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Perceptions of Special Education Supports by School Administrators

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This dissertation, directed and approved by the candidate's committee, has been accepted by the College of Graduate and Professional Studies of Abilene Christian University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership

Dr. Joey Cope, Dean of the College of Graduate and Professional Studies

Date: December 1, 2020

Dissertation Committee:

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Abilene Christian University

School of Educational Leadership

Perceptions of Special Education Supports by School Administrators

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction

of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership

by

Eric P. Oxford

December 2020

Dedication

To Lauren: for always validating my passion to continuously challenge systemic norms and for empowering me to constantly dream larger than may ever be achievable during my existence. I am forever indebted to you.

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I want to take a moment to thank those who directly helped me along the way on this journey.

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Finally—and most importantly—to my two little ladies, my daughters Maeve and Maren. You inspire me every single day. I hope that this dissertation serves as an example for you that hard work always pays off. I also hope that you realize the impact you can have by advocating for equity and inclusion for all souls who live on this beautiful planet. I love you more than I could have ever imagined.

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Abstract

This research study analyzed the perceptions of special education supports by school administrators. Specifically, this research discussed comparative findings of perceptions of special education supports between building principals and building-based special education team chairpersons in one Massachusetts public school district. The findings are grounded in the district's inclusive philosophy and its capability to ensure that all students are provided educational opportunities in the least restrictive educational environment. The problem studied was that many students with disabilities who are unable to find academic success within an inclusive academic environment are typically transitioned into a more restrictive—or substantially separate—alternative education setting. It is largely unknown how school districts perceive special education programming and structures of support in relation to reaching its goal of maximizing an inclusive philosophy for all students within the school district. This study followed a qualitative research design methodology, as its purpose was to describe the perceptions and experiences of district-wide administrators of one school district located in the state of Massachusetts. A total of 10 school district administrators—five principals and five special education team chairpersons—were interviewed for this study. All participants, from each population category (principals and special education team chairpersons), met the specific qualifying criteria in order to participate in this study. Participants were asked a total of nine interview questions, based on three overarching research questions, through a private semistructured interview process via the Zoom virtual platform. The themes that emerged from the dataset included: participants' general understanding of inclusive philosophies, the presumed misalignment between schools' practices and inclusive philosophies, barriers toward ensuring the implementation of a fully inclusive philosophy, and the overall expectation for

communication and improvement of teaching strategies when examining how to better support students with disabilities. Participants in this research study provided several examples regarding how an inclusive philosophy can be promoted and executed on a consistent basis. Yet, the findings indicated a stark difference between the philosophical expectation for implementing a fully inclusive school district and the actual implementation of this philosophy in everyday practice. Participants from this school district were not aligned in their definition of an inclusive philosophy, yet they consistently described specific barriers that contributed to the inability to implement an inclusive philosophy, including lack of district-wide training, lack of resources, and an overall lack of support when supporting students with disabilities.

Keywords: inclusion, special education, equity, least restrictive environment, FAPE

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Nearly two-thirds of students with disabilities in the United States receive the majority of their educational services within the general education setting (Kena et al., 2016). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004) provides a federal mandate requiring all students who receive special education services entitlement to a least restrictive environment that offers appropriate progress levels throughout their educational journeys (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). In their report submitted to the President of the United States, the National Council on Disability (2018) noted their nationwide findings that many students with disabilities who are unable to find academic success within an inclusive academic environment are typically transitioned into a more restrictive—or substantially separate—education setting. Research has concluded that separate learning environments hinder the academic progress and ability for students with disabilities (Kirby, 2017). It should also be noted that students accessing alternative schools and programs are typically at risk of educational failure or dropping out of school for a variety of reasons, such as drug and alcohol use, pregnancy, disruptive behavior, truancy, as well as a variety of social/emotional or academic disabilities (Aron & Zweig, 2003). Yet, alternative programs were not always created for these specific purposes. From a historical standpoint, Raywid (1994) explained that traditional American schools—those designed and structured during the late 19th and early 20th century—were dehumanizing and impersonal for children due to an emphasis on tracking and constricting students to only one method of education, regardless of specific learning styles (as cited in Lange & Sletten, 2002).

The National Association for Elementary School Principals (NAESP; 2016) noted the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA; 2015) provides states and school districts additional opportunities to create individualized, well-rounded educational opportunities for all students.

The Every Student Succeeds Act transferred more control to states and districts, ultimately providing the opportunity for district leaders to create educational programs that are most appropriate for specific student needs (NAESP, 2016). Additionally, Lee (2014) explained the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (2004) was designed to protect the rights of all children, regardless of cognitive or social or emotional disabilities. As a result, all public school districts are now required to provide necessary accommodations and modifications for any enrolled student within the district.

Maillet (2017) noted that alternative programs strive to provide a creative, supportive, and individualized learning environment for the most at-risk students via engaging and enriching educational experiences. Though these alternative education programs were designed to help at-risk students, some of these programs have excluded students from inclusion classes and ultimately have excluded them from the organic rhythm of being part of the inclusive school culture. All too often, these students become isolated from traditional school experiences due to many traditional school policies that call for students to be included only when their behavior is subjectively deemed appropriate (Richardson & Richardson, 2006). Furthermore, isolating students from inclusive experiences may ultimately result in an unnoticed difference in the overall quality of education for students enrolled in alternative education programs (Caroleo, 2014).

Statement of the Problem

Many students with disabilities who are unable to find academic success within an inclusive academic environment are typically transitioned into a more restrictive—or substantially separate—alternative education setting. It is unknown how school districts perceive special education programming in relation to reaching its goal of maximizing its inclusive

philosophy for all students within the school district. A lack of academic rigor and expectations can exist within these substantially separate programs (Zirkel, 2020). Consequently, separate learning environments hinder a special education student's academic progress and ability (Kirby, 2017). Nearly two-thirds of American students with disabilities receive the majority of their educational services within the general education setting (Kena et al., 2016), as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004) provides a federal mandate that requires all students who receive special education services to be entitled to a least restrictive environment that offers appropriate progress levels throughout their educational journeys (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Instead of moving students with intellectual or social-emotional disabilities out of the classroom and into substantially separate settings, the ultimate goal for public schools is to keep these students in the classroom alongside their general education peers to the greatest extent possible. True inclusive education exists when students with diagnosed disabilities spend 80% or more of their school day within the general education setting while receiving their required accommodations through their Individualized Education Plan (Kirby, 2016).

As defined by Massachusetts special education regulations through the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), students who are provided with educational services more than 60% of their school day outside of an inclusive educational setting are considered enrolled in a substantially separate setting (Massachusetts DESE, 2018). Students diagnosed with an emotional, cognitive, or developmental disability are typically held to significantly lower academic expectations by their teachers and am not expected to play a large role in the overall school culture by their peers (Oldfield et al., 2015). As such, the initiative to promote inclusion through providing students with an education in the least restrictive environment has become the priority across the nation.

An underlying notion exists throughout public education is the quality of alternative education is not at the same level as traditional public schooling (Caroleo, 2014). Alternatively, separate education programs focus on a wider range of values-based, authentic learning experiences while promoting a flexible learning environment (Plows et al., 2017). Yet, the sustained general meritocratic structure by the traditional American public school system ultimately maintains an unfortunate achievement gap between students enrolled in inclusion settings and students enrolled in substantially separate education programs (Zhao, 2016). Nonetheless, public school districts across the nation have continued to feel the financial strain of sending an increased number of students to schools outside of their own district, due to a lack of resources that best support the students' ability to make effective educational progress.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive study was to describe the perceptions of district-wide administrators regarding their school district's services and supports in relation to special education. The participants of this study described their perceptions on the district's services and supports in relation to their schools identified inclusive philosophy that ensures effective progress for all students with disabilities. Students enrolled in special education substantially separate programs have ultimately been identified as having to been diagnosed with a qualifying disability that limits their ability to make effective educational progress.

The target population in this study included district-wide administrators—building principals and special education administrative team chairpersons—within one Massachusetts public school district. In this study, a special education administrative team chairperson is defined as an individual responsible for the management and oversight of special education supports (student IEP creation and compliance), programming and structures present in the

respective school(s) under their supervision. To maximize credibility and ensure consistency, at the time of this study, the group of principals and the group of special education team chairpersons worked at the lower elementary, upper elementary, middle, and high school levels. Through the use of semistructured interviews this qualitative descriptive research study focused on exploring and describing appropriate district strategies that maximized effective best practices for students with disabilities within the school district.

This identified school district is one of many that have struggled with increasing out-of-district special education placements and its associated costs (e.g., out-of-district student transportation). Additionally, this school district has recently come under criticism for its illegal use of public funding as it pertains to the special education budget. The basis for these actions was due to the increasing costs of out-of-district student placements, which increased faster than the school district was able to anticipate.

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following three research questions:

RQ1. How do district-wide administrators of one Massachusetts public school district perceive their school district's ability to promote and maximize an inclusive philosophy for all students with disabilities?

RQ2. What barriers do district-wide administrators of one Massachusetts public school district identify that hinders their school's ability to appropriately support students with disabilities within their home district who cannot make effective progress within an inclusive learning environment?

RQ3. How do schools appropriately support students within their home district who cannot make effective progress within an inclusive learning environment?

Definition of Key Terms

Alternative education programs/schools. An alternative education program or school substantially separates educational settings that theoretically strive to provide a creative, supportive and individualized learning environment for the most at-risk students via engaging and enriching educational experiences (Maillet, 2017).

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). In this study, ESSA is defined as the United States' national education law and longstanding commitment to equal opportunity for all students. Enacted in 2015, ESSA updates the mandates and expectations of the nation's educational requirements and expectations (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). ESSA is the most recent amendment to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965, which replaced the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001.

Inclusion. Inclusion is an educational philosophy that maximizes student enrollment and participation within a least restrictive environment. This can include a heterogeneous mix of students—with and without documented disabilities—that incorporates built-in accommodations, additional staff, and any other applicable supports that ensures equitable learning opportunities and outcomes for all students (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2018).

Individualized education plan (IEP). An IEP is defined as a legally bound document, developed and approved in accordance with federal special education laws in a form established by the Department. An IEP identifies a student's special education needs and describes the individualized services a school district shall provide to meet those needs (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2018).

Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA). In this study, IDEA (2004) is defined as a federally mandated law that makes available a free and appropriate

public education (FAPE) to eligible children with disabilities throughout the nation. IDEA (2004) ensures special education and related services to children with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). IDEA (2004) is the most recent amendment of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, also often referred to as the Public Law (P.L. 94-142) of 1975.

Least restrictive environment (LRE). All students have the right to be educated in the general education environment. Students cannot be removed from the general education classroom setting solely because they require curriculum modifications; removal from the general education setting is permitted only when the additional supplementary supports do not appropriately assist the student in making effective educational progress (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2018).

Special education team chairperson. A district-level administrative position responsible for the management and oversight of special education supports (student IEP creation and compliance), programming and structures present in the respective school(s) under their supervision.

Substantially separate program/placement. A substantially separate program or placement is an alternative educational setting that solely serves students with disabilities for more than 60% of a students' school schedule. A substantially separate program or placement requires the following teacher-to-student ratios:

1. Instructional groupings that do not exceed eight students to one certified special educator, or
2. Twelve students to a certified special educator and an aide (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2018).

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive study was to describe the perceptions of district-wide administrators regarding their school district's services and supports in relation to special education. The participants of this study described their perceptions on the district's services and supports in relation to their schools identified inclusive philosophy that ensures effective progress for all students with disabilities. Specifically, the focus of this research study included how one particular public school district in Massachusetts increased their levels of student inclusion while simultaneously decreasing the number of students enrolled in substantially separate settings outside of the school district, in private placement. The targeted population for this research study was school administrators currently employed within the school district. Through the use of semistructured interviews, this qualitative descriptive research study focused on district-wide administrators on how they perceive their school district's ability to promote and maximize an inclusive philosophy for all students with disabilities, while also identifying any barriers for special education student inclusion.

Chapter 2 provides a comprehensive review of the literature regarding various levels of inclusionary placements and experiences, including an examination of substantially separate—or alternative—education programs. Specifically, the literature review seeks to provide a scholarly background on the following subtopics: the history of alternative education programs, stigmas and perceptions of alternative education programs, the importance of inclusion in school culture, and the benefits of participation in school activities.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive study was to describe the perceptions of district-wide administrators regarding their school district's services and supports in relation to special education. The participants of this study described their perceptions on the district's services and supports in relation to their schools identified inclusive philosophy that ensures effective progress for all students with disabilities. This literature review provides a summary of research related to the historical and social aspects of students enrolled in alternative education programs. Specifically, this literature review provides information about the history of alternative education programs, stigmas, and perceptions of alternative education programs, the importance of inclusion in school culture, and the benefits of participation in school activities. In order to frame the study, the literature review begins with a discussion on the two theoretical frameworks that will guide this study: social role theory and transformational leadership theory. After a discussion on the theoretical frameworks, I then provided general information about the history of alternative education, as well as the risks and benefits of these programs. Following the information about alternative education programs, this review provides details of previous research that has been conducted surrounding peer influences and perceptions, as well as the importance of inclusion in school culture and participation in extracurricular activities.

Theoretical Framework

Two theoretical frameworks guided this study, which included that of the social role theory and transformational leadership theory.

Social Role Theory

The social role theory states that individuals accept, and carry out, the typical expectations of their role within an organization based on how they are seen, approached, and

treated by others within the organization (Hoyt et al., 2013). In other words, an organization's structure and traditional expectations for a particular role are naturally forced upon the individual within at role. As such, that individual acts in this particular way in order to satisfy the needs and expectations of that role within the organization.

As noted by Hoyt et al. (2013), within the education organizational structure, administrators who possess different roles within the district naturally have different priorities and expectations for their department, their building(s), their employees, and their students. Specifically, when it comes to making decisions about student placement and expectations, a building-based school principal and a special education administrator may vary in their priorities and goals. In essence, it is essential for leaders to constantly keep their sights set on the overarching pillars—the vision, mission, and goals—of the organization. As Barnard explained, "the primary efforts of leaders need to be directed to the maintenance and guidance of organizations as whole systems of activities" (as cited in Grint, 1997, p. 95). Moreover, Gardner (1990) explained that vital leaders "think longer term" and place an emphasis on "the larger organization of which they are a part" (as cited in McMahon, 2010, p. 6). Likewise, Silva (2018) noted "in order to ensure that the vision of an organization is achieved, it is essential that effective leaders are goal-oriented and responsible communicators in their practice."

Barnard (1948) explained the specific goals and conditions of the organization will dictate how a leader reacts and responds (as cited in Grint, 1997). Thus, the leader must first establish an organizational vision through the input of employees and other stakeholders of the organization, then set specific and targeted goals on that vision, and finally work toward achieving those goals through overly communicating overarching organizational expectations (Lencioni, 2012).

Consequently, leaders need to collaboratively create an organizational vision with corresponding goals with the purpose of ensuring the organization's employees—and, thus, the overall organizational culture—embraces the pursuit of achieving these goals consistently (Lencioni, 2012). As Nohria and Khurana (2010) noted, "the most tangible way for a CEO to enhance or diminish their legitimacy is the results the organization delivers." In other words, it is the primary responsibility of an organizational leader to ensure all facets of the organization—employees, board members, and other stakeholders - are aligned in their communication and in their practice, and are interdependently maintaining their sight on achieving the mission of the organization (Bennett & Gadlin, 2012).

For organizational leaders, providing consistent communication can develop a healthy, positive organizational culture by reinforcing clarity. In his book *The Advantage,* Lencioni (2012) explained a set of disciplines that can help to enhance any organization. These disciplines include building a leadership team based on cohesion and trust and then creating, overcommunicating and reinforcing clarity of those norms and expectations. Lencioni (2012) explained that organizational leaders "have to play the tireless role of ensuring that employees throughout the organization are continually and repeatedly reminded about what is important" within the organization (p. 244).

Furthermore, "consistent communication within the shared domain of the community of practice helps to naturally create positive relationships and trust throughout the entire staff" (Wenger, 2011, p. 5). Gaining this trust and building solid, foundational relationships with employees of the organization requires the maintenance of core values, consistently open lines of communication, and genuine belief in the success of the organization (Reilly, 1998).

Transformational Leadership

To initiate organizational change and maintain high expectations amongst all members of an organization, a leader must demonstrate specific attributes. The transformational leadership theory emphasizes the importance of leading employees in a way that will "broaden and elevate the interests of their employees" (McMahon, 2010, p. 257). As Bass (1990) notes, "transformational leaders achieve these results in one or more ways: they may be charismatic...they may meet the emotional needs of each employee; and/or they may intellectually stimulate employees." The transformational leadership theory ultimately places the needs of others at the top of the priority list.

Transformational leadership emphasizes support and service to others, but also initiates constructive conflict and dialogue that allows the opportunity for the leader to coach the follower and, in turn, allows the follower to become a more knowledgeable employee. Additionally, Greenleaf (1977) emphasized the idea of transformational leadership allowing leaders to motivate and inspire the followers through positively challenging the norm and promoting the followers to question themselves, with the end goal of bettering the organization as a whole. Greenleaf also notes that it is essential for transformational leaders to "pay special attention to each individual follower's needs for achievement and growth by acting as a coach" (Greenleaf, 1977, p. 79).

As such, the transformational leadership model can be applied to virtually any organizational structure. For example, the lead, learn and grow (LLG) model has stemmed from the transformational leadership theory as an applicable platform for educational leaders (Watts & Corrie, 2013). In following the norm in education to place a constant emphasis on growth—both for students and staff—the LLG model takes the principles of transformational leadership and

applies them to education. Specifically, the LLG model supports school administrators to focus on helping teachers become transformative in their practice so they can teach their students how to "shape their motives, aspirations, values and goals" (Watts & Corrie, 2013, p. 87). The LLG model is particularly effective within education because school administrators often look to teachers to model best practices for students.

Alternative Education in the United States

History of Alternative Education in the United States

The 1960s brought cultural and legal shifts in American education. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965) was "enacted to offer equitable educational opportunities to the nation's disadvantaged [and still today] provides financial resources to schools to enhance the learning experiences of underprivileged children" (Thomas & Brady, 2005, p. 52). These increased expenditures for education created by the federal government allowed for the growth of alternative education schools and programs, both inside and outside of the mainstream public school setting (Lange & Sletten, 2002).

As DeNobile (2009) noted, the first formal alternative education movement began outside of public education, created for a call to answer a diverse range of "personal, moral, religious or spiritual, and/or social differences and choice" (pp. 15-16). Many of these informal alternative schools were organized by minority communities, and were often congregated in basements, churches, or other nontraditional spaces for teaching and learning (Lange & Sletten, 2002). Soon after, by the 1970s, the Open School movement brought the opening of the first alternative high schools in the United States. Gibboney (1994) explained the Murray Road Annex High School in Newton, MA, one of the first alternative high schools to open in the United States, designed an open curriculum in which students were responsible for their own education. This alternative

high school was created for any students, regardless of their academic achievement levels, who wanted to take personal responsibility for their learning. Regarding the Murray Road Annex and other similar schools that opened around the same time, Raywid (1981) noted, "within their first decade of existence, public alternatives exploded from 100 to more than 10,000" (as cited in Lange & Sletten, 2002, p. 5).

Alternative Education in the United States

DeNobile (2009) noted that due to new educational theories, beliefs, and pedagogies, alternative education schools and programs in the United States have grown in evolved since the 1960s. In other words, differing beliefs and theories resulted in a great variety of structure and pedagogies seen among alternative education schools and programs around the country. Yet, Arnove and Strout (1980), Barr (1981), Bryk and Thum (1989), Tobin and Sprague (1999), Young (1990), Natriello et al. (1990), and Gold and Mann (1984) found the majority of today's alternative programs include the following common characteristics: small size, an emphasis of one-on-one interaction with teachers, creating a supportive and therapeutic environment, allowing flexibility in structure, and allowing opportunities for student success relevant to the students' future. Moreover, Lange and Sletten (2002) noted the majority of the nearly 20,000 alternative education schools or programs open today now function within the public school district.

Though specific structures vary by state and by district, nearly every current day alternative education program or school seeks to help lower the nationwide dropout rate (DeNobile, 2009). The 2001 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) addressed the nation's student dropout issue. Thus, the Department of Education mandated, as part of the NCLB, that all alternative programs be developed "to prevent at-risk youth from dropping out of school, and to

provide dropouts, and children and youth returning from correctional facilities or institutions for neglected or delinquent children and youth, with a support system to ensure their continues education" (as cited in Duardo DeNobile, 2009).

In addition, Lee (2014) explained the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (2004) was designed to protect the rights of all children, regardless of any cognitive and/or social or emotional disabilities. As a result, all public school districts are now required to provide the necessary accommodations and modifications for any enrolled student within the district. As a result of the federal NCLB (2001) and IDEA (2004) Acts, alternative options must be available as an educational provision for eligible students. As Dynarski (1999) noted:

> Alternative schooling is not an option, but an absolute requirement in every American community. Alternative schooling opportunities will be needed to accommodate the educational needs of its youth because the traditional school system, and particularly the traditional high school, can no longer serve the needs of the students and their family lifestyles. (as cited in DeNobile, 2009, p. 20)

Crain (2003) found the majority of alternative programs focus "more on the interests and capacities of the developing person than on adult expectations or views of what children need to know and to be able to do" (as cited in DeNobile, 2009, p. 23).

Lange and Sletten (2002) and Franklin (1992) found that today's alternative programs provide small group settings with supportive environments that ultimately strengthen teacher to student relationships (as cited in DeNobile, 2009). Furthermore, Raywid (1994) described three types of alternative schools found in the United States. These three categories of alternative schools are still present in today's American schools:

1. Type I alternatives, which are schools of choice that offer specialized programs or themes

that address students' specific interests;

2. Type II alternatives, which are last-chance programs, and which are not of choice to students. These programs are typically created to provide students with one last chance to find success in school before an out-of-district placement;
3. Type III alternatives, which are remedial programs designed for students who typically need academic and/or social/emotional rehabilitation.

Although these three types of alternative education programs were designed to help at-risk students, they all exclude the enrolled alternative education students from mainstream inclusion classes and, thus, exclude them from the organic rhythm of being part of the mainstream school culture. All too often, these students are "isolated from the normal schooling experience under a mandate that reintegrates them back into the educational mainstream only when their general behavior is deemed to be "under control" (Richardson & Richardson, 2006, p. 148). Furthermore, Atkins (2008) noted, "the isolated nature of some of the programs make it more likely that the (potential) difference in quality of education may go unnoticed" (as cited in Caroleo, 2014, p. 39).

Risks and Benefits of Alternative Education

An underlying notion exists throughout public education is the quality of alternative education is not at the same level as mainstream schooling (Caroleo, 2014). Furthermore, although more recent alternative education programs focus on attending to students' behaviors (Hughes & Adera, 2006; Raywid, 2001) by providing students with a flexible environment (Darling & Price, 2004), Hagans (2006) noted that an achievement gap between alternative education and mainstream education students is evident (as cited in Caroleo, 2014).

All too often, alternative programs become a dumping ground for troubled students (Kim & Taylor, 2008). Furthermore, conflicting research exists surrounding the impact on self-esteem for alternative education students. Lehr and Lange (2003) found that "alternative programs are viewed as schools for students who have disciplinary problems" (as cited in Caroleo, 2014, p. 42). Yet, on the other hand, in their study of 900 alternative education high school students, Darling and Price (2004) found that 92% of the students reported they left the program with a higher level of self-esteem than when they entered the program (as cited in Caroleo, 2014). Overall, these findings provide evidence of both risks and benefits of alternative education programs. Thus, student outcomes in achievement for alternative education students greatly depend on several different factors, such as how they are labeled and perceived within their programs.

Stigmas and Perceptions

Dudley-Marling (2004) suggested that students' access to learning opportunities partially depends on their perceived potential (as cited in Shrifer, 2013). Gutierrez (2004) concluded, "even a small change in the patterns of interaction—effected through changes in the shared activity or teachers' actions—can have a significant effect on students' learning identities" (as cited in Dudley-Marling, 2004, p. 489). These findings ultimately played a role in the consequences of placing students into alternative education programs. These findings demonstrated that teachers' perceptions of their students had an effect on their level of achievement.

Moreover, at-risk students, including those with learning disabilities, have ultimately been labeled as such through a series of socially constructed interruptions in their learning process, which has affected the way that others perceive them (Dudley-Marling, 2004). In other

words, the difference between a student labeled as smart and a student labeled as challenged or at-risk is not the fault of the student. Instead, "when a child fails to learn and grow, the fault lies not solely with the child but instead lies mainly with the system and with the adults responsible for it" (Quinn et al., 2006, p. 11).

Consequences of Peer Stigmatization

More often than not, the students who do not find immediate success within the traditional mainstream school setting are perceived as difficult and/or behavioral and, as a result, are labeled in a negative way by both their teachers and their peers. Shifrer (2013) found that students diagnosed with a learning disability were held to significantly lower academic expectations by their teachers and were not expected to play a large role in the overall school culture by their peers. Additionally, for students who have had negative experiences in school, the feeling of "otherness" can ultimately lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy they are not expected to have an equal amount of academic success as their peers (McNulty & Roseboro, 2009).

Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

The term self-fulfilling prophecy "is defined as the process by which one's expectations about a person eventually lead that person to behave in ways that confirm those expectations" (Brehm, 1966, p. 111). Research has demonstrated that teachers' expectations of students ultimately affect student success in the classroom (Teacher Expectations, 2012). This same source, from the Education Commission of the States, also noted that "teacher expectations can, for example, be based on student characteristics such as race, ethnicity, and family income level, or indicators of past performance" (p. 1). Moreover, teachers' expectations of students are lower when they are teaching students who are disadvantaged in some way, or who come from lower socioeconomic statuses (Agirdag et al., 2013). Thus, whether a conscious act or not, teachers

may naturally place lower expectations on certain students based on how these students are negatively labeled in regards to specific demographic information.

Unfortunately, when these lower expectations are placed on students at a younger age, they often have lasting negative effects on student achievement throughout the entirety of their academic careers (Sorhagen, 2013). For example, as Sorhagen noted, "self-fulfilling prophecies in first grade classrooms exerted an especially lasting impact on the achievement of disadvantaged students…and may be one factor that contributes to the persistent and worrisome gap in achievement between children from different socioeconomic backgrounds" (p. 475).

Teacher labels at any early age ultimately play a large role in the level of success that students find in school and have an impact on the need for a student to enroll in an alternative education program. Students placed in separate alternative education programs are placed at a higher risk to receive a negative label from both teachers and peers. As Aron (2006) concluded, "alternative programs have their own stigmas attached to them, including that they are of poor educational quality and that they are often associated with students who are unsuccessful" (as cited in Caroleo, 2014, p. 42). These labels based on program placement can have a negative impact on students' desire to identify with the mainstream school culture.

School Culture

In addition to providing students with academic opportunities, schools naturally provide students with opportunities to participate in a variety of social experiences and interactions. Berger and Luckman (1966) posited that traditional school structures were designed in a way that had fulfilled social and cultural needs, including the needs of adolescent social development (as cited in Dudley-Marling, 2004).

At the high school level, one of the goals of the staff is to create a school culture that promotes positive learning experiences and, thus, an opportunity for all students to proudly earn their high school diploma. It takes an entire group effort, but if all participants work together toward this goal, graduation rates can improve (Bruckner & Mausbach, 2015). In other words, a positive school culture is created "when schools build from the idea that everyone is in it together" (Martinez & McGrath, 2014, p. 28). Martinez and McGrath (2014) also emphasized the importance of creating a school culture where students take responsibility of their own learning and that of their peers. In essence, a school's culture can ultimately make or break students' formal school experience, both academically and socially.

Lynch et al. (2012) found that peers can both promote and discourage academic attitudes and behaviors that contribute to school success" (p. 6). Furthermore, Ripski and Gregory (2009) found that:

> Collective perceptions of negative school climate (defined as perceptions of unfairness, hostility, and victimization) were associated with low school engagement among students. Schools where adolescents perceived high levels of hostility were more likely to have students who were less engaged than schools where adolescents felt students were less hostile. (as cited in Lynch et al., 2012, p. 7)

Lynch et al. (2012) reasoned that students' social norms are challenged during their time in school, explaining, "an individual's behavior is influenced by his/her perceptions of the behaviors of other individuals within his/her group" (p. 8). Unfortunately, because many students placed in alternative education programs have previously developed negative behavioral habits, these programs are often full of hostility and, thus, provide a greater potential for peer influenced negative behaviors and outcomes for all students within the program.

Peer pressure can play a large role in adolescents' decision-making and social experiences. Defining their role within peer groups is an important experience for adolescents (Kiran-Esen, 2012). Cook and Dayley (2001) reported that in regards to social development, "these peer groups offer independence from parents, provide feelings of being valued and safe, and allow adolescents to be recognized and accepted by people of a similar age and stage" (as cited in Kiran-Esen, 2012, p. 1302). Moreover, Kiran-Esen found that "peer pressure, which significantly influences many adolescent behaviors, has also been found to influence adolescents' general and academic self-efficacy" (p. 1306). In other words, peer influences ultimately affected the level of one's belief in his or her ability to succeed, both academic and in general. Evidence also demonstrates that peers can have a direct influence on each other's level of success and outcomes within the classroom (Gottfried, 2014). Unfortunately, because students enrolled in alternative education programs all suffer from previous failures and hardships in school, these programs significantly lack the potential for positive peer influences to drive success in the classroom. A group of at-risk adolescents constantly in each other's presence without outside peer influences naturally creates an environment with lessened academic expectations and motivations to succeed in school.

Student Inclusivity in Education

A 2016 study conducted by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) found that Massachusetts students on an IEP who are educated full-time in a general education setting are five times more likely to graduate on time compared to their peers who are enrolled in substantially separate placements. Additionally, Gilmour (2018) noted that "inclusion provides students with disabilities (SWDs) with access to the grade-level curriculum and the same educational opportunities as their peers" (p. 8) which maximizes a student's ability

to develop grade-level content mastery, maintain the same amount of time on learning as all other students in that grade, and ultimately be put in the best position possible to make effective educational progress.

From a social standpoint, an inclusive school can significantly impact the social development of students with disabilities. DeVries et al. (2018) noted that "learners with social-emotional needs have lower levels of academic self-concept, social inclusion, and emotional inclusion than their typically developing peers; however, these differences shrink dramatically…in inclusive schools." With that being said, it is important to highlight that "education in least restrictive environments is preferred, but practices are more important than placements" (Obiakor et al., 2012). In fact, several municipalities in Sweden have responded to the significant increase in the number of ADHD diagnoses by creating special classes only for students with ADHD. Though gaining notoriety as "the antithesis of inclusion," Swedish school administrators note the lack of funding available to properly train its staff members has led to the need to group all ADHD students into cohorts. While this approach has been met with much conflict and criticism, including amongst education officials within Sweden, school officials recognize these students require a specialized approach to learning, and only a small number of faculty and staff possess such training and skill.

As such, the onus falls on school districts to ensure all faculty and staff—general education and special education—are equipped with the necessary tools, skill set, and knowledge of best practices to serve all students, regardless of disability. It is nearly impossible for school districts to successfully promote and implement an inclusive philosophy without properly training its staff members to appropriately carry out that inclusive expectation.

Participation in School Activities

Fortunately, one of the most common and easiest ways for students to become involved in the culture of their school and to become positively influenced by peers is to participate in school clubs, sports, and other extracurricular activities. Various sources of research have demonstrated the benefits of student participation in school activities. Efthymiou and Kington (2017) noted the participation of the students with disabilities in cross-curricula activities that are offered in schools ultimately helps to develop these students' social/emotional skills.

As noted previously in this study, peer pressure played a large role in adolescents' decision-making processes. Thus, the addition of participation in extracurricular activities can provide social benefits for adolescents. These benefits can come either by way of positive peer teammate influences, or by naturally deterring these participants from making poor decisions that would negatively impact their ability to maintain membership in the club or activity.

Furthermore, Bower and Carroll (2015) concluded that students who participated in extracurricular activities benefitted long-term outcomes, such as higher odds to graduate high school and to attend college, as well as a higher tendency to be educationally resilient in their lifelong studies. Finally, their study showed that participants in extracurricular activities resulted in an increased sense of overall confidence, and as a result, these students demonstrated a desire to become leaders later in life.

Additionally, Montoya (2012) conducted a study that included adults who were labeled at-risk students during their high school careers. She found that participants in multiple extracurricular activities during their high school career had significantly lower levels of stress and depression later in life, and were significantly more likely to attend and graduate from college. Furthermore, Montoya's study found the students who participated in multiple

extracurricular activities earned, on average, over $10,000 more annually than non-participants. Finally, the study found arrests were significantly less common in at-risk participants of multiple extracurricular activities when compared to arrest records of nonparticipant at-risk students. These findings support the belief that participation in extracurricular activities is beneficial to both the short-term and long-term success of students. In addition, Eccles and Gootman (2002) noted:

> participation in multiple extracurricular activities gives students chances to experience success in a variety of domains, form an identity, and build self-esteem, all of which are positively linked to a healthy emotional state and the development of effective coping skills. (as cited in Montoya, 2012, p. 57)

Previous research also provides evidence that students diagnosed with intellectual and learning disabilities develop a higher sense of social competence when they actively participate in unstructured extracurricular activities that include limited parental involvement (Brooks et al., 2015). In their study, they concluded, “unstructured activities may center on building a collaborative social relationship as opposed to competing with another peer…and also might allow relatively greater room for both peer and parent facilitation of the social experience” (p. 685). The findings by Brooks et al. (2015) provided evidence that any form of participation in extracurricular activities - not just the formalized, structured activities - can benefit adolescents in terms of their overall social development and academic achievement.

On the other hand, Bower and Carroll (2015) found that adolescents who are not involved in extracurricular activities ultimately miss out on increased development of self-awareness and social responsibility. Based on their research, Bower and Carroll (2015) found that non-participants in extracurricular activities:

> Appeared to have less hope for the future, were less aware of their own strengths and challenges, were less able to regulate emotion, and were less likely to report pride in their achievements than those who were involved in sporting activities, cultural activities, or a combination of both. (p. 67)

At-Risk Student Participation in Extracurricular Activities

Unfortunately, in Montoya's (2012) study that included 1,555 participants, only 28.8% of these students claimed to have participated in multiple extracurricular activities. Thus, over 70% of the at-risk students in this study either participated only in one extracurricular activity, or did not participate at all. This high number of at-risk students who limit their participation in multiple extracurricular activities is alarming. With the amount of research that backs benefits of participation in extracurricular activities, it would seem most beneficial for our most at-risk students to participate in activities that can help to develop their self-esteem, their sense of self-awareness, and increase positive peer influences.

Yet it is important to reason why the number of at-risk student participation in extracurricular activities is so low. Various research and studies have supported Herr's (1989) conclusion that there is no concise or categorical definition for at-risk students (as cited in Dobizl, 2002). In general, research supports Morris' (2002) claim that at-risk students are simply those who are unlikely to graduate from high school. Yet other evidence leads to other factors that place students at risk for dropout. Kleiner et al. (2002) noted the most common factors for students to be at risk for educational failure include disruptive behavior, poor grades, suspension, and truancy (as cited in Dobizl, 2002). Furthermore, the Department of Public Information (1990) published a list of factors affecting at-risk youth, stating:

> Most have been touched by adverse circumstances, such as poverty, teen parenthood, homelessness, low self-esteem, drug or alcohol abuse, poor health or nutrition, deficiency in the English language, inadequate opportunities for success in school, loss of hope for the future, and the lack of life goals. (as cited in Dobizl, 2002, p. 8)

Moreover, as previously stated in this review, Carver and Lewis (2010) noted these students typically are at risk of educational failure and/or dropping out of school for a variety of reasons, such as drug and alcohol use, pregnancy, disruptive behavior, truancy, as well as a variety of social/emotional or academic disabilities. The lack of a concrete definition for at-risk students poses the idea there are innumerable potential reasons as to why a student becomes at risk for educational failure. Yet, for one reason or another, research shows that it has been difficult for these students to find consistent academic achievement rhythm throughout the path of their educational career. Consequently, many of these students must work harder than the average student to try to find success in school. As Montoya (2012) pointed out,

> juggling the amount of time and effort necessary for participation in these types of (extracurricular) activities, in addition to fulfilling the demands of the student role, is no easy task, and challenges an individual to structure their lives in a particular way in order to be successful. (p. 56)

Benefits of Inclusive Learning

Social Benefits

There are various ways in which inclusive learning enhances social benefit among learners. Social benefit is defined as the gains that relate to and emerge from the interaction, engagement with peers and friendship (Avramidis et al., 2018; Kurth et al., 2015; Schwab, 2015). An inclusive learning environment enables peer-mediated interventions to be adopted,

which, according to Watkins et al. (2015) are important in enhancing social interactions among students with disabilities. Watkins et al. argued the interaction between the students with disabilities and their peers in an inclusive learning environment enables the students with disabilities to develop social interaction skills. Watkins et al. based their conclusion on the assessment of the students with autism spectrum disorder who were placed in an inclusive learning environment. Therefore, Watkins et al. recommended for the adoption of peer-mediated interventions in inclusive classrooms as a means of addressing the students with disabilities' social needs. Carter et al. (2016) also highlighted the social benefits associated with the engagement of the students with disabilities in an inclusive learning environment. According to Carter et al. (2016), enhanced interaction of the students with their peers is observed when peer support arrangements are offered. Students with disabilities were able to release their individualized social goals and created more new friendships in inclusive learning environment with the support from the general population of students (Carter et al., 2016).

Kurth et al. (2015) also supported the view that inclusive learning facilitates enhanced social interaction between the students with disabilities and their peers, which translates to social benefits. Kurth et al. noted that students with disabilities were able to play and have a conversation with their peers in contexts unrelated to instruction. The researchers also noted the interaction occurred during the unstructured times and academic times in the classroom. According to Kurth et al., the interactions between the students with disabilities and their peers are reciprocally enjoyable. Kurth et al. posed that despite the observed social benefits associated with the inclusive environment, continued efforts need to be put in place to ensure the students with disabilities are active participants in the interaction and they are able to help and advocate for their peers without disabilities.

A longitudinal study that was carried out by Schwab et al. (2015) also reported a reduction in negative social behavior (aggression) among the students with disabilities who had inclusive learning experiences. However, Schwab also noted that understanding the social benefits associated with the engagement of the students with disabilities in inclusive environments are complex since social participation itself is a complex construct. The researchers reported that although inclusion is associated with social benefits highlighted above, students with disabilities are also likely to experience limited social inclusion values and less positive social behavior. It is, therefore, possible that although maximizing inclusion is likely to have social benefits among the students with disabilities, the determination of such benefits is a complex process that requires the researchers to consider various constructs and possible intervening factors.

It should be noted there is evidence that suggests students with disabilities can still experience limited social interaction in an inclusive learning environment. According to Schwab (2015), students with disabilities are not always able to effectively form a new friendship in an inclusive classroom. Schwab's study also noted these students with disabilities were not able to have peer acceptance and interaction and had a low perception of their social interaction. However, the researchers based their conclusion on the comparison between the students with disabilities and their counterparts without disabilities. Various researchers indicated that unlike the students with disabilities, the students without disabilities have better interactional skills (Hassan et al., 2017; Syriopoulou-Delli et al., 2018). Therefore, such comparison is likely to show limited social benefits to the students with disabilities.

Feldman et al. (2016) argued that for the students with disabilities to have social benefits from participation in an inclusive classroom, there is a need for teachers and the

paraprofessionals' intervention. They noted that one of the interventions should be geared towards ensuring the students with disabilities participate fully in inclusive educational settings. Unfortunately, all too often students with disabilities are pulled out of their general education classes for pullout interventions, consisting of small group or individualized instruction. In their conclusions, Feldman et al. (2016) noted these students with disabilities were unable to form robust interactions with their counterparts because they missed the majority of their time in mainstream classes.

Another intervention recommended by Feldman et al. (2016) included the type of training and guidance received by staff members who are directly supporting the students with disabilities, so as to enhance the staff members' confidence levels and their ability to interact with the students without disabilities. Feldman et al. also argued for the adoption of peer-mediated interventions in inclusive learning environments to ensure the students with disabilities are able to reap social benefits.

The lack of appreciable social benefits associated with inclusive learning experiences, as reported by Schwab (2015), and in part by Feldman et al. (2016) can be explained based on the social skills among the students with disabilities. Garrote (2017) noted that social skills play a major role in determining the nature of social interactions that exist between the students with disabilities and their neurotypical peers. However, Garrote added that other intervening factors could mediate the effect of social skills on social participation in an inclusive learning environment. According to Avramidis et al. (2018), the assessment of the social benefits associated with inclusive learning among the students with disabilities should shift from the focus on social participation to the determination of the quality and the durability of such interactions.

Emotional Benefits

It should be noted that although placement within an inclusive learning environment can be mandated through the legality of an IEP, the holistic benefits associated with the learning approach towards students with disabilities approach cannot be achieved through a similar process (Schwab, 2018). Various researchers have indicated the need to develop effective strategies within the inclusive learning model that enable the model to promote emotional development among the students with disabilities (Schwab, 2018; Shogren et al., 2016). Although no conclusive, one-size-fits-all model exists regarding the emotional benefits associated with inclusion for students with disabilities, there is evidence that participation within an inclusive learning environment holds various emotional benefits (Efthymiou & Kington, 2017; Evins, 2015), while other researchers have questioned the importance of inclusive in promoting emotional development and well-being of the students with disabilities (Eller et al., 2015).

The study conducted by Evins (2015) suggests the placement of students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms is associated with significant emotional benefits. Based on the views from the participants who took part in the study, it is evident that an inclusive learning experience is associated with enhanced confidence, which, according to Evins, is an indicator of emotional benefits. Evins also pointed out that inclusive learning is also associated with enhanced emotional development. The researcher noted that at the beginning of their placement within an inclusive learning environment, the students with disabilities tend to be shy and isolate themselves from their peers in the classroom. However, as the class progresses the students develop emotionally, as evidenced by their increased confidence levels.

Efthymiou and Kington (2017) also found that students with disabilities develop emotional skills in an inclusive learning environment. Efthymiou and Kington argued that emotional development is only possible if these students are accepted and supported by their peers. The researchers noted the support from the peers could be in the form of a strong friendship or a willingness to include these students in activities within the classroom. However, some researchers question the emotional benefit the students with disabilities receive from an inclusive learning environment. According to Eller et al. (2015), students with emotional and behavioral disorders are more likely to act out in an inclusive learning environment. In their study, the researchers pointed out the negative emotions associated with the feeling of being isolated or looking different from others ultimately result in such student dysregulation. As such, Eller et al. noted that students with emotional and behavioral disorders are less likely to exhibit negative emotions in the non-inclusive classroom because they do not view themselves as being different from the other students.

Academic Benefits

A study conducted by Dessemontet et al. (2012) noted that an inclusive learning environment is associated with positive effects on academic performance. The researchers based their conclusion on the comparison of the academic performance among the students with disabilities in alternative education settings and the performance among those placed in an inclusive learning environment.

Oh-Young and Filler (2015) also noted the placement of students with disabilities in an inclusive learning environment is associated with a significantly higher academic performance compared to the students placed in substantially separate, or specialized, programs. The researchers argued the separation of the students with disabilities from the general education

student population has a negative impact on academic performance and should, therefore, be restricted. An inclusive learning experience helps students, as well as teachers, to ensure the curriculum adopted is academically focused, which is not consistently the norm within substantially separate learning environments. The researchers noted the additional support the students with disabilities receive from their peers provides an extrinsic motivation for them to perform at a higher level.

In another study focused on student inclusivity, Ekeh and Oladayo (2013) compared the academic achievements among students within an inclusive learning environment and within a substantially separate learning environment. The researchers noted the students with disabilities placed in an inclusive learning environment performed better than the students with disabilities who received their academic instruction in a substantially separate learning environment. According to Ekeh and Oladayo, "enhanced academic achievement is realized in an inclusive classroom when general education and special education teachers participate in the teaching process." The researchers also noted the importance of training the academic and non-academic staff on effective ways to attend to the needs of the students with disabilities.

Some research also suggests that inclusive classrooms have beneficial effects on learning and achievement among students with disabilities. Nagro et al. (2018) noted that inclusion, when implemented using innovative approaches that enhance the engagement of all students in the learning process, results in enhanced academic achievement among the students with disabilities. The researchers reported that students with disabilities are likely to demonstrate enhanced academic performance in an inclusive environment that adopts whole-group response strategies in the teaching and learning process. The research by Nagro et al. suggested that in the evaluation of the academic benefits associated with the inclusive learning approaches, there is a

need for building principals to remain attuned to the specific teaching and learning strategies that are utilized in the classroom, to reach all students. The various researchers that have focused on the teaching and learning strategies in the assessment of the academic benefits associated with an inclusive approach include Clarke et al. (2016). The researchers focused on the importance of response card and they noted the approach leads to enhanced participation, which is a key contributor to academic success.

Conversely, McMaster and Fuchs (2002) reported the academic achievement associated with a placement in an inclusive learning environment is mixed. The researchers concluded that academic performance among students with disabilities varied based on the strategies used in teaching and learning. According to the research conducted by McMaster and Fuchs (2002), "the adoption of cooperative learning strategies that ensures accountability among each student and also incorporate group rewards are more likely to result in enhanced performance among the students with disabilities" (p. 62). With that being said, the researchers were non-committal on whether the examined cooperative learning strategies should be recommended for adoption in teaching inclusive classrooms.

Yet, certain teaching strategies for promoting an inclusive learning environment have been researched, with evidence of positive results. Rios (2016) focused on the inclusive strategies that enhance the academic benefits among students with disabilities. He noted the use of strategies, such as positive reinforcement, self-monitoring approaches, and positive behavioral interventions and support (PBIS) enhanced the academic achievement of students with disabilities when enrolled in an inclusive classroom environment. Similarly, Shah and Gathoo (2017) also emphasized the importance of the learning styles in the academic achievement of the students in an inclusive learning environment. According to the researchers, a significant

relationship exists between student learning achievement and a student's preferred learning style. Following the assessment of the data obtained from students with a specific learning disability, Shah and Gathoo (2017) noted the provision of the teaching approaches that pay attention to the student's specific area of weakness ultimately leads to enhanced performance by that student. Shah and Gathoo therefore advocated for the adoption of the teaching and learning approaches that are preferred by the students.

On the other hand, the study carried out by de Verdier and Ek (2014) challenged the academic benefit of inclusive classrooms for students with disabilities. Based on their longitudinal study, which focused on the examination of the performance among students with a severe visual impairment, de Verdier and Ek (2014) noted these students had lower academic achievements compared to their counterparts. Consequently, de Verdier and Ek attributed the poor academic achievement by these students to the lack of requisite skills held by the teachers. The researchers noted the teachers did not understand the braille system or any effective way of teaching students with visual impairment, which naturally directly impacted the teachers' ability to provide effective academic instruction and interventions to these students. It is fair to note the importance of appropriate and impactful teacher training that is specific to the level of needs of respective students with disabilities.

Co-Teaching to Promote Inclusion for All Students

Co-teaching, as the term suggests, is a teaching approach where two or more individuals collaborate in the teaching process (Lock et al., 2016). The individuals who are co-teaching are considered to have an agreed-upon strategy for sharing the teaching tasks (Lock et al., 2016). As indicated by Wenzlaff et al. (2002), the motive behind co-teaching is for individuals to able to deliver on goals that each would not have adequately addressed when teaching alone. Co-

teaching can also be understood as the cooperation between cooperating teachers in which the two individuals co-plan and co-deliver the instructions (Chitiyo & Brinda, 2018; Lock et al., 2016). According to Friend (2016), "co-teaching provides a means through which specialized services can be provided to students with disabilities while they are placed in general learning classes." Friend and Cook (2016) argued that co-teaching should only be regarded when the two or more educators jointly provide instructions in a single physical space. The definition, therefore, suggests that co-teaching allows embedding of accommodations—traditionally restricted as special education services—within the mainstream learning environment and the collaborating teachers are tasked with ensuring the needs of each of the student segments are met (Friend, 2016). Co-teaching is therefore characterized by teachers who have different but complementary expertise. Co-teaching works best when "the blending of the expertise of the general education teachers and the special education teachers facilitates the achievement of greater intensity in the teaching and learning process" (Friend, 2016). Generally speaking, based on the provided definitions, co-teaching can be thought of as a form of team teaching (Lock et al., 2016).

There are various strategies that can be used to effectively deliver co-teaching goals. One of the strategies includes one of the co-teachers observing while the other teaches (Lock et al., 2016). The two co-teachers determine before the class session the information that needs to be gathered (Peery, 2019). After the teaching session, the two co-teachers then analyze the collected information with the goal of determining whether the teaching objectives have been met (Lock et al., 2016). Co-teaching can also take the form of parallel teaching, in which the two teachers divide the class and deliver instruction of similar content simultaneously. The goal of the parallel teaching strategy is to enhance student engagement (Arxé et al., 2020; Simons et al., 2020).

Additionally, co-teaching can take the form of an alternative teaching approach where one teacher delivers instructions to a large group of students while another works with a smaller subset from the large group (Chitiyo & Brinda, 2018; Lock et al., 2016). The aim of the teacher working with a smaller group is to provide additional supports and/or more intensive levels of short-term intervention to students who need it. Another methodology of co-teaching can also be executed through teaming where two teachers deliver the same content to the class such as by providing opposing views through debates or problem-solving approaches. Finally, the last co-teaching approach—and the one that requires the least amount of planning and preparation—includes one teacher delivering the main instruction while the other teacher assists the students (Lock et al., 2016).

The practice of co-teaching continues to gain momentum in schools across the country, particularly due to the benefits of teaching of students with disabilities (Friend, 2016). It should, however, be noted that no provision in the federal special education law mandates co-teaching or inclusion for individual students. The increased adoption of co-teaching is associated with the perception the approach provides a means through which the goals of education reform initiatives such as access to the general curriculum are achieved (Friend, 2016; Theoharis & Causton, 2014). Co-teaching is also considered to be a good avenue through the IDEA vision for a least restrictive learning environment that can be actualized (Alquraini, 2013; Friend, 2016). According to Walsh (2012), “co-teaching strategies provide a means through which the learning and achievement disparities that exist between students (with disabilities) and the general education students can be addressed.” With that said, the practice of co-teaching has not been unanimously adopted as the “best practice” for educating all students. In fact, there are divergent views regarding the importance of co-teaching in inclusive teaching, including some researchers

who suggested the approach is associated with enhanced performance (Silverman et al., 2009) while others question its impact of the learning outcomes for students with disabilities (Fuchs et al., 2015).

Swicegood and Miller (2015) identified the importance of co-teaching as part of an inclusive structure. The researchers focused on how two teachers working collaboratively can facilitate enhanced literature learning and understanding between general education students and students with disabilities. According to the Swicegood and Miller, an enhanced understanding of literature through co-teaching leads to better awareness and understanding of the needs of the students with disabilities, which helps to enhance self-determination among all students. Swicegood and Miller indicated the co-teachers collaboratively plan and implement supportive classroom practices that help to boost literature reading and writing among the students with disabilities, and these practices ultimately supported all students within the classroom.

It is important to note the effectiveness and benefits associated with co-teaching are dependent on various factors (Friend, 2016). One of the factors is the quality of the instruction provided by the teachers. Although the teachers may collaborate in the planning and the implementation of lessons, the quality of teaching content and the delivery approach may influence the effectiveness of co-teaching (Friend, 2016). The other factor that can affect the effectiveness of co-teaching is the fidelity with which the approach is introduced in the mainstream teaching environment (Friend, 2016). The frequency of common planning time provided to teachers in order to maximize their collaborative approach with co-teaching planning also impacts the effectiveness of the co-teaching methodology. Another important factor to be considered is the nature of the relationship between the two teachers who are involved in co-teaching (Friend, 2016). As Friend noted, “for success to be realized, the collaborating teachers

need to work voluntarily, they should have mutual goals, they should have shared responsibilities, they should have shared accountability, and they should have shared resources" (p. 54).

With all of those factors considered, some research still does not fully support the notion that co-teaching ultimately benefits students with disabilities. According to Hutchinson (2015), co-teaching is not associated with any significant benefit on the student performance among the students with disabilities. The researchers noted the students with disabilities who were placed in co-taught classes did not have a significant increase in their performance compared to the control. However, that lack of benefits associated with co-teaching could be associated with factors related to the quality, planning, and implementation of the strategy—as noted above—rather than the strategy itself. According to Hutchinson, the teachers (both the general education and special education teachers) who were involved in the co-teaching strategy via his research did not have the appropriate training required for the successful implementation of a quality teaching approach. As such, the researchers noted the need for the teachers involved in co-teaching to undergo professional training and development that will enable them to work effectively in delivering the goals of the co-teaching model, in the best interest of all students.

Lochner et al. (2019) also noted that co-teaching strategies are associated with enhanced cognitive performance. The researchers assessed the association between co-teaching and student cognitive engagement. The assessment involved a comparison of the performance between co-taught students and solo-taught students.

Further, Tremblay (2013) described the benefits of co-teaching with regard to enhancing academic performance among students with disabilities. The researchers compared the academic achievement and class attendance among the students with disabilities who attended the co-

taught, inclusive classes and those who attended substantially separate special education classes. Specifically, Tremblay assessed the effectiveness of the full-time co-teaching approach that was facilitated by one general education teacher and one special education teacher and assessed the academic performance based on the scores in reading and writing and mathematics. Although the students in the two groups showed no difference in academic performance early in grade one, Tremblay noted that "the students in the inclusive learning environment made substantially more progress" than those in substantially separate special education classes by the end of grade two. These data suggested the adoption of co-teaching strategies in inclusive classrooms, particularly early on in elementary school, is likely to enhance the performance of the students with disabilities. Though the study was limited to focusing on the two elementary grades, the results of the study demonstrate the impact that proactive approaches to inclusive learning opportunities for all students can make.

Moreover, evidence provided by Ruoff (2019) also supported the effectiveness of co-teaching in enhancing the academic benefit among students with disabilities. Ruoff specifically focused on the effectiveness of the "station teaching model" of co-teaching, as defined above. Ruoff noted the adoption of the teaching approach results in increased students' academic performance and engagement in teaching and learning activities. The researcher also noted the adoption of a "station teaching model" correlated with increased satisfaction of students with the overall conceptualization of the learning process.

Finally, the study carried out by Watson (2019) also provided in-depth insights into the benefits associated with the co-teaching in an inclusive learning environment. The researchers noted the co-teaching model benefits both students and teachers alike. The researchers also reported that both the students with disabilities and the general education students benefitted

from co-teaching approaches. One of the benefits highlighted by Watson is enhanced self-confidence among the students receiving co-taught instruction. However, Watson noted that for co-teaching to be beneficial, it is necessary for the teaching partners to have common planning time that facilitates the discussion on ways to effectively collaborate in the management of the class and the methods to adopt in the teaching. Watson also noted that for students to have maximum gains from the co-teaching model, they should have sufficient and equitable access to both teachers throughout the school year.

Public School District Budget Issues

Underfunding throughout public school districts in the United States has resulted in a high level of segregation and a continued increased in the academic achievement gap, especially for the minority student demographic, including students with disabilities (Harvey, 2018; Holtz, 2018). Harvey noted that most of the inner-city students are trapped in low funded schools due to their inability to afford the high cost of property in other areas, while the affluent families, on the other hand, are able to move to where the schools are better funded. With that being said, Mallett (2016) noted the prevalent issue of underfunding no longer is limited to urban, inner-city communities. Without adequate funding, schools cannot obtain the resources that are necessary to provide students with high quality educational experiences, ultimately leading to poor performance and continued underfunding (Blanchett, 2010; McCann, 2014). Moreover, school districts with a restrictive budget face various limitations in their quest to provide quality education to students with disabilities. The federal mandate for FAPE—free appropriate public education—for students in these underfunded school district can be challenging since they lack the resources required to train teachers, acquire equipment and facilities required for quality

education (Ekeh & Oladayo, 2013). It should be noted that budgeting for such students is challenging since their individual needs vary greatly (Ahearn, 2010).

With regard to special education funding in the United States, McCann's (2014) research painted a rather unfortunate picture. According to the report, which included over 9000 school districts across the country, the priorities of federal grants to states have been abandoned and have led to disparities in the funding approach. An example of these disparities is provided where in 2011, Reynolds Public School District in Portland, Oregon received approximately $156 per child in additional federal funding, while Rhode Island's Glocester School District received $351 per child in additional federal funding (McCann, 2014). A closer look at these two school districts notes a similarity in student demographics in academic achievement levels, yet the disparities in federal funding are remarkable.

Budgetary constraints throughout public school districts in the United States lead to various issues in the provision of quality education to all students. The provision of quality education, especially for students with disabilities, requires schools to generate and maintain additional services, structures and infrastructure in order to appropriately support all students so that each and every student has access to a free, appropriate public education (FAPE). Without adequate levels of federal, state, and local funding, these public school districts are unable to always provide these additional supports to students within their public school district (Ahearn, 2010; Ekeh & Oladayo, 2013). As a result of the inability to appropriate serve specific students, school districts have felt increasing pressure to place students in private schools outside of the school district. In the long-term, these increase out-of-district placements ultimately cost the public school district substantially more money. Consequently, to maintain a balanced budget

without annual overages and to cover the costs of the out-of-district placements, the districts must make cuts to other budget line items.

Likewise, one of the issues that public school districts face when managing a restrictive budget is the amount of professional development and training to its faculty and staff. As already noted, the provision of quality educational services to all students, especially for students with disabilities, requires the staff to receive ongoing training and professional development with specific specialized skills, expectations, and regulations (Ekeh & Oladayo, 2013). The effective adoption of teaching strategies and methodologies such as inclusive learning and the co-teaching depends upon adequate and quality professional development and training of teachers and support staff (Ekeh & Oladayo, 2013).

Districts with a limited school budget also face the challenge of hiring an adequate and quality teaching workforce (Sigafoos et al., 2010). It should be noted that for schools to provide quality education, especially to the students with disabilities, the school district must employ skilled, licensed educators and support them with ongoing training and professional development (Sigafoos et al., 2010). This training and professional development, ideally, should be aligned with the vision and goals of the school district. However, schools without sufficient funds are unable to implement evidence-based best practices (i.e., inclusive learning environments) due to an inability to hire appropriate numbers of faculty and staff. Such practices limit the ability of such schools to provide quality education to students with disabilities (Sigafoos et al., 2010).

Additionally, when working with a limited district-level budget, the biggest challenge that school districts face from a special education standpoint is the concern of adhering to state and federal to determine the students that require additional services. Without adequate levels of specialized staff (e.g., school counselors, psychologists, speech/language pathologists, etc.)

schools struggle to appropriately identify students at risk for academic, social and/or emotional failure (Mason-Williams et al., 2019). When school districts are able only to employ a limited number of these specialists, special education eligibility timelines and determination meeting deadlines can fall out of compliance due to the inability of these specialized staff to keep up with the demand of student special education eligibility evaluations, meetings, and other requirements, all of which include specific timelines for completion. Consequently, when a school district begins to fall out of compliance, these districts must make even more significant adjustments to their budgets and priority goals; in turn, these abrupt changes—often mandated by state department regulators—can negatively impact the morale of the employees of a school district (Mason-Williams et al., 2019).

The underfunded district schools that are serving the students with disabilities also face the challenge associated with the politics of state and self-interest. Although the Federal government sought to provide additional subsidy based on student population, the ability of congress to continually provide the required finance has diminished over time (Ahearn, 2010; Mason-Williams et al., 2019). Without the reauthorization of the policies that ensure the funding of special education, the district schools that have insufficient finances strain to implement policy on equal access to quality education to all students (Ostrander, 2015). Fortunately, some states have begun to take this funding issue into their own hands. Massachusetts, for example, recently passed the Student Opportunity Act of 2019, which will phase in an additional $1.4 billion to school districts across the state over four years (Massachusetts DESE, 2019). The increased funding includes a mandate that funds must directly support students within the minority demographic and students with disabilities.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive study was to describe the perceptions of district-wide administrators regarding their school district's services and supports in relation to special education. The participants of this study described their perceptions on the district's services and supports in relation to their schools identified inclusive philosophy that ensures effective progress for all students with disabilities. This literature review provided a conceptual framework of substantially separate schools and programs, the benefits for students when placed within an inclusive learning environment, as well as a theoretical framework for the research study. As seen in the review of the literature, a cohesive organization that adheres to a strong mission and vision is one best prepared for success. In the context of a public school district, a high-performing organization can, in theory, provide students with the appropriate levels of supports to promote an inclusive environment and philosophy. Yet, budgetary constraints often hinder a school district's ability to promote inclusion for all students, including those with disabilities. A transformational leader must demonstrate attributes that support the employees of the organization at all times, while simultaneously focusing on accomplishing the short-term and long-term goals of the organization.

Looking ahead, Chapter 3 of this research study builds on the framework of the literature review to provide an organized methodology for my action research study. The methodology chapter highlights the appropriateness of the research methodology and design being utilized, the study's population and sampling methods, and the study's procedures. The chapter then concludes with a discussion of the study's ethical considerations, assumptions, limitations, and delimitations.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive study was to describe the perceptions of district-wide administrators regarding their school district's services and supports in relation to special education. The participants of this study described their perceptions on the district's services and supports in relation to their schools identified inclusive philosophy that ensures effective progress for all students with disabilities. This study was guided by the following three research questions:

RQ1. How do district-wide administrators of one Massachusetts public school district perceive their school district's ability to promote and maximize an inclusive philosophy for all students with disabilities?

RQ2. What barriers do district-wide administrators of one Massachusetts public school district identify that hinders their school's ability to appropriately support students with disabilities within their home district who cannot make effective progress within an inclusive learning environment?

RQ3. How do schools appropriately support students within their home district who cannot make effective progress within an inclusive learning environment?

This chapter serves to explain the research methodology of the study, including the specific research design, the target population, and sampling methods used. Additionally, this chapter covers a detailed explanation of the data collection procedures used within this study and conclude with a discussion on the ethical considerations that I followed, as well as highlighting the study's assumptions, limitations, and delimitations.

Research Methodology

This study followed a qualitative methodology, as its purpose was to describe the perceptions and experiences of district-wide administrators of one school district located in the state of Massachusetts. A qualitative methodology is a naturalistic approach to research where researchers can explore a phenomenon by having participants answer questions in any manner they see fit (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). There are many benefits to qualitative research, as the open-ended data collection methods encourage participants to examine a topic in deeper detail, as they are encouraged to provide answers that include their perceptions, lived experiences, behaviors, feelings, and attitudes (Silverman, 2016). A quantitative methodology was considered for this project, but ultimately rejected, as the goal of a quantitative methodology is to concentrate on the quantity of responses, determining any relationships or levels of significance in the dataset collected (Goertzen, 2017). Quantitative research is based upon mathematical and statistical analysis, and does not encourage participants to openly discuss the more important emotional insight, which is required in this current study.

Research Design

A qualitative descriptive research design was used in this study. There are many benefits that this research design can bring in qualitative studies, namely, that I am requesting participants to describe their perceptions or experiences when collecting the data. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative descriptive study was to discover and understand a phenomenon through the world-views, perceptions, and experiences of the participants. This, in turn, allowed for a rich description of their perceptions and experiences through easily understood language (Colorafi & Evans, 2016). Other qualitative research designs were considered for this study, but ultimately rejected, including that of ethnography and grounded theory. Ethnography is a qualitative

research design that aims to understand behavior of a specific culture through the means of observations (Fetterman, 2019). Because this study aimed to have participants describe their perceptions and experiences of their school district's services and supports in relation to special education, ethnography was not an appropriate design. Additionally, grounded theory was also considered for this study; however, this theory was rejected since the goal of grounded theory is to generate a theory through methodical data collection and analysis techniques (Glaser & Strauss, 2017). Because the two theoretical frameworks of the social role theory and transformational leadership theory are guiding this current study, grounded theory was rejected.

Population and Sampling Methods

The target populations for this research study included ten school district administrators who occupied the roles of a principal and a special education team chairperson. In this study, a special education team chairperson was defined as an individual responsible for the management and oversight of special education supports (student IEP creation and compliance), programming, and structures present in the respective school(s) under their supervision. All participants, from each population category (principals and special education team chairpersons), met the following criteria in order to participate in this study:

1. Each participant was an active employee in the school district under study in the state of Massachusetts.
2. Each participant held the role or job title as an administrator for the public school district being studied.
3. Each participant possessed an active state-level administrator's license or related qualifications for their respective position in which they were currently employed.
4. Each participant worked in his or her current position for a period of one year.

When recruiting participants, I followed a purposive sampling method that focused on recruitment efforts that were in alignment with the requirements that potential participants were required to meet (Terrell, 2016). The sample size for conducting data collection was 10 to 15 participants, which is an acceptable number of participants in qualitative research (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Participants spanned all levels of education within the school district that include elementary, middle and high school levels. Although I identified a sample size of 10 to 15 individuals, the final number of participants was determined by data saturation. Data saturation refers to the point in the data collection process, where no new information is found, and the participants' answers appear redundant (Faulkner & Trotter, 2017). I collected data via the use of semistructured interviews, where I asked each participant the same nine open-ended questions in private one-on-one interview. Each interview was electronically recorded and transcribed in preparation for data analysis.

Data Collection and Study Procedures

Prior to collecting the data, I obtained approval from my university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and site approval from the Massachusetts school district where this study took place (see Appendix A and Appendix B). Based on the three overarching research questions, I developed nine open-ended questions that I asked to each participant (see Appendix C) in a private interview format via the Zoom virtual meeting platform. Prior to beginning the interview process, I enlisted a panel of experts to review my semistructured interview questions. The panel of experts included three individuals who have similar educational and professional experiences as myself. Each panel member was provided with a list of the open-ended questions, as well as the problem being studied, the purpose of the study, the research questions, the identified methodology, and the theoretical frameworks. Each panel member reviewed the questions to

ensure they were in alignment with the study's structure and they did not recommend any changes to me that could have brought the questions into stronger alignment. This process accounted for researcher bias: ensuring that did not inject any personal influences into the data collection methods (Castillo-Montoya, 2016).

Before conducting the semistructured interviews, I field-tested the interview questions to ensure that participants understood them. In order to field test the interview questions, I recruited the first three individuals who met the criteria for this study from my target population. When completing field-testing, I informed the first three individuals that although they will be completing semistructured interviews, their answers would not be contributing to my data collection. Instead, the first three individuals provided feedback on the structure of the interview questions and their level of understanding. Additionally, the first three interviews of field-testing allowed me to practice interviewing and feel comfortable with the process (Kallio et al., 2016). When reviewing the semistructured interview questions, I was able to practice interviews with them following the same interview protocol that had been created. After field-testing, the individuals were able to provide me with their recommendations on how to change the semistructured interview questions to make them easier to understand, or how to improve the structure of the semistructure interview process.

After constructing the semistructured interview questions, I then contacted district-wide administrators at the identified Massachusetts school district. I received the names of principals and special education team chairpersons and contacted them via email, inviting them to participate in the study. After ensuring that each participant met the criteria to participate in the study, I then forwarded them a consent form that provided them with information regarding the study, what was expected of them as participants, and the level of risk associated in participating

in this study. It should be noted that participants experienced little to no risks participating in this study. Though anticipated to be minimal, psychological and social risks were listed on the consent form. Specifically, there was a psychological risk of guilt based on the participant's self-realization of his/her impact of any struggles within the school district or lack of appropriate support for a particular group of students. The social risk included a sense of embarrassment or potential for a loss of respect for colleagues as data and results were compiled and presented. After reviewing the consent form, signing the consent form, and returning it to me, the participants then scheduled their private one-on-one interviews with myself.

Each interview was conducted in an environment that supports confidentiality, and was convenient for both the participant and myself. Each interview lasted approximately one hour. Due to the current COVID-19 pandemic and related restrictions around face-to-face interactions with others, it is to be noted that my semistructured interviews and field-testing were conducted via the use of the Zoom virtual meeting platform. During the interview I asked each of the participants the same questions and electronically recorded each interview and transcribed each interview in preparation for data analysis. The structure of the interview questions prioritized being open-ended and objective, allowing for the opportunity to maximize breadth and depth of the participants' responses to each question. However, I did prompt each participant when necessary, in order to better understand a response or to have him or her expand on their thoughts, perceptions, and experiences that were being discussed.

After each of the semistructured interviews was completed and the transcriptions were developed, I scheduled a follow-up interview with each of the participants using the Zoom virtual meeting platform. The follow-up interview accounted for member checking—a process where the participants and myself reviewed the transcripts of the interview together in order to

determine accuracy of the information. This follow-up interview lasted between 15 to 20 minutes and the participants were able to review their transcripts for any inaccuracies, including reviewing the initial analysis of my findings.

Data Analysis Plan

I analyzed the data by following a qualitative thematic analysis. A thematic analysis allowed me to identify, analyze, and interpret patterns of meaning within the gathered dataset (Attride-Stirling, 2001). In order to complete a thematic analysis, I reviewed the transcripts of the interview data, in order to highlight nodes and codes that can identify any emerging themes. I used both NVivo 12.0 and a qualitative codebook in order to identify the codes in the dataset. NVivo is a qualitative software program that is utilized at the majority of research universities. When completing the analysis, I followed these specific steps:

1. Familiarized myself with the dataset.
2. Assigned preliminary codes that described the content.
3. Searched for patterns or themes within the codes.
4. Reviewed the themes.
5. Defined and named themes appropriately.
6. Aligned themes with the codebook to demonstrate the participants' exact quotations that support the themes.

Methods for Establishing Trustworthiness

In order to establish trustworthiness of the results, the qualitative interviews were conducted with a target population sample consisting of building principals and special education administrators who met the same criteria. It was essential to gather the perspectives and opinions of a sample that includes elementary, middle, and high school personnel. Additionally,

oftentimes in public education, an “us vs. them” mentality exists between special education and general education practitioners. As such, in order to frame the results of this study in a holistic and inclusive manner, it was essential that perspectives from each silo—general education and special education—were heard and considered.

The components that were crucial to use to establish trustworthiness were grounded in credibility, transferability, dependability, and triangulation (Shenton, 2004). In order to account for trustworthiness in this study, I accounted for researcher bias—a limitation of this study—by creating an interview protocol and completing a member-checking interview. As a current special education administrator with a general familiarity of macro-level issues with both student inclusion and budgetary restrictions, I hoped that my research uncovered inconsistencies in perceptions of inclusion among the district-level administrators. Specifically, I anticipated that a general discrepancy in perceptions of inclusionary practice—and related strategies to maximize inclusion for all students—existed in my research. These potential biases were important to point out as the basis for my research, but also so that I maintained a self-awareness of these biases as I conducted my research and gathered my data.

Prior to beginning the interview process, I enlisted a panel of experts to review my semistructured interview questions. The panel of experts included three individuals who have similar educational and professional experiences as myself. Each panel member was provided with a list of the open-ended questions, as well as the problem being studied, the purpose of the study, the research questions, the identified methodology, and the theoretical frameworks. Each panel member reviewed the questions to ensure they are in alignment with the study’s structure. This process accounted for researcher bias, ensuring that I did not inject any personal influences into the data collection methods (Castillo-Montoya, 2016).

Additionally, I also accounted for trustworthiness of the study by completing field-testing. During field-testing, I recruited the first three individuals who met the criteria for this study from my target population, yet I informed the individuals that although they will be participating in semistructured interviews, their answers will not account towards the data collection. Instead, the purpose of field-testing was to review the interview questions and process to determine they were easy to understand and make sense (Kallio et al., 2016). Additionally, when reviewing the semistructured interview questions, I was able to practice interviewing them following the same interview protocol that had been created. After field-testing, the individuals provided me with their recommendations on how to change the semistructured interview questions to make them easier to understand.

After each of the semistructured interviews was completed and the transcriptions were developed, I scheduled a follow-up interview with each of the participants using the Zoom virtual meeting platform. The follow-up interview accounted for member checking—a process where the participants and myself reviewed the transcripts of the interview together in order to determine accuracy of the information. This follow-up interview lasted between 15 and 20 minutes and the participants were able to review their transcripts for any inaccuracies.

Additionally, I accounted for other aspects of trustworthiness of this study, as I have described the step-by-step procedures of the study so that it can be replicated at any time. Also, I have listed the criteria needed in order for participants to participate in the study. Meeting these criteria aids in ensuring the participants have the educational and professional experiences that can answer the semistructured interview questions.

Researcher's Role

My personal motivation to conducting this qualitative descriptive research study was based on my own experiences as a special education teacher and administrator. I have seen first-hand ways in which public school districts can impact a student—positively and negatively—based on its availability of resources, budget constraints, programming definitions and implementation, and its adherence to a mission and vision. As such, it is my hope that this descriptive research study can provide key conclusions and recommendations for other public school districts to use in the development of their own inclusive practice for all students. While this research strictly adhered to the compliance factors of confidentiality, anonymity, and objectivity, it is important to note that my own experiences form the basis of this research study. It is essential that I approached this study in a way that aims to minimize bias.

Ethical Considerations

This study took multiple steps in order to protect the human participants. Prior to data collection, this research study received formal approval from Abilene Christian University's Institutional Review Board (IRB), as well as site approval from the identified Massachusetts school district. Prior to beginning each private, one-on-one interview, participants received a consent form that highlighted information that included all demographic data were used solely for data collection purposes and remain anonymous. All interview responses remained fully confidential and were used solely for data collection and analysis. The structure of the interview was semistructured. A series of questions were asked, in order, but there was the potential for follow-up and probing questions throughout the entirety of the interview. The interviews were conducted virtually via the Zoom meeting platform and were recorded to ensure clarity and accuracy. Participation in the interview was completely voluntary and answering any/all of these

questions was optional. Additionally, the participants were required to sign the consent form before participating, and were advised of the level of risk associated in participating in this project. This study exposed participants to little or no risks. No data were collected until full IRB approval was provided for this study, and no data were used without full written consent of each participant.

I also ensured that no private information was identified in this study, as referred to each participant in a numerical fashion (e.g., Participant 1, Participant 2, etc.). Additionally, each participant's school names were not used in the study, as I referred to the schools in an alphabetical manner (e.g., School A, School B, etc.). I will destroy all paper and electronic copies after a period of five years, which is in alignment with my university's Institutional Review Board.

Assumptions

Simon and Goes (2013) noted that assumptions include beliefs and presumptions in the research that cannot be proven yet are necessary for the purpose of the context of the research study. One of the overarching assumptions made as part of this research study was the level of honesty found within the responses received from the interviews. Culturally, educators are theoretically expected to be honest and trustworthy. Additionally, by emphasizing anonymity and confidentiality to all participants of this research study, it was assumed that all responses are accurate and truthful, to the best knowledge of the participants. Therefore, it was assumed that all participants answered the semistructured interview questions in a candid, honest, and straightforward manner. Also, it was assumed that each of the participants had the professional and personal experiences in order to answer the semistructured interview questions in full.

Finally, it was assumed that throughout this research study, any perceived bias or subjectivity toward an inclusive educational practice was based on federal and state regulations and expectations to provide students with the least restrictive learning environment. As such, any and all references to an inclusive practice were grounded in the legal expectations and foundational philosophy that an inclusive learning environment is beneficial for all students.

Limitations

Theofanidis and Fountouki (2018) noted that limitations within a research study include any potential weaknesses typically out of the control of the researcher and also correlate with the research design. There were some limitations that must be discussed in this current study. The first limitation was that of the participants themselves. Because I completed a study that is located in one Massachusetts school district and interviewed district-wide administrators, I cannot guarantee the results can be generalized to other populations and geographical areas outside of what was studied. Therefore, in order to understand other geographical areas and populations of individuals, future studies may have to be completed. Another limitation in this study was that of research bias. Because I have personal experiences, thoughts, and perceptions regarding the topic being studied, researcher bias can occur. In order to limit researcher bias, I created an interview protocol, where a panel of experts reviewed the study and the associated semistructured interview questions to ensure alignment. Additionally, I completed member checking where the participants reviewed the transcripts and informed me of any inaccuracies. This process ensured the data collected were accurate and were in alignment with the problem being studied.

Delimitations

As noted by Theofanidis and Fountouki (2018), delimitations within a research study are set by researcher and are derived based on the parameters or boundaries of the scope of the research. Because this study aimed to describe the perceptions of district-wide administrators regarding their school district's services and supports in relation to special education in one single Massachusetts school district, the study was delimited to the following individuals:

1. Each participant was an active employee in the school district under study in the state of Massachusetts.
2. Each participant held the role or job title as an administrator for the public school district being studied.
3. Each participant possessed an active state-level administrator's license or related qualifications for their respective position in which they were currently employed.
4. Each participant worked in his or her current position for a period of one year.

By ensuring that each of the participants met these criteria, it aided in ensuring the data collected were reliable and provided a stronger basis for the answering of the research questions.

Summary

Many school districts provide substantially separate programs as an alternative-learning environment for students who struggle within the general education classroom setting. These therapeutic classrooms sometimes decrease the level of academic rigor for students (Kirby, 2017). As a result, students naturally develop gaps in their levels of effective progress over time, making it increasingly more difficult for these students to ever return to an inclusive learning environment. Unfortunately, although many of these students may have initially been taught to dream big and seek to achieve great things, they ultimately get left behind when enrolled in

alternative education programs (El-Sherif &Niyozov, 2015). Yet, if the academic rigor and structure within these substantially separate programs remained at a high level, while simultaneously providing these students with the extra necessary academic and social/emotional supports in order to make effective educational progress, the number of transfers to more restrictive alternative learning environments would, in theory, naturally decline. Thus, the purpose of this qualitative descriptive study was to describe the perceptions of district-wide administrators regarding their school district's services and supports in relation to special education. The participants of this study described their perceptions on the district's services and supports in relation to their schools identified inclusive philosophy that ensures effective educational progress for all students with disabilities.

This chapter explained the research methodology of the study, including the specific research design, the target population, and sampling methods used. Additionally, this chapter covered a detailed explanation of the data collection procedures used within this study and concluded with a discussion on the ethical considerations that I followed, as well as highlighted the study's assumptions, limitations, and delimitations. The next chapter will provide a thorough overview of the results of the study.

Chapter 4: Results

The problem being studied was that many students with disabilities unable to find academic success within an inclusive academic environment are often transitioned into a more restrictive—or substantially separate—alternative education setting. It was unknown how school districts perceive special education programming in relation to reaching its goal of maximizing its inclusive philosophy for all students within the school district. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative descriptive study was to describe the perceptions of district-wide administrators regarding their school district's services and supports in relation to special education. This study was guided by the following research questions:

RQ1. How do district-wide administrators of one Massachusetts public school district perceive their school district's ability to promote and maximize an inclusive philosophy for all students with disabilities?

RQ2. What barriers do district-wide administrators of one Massachusetts public school district identify that hinders their school's ability to appropriately support students with disabilities within their home district who cannot make effective progress within an inclusive learning environment?

RQ3. How do schools appropriately support students within their home district who cannot make effective progress within an inclusive learning environment?

This chapter presents the findings and the results of the study, with an overview of each theme that emerged from the dataset. Each participant completed a private semistructured interview, where each of their responses to the open-ended questions were recorded and transcribed in preparation for data analysis. When discussing the findings of the study, I have

provided an overview of specific participant quotations that supported the theme being discussed under each research question.

Trustworthiness

In order to establish trustworthiness of the results, the qualitative interviews were conducted with a target population sample consisting of building principals and special education administrators. The crucial components for establishing trustworthiness were grounded in credibility, transferability, dependability, and triangulation (Shenton, 2004). In order to account for trustworthiness in this study, I accounted for researcher bias by creating an interview protocol and completing member checking follow-up interviews. Prior to beginning the interview process, I enlisted a panel of experts to review my semistructured interview questions. The panel of experts included three individuals who had similar educational and professional experiences as myself. Each panel member was provided with a list of the open-ended questions, as well as the problem being studied, the purpose of the study, the research questions, the identified methodology, and the theoretical framework. Each panel member reviewed the questions to ensure they were in alignment with the study's structure and were recommended to provide any changes to me that could bring the questions into stronger alignment. Each of the panel members did not recommend any changes to the interview questions. This process accounted for researcher bias, ensuring I was not injecting any personal influences into the data collection methods (Castillo-Montoya, 2016).

After each of the semistructured interviews were completed and the transcriptions had been developed, I scheduled a follow-up interview with each of the participants. The follow-up interview accounted for member checking—a process where the participants and I reviewed the transcripts of the interview together in order to determine accuracy of the information. This

follow-up interview lasted approximately 15 minutes and the participants were able to review their transcripts for any inaccuracies. Each of the participants did not recommend any changes to be made and reported that each of their transcripts were accurate.

Additionally, I accounted for other aspects of trustworthiness of this study, as I had described the step-by-step procedures of the study so that it could be replicated at any time. Also, I listed the criteria needed in order for participants to participate in the study. Meeting this criteria aided in ensuring the participants had the educational and professional experiences that could answer the semistructured interview questions.

Data Collection Methods and Analysis

The final sample size for conducting data collection included 10 participants, which was an acceptable number of participants in qualitative research (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Participants spanned all levels of education within the school district that included elementary, middle and high school levels. Although I had identified a sample size of 10 to 15 individuals, the final number of participants was determined by data saturation. Data saturation referred to the point in the data collection process where no new information was found, and the participants' answers appeared redundant (Faulkner & Trotter, 2017). Data saturation occurred in this process on the eighth interview; however, I completed two additional interviews to ensure that it was occurring. I collected data via the use of semistructured interviews, where I asked each participant the same nine open-ended questions in private one-on-one interviews via the Zoom meeting platform. Each interview was electronically recorded and transcribed in preparation for data analysis.

I analyzed the data by following a qualitative thematic analysis. A thematic analysis allowed me to identify, analyze, and interpret patters of meaning within the gathered dataset

(Attride-Stirling, 2001). In order to complete a thematic analysis, I reviewed the transcripts of the interview data, in order to highlight nodes and codes that identified any emerging themes (Attride-Stirling, 2001). I used both NVivo 12.0 and a qualitative codebook in order to identify the codes in the dataset. NVivo is a qualitative software program that is utilized at the majority of research universities. When completing the analysis, I followed these specific steps:

1. Familiarized himself with the dataset.
2. Assigned preliminary codes that described the content.
3. Searched for patterns or themes within the codes.
4. Reviewed the themes.
5. Defined and named themes appropriately.
6. Aligned themes with the codebook to demonstrate the participants' exact quotations that supported the themes.

Participant Demographic Data

I completed semistructured interviews with each of the 10 participants. Each individual that participated in the study reported a variety of demographic background information such as that of age, gender, experience in the district of which they worked, education, and position. Participant demographic data are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Participant Demographic Data

	Age	Gender	Experience in District	Education	Position
Participant 1	35	Female	9	M.Ed.	Team Chairperson
Participant 2	32	Female	1	M.Ed.	Team Chairperson
Participant 3	55	Male	4	M.Ed.	Principal
Participant 4	56	Male	22	Ed.D.	Principal
Participant 5	68	Female	9	M.Ed.	Principal
Participant 6	44	Female	6	M.Ed.	Principal
Participant 7	41	Male	5	Ed.D.	Principal
Participant 8	35	Female	1	M.Ed.	Team Chairperson
Participant 9	50	Female	9	M.Ed.	Team Chairperson
Participant 10	36	Female	1	Ed.D.	Team Chairperson

Age and Gender

From the total participant sample, 40% of the participants reported they were between the ages of 30 to 39 years; 30% reported they were between the ages of 50 to 59 years; 20% reported they were between the ages of 40 to 49 years; and the remaining 10% reported they were between the ages of 60 years or older. The average age of all 10 participants was that of 45.20 years. Throughout all 10 participants, 54% identified as female, whereas the remaining 46% identified as male.

Experience and Education Levels in the District

The participants presented with a variety of experience in terms of years. For example, 90% of participants reported having between 1 to 10 years of experience within the district, and the remaining 10% reported having 11 to 20 years of experience within the district. The average number of years in the district between all participants was that of 6.7 years. Each participant in this study either reported having a M.Ed. or an Ed.D. and 70% of participants reported having an M.Ed. and 30% reported having an Ed.D.

Positions Within the District

Fifty percent of participants reported they were working as a team chairperson, and the other 50% reported they were working as a principal. When it came to principal positions, three principals reported working in the elementary school setting; one principal reported working in the middle school setting, and one principal reported working in the high school setting. In terms of team chairpersons, the participants reported three of them worked as an elementary school team chairperson, one participant reported working as a middle school team chairperson, and one participant reported working as a high school team chairperson.

Findings

The findings are discussed in relation to each of the three research questions that guided the study.

School District's Ability to Promote and Maximize an Inclusive Philosophy

The first research question explored how district-wide administrators perceived their school district's ability to promote and maximize an inclusive philosophy for all students with disabilities. Two themes emerged for the first research question: (a) all participants' definition of inclusive philosophy was strong and (b) participants perceived a misalignment between an

inclusive philosophy and their respective school's implementation and practice. All participants contributed to this theme. Table 2 depicts the codes that were used to determine the themes.

Table 2

Codes for RQ1 Themes

Codes
All students
All staff members
Best for students
Work together
All learners
Including all learners
Co-teaching
Co-teaching model
Having access
Opportunities
Maximum potential
Assumption
No training
Students/Staff Excluded
Not included
Lack of training & knowledge
Lack of professional development
Staff Influenced
Lack of understanding

The two themes for RQ1 that emerged from the data highlighted how the majority of the participants were able to provide a strong definition of an inclusive philosophy, but also that a misalignment exists between the district-wide philosophy and the actual execution of these principles within schools. These results highlighted how the school district had an ability to promote and maximize an inclusive philosophy when appropriately executed. This was evident when Participant 1 defined an inclusive philosophy as being "about kind of really thinking about not just all students, but all staff members and how everyone fits together into school is kind of a learning environment generally."

Additionally, Participant 3 (P3) was able to discuss an inclusive philosophy as being based upon what is best for the students:

> I believe that our philosophy is one that is based upon doing what's best for students. I believe it's one that looking at all students, what they need and being able to meet them at their point of the greatest need, and certainly recognizing the fact that it works best when we, we all work together and we are able to, you know, really, really take a deep dive into what's best for every individual student and meet them there.

Participant 4 (P4) highlighted the importance of an inclusive philosophy as being important for all students, “Baggage they come with, or any kind of other issues that the children or the families might bring with them. To me, it includes all learners.”

Participant 5 (P5) agreed with P4 as they highlighted the importance of all learners when discussing an inclusive philosophy:

> Every student who walks through the door in my elementary school, our elementary school we're required to educate them to the best of, of our ability, no matter what their disability, what reported that they are required to serve all students. We have responsibility to serve all students. No matter how they come to us with whatever perceived deficits strengths, weaknesses, and it's our job to make sure we meet those needs.

Participant 6 (P6) was able to highlight how their definition of inclusive learning included that of co-teaching:

> The ideal inclusion setting is more of a co-teaching model where the teachers plan together and look at the big picture of the classroom. And so, you know, I see that as...the gen ed. classroom teacher, is looking at subject area and scope and sequence and what the

> lessons coming up are, and then the special education inclusion teacher giving that individualization for what their students would benefit from that ultimately ended up probably benefiting all of the students. But you know, that work together and kind of going through the process of the curriculum and providing what's needed for all students in front of them...but really kind of differentiating; for specifically the inclusion students...Allowing them to be in the classroom, learning the same material as other students are at the same time.

Participant 7 (P7) stated the importance of supporting students who are on Individualized Education Plans (IEP) and placing them in general education classes as much as possible:

> Inclusion to me means including students who are on IEP plans and in as many general education settings as possible with supports. I would say inclusion for them is including them as in as many general ed. classes as you can.

Participant 8 (P8) focused their definition on students with disabilities in general, stating, "Inclusion is defined as our students with special needs having access to their peers who are general education students who are not receiving services." Participant 9 (P9) discussed inclusion meaning all students have access to supports that aid in being successful, noting that "inclusion is an opportunity and an environment that allows for any and all students to access what they need in order to be the most successful." Finally, Participant 10 (P10) reported an inclusive philosophy as being:

> A philosophy of a school to ensure that all students are achieving their maximum potential by being exposed to as many different types of learner's teaching styles as possible; making sure that kids are getting the full breadth and depth of the experience and knowledge in a building because there really is something for everyone to offer.

Within theme one, participants reported that although their school districts had the ability to promote and maximize an all-inclusive philosophy, they did feel that there as a misalignment of maximizing inclusive philosophies in the school district. The participants either did not know their school's cultural stance on an inclusive philosophy, or they did not believe they were operating 100% under their personal identified philosophy. For example, P1 discussed how many individuals within the district would not be able to define what an inclusive philosophy is; therefore, they mentioned it is important to provide training to individuals so the entire school climate can operate within this philosophy:

> It would be that we should probably articulate what an inclusive philosophy is sooner rather than later, and put it out there because if we just assume that we have one as a district, that's, it's kind of a dangerous assumption. I'm not sure if every teacher in this district would know that we have an inclusive philosophy. And I think that if you put each of them kind of toes to the fire or whatever the expression, they would all agree that inclusive practices are important, but I don't think that we would have a uniform concept of what those are and what that looks like in a classroom.

P2 was able to discuss how although her school had an identified inclusive philosophy, they were not living up to their abilities to provide this philosophy to students and teachers. P2 reported:

> In my opinion it does not provide enough training knowledge support within inclusion. So, in terms of the topic of students that are on an IEP being are a part of the classroom, however, they're not counted in head counts for attendance. Isn't that crazy? I've seen examples of teachers being trained or have received Professional Development in LGBTQ related topics, which are incredibly important, but not in special education

> topics. And that makes up a huge population of our school, especially having our ASD (autism spectrum disorder) program and the elementary therapeutic program housed in our building. I feel like that training is needed more so than, you know, some other lower elementary schools. Seeing and hearing some things throughout my first year leads me to believe that not a lot is done in terms of promoting our philosophy at the building level to promote inclusion.

P3 discussed how even though the school has an inclusive philosophy, she perceived a misalignment because there are still areas of where students and teachers are experiencing stigmas related to not being included in mainstream classes:

> Some of the issues we have are due to is due to our academic class leveling. And I know that's been debated in some areas, particularly in the science and math, but I think the more levels you have unfortunately I think it creates more barriers. I think it also dilutes expectations with those that might be in the lower-level sections. And I think it becomes a stigma for some students. And I also think it also becomes like a stigma maybe for some teachers who are teaching those kids. So, it still bothers me that we have these levels at our school. Is that something I wanted to try to change? Yes. Although I know that the co-teaching is trend it's, it's changed the mindset of a few teachers, and I know it has…I've talked to them about it, but I know we have a ways to go.

P4 was able to discuss how there is misalignment between the school's inclusive philosophy due to the evaluators being subjective versus that of objective:

> But still there's a bit in there that I think is influenced by the evaluator and influenced by the classroom teacher; sometimes we have teachers meaning well that will say, well, you know, you need to do another assessment with this child or take a look again because I

> know something's going on here even when your data doesn't show it. So, I think the assessments and the training of the tutors that do that assessment probably is maybe the biggest issue that I have right now, because it can be kind of uneven.

P5 appeared to agree with P4 stating that more subjective assessments are occurring as data are not always being used to make decisions. They stated:

> So, I think even though it might not be orchestrated perfectly, when we need to look at an individual kid like that we will get that done and we will have the information because it's all out there; we just have to collect it where I think we could do a better job is somehow organizing that information so we don't lose track of it.

P6 discussed misalignment between their school's inclusive philosophy and current practices by discussing tiered instruction:

> So, I think more understanding of tiered instruction, more understanding of what it is. That you can push some students, but you cannot with others...kind of that bigger picture of not every student's going to understand everything and learn everything in the same way and having more education around that, just because we're saying a student needs some type of service or support from a special education inclusion teacher.... but it's not about the teacher. It's not that the teacher is doing anything wrong. It's more about seeing things from a different lens. Yeah, so I think maybe more just work around seeing what students really benefit from.

P8 was able to highlight similar perceptions to that of P6, as they discussed inclusion is not necessarily occurring because all of the students are grouped together:

> I think what is a struggle more is kids that we call inclusion aren't necessarily getting the supports they need because they are all grouped together. So, then they're not necessarily

being able to experience the same things as their general education cohort. They would be if things were more equitably distributed across cohorts.

Barriers That Hinder a School's Ability to Support Students With Disabilities

The second research question explored how district-wide administrators identified barriers that hindered their school's ability to appropriately support students with disabilities within their home district who could not make effective progress within an inclusive learning environment. One theme emerged from the data for RQ2, which identified a lack of support, resources, and training being as barriers for an inclusive philosophy. All 10 participants contributed to this theme, and Table 5 depicts the codes that were used to determine the theme.

Table 3

Codes for RQ2 Theme 3

	Support, resources, and training are identified barriers for an inclusive philosophy
Codes	
	Budget issues
	Personnel issues
	Staff training
	Supporting students
	Supporting faculty
	Socio-emotional needs
	More collaboration
	Role and jobs

The lone theme for RQ2 that emerged from the dataset highlighted how the participants perceived barriers as being a lack of support, lack of resources, and lack of training in order to promote an inclusive philosophy. An example of how the participants perceived different barriers can be seen with P1, who stated, "I can say that I think a lot of my colleagues are gonna say there's budget issues and there's personnel issues, or we just don't have the staff to do as

much as we could which might be true." P2 was able to discuss a major identified barrier around the amount of staff training provided by the school district:

> Yeah, so the biggest one for me is that staff training piece. And if contracts have support staff kind of coming in 15 minutes beforehand and leaving 15 minutes afterwards, that leaves me no time to train the support staff. And they are the ones that are the anchors of everything; they're in the nitty gritty of the day. And if I can't train them without a student right next to them on how to be accepting or promote independence, then that's a big limitation to the programs.

P3 discussed the importance of school resources and training focusing on social-emotional needs of both teachers and students:

> At the end of the day, you know, the more work we can do on social/emotional learning and how that impacts our students would go a long way to breaking down barriers and also supporting our students at a much better place because that is a growing issue, and it's going to be even more so when we come back to whatever school is in September. I think that's something that we really need to put a big focus in is how do we support our students and the social emotional needs as well as our faculty, quite frankly in that area as well.

P4 was able to highlight the importance of staff training, as they stated that there are some teachers who do not have the skillset to work with particular students effectively:

> Probably the biggest barrier for me is that we are still operating in a way that's in the best interest of students so you kind of skirt around some of the issues you might have with staff members that aren't as good working with particular students. Now that could be academic, it could be social/emotional, but that I think is to the detriment of particular

> teachers or staff members that don't have those skills, but it's also a detriment to the student body as a whole, because then you're putting maybe students with teachers or staff members that should be better skilled at those kinds of things, thinking about academic or social emotional issues.

P4 went on to report:

> You have classroom teachers that other teachers say, well, no, they can't teach this kind of child, or they cannot keep teaching him or her. They're not good at working with this particular child. So, we kind of skirt around that issue instead of training those teachers or working with those teachers; we end up putting those children in a different classroom. And as a result, for the teachers that are fantastic with social/emotional issues, or working with students with specific academic needs, they kind of get the largest group of those particular students. So that, that to me is a struggle and it's gone on for years. And we need to, I think, work on changing that.

P5 discussed the importance of school resources such as that of the team chair. The participant reported that over the time they had been at the school, the team chair was replaced each year, making it difficult to provide resources for teachers to fully understand their roles within their job descriptions:

> I've been here nine years, and basically since I came here, we had a new Team Chair every year and that's a handicap because the SPED teachers are trying to figure out what their role and job is. And then when that changes and the expectations change and they do because you have individual expectations and rapport with that person that person is supposed to be a resource to the SPED staff in the building. And there has to be a level of

> trust developed and not only that, and then trust and understanding. When you don't have trust in any kind of administrative person prior, that takes a long time to develop.

P6 discussed staff training, reporting that there are some teachers who have a particular mindset when working with students, which can affect them negatively:

> Unfortunately, I do feel like there's those teachers that you can do the best you can with them. They've just, they've been stuck in a mindset for years and you gotta just work with the majority. They really are doing a good job at the same time. You know, this whole situation that we're in now has given me hope that maybe even teachers that reluctant in using technology are actually benefiting from using technology and trying new things.

A lack of support was identified by P7, who was able to discuss teachers buying-in to the concept of co-teaching:

> I don't think it's even district level stuff or not support for it. I think it's not buy-in. So, for example, buy-in for co-teaching is the hard one. I would say, because even teachers who signed up, aren't always buying in, or they may co-teach one year and not the next; I think it's schedule structure, it's support from the top too...making sure that all of the admins are supporting the initiative. And we've had some turnover at the building and district levels recently, so that's been a bit of a hurdle. So anyway, but it's just, I think it's hard to get consistency with support.

P8 stated they did not feel there were adequate resources, and if there were, they were not being utilized or accessed effectively:

> I feel like there are a lot of resources available, but they're not utilized effectively. They're kind of almost earmarked, right? It's like, this is how you get this much from this

> budget line or area. You can't really be flexible within what we have right now. So, I have a bunch of paraprofessionals and tutors, but they are very much you know, stuck to a program or expected to be stuck to a program, which then makes it very challenging to leverage them elsewhere. Or we have you know, three teachers, which is great, but we have 12 cohorts and to equitably distribute we don't necessarily have a way for them to access or get to all those students because having an IEP doesn't mean that your IEP looks like the kid next to you, etc. So, even if student special education caseloads are equitable in numbers, they are not necessarily equitable in terms of workload. And so, to be flexible I don't think we have the tools, or the resources rather, in terms of personnel right now to be as flexible as we need to be.

P9 agreed with P8 when it came to the lack of strong resources, as they stated the resources can become more flexible and not remain rigid when it comes to allocation:

> I hope that the long-term plan is that resources will become more flexible and not allocated so rigidly. But, I do think that there's opportunity for training among staff around more collaborative instructional methodologies for co-teaching particularly and also just in general, how to work with curriculum so that it can be more flexible...you know, how to take curriculum standards and be able to see them from multiple perspectives - not just for special education - but also just whether that's from a more diverse perspective. I think as educators we all could continue to grow in our use of different educational approaches that are research-based. And I think sometimes we just don't have the structures to do that in our district. From a development standpoint, I think we try really hard with the time that we have. But I think it's limited.

P10 agreed the allocation of resources acts as barriers simply because school's culture:

> I think it's more like the allocation of the existing resources more than anything else. Like for example, if we believe, and I believe that co-teaching is an important inclusive practice, part of the reason why we don't have as many teachers co-teaching is because they have too many curriculum support classes. Curriculum support classes are small group - SPED students only - taught by SPED teachers to reinforce curricula and to provide a dedicated time in the student's schedule to work on IEP goals and objectives. And is there enough value in curriculum support that it outweighs someone being in a co-taught class? I'm not so sure. You know, I think the way that we use tutors and paraprofessionals, we could be more thoughtful about that allocation of resource. But there's an embedded culture here and change will be tough.

Appropriately Supporting Students in Their Home District

The third research question explored how district-wide administrators perceived their schools capability to appropriately support students within their home district who struggled to make effective progress within a fully inclusive learning environment. One theme emerged from the data for RQ3, which included that team consult meetings, open communication, and teaching strategies must be utilized from an objective perspective. Nine out of the 10 participants contributed to this theme, and Table 7 depicts the codes that were used to determine the theme.

Table 4

Codes for RQ3 Theme 3

Team meetings, open communication, and teaching strategies are utilized from an objective perspective
Codes
Support
Energetic classroom
Successes
Co-teaching model
Talking to teachers
Additional testing
Alternate setting
Team chairperson
Open communication
Teaching strategies
Team meetings

The lone theme for RQ3 that emerged from the data highlighted how participants perceived schools as using team meetings, open communication, and alternative teaching strategies from objective perspectives when dealing with students within their home district who struggled to make effective progress within an inclusive learning environment. P1 was able to discuss co-teaching models where they explained:

> There's been a big push over the last three years to build a co-teaching model. And this is largely one special educator and then a general education teacher sharing a classroom for either a class period or chunk of the day or a whole day in order to again, to the greatest degree possible. Doing what I've described in terms of backwards design, making the lesson accessible to all learners and keeping everyone in the classroom, feeling successful and being well, being able to access the lesson.

P2 highlighted the importance of open communication with teachers:

> What I have done is taken a look at talking to that inclusion teacher. Assuming that he is with an inclusion teacher for at least math or something. So, taking a look with that and

> having the conversation, trying to figure out what have you been trying? What haven't you done yet? Is there anything more that you can do and does it require additional testing? Is it a whole new area that he's not doing well in that we're not targeting within special education? Do we need some consent forms or evaluations to be done? Do we need anything that can be done without a consent form? Could you just look at some informal observations or data collection? Kind of going down that road and seeing if there is another area that we can help out with?

P4 discussed how they would like to use team meetings to aid in improving the student's success:

> The next steps would be that you pull a team meeting in, you do additional assessments if it's appropriate and really try and identify why this child is not making effective progress in a setting they're in, using data and also with the team approach, you can come up with a solution...either increase those supports in the setting that they're now in, or consider an alternate setting. We have some of those programs in our building for more restrictive environment, which will work for certain students. But of course, you need to have some kind of fence up to make sure that whatever more restrictive plan you put in place is appropriate for that particular child.

P5 also discussed the importance of open-communication, especially when it came to teachers and team chairpersons:

> What I really appreciate about working with my Team Chairperson is we always have open and upfront conversations about those things. And I think, we are open to, okay, if we've done everything that we have in our system and everything.... where do we go from here? Do we tie our central admin into a conversation if they are struggling? I hate

> when it's something that I've heard for the first time, and it's not a student that we're talking about in like our Monday support meetings where we talk about all our high risk students. I would rather that student be coming up again and again, and be problem solving through the situation...like Okay, let's try this and then let's try this. And I feel like most times when we're at that level, we've already exhausted all of our resources and had those conversations.

P5 further reported:

> So, I think it's just open communication all along the way in order to determine, okay, what is the next step? And that's, I think those are the hard pieces of we've done everything we can and admitting that we've done everything we can. And you feel like you're giving up on a student at the same time that, you know, you want what is best for the students.

P7 discussed the importance of using objective data when making a decision on what to do next in order to better support a struggling student:

> What have we done in the past with a student like this? It may be considering the program that that student is currently in. So, if the special education teacher said to me, the student's really struggling and I really think we need to look, look at making a change...and then I talk with the Team Chair and she had done her homework and talked to the inclusion teacher or looked up grades, etc., then I'd say all right, let's do if. Let's make a move.

P9 also discussed the importance of using objective data when they stated:

> Well, I think my first question is what data are you using to, you know, make that determination. And I would want to see that data. I would want to know what was the

> starting point, you know, for that data. And why are we now coming to this, that this there's no, you know, either lack of progress or a concern about progress? I feel like I push pretty hard on that question. And many times, the team will come back without data. And so, then the next step is, well, okay, well, before we say no progress or lack of progress or concern about progress, let's get some data that everybody on the team agrees with is a good measure for that particular child.

Results

The results of the study aim to answer the research questions that guided this study.

School District's Ability to Promote and Maximize an Inclusive Philosophy

When answering this research question, it is important to note that the majority of participants were able to demonstrate a strong understanding of what an inclusive philosophy is, and how they did not feel that their own inclusive philosophy was in alignment with their school's cultural behaviors. One participant discussed they did not know what their school's inclusive philosophy was, with another participant noting the importance of educating everyone within the school on understanding the definition of an inclusive philosophy. Many of the participants were able to discuss how they felt that there was a major misalignment especially in the areas of staff training and the exposure to a lack of resources. Other participants explained how they perceived the school as not using objective, quantitative student data; instead, it appears that the schools rely on data from teachers that are using their subjective thoughts and experiences. A final example was when a participant discussed a co-teaching model that was meant to be implemented, but yet was still not fully implemented within the school. These instances demonstrated that the schools would benefit from significant staff training on the principles of an inclusive philosophy, while also providing training, resources, and following

through with actions. These actions would help to advance an aligned model for embracing a district-wide inclusive philosophy and set of practices.

Barriers That Hinder a School's Ability to Appropriately Support Students With Disabilities

The participants were able to highlight different barriers that hindered their school's ability to appropriately support students with disabilities within their home district who could not make effective progress within an inclusive learning environment. Participants identified support, resources, and training as the main barrier to supporting students with disabilities and, in fact, the answers did not reflect on the students at all. Most participants perceived it was the school's responsibility to provide support and training to teachers; many participants also discussed budget issues, personnel problems, lack of training and professional development in social-emotional learning, and more communication between everyone involved in the student's success. Additionally, providing training to teachers who report they cannot work with specific demographics or populations of students is another important component of this barrier to an inclusive philosophy, which highlights the importance of training throughout the school district.

Appropriately Supporting Students in Their Home District

Participants provided data that answered the third research question. The participants of this study perceived that in order for schools to appropriately support students within their home district who could not make effective progress within an inclusive learning environment should conduct regular team meetings, provide open-communication, and examine teaching strategies from an objective perspective. Many of the participants were able to report this is what their schools attempt to do, with many participants discussing co-teaching strategies, regular meetings, talk openly between teachers, principals, and team chairpersons at all times.

Summary

This chapter presented the findings and the results of the study, with an overview of each theme that emerged from the dataset. The themes that emerged from the dataset included: participants' strong understanding of theoretical inclusive philosophies; there appears to be a misalignment between schools' practices and inclusive philosophies; overarching, district-wide barriers to embracing an inclusive philosophy included lack of training, lack of resources, and lack of support when supporting students with disabilities; and schools typically conduct team consult meetings, model open communication, and seek to improve teaching strategies when examining how to better support students with disabilities. Each participant completed a private semistructured interview via the Zoom meeting platform, where each of his or her responses to the open-ended questions were recorded and transcribed in preparation for data analysis. When discussing the findings of the study, I provided an overview of specific participant quotations that supported the theme being discussed under each research question.

The next chapter is that of Chapter 5 that will conclude the study. The final chapter will provide a discussion on the study's findings in relation to the literature and the theoretical framework and the limitations experienced in the study. The final chapter will conclude with a discussion on the study's implications and recommendations for future research.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive study was to describe the perceptions of district-wide administrators regarding their school district's services and supports in relation to special education. I collected data from 10 participants who participated in semistructured interviews, where each participant answered the same open-ended questions. After electronically recording and transcribing the interviews, I completed an analysis and found different themes that emerged from the transcripts. The themes that emerged from the dataset included: a) participants' understanding of a theoretical inclusive philosophy was strong; b) there appears to be a misalignment between the understanding of an inclusive philosophy and schools' everyday practices; c) barriers to reach a successful inclusive district-wide philosophy included a lack of training, a lack of resources, and a lack of support when supporting students with disabilities; and d) schools typically held regular team meetings, prioritized open communication, and sought to improve teaching strategies when examining how to better support the students with the highest needs in the district.

This chapter concludes the dissertation and discusses my findings in relation to previous literature and also in relation to the theoretical framework that guided this study. Additionally, the chapter will also discuss the study's limitations that were experienced throughout the research process. The chapter will then conclude with recommendations for future studies, as well as recommendations for practice.

Findings in Relation to the Literature

The findings of this study highlighted four main themes. The themes that emerged from the dataset included: a) participants' understanding of a theoretical inclusive philosophy was strong; b) there appears to be a misalignment between the understanding of an inclusive

philosophy and schools' everyday practices; c) barriers to reach a successful inclusive district-wide philosophy included a lack of training, a lack of resources, and a lack of support when supporting students with disabilities; and d) schools typically held regular team meetings, prioritized open communication, and sought to improve teaching strategies when examining how to better support the students with the highest needs in the district.

These themes are discussed in-depth below in alignment with each research question, providing a discussion on the implications of the findings.

RQ1. How do district-wide administrators of one Massachusetts public school district perceive their school district's ability to promote and maximize an inclusive philosophy for all students with disabilities?

Theme One: District's Ability to Maximize an Inclusive Philosophy

The first theme for RQ1 that emerged from the data highlighted how the majority of the participants were able to provide a strong definition of what an inclusive philosophy meant. This highlighted how the school district had an ability to promote and maximize an inclusive philosophy. When discussing this theme, it is important to note the majority of participants were able to demonstrate a strong understanding of what an inclusive philosophy was, but conversely they did not feel their school's inclusive philosophy was in alignment with the everyday practices in their respective schools. For example, many of the participants were able to discuss how they felt that there was a major misalignment especially in the areas of staff training and the exposure to a lack of resources. Additionally, other participants were able to discuss how they perceived the school as not using objective data; instead, it appears the schools relied on data from teachers that were using their own subjective thoughts and experiences.

One participant in particular discussed how her school was attempting to utilize co-teaching techniques in order to highlight inclusivity. This teaching technique is in alignment with various studies. For example, Swicegood and Miller (2015) identified the importance of co-teaching as part of an inclusive structure. The researchers completed a study that focused on how two teachers working collaboratively can facilitate enhanced literature learning and understanding between general education students and students with disabilities. The results of their study concluded that co-teachers collaboratively plan and implement supportive classroom practices that help to boost literature reading and writing among the students with disabilities, and that these practices ultimately supported all students within the classroom. This methodology of instruction aids in increasing academic opportunities and inclusivity within the classroom.

Additionally, there are many benefits to co-teaching that have been identified through research. For example, Friend (2016) reported benefits that included quality of instruction provided by the teachers and the fidelity with which the approach is introduced in the mainstream teaching environment. However, Friend warned that these factors can also act as barriers to co-teaching, as although the teachers may collaborate in the planning and the implementation of lessons, the quality of teaching content and the delivery approach may influence the effectiveness of co-teaching.

Theme Two: Misalignment Between Inclusive Philosophy and Practice

In terms of the misalignment that was identified between the training of teachers and staff and the exposure to a lack of resources, this thematic finding also appears in alignment with previous research. For example, Ekeh and Oladayo (2013) reported that many public school districts continue to face restrictive budgets, which impacts the amount of professional development and training provided to its faculty and staff. The authors noted that the provision

of quality educational services to all students, especially for students with disabilities, requires the staff to receive ongoing training and professional development with specific specialized skills, expectations, and regulations. The effective adoption of teaching strategies and methodologies such as inclusive learning experiences and co-teaching depends upon adequate and quality professional development and training of teachers and support staff (Ekeh & Oladayo, 2013).

Additionally, some participants from my study reported the district does not necessarily make decisions based on objective, quantitative data. This issue is also highlighted as troublesome in previous literature. For example, when educators attach labels and stigmas to students at any early age of a child's education, these labels ultimately play a large role in the overall progress and level of success that students find in school and have an impact on the need for a student to be placed in an alternative, more restrictive, education program (Maxwell et al., 2017). Students placed in separate alternative education programs are placed at a higher risk to receive a negative label from both teachers and peers (Kennedy & Soutullo, 2018). As Aron (2006) concluded, "alternative programs have their own stigmas attached to them, including that they are of poor educational quality and that they are often associated with students who are unsuccessful" (as cited in Caroleo, 2014, p. 42). These labels based on program placement can have a negative impact on students' desire to identify with the mainstream school culture. Additionally, these labels that are created by teachers tend to be subjective in nature, and therefore need to be backed up by evidence and data, especially if they impact a student's opportunity to remain in the least restrictive educational environment.

Therefore, there are also some implications that need to be discussed in relation to this theme for the first research question. The first theme provides implications of the importance of

schools to develop strong policies and learning in relation to inclusivity. For example, previous research has highlighted the importance of ensuring that inclusive philosophies are documented in a school's vision and mission statement (LaForce et al., 2016). However, because the majority of the participants in this study highlighted a strong understanding of what an inclusive philosophy is, and how they did not feel their school's inclusive philosophy was in alignment with their behaviors, this discrepancy can determine how schools need to better ensure their mission statements are aligned within their inclusive philosophy. It is also vital for the entire school district to develop a cohesive definition and vision for how they will work to carry out an inclusive philosophy for all students. If teachers find it difficult to pinpoint specific alignment between their knowledge of inclusion and the everyday practices embedded in the school's culture, this misalignment could be detrimental for the students.

Another implication in this first theme is that after aligning their inclusive philosophy within their mission statement, it is important for the school to provide training and professional development opportunities to both staff and teachers on best practices instilling inclusivity in the classroom and as part of the school environment. For example, professional development opportunities should be crafted and implemented in a manner where teachers can ensure they are appropriately utilizing effective teaching practices such as that of co-teaching and universal design for learning. An increase in professional development is particularly important, especially since Friend (2016) reported that at times, barriers can outweigh the benefits such as when facing how teachers may collaborate in the planning and the implementation of lessons, the quality of teaching content and the delivery approach of inclusive, universal practices and expectations. Therefore, with strong professional development opportunities, teachers can experience a streamlined of teaching practices that support a school's inclusive philosophy.

RQ2. What barriers do district-wide administrators of one Massachusetts public school district identify that hinders their school's ability to appropriately support students with disabilities within their home district who cannot make effective progress within an inclusive learning environment?

The participants were able to highlight different barriers that hindered their respective school's ability to appropriately support students with disabilities within their school district who could not make effective progress within an inclusive learning environment. Participants identified support, resources, and training as the main barriers to best supporting students with disabilities. Most participants stated it was the school's responsibility to provide this support and training to teachers, which traditionally had been inconsistent. Many participants also discussed budget issues, personnel problems, lack of training and professional development in social-emotional learning, and more communication between everyone involved in the student's success. Additionally, providing training to teachers who report they cannot work with specific demographics and populations of students is another important component of these identified barriers, as this issue highlights the importance of necessary training and professional development throughout the school district.

The barrier of adequate staff training also highlights how a school can support their teachers. For example, if a particular school or an entire school district promotes an inclusive philosophy and it is highlighted within their vision and mission, then they should simultaneously be providing authentic, relevant training for both staff and teachers. This has been highlighted within the literature, especially from a general standpoint where many researchers have highlighted how school districts within the United States are underfunded and therefore struggle to provide their staff and teachers with adequate training. For example, underfunding throughout

public school districts in the United States has resulted in a high level of segregation and a continued increased in the academic achievement gap, especially for the minority student demographic, including students with disabilities (Harvey, 2018; Holtz, 2018). Without adequate funding, schools cannot obtain the resources that are necessary to provide students with high quality educational experiences and teachers with strong professional development and training programs, ultimately leading to poor performance and continued underfunding (Owens, 2018; Whitley et al., 2020). Moreover, school districts with a restrictive budget face various limitations in their quest to provide quality education to students with disabilities. Therefore, to signal support, schools need to provide a stronger training program and professional development sequence that supports the effective adoption of teaching strategies and methodologies to promote and embrace inclusive learning and the co-teaching. The level of training depends upon adequate and quality professional development and training of teachers and support staff (Barnes, 2017).

In terms of the support that teachers experience regarding an inclusive philosophy, research has shown that it is important for the school's leaders to ensure that this philosophy is intertwined throughout the district. For example, Poekert et al. (2020) discussed the importance of school leaders to develop a vision for the school and develop goals that will maintain an endless pursuit of this vision on a consistent basis. For example, the authors reported that when ensuring an inclusive philosophy throughout the district, it is essential to appropriately frame all social justice issues; examine the context, resources, and motivations for an inclusive environment, and normalize inclusion and shared leadership. This is an important implication for this study, as the vision and manner in which it is carried out signifies the level of support that teachers experience and the kind of inclusion that students can experience (De La Cruz, 2020).

RQ3. How do schools appropriately support students within their home district who cannot make effective progress within an inclusive learning environment?

Participants were able to provide data that answered the third research question. The participants of this study perceived that in order for schools to appropriately support students within their home district who were unable to make effective progress within an inclusive learning environment, staff members should conduct regular team consult meetings, prioritize open-communication, and examine and critique teaching strategies from an objective perspective. Many of the participants were able to report this is what their schools attempt to do, with many participants discussing co-teaching strategies, regular team meetings, and open discussion and collaboration between teachers, principals, and team chairpersons at all times. However, it was apparent that some of the participants did not feel these structures were adequate in terms of supporting an inclusive environment and philosophy. As seen in the data, schools only appeared to provide overarching ideas and theoretical goals on inclusive teaching strategies, such as that of co-teaching or universal design for learning (UDL), but failed to provide adequate training on how to execute this teaching strategy appropriately in practice, for the benefits of all students in the classroom.

This theme was especially tied to the other themes in this study. Many of the constructs were discussed again, such as that of lack of training, lack of support, and the need for an improved communication exchange. These data highlight the importance of the school leaders in providing an open, supportive and collaborative environment for the teachers to continuously learn and grow professionally. This has strongly been studied within previous literature. For example, Wenger (2011) reported that consistent communication ensures that every member of the team is clear on the expectations and it also provides extra support for everyone.

Furthermore, consistent communication within the shared domain of the community of practice helps to naturally create positive relationships and trust throughout the entire staff. But before examining communication patterns, an important implication arises that can help to ensure that schools are on the correct path to establishing a strong inclusive philosophy: the school's culture.

McMahon (2010) reported that in order for a school leader to initiate organizational change and maintain high expectations amongst all members of an organization, a leader must demonstrate specific attributes. Many studies have discussed the benefits of transformational leadership, which has been defined as a style of leadership that emphasizes the importance of leading employees in a way that will "broaden and elevate the interests of their employees" (McMahon, 2010, p. 257). Therefore, an implication based on these results is for school leaders to examine their leadership style and adapt their style to meet the needs of the employees of the school. For example, school administrators can focus on helping teachers become transformative in their practice so that, in turn, they can teach their students how to "shape their motives, aspirations, values and goals" (Watts & Corrie, 2013, p. 87).

Limitations

There were some limitations that were experienced within this study, such as that of participants themselves, as well as the methodology employed. Because this study was focused on one Massachusetts school district where I interviewed district-wide administrators, findings cannot be generalized to other populations and geographical areas outside of what was studied. Therefore, future researchers will need to complete additional future studies in order to understand other geographical areas and populations of individuals that are outside of this study's parameters.

Another limitation in this study was that of researcher bias. Because I had personal experiences, thoughts, and perceptions regarding the topic being studied, researcher bias could have occurred. However, I attempted to reduce instances of researcher bias by creating an interview protocol, where a panel of experts reviewed the study and the associated semistructured interview questions to ensure alignment. Additionally, I completed member checking where the participants reviewed the transcripts and informed me of any inaccuracies. This process ensured the data collected were accurate and in alignment with the problem being studied.

A final limitation is that of the research methodology and design. While I only collected administrator perceptions, future studies that focus on the perspectives of other stakeholders could be important to the cause of inclusivity over the course of time. Therefore, a methodology and research design that could focus on a longitudinal perspective could be more beneficial, as it can provide a snapshot of how schools have changed over time in relation to the inclusive philosophies. Additionally, other forms of data collection could have been collected that could also provide a stronger snapshot of the current climate within the school district. For example, examining school policy and procedures and staff training programs that focus on educating and training staff on inclusive practices could have provided a stronger understanding of the problem being studied.

Recommendations for Future Research

There are some recommendations for future research that need to be discussed. Future researchers can aim to better understand a school's inclusive philosophy by collecting a variety of data, which means understanding and delving deeper into a school's inclusive philosophy and how it is structured within the district. For example, future researchers can collect other forms of

data, such as that of a document review by collecting school policies and procedures documents, and professional development and staff training schedules that can demonstrate how schools approach an inclusive philosophy and align it within the school environment. Future studies could also benefit from examining this topic in different geographical locations and different grade and school levels, as well as collecting data from teachers and possibly students. This can create a stronger understanding of the different perceptions and experiences of teachers and students, who are crucial in not only implementing an inclusive philosophy, but also that of receiving the services of an inclusive philosophy.

Finally, future research could also include a longitudinal approach, or an approach that is centered over time, to demonstrate how schools have acted in promoting an inclusive philosophy. Examining different points of time can also aid researchers in better understanding how schools adapt to local, state, and federal law changes, as well as the needs that the school have in relation to their mission statement. This examination, in turn, can ensure that the practices of the school are not only in alignment with the mission statement, but also that of the teaching methods, practices, and offerings to ensure student inclusivity.

Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive study was to describe the perceptions of district-wide administrators regarding their school district's services and supports in relation to special education. I collected data from 10 participants who participated in semistructured interviews, where each participant answered the same open-ended questions. After electronically recording and transcribing the interviews, I completed an analysis and found different themes that emerged from the transcripts. The themes that emerged from the dataset included: a) participants' understanding of a theoretical inclusive philosophy was strong; b) there appears to

be a misalignment between the understanding of an inclusive philosophy and schools' everyday practices; c) barriers to reach a successful inclusive district-wide philosophy included a lack of training, a lack of resources, and a lack of support when supporting students with disabilities; and d) schools typically held regular team meetings, prioritized open communication, and sought to improve teaching strategies when examining how to better support the students with the highest needs in the district.

This chapter concluded the dissertation and discussed the study's findings in relation to previous literature and also in relation to the theoretical framework that guided this study. Additionally, the chapter also discussed the study's limitations that were experienced throughout the research process. The chapter then concluded with recommendations for future studies that highlight the importance of continuing research in this field. This potential continued research is both in reference to the practices and methods that schools adopt in order to ensure inclusive philosophies are being carried out and are in alignment with the school's mission statement, that the philosophy is understood and supported by the teachers, and that sufficient training is provided to all stakeholders so all students enrolled in the school district are afforded an equitable, high-quality and inclusive educational experience they deserve.

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Appendix A: IRB Approval Letter

ABILENE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY
Educating Students for Christian Service and Leadership Throughout the World

Office of Research and Sponsored Programs
320 Hardin Administration Building, ACU Box 29103, Abilene, Texas 79699-9103
325-674-2885

Dear Eric,

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board, I am pleased to inform you that your project titled

(IRB# 20-073)is exempt from review under Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects.

If at any time the details of this project change, please resubmit to the IRB so the committee can determine whether or not the exempt status is still applicable.

I wish you well with your work.

Sincerely,

Megan Roth

Megan Roth, Ph.D.
Director of Research and Sponsored Programs

Our Promise: ACU is a vibrant, innovative, Christ-centered community that engages students in authentic spiritual and intellectual growth, equipping them to make a real difference in the world.

Appendix B: Participant Recruitment Letter

20-073

Dear school administrator,

I hope this email finds you well during this difficult and unprecedented time in our lives.

The purpose of my email is to request your participation in my dissertation research study for the completion of my doctorate. My research focuses on perceptions of special education supports by school administrators. Specifically, I seek to learn more about the ways in which your school promotes and inclusive environment for all students, while simultaneously providing appropriate supports for students with disabilities.

As a fellow special education administrator, I absolutely appreciate how precious your time is, especially as we seek to navigate these unchartered waters of remote learning and supporting our must vulnerable students.

With that being said, I would love the opportunity to learn about your thoughts and experiences on this topic. My research topic stems from my own experiences in which the balance between maximizing student inclusivity and ensuring appropriate supports for all students is a complex situation.

I do hope this research topic will be of interest to you. The interview will only take one hour and all results will be kept confidential. If you are interested in participating in this research topic, please let me know and I will provide you with the consent form for your review.

Thank you so much for your time. I look forward to hearing back from you soon.

Sincerely,

Eric Oxford, Ed. S.
Doctoral Candidate
Abilene Christian University

Appendix C: Semistructured Interview Questions

Interview Questions

Procedure: The following nine questions have been separated and organized based on the three overarching research questions found in my research study. All interview questions will be asked to each participant in a semi-structured manner: the researcher will ask follow-up and probing questions, as needed, based on the answers provided by the participants. Interviews are being conducted virtually via the Zoom meeting platform in light of COVID-19 research guidelines.

RQ1: How do district-wide administrators of one Massachusetts public school district perceive their school district's ability to promote and maximize an inclusive philosophy for all students with disabilities?

a. What is your school's inclusive philosophy for all students?
b. Describe what it means to you to promote an inclusive philosophy for all students with disabilities.
c. How would you change your school's inclusive philosophy?

RQ2: What barriers do district wide administrators of one Massachusetts public school district identify that hinders their school's ability to appropriately support students with disabilities within their home district who cannot make effective progress within an inclusive learning environment?

a. What barriers do you perceive your school as having when it comes to supporting students in general?
b. What barriers do you perceive your school as having when it comes to supporting students with disabilities?

c. What changes would you like your school to make when it comes to working with students with disabilities?

RQ3: How do schools appropriately support students within their home district who cannot make effective progress within an inclusive learning environment?

a. Discuss how your school promotes and maximizes an inclusive philosophy for students.
b. How does this differ for students with disabilities?
c. What does your school do for students with disabilities who cannot make effective progress within an inclusive learning environment?