interviewees and to focus group participants (see Appendix C and E). All participants were asked to sign and return the consent form via email to me. Verification of signed consent forms from each of the 14 participants preceded any data collection.

This study utilized three types of data collection that included eight individual interviews, one focus group, and document analysis. Yin (2009) recommended “multiple sources of evidence” for triangulation of data (p. 114). First, I conducted individual interviews. Each of the interviews were digitally recorded using Audacity® a computer-based recording program, and transcribed verbatim by me to ensure accuracy of the interviewees’ perceptions of the phenomenon. These transcriptions were shared with the participants, via email, to ensure accuracy of the information. Copious notes were taken during the focus group, but the focus group was also digitally recorded using Audacity® a computer-based recording program, and transcribed verbatim by me to ensure accuracy. A copy of transcription was shared with the participants of the focus group to ensure accuracy of the information. These validations of accuracy, known as member checking, provided credibility (Creswell, 2013; Saldaña, (2013).

The analysis of documents, one prong of the data collection process, provided me opportunity to contemplate about who created the document, for what audience, and for what purpose (Saldaña, 2013). The way the document was constructed, the design lay-out, the style, and font size all provided information about the creator of the document (Saldaña). The messages of the documents may provide insight into the phenomenon, especially when the messages triangulate with the other data sources; this, Yin (2009) referred to a “convergence of evidence” (p. 117). During the 2012-2013 and 2013-2014 school years several statewide meetings concerning inclusive education for low incidence disabilities were conducted. The agendas, handouts, PowerPoint notes, and any other documents provided from those meetings were analyzed to determine congruence or non-congruence with responses from either the individual interviews, the focus group, or both. Additionally, the Midwestern Department of Education collects preschool and school-age LRE data for each district. The comparison of those data to responses of interviewees and focus group participants may show an understanding of the perceptions of state-level leaders concerning the readiness of schools for inclusive education.

Data was analyzed using Saldaña’s (2013) coding methods for the identification of themes found in the data. Saldaña recommended beginning researchers manually code “on hard-copy printouts first, not via computer monitor” (p. 26). This manual manipulation of data provided more interaction with and ownership of the data (Saldaña, 2013). As the sole researcher of this study, I coded solo, but engaged some of the participants during analysis through member checking to ensure accuracy of data analysis (Saldaña, 2013). During this coding process, I utilized analytic memo writing as a means of reflecting on the data. Analytic memo writing allowed me to document how I was thinking about and understanding the data

(Saldaña, 2013). This process also allowed for patterns, categories, themes, and concepts to be identified (Saldaña, 2013).

The Researcher's Role

I currently supervise the special education program at a small city school system made up of two elementary schools that each house grades P-6, and one junior high / high school building for grades 7-12. In this school system, more than 25% of the students have an identified disability and nearly 95% of the students are eligible for free or reduced lunch. As the special education supervisor, I ensure the intervention specialists write compliant Individual Education Programs (IEP) for each student with a disability. Another responsibility includes providing guidance about service continuum options and counsel about special education policies and procedures to school principals and IEP teams so students with special needs receive quality services. Sometimes, I am part of the IEP team helping make placement decisions that equate to least restrictive environment; however, typically I only see the end result of the IEP team's decision as I review the team created IEPs.

My work as supervisor of special education for the last six years has provided opportunities to interact with both general and special educators. I also have the privilege to serve on district and regional autism professional development teams as a trainer. My work has allowed me to present nationally about the need to provide the supports and aids necessary for students with low incidence disabilities to be included in the general curriculum to the maximum extent possible.

A unique characteristic of qualitative research is the researcher serves as the human instrument (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Prior to embarking in the actual research for this study, it was vital for me, serving as the human instrument, to set aside my own assumptions about the

phenomenon under study. Moustakas (1994) referred to this as bracketing where the researcher sets aside his “prejudgments, biases, and preconceived ideas about things” (p. 85). Creswell (2013) posited the researcher must listen closely to what the participants have to say and how their experiences have shaped their reality about the phenomenon. Furthermore, Yin (2009) asserted if one’s intention in using a case study design is to “substantiate a preconceived position” (p. 72) the data and findings will be negated.

My relationship to the case is one of professional colleague only. I do not report to any of the participants; nor do any of the participants report to me. I have served with some of the participants in work groups over the years, but only in the capacity of brainstorming about how schools can better serve students with disabilities. I do not believe my relationship to the case affected the research study.

Data Collection

Essential to qualitative inquiry is meticulous data collection. Creswell (2013) denoted data collection in qualitative study is much more than simply going out and listening to people during interviews. Rather, Creswell likened qualitative data collection to a “series of interrelated activities aimed at gathering good information to answer emerging research questions” (p. 146). Accordingly, this series of activities includes “locating site/individual, gaining access and making rapport, purposefully sampling, collecting data, recording information, resolving field issues, and storing data” (p. 146).

Yin (2009) stated case study evidence should come from multiple sources. Yin suggested these six:

- documentation – notes, agendas and meeting minutes, internal administrative records, and news clippings

- archival records – “public use files,” organizational records, service records, maps, survey data previously collected,
- interviews – one of the most important sources
- direct observation – formal or casual activities
- participant-observation – more than a passive observer, actually participate
- physical artifacts – a tool or instrument, art pieces. (pp. 101-113)

Even though Yin suggested no single data source has an advantage over another, I chose to collect data in the following order that includes individual interviews, a focus group, and documentation. I selected to complete the individual interviews first, since according to Yin interviews are one of the primary sources of case study data. The focus group interview seemed to naturally follow the individual interviews since a focus group conversation can be used to corroborate previously understood information (Yin, 2009), as well as tease out new and additional information (Frey & Fontana, 1991). Finally, Yin argued “the most important use of documentation in case study is to corroborate and augment evidence from other sources” (p. 103).

The theoretical framework of this study, built around the adult learning theory (Knowles, 1970, 1990), the sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986), and the implementation science framework (Blasé et al., 2009; Fixsen, Naoom, Blasé, Friedman, & Wallace, 2005) has served to develop all aspects of this study including the data collection strategies. The adult learning theory supports the data collection strategy of interview since life’s experiences helps orientate the learner and leads to increased learning. The individual interview provides understanding of the interviewees’ experiences with inclusive education, and their perceptions of district readiness for inclusive education for students with low incidence disabilities, through the rich data that is

gathered to better understand the phenomenon. Second, the implementation science framework (Blasé et al., 2009; Fixsen et al., 2005; Fixsen, Blasé, Horner et al., 2013; Fixsen, Blasé, Metz et al., 2013) supports focus groups. As stated earlier, two stages of the implementation science framework include exploration and installation. These stages seek to understand the need for change, possible solutions to promote change, and the exploration of the financial and human resources necessary to implement the change (Blasé et al., 2009; Fixsen et al., 2005; Fixsen, Blasé, Horner et al., 2013; Fixsen, Blasé, Metz et al., 2013). The third data collection deals with documents and is supported by the implementation science framework (Blasé et al., 2009; Fixsen et al., 2005; Fixsen, Blasé, Horner et al., 2013; Fixsen, Blasé, Metz et al., 2013). The documents provided data relating to current LRE practices and discussion points of leaders from across the state concerning the readiness for inclusive education for students with low incidence disabilities. These documents offered the beginning data needed for the third and fourth stages of the implementation science framework that addressed initial and full implementation. These two stages use data to facilitate implementation, to address barriers to implementation, and certify the level of integration of the change strategies.

Individual Interviews

Yin (2009) suggested that an interview is one of the “essential source[s] of case study evidence” (p. 108). Rubin and Rubin (as cited in Yin, 2009) posited the case study interview is “likely to be fluid rather than rigid” (p. 106). Yin proposed even though researchers follow an interview protocol and a list of questions, they must also be cognizant of “simultaneously putting forth ‘friendly’ and ‘nonthreatening’ questions” (p. 107) during the interview in order to gain insight into the phenomenon.

After the development of interview and focus group questions, three experts reviewed the interview and focus group questions prior to IRB approval. Two of the experts have Doctor of Education degrees in Educational Administration, and the third expert has a Doctor of Education in Special Education; all three experts are university faculty. The use of these experts provided content validity to the questions and ensured the questions collected the information to understand the phenomenon of inclusive education for students with low incidence disabilities. I revised my questions for the individual interviews and the focus group based upon input from these experts.

The use of standardized open-ended interview questions was employed with each of the eight interviewee participants in this study (see Appendix F). The eight individual interviews were conducted in a mutually agreed upon location. Each interview was between 30–60 minutes and recorded using the computer-based program Audacity® for accuracy purposes. I transcribed verbatim, each interview. Patton (2002) stated when a researcher completes his own transcription, it “provides an opportunity to get immersed in the data, an experience that usually generates emergent insights” (p. 441).

Standardized Open-ended Interview Questions

Background Information and Inclusive Education Experience

1. Please share with me the number of years you have spent in the educational profession and the positions you have held.
2. How many courses did you complete in college, at any level, that dealt specifically with students with disabilities? Please describe the general content of those courses.

3. I would like to hear more about your experiences with students with disabilities. Please tell me about some experiences that stand out to you and share both the rewarding ones and challenging ones.
4. How do you define inclusive education?
5. Have you had any experiences with inclusive education? If so, please tell me about your experiences with inclusive education.
6. What does the term low incidence disabilities mean to you?

Perceptions of Current Practice and Gap between Philosophy and Practice

7. Do you believe districts in your geographic area are ready to practice inclusive education for all students? What evidence do you have to support your thoughts?
8. To what extent do districts in your geographic area include students with disabilities in the general education classroom? What evidence do you have of this practice?
9. Will you discuss specifically the extent to which districts in your geographic area practice inclusive education of students with low incidence disabilities?

Roadblocks to Inclusive Education and Next Steps

10. Do the districts in your geographic area face roadblocks regarding the implementation of inclusive educational practices, particularly for students with low incidence disabilities? Can you describe those roadblocks?
11. Do the districts in your geographic area have professional development needs to be more prepared to practice inclusive education? If, so, what are some of the specific needs districts have in order to be more prepared to practice inclusive education for all students? Who do you believe should be responsible to provide those needs?

Pre-service Teacher Preparation

12. How prepared are newly hired teachers to utilize inclusive education practices?
13. What ideas can you share on how districts in your area could help inform institutions of higher education about the needs pre-service teachers have regarding inclusive education and particularly the inclusion of students with low incidence disabilities?

Additional Information

14. What other information have I not asked about that might be helpful in understanding inclusive education practices in your geographical area?

The purpose of questions one through six was to provide past and present experience with the phenomenon. Rubin and Rubin (1995) stated the importance of understanding the experiences of the participants with the phenomenon. The responses to questions one through six established the background and experience of the interviewees with inclusive education. This information provided insight into the leaders' understanding of inclusive education and helped answer research question one concerning district readiness. Ball and Green (2014) found school leaders had limited experiences regarding special education and inclusive education practices; however, 84% percent of leaders reported having some formal training that amounted to from one to nine credits at the university level.

The responses to questions seven through nine provided insight into the perceptions of state leaders regarding current practices with inclusive education as well as the reality of current practices. Further, the responses provided understanding of how ready schools are for inclusive education in the leaders' areas. The responses to questions seven through nine sought to address the answer to research questions one and three. Understanding leaders' perceptions of the current practices in districts regarding inclusive education provided insight into the work that

still needs completed for inclusive education to become a reality. Landers, Courtade, and Ryndak, (2012) found that while state-level leaders believed students with complex disabilities could be included in school-wide programs, the reality was students were not included in school-wide programs. The responses to questions seven through nine spoke to the gap between philosophy and practice (Grima-Farrell et al., 2011).

Understanding the roadblocks to inclusive education and the needs districts have provided state-level leaders with the understanding of how districts need supported if inclusive education is to become reality for more students. DeMatthews and Mawhinney (2013) cited the need for districts to understand the “pace of change and district capacity” (p. 22) as it related to inclusive education. Moreover, DeMatthews and Mawhinney found districts should concern themselves “with issues related to school capacity, professional development, district-wide culture, and the pace at which they transition students from the most restrictive placements to less restrictive placements” (p. 22). The responses to questions 10 and 11 helped answer research questions four and five in the study.

Questions 12 and 13 provided understanding of state leaders’ perceptions about the readiness for new teachers to implement inclusive education and how institutions of higher education might become better informed of preservice teacher needs (Fuchs, 2009-2010; Gable et al., 2012). The responses from questions 12 and 13 helped to answer research question two in the study.

Focus Group

Patton (2002) described focus groups as a highly effective data collection tool for qualitative studies. “Participants tend to provide checks and balances with each other which tend to weed out false or extreme views” (p. 386). Patton further posited that focus groups are

interviews, they are not problem solving or decision making groups, and the researcher must be cognizant of the purpose of the focus group and ensure its purpose is achieved.

Krueger (1988) stated, “focus groups produce qualitative data that provide insights into attitudes, perceptions, and opinions of participants” (p. 30). Furthermore, “the focus group is a special type of group in terms of purpose, size, composition, and procedures” (p. 18). As researcher, I served several roles in the focus group including moderator, listener, observer, and ultimately analyzer of the data (Krueger, 1988). Frey and Fontana (as cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 1994) described the focus group as having these characteristics: (a) formal in setting, (b) structured question format, (c) exploratory purpose, and (d) directive interviewer role (p. 365).

Yin (2009) spoke of a focused interview whose purpose is to “corroborate certain facts that you think have been established” (p. 107). Frey and Fontana (1991) suggested a focus group provides opportunity for the interviewer to evaluate statements made, “by allowing opinions to bounce back and forth and be modified by the group, rather than being the definitive statement of a single respondent” (p. 178). Concerning this, Yin posited the interviewer must precisely formulate questions so the interviewer “appears genuinely naïve about the topic and allow the interviewee[s] to provide a fresh commentary about the topic” (p. 107).

A focus group comprised of five leaders, Executive Managers and Executive Deputy Managers from the Offices of Special Education, School Preparedness, and School Improvement, comprised one of the data collection prongs. I chose this group of participants for the focus group since collectively they provide oversight of the supervisors of the State Education Support Groups. This group has the capacity to effect policy changes, and they allocate funds for professional development and technical assistance across the state. The interaction between these participants concerning inclusive education for students with low

incidence disabilities may provide insight into the overall direction of inclusive education practices within the state.

Guiding questions for the focus group are found in Appendix G. The same group of experts who reviewed the individual interview questions also reviewed the focus group questions. This expert review of the guiding questions provided content validity and ensured the questions will provide the information needed to understand the phenomenon.

Standardized Open-ended Interview Questions

Focus Group Guiding Questions

1. How would you define the term inclusive education? What has been your personal experience implementing inclusive education?
2. Considering the LRE data for the state and the requirements of IDEA regarding the inclusion of students with disabilities, in general, where are examples of geographical areas or districts that are meeting the requirements? Where are examples of geographical areas or districts that are meeting the requirements concerning students with low incidence disabilities? Why do you believe some parts of the states or particular districts have been able to meet the IDEA requirements and practice inclusive education, particularly for students with low incidence disabilities?
3. What are the roadblocks or implementation curbs that prevent districts from practicing inclusive education? What measures, if any, are state-level leaders taking to help districts overcome these barriers, and to assist districts in the implementation of inclusive education?

4. How well are institutions of higher education preparing pre-service teachers to practice inclusive education? What actions, if any, are state-level leaders taking to influence higher education to better prepare pre-service teachers to practice inclusive education?
5. What are the perceived needs of districts across the state if inclusive education is to become a reality for students with low incidence disabilities? How are state level leaders working to provide the support to meet those needs?

The purpose of focus group question one is to discover the focus group participants' understanding of the term, inclusive education, and any personal experience with the phenomenon. This question sought to answer research question one that concerns district readiness for inclusive education. Burton and Pace (2009) proposed the landscape of the classroom has changed; the new heterogeneous make-up of classes includes children formerly in special education classes. Teachers face children who “not only have different learning styles, but process information differently than typical students” (p. 108). Burton and Pace suggested, “teachers need to possess the skills and dispositions to teach a diverse group of students in inclusive settings” (p. 108).

Focus group question two speaks to the current practices across the state concerning inclusive education and addresses the concerns of research question three. Understanding current practices not only provides insight into compliance with federal mandates like IDEA (2004) and NCLB (2002), but also provides models that other districts could emulate. Having data to support practices of least restrictive environments for students with disabilities may validate or refute Lipsky's (2005) contention that schools in the United States have achieved access to public education for students with disabilities. McLeskey, Landers, Williamson, and Hoppey (2012) presented data that “revealed substantial changes have occurred in LRE

placement over the last decade or more for students with disabilities. The responses to this question seek to address research questions one and two.

Awareness of the roadblocks or implementation curbs that prevent districts from practicing inclusive education provides insight for leaders. The responses to focus group question three offers insight into the roadblocks and help address research question four. Two roadblocks identified in the literature include teacher preparedness and the limited understanding of teachers concerning the needs of students with disabilities. Burton and Pace (2009) determined teachers have positive attitudes toward students with disabilities, but have limited understanding of the needs of students with disabilities and fear they lack skills necessary to meet the needs of those students. These same sentiments, reported by Allday et al. (2013) found teachers unprepared due to limited pre-service and on-going training. Allday et al., discovered teachers must

- have a basic knowledge of the characteristics of students with disabilities and an understanding of their role in the special education process,
- understand how to differentiate instruction to meet the needs of students with various disabilities,
- possess effective classroom management strategies to promote academic engagement and pro-social behavior, and
- learn how to communicate and collaborate effectively with special education teachers (pp. 299-300).

Addressing these teacher needs, and thus, helping to eliminate the barriers for inclusive education is imperative. Another roadblock is the 'blame game' approach to students with disabilities, whereby teachers who lack understanding of students with disabilities blame the

students for their failure to learn and fail to understand teacher responsibility for student success (Allday et al., 2013). Allday et al. argued teacher attitudes predict teaching practices, which in turn predict student outcomes.

One key component of successful inclusive education programs seems to be teacher preparation (Alvarez McHatton & Parker, 2013). Research question two of this study seeks to determine how well institutions of higher education prepare pre-service teachers for the demands of inclusive education. Burton and Pace (2009) stressed the importance to link theory and practice in field experience; it was not enough for pre-service teachers to simply take a course about students with disabilities, they also needed experience interacting with these students during field experiences.

Historically, pre-service teacher preparation programs have not been receptive to inclusive education (Allday et al., 2013). In their study of 109 university teacher preparation programs, Allday et al. revealed 67% of the universities did not offer a course on the topic of inclusive education. McCray and Alvarez McHatton (2011) discovered traditional teacher education programs have students only complete one course devoted to special education. Research question two examines state-level leaders' perceptions of how well pre-service teacher programs prepare new teachers for the inclusive education settings they may face.

Focus group question five investigates state-level leaders' perceptions of the needs of districts concerning inclusive education. Odom, Buysse, and Soukakou (2011) identified implementation science framework as a strategy that uses a "systems perspective that promotes organizations' adoption of innovation or change" (pg. 352). The phenomenon of inclusive education of students with low incidence disabilities could well be considered an innovation in many school systems. Fixsen, Blasé, Metz, et al. (2013) posited, "participants in current systems

have a difficult time creating the conditions for systems change” (p. 217). Fixsen, Blasé, Metz, et al. suggested, a crucial step toward change involves state leaders who understand the needs of districts across the state as they “remain focused on the implementation level until this essential foundation has been established” (p. 216) if systems change is going to happen. Responses to this question seek to address research question five of this study.

Documentation

Yin (2009) claimed “documents play an explicit role in any data collection in doing case studies” (p. 103). Documents serve to corroborate information from other sources (Yin, 2009). Yin posited the use of documentation since it has the strengths of being “stable, unobtrusive, exact, and having broad coverage” (p. 102). Conversely, Yin stated the weaknesses of “retrievability, biased selectivity, reporting bias, and access” (p. 103) could hinder documentation as a source of evidence. That is, the researcher may not be given access to the documents, or choose poorly or with bias the documents to include in the study. Further, the researcher must understand the documents were produced for another purpose and simply assist triangulation (Yin, 2009).

For this study, one set of documentation involves the use of archived LRE data to support or discover the inclusive practices of districts in this Midwestern state. This documentation set provided insight into research question three that addresses the current practices concerning inclusive education throughout the state. Each district in the state is required, because of the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) annual submission requirements, to submit the LRE data for the district. This data is readily available to the public for review using the Midwestern State Department of Education (2014) website. The entire LRE data set was used to determine how widely practiced inclusive education and LRE is across the state. These data

were not created as a result of the study; only analyzed as a source of evidence. These data were used to analyze the current service percentages for each education support group and how perceptive the participants are regarding inclusive practices in their geographic area.

A second set of documents were analyzed to determine how state-wide leaders are organizing informational meetings concerning inclusive education. These documents, from several state-wide conference-like meetings regarding inclusive education for students with low incidence disabilities, provide background information about the phenomenon. It is important for me to understand these documents were produced for another purpose and not for the purpose of this study. This set of documents seek to address the concerns of research question four; the roadblocks or implementation curbs that prevent districts from practicing inclusive education.

Data Analysis

While “qualitative analysis transforms data into findings . . . the challenge of qualitative analysis lies in making sense of massive amounts of data” (Patton, 2002, p. 432) and is quite possibly the hardest aspect of case study (Yin, 2009). My data analysis followed the models of Yin (2009) and Saldaña (2013). Saldaña (2013) suggested data analysis begins when data collection begins since common ideas are heard and seen. The process continues during transcription of recorded interviews, sorting gathered documents, or detailing notes from focus groups (Saldaña, 2013). Yin posited the need to “play with the data . . . as a prelude to developing a systematic sense of what is worth analyzing and how it should be analyzed” (p. 162).

One form of qualitative data analysis involves coding (Saldaña, 2013). A code is a word or phrase that “symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essences-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (p. 3). As previously discussed, Yin

(2009) stated data sources include interviews, observation, documentation, physical artifacts, and archival records. Data will likely need to be coded several times, or looked at in what Saldaña (2013) calls cycles.

Using Saldaña's (2013) mechanics of coding, the first step in actual data analysis involved data layout. This step involved taking the data and displaying the data in short paragraph-length chunks with space between paragraphs when topics seem to change (Saldaña, 2013). Coupled with this step is pre-coding, the highlighting, underlining, or circling of data when obvious codes appeared. Saldaña (2013) called this playing with the data. Additionally, all data received thorough readings during which memos, notes, or jottings took place in the margins. This entire step was best accomplished using a three-column template (See Appendix H) where the data was displayed on the right hand side of the paper with preliminary and final codes written in the columns of the middle and left hand side of the template, respectfully (Saldaña, 2013). Furthermore, this step allowed for the data codes to be grouped and systematized into categories (Saldaña, 2013). Second, similar codes were formulated into categories. These categories, or what Saldaña called families, have similar attributes. Saldaña advocated the linking of codes "according to similarity and regularity" (p. 8) to form categories. Then, out of categories, themes are formed (Saldaña, 2013). It is these themes that provide the constructs for the written narrative about the case (Saldaña, 2013). As suggested by Saldaña (2013), "there is something about manipulating qualitative data on paper and writing codes in pencil that give you more control over and ownership of the work" (p. 26).

Once the data was analyzed, a peer, an education professor at a local university who holds a Doctor of Education degree in early childhood education, reviewed my analysis of the data to ensure I had presented the data honestly. Lincoln and Guba (1985) referred to this

process as peer debriefing; the process of exposing oneself to a disinterested peer....for the purpose of exploring aspects of the inquiry that might otherwise remain only implicit within the inquirer's mind" (p. 308). The use of an independent peer provided opportunity to uncover any unintended bias and assumptions toward the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was established in this study by addressing credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability. Creswell (2013) referred to this process as validation; "an attempt to assess the 'accuracy' of the findings" (p. 250). Moreover, Creswell viewed validation as a "distinct strength" (p. 250) of qualitative research based upon the amount of time the researcher spends with the participants and the detailed, thick description that results.

Credibility

Credibility seeks to demonstrate the accuracy of data interpretation; put differently, the internal validity of the data. Credibility will be addressed using triangulation, what Creswell (2013) called, "corroborating evidence from different sources" (p. 251). Triangulation ensures that at least three components of data are represented in the study. In this case study, I used individual interviews, a focus group, and document analysis. Lincoln and Guba, (1985) discussed member checking as "the most critical technique for establishing credibility" (p. 134). I employed member checking by asking the participants to review the transcribed individual interviews and the focus group discussion to ensure accuracy.

Credibility was established through the use of experts who examined my individual interview questions and the focus group guiding questions to ensure the questions will collect the needed information to fully understand the phenomenon of the study. These experts have terminal degrees in education and practice in the field.

Further, credibility was established through a pilot study (Patton, 2002; Yin, 2009). After IRB approval and before data collection took place, I conducted a pilot study that included one individual interview and a focus group discussion with three participants who are experts in the field. This pilot study was designed to help refine the individual interview questions and focus group questions to ensure that the questions would garner the information needed to understand the phenomenon fully (Patton, 2002; Yin, 2009).

Dependability

Dependability involves determining how faithful the data is to what was said during interviews and focus groups. The use of peer debriefing was employed whereby the researcher utilized a peer to review the data, a ‘devil’s advocate’ if you will, who will ask tough questions about the interpretations of the data provided by the researcher (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As noted above, once the data was analyzed, a peer reviewed my analysis to ensure I had presented the data honestly. Additionally, an audit trail (see Appendix L) ensured the data collection, the researcher’s thinking about the data, and the original data was preserved so an outside evaluator can trace the data from the beginning (exactly stated by the interviewee) to the end (analyzed and interpreted by the researcher) (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Confirmability

Confirmability seeks to determine if the data is authentic. This was established through the use of direct quotes, member checks, and enumeration. Direct quotes “bring the voice of the participants in the study” (Creswell, 2013, p. 219). Direct quotes are employed in order to use the exact words of the participants to substantiate what was said during the interview and to demonstrate I have guarded the thoughts and ideas of the participants. Member checks provide opportunity for the participants to review the transcribed interviews to ensure accuracy of the

data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Finally, enumeration is the use of numbers to verify how often and to what degree themes and codes were expressed by the participants (see Appendices I and J).

Transferability

Transferability addresses the external validity of the data. Transferability establishes the extent to which the study and findings transfer to other settings (Creswell, 2013). Through the use of rich, thick description of the study's setting and participants, readers can determine if information from the study can transfer to other situations (Creswell, 2013). More importantly, the rich, thick description, what Lincoln and Guba (1985) called the "foundation of qualitative analysis and reporting . . . will open up a world to the reader through rich, detailed, and concrete descriptions of people and places in such a way that we can understand the phenomenon studied and draw our own interpretations about meanings and significance" (p. 438).

Ethical Considerations

Several ethical considerations were addressed in this study. First, Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was sought before any data collection was started for this study. Next, issues of confidentiality were addressed by assigning pseudonyms to people, places, and other potential identifiers of this study. Participants understood the voluntary nature of this study and were asked to provide a signed informed consent form. At the same time, participants realized they could withdraw from the study at any time. Withdrawal from the study simply takes an email stating the desire to withdraw from the study. Data from a participant who withdraws will be destroyed immediately. Finally, electronic file data storage will be guarded through the use of password protection, known only to me. These electronic files will be kept in a locked filing

cabinet in my home for three years. At the end of the three years, all data from the study will be shred.

Summary

This holistic single-case study sought to examine the perceptions of state leaders concerning the readiness of schools for inclusive education in this Midwestern state. A case study is fitting for this study since Yin (2009) stated the unique strength of case study is that the design provides the vehicle to gather and analyze evidence from various perspectives. This study utilized individual interviews, a focus group, and documents as data collection sources. Data analysis was guided by the research of Saldaña (2013) and used coding to analyze the data; codes were grouped into categories, and ultimately the themes were identified. The trustworthiness of the study was established through data triangulation to ensure the areas of credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability were met. The IRB approval of the study and the issue of confidentiality addressed the ethical considerations for the study.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

This holistic single-case study examined the perceptions of state-level educational leaders concerning the readiness of school districts to practice inclusive education for students with complex needs and low incidence disabilities. This chapter begins with a discussion of the study's participants presented through demographic information and a brief history of educational experience for each interviewee. Experiences of the participants, both rewarding and challenging ones, concerning students with disabilities, follow. Further, the chapter includes a discussion of the results of the data presented through themes, aligned with the research questions and the theoretical framework(s) associated with the research question. The chapter concludes with a summary.

Participants

Participants were selected using a purposeful, criterion sampling approach that included two sets of participants; a participant group of eight interviewees selected from the sixteen supervisors of the State Educational Support Groups, and a focus group of five participants who serve as executive or deputy executive managers of the Offices of School Preparedness, School Improvement, and Special Needs. In this study, pseudonyms for all identifiable information associated with the setting, participants, and the names of offices and participants' titles were assigned in order to protect the confidentiality of the setting and the participants. Table 2 shows the demographic make-up of the participants, in no particular order except the quadrant in which they serve.

Before any data collection began, each participant signed the consent form (see Appendices C and E). After the completion of the interview or focus group discussion, each

interview and the focus group discussion was transcribed verbatim (see Appendix N), then participants were provided, via email, a copy of the transcript of the interview or focus group discussion for review as a member check. Participants were asked to review the transcript to ensure I had accurately captured their thoughts. Only five of the eight interviewees responded to the member check request; however, each of those five responded that the transcription was an accurate reflection of their thoughts.

Table 2

Participant Demographic Information

Participant name	Highest degree held	Quadrant	Types of districts	Current position	Years of experience		District
					Classroom	Building	
Individual Interviewees							
Sharon	M. Ed.	A	Suburban / rural	3	2	19	0
Cindi	M. Ed.	A	All	2	19	0	7
Frank	Ph. D.	B	All	1	0	0	5
Gina	M. Ed.	B	Rural	1	17	0	4
Kathy	Ph. D.	C	All	1	0	6	0
Staci	Ph. D.	C	All	5	8.5	4.5	12
Cara	M. Ed.	D	All	10	12	15	0
Marie	Ed. D.	D	Rural	14	0	0	5
Focus Group Participants							
Terri	Doctoral candidate	N/A	N/A	1	7	0	0
Vanessa	Ph. D.	N/A	N/A	1	2	0	0
Gwen	Ph. D.	N/A	N/A	4	7	17	5
Rhonda	Ph. D.	N/A	N/A	3	5	5	4
Pam	M. Ed.	N/A	N/A	3	17	6	3

Sharon

Sharon has 25 years of experience in the educational profession. She is currently a supervisor of a State Education Support Group in quadrant A of the Midwestern state. Her career started in a southern state where she taught students with emotional disabilities at a self-contained school. After two years, her district moved her classroom into an elementary school in order to practice inclusion. She said it was called inclusion, but her students never met with other students; her students have separate recess times, a separate lunch time, but her classroom was considered to be included since it was in the building. After a few years, Sharon returned to her home state to teach children with emotional disabilities at a middle school. Three years later her husband was transferred and she became a teacher of children with specific learning disabilities. There she had students with all sorts of disabilities that she worked with and she was happy to do so. Then, she became the teacher of children with emotional disturbances during which time she earned her Master's in education and received her principal's license. With the encouragement from her principal, Sharon moved to a regional position where she provided technical assistance and professional development to school districts, particularly concerning Positive Behavior Supports and non-violent crisis intervention techniques. Her other experiences include pupil services director for a school district and special education director for a regional group of school districts. Currently, Sharon provides support to school districts in quadrant A of the state. Sharon's academic coursework included nearly 20 courses in the area of special education. When discussing rewarding experiences concerning students with disabilities, Sharon stated she was pleased, "to see the progress we've made in special education; very very, um, (pause) few self-contained schools anymore, I think there is a place for all of the continuum, (pause) but we're getting wiser about LRE, which makes me very happy" (Sharon, personal

communication, July 8, 2015). The challenging aspect of working with students with disabilities is the “frustration that we haven’t come further....that we’re having that difficulty to change the culture” (Sharon, personal communication, July 8, 2015).

Cindi

Cindi has worked in the educational field for 26 years. She was a classroom teacher for many years, then became a part-time curriculum director and taught in the content areas so that she had more credibility with her peers. The curriculum director job became full time that focused on reading and language arts. She later managed the federal programs and was a Title I teacher. All of these positions were in one district. Cindi moved to a regional position as a consultant to school districts; a job she had for several years. She currently serves as the supervisor of a State Education Support Group in quadrant A in the Midwestern state. Cindi did not recall having any college coursework as a general education teacher regarding special education. Her greatest challenge working with students with disabilities was not having enough background as part of her coursework in college. Cindi expressed concern about students who were pulled from her classroom for services and how they responded to never wanting to leave her classroom. She stated a concern for her students was “their day was fragmented, it was very hard to make connections from what was happening in a resource room to (pause) the curriculum. I felt there was a dis-service being done to the students academically” (Cindi, personal communication, July 6, 2015). Cindi did not necessarily have rewarding experiences working with students with disabilities, but expressed she had rewarding experiences with students with disabilities in her personal life. She said,

so I don’t necessarily have rewarding experiences professionally, I have more things that causes me to question the way our system (pause) worked or I would say, didn’t

work (long pause) a lot of students were put into resource rooms and not able to interact with their peers. (Cindi, personal communication, July 6, 2015)

Frank

Frank recently completed 34 years in the education profession. He holds several degrees in psychology. His experience includes more than a decade of working with students and adults with developmental disabilities in a variety of settings. He served on the team that introduced Positive Behavior Support training to districts across the Midwestern state. Frank has served as a consultant to school districts helping schools with special education compliance issues, IEP training, and other needed professional development. His recent work includes serving as a consultant to schools concerning evaluation and assessment of students. Currently, Frank supports school districts in quadrant B of the state. Frank's college coursework included more than 20 courses specifically dealing with students with disabilities. Frank's most rewarding work was at a center for students with severe behavioral needs. He stated he was able to provide various types of therapy, "there was really beneficial to kids and the families and were really rewarding" (Frank, personal communication, July 14, 2015). These students came from many different states and were very difficult to deal with in the sense of evaluation and treatment. The challenging part of his experience with students with disabilities, were the kids who did not respond to interventions no matter what the team did to provide support for the students. "Sometimes some kids did not respond to the interventions no matter what you did and that was, not the majority, of course, but there were some kids that didn't respond" (Frank, personal communication, July 14, 2015).

Gina

Gina has 20 years of experience in education. She has a variety of experiences teaching English/Language Arts to students in grades 7-12. Her other roles include curriculum coordinator, grant director, curriculum specialist and consultant to school districts. Her current work involves providing technical assistance and professional development to school districts seeking to improve their services to students with disabilities. She provides those services to the districts located in quadrant B of the state. Her college coursework included one course in special education that taught her to understand an IEP, but did not provide her with intervention strategies or teach her how to differentiate instruction for students. She related, “I had one course, and I am trying to remember it, was because all I can remember was all of those literature courses that I had to write a million papers for...” (Gina, personal communication, June 24, 2015). She did not feel prepared to work with students with disabilities. Her most challenging experience with students with disabilities was during her first year of teaching. Her administration asked her if she would allow a student who had been identified as severely, emotionally disturbed, but who was very high functioning into her drop-out prevention English classroom for grades 10 -12. Gina related she was terrified since she was only 21 years old, teaching 12th graders, and she was supposed to mainstream this young man, too. Gina found the year to be most rewarding since the young man was actually a wonderful student. Gina related concerning the young man, “I enjoyed him, I thoroughly enjoyed him, I didn’t know his IEP, I didn’t know nothing, he literally showed up one day, they told me can we do this, I said, yep!” (Gina, personal communication, June 24, 2015). Later in her career, Gina’s most rewarding experience was when she partnered with a self-contained classroom teacher for students with disabilities. Gina would share her lesson plans with the special education teacher who would

show her how to differentiate, how to read and use an IEP to provide services to students, and how to implement Universal Design for Learning strategies. “She (the self-contained teacher) was the reason, not the district” (Gina, personal communication, June 24, 2015) that we were successful with our students.

Kathy

Kathy has nearly 15 years of experience in education. She is a trained school psychologist. After a number of internships and assistantships, she worked for a center for autism and related disabilities. There she provided consulting for students around behavior supports. She has worked as a school psychologist for preschool through high school. Kathy also served as a consultant for school districts providing technical assistance and professional development concerning school improvement and special education. Currently, Kathy works in quadrant C of the state. She does not recall having any coursework about special education in her undergraduate work, but had several courses in her graduate work. One of her most challenging experiences with students with disabilities was with a student who was in a preschool program when she worked in an integrated preschool program. There were some kids who had IEPs and other students who functioned as peers, sometimes known as typicals. There was a four year old who started manifesting some pretty significant behavioral challenges, and it was a really difficult situation, because it was a lot of running, a lot of significant outbursts, some verbal behaviors, and he started escalating the teacher, he really knew how to get her upset. He was a very bright student but he had a really hard time managing his own behavior and I think he was also very skilled at playing the environment and so, in some ways, the intervention needed was much more in terms of a classroom management support for the teacher than it was for the student. There were definitely supports that he needed, but this was a skill set the teacher did not

have and she was near the end of 30+ year career. The teacher had never encountered a student like him before and she just did not know what to do with him. Kathy spent a lot of time working with the teacher, tried to develop some interventions with him, some social stories, some video modeling for him, and he continued to struggle. Finally, the team decided to move the young man to a different classroom, a very comparable classroom, but just with a different teacher.

It was so disheartening because really I wanted to see that teacher grow in her ability and meet his needs, but ultimately we got to the point where we thought we want this student to be successful in this inclusive environment and we don't have forever. (Kathy, personal communication, July 8, 2015)

The young man experienced better outcomes in the new classroom. A more positive example was with a student who had what was called Asperger's syndrome; he was a third grade student. He was so bright and very academically capable, "there was no reason on earth that he would not have been successful in a general education environment from an academic perspective, but behaviorally that was the barrier that kept him from being included" (Kathy, personal communication, July 8, 2015). The

intervention specialist was struggling mightily with him, particularly some argumentation with him when things were not going exactly his way, even to the point that he would argue about fonts, he was expecting the letter a to show up a certain way, and if the letter did not show up a certain way, he could not handle it, and he would sit and argue about it. (Kathy, personal communication, July 8, 2015)

Kathy worked with him and had to make him a social story in Power Point to show there are all kinds of different fonts. Again, Kathy found she was supporting the teacher more than she was

supporting the student. Kathy worked to find two teachers who were very knowledgeable about autism that could provide consultation to the team and who could rally around this teacher team and around this student and do a lot of problem solving in order for the student's academic experience to be much more successful.

Staci

Staci has 30 years of experience in education. Her first classroom experience was in a middle school science classroom that had students included from a resource room. She related "it was during the time when general education teachers were not allowed to see students' IEPs" (Staci, personal communication, July 8, 2015). She moved to a district coordinator's position as well as classroom teacher. After some training about inclusive practices, she worked with a school team to design supports for all kids. The design included an emphasis on changing the mindset of the general education teachers that they could provide the core instruction needed for students with disabilities in the general education classroom. Staci had the opportunity to move to another district as the curriculum director. There, her team worked hard to move low performing schools to become high performing schools by building strong, positive environments and putting systems in place where teachers were working together. She later served as the superintendent in that district and continued to see changes for all students. Her college coursework included a few courses concerning students with different abilities. One of her most rewarding experiences working with students with disabilities was when she was a science teacher. The students with disabilities were not afraid to do any of the experiments concerning electricity and served as role models in the class. A challenging experience she encountered with a student with a disability was when a mother came to enroll her son. The young man had autism, no spoken language, and pretty erratic behaviors. After some discussion

with other professionals and a visit to the young man's home, the team decided to figure out what to do to help the young man be successful in a school setting. It was the trip to the young man's home that challenged her the most. Staci related the visit changed her life since she saw how the mom had figured out how to meet the young man's needs, even down to a tire swing hung from the ceiling of the mobile home. During the visit and afterwards, all she

kept thinking about was, this, this mom can figure this out, we can, and it changed every student and every teacher in that building because (pause and a show of emotion) what mom said to me was "all I want is for when I go to the store for some child to recognize my son and say hello, or if he goes to a baseball game for them to know each other."

(Staci, personal communication, July 8, 2015)

Staci currently serves school systems in quadrant C of the Midwestern state.

Cara

Cara has more than 20 years in education; a second career for her. She began her career as a teacher and quickly moved into a leadership role at a drop-out recovery program where she was the principal, technology coordinator, and special education director at the same time. She then moved to an educational service center as a consultant and has spent the last decade serving school districts at the State Educational Support Group as a supervisor in quadrant D. Her undergraduate work was a comprehensive program that included a lot of behavior management kinds of classes as well as curriculum training that included literacy specialist coursework. Her Master's work involved technology and education. She stated her program of study "looked at ways to be more inclusive for students with disabilities, because technology tends to be a 'leveler' for all kids" (Cara, personal communication, July 21, 2015). Her second Master's included extensive coursework in special education and educational leadership. The program

focused on how to have “an integrative approach to special education and more inclusive practices, they were pretty innovative at the time, and that was 2005, so every step of my profession has had some way to include kids no matter what the disability” (Cara, personal communication, July 21, 2015). One of her most rewarding experiences with students with disabilities was a project that involved a local university, a general educator, a ‘STEM-like’ program, and Cara as the special educator. The program was inclusive in nature and allowed students to interact with science and math in a hands-on environment. Cara still sees students from that program and they still talk about it. Her challenging experiences involved parents who wanted her to ‘fix’ their kids. Cara found it difficult when the parents had unreasonable expectations for their children and found it even more challenging when the parents had myopic views for their children when the children had far more capabilities.

Marie

Marie is ending her educational career after 40 years. Her career began in a Head Start classroom as she waited to enter graduate school. Her graduate work as a school psychologist provided her the opportunity to spend time in a center for students with autism. She worked in a few school districts as a school psychologist before moving to an educational service center that provided technical assistance and professional development to school districts in the area of special education. At the center, she served on the diagnostic team, coordinator of school psychologists, and the early childhood team and eventually become the director. For the last decade she has served as the supervisor of the State Education Support Group in quadrant D of the Midwestern state. Her college coursework included many courses concerning students with disabilities. As she reflected on her career, the most rewarding experiences were those she had working with parents and teachers of students with disabilities. Her most challenging aspect of

her career was the early realization that as a school psychologist she would spend her career labeling students with a disability category; she “found the labeling process of persons with disabilities disheartening” (Marie, personal communication, June 19, 2015). Recalling her experiences with students with disabilities, she stated one of her struggles is “acknowledging that there are children that are extraordinarily difficult to teach because we don’t know how to do it yet” (Marie, personal communication, June 19, 2015).

Focus Group

The focus group participants have a combined experience of 90 years in the educational profession. The range includes one participant who has as few as 3 years to a participant with more than 35 years of experience. Three of the five participants hold doctoral degrees, one holds a Master’s degree, and one participant is a doctoral candidate. Each of the participants serves in a state-level leadership position in the Midwestern Department of Education. The group stated that some of the most rewarding experiences have been when local school districts design programs for all kids, regardless of ability or disability, so students can be successful. One of the greatest challenges expressed by the group is the need to dismantle the silos that exist in educational arenas, and the need for the conversation to be around implementation, not just training, not just someone writing an IEP goal, but more about helping people and providing reassurance that the help and support is not going away. The conversation needs to be about how school districts can provide the programs and services needed so children can have the best results.

Documents

Two sets of documents were analyzed for this study. The first set of documents was the LRE data from across this Midwestern state. The data is district self-reported and provided data

for the three different LRE categories required for federal reporting. Many data points were missing or simply not reported by districts. The focus group participants, in particular, stressed the LRE data was unreliable concerning actual LRE placement of students. The second set of documents were gathered from different forums and institutes held across the state over the last several year concerning inclusive education for students with low incidence disabilities and other marginalized student groups.

These document sets, combined with the data from interviews and a focus group discussion provided for the triangulation of data and served to verify what participants offered. Both of these sets of documents confirmed the data gathered through the focus group discussion and the individual interviews. As such, the document sets supported what individuals during the interviews and focus group discussion shared concerning the lack of consistent, accurate LRE data, and validated the need for on-going discussions about how districts can move forward with inclusive education practices for all students.

Results

The analysis of individual interviews, a focus group discussion, and document review provided the results for this study. The use of a data analysis coding template (see Appendices H, K, and M) allowed for data layout and several cycles of coding. The cycles of coding resulted in the identification of themes. A discussion of the themes, followed by an examination of answers to each of the research questions linked with the theoretical frameworks and in support of the literature associated with this study, guides the reader through this section. It would be useful to the reader to know that all participant quotes are included verbatim, including any grammatical or spelling errors, to more accurately depict participants' voices.

Themes

Three themes were identified after several cycles of coding that included descriptive, in vivo, and theming the data as first cycle coding methods, and focused coding as a second cycle coding method. These themes are: a) change the conversation, b) change the culture, and c) change the system.

Change the conversation. The actual word or idea of conversation surfaced at least nine times across the interviews and focus group discussion. One particularly compelling idea concerning changing the conversation, spoken from the vantage point of a student, and stated as the place school staff needs to arrive concerning inclusive education, follows

It doesn't matter if I'm identified as a student with a low incidence disability or not, or if I have multiple disabilities, that I'm a unique individual with a unique set of needs and skills and strengths, and you, the teacher, whoever you are and whatever training preparation you have, need to figure out what you need to know about me in order to meet my needs. (Focus Group, personal communication, August 11, 2015)

In recent years, state-level leaders attended several forums that focused on students with low incidence disabilities. I had the privilege of attending these forums as a district leader. Discussions during those forums involved fostering high levels of agreement among state-level leaders concerning presumed competence, the promotion of membership and active participation in the general education classroom, and the expectation for learning to take place for students with low incidence disabilities. The vision cast during these forums was this: "When students with disabilities are provided with appropriate instruction and supports, they can learn grade-level academic skills and communicate in ways that are commensurate with their same-age peers

without disabilities” (Focus on Low Incidence Forum One, personal communication, January 23, 2013).

Creating such a vision would necessitate state-level leaders and school teams that include district, building, and teacher leaders having conversations around the following ideas

- strong administrative leadership
- multi-tiered systems of support that include research-based strategies for academic, behavior, and social-emotional needs of students
- development of an inclusive educational framework where there are no silos of services, rather a fitting and supporting approach for students instead of a ‘fixing kids’ approach,
- family and community engagement, and
- inclusive policies of practice and structures (Focus on Low Incidence Forum One , personal communication, May 30, 2013).

Sometimes schools have the wrong conversations; too often the conversations continue around the traditional ways of practice. The traditional conversation continues to reflect a disability or deficit-based perspective rather than a presumed competence or strength-based perspective. “We can’t have people having a bad experience with inclusion and thinking what they experienced was inclusive education” (Focus on Low Incidence Forum One, personal communication, May 30, 2013). Other school districts and leaders in those school zones are having a different conversation. The conversation in those districts centers on

who are our kids, how are we meeting the educational needs, just through our terminology, through our policies, how are we discriminating against our marginalized students, and so to me that is a game-changer conversation, but it is a hard conversation.

It's an exciting conversation, but it's a really hard conversation. (Focus Group, personal communication, August 11, 2015)

The practice of inclusive education for students with low incidence disabilities will necessitate a change in conversation around Least Restrictive Environment. The conversation will need to change from the “traditional conversation, you are relegated to a place, but there are people who don't even know there is a supposed to be a continuum conversation” (Focus Group, personal communication, August 11, 2015). The traditional conversation placed students in environments solely based upon their disability category. The new conversation focuses on a continuum of services where student needs and strengths are considered. The new conversation focuses on “presumed competence and the value-added aspect of inclusive education” (Focus on Low Incidence Forum One, personal communication, January 23, 2013).

Change the culture. The theme of changing the culture involves changing a belief system and changing the climate. When the climate is right in a district, “teachers and students are excited to be present, there is collaboration among staff at all levels, and there is strong leadership support for teachers and staff” (Focus on Low Incidence Forum One, personal communication, May 30, 2015). In a culture that focuses on inclusive practices, “attitudes of ownership, advocacy, etiquette, and respect exist” (Strengthening District-wide Inclusive Practice for Every Child, personal communication, June 12, 2014). When districts have inclusive practices, all students attend their neighborhood schools and classrooms they would attend if not labeled (Leading for Social Justice Institute: Ensuring ALL Students are Supported, personal communication, June 29, 30, and July 1, 2015).

Changing the culture was viewed as a barrier to inclusive practices. Traditional practices, systems, and beliefs keep school personnel functioning in ways that prevent students from

moving from exclusive settings into inclusive settings. Marie, when asked about other information that might be helpful in understanding inclusive practices in her geographical area, stated,

I think as much as anything, attitudes about the possibilities for kids, and this is as much about disadvantaged kids as it is about severely disabled kids. I think we struggle in rural areas with beliefs about what poor kids can do, what disabled kids can do, and I don't mean this is like what Mary Jones believes this, I mean it's like a general fog that encircles us. (Marie, personal communication, June 19, 2015)

Cindi, when asked about roadblocks to inclusive education practices in districts, stated, "their [teachers] own perceptions, their own core beliefs, their own mindset" (Cindi, personal communication, July 6, 2015).

Some districts have been working to change the culture. The Focus Group discussed a district, and particularly a building, that had developed the knowledge and skills of their general and special education teachers in order to implement a good working inclusive relationship. Inclusive educational practices were "the culture of the building that we didn't have a self-contained classroom" (Focus Group, personal communication, August 11, 2015). For the culture to change toward an inclusive education mindset, "first you've got to have the beliefs and then you've got to have the knowledge and skill to back that up in order to be successful in this implementation (Focus Group, personal communication, August 11, 2015).

Change the system. Changing a system of practice means there has been the recognition that what is currently in practice in schools for students with low incidence disabilities is not working effectively, there is a willingness to think about new ways of practice, and there is a focused plan to implement the change and monitor the success of that plan.

State-level leaders recognize the need to change the practices that currently exclude or marginalize students. This recognition, based upon LRE data is only a small part of the reason to change the system. Marie related that some of the districts she works with look at their LRE data and recognize there are students who are marginalized, but do not know how to change that situation for those students (Marie, personal communication, June 19, 2015). Additionally, the system that is used to gather LRE data needs to be revised. The focus group, particularly, recognized the current reporting system for LRE data is not accurate. This was noted earlier when it was reported that more than 500 districts did report LRE data for category B and more than 700 districts did not report data for category C. This non-reporting is problematic in that a non-report is equivalent to meeting the criteria. Furthermore, simply because the LRE data indicates a district is meeting LRE federal guidelines, does not mean students are getting quality education. “The percentage of time in the environment [general education classroom] doesn’t necessarily mean that the child receives special education services there. So you still don’t know when you look at the data which is unfortunate” (Focus Group Discussion, personal communication, August 11, 2015).

More importantly, state-level leaders recognized the need to change the system based upon student achievement scores and the 25% plus gap that exists between students without disabilities and students with disabilities in reading and math, and especially students with low incidence disabilities. These state-level leaders also recognized the relationship between the amounts of time students receive instruction in the general education setting and the level of achievement for those students.

Kathy recognized that tradition and past practice keep schools operating under a system that does not serve students well. She stated,

we've been operating in a segregated model for so long, we were brought up that way, we were trained that way, that seems like, like that should work, but we have 40 years of data to suggest that it [segregated models] doesn't, and so, people are so used to operating in that mindset, it's such a huge shift to think differently. (Kathy, personal communication, July 8, 2015)

Gina concurred,

the issue is that they [districts] don't want to include students with disabilities, or low incidence disabilities, or students with behavioral issues into the gen. ed. classroom, I, I believe they don't have the systems and supports necessary for it to occur. (Gina, personal communication, July 14, 2015)

Cindi discussed some of the work of state-level leaders involves helping districts realize "they have issues with their systems and structures (Cindi, personal communication, July 6, 2015).

The work of state-level leaders among school districts has involved the provision of professional development using the platforms of forums and institutes. At these forums and institutes, discussions take place about systems change. One recent institute facilitated discussion to "help all of us [state-level and district-level leaders] be reflective about why we need to think about doing things differently" and caused leaders to consider how to "design systems so that all kids can be successful" (Staci, personal communication, July 8, 2015). Kathy suggested before districts simply put all students into general education classrooms, that districts "think intentionally about what does it [the system] need to look like and how can we [district leaders with support from state-level leaders] build a system that will support those kids" (Kathy, personal communication, July 8, 2015).

Some of the work of the professional development institutes involved outlining a plan to change the system. The work of Frattura and Capper (2006) served as the foundation of system change, whereby state-level leaders and district personnel discussed four ways to implement change:

- core principles – focusing on equity and the development of non-negotiables
- establishing equitable structures – planning the location of arrangement of students and staff and the development of infrastructures
- implementing change – leveraging policy / funding and determining entry points
- establishing access to high quality teaching and learning – developing teacher and leader capacity.

Some early conversations about systems change, facilitated during professional development forums concerning inclusive educational practices for students with low incidence disabilities, proposed the facilitation of systems change through:

- strong, engaged administrative leadership
- multi-tiered systems of support
- inclusive educational frameworks
- family and community supports
- inclusive policy regarding structure and practice (Focus on Low Incidence Forum One , personal communication, January 23, 2013).

Similarities exist among these two proposals for systems change. State-level leaders continue to work with districts to facilitate these changes. The work is not nearly complete.

Research Questions

Data analysis of individual interviews, a focus group discussion and document review provided answers to the research questions that framed this study. A theoretical framework linked to each research question provides a rich discussion for each research question.

Research question one – What are state-level leaders’ perceptions of district readiness concerning inclusive education for students with low incidence disabilities?

Participants presented several perceptions during interviews and the focus group discussion. The perceptions ranged from urban districts are already practicing inclusive education to districts are not ready to practice inclusive education and do not understand the reasons behind the concept.

A State Education Support Group supervisor had a noteworthy perception of district readiness:

We have had a couple of districts over the years who have said, “OK, we are full inclusion,” close the [self-contained] classroom, booted the kids into general ed., then when it didn’t work, were surprised, you know, good intentions, but it didn’t work, so then they became, um, dissatisfied so they put kids back in self-contained. (Marie, personal communication, June 19, 2015)

Another interesting perception concerning district readiness for inclusive practices came from three different perspectives. One State Education Support Group supervisor, who provides support to a large urban among other district typologies, had the perception that “the majority of districts in our [geographical area] are supporting, um, have kids, are including kids in the gen. ed. classroom” (Frank, personal communication, July 14, 2015). Three times during the interview, Frank emphasized that the large majority of districts are including students in the general education classroom. The second perspective came from a focus group participant who

had the perception that “if you go to one of our larger urbans, they would say they have inclusion, but it is a prescribed, if you have this kind of a disability you must be in this kind of a setting” (Focus Group Discussion, personal communication, August 11, 2015). The final perception came from a State Education Support Group supervisor, who works in a different quadrant than Frank, and who stated emphatically that, “our urban districts are not [including students with low incidence disabilities], um, I think they are attempting to, their lack of implementation is not due to lack of interest, it’s just that it’s massive, a district that has a lot of kids” (Cara, personal communication, July 21, 2015).

Many of the participants believed that at some level at least some of the districts in their geographical area were ready to practice inclusive education, but more for students with high incidence disabilities rather than low incidence disabilities. Staci felt that among districts in her geographical area, there was

a spectrum of ready, um, and we have been working really hard on all districts by providing the forum, to raise the level of awareness that the way we’ve done business doesn’t need to be the way we continue to do business. (Staci, personal communication, July 8, 2015)

Regarding students with low incidence disabilities, Staci commented that districts still have work to complete and “they are going to work hard at bringing everybody home” (Staci, personal communication, July 8, 2015). Kathy stated, “there is an increased openness to being more inclusive” but she added, “I can’t say unilaterally, ‘yes, our region is ready for inclusive education, or no, they’re not,’ I think it’s, it’s growing and it’s coming over time” (Kathy, personal communication, July 8, 2015). Another perception presented was, “it depends on the

district and even further it depends on the building and the teachers” (Sharon, personal communication, July 8, 2015).

Change the conversation. The conversation that needs to change is not only the one concerning inclusive practices for students with low incidence disabilities, but also concerning students with high incidence disabilities. Sharon stated, “very few districts include students with low incidence, low incidence I will say overall are not included, we’re still struggling to get our mindset around high incidence” (Sharon, personal communication, July 8, 2015). The idea of inclusion for students with low incidence disabilities is a difficult conversation when districts continue to struggle to include students with high incidence disabilities. An emphatic, “absolutely not” was the response when Gina was asked if districts in her geographical area included students with low incidence disabilities (Gina, personal communication, July 14, 2015). “My reality is that they [districts] aren’t even mainstreaming with learning disabilities and high functioning students, students who are high functioning, they’re [districts] not even mainstreaming them well” (Gina, personal communication, July 14, 2015). Cindi echoed Gina’s emphatic “not” when questioned about her perception of district readiness to include students with low incidence disabilities (Cindi, personal communication, July 6, 2015). She further stated,

we still have rooms where students are housed for their educational careers; I have a [geographical area] that area that doesn’t see how high incidence or even marginalized students fit in a classroom and the accommodations and supports we give them if they’re on an IEP or not, and the scaffolding, how will they [districts] ever believe they can bring in a low incidence student. (Cindi, personal communication, July 6, 2015)

Changing the conversation means helping districts understand how to implement changes so they begin to practice inclusive education for all students. Currently some districts have the perspective and “see it [inclusive education] as something they should do, but I don’t think they see it as something they currently can do” (Gina, personal communication, July 14, 2015).

Research question two – From a state-level leaders’ perspective, what is needed in preservice programs that would support general and special education teacher readiness concerning inclusive education for students with low incidence disabilities? The resounding message from all participants was that preservice teachers are not prepared. “I don’t think most of the kids [pre-service teachers] are prepared to come into the class of diverse, I don’t think they’re prepared for how diverse that classroom is, they’re just not ready for the challenges that life teaching brings” (Marie, personal communication, June 19, 2015). “When we have conversations, though, with our districts, they tell us that their new teachers still aren’t prepared to support students in the general education classroom” (Staci, personal communication, July 8, 2015). A focus group participant stated, “That’s another thing I remember about being a young teacher is not feeling confident about saying you can do this for your child” (Focus Group, personal communication, August 11, 2015). Cara stated, “it’s really depending on the university” [the preservice teacher attends] (Cara, personal communication, July 21, 2015). “Teachers they [universities] are producing are not ready to deal with the level of kids that are being placed in general education classrooms” (Cara, personal communication, July 21, 2015). The participants stressed the need for a change in the system.

Change the system. A number of the participants could delineate state universities that were working to change the system. Some of this work was the result of pilot studies funded by the Midwestern Department of Education and other grants. The conversation about system

change involved state educational offices, the Board of Regents, and universities working together to investigate a dual licensure structure for preservice teachers. Another conversation involved the deliberate, careful placement of preservice teachers for their student teaching experience. A third conversation involved providing preservice intervention specialists the opportunity to understand the purpose of and have practice in the development of Individual Education Programs (IEPs) for students. Furthermore, preservice teachers need sufficient coursework to attain a working knowledge of the best practices of UDL, differentiated instruction, scaffolding, and co-teaching strategies.

First, the need to reframe the licensure structure for preservice teachers to a dual-certification system was clear. “I think we’ve probably caused some mishap because we do a K-12 license for special education and kids in kindergarten are not the same as grade 12” (Focus Group, personal communication, August 11, 2015). The Midwestern Department of Education is developing a proposal with regards to an “integrated license for teachers of content grade level, teachers paired with an intervention specialist, compared to intervention specialist skills, an integrated license to teach mild to moderate as well as whatever their content area of expertise” (Focus Group, personal communication, August 11, 2015). A focus group member commented, “I do wish the culture did permeate at that level [state level] and that there wasn’t special education over here and general education over here, there really is room for things to come together” (Focus Group, personal communication, August 11, 2015).

Some state universities are creating dual licensure programs that certify preservice teachers as general and special education together. Kathy spoke of one such program that was grant-funded and endeavored to “build a pilot middle childhood dual licensure program, so it was middle childhood and special education” that did not add another year of education, but,

completed in four years (Kathy, personal communication, July 8, 2015). The program prioritized strategies like “multi-systems of support, understanding that differentiation shouldn’t happen after the fact, that it’s universal design and planned from the get go” (Kathy, personal communication, July 8, 2015). Cindi emphasized the value of a dual licensure structure where preservice teachers come out of programs and “understand accommodations, scaffolding, strategist supports, as well as content [academic content knowledge], so you’re not gen. ed. or special ed. anymore, you’re a teacher of all students, so that type of licensure would support any type of student coming into your classroom” (Cindi, personal communication, July 6, 2015). Some teachers have worked a different pathway to dual certification. They completed an undergraduate degree in general education, then completed a Master’s degree in special education. Staci discussed when she served as a district superintendent, “I worked hard to hire people who were dual certified so they could be prepared to do a task, know the inclusive practices because they have content and pedagogy” (Staci, personal communication, July 8, 2015).

Second, several interviewees and the focus group expressed the need for change to a deliberate, careful placement of preservice teachers for their student teaching experience. Part of the problem is “our own fault in K-12, so if they (preservice) come to us for student teaching experience and we don’t give them an inclusive teaching experience, it’s on us” (Staci, personal communication, July 8, 2015).

The clinical experience is essential, you can’t do this without quality, and quality settings, you know, we in public ed. would say, “you’re not sending us well qualified teachers,” higher ed. perspective is, “they get squashed when they get to the field, we are presenting, but they get squashed when they get there, either nobody wants to do it that

way, or they're not allowed to do it that way," and probably the truth is somewhere in between, so higher ed. is the critical part in all of this. (Focus Group, personal communication, August 11, 2015)

A working knowledge of theory about inclusive practices is not enough for preservice teachers. The key is for preservice teachers to have the opportunity to experience an environment where inclusive education practices take place. "The placement for student teaching and observation is critical for success and readiness for a preservice teacher" (Cara, personal communication, July 21, 2015). Some universities "are doing a much better job of getting their students real experiences before they are put out into the world and put in these jobs that can have an impact on children's trajectories for their lives" (Focus Group, personal communication, August 11, 2015).

Last, the preservice preparation needs to change so preservice intervention specialists have a greater understanding of best practices and have a working understanding of IEPs. Gina stated, we had "several districts come to us and say, 'you know our resident educators [teachers in their first year of teaching] haven't even written an IEP, and they're intervention specialists, they're not gen. ed.,'" (Gina, personal communication, July 14, 2015). Gina's team sat down with the Dean of Education at a local institution of higher education and expressed the concern about lack of IEP knowledge and the university started making changes internally so their graduates were better prepared. Frank stated, concerning preservice teachers, "intervention specialists are prepared to give specially designed instruction, but are still requiring a lot of inservice training on how to write IEPs" (Frank, personal communication, July 14, 2015).

Research question three – From a state-level leaders' perspective, how do current practices in districts promote inclusive education for students with low incidence

disabilities? The message from the focus group discussion was clear concerning successful inclusive practices. When there is the belief among staff that inclusive education is the right practice for students, and there is the knowledge and skill among the staff to effectively implement that knowledge and skill, inclusive education happens for all students, including those with low incidence disabilities. The focus group discussion participants had this to say:

In terms of systemic districts where you have district levels, that special education administrators who have this concept [the beliefs, knowledge and skills for inclusive education] are always seeking to offer support to their special education teachers to help them understand, and also to work with their general education classroom teachers to help them understand what a good working inclusion relationship is like. (Focus Group Discussion, personal communication, August 11, 2015)

A key, therefore, to successful district implementation is leadership support.

Throughout the interviews with individuals and during the focus group discussion, more issues that prevent inclusive practices than promote them seemed to be the topic of discussion. Several of those practices were previously discussed, but there remains one practice in this Midwestern state that continues to limit inclusive practices.

The state has a system of regional service centers. School districts join in partnership with other surrounding districts to contract services for special education; particularly related services like occupational, physical, and speech therapy. Besides related services, many regional service centers also operate service units for students with emotional disturbances, multiple disabilities, and sensory disabilities like hearing and visual impairments. While the idea of districts joining together to provide one or more units of service within one county seems fiscally

wise, the practice actually prevents inclusive practices for students with low incidence disabilities.

Frank would agree that regional service centers prevent inclusive practices, however; he also believes the students may receive a better education in those regional service center units; therefore, the trade-off of more exclusive settings is justified. Frank stated,

As far as the education service center program goes, when you start talking about low incidence kids and services and some of the unique needs many of those kids have, it makes more economic sense to combine those, for the educational service center to combine those services, from the sense of providing FAPE, I think many districts can do that, but when they sit down to look at where a child can receive the best services, I think that combining services with the educational service center program, I think that maybe you might find a higher quality education than what they might get out in the districts, so does it keep the kids outta the home schools, sometimes, does it provide a better education than the home schools, sometimes probably so. (Frank, personal communication, July 14, 2015)

Among the participants who see the educational service center units as a model that prevents inclusion, there were several ideas of thought about why such units exist. Staci commented her districts have “very collaborative relationships with the [regional service centers], who definitely runs separate programs, but typically, only because the districts have asked them to” (Staci, personal communication, July 8, 2015).

One participant, whose office serves all district typologies, stated,

We still have county programs, each one of our counties, each one of the educational service centers has a program, each one does, so it is easy to say this student doesn't fit

[in the home district], let's send him to the county program, and when the rurals [rural districts] don't have curriculum director or behavioral specialist or a special ed. director, it's easy to move kids out. (Cara, personal communication, July 21, 2015)

The implication being larger districts have greater central office staff capacity who may advocate differently than building level staff concerning students with greater needs.

Two opposite perspectives were offered about educational service center units. A negative side of the unit structure offered the perspective that,

districts [the home] forget that those students exist, they don't see them as being students belong, "their students," students who they should show concern for, or have, or who, or should look at data concerning, it's a way that someone else is taking care of that child for us so we don't need to worry about it. (Gina, personal communication, July 14, 2015)

A positive perspective of the unit structure was the perspective that at least the units for students with multiple disabilities are housed in age appropriate school buildings, as opposed to units for students with emotional disturbances which are often located in separate facilities. "The improvements, if there is any, is those classrooms are co-located in general ed. buildings" (Marie, personal communication, June 19, 2015).

A final perspective gave some hope for different conversations to take place concerning inclusive educational practices. "For now our thinking is in silos and how do we keep our programs, how do we keep our program alive, not how do we reconfigure" (Cindi, personal communication, July 6, 2015). The conversation that should be taking place is how do we get those students back into their home schools, but with the idea that,

we're not taking programs away, that we're not taking jobs, we'll need those teachers as coaching supports in districts, we'll need their expertise, it's not about getting rid of things, it's about reconfiguring how to utilize our capacity, our resources, our human capacity. (Cindi, personal communication, July 6, 2015)

This conversation and the work involved has the goal of providing better services for students in their neighborhood schools alongside their typically developing peers.

Change the conversation. One point of discussion was the aspect of the requirement to provide a continuum of services for students with disabilities, not just an inclusive setting. Therefore, beginning with the some of the youngest learners in the state, the perception of state-level leaders was that preschool offered a complete continuum of services for students. Students ranging in age from 3 to 5 years old generally have access across the state to classrooms that have a ratio of 2:1. Concerning preschool,

we definitely had the full continuum of least restrictive environment offered which I think is something that is positive, that there are places that are offering a full continuum of services and even the fact that one teacher could be providing nearly a full continuum of services was pretty exciting to me. (Focus Group, personal communication, August 11, 2015)

When addressing school age services, the leaders were not nearly as positive about a continuum of services for students. "In some places, it's [inclusive settings] their first choice, they walk through the continuum and say, 'Ok, I think we can do it' and that's just part of the process, and in other places they look at the disability" to determine placement (Focus Group, personal communication, August 11, 2015).

The conversation that aligns with inclusive education practices is one that first considers the general education classroom membership and full participation in that classroom for students with low incidence disabilities as the place for services and supports, high quality instruction with high expectations, and attitudes of presumed competence that all students can achieve at high levels.

Change the culture. Data in most districts in this state, and even nationally, support that schools often have a ‘culture of marginalization of students by race, disability, language, social class and ability’ (Low Incidence Institute, personal communication, September 22, 2014). In many schools a silo structure exists whereby students find themselves in one of many different groups that might include the general education setting, but could also include the silos of disability, at-risk, poverty, gifted, reading intervention, English Language Learner, drug and alcohol counseling, and a host of others.

The culture that aligns with inclusive education practices is the culture that embraces all students regardless of the labels that typically marginalize students. It is a culture that adopts positive behavior supports for students. It is a culture that sets high expectations for all students and provides the supports and services necessary for all students to achieve at high levels.

Research question four – What are state-level leaders’ perceptions of the roadblocks in local districts that prevent districts from preparing for and practicing inclusive education for students with low incidence disabilities? This question was perhaps one of the easiest for participants to answer; it took little thought for participants to state one or more of the roadblocks districts face concerning inclusive education. The idea of adult attitudes was the roadblock mentioned most by participants with 13 references to the idea of adult attitudes. Five

other roadblocks received five or less mentions by participants. Those five roadblocks included the system itself, administrative support, students with great challenges, fiscal, and parents.

The lack of administrative support, viewed as a barrier by three participants, also included the idea that administrators do not see inclusive education as something that needs to happen for all students. The focus group discussed the situation where the superintendent or special education supervisor does not believe in inclusion.

I see that way too often in the state, when you have people that I would think, because I don't have a special education background, but I would think they would be the champions for students with disabilities, but yet they don't believe in the process, they don't believe in that instructional modality and my eyes just get so wide and large and I don't understand how you can treat children that way, just because you don't think it should be done in the school district, to me the child is the loser in the situation. (Focus Group, personal communication, August 11, 2013)

Gina stated, "I can't think off the top of my head of a superintendent or a principal who had this [inclusive education] as a call to action" (Gina, personal communication, July 14, 2013).

Four participants stated that fiscal issues were a barrier to inclusive education practices. Staci stated that how districts think "about how we use IDEA B money" is a roadblock when the traditional ways of thinking about general education and special education as being separate take place (Staci, personal communication, July 8, 2015). Frank stressed repeatedly about fiscal issues being a barrier.

Parents as a roadblock to districts practicing inclusive education had differing perceptions. Marie did not see parents as a barrier to inclusive education. Conversely, Cara viewed parents as a barrier; particularly parents of typical and gifted students. She stated,

some of the roadblocks are parents of typical students or gifted students who think you're going to put these kids in these classes and then you're going to "dummy-down" what you do for my gifted child, so it creates a problem for some districts, it's all perception.

(Cara, personal communication, July 21, 2015)

Parents can be the roadblock in a different way. "I have run into parents who feel that their child couldn't be in a setting with typically developing peers because they worry about their safety"

(Focus Group, personal communication, August 11, 2015).

Students with great challenges posed as a roadblock for three participants. Gina related a story about a student who had a traumatic brain injury.

He was unable to write legibly, so he used a mini-laptop or a netbook, whatever, but he also was very unstable and he would drop it all the time and it would break all the time and then he couldn't communicate, you know, and who was going to fix it and there were all these issues about that stinking laptop and it became a barrier as opposed to a point of access. (Gina, personal communication, July 14, 2015)

Two participants discussed student behavior as a barrier to inclusive education. Marie related how student behavior interferes with learning; "the disruptive kids bother every, I mean kids with outbursts, kids with, um, it's hard for the gen. ed. teacher to feel success and they worry [the outbursts affect achievement of other students]" (Marie, personal communication, June 19, 2015). Another participant viewed behavior as a greater barrier than academics; technology provides an avenue to deliver academics and schools are learning to use technology more. "But the behavior, there's another whole mind set of, 'I won't tolerate that behavior in this room, that student's dragging everybody else down, parents are calling me,' to me that's one of the biggest obstacles to inclusion" (Kathy, personal communication, July 8, 2015).

Additionally, the misconceptions concerning the best practice of co-teaching presents as a roadblock. Participants discussed the idea of co-teaching 15 times throughout the data, and centered on districts' perceived need for training on the practice. Some districts have the idea that co-teaching is the key to inclusive education practices. One participant related the thinking of some districts in her area.

[The districts will say] "Let's do full inclusion," pull all of those kids in the resource room back into the regular classroom and then they push them in and say, "If we find a co-teacher, we'll be good to go" without professional development, without doing an analysis of what other supports that student really need, without thinking about how can we assign students in ways that sort of honors the natural proportions of students with disabilities in the district, instead of saying, "well this is going to be the co-teaching classroom, so we'll make it a 50-50 [50% students with disabilities and 50% students without disabilities in the same classroom]," well you've already stacked the deck. We'll go in and do PD on co-teaching, differentiated instruction, but that doesn't tackle that mindset, it doesn't tackle that disposition, it doesn't tackle the infrastructure pieces.

(Kathy, personal communication, July 8, 2015)

Simply using the co-teaching model does not mean that a district is practicing inclusive education for all students. Co-teaching is

much more than just putting two teachers in the classroom, how do we group kids, what do we do, what content needs to be adjusted, who does what part so that it looks seamless, and otherwise it doesn't work, it works for a little while and then we see it fall apart. (Cara, personal communication, July 21, 2015)

There needs to be on-going coaching and follow-up with the co-teaching teams. The focus group discussed that teachers in general, but especially intervention specialists

don't know how to instruct as a co-teacher. They are so trained or I hate to say it, 'brainwashed' to that fact that only they [intervention specialists] can teach in that resource room setting what that child needs and in the manner that that child needs it, that if they released that child, that education isn't going to happen. (Focus Group Discussion, personal communication, August 11, 2015)

The mindset, the disposition, the infrastructure that addresses inclusive education practices centers on changing how teachers work together. Districts recognize that co-teaching is "the idea of the marriage between a specific intervention specialist and a specific general education teacher" (Cindi, personal communication, July 6, 2015). State-level leaders seek to utilize districts' perceived need for co-teaching professional development, and

use the lens of inclusive education which is more of a co-plan, co-service model, so that the intervention specialist becomes more the learning strategist and helps with the planning for the general education teachers more than their work to build the capacity of the general education teachers on learning strategies, but then also have the general education teachers build capacity of the intervention specialists within content areas.

(Cindi, personal communication, July 6, 2015).

Changing the culture concerning co-teaching will necessitate not just a change in how teachers work together, but also a mindset change concerning the needs of all students.

The greatest barrier identified by participants was adult attitudes. Thirteen times participants posited that adult attitudes, in some way or another, created roadblocks for districts concerning inclusive education practices. One participant pointed out the issue of attitude

presents when “the gen. ed. teachers who still says, ‘those students’ or ‘the intervention specialists’ students’ and not ‘my students’” (Gina, personal communication, July 14, 2015).

Participants spoke about perceptions, core beliefs, and the mindset about students with disabilities as being barriers for adults.

Adult attitudes about whether students with disabilities can achieve is a gen. ed. classroom concern on the part of, uh, um, great general ed. teachers that there is something else that needs to be done for kids and if they are in their gen. ed., um, they are not getting something. (Marie, personal communication, June 19, 2015)

Some of this attitude may be due to the skill gap in educators. There’s a reason why often those teachers don’t want those kids in their classroom, because they don’t feel that they have the skills and the knowledge necessary, um, the intervention specialists often don’t feel like they have content knowledge, so there’s growth needed on both sides” (Kathy, personal communication, July 8, 2015).

“I think underneath that [the roadblock of traditional belief and expectations], but no less important, is the skill gap in educators of being able to address those needs” (Kathy, personal communication, July 8, 2015).

The concept of presumed competence is an adult attitude of concern. Marie expressed that, “adult attitudes about whether disabilities can achieve in a gen. ed. classroom concerns, concern on the part of, uh, um, great general ed. teachers” (Marie, personal communication, June 19, 2015). Rather than assuming students can achieve at high levels in the classroom, teachers question whether high achievement is possible for these students. Kathy, after gaining a better understanding of a young man’s ability, stated, “it causes me to wonder, what else does he know that we don’t know about” (Kathy, personal communication, July 8, 2015).

Change the system. When considering the integration of students with low incidence disabilities into the school, “we need to take a unique look at each kid and make sure that the folks who are going to be educating this kid are familiar with some of the characteristics and disabilities of some of these kids they are going to be facing” (Frank, personal communication, July 14, 2015). One participant related the perspective practiced by one administrator with whom she worked. She stated the administrator had the mantra that “all of these kids, belong to all of us” and the administrator believed in the mantra to the point, “she wanted it to be in the fabric of that building” (Kathy, personal communication, July 8, 2015).

Staci discussed her work with seven districts around those ideas. Changing the system will involve getting districts to ask hard questions, to be reflective about practices that need to change, and conducting a deep data analysis. In those districts, the work involves building multi-tiered systems of support that address having a strong core curriculum and positive behavior interventions. She stated in those districts, “we’re going to talk about how do we design systems so that all kids can be successful, they’re going to hear that in our preschool work, in every professional development work, they’re going to hear that message” (Staci, personal communication, July 8, 2015).

Changing the system will mean thinking differently about the way schools practice. “It’s such a huge shift to think differently and it feels very scary, but before we say, ‘let’s put all kids in the mainstream,’ how can we think intentionally about what does it need to look like and how can we build a system that will support those kids, and that’s a huge undertaking” (Kathy, personal communication, July 8, 2015).

Research question five – What additional resources do state-level leaders believe might be necessary for districts in order for inclusive educational practices to take place for

students with low incidence disabilities? During interviews and the focus group discussion, state-level leaders did not actually identify any additional, tangible resources; however, they did identify three additional needs necessary for districts in order for inclusive educational practices to take place for students with low incidence disabilities. Those needs included a consistent, state-wide definition for inclusive education, strong leadership, and a vision concerning inclusive practices for students with low incidence disabilities.

When questioning participants concerning the definition of inclusive education, often the response was if I wanted their personal definition or a district's definition. Each time, I encouraged participants to offer their own definition since this study examined perceptions of state-level leaders. Based upon the responses, there was little or no consistency across the state regarding the definition of inclusive education for students with low incidence disabilities. During the document review process of data collection, the discovery of a document containing more than 15 different definitions concerning inclusive education indicated just how little consistency exists across the state (Low Incidence Forum, personal communication, January 23, 2013). Additionally, the collection of more than 15 different definitions resulted from a low incidence forum of state- and district-level leaders.

Some participants noted the need for strong leadership and leadership teams across districts for inclusive education to take place for students with low incidence disabilities. The idea that geographical location within the state had little to do with whether inclusion was practiced or not, rather it was more about district leadership at all levels. "It's not about geography, it's about leadership, it's about what they're saying and what they're doing by their action that supports all of their kids" (Focus Group, personal communication, August 11, 2015).

Cindi noted, “not every leader that comes into a position is a systems thinker and when we don’t have systems thinkers in leadership positions, we have silos work.” (Cindi, personal communication, July 6, 2015). With the constant change in leadership, particularly at district levels, there exists the need to “start anew in trying to get them [new leadership] into systems thinking and trying to recreate the knowledge and the background” concerning inclusive education (Cindi, personal communication, July 6, 2015).

The focus group participants stated, concerning leadership, it’s about leadership, it’s about what they’re saying and what they’re doing by action that supports all of their kids, because people have to be willing to take risks to try something new, and learning something new, it’s generational, the leadership, when did they stop learning. (Focus Group, personal communication, August 11, 2015)

The implication being that younger leadership is more open to change; more open to having conversations about inclusive practices.

I think also as we go through a leadership change with retirements in both the teacher setting and the leadership setting, we are going to see a big shift begin to happen, I think education is vital, the more we can get the right message out, and the right implementation techniques, the more we are going to help districts succeed with this. (Focus Group, personal communication, August 11, 2015)

The final need expressed by participants is for a consistent vision across the state for inclusive educational practices. The focus group participants, as state-level leaders, see themselves as conveners of stake holders.

We do at the state level a lot of convening various groups and trying to then look across the state and see what is working what is not working and what we need to do better. I

guess I would like to see more of putting out our vision. (Focus Group, personal communication, August 11, 2015)

There needs to be conversation, “so that we are actually publically saying this [inclusive education for all students] is our vision. We need to have the long term vision in order for us to be able to justify the small steps that we are making” (Focus Group, personal communication, August 11, 2015).

Some districts “already have some exciting things happening with inclusion, and how that because they have someone there who has the vision” (Focus Group, personal communication, August 11, 2015). One of the things state-levels can do “is to talk about you know what our vision is at the state level for districts. It’s nothing new, but I think casting the vision” (Focus Group, personal communication, August 11, 2015).

Change the conversation. The conversation needs to change so that districts across the state, both small and large, know that inclusive education is not just one more initiative that if districts wait long enough will go away. Districts need to understand the traditional approach to inclusion that considered one kid at a time is no longer the way of conducting business. The state-level leaders need to cast the vision, not necessarily from a top-down, heavy-handed perspective, but from the standpoint of teams working together to ensure all students, regardless of disability category, are included in meaningful ways in the general education classrooms at their neighborhood schools.

Summary

This holistic, single-case study examined the perceptions of state-level leaders concerning district readiness to practice inclusive education for students with low incidence disabilities. The study identified two sets of participants; a participant group of eight

interviewees selected from the sixteen supervisors of the State Educational Support Groups, and a focus group of five participants who serve as executive or deputy executive managers of the Offices of School Preparedness, School Improvement, and Special Needs. After data analysis, using Saldaña's (2013) coding procedures for qualitative data, three themes were identified. Those themes included change the conversation, change the culture, and change the system. Answers to the five research questions for the study, a discussion of the themes associated with the research questions, followed by the theoretical framework connected to the research questions guided the reader through a discussion of the results. This study found that districts are not prepared to practice inclusive education for students with low incidence disabilities according to state-level leaders' perspectives. Additionally, preservice teachers are not prepared to face the challenges of students in today's classrooms. Further, the greatest roadblock to the implementation of inclusive education for all students may well be adult attitudes. In summary, state-level leaders must work to facilitate a different conversation, promote a different culture, and implement systems changes concerning inclusive education practices for all students.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overview

The purpose of this holistic, single-case study was to examine the perceptions of state-level leaders concerning the readiness of districts to practice inclusive education for students with low incidence disabilities. Each of the participants holds positions of leadership in several different offices within the Department of Education throughout this Midwestern state. The use of eight individual interviews, a focus group discussion, and document review provided the data for this study. As Yin (2009) proposed, the documents reviewed for this study, indeed, served to corroborate evidence collected during the interviews and focus group discussion. These multiple sources of evidence converged in a triangulation fashion; a technical aspect of case study inquiry (Yin, 2009). Data analysis utilized several cycles of coding that led to themes; an approach outlined by Saldaña (2013).

This chapter begins with a summary of the findings, in relation to the research questions, followed by a discussion of those findings relative to the identified themes, the supporting literature and theoretical frameworks that guided this study. The chapter includes a discussion of the implications of the study, an examination of the limitations of the study and recommendations for future research. The chapter concludes with a summary.

Summary of the Findings

For each of the research questions that guided this study, a concise summary of the findings is presented. The following research questions guided this study:

1. What are state-level leaders' perceptions of district readiness concerning inclusive education for students with low incidence disabilities?

Most state-level leaders believe some districts practice inclusive education for students with disabilities, but few districts include students with low incidence disabilities. One participant perceived that the majority of districts in his geographical area practiced inclusion. Districts that practice inclusive education typically do so with students with high incidence disabilities like specific learning disabilities and mild cognitive delays. Little or no discussion took place concerning large areas of the state that widely practice inclusive education, conversely, state-level leaders mentioned particular geographical areas of the state where inclusive education is not generally practiced.

The perception of state-level leaders is that some districts tried to practice inclusive education without much direction, planning, or preparation. Inclusion in those districts usually failed. In districts where there is leadership among school administration and classroom teachers who support inclusive education, more students generally get included into the general education classroom and have meaningful participation and experience academic success in those rooms.

2. From a state-level leader's perspective, what is needed in preservice programs that would support general and special education teacher readiness concerning inclusive education for students with low incidence disabilities?

State-level leaders were clear that preservice programs did not adequately prepare general or special education teachers to practice inclusive education for students with low incidence disabilities. Preservice teachers are not prepared to face the tremendous diversity of today's classrooms.

Using the assumptions of Knowles (1970) adult learning theory, the collaborative efforts of state-level leaders to advance the work of reframing the licensure system must continue if preservice teachers enter today's classrooms ready to instruct diverse student population.

Imperative to this work is the involvement of all stakeholders to ensure quality programming and dual certification licensure structures exist for today's teacher workforce.

3. From a state-level leader's perspective, how do current practices in districts promote inclusive education for students with low incidence disabilities?

The current practice in most districts of the silo model, whereby students, with any need for additional supports and services, receive those services in places outside of the general education classroom does not promote inclusive education for all students. Moreover, as stated by many of the participants, the unit structure of educational service centers further 'silo' students away from their neighborhood school. While there may seem to be a cost effectiveness to this model, the participants believed the silo model greatly limits inclusive practices for all students with disabilities.

The idea of co-teaching surfaced throughout the interviews and focus group discussions as one current practice that could promote inclusive education. The perception of many of the participants was most districts still need much assistance and professional development concerning the practice.

4. What are state-level leaders' perceptions of the roadblocks in local districts that prevent districts from preparing for and practicing inclusive education for student with low incidence disabilities?

State-level leaders were quick to discuss roadblocks that prevent the practice of inclusive education for students with low incidence disabilities. Some frequently mentioned roadblocks included the lack of administrative support, parents, students who present with great challenges, fiscal issues, and the special education system itself.

The roadblock identified most often by participants was the idea of adult attitudes. More than ten times, participants discussed this roadblock. Participants discussed that the adults have attitudes that special education teachers know how to better deal with special education students, attitudes that special education students cannot achieve at the expected levels in the general education classroom, and attitudes that special education students are not the job of general education teachers. Participants also discussed that special educators have attitudes that they should be the ones educating the special education students. The skill gap in general education teachers regarding special education students and the types of strategies and practices that would support students in the classroom is a concern.

5. What additional resources do state-level leaders believe might be necessary for districts in order for inclusive educational practices to take place for students with low incidence disabilities?

Perhaps the greatest need for inclusive education to take place for all students, particularly those with low incidence disabilities, is a clear vision for the practice across the state. State-level leaders believed the vision must first come from them. The leaders stated the vision of inclusive education is nothing new, but one that needs communicated more clearly, more intently, and more consistently. The traditional conversation of addressing the needs of special education students, ‘one kid at a time’ must change.

Another need of districts is a clear definition of the term inclusive education. During the eight interviews and one focus group discussion, some similarities existed when participants discussed their definition of inclusive education, but there was not a clear definition across the state. Aiming for the target of inclusive education for all students without knowing the location of the target, means few districts will actually hit the target. In the end, district could make great

efforts to practice inclusive education, but without a consistent definition, no measure exists by which to judge quality implementation of the practice.

Discussion

This section seeks to address the connection between current empirical research, the theoretical framework and the findings of this study. The identified themes of change the conversation, change the culture, and change the system serve as a guide through this section, particularly concerning current practices, preservice program preparation, the roadblocks districts face regarding inclusive education practices, and the needs districts have for inclusive education to become a reality.

Change the Conversation

Federal legislation requires that all students receive a free, appropriate, public education regardless of disability (Yell, et al., 1998). Public law 94-142 provided students with disabilities the opportunity to be educated in the least restrictive environment, among other ideas. Sometimes the least restrictive environment was the general education classroom, but more often this was not the case for students with low incidence disabilities. Ryndak, et al. (2007) stated schools struggle to practice inclusive education for students with low incidence disabilities.

When students attend their neighborhood school along with their peers who are typical, the opportunity to receive instruction in the general education classroom and have meaningful participation in that classroom is greater. Vygotsky stressed “that only a truly differentiated learning environment can fully develop the higher psychological functions and overall personality of a child with a disability” (Gindis, 1999, p. 338). Students placed in unit structures often have little to no interaction academically or socially with students who are typically developing. Modeling of age-appropriate behaviors, age-appropriate language and

communication, and age-appropriate social and emotional skills is not available. As noted earlier, the vision cast during professional learning opportunities for state-level leaders was that, “When students with disabilities are provided with appropriate instruction and supports, they can learn grade-level academic skills and communicate in ways that are commensurate with their same-age peers without disabilities” (Focus on Low Incidence Forum One, personal communication, January 23, 2013).

The current study found that some districts in this Midwestern state practice inclusive education for their students with high incidence disabilities, and other districts are working to practice inclusive education for students with low incidence disabilities, however; while there exists an increased openness to being more inclusive in general, unilaterally districts are not including students with low incidence disabilities. State-level leaders should capitalize on the increased openness to the idea of inclusive education for all students and support districts through a vision for inclusive education, the guidance and professional development needs to implement inclusive education for all students, and the mandate to become compliant with federal LRE guidelines and reporting.

The change in conversation centers on school teams making educational placement decisions about students based upon presumed competence, strengths, and needs, not on placing a student in a more restrictive learning environment solely based upon a disability label. The disability label was never intended to be used as a placement decision for where students would get the services they need. The participants in this study acknowledged the disability label was intended for funding purposes only, since there was a federal and state government awareness that students with more involved physical, cognitive, behavioral, and social-emotional needs often required more intense services; therefore, school districts would need more funding for

those students. Districts need help with changing the conversation about these types of decisions.

The need to change the conversation concerning inclusive education for students with low incidence disabilities, calls for districts to look at quality preschool programs that consistently include all students regardless of disability. Preschool children receive most or all services in the preschool classroom alongside their typically developing peers. This model could serve school age inclusive decisions and practices.

The conversation concerning presumed competence will be a new conversation for many districts since it means districts discuss students from a ‘can do’ perspective, or a strengths-based perspective rather than a deficit-based perspective. Presumed competence is the mindset that presumes students with disabilities are competent and can learn the general education curriculum when given the proper aids and supports to do so (Jorgensen, McSheehan, & Sonnenmeier, 2010). The current conversation in most districts continues to view students with deficits that need shored before they can participate in the general education classroom. Recall the perspective of the student discussed earlier when the student stated it should not matter that she has a certain disability label, what should matter is the strengths and needs she presents with in class and the job of the teacher is to figure out the services, supports, and aids needed for the student to be successful in the general education classroom.

Link to theoretical framework. Professional learning communities provide opportunities for teams to learn new ways of practice. The adult learning theory (Knowles, 1990) relates to this study since adults “are motivated to devote energy to learn something to the extent that they perceive that it will help them perform tasks or deal with problems that they confront in their life situations” (p. 62). The work of the professional development forums and

institutes have afforded district teams the opportunity to learn together, to learn new ways of practice, and to implement changes in their systems and structures so all students have access to core instruction in the general education classroom when adequate supports are provided. School teams work together to change the conversation concerning all students and to implement the systems changes needed for student success.

Professional learning communities, like the low incidence forums and institutes discussed above, that utilize Knowles (1990) learning theory, identified as part of the theoretical framework for this study, could start the conversation that brings about the necessary changes in attitudes, policies, and practices for inclusive education throughout the district. This will take the devotion of time and energy to deal with the problem of the need for inclusive education practices.

Change the Culture

A change in culture that accepts all students into the general education classroom regardless of disability needs to become the culture of practice if schools are to practice inclusive education for all students. Inclusive practices for all students, particularly those with low incidence disabilities, become a reality when both faculty and administration promote a strong culture for and shared commitment to inclusive education (Hoppey & McLeskey, 2010; Horrocks et al., 2008; Waldron et al., 2011). The need to change the culture calls for setting high expectations for all students, the implementation of positive behavior supports, and the elimination of the silo structure as the dominate structure throughout the state.

One of the obstacles that prevent schools from practicing inclusive education includes lack of teacher and administrative readiness. The current culture in most schools does not promote inclusive education; a direct result of the people who work in the building and their lack

of training to work with students with disabilities. Gable, et al. (2012) found that too often neither the general nor special educator was adequately prepared to serve students with low incidence disabilities. Equally, Ball and Green (2014) discovered a correlation exists between the amount of education and experience a school leader possesses and the attitudes of leaders toward inclusive educational practices. Additionally, Horrocks, et al. (2008) and McGhie-Richmond, et al. (2013) found that often the greater the number of years of service held by a school leader, the less likely positive attitudes toward inclusive educational practices exist. The current study found a skill gap exists among general and special educators. Participants stated there are students that schools simply do not know how to teach yet. For this reason, schools want to send these students somewhere else for an education. During the interviews and focus group, I discovered that many of the state-level leaders had minimal coursework regarding students with disabilities, often only one course each at the undergraduate and graduate levels. Participants who pursued degrees in special education stated the coursework, though more than one or two courses, did not prepare them to work with students with disabilities in the general education classroom.

Further, and perhaps more importantly, leaders are still not prepared to practice inclusive education. Fullan's (2001) work detailed the importance of leadership support in times of change. Participants in this study noted that leaders provide support for inclusive education by their words and their deeds. The acknowledgment of leadership age and connection to the support for inclusive education practices by participants was evident in the following: "I think also as we go through a leadership change with retirements...we are going to see a big shift begin to happen" (Focus Group, personal communication, August 11, 2015). In the current

study, this perception of state-level leaders concerning leadership age and the acceptance of the practice of inclusive education finds support in the literature as noted above.

For inclusive education to become a reality for all students, most districts, first need to change the conversation so that all stakeholders in the district begin evaluating current practices, policies, and mindsets within the district. Second, districts need to develop a plan concerning how to implement changes that would facilitate inclusive practices for all students in the district. State-level leaders have the perception that for inclusive practices to become a reality in the district, it will take central office personnel with an instructional leadership mindset to meet the academic, social, and behavioral needs for all students in the district. Participants stated that for the most part, central office leadership still operates under a system of tradition and past practice, particularly concerning students with disabilities. A change in culture at the top leadership levels must take place for building and classroom level leaders to accept and practice inclusive education thinking for all students.

Link to theoretical framework. Recall that Sailor (2008) posited that the implementation of a true systems change will need to happen for all students to have access to the general curriculum; it is going to take more than just tinkering along the edges to fix the issue. The implementation science framework (Fixsen, Blasé, Horner, et al. (2013) is one vehicle that could help state-level leaders facilitate such change. The framework suggests the key points of strong leadership, professional development and technical assistance to districts that supports the change, and capacity building toward full implementation. The low incidence forums and institutes taking place in the state are intended to help districts understand how to facilitate practices of inclusive education. State-level leaders spend time discussing non-negotiables that focus on equity for all students and infrastructures that establish equitable

structures for all students. In addition, discussions about policies concerning structures and funding changes take place.

Changing the culture leads to changing the system that involves changing adult attitudes. This work involves getting districts to ask tough questions like where should our students be educated since they are our students. The work requires districts to reflect on current practices and the results those practices currently produce and if those are the results the district wants for all students. The work entails districts working as teams to design policies and practices so that all students regardless of disability, race, gender, or socioeconomic differences.

Some districts across the state have begun the work in earnest through attendance at different professional development institutes. Systems change frameworks discussed at the institutes help districts work through the questions, policies, and practices that need addressed for inclusive education practices to become a reality. The work of Frattura and Capper (2006) and Fixsen, Blasé, Horner, et al. (2013) help guide the work.

Change the System

The need for highly qualified teachers is imperative if the students in today's classroom are to receive the level of education needed to be career and college ready. The perception of both general and special education teachers is the feeling of not being well prepared to teach (Valeo, 2008). Smith and Tyler (2011) stressed that today's teachers must be better prepared with skills and knowledge than previous generations of educators if "supportive and responsive environments are ever to be achieved" (p. 326). Gehrke and Cocchiarella (2013) found that both general and special education preservice teachers possessed a working knowledge of inclusive education practices, but could not identify inclusive education practices in their field experiences. Ryndak, et al. (2012) proposed that most preservice teachers have non-inclusive

student teaching placements that provide little to no interaction with students with disabilities. However, when preservice teachers possess both knowledge and skill concerning the education of students with disabilities, and have student teacher placements that practice inclusive education, this integrated experience results in positive attitudes about students with disabilities (Burton & Pace, 2009).

The current study revealed that preservice teachers are not prepared to face the diversity of today's classrooms, nor are they prepared to support students in inclusive, general education settings. Moreover, participants in this study stressed the value of a dual licensure structure whereby preservice teachers exit college with an understanding of skills like scaffolding, differentiation of instruction, and co-teaching. This dual licensure structure would prepare preservice teachers with a solid foundation in both academic content knowledge and teaching strategies to meet the needs of all students. These skills provide the structure needed for students with and without disabilities in the general education classroom. The dual licensure would prepare teachers to teach both general education curriculum content and provide the skills needed to meet IEP goals of students with disabilities. Some universities within this Midwestern state have model dual licensure programs that are being used to further develop the concept of dual licensure. State-level leaders are working with all university and state-level agency stakeholders to get the dual licensure structure approved. Once approved, more universities could begin offering this dual licensure structure so teachers are better prepared to meet the needs of today's students.

Furthermore, this study found that student teacher placement in settings that practice inclusive education is not only purposeful, but essential for preservice teachers. A cohort of universities is experimenting with a year-long structure for student teacher placements. This

structure allows preservice educators to work within a school year from the in-service days prior to student arrival to the last work day of the school year and all of the activities in between. It is this type of structure that places preservice teachers into classrooms that practice inclusive education exposing preservice teachers to the diverse needs of all students. The expectation in this structure is for preservice teachers to provide instruction to all students. The current literature supports this type of structure that exposes preservice teachers to students with various needs. The need to change the system involves reframing the licensure structure to a dual certification system and ensuring preservice teachers receive intentional, conscientious placements for student teaching and practicum experiences. Some state universities already have model, dual certification programs. Other institutions across the state should embrace the model. Across the state, the need exists for model programs that incorporate inclusive education practices and provide excellent student teaching experiences. Additionally, each of these model programs must ensure preservice teachers have a working knowledge of IEPs.

Another systems change component revealed in this study is the need for a consistent definition of inclusive education. Ryndak, et al. (2007) offered a lengthy, but complete definition of inclusive education that was born out of a 7-year longitudinal study. During the current study, no less than nine different definitions of inclusive education surfaced during the interviews and discussion groups. Similarities in the definitions existed, but when participants were asked to define inclusive education, often they asked me if I wanted their definition of the term or the definition of the districts with whom they work. The participants implied that differences exist and that there is a lack of congruence among the definitions throughout the state. Likewise, during the document review, another 15 definitions were identified, all similar in nature, but at the same time different from each other. These multiple definitions of the term

inclusion was not surprising since Ryndak, et al. (1999) discovered that a clear definition of the term inclusion did not exist among nearly 50 participants in their study. A consistent definition of inclusive education is important for state-level leaders to cast a vision for inclusive education practices for all students throughout the state.

The need to change the system involves state-level leaders casting the vision of inclusive education for all students and that includes students with low incidence disabilities. However, to simply cast the vision without a process to help districts implement the vision will do little more than sound like just one more unfunded initiative. The work of the professional development institutes around inclusive education can help with the process.

Link to theoretical framework. Knowles (1970) adult learning theory has five assumptions. At least two of those assumptions connect with this theme (a) often a life experience becomes the catalyst for adults to pursue learning, and (b) life's experiences help orientate the adult learner that leads to increased learning (Knowles, 1970).

The participants discussed that preservice teachers were not fully prepared to enter classrooms and provide quality instruction for today's diverse population of students in the general education classroom. State-level leaders charged with this concern have been working collaboratively with the Collaboration for Effective Educator Development, Accountability, and Reform Center (CEEDAR). This state-wide work centers on revising teacher and leadership preparation programs to ensure preservice teachers and leaders are prepared to implement evidence based strategies to improve the educational achievement for students with disabilities. In this Midwestern state, the group is a combination of university deans and heads of teacher education, representatives from teacher unions, special education and related services faculty, school superintendents and principals who serve as a bridge between the Midwestern Office of

Special Education and institutions of higher education. When speaking of this work group, a focus group member shared,

the state had done experiments on inclusive education for several years with special education professors, and when asked what they would recommend or how they could help us (Office of Special Education) influence preparation of teachers from what they experienced, they had no recommendations, because they had no power to influence within their institutions. (Focus Group, personal communication, August 11, 2015)

The work group formed to help address the needs of preservice teachers. The work group meets four times annually to learn together, incentivize innovative practices, and to build partnerships.

The lack of preparation of today's teachers to enter classrooms filled with diverse learners becomes the catalyst for faculty of institutions of higher learning and state-level leaders to pursue new ideas and practices to better prepare preservice teachers. The experience of these faculty and leaders learning together provides brings about a system more fully equipped to train preservice personnel.

The implementation science framework (Fixsen, Blasé, Horner, et al., 2013) serves as the vehicle to facilitate the changes necessary for districts across the state to practice inclusive education for all students. The three implementation drivers of Fixsen, Blasé, Horner, et al. (2013) provide the process for districts to employ inclusive education practices for all students. The implementation drivers address the policies and practices, the leadership support, and on-going coaching and training needed for districts to successfully practice inclusive education for all students. First, the driver of leadership helps set the vision and offers direction for resource allocation necessary for implementation. Second, the driver of organizational environments provides the ability to create 'host' sites that serve as models for others to emulate. Third, the

driver of competency serves to provide a system of coaching and training that seeks to support districts during and after implementation.

In summary, this study adds to the current literature regarding the perceptions of state-level leaders concerning inclusive education for students with low incidence disabilities. Research exists concerning the perceptions of principals and teachers about inclusive education, but little research exists concerning state-level leaders; this study adds to that body of literature. Moreover, this study adds to the current literature about the lack of adequate preparation of preservice educators. The classrooms of today are unlike those a generation ago, and today's teachers must understand the challenges of today's classrooms and be well prepared to meet those challenges and the needs of the diverse student body within those rooms.

Implications

Several implications arise from this study. Discussions of empirical, theoretical, and practical implications will guide the reader through this section.

Empirical

Shurr and Bouck (2013) noted the scarcity of research concerning the population of students with low incidence disabilities. Moreover, Ball and Green (2014), Mcleskey (2010), and Waldron, et al. (2011) provided perceptions of teachers and principals concerning inclusive practices. A gap in the literature was the perception of state-level leaders concerning inclusive practices. The current study adds to the literature in that it provides insight into the perceptions of state-level leaders concerning district readiness to practice inclusive education for students with low incidence disabilities.

Theoretical

The implementation science framework, proposed by Fixsen, et al. (2009) and Fixsen, Blasé, Horner, et al. (2013) provides the implementation drivers of leadership, organizational environment, and competency. The framework is used to facilitate change in systems to more preferable ways of practice in order to realize the desired results. In the current study three themes were identified: (a) change the conversation, (b) change the culture, and (c) change the system. The implementation driver of leadership addresses the theme of change the conversation in regards to vision, among other ideas. State-level leaders expressed the need to cast a vision, as part of the conversation, for inclusive education for all students, particularly students with low incidence disabilities. The second driver promotes the idea of ‘host’ environments where the proposed change is either already functioning or could easily be implemented. The need to change the culture aligns with this second driver in that districts that already practice inclusive education serve as models to other districts. The third driver encourages the development of the mechanism that helps develop, improve, and sustain the proposed change. This third driver supports the theme of change the system in that there is reflective discussion that current practices do not work effectively, there is a willingness to think about new ways of practice, and there is the development of a focused plan to implement the change and monitor its success.

Practical

The implication for state-level leaders is the need to construct a consistent definition of inclusive education that clearly outlines the parameters of the concept. The definition should describe the intended population involved concerning inclusive education. A clear description of the settings that would align with the definition is fitting. The roles of the stakeholders need delineated. The definition needs to align with federal and state guidelines. Next, state-level

leaders need to frame the vision for the statewide practice of inclusive education for all students. The realization of the vision will take time to execute consistently across this Midwestern state, but the time is now to begin implementation. A defined time frame for districts to report LRE data with fidelity and to comply with the federal and state LRE requirements should accompany the vision for inclusive education and become the compliance component of the vision.

The implication for the State Education Support Group supervisors is the need to promote the low incidence forums and equity institutes to include more districts. Currently only a few districts participate. For inclusive education to become a reality, all districts need access to professional development opportunities in order to understand the complexity of the issue. During these professional development sessions, there must be discussions about the changes needed in districts that will promote inclusive education with respect to culture, policies and procedures, and teaching and learning. If state-level leaders will cast the vision for inclusive education as described above, the option that currently exists for districts to opt-out of professional development opportunities like the equity institutes would not be available.

Next, district-level leaders across the state should assess the quality of education afforded students in education service center unit-type settings and determine if the district could (a) provide higher quality instruction than what is being provided in the unit settings, (b) if the district could bring those students back to the home district, and (c) develop systems at the district level whereby those students could be served at least some of the day in the general education classroom among grade-level appropriate, typically developing peers. These steps would help eliminate the ‘silo’ approach to placement and services currently practiced in many districts. Then, district-level leadership should become knowledgeable of disability

characteristics, inclusive education practices, and ways to promote and implement a culture of inclusive education for all students.

Furthermore, once the culture of inclusive education has been established throughout the district, the work continues for building leaders and teacher teams who are functioning as professional learning communities. Teams will need to read and discuss the latest research concerning strength-based approaches to placement and base placement decisions on that research. Additionally, teams will need to examine research-based best practices that support inclusive education, and implement those practices. The next step is to make decisions on placement issues based upon student strengths and needs, and with the attitude of presumed competence about what students are able to do academically and socially. The building level teams should set high expectations of performance for all students and ensure adequate supports and resources are in place to make student achievement for all students a reality across the district. These teams could also examine how inclusive education operates in preschool settings where it is common practice for students with disabilities to receive all services and instruction within the preschool classroom alongside their typically developing peers.

Equally important, the implications for institutions of higher education are multi-faceted. First, if inclusive education is to become a reality, education faculty must practice inclusive education within the college classrooms of preservice teachers to serve as a model to these new teachers. Second, education faculty must insist upon student teacher placements that support and practice inclusive education for all students. This will not be an easy task at first, but as more districts begin to practice inclusive education, placement opportunities will become more readily available. . Third, preservice teachers not only need the theoretical framework around inclusive

education, but must also be taught the research-based, best practice, instructional strategies used with all students to ensure students demonstrate academic success.

The final implication involves leaders who hold positions at the Midwestern State Department of Education, at institutions of higher learning, and at the district level across the state. The work that has started among these leaders to reframe the teacher education programs to offer dual certification should continue. The current dual certification pilot programs that exist in a couple of the universities across the state should serve as models for other institutions of higher education. Research studies that investigate the success of these programs could assist program monitoring so preservice teachers are well equipped to enter today's classrooms.

Limitations

The limitations of the study are the “parameters” within which the research was conducted (Joyner, et al., 2013, p. 208). Several limitations exist in this study. First, the case itself limits this study. The selection of this Midwestern state, the case, limits the findings of this study to this particular case. Generalizations to other areas of the country may be limited. Next, participant selection limits this study in that the study only identified state-level leaders as potential participants for the study. This was fitting since the purpose of the study examined state-level leaders' perceptions of district readiness to practice inclusive education, however; the selection of a different set of state-level leaders could have produced different results. Third, the sample size limits this study. In all, 13 participants; eight individual interviewees and a five-member focus group discussion, provided the data for this study. This limits the findings of this study to these 13 participants; different participants might reveal different perceptions of the phenomenon. Last, the researcher's bias toward the topic of the study may limit this study. One of the unique characteristics of qualitative research is the researcher serves as the human

instrument (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Every effort was made to set aside my own beliefs, biases, and preconceived ideas about the phenomenon of the study. Moustakas (1994) called this bracketing. I endeavored, as Creswell (2013) posited, to listen closely to what the participants had to say and how their experiences shaped their reality about the phenomenon.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study adds to the literature concerning state-level leaders' perceptions of inclusive education and concerning inclusive education for students with low incidence disabilities. Further research should address other areas of the country in order to gather state-level leaders' perceptions from multiple geographical areas. Second, since the study was limited to 13 state-level leader participants, future research should seek to capture the perceptions of other state-level leaders within this Midwestern state. Additionally, future research could focus on the perceptions of district superintendents concerning district readiness to practice inclusive education for students with low incidence disabilities.

Furthermore, considering this study identified that districts struggle to provide inclusive education for high incidence disabilities, future research could investigate districts that have successfully implemented strategies for the inclusion of high incidence disabilities and how those strategies might generalize for students with low incidence disabilities. The study of districts that have successfully implemented inclusive practices for students with low incidence disabilities, as indicated by student achievement, need studied to determine what successful strategies were used in classrooms, the topics of professional development used to prepare teachers, and other aspects the districts identify that led to successful implementation of inclusive education practices.

Future research should not only investigate how universities are implementing a dual licensure structure for preservice teachers, but also examine, through a longitudinal study, how the dual license program influenced teachers' perceptions of students with disabilities and inclusive education practices. Further, the longitudinal study could explore whether students who are educated by a dual-licensed teacher perform better academically than students educated by two, single-licensed teachers, an intervention specialist and a general education teacher.

Finally, future research could study the idea of leadership age and length of time served in a leadership role, and how those factors influence attitudes and perceptions of inclusive education. This area of research could either support or refute the perceptions of the participants in the current study concerning the shift that could possibly take place with the retirement of many leaders.

Summary

This study examined the perceptions of state-level leaders concerning district readiness to practice inclusive education for students with low incidence disabilities. This study found that state-level leaders perceive that districts are not ready to practice inclusive education for students with low incidence disabilities. One finding of the study that caused me great concern was the statement reiterated by several participants that districts struggle to include students with high incidence disabilities. If the perception of state-level leaders is accurate concerning the struggle districts have providing inclusive education for students with high incidence disabilities, the need exists for district leadership to understand the mandate for inclusive education, to read current literature and seek professional development opportunities about how to implement inclusive practices, and to implement such practices for not just students with high incidence disabilities,

but for all students with disabilities. The mandate for, and practice of inclusion is not a new concept. The need to change the culture is never more evident.

Second, the understanding I gained of the deep work that is taking place to educate district, building and teacher leadership teams concerning inclusive education practices for all marginalized students was fascinating to learn. The low incidence forums and institutes that continue to educate leaders at all levels could be the catalyst that makes inclusive education practices for students with low incidence disabilities a reality. The need to change the conversation in order to see inclusive education practices a reality for all students, seems to be happening, at least in small ways.

Finally, it was not surprising to find that preservice educators are not prepared to practice inclusive education as supported in the current literature. The focus group discussion concerning the work groups with educational leaders and universities from around the state provides hope that the system that currently does not prepare preservice educators will change in positive ways. The need to change the system that prepares educators for today's classrooms appears to be moving toward reality.

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APPENDICIES

Appendix A: Permission to Conduct Study

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

June 2, 2015

Charles W. Kemp

IRB Approval 2224.060215: Inclusive Education for K-12 Students with Low Incidence Disabilities: A Case Study of State-Level Leaders' Perceptions

Dear Charles,

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year from the date provided above with your protocol number. If data collection proceeds past one year, or if you make changes in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. The forms for these cases were attached to your approval email.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,



Fernando Garzon, Psy.D.
Professor, IRB Chair
Counseling

(434) 592-4054

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Appendix B: Recruitment Letter Email to Interviewee Participant

To: (Name of State Education Support Group Supervisor)

My name is Charles W. Kemp; a doctoral student with Liberty University. I am conducting research as part of my dissertation program. I would like to invite you to participate in this study that seeks to examine the perceptions of state leaders concerning the readiness of school districts to practice inclusive education for students with low incidence disabilities. You were selected as a possible participant because of your position as a state-level leader in education.

If you would like to participate in this study, I would ask you to do the following:

- (a) complete the demographic information below
- (b) email the demographic information and your statement of interest to participate in the study, and
- (c) respond within 7 days of receiving this email.

I will make final selection of participants and will notify you via email if you are selected.

If you are selected, you will be asked to participate in an individual interview with me, the researcher. The interview will be conducted using a set of standardized open-ended questions that will be asked of each participant. The interview will be digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim by me. You will have the opportunity to review the transcription to ensure accuracy. The interview is designed to take approximately 30 minutes. Your confidentiality will be guarded through the use of pseudonyms.

Demographic Information

Name:

Highest degree held:

Years in current position:

Typology of districts served: urban, suburban, rural

Years of classroom teacher experience:

Years of building level experience:

Years of district level experience:

Years removed from building or district level:

I appreciate your consideration of my study and look forward to hearing from you. Feel free to contact me if you have questions about the study.

Sincerely

Charles W. Kemp

Ckemp12@liberty.edu

Appendix C: Informed Consent Form – Interviewees

The Liberty University Institutional
Review Board has approved
this document for use from
June 2, 2015 to June 1, 2016
Protocol # 2224.060215

Consent Form - Interviewees

Inclusive Education for Preschool-12th Grade Students with Low Incidence Disabilities: A Case Study of State Leaders' Perceptions

Charles W. Kemp
Liberty University
School of Education

You are invited to participate in a research study that seeks to examine the perceptions of state leaders concerning the readiness of school districts to practice inclusive education for students with low incidence disabilities. You were selected as a possible participant because of your position as a supervisor of a State Education Support Group. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Charles W. Kemp, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is to examine the perceptions of state-level leaders concerning the readiness of schools to practice inclusive education for preschool-12 students with low incidence disabilities.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:

Complete a demographic survey. Participate in an individual interview with me, the researcher. The interview will take place at a mutually agreed upon time and place. The interview will be conducted using a set of standardized open-ended questions that will be asked of each interview participant. The interview will be digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim by me. You will have the opportunity to review the transcription to ensure accuracy. The interview is designed to take approximately 30 minutes. If necessary, I may need to contact you for clarification of information once transcription of the interview takes place.

Risks and Benefits of being in the Study:

The study has some risks, but these risks are no more than you would encounter in everyday life.

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Protocol # 2224.060215

There are no direct benefits to the interviewee participants in this study. The information gained from this study will possibly further promote the practice of inclusive education throughout the state for students with low incidence disabilities. As successful practices are learned and shared with others, students have the potential of benefit.

Compensation:

You will not be compensated in any way for participation in this study.

Confidentiality:

The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report that I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a participant. Research records will be stored securely in a locked cabinet and only the researcher will have access. Your confidentiality will be guarded through the use of pseudonyms, both for your name and your position and for the location of the study.

The digital recordings, notes taken during the interview, the transcription of the interview, and notes made on the transcription will all be kept in a locked cabinet. I will be the only one who has access to the cabinet. The data will be kept for a period of three years following the completion of the study. At that time, all data, notes, and recordings will be shredded.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships. If you decide to withdraw from the study, simply email me at ckemp12@liberty.edu. Should you decide to withdraw from the study, no part of any collected data from you will be used in the study; such data will be destroyed immediately upon your withdrawal.

Contacts and Questions:

The researcher conducting this study is Charles W. Kemp. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact me at ckemp12@liberty.edu. You may also contact my advisor, Gail Collins, Ed.D., at gcollins2@liberty.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd, Suite 1837, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

The Liberty University Institutional
Review Board has approved
this document for use from
June 2, 2015 to June 1, 2016
Protocol # 2224.060215

Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information to keep for your records. Statement of Consent:

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

☐ The researcher has my permission to digitally-record me as part of my participation in this study.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Signature of Investigator: _____ Date: _____

Appendix D: Recruitment Letter Email to Focus Group Participant

To: (Name of Executive Manager or Deputy Executive Manager)

My name is Charles W. Kemp; a doctoral student with Liberty University. I am conducting research as part of my dissertation program. I would like to invite you to participate in this study that seeks to examine the perceptions of state leaders concerning the readiness of school districts to practice inclusive education for students with low incidence disabilities. You were selected as a possible participant because of your position as a state-level leader in education.

If you would like to participate in this study, I would ask you to do the following:

- a) complete the demographic information below
- b) email the demographic information and your statement of interest to participate in the study, and
- c) respond within 7 days of receiving this email.

I will make final selection of participants and will notify you via email if you are selected.

If you are selected, you will be asked to participate in a focus group that will consist of other directors and deputy directors, with me as the researcher/facilitator. The focus group will take place at a location agree upon by the participants and scheduled at a time convenient to the participants. The focus group will be conducted using a set of guiding questions. The focus group will be digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim by me. You will have the opportunity to review the transcription to ensure accuracy. The focus group is designed to take approximately 60 minutes. Your confidentiality will be guarded through the use of pseudonyms.

Demographic Information

Name:

Highest degree held:

Years in current position:

Years of classroom teacher experience:

Years of building level experience:

Years of district level experience:

Years removed from building or district level:

I appreciate your consideration of my study and look forward to hearing from you. Feel free to contact me if you have questions about the study.

Sincerely

Charles W. Kemp

Ckemp12@liberty.edu

Appendix E: Informed Consent Form - Focus Group

The Liberty University Institutional

Review Board has approved this
document for use from
June 2, 2015 to June 1, 2016
Protocol # 2224.060215

Consent Form - Focus Group

Inclusive Education for Preschool-12th Grade Students with Low Incidence Disabilities: A Case Study of State-Level Leaders' Perceptions

Charles W. Kemp
Liberty University
School of Education

You are invited to participate in a research study that seeks to examine the perceptions of state leaders concerning the readiness of school districts to practice inclusive education for students with low incidence disabilities. You were selected as a possible participant because of your position as a state-level leader in education. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Charles W. Kemp, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is to examine the perceptions of state-level leaders concerning the readiness of schools to practice inclusive education for preschool-12 students with low incidence disabilities.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:

Complete the demographic survey. Participate in a focus group with other Directors and Assistant Directors of the Offices of Exceptional Children, Early Learning and School Readiness, Innovation and Improvement. The focus group will take place at a mutually agreed upon location and time. The focus group will be conducted using a set of standardized open-ended questions. I will be present as a facilitator and note taker. The focus group will be digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim by me. A copy of the transcript will be shared with each participant. The focus group is designed to take approximately 60 minutes.

Risks and Benefits of being in the Study:

The study has some risks, but these risks are no more than you would encounter in everyday life.

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Protocol # 2224.060215

The benefits to the focus group participants includes being able to use the information gained through the collaborative discussion in the focus group to further promote the practice of inclusive education throughout the state for students with low incidence disabilities. As successful practices are learned and shared with others, students have the potential of benefit.

Compensation:

You will not be compensated in any way for participation in this study.

Confidentiality:

The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report that I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a participant. Research records will be stored securely in a locked cabinet in the researcher's home, and only the researcher will have access to the records. Your confidentiality will be guarded through the use of pseudonyms, both for your name and your position, as well as the location of the study.

The notes taken during the focus group will be kept in a locked cabinet in the researcher's home. The digital recording will be saved to a flash drive and will be kept in a locked cabinet in the researcher's home. I will be the only one who has access to the cabinet. The data will be kept for a period of three years following the completion of the study. At that time, all data, notes, and recordings will be shredded or erased.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships. If you decide to withdraw from the study, simply email me at ckemp12@liberty.edu. Should you decide to withdraw from the study, no part of any collected data from you will be used in the study; such data will be destroyed immediately upon your withdrawal.

Contacts and Questions:

The researcher conducting this study is Charles W. Kemp. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact me at ckemp12@liberty.edu. You may also contact my advisor, Gail Collins, Ed. D., at glcollins2@liberty.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd, Suite 1837, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

The Liberty University Institutional
Review Board has approved this
document for use from
June 2, 2015 to June 1, 2016
Protocol # 2224.060215

Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information to keep for your records. Statement of Consent:

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

☐ The researcher has my permission to digitally-record me as part of my participation in this study.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Signature of Investigator: _____ Date: _____

Appendix F: Individual Interview Protocol

Time of interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer:

Interviewee (pseudonym):

Position of interviewee:

Purpose of interview: This interview is being conducted to examine the perceptions of state-level leaders regarding the readiness of preschool-12 schools to practice inclusive education for students with low incidence disabilities. This interview will be digitally-recorded and transcribed by the interviewer. The interviewee will receive a copy of the transcription and asked to verify the accuracy of the transcription. If changes need made to the transcription, the interviewee is asked to contact the interviewer within one week of receipt of transcription. You may contact me at ckemp12@liberty.edu.

Interview Questions

Standardized Open-ended Interview Questions

Background Information and Inclusive Education Experience

1. Can you share with me the number of years you have spent in the educational profession and the positions you have held?
2. How many courses did you complete in college, at any level, that dealt specifically with students with disabilities? Can you describe the general content of those courses?
3. Will you describe your experiences, both rewarding ones and challenging ones, with students with disabilities?

4. How do you define inclusive education?
5. Will you describe your experiences with inclusive education, if any?
6. What does the term low incidence disabilities mean to you?

Perceptions of Current Practice and Gap between Philosophy and Practice

7. Do you believe districts in your geographic area are ready to practice inclusive education for all students? What evidence do you have to support your thoughts?
8. To what extent do districts in your geographic area include students with disabilities in the general education classroom? What evidence do you have of this practice?
9. Will you discuss specifically the extent to which districts in your geographic area practice inclusive education of students with low incidence disabilities?

Roadblocks to Inclusive Education and Next Steps

10. Do the districts in your geographic area face roadblocks regarding the implementation of inclusive educational practices, particularly for students with low incidence disabilities? Can you describe those roadblocks?
11. Do the districts in your geographic area have professional development needs to be more prepared to practice inclusive education? If, so, what are some of the specific needs districts have in order to be more prepared to practice inclusive education for all students? Who do you believe should be responsible to provide those needs?

Pre-service Teacher Preparation

12. How prepared are newly hired teachers to utilize inclusive education practices?
13. What ideas can you share on how districts in your area could help inform institutions of higher education about the needs pre-service teachers have regarding inclusive education and particularly the inclusion of students with low incidence disabilities?

Additional Information

14. What other information have I not asked about that might be helpful in understanding inclusive education practices in your geographical area?

Appendix G: Focus Group Guiding Questions

1. How would you define the term inclusive education? What has been your personal experience implementing inclusive education?
2. Considering the LRE data for the state and the requirements of IDEA regarding the inclusion of students with disabilities, in general, where are examples of geographical areas or districts that are meeting the requirements? Where are examples of geographical areas or districts that are meeting the requirements concerning students with low incidence disabilities? Why do you believe some parts of the states or particular districts have been able to meet the IDEA requirements and practice inclusive education, particularly for students with low incidence disabilities?
3. What are the roadblocks or implementation curbs that prevent districts from practicing inclusive education? What measures, if any, are state-level leaders taking to help districts overcome these barriers, and to assist districts in the implementation of inclusive education?
4. How well are institutions of higher education preparing pre-service teachers to practice inclusive education? What actions, if any, are state-level leaders taking to influence higher education to better prepare pre-service teachers to practice inclusive education?
5. What are the perceived needs of districts across the state if inclusive education is to become a reality for students with low incidence disabilities? How are state level leaders working to provide the support to meet those needs?

Appendix H: Data Analysis Coding Template
(Formatted for Left-Handed Researcher)

Final Codes	Preliminary Codes	Display of Data

Note: This template is used to hand code data. The data is entered into the far right hand column. The data is divided into small, chunk-like paragraphs. As the data is analyzed, preliminary codes are identified. These preliminary codes get entered in the middle column of the template. The preliminary codes are analyzed further until final codes become evident. These final codes are recorded in the far left column of the template. It should be noted this template is formatted for a left-handed researcher.

Appendix I: First and Second Cycle Code Counts Across Data Sets

Not practicing w/HI much less LI	5
Co-teaching	15
Issues	7
Lack of skill/knowledge w/some kids	12
<u>Roadblocks</u>	
Gen Ed Teachers	5
DD/ESC	3
Past Practices/Tradition	1
\$ Usage	4
Parents	6
Adults Perceptions	5
Adults attitudes	2
Adults some-one else better trained	1
Adults mindset	3
Behavior of students	1
Culture	5
Int. spec	2
Special Ed	1
Lack of Admin support	1
Fear of change	1
Silo system	4
Changing a belief system	3

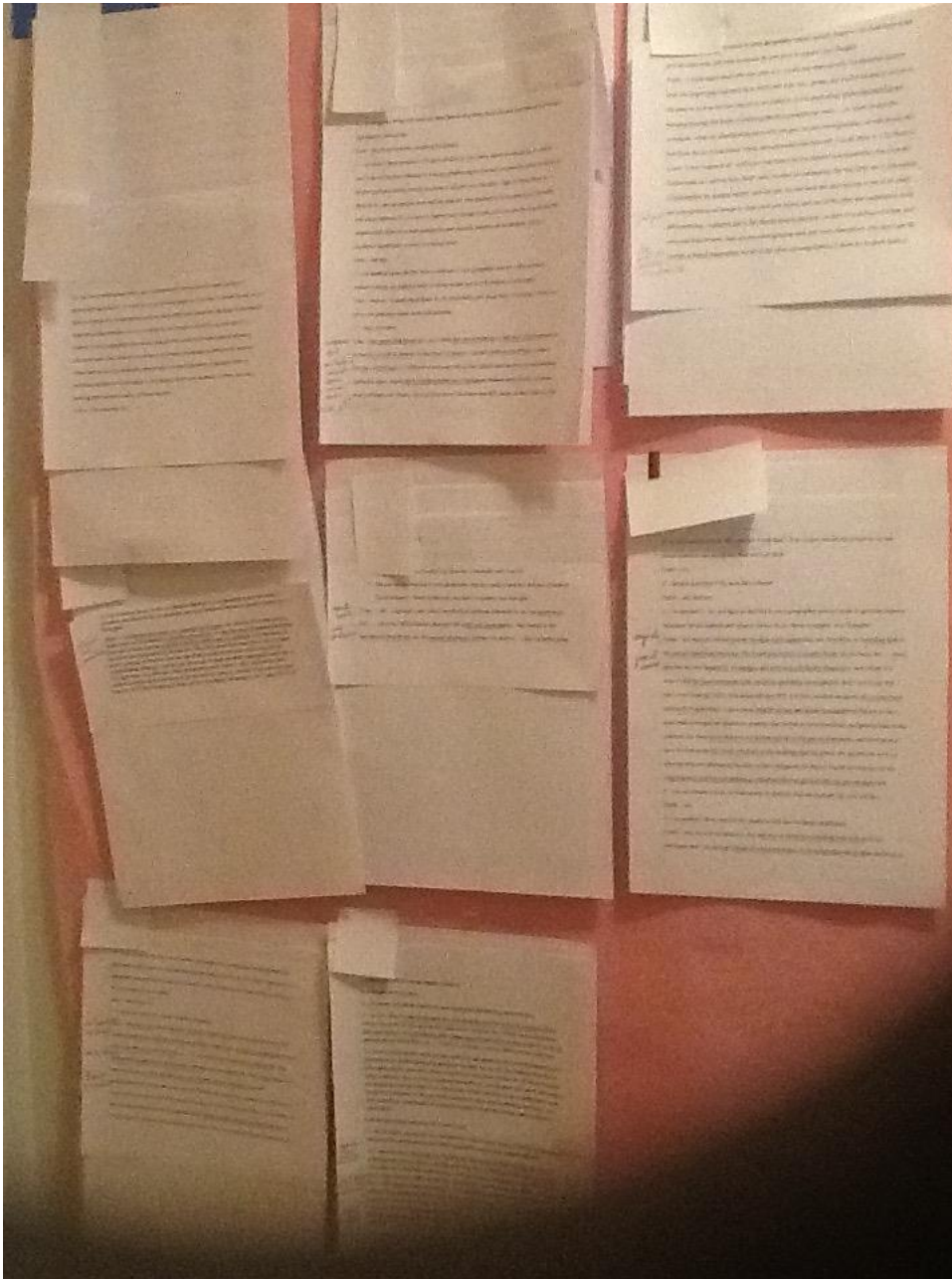
Non-communicative kids	1
Interest in UDL/Diff Inst.	1
Four Cornerstones	3
<u>Pre-service needs</u>	
Not ready	6
IEP training	2
Quality Stud teacher placement	3
Good relationship w/local colleges	1
Licensure structure	5
Staff turnover (teachers, leaders)	4
School Psych workload	2
Systems & structures	12
Presumed competence	6
Teacher Exp	1
Belief/Expectations	2
Core beliefs	1
LRE data	4
Systems Change (need for MS support)	3
Coaching	1
Disability = placement	2
40 years of data shows it's not working	1
Tech a leveler 4 kids	2
<u>Lack of common def</u>	

Inc Ed	9
LI	7
UDL	1
DI	1
RTI	1
Uphill battle	7
Pull out vs Push in	1
Unhealthy side of pull out	1
Relationship between 2	1
Equity Work	3
Fragmentation of student day	2
Fixsen implementation science	4
Quality instruction=gains in academic achievement	1
Leadership support	5
Silos	3
Vision	5
Conversation	9
Skill	1
Knowledge	1

Appendix J: Enumeration Table

Open-Codes	Enumeration of open-code appearance across data sets	Themes
Vision	5	Change the Conversation
Presumed Competence	6	
Not Practicing Inclusive Education with High Incidence Much Less Low Incidence	5	
LRE data	4	
Lack of Common Definitions	19	
Conversation	9	
Lack of Skill / Knowledge with Some Kids	12	Change the Culture
Up Hill Battle	7	
Adult Perceptions / Attitudes / Mindset	11	
Culture	5	
Leadership Support	5	
Co-teaching	15	Change the System
Licensure / dual	5	
Preservice Not Ready	6	
Preservice IEP Training Needs	2	
Quality Student Teacher Placement	3	
Systems and Structures	12	
Systems Change - Need for Multisystems Support	3	
Fiscal Issues	7	
Silo System	4	
Equity Work (Systems Change Initiative)	3	
Fixsen Implementation Science (Systems Change Initiative)	4	

Appendix K: Sample Data Layout to Identify Themes



After first and second cycle coding, I placed data from each participant according to interview questions in order to help identify themes within the codes. It was helpful to see all of the data pertaining to certain questions in one place. This allowed me to see the themes among the codes.

Appendix L: Audit Trail

June 2, 2015 received IRB approval for the study, contacted all participants via email asking them to participate in the study

June 3, 2015 heard from a couple of participants – responded that I would contact them of their selection

June 12, 2015 conducted pilot study and learned some tips for transcribing

June 12, 2015 sent second request to participants who had not already responded

June 17, 2015 received CC of email from one of the executive managers who encouraged supervisors to participate in the study

June 18, 2015 confirmed first interview for 6/19

June 19, 2015 conducted first interview – it went well, took longer than first planned

June 20 – 22, 2015 transcribed first interview – took much longer than first planned, learned I needed to keep computer closer to participant in order to hear more fully

June 23, 2015 confirmed with several other participants concerning interviews, read through the first interview to see what stood out, made notes along the margin of the transcription, emailed transcription to participant for member check (never heard from participant)

July 6, 2015 conducted second interview

July 8, 2015 conducted third, fourth, and fifth interviews

July 9 – 13, 2015 transcribed each of the interviews conducted over the last several days, emailed transcriptions to participants for member checking

July 14, 2015 conducted sixth and seventh interview, began transcription of interviews,

July 15-16, 2015 completed transcriptions and emailed participants for member checking

July 21, 2015 conducted eighth interview

July 22 – 23, 2015 completed transcription of final interview, emailed transcription for member checking

July 24 – August 20, 2015 read through interview transcriptions making notes in the margins of initial codes, thoughts, questions, and began to see some patterns. I used the Data Analysis Coding Template for each interview to identify codes. Noted similarities among the codes, noted patterns among the codes and how the codes helped to identify the themes. I began to divide the interview transcriptions according to the interview questions. I organized the transcriptions according to the research questions and according to the identified themes. During this time period, I heard from several, but not all, of the participants regarding the member check. None of the participants had issue with the transcription (some of them corrected their own grammar, and wanted to ensure that I would not use any names or places found in the transcriptions. I emailed those who asked and confirmed that place names would be deleted or given pseudonyms.

August 21, 2015 conducted the focus group discussion

August 22 – 25, 2015 transcribed the focus group discussion and began making notes in the margins, used the data analysis template to note codes during first and second cycle coding.

August 26 – September 1, 2015 spent time organizing data, rereading transcriptions, looking at codes, becoming familiar with the data in totality, coded the documents and added those codes to the list of first and second cycle coding.

September 2 – 8, 2015 composed first draft of one research question for Dr. Collin's perusal.

Appendix M: Sample of Data Analysis Coding Template

(2)

Appendix H: Data Analysis Coding Template
(Formatted for Left-Handed Researcher)

Final Codes	Preliminary Codes	Display of Data
	<i>Good blocks</i> <i>teacher perception</i> 9 <i>parents typical</i> 9 <i>gifted</i> <i>PD must be person</i> 9 <i>intentional</i> <i>M. Shoben</i>	<p>kids and maybe visual and maybe speech, but again, it would go back to what does that district need?</p> <p>C – so I look at this, um, in relation to the other folks I have interviewed, some of them saw that responsibility as the SST, some of them saw that responsibility as the state, and saw that as a combination, some saw the district, do you see any of those, any or all as responsible?</p>
<i>Co-teaching</i>	<i>Co-teaching</i> 10 <i>Coaching</i> 10 <i>PD difficulties</i> 10	<p><i>Co-teaching</i> <i>Coaching</i></p> <p>Cara – my experience with the autism coaching team is it goes to co-teaching, to do this right, you need to have somebody in the building co-teaching and following up, I don't know that the SST would have, unless we have lots more money and lots more resources would be able to do that,</p>
<i>Co-teaching</i>	<i>Co-teaching somewhat</i> 10 <i>more than 2 bodies</i> <i>in same place</i>	<p>C – so more of a 'boots on the ground' approach</p> <p>Cara – yep, I was going to say that, somebody has to be in there providing technical assistance, could we be trained to do that, absolutely, we have plenty of people who could do that, is it in our scope of work right now, no, and I don't think co-teaching is within our scope of work per se, we could do overviews, what are the six different kinds of inclusive practices, you know, what does that look like for collaborative teaching, but my fear is, and one of the reasons we have not done co-teaching is we can't give it the attention that it needs and the service that it needs, so to bring people in and show how to do and then say now go do without doing the follow-up, consulting and support, so it is a partnership, absolutely, could we do some overview, sure, but we'll need someone to monitor and support them, someone who's done it before, if you've never been a co-teacher, you have no clue what it's like, believe me, I taught with a</p>
<i>Student teacher placement key</i>	<i>T Prep</i> <i>depends on college</i> 11 <i>depends on what teacher</i> 12 <i>placement</i> 15 <i>lack of common def</i> 13 <i>state ed</i> <i>diff. motivation</i> <i>RH</i>	<p><i>difficulty</i> <i>by</i> <i>PD</i> <i>needs/</i> <i>implemented</i></p>
<i>Culture</i>	<i>Communication and collaboration</i> 15 <i>architecture, one room school</i>	

I used the template for each of the pages of data and made notes both in the margins of the data and in the middle column of the template. This template served for first and second cycle coding.

Appendix N: Sample of Focus Group Discussion Transcript

Focus Group 7

Pam – it is,

C – it really is

Rhonda – there's a protection there, a feeling of security maybe, yep, and you have to respect it as you edge away at it.

Staff themselves a barrier
 Pam – don't think educators didn't perpetuate that themselves, because we have prescribed that they need this special attention, they need, you know, they, they, instead of we can give you this here, and you can get it here, and it's going to be great

Rhonda – I think it's perpetuated by the fear that it dilutes the education of all other children, because it requires a rethinking of resources and how they are used, how their aligned to support kids

Teacher perception
 Pam – it also requires teachers to really look at themselves and how they prep, because you are looking at different styles for all of those children, so you can't just do a lecture, you just can't do a worksheet, you've got to have your lessons in so many modalities than you think, at least the first couple times that you do it and get used to it, I mean, that was the hardest part, thankfully I went through college when thematic units were a thing

All others – (laughing, chuckling)

Pam – (overlapping) that's how I was taught

** leadership doesn't believe in me*
 Gwen – this may be more toward the C part of the questions, but when I go into a district and I hear, for instance, at a district level team meeting, and I listen to a special education supervisor, or a superintendent, that doesn't believe in inclusion, I see that way too often in the state, when you have people that I would think, because I don't have a special education background, but I would think they would be the champions

Rhonda – (overlapping) um mmmmm