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Inclusive Education in Practice: District-Level Special Education Administrators' Leadership

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ABSTRACT

Considering six million children ages six through 21 receive special education services in the United States (Department of Education, 2017), it is critical to examine the leadership it takes to provide equitable education to students with disabilities. This study employs a qualitative research methodology utilizing in-depth interviewing to understand the leadership experiences of seven district-level special education administrators who are committed to enacting inclusive educational practices using the following three paradigms or ideological approaches: phenomenological perspective, social construction perspective, and transformative inquiry. The following research questions guide this dissertation: 1) How do district-level special education leaders articulate their conceptualization of and commitment to inclusive education? 2) What strategies of advocacy are evident in the ways that district-level special education leaders make sense of their enactment of inclusive educational opportunities and service delivery for students with disabilities? 3) What actions and decisions have district-level special education leaders implemented in order to remain committed to their district's enactment of inclusive education?

A philosophical approach of inclusive education and theoretical frameworks of social justice leadership and disability studies in education provide the analysis lens in which to understand participants' resistive actions and leadership practices. The data were analyzed using NVIVO, a digital research software, followed by hand-coding, analytic memos, and member checks. Data demonstrated that participants' drive for inclusive educational practices stemmed from family experiences or a poignant career event. Another finding was participants' work in the field of inclusive education was an intentional social justice action to prepare students with and without disabilities to engage in the larger inclusive society. In addition, themes emerged in the data that demonstrate advocacy strategies linked to: 1) personal leadership disposition; 2)

advocacy for students with disabilities; 3) capacity building; and 4) actions. Finally, themes

demonstrated that leaders worked toward improvement through: 1) an emphasis on the growth

process; 2) connectedness with community; and, 3) compliance with legal regulations.

I conclude by discussing social justice leadership, advocacy tactics, and district practices

that participants have implemented and describe implications for administrator preparation,

teacher preparation, and state and federal policy. I propose a theory of inclusive education

leadership that illuminates the process for creating systems change at the district level that

involves praxis and critical reflection. It is my hope that participants' subtle resistive tactics,

incremental changes, and methods to set innovative district norms provide an exemplar for

leaders who feel called and have an opportunity to enact inclusive educational services with a

vision of constructing public school districts that seek to educate and include all learners.

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN PRACTICE:

DISTRICT-LEVEL SPECIAL EDUCATION ADMINISTRATORS' LEADERSHIP

By

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education means that students with and without disabilities have full-time membership and access to learning in heterogeneous general education classrooms within their neighborhood districts. In school districts where administrators have adopted inclusion, leaders explicitly focus on establishing a sense of belonging, participation, social interactions, and progress in academics for all learners. Inclusive education relies on collaborative teaching between special and general educators, such that learning experiences, materials, accommodations, and modifications meet the needs of every student. Implementing it requires administrators to value diversity, differences, and disabilities as well as analyzing structural inequities. Administrators in inclusive districts make organizational decisions to ensure students districts might otherwise marginalize have access to learning in grade-level classrooms, special area subjects, friendships with general education peers, and recreational opportunities. Inclusive education involves administrators interrogating and adjusting practices and structures to include all learners (Causton-Theoharis, Theoharis, Bull, Cosier, & Dempf-Aldrich, 2011; DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014; Theoharis, Causton, & Tracy-Bronson, 2016). Inclusive education is the philosophical approach that guides this research.

Inclusive Education in Practice

Inclusive education has been the core of my teaching, advocacy for students with disabilities, and university teaching and service work in teacher preparation programs. Collaborative university-school partnerships aimed at inclusive school reform (Theoharis et al., 2016), as well as articles and books written for school professionals who work toward creating increased inclusive opportunities for all learners led me to wonder about the role of administrators in inclusive education. This dissertation examines the perspectives and

experiences of administrators in order to understand more about the strategies they use to enact special education services in inclusive ways.

In this section, I share a personal experience that led me to do this dissertation research. It is a story of inclusive education in practice, grounded in school reform work, specially examining administrators' leadership and its immediate impact on a student with a disability. This project reveals that administrators' leadership commitments have a profound impact on how students with disabilities experience education. The role of Enzo,[1] an elementary school principal, in the educational experience of Gina reflects this.

When Gina entered the school system, administrators in her neighborhood school district had classified her with an intellectual disability. In Point School District, that meant that Gina started preschool in the Disabled Preschool Program, a self-contained preschool classroom for students with disabilities. From kindergarten through third-grade, she received instruction in the same self-contained special education classroom. Classroom learning focused on life skills (e.g., cooking, dressing, and calendar). She had the same teacher for four years. Her classmates were other students with disabilities who also had complex support needs. Her only opportunities for inclusion to interact with children without disabilities took place during lunch and specials (e.g., music).

Gina's educational path changed because Enzo and Isabella, the director of special education at Point School District, were determined to partner with me to implement inclusive education. We made a commitment to transform special education and related services from segregated self-contained programs to configurations that required classroom teachers to include students with disabilities within general education for all of the school day. With the co-teaching

---

[1] Student, administrator, and district names have been changed to pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality.

of a special educator in her classroom, Gina's fourth and fifth grade teachers have fully included her in the general education classrooms. She receives accommodations and curriculum modifications that are delivered through their collaborative co-teaching. However, a Resource Room Special Education teacher still offered pull-out instruction for 30 minutes per day for reading for some students with learning disabilities in her school. In a meeting we held during Gina's fifth-grade year, Enzo remarked:

> Why wait? Let's eliminate the resource room this year. If we can do [full inclusion] with [Gina], we can do it with every one of our students. We have our students with the most complex needs fully included. Yet, we're pulling students with learning disabilities to the resource room for no reason.

The proposal was radical, but Isabella and I could see why he proposed it.

Point School District had eliminated all self-contained classrooms at the end of Gina's third-grade year. Students with complex learning needs participate fully in every classroom in the district. Students with autism, intellectual disabilities, and with multiple disabilities now have full access to the academic portions of the day and the opportunity to feel a sense of belonging in their general education classrooms. Co-teaching configurations called on general and special educators to design and implement instruction jointly that is differentiated to meet individualized needs. These partnerships embedded modifications, accommodations, and assistive technology within the learning experiences in general education classrooms. The district earmarks time during the day to give teachers collaborative planning time. It provides professional development and coaching designed to enhance teacher capacity around including all learners. And I meet frequently with the school's administrative team, including Isabella and Enzo, to discuss the state of special education programming in the district. This multi-year

inclusive school reform partnership and collaboration at Point School District provided crucial grounding for this dissertation.

Gina's success became a crucial point in one of Enzo and Isabella's frequent debates about student learning needs and faculty placements during the spring. Isabella and I had spent time over the preceding two years building Enzo's and other principals' capacity around leading inclusive schools for two years. Enzo had fully embraced the model. He read the research on the efficacy of inclusive education (Cosier, Causton-Theoharis, & Theoharis, 2013; Oh-Young & Filler, 2015) and inclusive school reform (Causton-Theoharis, Theoharis, Bull, et al., 2011; Theoharis et al., 2016). He saw firsthand the dramatic shift in Gina's learning, her decrease in instances of challenging behavior, and her friendships. Isabella pointed out the problem with eliminating his school's resource room:

> But how do we respond to the state that mandates that we have a continuum of placement options available? It's the continuum mandates that hold us back. You two don't have to deal with the paperwork; it's easy for you both to say that. I do. I have to fill out the paperwork and answer to the state.

Isabella was profoundly committed to inclusive special education, but she knew the legal regulations, state reporting mandates, and the ways in which school administrators had interpreted them historically. Gina's mom had asked Isabella about fully including her daughter two years before, and since then Isabella had led the charge in the district. She had contacted me to facilitate teacher capacity around creating inclusive classrooms and led the school through inclusive reform. She had never created inclusive services before, but she was tireless in building her capacity to lead in the district that serves Gina and many other students like her, using all available resources. Our collaborative partnership supported Isabella as she became a

district-level leader in inclusion. We designed professional development for teachers, discussed coaching observations conducted in the co-taught inclusive classrooms, and hashed out key points from research articles I identified for her. She would later review the findings of the research study I present here.

Enzo's remarks referenced Isabella's enormous success, as well as his and mine, in Gina. A general education and special education teacher co-taught her fifth-grade classroom and she received special education services in this setting. Her Individualized Education Program (IEP), which read "In the presence of general education students for less than 40% of the school day" now says she is in the classroom for "80% or more of the school day." In fact it was 100% and has continued to be 100% in the years since. Gina fully participates in recreational activities in the school community, something their organizers had not allowed her to do before.

The band teacher was one of the many recreational professionals who had learned to include Gina. This story was one of the most surprising to all of the adults in Gina's life. Gina has a sensory processing disorder that makes her sensitive to loud noises. Gina's mom chuckled when she recalled that Gina explained that her friends were joining band and she was going to be a drummer. "A percussionist," Gina's mom told me. "Let me be clear—this would be the last instrument I'd pick, if I was choosing for Gina." It was a signal of the positive effects of the social interactions Gina had in her classroom that she could choose even to be in the presence of a drummer, much less *be* one. But she participated in the extracurricular activity with her grade-level friends and seemed to enjoy it.

Isabella's ongoing relationship with Gina has provided the advocacy, opportunities, and access to implement the right supports that had a critical impact on Gina's learning and social experiences. As Isabella's case suggests, district administrators can build their skills and

knowledge collaboratively in order to implement inclusive school reform, even in a district that has created multiple self-contained programs and resource room settings in the past. Administrators and educators only change special education programs with an impetus. A parent advocate might play a role, as Gina's mom did. If leaders like Isabella and Enzo have the vision to include all learners, change and implementation can happen. Research supports inclusive education (Cosier et al., 2013; Jackson, Ryndak, & Wehmeyer, 2009; Oh-Young & Filler, 2015), but as Isabella pointed out to Enzo and me, administrators have interpreted legal requirements as calling for an array of special education programming options, which procedural reporting codifies, and districts must remain in compliance with legal policy and procedures.

Isabella's argument for keeping the resource room led me to think about how other districts navigate the barriers she described. The interlocking administrator perspective of meeting student needs, full inclusion, leading a social justice initiative, inclusive school reform, and compliance with federal and state regulations grounded this research study. This collaborative experience in inclusive education in action had urged me to reflect and informed for this dissertation research. I wondered how administrators navigated their advocacy and inclusive leader identity. Speaking with district-level administrators about these perplexing issues for this dissertation while I continued to help Isabella lead Point School District through inclusive school reform gave this dissertation depth and a context for authentic application. Seeing the impact of inclusion on students is always inspiring. Images of Gina as a percussionist in the school band playing with her fifth-grade friends, meetings with her co-teachers as we analyzed data documenting her progress toward both individualized goals and her learning of grade-level content, and planning meetings where we brainstormed small group lessons, sensory supports, and accessible text materials were never far from my mind.

Gina is one of more than six million children ages six through 21 who receive special education services in the United States (Department of Education, 2017). In this dissertation, I explore the lived experiences of special education district-level administrators about their advocacy and leadership in districts, like Point School District, in which educators provide inclusive special education services. United States school systems segregate over 37% of students with disabilities; like Gina before inclusion came to Point School District, they spend 79% or less of their day in general education settings (Department of Education, 2017). District-level administrators who pursue inclusion sometimes see it as a matter of social justice, and this dissertation explores the roots of participants' inclusive education identity and how those roots drive them, their actions to eliminate traditional separate special education spaces, and district practices they follow as they negotiate sustaining equitable educational opportunities. The path to implementation varies. I aim to understand their enactment of inclusive education and what it means to take on an inclusive leadership identity within public school districts. My hope is that the district-level leaders' words and experiences challenge dominant ways of providing special education in segregated classrooms, buildings, and schools that serve as exclusionary spaces. This research offers an alternative narrative of social justice leadership. It will contribute to the education leadership conversation by uncovering the advocacy tactics district-level special education leaders employ as they create inclusive educational contexts that provide equitable education to all students.

The next section describes the current context of inclusive and special education in the United States. I discuss inclusive education as a philosophy of education and explore the concept of least restrictive environment (LRE). Debate around the continuum of educational placements and the resulting silos point to discrimination and unequitable access. Empirical

research confirms that inclusive education supports positive academic and social outcomes for all students, including those with and without disabilities. Federal special education legislation reflects this understanding, providing a presumption and framework for inclusive education, but individual school- and district-level practices do not always conform. I have embedded this dissertation within this context and within these larger special education challenges. My examination through a lens of disability studies in education (DSE) and social justice provide the guiding theoretical framework. This chapter concludes with sections on the research questions that guide this inquiry and an overview of the subsequent chapters of this study.

Current Context of Inclusive and Special Education in the United States

Across the United States students with disabilities receive disparate educational opportunities (Harper, 2012). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is the federal law that mandates a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) and ensures special education and related services for children with disabilities. Some students receive inclusive programming within general education school buildings and classrooms, whereas others are educated in separate special education settings. Figure 1.1 shows the percentage of students with disabilities served under the IDEA, Part B, by educational environment, according to the U.S. Department of Education's Report to Congress (2017). The majority, 62.7% of students with disabilities, ages six through 21, spent 80 to 100% of their time in a general education setting, meaning special education teachers provided them special education and related services outside of the regular classroom for less than 21% of the school day (Department of Education, 2017). This group of students with disabilities has the most inclusive programing in public schools. Yet, data indicate that placement for students with disabilities ages six through 21 in more restrictive separate settings for some or all of the day are prevalent. For example, 18.7% of all

students with disabilities spend 40 to 79% of their time in a regular class, meaning they spend the remainder of their school day in specialized settings, including resource rooms and self-contained classrooms (Department of Education, 2017). Data indicate 13.5% of all students with disabilities spend less than 40% of their time in a regular class (Department of Education, 2017). These students spend their time in self-contained classrooms, as Gina did from kindergarten to third-grade, or at special schools. Other students with disabilities ages six through 21, 5.2% of this population, spend all their time in other environments, consisting of separate schools, residential facilities, homebound/hospitals, correctional facilities, or in private schools where parents have placed them (Department of Education, 2017). Understanding the extent that educators included students served under IDEA, Part B, in classrooms with their peers without disabilities serves as an indication of access to inclusive educational placements across the country. It also led me to wonder about shifts in placement practices over time.
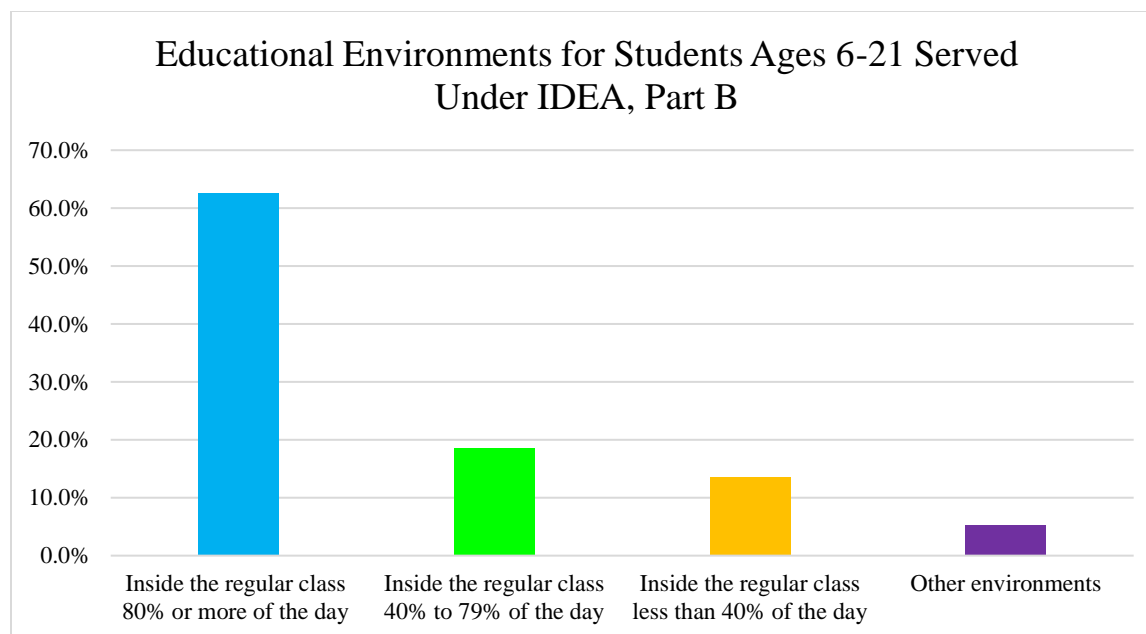
Figure 1.1. Educational Environments for Students Ages 6-21 Served Under IDEA, Part B

Note. Data is from U.S. Department of Education. (2017). *39th annual report to Congress on the implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.* Washington, DC: Government Printing Office.

Comparing the 2017 data to those gathered from 2006 through 2015 suggests a national shift. U.S. districts only included 55.2% of students with disabilities in a regular class for 80% or more of the day in that period, a figure that rose to 62.7 % in 2015 (Department of Education, 2017). The percentage of students educated inside the regular class no more than 79% of the day and no less than 40% of the day decreased from 23.5% in 2006 to 18.6% in 2015 (Department of Education, 2017). Trends indicate that the percentage of students administrators and teachers include inside the regular class less than 40% of the day also decreased from 16.3% to 13.5% from 2006 to 2015 (Department of Education, 2017). Thus, data indicates that a greater

percentage of students with disabilities are receiving special education and related services in general education classrooms for most the day, fewer students receive instruction outside this setting, the amount of time they spend outside the general education setting has decreased, and the number of students in self-contained settings has decreased. However, the number of students with disabilities administrators and educators relegate to residential facilities, homebound/hospitals, correctional facilities, or in private schools increased from 4% in 2004 (Department of Education, 2016) to 5.3% in 2015 (Department of Education, 2017). Leadership in individual districts create disparate educational opportunities through placing some students with disabilities in general education settings and others in more restrictive separate placements. Understanding these statistics causes me to wonder about the efficacy of such placements and the district-level administrator's role in placement practices. At the same time as this national shift in the implementation of IDEA, inclusive education as a philosophy of education is clearing growing.

Inclusive Education

Inclusive education is a philosophical framework (McLeskey, Rosenberg, & Westling, 2013) that purports all learners are capable thinkers, authentic members, and valued contributors who can receive instruction within general education settings with differentiated and individualized teaching and learning strategies that match their strengths, learning styles, challenges, and interests. It offers "a conceptual pathway out of class or categorical segregation in education" (Sailor, 2015, p. 94). Administrators implement inclusion to create a sense of belonging within and participation in both academic and social spheres of schooling for every learner. Within this community students, teachers, and administrators recognize, appreciate, and celebrate individual strengths, diversity, and differences.

A broad definition of inclusive education aims to increase participation, access, education, opportunities, and outcomes for students who experience other forms of marginalization and have been traditionally segregated in schools. Social justice leadership involves administrators interrogating and adjusting school practices and structures that marginalize students on the basis of ethnic status, race, class, sexuality, disability, language, and gender (Theoharis, 2007). Sapon-Shevin (2003) explains, "Inclusion is not about disability…. Inclusion is about social justice…. By embracing inclusion as a model of social justice, we can create a world fit for all of us" (p. 26-28). This philosophy can benefit all learners, especially if it permeates the culture of their school (Kluth, 2010). Artiles and Kozleski (2007) emphasized,

> Inclusive education work must not focus on access and participation in general education for students with disabilities, but rather on access, participation, and outcomes for students who have endured marginalization due to ethnic identity and ability level in educational systems fraught with inequitable structural and social condition. (p. 39)

This explicit definition provides understanding about the broader philosophical approach to education this dissertation will explore. It causes me to wonder about how district administrators can embrace and enact inclusive education across school buildings and about district-wide implementation as a means to build equitable inclusive educational systems. In the section that follows, I discuss the embedment of this philosophy within federal special education law (IDEA, 2004).

Federal Mandates

Elements of IDEA (2004) urge school districts and administrators to provide inclusion without actually naming the term. The first mandates that districts to provide

the least restrictive environment [by ensuring] to the maximum extent appropriate,

children with disabilities…are educated with children who are not disabled, and special

classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular

educational environment occurs only if the nature or severity of the disability of a child is

such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services

cannot be achieved satisfactorily. (IDEA, 34 C.F.R. § 300.114 [a] [2] [ii], 2004)

The LRE provision provides clear preference for the education of students with disabilities in the

"regular" or general education setting. In including the term lawmakers emphasized that

students with and without disabilities should spend their school day together. However, it does

not directly describe special education settings as more "restrictive"; this principle comes from

an understanding that being separated from children without disabilities imposes a restriction

(Baglieri & Shapiro, 2012).

The second statement within IDEA (2004) that supports inclusion requires districts to

justify removal of a child with a disability from a general education class. It states that districts

must provide "supplemental aids and services" to support inclusion, which, as the statute

clarifies, "means aids, services, and other supports that are provided in regular education

classes…to enable children with disabilities to be educated with nondisabled children to the

maximum extent appropriate" (IDEA, 34 C.F.R. § 300.42, 2004).

Federal reporting standards collect data on educational environment and percentage of

the day students with disabilities spent in the regular class (Department of Education, 2017).

This data provides insight as to what extent students with disabilities receive education with

peers without disabilities. It addresses students with disabilities who spend 80% or more of the

day inside the general education class and thus have the most inclusive placements. I use this percentage standard in this dissertation as well.

The IEP team in every school determines the placement of individual children and thus determines how schools and districts will comply with IDEA. The statistics reveal that millions of students with disabilities do not receive all of the specialized instruction their schools say they need in the general education classroom (Department of Education, 2017). Sailor (2015) suggests that the LRE standard has failed to serve many students. He proposes that instead of asking "What is the least restrictive place to educate a specific student?" they ask, "What is the best instructional situation for this student to successfully engage the general curriculum?" (Sailor, 2015, p. 94). This shift makes me wonder about the questions and inquiry that district-level leaders who prioritize inclusion use to implement the approach. The next section discusses the theoretical framework on which my exploration of the strategies and actions these leaders employ depends.

Theoretical Framework

Disability studies in education (DSE) and the theory of social justice leadership provide the framework for this dissertation. I ground this research in social justice leadership literature, purposefully connecting to existing research in educational leadership. I describe the theories in DSE and social justice leadership next, as these influenced the ways in which I understand my methods, data, and analysis.

Disability Studies in Education

DSE is a field of inquiry designed to explain issues for individuals with disabilities differently from a medicalized understanding and to interrogate the social exclusion and academic oppression of students with disabilities. Disability studies scholars contest

perspectives of ableism and provide a lens to examine the social conditions that create inequitable practices. As applied to education, this means educational systems are analyzed to determine inequitable consequences for students with disabilities.

Disability studies scholars challenge the idea that disability is an individual deficit or deviance, recognizing that "disability is a culturally and historically specific phenomenon, not a universal and unchanging essence" (Shakespeare, 2006, p. 216). Through a socially constructed model, scholars acknowledge the social conditions that create disability and reject a deficit mode of thinking (Garland-Thomson, 1997; Linton, 1998). Educators and administrators have long viewed special education through a medical lens, regarding "ability is innate, biologically predicated, and normally distributed" (Gallagher, 2006, p. 63). The medical model assumes that disability is a deviance, that it occurs within the individual, and that fixing it would best serve the needs of the individuals and society. Operating with an embedded medical model approach, special education traditionally has served to remediate, fix, and intervene for students with disabilities. As Erevelles (2011) explains, "All medical (and educational) interventions are geared toward bringing the individual as close to normalcy as possible" (p. 19). DSE proposes an alternative to the medical model, a social model lens that positions disability contextually and addresses the social, cultural, historical, and political context that can cause the marginalization.

DSE offers a framework for understanding disability as situated within social, economic, political, historical, and cultural contexts (Danforth & Gabel, 2006). DSE questions "constructions of disability" and challenges "special education assumptions and practices" (Taylor, 2008). This study uses DSE as a framework to understand the experiences of students with disabilities as a result of district structures that allow for a range of bodies to belong. I selected administrators as the "central phenomenon" to study because it is these leaders who

construct, disrupt, or sustain special education practices that are consequential to the schooling

experiences for students with disabilities (Creswell, 2012, p. 16). The social model lens suggests

it is the physical and social environment of districts that need change and that disruption of the

system involves the leadership of administrators. DSE provides an understanding of the basis on

which district-level administrator's work to mitigate historically oppressive educational systems,

whether or not they consciously adopt a DSE lens.

Discussing the bureaucratization of schools over the last 30 years, Skrtic (2005) adopts a

DSE lens when he argues that both student disability and special education are institutional

categories:

> As bureaucracies, schools are performance organizations, standardized, non-adaptable
>
> structures that must screen out diversity by forcing students with unconventional needs
>
> out of the system. And because they are public bureaucracies charged with serving all
>
> students, special education emerges as a legitimating device, an institutional practice that,
>
> in effect, shifts the blame for school failure to students through medicalizing and
>
> objectifying discourses, while reducing the uncertainty of student diversity by containing
>
> it through exclusionary practices. Moreover, as institutionalized bureaucracies, schools
>
> do not change on demand; they respond to mandates like the IDEA by signaling
>
> compliance with the letter of the law through symbols and ceremonies of change that are
>
> largely decoupled from meaningful practice (think IEPs, IEP staffing, and what passes as
>
> inclusive education or "access to general education curriculum"). (p. 149-150)

Skrtic (2005) continues to demystify the social construction of disability and explains that

implementing IDEA to its maximum intent requires different methods. "Adhocracies" that are

based on "innovation rather than standardization, on the invention of personalized practices

through organizational learning grounded in collaboration, mutual adaptation, and reflexive discourse among the organizations' members and the people it serves" (Skrtic, 2005, p. 150). I wonder about the ways that district-level leaders who center their practice on thinking about the experiences of students with disabilities in school structures engage in, as Skrtic (2005) proposes, innovation, invention, collaboration, and reflexive discourse.

As a DSE scholar, issues of oppression and discrimination for individuals with disabilities, as a result of institutionalized educational practices, are at the core of this research study. Through a lens of DSE, this study examines district-level leaders' practices to deconstruct special education as a "legitimizing device" that uses the medical model to blame individuals and seeks to use exclusionary practices as a response to human variation (Skrtic, 2005). Across the country, some districts continue to operationalize the medical model through continuing the prevalent practice of creating physical spaces where students with specific disabilities are contained for entire portions of the day (Department of Education, 2017). Administrators and educators generally call these spaces self-contained classrooms or life skills classrooms, or sometimes use terms that reference a specific disability, like autism programs or multiple disabled classroom. Such a structure contributes to physical, social, and academic exclusion that contributes to educational oppression for students with disabilities. Using a DSE lens to understand district practice provides a social model understanding of the oppression that individuals with disabilities experience as a result of attitudes and structures (Baglieri & Shapiro, 2012). The district-level leaders who prioritize "removing barriers to access" who participated in this study view it as a fundamental school responsibility (Baglieri & Shapiro, 2012, p. 18). In this research, I intentionally uncover the experiences of administrators who take up the work of innovatively cultivating equitable districts that create spaces of belonging for a range of students

through ongoing opportunities to enact inclusion. Next, I explore social justice in the field of education broadly before focusing on social justice leadership.

Social Justice Leadership

The assumption is that education is a human rights issue that guides social justice scholars; as such, its enactment, or lack thereof, as a framework has the potential to impose equity or marginalization on groups of students at the institutional level. A social justice lens reflects an understanding of power differences based on class, race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and disability (Cambron-McCabe & McCarthy, 2005; Christensen & Dorn, 1997) and the subsequent social inequalities these systems of power and privilege produce (Hackman, 2005). Social justice scholarship provides a critical consciousness about these socially constructed differences and the related inequities that affect the structures and practices of schooling (Cambron-McCabe & McCarthy, 2005). Aligned with this perspective, I define social justice educational scholarship as research that seeks to examine systems of power and privilege critically within public school systems and offers alternative narratives for including historically marginalized students as a means for promoting educational equity.

District-leaders who seek to do social justice work challenge the institutionalized structures and policies in schools that marginalize certain groups and cultivate equitable opportunities by changing practices (Bogotch, 2002; Goldfarb & Grinberg, 2002; Marshall & Ward, 2004). Goldfarb and Grinberg (2002) asserted social justice is "the exercise of altering [institutional and organization power arrangements] by actively engaging in reclaiming, appropriately, sustaining, and advancing inherent human rights of equity, equality, and fairness in social, economic, educational, and personal dimensions" (p. 162). Social justice leaders who

operate in schools challenge and change structures that reproduce inequities for certain groups of students in their districts.

McKenzie (2008) uses a definition that recognizes that application of social justice leadership is complex and not universal for every context, yet centers on leaders who have the power to address academic achievement disparities, possess a critical consciousness, and implement inclusive practices. Conceptualizing social justice from these definitions, as well as other educational scholars (Blackmore, 2002; Bogotch, 2002; DeMatthews, 2014; Marshall & Ward, 2004), this study aligns with the definition of leadership for social justice Theoharis (2007) uses in his study of principals who are social justice leaders. As he notes, such principals

> [m]ake issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically
> and currently marginalizing conditions in the United States central to their advocacy,
> leadership practice, and vision. This definition centers on addressing and eliminating
> marginalization in schools. Thus, inclusive schooling practices for students with
> disabilities, English language learners (ELLs), and other students traditionally segregated
> in schools are also necessitated by this definition. (p. 223)

Applying Theoharis's (2007) definition of social justice leaders, in this study I am particularly interested in exploring the ways in which district-level special education administrators position both historical and current marginalizing factors at the core of their leadership, and how they work directly toward eliminating marginalization in their districts.

Embedded within the field of educational leadership as the latest trend (Pazey & Cole, 2012), social justice leadership structures issues of marginalized groups central to leadership, advocacy, practice, and vision. Harper (2012) argues:

It is incumbent upon us, as leaders for social justice, to be active agents, challenging

systems of power and privilege that result in disparate outcomes and perpetuate existing

social and structural stratification. Thus, leadership requires disturbing people, but at a

rate they can absorb. (p. 51).

This requires that leaders for social justice recognize the inequitable practices that persist in

school, seek alternative possibilities, and take action (Harper, 2012). Social justice leaders

demonstrate a commitment to acknowledging and embracing differences in order to create an

educational environment where all students can learn (Pazey & Cole, 2012).

Research now merges social justice leadership and special education, but the literature

base and training around the social construction of disability (Garland-Thomson, 1997) as a

historically marginalized group with social justice literature is troubling since it often focuses

primarily on race, ethnicity, and cultural diversity (Pazey & Cole, 2012). In other words,

researchers note that social justice oriented educational leadership discourse rarely places

students with disabilities at the center of discussion and that therefore recommendations

generally position specialized teachers and administrators as "experts" without questioning the

power dynamics surrounding such students (Capper, Theoharis, & Sebastian, 2006; Pazey &

Cole, 2012). Disability issues remain largely outside of leadership discourse. Given a critical

tenet of inclusive education is that it shifts responsibility for students with disabilities to all

school personnel (i.e., both special and general educators), such discussions are vital. Equity is

at the heart of the vision, decision-making, and actions for special education leadership.

Merging social justice leadership with special education is about "issues of race, class,

gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically and currently marginalizing

conditions in the United States central to their advocacy, leadership, practice, and vision"

(Theoharis, 2007, p. 223); this dissertation builds on this social justice leadership definition. Advocating for all students that fall outside, or have historically fallen at, the margins requires leaders to implement inclusive schooling practices that allow for the equity orientation of philosophies, structures, decision making, and practice. Leaders need to examine the unintended consequences that school structures have on marginalized students. Although the focus of this study is on administrators, these are the professionals who build structures and determine the type of service delivery within educational institutions that enable or deny access for students with disabilities. In this way, advocacy of all students requires equity and access to educational opportunities and contexts as a first step for ensuring social justice for individuals with disabilities in school systems. Thus, special education leaders who advocate for inclusive schooling environments recognize that inclusion is fundamentally about social justice. As Sapon-Shevin (2003) argued, "By embracing inclusion as a model of social justice, we can create a world fit for all of us" (p. 28). Inclusive schooling practices rely on an understanding that all students matter and rightfully assume full membership in the district.

Related to the need for social justice leadership, literature calls for critically conscious special education leaders. Crockett (2011) suggests advancing the discourse of access, equity, equal opportunity, and educational outcomes through administrators adhering to an equity consciousness to ensure that all students receive an equitably beneficial education. McHatton, Glenn, and Gordon (2012) argue this is important for not only local practice, but also the broader sociopolitical context. Taking this critically conscious stance as a leader is the route toward social change within the educational system (Simmonds, 2007). As McHatton et al. (2012) explain, "Such a stance of resistance requires strategic risk taking and willingness to fearlessly challenge institutional norms that perpetuate rather than contest unjust practices" (p. 40).

Resisting structures and policies that reproduce inequalities is a challenge for critically conscious leaders who position themselves as agents of change. This acknowledgement of inequities within the system and the actions leaders take has personal and professional risks. The cost educational leaders pay for challenging hegemonic norms is apparent (Theoharis, 2007).

Embedded within the aforementioned DSE and social justice theoretical frameworks, my identity as a critical change agent is woven throughout this study. This research was a way to interrogate what it means to take up a transformative stance as an inclusive-oriented district leader. I was interested in gaining a nuanced understanding of the innovative advocacy and structural changes administrators negotiated. This served as purposeful opposition to the historically oppressive educational system that has used a medicalized lens to understand students with disabilities and forces diverse learners who do not meet the standardized norms into special education environments. The next section describes the purpose of this study in detail in light of this history.

The Purpose of the Study

Leaders are central to facilitating equitable access to general education contexts for students with disabilities. Administrators across the United States are accountable for the implementation of special education and related services in public schools and agencies. Districts identify, on average, 8.9% of the students ages six through 21 they educated as having at least one of the 13 disability labels IDEA designates (Department of Education, 2017). Special education leadership with an inclusive vision is pivotal in ensuring that diverse students have equitable access to curriculum, materials, and learning environments that foster high achievement standards. Yet researchers repeatedly notice the dearth of literature that merges

knowledge from the special education and educational leadership fields (Boscardin, McCarthy, & Delgado, 2009; Pazey & Cole, 2012).

The field of special education leadership intersects discourse from educational leadership, special education, and general education (Crockett, Becker, & Quinn, 2009; Lashley & Boscardin, 2003). However, the literature is sparse. Lashley and Boscardin (2003) conducted a literature review in which they found that most special education administrators have previously held a special education personnel job. As such, they possess deep knowledge about the "assumptions, practices, and knowledge traditions of the disciplines of special education" (p. 4). These individuals often have limited professionalized knowledge of educational leadership or general education. This leaves many special education administrators not skilled to lead in special education programs that involve district-wide inclusion. Devising contemporary programs that align with best practices requires an understanding of the academic accountability standards (e.g., No Child Left Behind, 2001; IDEA, 2004), whole-school reform initiatives (Causton-Theoharis & Theoharis, 2009; Causton-Theoharis, Theoharis, Bull, et al., 2011; Choi, 2016; McLeskey & Waldron, 2006; Sailor & Roger, 2005; Theoharis & Causton, 2014; Theoharis et al., 2016), and inclusive education (Causton & Tracy-Bronson, 2015). Administrators have adopted these measures to offer equitable academic, social, and emotional outcomes for all students, including students with disabilities, but leaders must possess a wealth of skills to implement them successfully.

The literature has vast gaps about the type of special education leadership districts need to lead comprehensive service delivery within diverse, inclusive schools that have unified the general education and special education systems. Studies of the role of leaders have generally focused on principal leadership; these studies provide inspiring and practical examples of

inclusive leadership in action (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013; Huberman, Navo, & Parrish, 2012; Oyler & Fuentes, 2012; Theoharis, 2010; Theoharis et al., 2016; Waldron, McLeskey, & Redd, 2011a). Research on highly effective inclusive schools provide analysis of implementation at the school level (Farrell, Dyson, Polat, Hutcheson, & Gallannaugh, 2007; McLeskey, Waldron, & Redd, 2014). There are also studies on inclusive school reform initiatives within schools that provide research on the leadership capacity to enact and sustain these integrated services (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010; Causton-Theoharis, Theoharis, Bull, et al., 2011; Theoharis et al., 2016; Waldron & McLeskey, 2010). There are calls to understand the whole-school structural and administrative elements that equity-based inclusive education requires (Sailor, 2017). Unanswered questions remain in terms of the district-level leadership that will facilitate receipt by students with disabilities of special education and related services within the context of general education. Thus, there is a research gap about the district-level leadership needed to improve special education practice, policy, and vision. This is the specific purpose of study.

I employed qualitative research methodology in order to explore the voices, advocacy and leadership experiences, and actions of inclusive-oriented district-level special education leaders. I explored their experiences in implementing inclusive education, their actions to eliminate traditional segregated special education spaces, and their struggles to sustain equitable educational opportunities in their own words and perspectives. Participants' experiences provide a narrative about special education practices that serve to include all members. Thus, I seek to make a distinct contribution to the conversation about how leadership can support the provision of inclusive special education. The next section states the research questions that guided this study.

Research Questions

The following questions guide this dissertation:

1. How do district-level special education leaders articulate their conceptualization of and commitment to inclusive education?

2. What strategies of advocacy are evident in the ways that district-level special education leaders make sense of their enactment of inclusive educational opportunities and service delivery for students with disabilities?

3. What actions and decisions have district-level special education leaders implemented in order to remain committed to their district's enactment of inclusive education?

Overview of Chapters

The remaining section of Chapter One provides an overview of the chapters in this study. Chapter Two presents the literature reviewed for this study. It is focused on the context of inclusive education, special education leadership, and leadership for effective inclusive schools. The literature reviewed established the foundation for conducting this research and guided the study design.

In Chapter Three, I present my research methodology—the research design, the methodology, and a description of the districts. I provide details about data collection and analysis, and the role I played as a researcher.

Chapter Four serves to initiate analysis around the first research question: How do district-level special education leaders articulate their conceptualization and commitment to inclusive education? This chapter provides insight into the district-level special education leaders who were participants in this study. It reveals leaders' demographics and experiences and examines how these administrators articulate their commitment to inclusive education. It

explores how participants' roots led them to engage in educational equity, social justice, and inclusive education work.

Chapter Five reveals data connected to the second research question: What strategies of advocacy are evident in the ways that district-level special education leaders make sense of their enactment of inclusive educational opportunities and service delivery for students with disabilities? This chapter synthesizes data that depict the moments of advocacy that in which district-level special education leaders engage to make sense of their enactment of inclusive educational practices.

The findings in Chapter Six are aimed to cultivate discussion around the third research question: What actions and decisions have district-level special education leaders undertaken in order to remain committed to their district's enactment of inclusive education? This chapter analyzes data that reveals actions and procedures district-level special education leaders implement to improve and sustain inclusive educational practices as they work toward the goals of social justice in education.

The final portion, Chapter Seven, concludes with a discussion and analysis of key findings in each of the data chapters. Finally, it explores the theoretical and practical implications of this study for district-level special education administrators who aim to create inclusive educational environments for all learners.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW: PROMISING PRACTICES IN LEADERSHIP

FOR INCLUSIVE SPECIAL EDUCATION

Leadership in inclusive educational settings is central to facilitating equitable access to general education contexts for students with disabilities. More than 20,000 administrators across the United States are accountable for the implementation of special education and related services in public schools and agencies (Department of Education, 2005). Six million school-aged students in the United States are classified with a disability, meaning they have an IEP and receive special education and related services (Department of Education, 2017). The nationwide percentage of students ages six through 21 served under IDEA (2004), is 8.9% (Department of Education, 2017). Special education leadership that uses an inclusive vision is pivotal in ensuring these students with disabilities have equitable access to curriculum, materials, and learning environments that foster high achievement standards.

IDEA calls on districts to educate students in the least restrictive environment available, implying that educating students with disabilities in general education settings is preferable to separate settings. Approximately 63% of students with disabilities who are identified, and subsequently receive special education and related services, spend at least 80% of the school day in general education settings (Department of Education, 2017). Yet these figures range by state from 36.8% to 83.6% (Department of Education, 2017). In addition to geography, student ethnicity and identified disability category predict students' likelihood of receiving inclusive education (de Valenzuela, Copeland, Huaqing Qi, & Park, 2006; Sullivan, 2011; Waitoller & Artiles, 2013; Waitoller, Artiles, & Cheney, 2010). This suggests that "disproportionate representation of students in special education is also connected to local contexts (e.g., financial, political, and sociological), histories, and practices" (Kozleski & Artiles, 2012). Inequitable

special education services, that merely serve to separate and segregate students from general education learning contexts, result from the student's ethnicity since this affects category of disability. Students of color who have disabilities are more likely to be in more restrictive educational environments than White peers. Data indicates that 65.5% of White students with disabilities are in a general education setting for 80% or more of the day, while only 64.1% American Indian or Alaska Native, 56.5% of Asian, 58.0% Black or African American, 61.0% Hispanic or Latino, and 55.2 % Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander have this level of inclusion within the general education classroom (Department of Education, 2017). Given this violation of students' right to equal access to education without regard to race or ethnicity, it is imperative to gain an understanding of the special education leadership capacity it takes to serve students with disabilities in the LRE while servicing them fully.

This reality of a dual system that provides inequitable education to students with disabilities continues to have impact on current education policy and practice (Boscardin, 2005; Frick, Faircloth, & Little, 2013; Harper, 2012; Huberman et al., 2012; Pazey & Cole, 2012). The federal special education laws, and the resulting bifurcated system, have not prevented discrimination towards an increasing population of students with disabilities (Harper, 2012). Students with disabilities in self-contained programs are often isolated from other students in separate hallways or the basement of the school building. Those in general education classrooms may be treated as guests with little instructional modification or differentiation. Specialized reading, writing, and math occurs in pull-programs. Students with disabilities are often held to low expectations. Districts often follow a readiness model in which students with disabilities would need to learn developmental skills in order to be granted access in general education settings. District level special education leadership plays a crucial role in increasing access to

general education classrooms among students with disabilities, yet calls for research on their role (Boscardin et al., 2009; Pazey & Cole, 2012) have not been answered. A review of 474 abstracts published by Crocket, Becker, & Quinn (2009) in educational journals from 1970 to 2009 indicates that theoretical or interpretive professional commentary dominates the literature on special education leadership, with peer-reviewed, research studies in short supply (Crockett et al., 2009). In order to strengthen the field of special education leadership and ensure that empirical research informs practice (Bateman, 2007), more research is needed.

      This chapter provides a systematic review of educational research in the area of leadership that supports inclusive education. Since this study cuts across inclusive education and special education leadership, this chapter will address literature related to: 1) the context of inclusive education; 2) special education leadership; and, 3) leadership for effective inclusive schools (see Figure 2.1). Inclusive-oriented districts that are providing students with disabilities special education and support services within general education settings have been increasing; for example, in 1993, 39.8 % of students with disabilities ages six through 21 participated in regular classroom placements (Department of Education, 1995), as compared to 62.7% of students with disabilities who were educated for 80% or more to the day in 2015 (Department of Education, 2017). Even though there continues to be a need for improvement, steady progress toward including students with disabilities 80% or more of the day has been made since the implementation of IDEA. Hoppey and McLeskey (2013) argue that "inclusion appears to depend on the extent to which inclusion is a priority in the individual schools and districts" (p. 35). Thus, this research study is a contemporary and pressing topic for the field of special education. This chapter grounds this study by addressing the publication trends and findings around educational leadership and inclusive education.

Figure 2.1. Literature Review
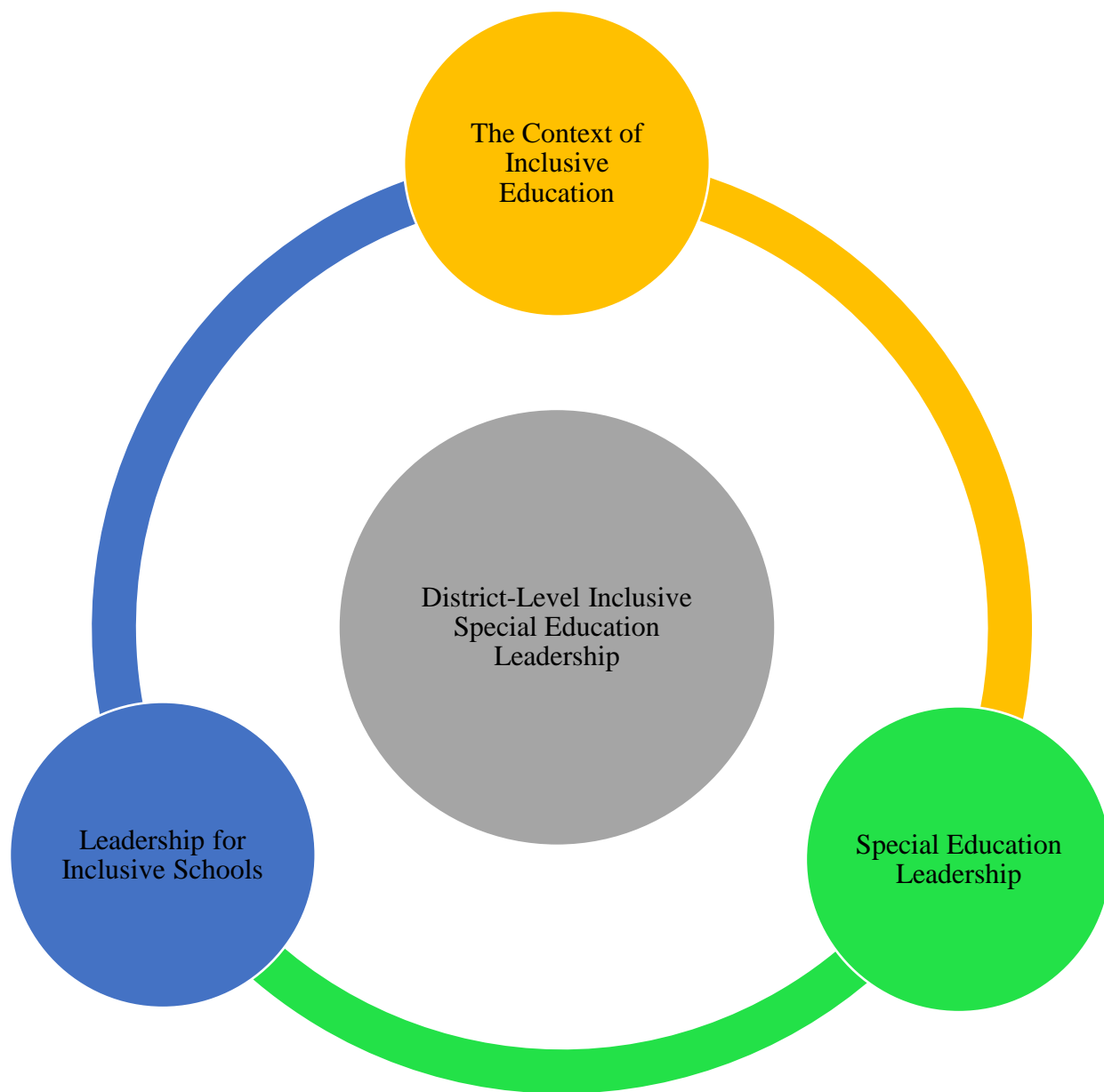
Figure 2.1. Visual representation of the literature reviewed that informs district-level inclusive special education leadership.

The review consists of articles garnered from three major education database search engines: Education Full Text-Wilson, ERIC, and Education Research Complete. Searches consisted of the following descriptive terms and key words *inclusive education*, *inclusive special education*, *inclusion, inclusion outcomes, and special education outcomes* were combined with the terms *leadership*, *leaders*, *central office administration*, or *principals* by the connector "and" in every possible combination. I also searched for *inclusive education leadership*, *special education leadership*, and *social justice leadership*.

The following questions guided the search as well as the organization of this chapter: (a) what is the context of inclusive education? (b) What does research on outcomes of special education delivered through inclusive education demonstrate? (c) What are the roles and responsibilities of special education leaders? (d) What are the key tenets of leadership of inclusive schools? (e) What are primary publication trends in this area of literature?

The Context of Inclusive Education

The construction of a dual system has served to sanction inequitable educational opportunities and treatment. One of the original purposes of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (EAHCA) was to merge general education and special education rather than to have two distinct disciplines (Pazey & Cole, 2012). However, scholars have long argued that this initial federal special education law created a dual system of education (Skrtic, 1991, 1995). That is, it removed special education from general education. This is justified through the range of educational placement options. Segregated spaces were created to fix, normalize, and remediate academic, behavior, and social skills among children with disabilities (Baglieri & Shapiro, 2012). While initially conceptualizations suggested that a range of placement options that would be advantageous to students with "specialized" needs (Kauffman, Bantz, &

McCullough, 2002), scholars raised concerns about denying students with and without

disabilities the right to learn together (Causton-Theoharis, Theoharis, Orsati, & Cosier, 2011;

Karagiannis, Stainback, & Stainback, 1996). A continuum arose, which Turnbull, Turnbull,

Wehmeyer, and Shogren (2013) describe as ranging "from the most typical and most inclusive

settings to the most atypical and most segregated settings" (p. 39).

      The debate over the traditional continuum of special education placements versus

inclusion has persisted among special education scholars (Brantlinger, 1997; Taylor, 2001).

Prominent special education researchers have consistently contested the multiple grounds of the

inclusion movement of including all students for the entire school day and argue that not all

students can be educated within general education (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1997; Gresham & Forness,

1996; Hallahan & Kauffman, 1995; Hargreaves, 1996; Kavale, 1995; Kavale & Forness, 2000;

Liberman, 1996; MacMillan, Gresham, & Forness, 1996; Padeliadu & Zigmond, 1996). Critics

of inclusion argue that scientific evidence does not support it (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1991, 1995;

Gallagher, 2001; Hallahan & Kauffman, 2008). They also claim that the emotional, social, and

academic supports students with disabilities need cannot be provided in general education

classrooms (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1994; Kauffman et al., 2002). On the contrary, other researchers

who support inclusion claim that segregated placements yield inequitable education (Harry &

Klinger, 2006; Lipsky & Gartner, 2004b) and question the conceptual foundation of a continuum

of placements based on the severity of disability: "What is needed are not new slots, but changes

in how services and supports conceptualized" (Taylor, 2001, p. 29). The "slots" are the separate

programs, placements, and schools created for only students with disabilities. Research shows

that districts where students with disabilities are performing particularly well are inclusive; as

researchers write, these districts "avoid silos" in favor of "bridg[ing] the gap between general and special education" (Huberman et al., 2012, p. 67).

Some scholars criticize the legal principle that underpins inclusion, LRE. Taylor (1988) argued the following: 1) the LRE principle legitimizes restrictive placements; 2) segregation and integration is confused with the intensity of support services required; 3) the LRE model is based on a problematic developmental continuum or readiness model; 4) because LRE placement nominally serves "individual needs," it generally reflects decision makers' moral judgement; 5) the LRE principle intrinsically allows restrictions, which violates students' rights; 6) the LRE principle implies individuals must move educational placements as they develop new skills; and, 7) the principle has led to an overemphasis on physical settings rather than on the services and supports students need (p. 45-48). Taylor (1988) urges a shift toward full community, school, and employment participation for students regardless of ability, personal choice rather than professional judgement, multiple opportunities for full integration, changes in services, recognition of a range of human needs, community belonging, and facilitation into being full members of communities (p. 51). This research introduces new ideas around the community, residential, and school continuum, and served as an anchor toward shifting new ideas and thinking in regards to the special education continuum.

In a review of research in the field of special education, Brantlinger (1997) describes a debate between traditionalists, who support traditional special education placements in separate classrooms or schools, and inclusionists, who argue that students with disabilities, regardless of severity of disability, can be educated within general education classrooms. Traditionalists base their rationale on positivism, scientific discourse, and empirical research. They attack inclusionists as ideological, political, and subjective. Yet Brantlinger (1997) argues that

tranditionalists are no less ideological and posits that all work is ideological in nature. She

suggests that inclusionists recognize the "deep cultural and structural causes of inequality" and

recognize that any discussion that disregards these causes cannot make effective educational

decisions (Brantlinger, 1997, p. 449). Working toward inclusion is a philosophical lens that urges

critique and change of inequitable school structures. In keeping with this point of view, I read

the literature from this critical perspective that inclusive, democratic education is a means to

promote social justice and equitable educational opportunities for marginalized students in the

public school system. The next section describes research that reports on outcomes of special

education that is delivered through separate programs.

Outcomes of Special Education Delivered Through Separate Programs

Separate educational environments that provide students with disabilities specialized

instruction with teachers who have specialized knowledge represent the most traditional model

of special education (Kauffman et al., 2002). The model is based on the idea that general

education cannot meet the significant educational needs of students with disabilities (Vaughn &

Linan-Thompson, 2003). However, research suggests that segregated educational placements do

not provide improvement in student outcomes (Gartner & Lipsky, 2004). Causton-Theoharis,

Theoharis, Orsati, et al. (2011) observed six self-contained classrooms to determine whether they

offer advantages in four areas commonly attributed to self-contained special education,

specifically enhanced community, distraction-free environments, specialized curriculum and

instruction, and intensive behavioral supports, that a general education classroom could not offer.

They concluded the classrooms did not offer anything that could not occur in a general education

classroom. Causton-Theoharis, Theoharis, Orsati, et al. (2011) stated, "Everything observed that

could have been considered educational could have been transported to inclusive settings without

compromising the education these students were receiving" (p. 73). Other researchers have reported evidence that disputes the claim that the pedagogy and instruction in the separate special education spaces is better or even different than in the general education setting (Vaughn & Linan-Thompson, 2003; Vaughn, Moody, & Schumm, 1998). The aforementioned research suggests that such programs exist not to benefit students with disabilities, but to avoid inconveniencing teacher and/or students in the general education classroom.

The problem with separate special education classrooms is these students do not have access to the same general education curriculum as grade-level classrooms. There is a general presumption that the curriculum must be modified, specialized, and delivered at a slower pace and placing students with disabilities in a more specialized setting to provide individualized education would be beneficial (Turnbull et al., 2013). In practice, the curriculum of these special education classrooms are merely narrowed versions of material covered in general education classrooms, which leads researchers to argue that with accommodations and modifications, general education should be able to teach students with disabilities as well as special education (Causton-Theoharis, Theoharis, Orsati, et al., 2011). Research has not borne out the belief that teachers in special education have specialized pedagogical knowledge, skills, and dispositions (Causton-Theoharis, Theoharis, Orsati, et al., 2011; Vaughn & Linan-Thompson, 2003; Vaughn et al., 1998).

Research also questions the assumption that separate classrooms or schools provide better behavior supports. Rather it suggests an overreliance on the use of seclusion and restraint in these settings, and note "there is an urgent need for school leaders to better understand what is happening in self-contained settings and work to harness the potential benefits of more inclusive and meaningful services for students with significant needs" (Causton-Theoharis, Theoharis,

Orsati, et al., 2011, p. 75). Other researchers argue that explicit teaching of proactive positive

behavior is more common in inclusive schools and that it benefits students with disabilities more

than reacting to destructive and inappropriate behaviors (Hehir & Katzman, 2012). The next

section describes research that focuses on outcomes of special education delivered through

inclusive education.

Outcomes of Special Education through Inclusive Education

A substantial body of research shows that students with and without disabilities benefit

academically and socially from inclusive education (Baker, Wang, & Walberg, 1995; Choi,

2016; Cole, Waldron, Majd, & Hasazi, 2004; Cosier et al., 2013; Fisher, Pumpian, & Sax, 1998;

Fisher & Meyer, 2002; Freeman & Alkin, 2000; Fryxell & Kennedy, 1995; Hunt & Goetz, 1997;

Hunt, Staub, Alwell, & Goetz, 1994; Kalambouka, Farrell, & Dyson, 2007; Kennedy, Shulka, &

Fryxell, 1997; Kurth & Mastergeorge, 2010; McDonnell, Mathot-Bucker, Thorson, & Fister,

2001; Peterson & Hittie, 2002; Ruijs, 2009; Ruijs, Van der Veen, & Peetsma, 2010; Salend &

Garrick Duhaney, 2007; Sermier Dessemontet, Bless, & Morin, 2012; Sermier Dessemontet &

Bless, 2013; Sharpe, York, & Knight, 1994; Waldron & McLeskey, 1998; Walther-Thomas,

1997). This aforementioned research confirms that all students can participate and learn grade-

level content, build social relationships, and display positive behaviors through inclusive

education. Key findings from research on academic, behavioral and social, and postsecondary

benefits of inclusive programs are detailed next.

Early meta-analyses examined research that compared the effects of inclusive educational

placements for students with disabilities and effect sizes with non-inclusive placements. These

studies indicate inclusive education has a small to moderate beneficial effect on both academic

and social outcomes (Carlberg & Kavale, 1980; Wang & Baker, 1985). Additional research

indicates students with disabilities do at least as well, or better, on academic outcomes than when they are educated in resource or self-contained classrooms (Cole et al., 2004; Freeman & Alkin, 2000; Roach, Salisbury, & McGregor, 2002; Ryndak, Morrison, & Sommerstein, 1999; Salend & Garrick Duhaney, 2007; Waldron & McLeskey, 1998). Empirical research shows students with disabilities experience improved outcomes in math and reading if they spend more time engaged in general education curriculum (Cole et al., 2004; Cosier et al., 2013; Kurth & Mastergeorge, 2010; Sermier Dessemontet et al., 2012). Students with disabilities educated in inclusive settings receive higher grades, earn increased or comparable scores on standardized tests, attended more days of school, and had comparable instances of behavior misconduct to students in separate classrooms (Rea, Mclaughlin, & Walther-Thomas, 2002). Research also connects students with disabilities who are educated in inclusive settings with improved work habits, enhanced self-confidence, increased willingness to take risks, and more on-task behavior (Dore, Dion, Wagner, & Brunet, 2002; Foreman, Arthur-Kelly, Pascoe, & King, 2004; Waldron, McLeskey, & Pacchiano, 1999). Another study attributed improved progress toward basic communication and motor movement objectives on students' IEP as well as the ability to generalize communication and motor skills inclusive, cooperative learning groups in general education classrooms (Hunt et al., 1994). Research also suggests that "inclusive educational programs, to a greater extent than special class programs, target educational objectives and structure educational environments to promote communicative and social interactions between the students with disabilities and their classmates" (Hunt et al., 1994, p. 19). Time spent in settings with general education peers improved metacognition for students with more complex support needs (Copeland & Cosbey, 2009; Jackson et al., 2009; Wehmeyer, 2006). Students with autism who are educated in inclusive settings scored significantly higher on academic achievement measures than those in

self-contained settings (Kurth & Mastergeorge, 2010). Research also demonstrates that students with disabilities who receive services in inclusive general education contexts have increased learning outcomes in literacy (Dessemontet, Bless, & Morin, 2012; Kliewer & Biklen, 2001; Ryndak et al., 1999) and content areas (Hunt et al., 1994; Miles, Cole, Jenkins, & Dale, 1998). Research also indicates that instruction on functional activities can be effectively embedded in general education curriculum (Fisher & Frey, 2001; Hunt et al., 1994; McDonnell, Thorson, McQuivey, & Kiefer-O'Donnell, 1997). Perhaps surprisingly, a study found that even when special education services did not completely align with evidence-based best practices, this did not impact the advantages of receiving services within the general education context and students continued to make more progress than when they were educated in self-contained settings (Ryndak et al., 1999). Research on the academic benefits of inclusive education for students with disabilities is overwhelmingly clear.

Beyond students with disabilities, research suggests that implementing an inclusive model of service delivery has positive effects on all students (Burstein, Sears, Wilcoxen, Cabello, & Spagna, 2004; Cole et al., 2004; Giangreco, Dennis, Cloninger, Edelman, & Schattman, 1993; Kalambouka et al., 2007; McLeskey & Landers, 2006; Morris, Chrispeels, & Burke, 2003; Ruijs, 2009; Ruijs et al., 2010; Salend & Garrick Duhaney, 2007; Sermier Dessemontet & Bless, 2013). Furthermore, research suggests that students without disabilities perform at least as well, or better, in inclusive general education classrooms as those whose classrooms exclude students with disabilities (Cole et al., 2004; Cushing & Kennedy, 1997; Dugan et al., 1995; Kalambouka et al., 2007; McDonnell, Thorson, Disher, Mathot-Bucker, & Ray, 2003; Ruijs, 2009; Ruijs et al., 2010; Saint-Laurent et al., 1998; Sermier Dessemontet & Bless, 2013; Sharpe et al., 1994; Staub & Peck, 1995). Inclusive classrooms give students

without disabilities the opportunity to provide peer supports. Research shows that this role leads to increased academic achievement, assignment completion, and participation level for students who provided peer supports in general education classrooms for students with disabilities (Cushing & Kennedy, 1997). Academic performance at the elementary and secondary level is equal to or better in inclusive settings for general education students (Salend & Duhaney, 1999). Other research indicates no significant difference in academic performance for students without disabilities who were educated in classrooms with and without inclusion (Ruijs et al., 2010; Sermier Dessemontet & Bless, 2013). In a meta-analysis of inclusive education, research indicated 81% of the reported outcomes demonstrated including students with disabilities in general education classrooms resulted in positive or neutral effects for students without disabilities (Kalambouka et al., 2007). Perhaps the reason for this is the placement of students with disabilities in the inclusive classroom had no effect on the time allotted to instruction or the interruptions that occur (Staub & Peck, 1995). In an era of heavily increased academic accountability, schools need to ensure that all learners are progressing academically, so it could be a problem if such placement had such effects, but empirical research has proven the academic and social benefits of inclusive education for all learners.

Empirical research also addresses the concern that inclusive education is advantageous for students who have mild disabilities, but that students with so-called severe disabilities[2] suffer under the model. Students with significant disabilities seem to clearly benefit from inclusive

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[2] I previously described my purposeful use of language that is consistent with person-first language guidelines (Snow, 2013) and federal legislation (IDEA, 2004). In this paragraph, I use terminology to describe severity of disability, such as "mild," "severe," and "significant" with full recognition that this is problematic in terms of constructing a hierarchy of disability within categories of disability. However, some researchers and articles used such terminology. In attempts to providing a comprehensive review of the current literature, I am using this language as a way to describe their research studies holistically. In other portions of this dissertation, I use the phrases students with disabilities, students with complex disabilities, or students with support needs to indicate a DSE grounding and alignment with person-first language.

learning environments and can learn new skills (Hunt & Goetz, 1997; Hunt et al., 1994).

Research indicates that students with significant disabilities attain increased academic outcomes and lower behavior challenges when educated within general education settings as compared to separate special education settings (Dawson et al., 1999). In an early research review, conducted by Weiner (1985), 50 studies comparing the academic performance of students with mild disabilities who were included and those who are educated in segregated settings, "the mean academic growth of the integrated group was in the 80th percentile, while the segregated students was in the 50th percentile" (Weiner, 1985 as cited in TASH, 2009). Current research reveals students with disabilities who are educated in inclusive settings obtain higher grades and earn higher scores on standardized tests than students with disabilities placed in separate, special classrooms (Roach et al., 2002). Again, the research on inclusive education is clear. Students with all types of disabilities, ranging from high incidence to low incidence, benefit from learning within an inclusive educational environment.

In addition to academic learning, schooling is about teaching social and behavioral skills to students with disabilities. Research indicates that general education contexts enhanced the self-esteem, amount and quality interactions with peers, friendship networks, social skills, and social status of students with disabilities compared to self-contained settings (Boutot & Bryant, 2005; Fisher & Frey, 2001; Fisher & Meyer, 2002; Freeman & Alkin, 2000; Fryxell & Kennedy, 1995; Gilberts, Agran, Hughes, & Wehmeyer, 2001; McDonnell et al., 2001; Salend & Duhaney, 1999; Salend & Garrick Duhaney, 2007). An advantage to education in inclusive settings is that students with disabilities have multiple opportunities to interact, practice, and hone their social skills when the IEP is written for services to be delivered in general education (Cushing & Kennedy, 1997; Hunt et al., 1994) and authentic friendships develop (Fryxell & Kennedy, 1995;

Hunt, Alwell, Farron-Davis, & Goetz, 1996). Belonging and acceptance are social outcomes of inclusion that parents have reported in studies (Erwin & Soodak, 1995; Ryndak, Downing, Jacqueline, & Morrison, 1995). In addition, students without disabilities serve as age-appropriate models for students with disabilities to watch and acquire skills. These visual models are helpful to teaching appropriate social and behavioral skills. Time spent in settings with general education peers facilitated improved enhanced interpersonal capabilities and networks of relationships for students with more complex support needs (Copeland & Cosbey, 2009; Jackson et al., 2009; Wehmeyer, 2006). Furthermore, students with autism who were included for academics and social portions of the school day experienced enhanced developmental indicators and positive patterns of change into adulthood, engaging in fewer antisocial behaviors, and had improved independent daily living skills (Woodman, Smith, Greenberg, & Mailick, 2016). Research also indicates inclusive education supports students without disabilities socially through increased personal growth, acceptance of peers, developing friends, and providing support to others students (Boutot & Bryant, 2005; Burstein et al., 2004; Carter & Hughes, 2006; Gun Han & Chadsey, 2004; Idol, 2006; Lee, Yoo, & Bak, 2003; Peck, Staub, Galucci, & Schwartz, 2004; Salend & Duhaney, 1999). Students without disabilities also develop enhanced attitudes and understanding about individuals with disabilities and diversity (Fisher, 1999; Helmstetter, Peck, & Giangreco, 1994; Krajewski & Hyde, 2000). Inclusive education has numerous social implications and benefits for students with and without disabilities.

Research has demonstrated that students with disabilities who were educated in inclusive settings were more likely to experience postsecondary success, as indicated by education, employment, and independent living indicators than students who were educated in segregated settings (Cushing, Carter, Clark, Wallis, & Kennedy, 2009; Haber et al., 2016; Ryndak, Ward,

Alper, Montgomery, & Storch, 2010; White & Weiner, 2004). Students with disabilities who were included in general education settings were more likely to enroll in postsecondary education as compared to their peer counterparts who were educated in more segregated settings (Rojewski, Lee, & Gregg, 2015).

This section had suggested the overwhelming favor of inclusion in education. Research demonstrated that inclusive education, where children of varied learning needs are educated together within the general education, benefits all students. Better academic, behavior and social, and postsecondary outcomes provide the rationale for creating inclusive school districts. The subsequent section examines special education leadership, a key factor in influencing how districts implement special education.

Special Education Leadership

Grounded in the literature, this section describes the roles and responsibilities of special education leaders. First, it provides a broad review of literature on special education administration. Then, it examines special education leadership roles. Special education leaders are closely associated with the following roles and have impact on these areas within schools: educational placement, instructional leadership, accountability, problem solving methods, collaboration, organizational culture, advocacy, knowledge of the law, professional development for professional staff, and receiving support as administrators. This section will review the role of special education leaders within each of these responsibility areas.

Special Education Administration

Pazey and Cole (2012) argue special education leaders must possess astute practical knowledge about how to implement educational placement decisions as well as how they should be determined. This includes the structuring of services and instruction to make inclusion a

reality. That is, the special education administrator takes the role of an instructional leader with the capacity-building skills to teach and demonstrate evidence-based practices to faculty within the fields of both general education and special education that can be implemented within inclusive educational settings (Pazey & Cole, 2012).

In examining the special education leadership needed to provide services to students with disabilities, researchers interviewed 64 participants across five countries to determine their perspectives on the critical capabilities of special education leaders and whether leadership professional development programs influence special education components (O'Brien, 2006, as cited in Boscardin et al., 2009). Five themes or skill types emerged from this research: interpersonal, personal, educational, organizational, and strategic. Interpersonal skills suggest administrators can have productive relationships, inspire others, and communicate with faculty. The personal theme suggested a deep sense of values and ethics, a commitment to ongoing professional development, and strong decision making. Educational skills meant having a strong pedagogical base and focus on student learning. The organizational theme meant that administrators needed strong management skills to structure resources to achieve desired goals. Strategic skills included building a shared school vision and culture, cultivating leadership opportunities, and promoting advocacy in the school (O'Brien, 2006 as cited in Boscardin, 2009).

In a review of 474 research abstracts published from 1970 to 2009, Crockett et al. (2009) identified categories characterizing articles on special education administration and general education administration: law and policy, roles and responsibilities in administrating special education, leadership preparation and development, personnel training and development, organizational arrangements and service delivery models, and communication and collaboration.

Other emerging themes were racial and cultural diversity, general education environments, and technology (Crockett et al., 2009).

Boscardin (2004) reports that research in special education administration has historically focused on topics such as, administrative shortages, in-service needs, certification and licensure, special education finance and costs, legal issues, and staff retention strategies, but that special education administration needs a strong research and philosophical base that supports evidence-based instruction that improves instruction and academic outcomes. Researchers suggest that if administrators are to improve educational outcomes for all students, they must oversee the implementation of evidence-based practices among teachers within inclusive learning environments and that this requires significant knowledge and skills (Boscardin, 2005). Researchers argue that, while the quality of individual students' educational lives depends primarily on teachers, teacher quality and instructional effectiveness reflects in part administrative decision making and competence (Thompson & O'Brian, 2007). More specifically, special education leaders affect the education of all students with disabilities in their districts (Thompson & O'Brian, 2007, p. 33).

Compared to other areas of educational leadership discourse, special education leadership is relatively sparse (Boscardin et al., 2009; Pazey & Cole, 2012). Researchers point to the substantial gaps in special education administration literature. This lack of research is especially noteworthy given that federal legislation has regulated special education in public schools for more than 35 years (Pazey & Cole, 2012). Boscardin, McCarthy, & Delgado (2009), for example, expressed the expectation that the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2001 and IDEA in 2004 would lead to drastic increases in research. Yet the special education literature base primarily consists of theoretical and professional commentary, not true research

articles based on data-driven arguments (Crockett et al., 2009). As Crockett et al. (2009) pointed out, if "research guides special education and its administration, then we might expect to see more and not fewer data-based publications" (p. 66). Linked to the meager research base, it is no surprise that there is a shortage of appropriately trained administrators of special education (Lashley & Boscardin, 2003)

This section provided an overview of the type of literature available on special education administration, including leadership skills, law and policy, roles, preparation, training, service delivery, and collaboration. Based on the lack of data-based research in special education leadership literature, it also reported the call for more research (Boscardin et al., 2009; Crockett et al., 2009). To add to the body of literature reviewed, this research study focuses on the district-level special education leader's role in creating inclusive districts.

Educational Placement

Federal special education law requires "to the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities…are educated with children who are not disabled...with the use of supplementary aids and services" (IDEA, 20 U.S.C. §1412 (5) (B) *et seq.*). Special education directors are crucial in ensuring that the schools in their districts follow the spirit of this law. The IDEA established a multidisciplinary team that includes the general education teacher, special education teacher, administrative designee, psychologist, a guardian, and any other individuals who are knowledgeable about the student, collaboratively design the student with disability's IEP, including special education and related services (IDEA, 2004). An IEP is developed to outline the "specially designed instruction," related services, and any supplemental aids and services the student needs to benefit from instruction. The team determines the educational placement of students in these meetings. Special education leaders have the responsibility to

ensure that the other members of the team see the general education classroom as the first option

for placement for all students with disabilities, under the LRE mandate within IDEA (Hoppey &

McLeskey, 2013). Inclusive-oriented administrators strive to ensure that all students with

disabilities, regardless of nature or severity of disability, have access to the general education

curriculum, classroom, and school and to provide the necessary supplementary aids and services

to ensure equitable access (Frattura & Capper, 2007).

Instructional Leader

   Administrators of special education are vital instructional leaders with responsibility for

improving student outcomes. As principals assume responsibility for the provision of special

education services in their buildings, the role of the special education administrator has shifted

(Lashley & Boscardin, 2003). Special education administrators are increasingly working with

principals and other administrative staff to develop interventions and implement research-based

practices that ensure accessible curriculum for students with disabilities (Boscardin, 2005).

Administrators must be knowledgeable about evidence based instructional practices, passionate

about cultivating rich learning opportunities, support teachers to implement these in efforts to

improve educational outcomes for all students (Boscardin, 2004; Oyler & Fuentes, 2012), and

increase post-school outcomes (Harper, 2012). Moreover, the administrator of special education

facilitates teachers' ability to re-engineer the curriculum, materials, and environment to make

them accessible to students with disabilities (Boscardin, 2005; Rose & Meyer, 2006). Special

education leadership literature reveals an instrumental shift from the manager of placement

decisions (e.g., the learning environment) toward the explicit curriculum taught and the quality

of pedagogy (Crockett et al., 2009).

Huberman et al. (2012) interviewed special education directors about policies and practices in their districts. These directors represent districts that produce much higher educational outcomes for students in special education than comparable districts. The study revealed these findings for the districts that outperformed similar districts on state assessment measures: 1) inclusion and access to the core curriculum; 2) collaboration between special and general education teachers; 3) continuous assessment and use of Response to Intervention; 4) targeted professional development; and 5) use of Explicit Direct Instruction.

The study suggests that special education directors drove the successful implementation of the five factors. The first theme connects to the previous claim that administrators are crucial members of the IEP team that advocate for the spirit of the law to be followed. That is, that the educational placement of the student with disabilities is in the LRE and that supplementary aids and services provide equitable education for the student. The themes of collaboration, progress monitoring, targeted professional development, and the use of direct instruction all align with the claim that the leader's role has transcended to that of instructor leader who seeks to build the capacity of teaching staff to implement engaging, multi-leveled curriculum through logical pedagogical decisions. Logical pedagogical decisions were key. Further, districts that had academic performance scores that soared above comparable districts placed these factors at the center of their leadership (Huberman et al., 2012).

Special education research has long examined instructional settings along a continuum of available placements, including mainstream, inclusion, and specialized school and class environments (Crockett et al., 2009). In their review of special education research, Crockett et al. (2009) determined that from 1970 to 1979, mainstreaming placement and instructional trends for educating students were significant; from 1980 to 1989, mainstreaming remained prevalent and

discussion of the general and special education relationship and administrator role was infused into literature; from 1990 to 1999, the topics transitioned to inclusive environments and the change process needed; and in the last cohort of articles, from 2000 to 2009, research focused on the quality of learning environments and measurement of quality of inclusive practices. The inclusive education movement drove research on the learning environment students with disabilities experience, as did concern about the role of administrators in establishing accountability for all learners (Crockett et al., 2009; Murphy, 2006).

Accountability

Mere participation in any education setting was important for students with disabilities, and accountability for student learning became an important topic in special education leadership research over time. In their review of special education research, Crockett et al. (2009) noted that from 1990 to 1999, four research studies and 10 commentaries discussed "standards-based reforms" and "total quality management." They describe heightened concern for diversity, multicultural education, and overrepresentation of special education students from ethnically marginalized groups. From 2000 to 2009 the discussion around student accountability drastically increased, as there were 10 studies and 23 commentaries on this topic. The discussion centered around the leadership needed for whole-school reform efforts, improving educational outcomes for all students, and closing the achievement gap (Crockett et al., 2009). This trend in accountability for student learning is linked to legal mandates that hold schooling institutions responsible for increased performance (Boscardin, 2005; Harper, 2012). Research has also explored the impact of this era of accountability on student learning, teacher's pedagogy, and the administrators' role.

It is clear that within the special education literature, there are differences about the administrator's role in maintaining an accountability system for a school. It is widely recognized that high-stakes in education has increased student learning outcomes for all students, ensuring that learners with diverse needs have access to quality curriculum and instruction (Crockett et al., 2009; Harper, 2012). The purpose of standardized testing is to disaggregate and publicly report learning outcomes for subgroups of students and to inform future instructional decisions. There have been some concerns in the research "about the use of these data and how they affect the instruction and outcomes of students with disabilities" (Frick et al., 2013). Researchers have raised alarms about the impact of high-stakes testing, particularly for testing can encourage "bubble student" practices, in which schools target support and instruction to students who they perceive as having a better chance of reaching proficiency in order to improve school ratings, while neglecting students who are deemed too far below grade-level to achieve the passing score because they will not have a drastically positive impact on school ratings (Booher-Jennings, 2005; Diamond & Spillane, 2004). On the other hand, research showed that increased inclusion, as measured by time spent in the general education classroom, leads to higher academic outcomes (Cosier et al., 2013). Research on highly inclusive schools show they have had success in attaining high achievement outcomes for all learners (Farrell et al., 2007; McLeskey & Waldron, 2011; Waldron et al., 2011a). Subsequent research is needed given the increased evidence that schools have made progress toward including students with disabilities in general education classrooms for most of the day (Causton-Theoharis, Theoharis, Orsati, et al., 2011). Other research suggests accountability systems that monitor student progress effectively improve the quality of teaching, and struggling learners and students with disabilities make increased

academic progress compared to similar students in other schools (Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013; Huberman et al., 2012).

Collaboration

Interest in collaboration and interaction among educators and administrators in inclusive schools spiked among special education leadership researchers during the years 2000-2009 (Crockett et al., 2009). An essential role of special education administrators within inclusive schools is fostering a collaborative context amongst themselves, general educators, and special educators to ensure that learning environments and experiences are accessible to a wide range of students (Boscardin, 2004, 2005; Lashley & Boscardin, 2003). In fact, a current study revealed the administrator deliberately acknowledging an important role "to take care of people," and referred to this as "lubricating the human machinery" (Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013). This administrator personally invested in staff in three ways: (a) trusting teachers; (b) listening to their ideas, concerns, and problems; and, (c) treating staff fairly (Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013). This demonstrates that the collaboration work of administrators also involves an ethic of care (Noddings, 1992) whereby building relationships with staff is foundational but also an overall community value of care is evident. The type of collaborative environments needed in inclusive schools can be created through explicit care-based leadership.

Through determining teacher placement decisions, special education administrators further affect the collaboration and professional bonds between teachers (Boscardin, 2005). Special educational leaders also collaborate with other administrators, psychologists, and counselors to build their ability to undertake law and research-based interventions that ensure curriculum access for students with disabilities (Boscardin, 2005). As Murkuria and Obiakor (2006) suggest, this collaboration-based leadership is "the key ingredient without which very

little can be achieved in any school setting" (p. 13). This instructional coherence and school coherence brings together teaching, learning, and programs, and places value in the web of relationships needed to support the achievement of all learners (Murkuria & Obiakor, 2006). Administrators form and foster collaborative bonds; they are vital in inclusive schools seeking to establish a strong culture that promotes high achievement outcomes for all students.

The web of collaborative relationships serves as the foundation of a strong culture in inclusive schools where the focus is on improvement of educational outcomes for all learners. Research suggests that an optimal characteristic of inclusive schools is a strong school culture and interpersonal commitment to increased outcomes for all (Farrell et al., 2007). Researchers suggest that administrators must be versed in knowledge regarding school change (Fullan, 2007) specifically understanding concrete strategies to change school culture (Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013; Waldron & McLeskey, 2010). Although this body of research does not focus on inclusive leadership, cultivating an authentic sense of belonging (Kunc, 1992) serves as the foundation for inclusive schools. Researchers are also rethinking the practice of isolating students with disabilities in one room (Causton-Theoharis, Theoharis, Orsati, et al., 2011; Causton-Theoharis, Theoharis, & Trezek, 2008) because it signifies they are different and has consequences on students' self-esteem and learning potential (Causton-Theoharis & Theoharis, 2009; Peterson & Hittie, 2002). Special education leaders work to foster a culture in their inclusive schools that creates a learning community that values and serves all students.

Organizational Culture

Organizational culture is vital to a school having meaning, purpose, and a shared vision (Deal & Peterson, 1999). Others have referred to this culture as "the air that we breathe: invisible, intangible, and absolutely vital" (Haberman, 2013, p. 2). Research on school leaders

with a strong social justice stance found that this climate of belonging was important in transforming school discipline and student behavior (Theoharis, 2009a). Each sought a "proactive, process-oriented, holistic approach" to create a warm and welcoming school climate, bolster community building in classrooms, make connections with marginalized families and the community, incorporate social responsibility into the school curriculum, and use a proactive discipline approach (Theoharis, 2009a, p. 76) . As Theoharis (2009a) argues, "These leaders appeared to move beyond lip service about climate and diversity to building a school culture that embraced diversity and connected in meaningful ways with the community" (p. 75). Cultivating this sense of ongoing belonging, as well as working toward inclusive services and continuous improvement of instruction and curriculum, was instrumental in the academic achievement of these social justice leaders' schools.

Advocacy

Special education administrators are responsible for ensuring the rights of students with disabilities (Harper, 2012). They advocate for quality school and classroom practices that are beneficial for students with all types of disabilities (Alquraini & Gut, 2012; Boscardin, 2005). Research suggests administrators of special education are more engaged as advocates than teachers, aim to improve government provisions for educating students with disabilities, and continually search for inadequacies in current services and seek to promote improvement (Fiedler & Van Haren, 2009). Thus, special education administrators play a pivotal advocacy role in specific classroom experiences for individuals with disabilities and solve school-wide special education service provision issues.

Special education administrators are the foundational element to the successful education of students with disabilities. Fiedler and Van Haren's (2009) survey research investigating the

engagement of administrators in professional advocacy actions found the actual level of advocacy activities was much lower than the expressed support by special education administrators and teachers. In fact, advocacy actions were often conducted to ensure legal provisions mandating a "free appropriate public education" (IDEA, 2004) to individuals with disabilities, as opposed to their engagement with

> Generic and global advocacy, such as advocating for improved governmental laws and regulations pertaining to special education services for students with disabilities. This type of advocacy would typically involve legislative and legal actions, and apparently, most special education professionals either do not see this as a legitimate job responsibility or feel ill-prepared to engage in such actions. (Fiedler & Van Haren, 2009, p. 12)

Research indicates that special education administrators engage in significantly more advocacy actions than teachers (Fiedler & Van Haren, 2009; Rock, Geiger, & Hood, 1992) and administrators focus on larger issues, whereas teachers respond to classroom matters and student's rights (Fiedler & Van Haren, 2009; Murry, 2005).

Knowledge of the Law

Effective advocacy for students with disabilities depends upon knowledge about special education law. Beginning with the passage of P.L. 94-142, The Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) in 1975, special education administrators have become legal compliance monitors instead of mere advocates (Boscardin, 2005). Federal laws concerning special education, such as IDEA (2004) and the NCLB Act (2002), continue to alter the roles and responsibilities of special education administrators. As Pazey and Cole (2012) argue, "The current focus of educational reform on instructional leadership and student achievement issues

creates a complex maze of legal requirements made even more difficult by considerations of disability and accommodations" (p. 246). Special education legal issues that concern administrators revealed by Wagner and Katsiyannis (2010) were discipline, placement, parental rights, and FAPE. Researchers argue that students with disabilities are entitled to a FAPE within the LRE and special education provision falls within the professional responsibility of both building- and district-level administrators (Bays & Crockett, 2007; Lashley, 2007; Pazey & Cole, 2012). Administrators of special education must have the knowledge and capacity to not only comply with federal laws but also employ them as advocacy tools.

Ensuring that districts are complying with current legal mandates requires special education administrators to assume an active training role. Compliance with updated regulations, forms, and policies is an ongoing process (Carter, 2011), and the role of special education administrators therefore must evolve. A survey of special education administrators showed that they consider knowing the law and being able to manage the financial issues associated with compliance as being very important (Thompson & O'Brian, 2007). This means that with any new authorizations of IDEA and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, Response to Intervention, and IEP changes, administrators must be acquainted with new processes and train their staff in order to remain in compliance with federal legal directives (Carter, 2011). A confluence of federal initiatives requires administrators of special education to be versed in understanding and demonstrating the impact of special education service provision on student achievement (Thompson & O'Brian, 2007). Because administrator preparation programs have minimal content related to special education and special education law (Murkuria & Obiakor, 2006; Pazey & Cole, 2012), administrators of special education must assume the role of adhering to the spirit of the federal legal mandates through on-the-job, continual training.

Receiving Support as Administrators

It is also imperative that special education administrators have proper support in leading and solving issues around special education. Three studies investigate programs that provide such support. The first examined the Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network (PTTAN). The network was designed to improve educational outcomes, legal compliance, and special education provision (Milligan, Neal, & Singleton, 2012). It incorporates a Fellows Program that supports administrators of special education as they implement changes based on standards the Council for Exceptional Children and Council for Administrator Standards set and a Summer Academy designed for administrators to implement research and data-driven strategies to improve special education services. Participants reported these professional development opportunities have a positive influence and renew their sense of confidence, and leadership capacity, as well as giving them the opportunity to participate in shared problem solving (Milligan et al., 2012).

The Schools of Promise initiative provided professional development support to support educators to include a range of learners in inclusive classrooms. This university-school partnership also provided support to administrators as they reconfigured human resources and changed special education and related service provision to be delivered in inclusive ways (Theoharis et al., 2016). A study of the initiative showed that this change in service delivery supported administrators to create inclusive learning environments, which produced concrete educational outcomes for students with and without disabilities in each of the schools (Theoharis et al., 2016).

A third example of nationally-based technical assistance is the Schoolwide Integrated Framework for Transformation (SWIFT) center. It is designed to build administrators',

teachers', and professional staff's understanding of providing academic and behavioral support to improve educational outcomes for all learners through equity-based inclusion (www.swiftschools.org). Values that SWIFT advances are: a) all children have the right to belong, b) all students should be included and engaged in learning, and c) research shows that when students with varying degrees of support learn together, there are improved academic, behavioral, and social outcomes.

Special education leaders play a fundamental role in the education of students with disabilities. Special education leaders ensure general educational placements are available, seek to improve the curriculum taught and quality of pedagogy, monitor accountability of student learning, promote problem solving, engage in and facilitate collaboration, heighten the sense of positive culture, play an advocacy role, possess knowledge about special education law and ensure compliance, and seek professional development opportunities. Some of these roles and responsibilities are similar to those the literature attributes to effective school leadership in general education (Darling-Hammond, 1996). This raises the question as to what characteristics or responsibilities enable effective leadership in inclusive schools. The next section reviews literature that centers on leadership for inclusive schools.

Leadership for Inclusive Schools

This section provides an overview of research on leadership for inclusive schools. Literature demonstrates educational practices and strategies high performing schools provide inclusive special education services. Inclusive practices include the reconfiguration of services, principal's thoughts about inclusion, collaboration, development of a shared vision, improvement of school conditions, and spreading inclusive values throughout the school.

Inclusive Practices and Full Access

Huberman et al. (2012) interviewed special education directors in eight districts to determine the practices and policies that they credited for their districts' success, especially high academic performance of their students in special education. As they found, the patterns across districts linked to special education performance "are consistent with the research and literature on effective practices that lead to improved student achievement for students in special education" (p. 59). Participants most commonly described inclusion and full access to the core curriculum as the indicator of increased special education performance. They sought to cultivate in their districts an underlying belief that all children can learn (Huberman et al., 2012). Yet their inclusion tactics differed across settings. Two schools fully integrated all students as much as possible with the necessary supplementary aids and services; another school initially used de-tracking efforts as the impetus to engage in inclusive reform efforts, and another used a flexible service delivery model that allowed the inclusion of students with disabilities in general education as much as possible but also supported specialized academic instruction as needed (Huberman et al., 2012). This research is pivotal to the literature because it indicates there is not one approach a school must assume in order for inclusive education benefits to be effective. The common element is that inclusive practices, including access to the general education curriculum, were the foundation for each of the districts. This research aligns with other studies that indicate mere access to general education contexts drastically improves academic outcomes for all learners (Causton-Theoharis, Theoharis, Orsati, et al., 2011).

This finding that inclusion and access to core curriculum is essential parallels Cosier et al. (2013) suggestion that the more time students with varying disabilities spend in general education settings, the higher their academic achievement, because of the learning opportunities

they gain through general education curriculum. Special education leadership literature suggests that inclusive practices and access to the general education curriculum is an essential element in students with disabilities' academic attainment.

Services Reconfiguration. Creating inclusive learning environments involves reconfiguration of all services, aiming to decrease separate teaching of groups, and focuses on teaching all students in heterogeneous arrangements (Burrello, Lashley, & Beatty, 2000; Frattura & Capper, 2007; Waldron et al., 2011a). Researchers emphasize that administrators have the responsibility to restructure schools in order to eliminate separate services and programs that segregate students (Causton-Theoharis & Theoharis, 2009). Frattura and Capper (2007) urge that administrators need to establish equitable structures, specifically examining the location and arrangement of educational services. As an alternative, Theoharis' (2009) research demonstrates that schools moved to heterogeneous classes, allowing them to implement inclusive special education services and inclusive ELL teaching and de-track math and reading programs based on ability. Further, this research depicts the service delivery methods before and after the implementation of inclusion, using a visual representation that shows the reconstructed human resources. This research shows that mere reconfiguration of human resources that leads to providing inclusive special education, related services, and ELL produced academic achievement gains for all students in the schools (Theoharis, 2009a).

In Waldron et al. (2011a)'s research quoted a principal who noted,

The inclusion movement came as a plan to meet all kids' needs, but in particular students with disabilities. It's not an add-on program that just meets the needs of one group of students. It became part of the whole school's plan for improving achievement for all students. (p. 55)

Leaders for inclusive schooling must develop competency in making significant changes to the school structure (McLeskey & Waldron, 2011; Theoharis, 2010). Service delivery options must be made available that allow for the flexible delivery of special education in ways that allow students with disabilities to access the general education environment and curriculum. Underlying restructuring, inclusive service delivery options, and establishing a collaborative professional teaching atmosphere, is the presumption that all children can learn (Huberman et al., 2012). As Cosier, Causton-Theoharis, and Theoharis's (2013) study clarifies, the more time students are in the classroom and have increased learning opportunities, the more academic achievement for all students will increase. Research indicates there is not one reform approach, but it is up to leaders to begin the inclusive school reform initiative.

Principals' Attitude and Thoughts About Including Students With Disabilities.
Understanding the literature about principal leadership in inclusive schools provides a glimpse into the characteristics, responsibilities, and dispositional values special education leaders should possess. As research suggests, "the skill sets for both special education administrators and building principals are very similar…as services and systems are merged, training and development of leadership at all levels will require a common set of skills" (Passrnan, 2008, p. 47). This dual knowledge base is especially important given the combination of statewide accountability and assessment system with the federal special education law that guarantees students with disabilities a free appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment with the overall implementation of special education programs being the responsibility of both building- and district-level administrators (Bays & Crockett, 2007; Lashley, 2007; Pazey & Cole, 2012).

As school-building leaders, principals are responsible for knowing special education issues (Crockett et al., 2009) and ensuring academic outcomes for all learners (Waldron et al., 2011a). Principals' attitudes and approach toward full inclusion of students with disabilities are pivotal to the culture and direction of a school. Literature suggests that past experiences that have been positive, training in effective inclusion practices, and the student's special education category affect principals' attitudes toward inclusion (Praisner, 2003). Frick et al. (2013) argued, "Failure to provide adequate preservice and ongoing professional development in the education and inclusion of students with disabilities, within the general education environment, has the potential to detrimentally affect principals' ability to effectively lead special education programs and services and thus work in the best interest of students with special educational needs" (p. 211). Principals' attitudes and approaches toward including students with disabilities within an inclusive school environment is pivotal to the culture and direction of a school.

Interpersonal Relationships, Collaboration, and Teacher Development. A case study of the principal leadership in an effective inclusive school, research shows that providing continual emotional support for school improvement and building warm relationships with faculty is vital (Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013). Researchers quote the school's principal who called these measures "lubricating the human machinery" in order to "improve the lives of teachers and students so that they can do their best work" (Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013, p. 253). The moral responsibility to "take care of people" is the driving force behind his thinking and actions (Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013, p. 248).

The principal also continually focused on moving the school toward a commitment to educating all students, with emphasis on students with disabilities (Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013). He upheld his vision of sustaining an inclusive school with a purpose of improving outcomes for

all students. His goal was to use the strong positive culture within the school to create buy-in

from faculty to improve educational outcomes for all learners (Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013).

Principal leadership also included shielding faculty from external high-stakes accountability

pressures while promoting teacher growth (Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013). The principal was able

to promote inclusive education and improvement of academic outcomes for all children during

an era heavily tainted by high-stakes accountability, through a commitment to develop a strong

culture with warm relationships, collaboration, and promotion of teacher development.

The high performing districts the Huberman et al. (2012) study examined also used

collaboration between special education and general education teachers as an explicit strategy to

improve special education performance. In these districts, collaboration happens through

discussion of student needs and instructional planning. In one district school psychologists are

part of this collaboration. Another two use blended instruction, transition planning, learning

centers, and the participation of special education teachers on leadership teams to ensure the

merging of general and special education issues (Huberman et al., 2012). Based on localized

contextual factors related to the professionals who work in each school, the focus topic of

collaboration varies. However, collaboration amongst all educators is a significant characteristic

of inclusive districts who strive for high performance of all students.

Development of Shared Inclusive Vision. Waldron et al. (2011a) case study of an

effective inclusive school found that the principal was essential in collaboration with teachers to

setting the vision of the school, restructuring the organization, improving the condition of the

school, ensuring access to quality instruction, and using data to drive decision making in order to

sustain an effective inclusive school. The principal explicitly articulated her goal of developing

a shared vision and moral purpose of educating all students by meeting their needs. This meant

that students with disabilities were educated alongside age-appropriate peers. This inclusive educational standard was not negotiable, but teachers had the flexibility to enact this in different ways (Waldron et al., 2011a).

The principal enlisted the collaboration of teachers to redesign the school to provide for the support needed. A learning community was nurtured as she shared responsibility for decision making as the school was restructured and the culture evolved (Fullan, 2007). The principal said, "The inclusion movement came as a plan to meet all kids' needs, but in particular students with disabilities. It's not an add-on program that just meets the needs of one group of students. It became part of the whole school's plan for improving achievement for all students. It's not about students with disabilities or gifted students—it's about how can we make every child successful" (Waldron et al., 2011a, p. 55). Fostering a strong learning community was essential for creating an effective inclusive school.

Changing Improved School Conditions. Waldron et al. (2011a) also described the development of a supportive learning community and hiring new staff that fit well with the inclusive vision of the school as part of the success of an inclusive school. The principal sought resources teachers needed for their classroom practice and often celebrated teachers' successes within the school. Problem solving was used as a means of shared responsibility to improve academic outcomes when test scores were drifting.

The principals in both Hoppey and McLeskey's (2010) and Waldron et al.'s (2011a) described buffering faculty from external accountability demands (i.e., state reported standardized test data), while ensuring they were well equipped to meet them. The latter principal also quickly dealt with difficult decisions regarding staffing, scheduling, and evaluations, signifying a sense of respect and attentiveness for teachers and the school

community (McLeskey & Waldron, 2011). His astute attention to attending to the working conditions of the community helped create a sense of positive inclusive space for teaching and learning.

Waldron et al.'s case study describes the principal as committed to ensuring that all students had access to high-quality instruction within an inclusive model of service delivery. He observed students with disabilities leaving effective general education classrooms to a room where behavior issues abound and rote learning was the instructional focus—a segregated environment where rich learning experiences and behavior models were not present. The school transitioned to a tiered model of providing effective instruction to all students through small group and direct instruction. Furthermore, the principal created professional development opportunities to promote teacher growth. Professional development happened through interaction with other faculty (e.g., grade-level meetings, inclusion planning meetings, book studies, co-teaching conversations) and conference sharing (e.g., after attending conferences, the "experts" who attended would teach and coach others). Delivering high quality instruction within the inclusive environment was an area of ongoing development in which the principal encouraged and sought new ways for teacher growth (McLeskey & Waldron, 2011).

The principal created a data driven value at the school upon which to guide instruction, resource use, and accountability. The school also had a systematic method for gathering and monitoring student progress that was directly linked to classroom instruction and future planning. A crucial strategy was to celebrate the incremental successes that the state accountability tests showed in years past for all the teachers, and not just the grade level in which the test was administered. The positive uses of progress monitoring data were used as successes were celebrated yearly until this system became part of the teaching culture at the school. Data

monitoring supported decision making, accountability, human resource management (e.g., how co-teachers and paraprofessionals were distributed to classrooms), areas for future professional development, and technology resource allocation (Waldron et al., 2011a).

Waldron et al. (2011a) highlighted the fundamental steps that the principal took in order to develop a highly effective inclusive school program at one elementary school. Through the stance of what Ware (2006) called a "warm demander," the principal implemented the steps needed to improve academic outcomes for all students, including those students with disabilities (Waldron et al., 2011a). The school community engaged in shared decisions and responsibilities to fulfill this foundational vision. The use of a data monitoring system to drive instruction, decisions, and planning was key to success for this school to ensure all students were met. Administrators who implement knowledge-based and evidenced-based decision making and instructional practice understand this as imperative to show evidence of efficacy (Boscardin, 2005). The school Waldron et al. (2011) studied did not require additional resources to create its inclusive service delivery model, which indicates that adjusting services can be done without extra financial resources.

Inclusive Values Permeate Multiple Areas. In a third study of an inclusive school, Causton-Theoharis and Theoharis (2009) describe that the principal's commitment to inclusion at Falk Elementary "meant no self-contained special education classrooms, no pullout programs, no kids sent to other schools" and "nothing separate, no special spaces, no special teachers" (p. 44). The focus was on ensuring every student was a member of the classroom and school community. One crucial element from this case was that cultivating an inclusive environment "permeated all aspects of the school—after-school programs, reading interventions, the physical arrangement of classrooms, and dramatic changes on the playground" were physically included

in all parts of the school environment and felt a sense of belonging within each of these spaces (Causton-Theoharis & Theoharis, 2009, p. 44). Effort to create a learning environment that welcome and create a sense of belonging transcend classroom walls and must include recreational, social, and all meaningful experiences of the school.

This case offers concrete evidence of academic achievement improvement after transforming to inclusive services and cultivating students' sense of belonging throughout the school community. Data indicate 20% more students were administered the state reading test, meaning that students with disabilities and English language learners were included in the state accountability standards. The achievement of students at the proficient or advanced level on the reading test increased by 36% three years after restructuring service delivery. A significant result is that improvements were found for each sub-group at Falk: African-American or Black students improved from 33% to 78% achieving at a proficient or advanced level, Asian students from 47% to 100%, Hispanic students from 18% to 100%, students with special education labels from 13% to 60%, and English language learners from 17% to 100% (Causton-Theoharis & Theoharis, 2009). These increases were a result of the restructuring of special education, at-risk, and English language learner intervention service delivery models to a whole-school comprehensive service delivery model that provided students with the supports needed within the context of the general education classroom.

The authors of the study offer four practical recommendations to leaders. To develop an inclusive district, "the superintendent and administrative team must articulate a vision and a commitment to the philosophy and practice of inclusive education for all" (Causton-Theoharis & Theoharis, 2009, p. 47). Students with disabilities must be the center of conversation and reflection, and there must be a plan for students to be placed in general education classrooms.

Second, inclusion in a general education classroom cannot be predicated on the learner's readiness or behavior. Instead, leaders understand that the best method to prepare students for participation in our inclusive society is to participate and learn in inclusive educational settings. Third, resources should be allocated to creating and building capacity in general education classrooms. When districts provide monetary and human resources for separate schools, classrooms, and spaces, these segregated places can become holding places for different or diverse students. Fourth, ongoing professional development must happen to develop teacher's capacity to include all students within inclusive settings (Causton-Theoharis & Theoharis, 2009). These recommendations are the initial steps that leaders committed to developing inclusive educational settings can take to ensure all students have access to the general education environment and curriculum and be better fit to live, work, and play in our inclusive society.

Taken collectively, the case studies on inclusive schools reveal that principals play a crucial leadership role in inclusion (Causton-Theoharis & Theoharis, 2009; Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013; Waldron et al., 2011a). An interesting point Causton-Theoharis and Theoharis (2009) articulated is that the school they examined was far from perfect. It seems likely that no school is perfect. There are always school, community, and instructional factors to improve, but inclusion is an ongoing development that welcomes changes that serve to realize the inclusive vision of the school.

Gaps in the Literature

The field of special education leadership intersects discourse from educational leadership, special education, and general education (Crockett et al., 2009; Lashley & Boscardin, 2003), yet the literature is relatively sparse. Lashley and Boscardin (2003) conducted a literature review in which they found that most special education administrators have worked previously in special

education. They possess deep knowledge about the "assumptions, practices, and knowledge traditions of the disciplines of special education" (p. 4). These individuals often have limited professionalized knowledge of educational leadership or general education. As such, many struggle to lead and to implement special education programs that are aligned with best practices in line with new academic accountability standards (e.g., NCLB, 2001; IDEA, 2004), school reform initiatives (Causton-Theoharis, Theoharis, Bull, et al., 2011; Theoharis, 2009a), and contemporary thinking on inclusive education that together offer renewed interests in equitable academic, social, and emotional outcomes for all students, including students with disabilities.

There are substantial gaps in the literature in understanding the type of special education leadership needed to lead comprehensive service delivery within diverse, inclusive schools where the general education and special education systems are unified. Specifically, there is scant research on the district-level special education administrator's role in inclusion to complement the studies that address the role of the principal at the building level (Causton-Theoharis & Theoharis, 2009; Huberman et al., 2012; Oyler & Fuentes, 2012; Waldron et al., 2011a). There are also studies on inclusive school reform initiatives within schools that provide research on the leadership capacity to sustain inclusive service provision (Causton-Theoharis, Theoharis, Bull, et al., 2011; Theoharis et al., 2016). Beyond the scope of this review of the literature, research has addressed, for example, instructional topics for teacher training for inclusive classrooms, such as co-teaching and collaborative teaching (Naraian, 2010; Nevin, Villa, & Thousand, 2009; Villa, Thousand, & Nevin, 2008), differentiation, universal design for learning (Meyer, Rose, & Gordon, 2014; Rose & Meyer, 2006), supplementary aids and services, and provision of related services. There are still questions unanswered in terms of the district-level leadership needed to provide students with disabilities special education and related

services within the context of general education. Thus, a research gap about the district-level leadership needed in terms of the special education practice, policy, and vision remains.

Within this larger gap, there are specific areas where additional research is needed. How does the district-level special education administrator develop a shared vision with building-level leaders in order to create buy-in about inclusive education or the reform process? What role does the district-level special education administrator play as an instructional leader? Research demonstrates that special education leaders have the role of an instructional leader who understands general education, special education, and special education law. How do special education leaders function as instructional leaders and problem solvers when issues surface? How does the district-level leader make decisions based on human resource allocation and service delivery within inclusive districts? How do district-level special education leaders address intersections of race, culture, socioeconomic status for students who have historically been underperforming? These are just some of the questions that this review of the literature has left unanswered. It is not surprising since there is still limited research on special education leadership (Boscardin et al., 2009; Crockett et al., 2009; Pazey & Cole, 2012).

Overview of Literature

In summary, special education leadership is undoubtedly essential for districts that work to create inclusive educational opportunities that produce high performance outcomes for all children. By providing equitable access to the general education environment and curriculum, students are afforded the opportunity to achieve and soar academically and socially. For students with disabilities, this is the best preparation for living, playing, and working within the larger inclusive society that awaits after the schooling years. Given the national 8.9% average for

students who are identified with one of the thirteen federally recognized disability labels, and thus receive special education and related services (Department of Education, 2017), it is this group of students that special education administrators who create inclusive educational opportunities directly impact.

This review examined the literature based on special education leadership in inclusive educational environments. Discourse from educational leadership, special education administration, and inclusive education based academic journals were reviewed. An increasing number of districts that are providing inclusive special education and related services (Department of Education, 2017), and researchers must continue to conduct studies to understand the leadership needed at the district-level to implement inclusive services.

This review of the literature examined the context of inclusive education. Research on the outcomes of special education delivered through separate programs and inclusive education was examined. In the special education leadership discussion, roles and responsibilities of educational leaders was reviewed. The most common findings were roles as: (a) members of the IEP team; (b) instructional leader; (c) problem solving facilitator; (d) promoter of a collaborative culture; (e) advocate; (f) expert of special education law and policy; and, (g) professional development leader for faculty. A crucial finding is that the importance of these roles for special education leaders are jointly shared with general education administrator. That is, these roles and responsibilities are crucial for all school leaders. Digging deeper into the literature on the role of leaders within inclusive education environments revealed other key leadership themes.

Research showed that inclusive educational practices improved academic outcomes for students with disabilities and either contributed to or had no effect on outcomes for students without disabilities. Access to general education environment, curriculum, and peers was the

most important element that studies pointed to for high performing districts (Huberman et al.,

2012). School leaders needed to focus on resource allocation in order to implement inclusive

services (Scanlan, 2009; Theoharis, 2009a) and to provide inclusive curriculum that promoted

"three-dimensional learning" whereby students had different entry or access points into the

content learning, and experience the topics through concrete manipulatives and sensory modes

(e.g., touching, seeing, tasting) related to the core content (Oyler & Fuentes, 2012). Research

indicates access to general education curriculum is a significant factor in the success of high

performing districts for all cohorts of students, including those with identified disabilities.

      Case study research addressing inclusive schools suggested the importance of

principals and provided inspiring cases of special education leadership in action (Causton-

Theoharis & Theoharis, 2009; DeMatthews, 2015; DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014; Hoppey &

McLeskey, 2013; Theoharis, 2009a; Waldron et al., 2011a). Principals' assumed the nurturing

and caring of the staff, developing shared visions, buffering the staff from external accountability

pressures, ensuring teachers have leadership opportunities through distributed leadership, and

establishing a progress monitoring system. This research demonstrates the need for special

education leadership at the building level without addressing its importance at the district level.

This leaves clear room for case studies of district-level special education leaders and their roles

and responsibilities.

      It is clear that the current research is limited in scope and application of special education

leadership to building-level administration. Research reviewed in the introduction chapter that

draws from the discourse from social justice leadership to educational administration is also

important to consider. Scholarship that has applied social justice to special education leadership

generally offer a building level-analysis or take a larger theoretical stance (Artiles, Harris-Murri,

& Rostenberg, 2006b; Capper et al., 2006; DeMatthews, 2014, 2015; Theoharis, 2009a).

Equipped with insight from this literature review, the following chapter describes the research

methodology used to contribute a district-level special education leadership understanding to

creating inclusive educational contexts.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This dissertation employed a qualitative research methodology in order to understand the experiences of seven district-level special education leaders committed to inclusive educational practices using the following three paradigms and ideological approaches: phenomenological perspective, social construction perspective, and transformative inquiry. The intention of this study was to explore the voices, perspectives, and leadership experiences of these participants who advocate, enact, and sustain equitable and inclusive special education services. As a result of this study, I became particularly interested in understanding the construction by district-level leaders of an alternative narrative. This alternative narrative is about special education practices that serve to include all students, as contrasted with a traditional medical narrative that uses disability descriptors that are merely medical diagnoses, as the basis for educational placement and research examination. In order to explore participants' voices and experiences, the dominant data collection strategy employed was conducting in-depth interviews.

This chapter is organized as follows. First, I describe qualitative research as a methodology, framed with phenomenological perspectives, social construction perspectives, and transformative inquiry. Second, the history of the study is provided, revealing my positionality as a researcher and how I came to ask the research questions of this study. Third, the research design reveals the recruitment and criteria, and chronicles my selection of participants. Next, I describe data collection procedures, including in-depth interviewing, the methods of each of the interviews, member checks, and field notes. Fifth, data analysis and interpretation methods are revealed, and I explain analytic memo writing, my researcher subjectivity, data analysis, and specific analysis procedure. Sixth, I discuss trustworthiness and ethical considerations. Then, I describe the participants in this study and the districts they lead. In the next chapter, I also

explore participants' commitment to inclusive education and present findings as three themes across the district-level special education administrators' articulated belief systems.

Qualitative Research

This study aimed to understand the experiences of administrators who lead districts that value inclusive special education service provision. The tradition of qualitative methodology (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2017) is used to guide this research investigation. As Denzin and Lincoln (2017) argue:

Qualitative research consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations… [and] memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things…attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (p. 10).

In qualitative research, these practices are used as a way to gather rich descriptive data (e.g., written words and narration) about taken for granted instances and meanings participants have about their lives and actions (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). As Bogdan and Biklen (2007) assert, "The qualitative research approach demands that the world be examined with the assumption that nothing is trivial, that everything has the potential of being a clue that might unlock a more comprehensive understanding of what is being studied" (p. 5). This research aimed to uncover the meanings and assumptions that special education leaders in inclusive-oriented districts construct of their school lives. Denzin and Lincoln (2017) posit, "Qualitative research involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials…that describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals' lives (p. 10). "Participant perspectives"

(Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 7), "capturing the individual's point of view" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017, p. 11), and how each makes sense of their own life, is of utmost concern to qualitative researchers, and were elements of focus during this research study. This methodological approach values process (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Rather than using numerical data to determine changes in outcomes and products as quantitative research techniques demonstrate (Sprinthall, 2012), this study has an explicit descriptive focus on how ideas, meanings, and definitions are formed by inclusive special education leaders and are constrained by their social world.

Qualitative research "has no theory or paradigm that is distinctly its own…it does not belong to a single discipline" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017, p. 12). In attempts to illuminate the complexity inherent in qualitative research, Denzin and Lincoln (2017) explain:

> Qualitative research is an interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary, and sometimes counter-disciplinary field. It crosscuts the humanities, as well as the social and physical sciences. Qualitative research is many things at the same time. It is multiparadigmatic in focus. Its practitioners are sensitive to the value of the multimethod approach. They are committed to the naturalistic perspective and to the interpretive understanding of human experience. At the same time, the field is inherently political and shaped by multiple ethical and political positions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017, p. 11)

Qualitative research is a complex toolbox of practices that researchers employ to build an interpretation of participants' lived experiences, relying on a variety of theoretical frameworks. In this toolbox, this methodology "involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials…that describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals' lives (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017, p. 10).

Further, this methodology recognizes political, ethical, and historical tugs of wars, yet finds strength in a core value of understanding. The aim is to explore a "central phenomenon" (Creswell, 2012, p. 16), in this study that is the work that special education leaders conduct within inclusive districts, "in order to gather descriptive data in the subjects' own words so that the researcher can develop insights on how subjects interpret some piece of the world" (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 103). This qualitative study attempts to discover and describe what a particular subset of leaders do in their everyday school lives and what their actions of advocacy mean to them (Erickson, 2011). Foundational to qualitative research and this inquiry is to learn from the leaders "what they are experiencing, how they interpret their experiences, and how they themselves structure the social world in which they live" (Psathas, 1973, p. 10). This research aimed to uncover "the very assumptions that structure the experience of actors in the world of everyday life" and the meaning structures that participants employ to interpret their world (Psathas, 1973, p. 14).

Although qualitative research is comprised of common methods and techniques (e.g., open-ended interviewing, concerned with understanding, attuned to process and meaning, and flexible design), Bogdan and Biklen (2007) assert that it also includes a particular way of thinking about a study. A paradigm is a general worldview, belief system, or perspective that is "guided by a set of beliefs and feelings about the world and how it should be understood and studied" that the researcher embodies and employs as a framework to guide actions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017, p. 19). In the next sections, I explain the paradigms and ideological approaches this work is embedded within. They are a) phenomenological perspective; b) social construction perspective; and, transformative inquiry.

Phenomenological Perspective

A theoretical underpinning of this research is from a phenomenological perspective (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). "Researchers in the phenomenological mode attempt to understand the meaning of events and interactions of ordinary people in particular situations" (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 25). The lived experience of participants is important. This approach leads with the assumption that I do not know what things mean to the participants, and through using silence and space in the conversations, I can come to understand the experiences of my participants, including the sorts of things they take for granted as true. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) explain this approach: "This 'silence' is an attempt to grasp what it is they are studying by bracketing an idea the informants take for granted as true. That is, researchers act as if they do not know what it means and study it to find out what is actually taken for granted" (p. 25). This concept of 'silence' was used during the interviewing as a purposeful research strategy to position myself as a listener, learner, and someone with less practical experience than the participants, allowing specifics and details to emerge. The attempt is to understand the conceptual world from the participants' perspectives, the understanding and meaning they attach to situations, their lived experience, and their social construction of their school lives.

This perspective influenced my research design in that I aimed to describe the participants' unusual perspectives, discover taken-for-granted assumptions, and utilized methods that allow for discovering participants' deep ways of perceiving their lived experience as administrators. Given that the participants in this study are district-level special education administrators, which is drastically different from my positionality as a researcher, former inclusive special education teacher, and never a school leader, my ability to find out what leaders take for granted in their approach to leadership of their districts was heightened. Specifically,

my unique positionality allowed me explicitly ask questions about the participants'

administration of special education in ways that, as Bogdan and Biklen (2007) notes, facilitated

my position as a learner studying their explicit and unintended practices.   Since this perspective

is concerned with the reconstruction and understanding of the participants' authentic

experiences, it also influenced the design and incorporation of a member check to determine if

the essence of their core had been captured and described accurately.

Social Construction Perspective

From this phenomenological perspective, participants' social construction of their reality

is influenced by historical conceptions and practices of their professional fields. The values,

ideological assumptions, as well as curricular and pedagogical practices and recommendations

participants make are all embedded within certain schools of thought that are embedded within

political assumptions. That is, their knowledge is ideological and grounded in certain values.

With a mission to understand the experiences of the special education leaders in my study, I

purposefully grounded this learning in a socio-historical and political perspective. That is, the

districts the participants lead are inherently influenced by policies at the federal and state level,

and well as by local communities. For this reason, through my review of the literature that

emphasized the changing societal and legislative perspectives around special education, I

attempted to gain insight into the historical and ideological foundations in special education that

may impact leaders' current practice. Each of these educational communities have ways of using

language, constructing norms, constructing the education of students with disabilities,

interpreting legal mandates, and perpetuating power dynamics. These emerge out of historical

ways of being, are shaped by current actors in the system, and ultimately influence contemporary

practice (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). As an impact of these educational communities, district-level

special education leaders make meaning of their lives in particular ways that cannot be removed from the socio-historical and political perspectives (e.g., districts creating separate special education programs as interpretation of the LRE and continuum of placement options) of their field.

Transformative Inquiry

This research might be better identified as transformative inquiry. The study began as a way to understand how district-level leaders sought to resist oppressive structures within the educational institutions. It was an inquiry of praxis; that is a way to explore or investigate the lived experiences and actions transformative leaders engaged in inclusive school reform within their school districts while operating with a social justice framework at their core. Denzin and Lincoln (2017) posit the need for social justice has never been greater:

> This is a historical present that cries out for emancipatory visions, visions that inspire transformative inquiries, and for inquires that can provide the moral authority to move people to struggle and resist oppression. The pursuit of social justice within a transformative paradigm challenges prevailing forms of inequality, poverty, human oppression, and injustice (p. 1).

This research drew on a critical studies foundation (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). I sought to understand the ways in which power, oppressive structures, and district organization relate to and inform the education of students with disabilities. This was a critical lens through which I set research questions, participant criteria, and made meaning of the data. In this way, this study is an "Inquiry [that] implies an open-endedness, uncertainty, ambiguity, praxis, pedagogies of liberation, freedom, and resistance (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017, p. 11).

Operating within this transformative inquiry paradigm, participants' subtle resistive tactics were noticed. I intentionally used the phrase transformative inquiry because it was my hope that the participants in this study serve as exemplars for other educational leaders who take on a transformative, resistant administrative identity and initiate changes in district structures that allow for the full inclusion of students with disabilities. At times in this research, rather than only using a critical researcher lens in understanding participants' decisions, I made the conscious choice to illuminate the transformative incremental changes participants have made that are situated in complex educational institutions with their historical, political tensions. Recognizing this ambiguity led me to understand the pedagogies of liberation and resistance with the oppressive nature of the institution that participants must work in. This allowed me to see participants as transformative leaders who actively resisted and disrupted district structures in order to enact district-level inclusive education.

The aforementioned paradigms served as a collection of my beliefs or worldview as I conducted research. Together the paradigms influenced the methods of this research (see Table 3.1).

Table 3.1. Paradigms and Ideological Approaches

Paradigm	Worldviews or Beliefs	Influences to Methods
Phenomenological Perspective	• Understand the meaning of events and interactions of people in particular situations • Lived experiences	• Describe participants' unusual perspectives • Discover taken-for-granted assumptions • Use interviews that allow for a deep way of understanding their experience • Learner studying their explicit and unintended practices
Social Construction Perspective	• Knowledge is constructed; individuals create meaning through their interpersonal interactions and with the environment • Understanding is key • No single truth • Context and culture is important • Concern for how meanings are negotiated • Influenced by historical conceptions and practices of their professional field • Pedagogical practices and recommendations are embedded within certain schools of thought	• Knowledge constructed between participant and researcher • "Coming to consciousness" (Freire, 1998) and a new level of understanding and articulation was a result of conversation and collaboration • Passionate participant and facilitator of conversation
Transformative Inquiry	• Influenced by core to resist oppressive structures within educational institutions • Explore or investigate the lived experiences and actions leaders engaged in while operating from social justice theoretical framework • Reality and knowledge is socially constructed, as well as influenced by power relations in society	• Critical qualitative research • Inquiry of praxis-ongoing reflective approach to taking action • Inquiry guided by open-endedness, ambiguity, praxis, pedagogies of liberation and resistance • Understanding social justice roots • Resistance, reform, and ways of disrupting system • Critical conscious is key for larger political struggle to

challenge and transform
oppressive social conditions
and create more egalitarian
school system
- Activist orientation
- "transformative intellectual"
as advocate and activist

As a researcher, I was cognizant that trying to understand "participants' perspectives" and the social construction of their school lives is subjective. A primary aim of this research was to be descriptive of participants' words and experiences, but there is also interpretation that happens. The research data collection, analysis, and writing are all contingent upon my interpretation of the participants' perspectives. This interpretation is my subjective way of understanding and making sense of their perspectives, and although grounded in empirical evidence, it still is interpretive. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) explain, "Thus reality comes to be understood to human beings only in the form in which it is perceived" (p. 26). That is, the themes that emerged from this research are not the absolute truth. Rather, they are merely my researcher interpretation of the participants' social construction of their daily school lives. As such, "Most qualitative researchers see what they produce, research reports and articles, not as transcendent truth, but as a particular rendering of interpretation of reality grounded in the empirical world" (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 27). These perspectives form the belief framework that shaped the research design and contributed to my decisions described in the next section. The next section describes the origins of this study and my positionality as a researcher.

My Positionality

My interest in learning about the perspectives of district-level special education leaders who have a commitment to inclusive education is a culmination of eight major influences in my professional career: (1) studying inclusive education within Syracuse University's undergraduate

teacher preparation program and implementing co-teaching; (2) working intensively with a family to include their child with autism in academic, social, family, and community activities; (3) studying curriculum and teaching at Columbia University and implementing research; (4) teaching inclusive elementary classes where diverse learners had access to the general education curriculum and peers; (5) engaging in doctoral courses at Syracuse University that focused on leadership for inclusive education; (6) volunteering with inclusive school reform projects; (7) consulting as an inclusive education advocate to ensure inclusion of students with disabilities; and, (8) teaching undergraduate and graduate University courses in special education and teacher education. See Figure 3.1 called *History of Study* for a visual depiction of the major influences in my professional career described in this section. Detailed background information (see Appendix 3.1) reveals my positionality (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) as a researcher and provides context for asking the research questions of this study.

Figure 3.1. History of Study

Studying Inclusive Education at Syracuse University and Implementing Co-Teaching

Professor in Special Education and Teacher Education Programs

Including a Student with Autism in Academic, Social, Family, and Community Activities

Consulting as an Inclusive Education Advocate

Leadership For Inclusive Educational Practices

Studying Curriculum and Teaching at Columbia University & Research in a Diverse Urban Context

Volunteering with Inclusive School Reform Projects

Doctoral Courses at Syracuse University Focused on Leadership for Inclusion

Teaching Inclusive Elementary Classes where Diverse Learners Had Access

My professional experiences have initiated a desire to learn about, explore, and hear the voices and perspectives of administrators who value and directly advocate for students with disabilities to be educated within inclusive educational environments. For this reason, this

dissertation focuses on the powerful advocacy of administrators who are committed to providing all students with disabilities with an inclusive education. My meandering professional path prompted awareness that other administrators and those interested in inclusive education could learn from what they had to contribute. Shaped both by this positionality as well as the aforementioned paradigms that provide my beliefs and worldview, I see myself as a "transformational intellectual" (Giroux, 1988, p. 213) who uncovers understanding and inquires about historically oppression, critiques structures, and aims to effect change. Given this, I also understand my positionality as someone who does not identify as someone with a disability and as a straight, white researcher studying social justice and inclusive education. The norms of whiteness and ableism likely impacted the study and findings, and there is a certain situated sense of power and privilege granted with these identifying social markers.

Research Design

Recruitment

Purposeful sampling (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) of individuals who directly fit the recruitment criteria was used because these special education leaders helped me understand the district-level leadership needed to enact an inclusive education vision. As previously discussed, the research literature does not contain voices and experiences of district-level special education leaders. Thus, purposeful sampling was a tool employed to delineate this study to this subsection of leaders of special education who demonstrate deep personal beliefs in inclusive schooling and are knowledgeable about the practical realities of district-level implementation. Purposeful sampling was used because the district-level leaders who meet the recruitment criteria are few. In other words, the purposeful sampling was used to identify individuals who were especially knowledgeable about and had experience with a phenomenon of interest (Creswell, 2015).

Furthermore, selection of these particular participants would be viable "because they are

believed to facilitate the expansion of the developing theory" (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 73).

Snowball sampling (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Patton, 2015) was the specific sample

recruitment method used to locate individuals across the country who are in the field of inclusive

education who in turn knew district-level administrators with a similar educational mission.

Three strategies were employed to recruit potential participants. See figure 3.2 for a visual

depiction of the recruitment strategies used. My approach initially involved examining the

research literature reviewed in other sections of this dissertation around leadership for inclusive

education, inclusive school reform, and special education leadership; this yielded researchers

whose work cuts across the aforementioned disciplines that provide the underlying framework of

this study. With these researchers noted, I contacted these 29 professors who are employed by

higher education institutions across the United States, 1 employed at a university in Canada, two

who are employed as researchers at the American Educational Institute. I used the Recruitment

Email (see Appendix 3.2) and Recruitment Flyer (see Appendix 3.3) to provide each individual

with information about the research study, participants needed, and time commitment. I asked

these researchers for their support in making connections to potential participants. I contacted 29

researchers and 25 replied. This meant that 86% responded to my initial inquiry. This yielded a

pool of 34 individuals who I contacted. Additionally, I contacted 5 individuals. After receiving

the forwarded Recruitment Email and the Recruitment Flyer, participants emailed me back if

they were interested. 17 participants indicated their interest in participating in this research study

and signed consent forms (see Appendix 3.4 for an example of the Consent Form, approved by

the Institutional Review Board).

Figure 3.2. Recruitment Strategies
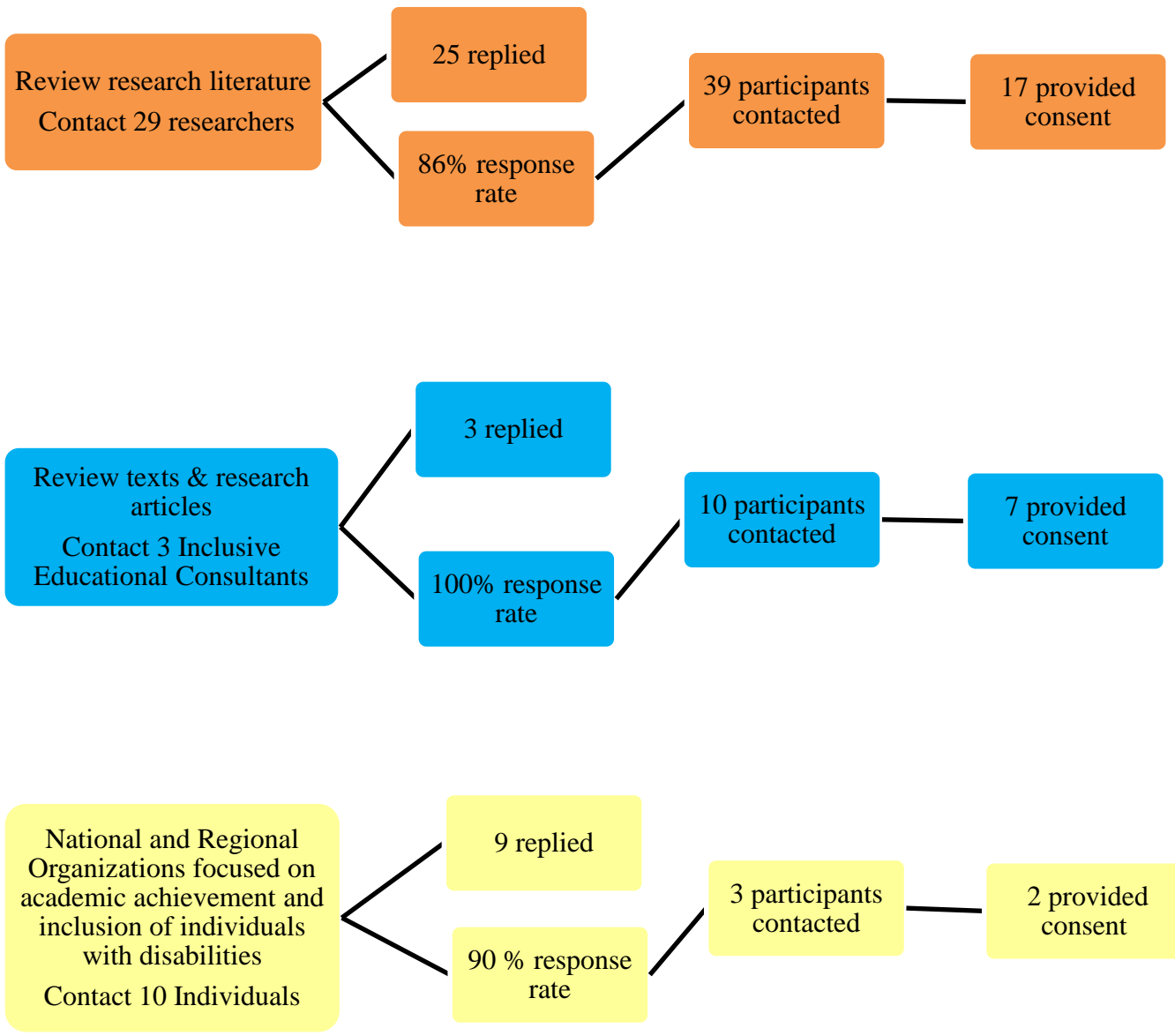
In recruiting participants for this research study, the second strategy I employed was to contact Inclusive Educational Consultants across the country. These consultants wrote texts and articles about inclusive education practices that I have cited throughout the dissertation. There were three I contacted. Three provided a reply with suggestions of district-level administrators to contact. This yielded a pool of 10 individuals who I contacted. 7 participants expressed their willingness to participate in this research and provided their sign consent.

The third recruitment strategy was to contact individuals associated with National and Regional organizations that advocate and provide professional development around the areas of inclusive education and increasing the participation and academic achievement for students with disabilities. A list of these Inclusive Education Organizations are listed and described in Appendix 3.5. I contacted four of these organizations from my previous knowledge regarding their dissemination of professional development around inclusive education. I contacted two additional organizations recommended by the researchers and consultants. I contacted 10 individuals and 9 responded. From reaching out to these organizations, this yielded a pool of 3 potential participants who I contacted and 2 provided consent.

From the aforementioned recruitment strategies, I had this pool of 52 individuals who were recommended as district-level administrators who lead their district toward inclusive educational practices. I sent them the Recruitment Flyer (see Appendix 3.3) and asked them to contact me via email if they were interested. In total, 26 individuals contacted me, indicating their willingness to contribute to this research study. I scheduled the initial Recruitment Screening Interview with these 26 individuals. In the next sections, I explain the recruitment criteria for selecting participants.

Recruitment Criteria

This study seeks to uncover the experiences of district-level special education leaders who

advocate for, enact, and sustain inclusive educational practices. As such, the participants were

recruited according the four criteria (see Table 3.2). Descriptions for criteria are highlighted in

the subsequent paragraphs.

Table 3.2. Recruitment Criteria

Recruitment Criteria to Select Participants
1) Employed in a public school district
2) Member of the district-level central office administration responsible for special education
3) Evidence of a strong commitment to inclusive education, as indicated by A or B below.
A. Provides leadership for a district that has a publicly stated commitment for inclusive education
B. Demonstrates strong personal commitment for inclusive education, as measured by positive indicators (described below) on the *Inclusion Survey* (Praisner, 2003) in Section III and Section IV.
4) Evidence of Inclusive Education in Action, as indicated by A, B, or C below
A. Provides leadership for a district that is inclusive of students with disabilities, meaning that schools educate students with disabilities in their home school.
B. Provides leadership for a district that predominately educates students with disabilities in general education classrooms, with no students placed in separate special education classrooms for a majority of the day, using the principle of natural proportions.
C. Provides leadership for a district that is taking tangible steps toward inclusive education.

     Public school district. The first criterion requires that the participant works or

previously worked in a public school. The rationale for this decision is three-fold. As

demonstrated in the literature review, navigating the medically-driven and procedural aspects of

IDEA (2004) in districts that value the diversity and differences of students and providing

everyone with an inclusive education can be challenging. Private schools that do not receive

federal funding are not held to these same federal mandates. The second reason is that as a

public school teacher, I was (and continue to be) committed to creating equitable schooling

opportunities for students from marginalized groups. I believe that public schooling can provide the dispositional skills and knowledge that children in the margins need to succeed in their lives. I view inclusive education as an act of social justice about equality of education that has a core that is driven to create social change for marginalized groups (Winzer & Mazurek, 2000) and as a strategy to combat hegemony of ableism, sexism, racism, and classism (Kugelmass, 2001). Private schools are often financially unattainable for these students from marginalized groups. The third reason is that within the U.S. Department of Education's IDEA (2004) Data Accountability Center, placements in private schools are considered a separate placement category for students with disabilities. This research is about the subset of administrators who seek to create inclusive opportunities, not separate, private experiences for students with disabilities. Given this three-fold rationale, this study purposefully seeks to include the experiences of public district-level leaders responsible for special education who navigate, negotiate, and make sense of federal special education legislation in order to provide equitable, inclusive education for all learners.

Responsible for special education services. The second criterion is that the participant is a district-level leader who is in charge of special education programming and service provision. The literature review provided evidence that there is a growing body of research on principals, or building-level administrators, who lead equity-oriented schools and implement inclusive practices (Causton-Theoharis & Theoharis, 2009; Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013; Huberman et al., 2012; Theoharis, 2009b; Waldron, McLeskey, & Redd, 2011b). With this knowledge about building-level leadership, it is evident that research is needed on district-level inclusive-oriented special education leadership. Examining the role of the district-level leader contributes to this conversation.

Commitment to inclusive education. The third criterion is that participants demonstrate evidence of a strong commitment to inclusive education. Research indicates that this commitment to educating all students is a necessary component that leads to implementation of inclusion (Dukes & Lamar-Dukes, 2009; Kugelmass, 2001; Theoharis, 2009b). Additionally, scholars in the area of organizational change assert the leaders' commitment and ability to communicate a shared understanding, purpose, or vision is imperative for sustainable actions that lead to a coherent mission (Hatch, 2009) and this unity around goals, values, and norms must come from within (Elmore, 2002). Participants can demonstrate evidence of this commitment to inclusion criterion in two ways. The first is that the district where the special education leader works has a publicly stated commitment for inclusive education. I envisioned this commitment taking many forms. It could be a publically stated commitment on the district webpage, a mission to ensure access and inclusion on the special education webpage, or even a mention of restructuring practices in school improvement plans. It also could be commitment that is merely evident by actual practice in the district, including not using pull-out academic intervention services or special education, self-contained special education, or separate schools for students with significant disabilities that could be demonstrated in a visual service delivery map (Theoharis, 2009b). This commitment would be evident by asking about staffing and utilization of special education teachers.

The second way to demonstrate evidence of a strong commitment to inclusive education is through analysis of the outcomes of an *Inclusion Survey* (see Appendix 3.6). Research has demonstrated the importance of administrators' attitudes and positive experiences with students with disabilities on the successful implementation of inclusion and special education provision in less restrictive settings (Martin, 2004; Praisner, 2003; Vazquez, 2010). The survey was

originally conducted to examine the relationship between attitudes of elementary principals (408

randomly selected from Pennsylvania) toward inclusion of students with disabilities and

placement perceptions (Praisner, 2000; Praisner, 2003). The results of the research revealed that

attitudes were positive in 1 out of 5, but most administrators were uncertain about inclusion.

Praisner (2003) found that principals with positive experiences of students with disabilities and

increased exposure to special education concepts yielded more positive attitudes toward

inclusion. Most importantly for this research, these positive attitudes and experiences resulted in

an increased likelihood that students would be placed in less restrictive settings. Praisner (2003)

stated, "Therefore to ensure the success of inclusion, it is important that principals exhibit

behaviors that advance the integration, acceptance, and success of students with disabilities in

general education classes (p. 135).

Since Praisner (2003) showed that there is a relationship between principals' attitudes and

experiences with their perceptions of appropriate placements for students with disabilities, this

tool was a suitable gauge of administrators likely commitment toward inclusive education. There

are four sections to the *Inclusion Survey* (Praisner, 2003): a) demographics; b) training and

experience; c) attitudes toward inclusion, and d) principal beliefs about most appropriate

placements. As a result of my informants being district-level administrators, there needed to be

some minor changes in the language of the survey. Some language was also amended to reflect

current changes in federal special education. A detailed description of all these changes and

explicit rationale are included in Appendix 3.7 called *Description of Inclusion Survey Changes*.

See Appendix 3.8 called *Inclusion Survey Modified for District-Level Administrators* for the

survey that was used as a recruitment tool in this research. Section I called *Demographic*

Information and Section II called *Training and Experience* of the *Inclusion Survey* (Praisner, 2003) was given to all participants during the initial screening interview.

Interpretation of the results of Sections II and IV on the *Inclusion Survey* helped determine if participants were selected for membership in the study. For Section III, called *Attitudes Toward Inclusion of Students with Special Needs*, candidates needed to align with 8 out of 10 factors of inclusion, and were asked to continue in the study (if they concurrently meet the stated criteria for Section IV). For questions 1, 3, 5, 8, and 9, candidates should indicate "disagree" or "strongly disagree" to be considering aligning with inclusion. For questions 2, 4, 6, 7, or 10, candidates should indication "agree" or "strongly agree" to be considered aligning with inclusion.

For Section IV called *Most Appropriate Placements for Students with Disabilities*, candidates rate whether they believe that students that identify within a specific category of disability (e.g., specific learning disability, intellectual disability, emotional disturbance, blindness/visual impairment, deafness/hearing impairment, speech and language impairment, other health impairment, physical disability, autism, and neurological impairment) should have an educational placement described as: a) special education services outside regular school; b) special class for most or all of the school day; c) part-time special education class; d) regular classroom instruction and resource room; e) regular classroom instruction for most of day; or, f) full-time regular education with support. Selection for participation in this study was based on whether candidates believe that students with disabilities within at least 9 out of 11 of the categories of disability listed should be educated in "regular classroom instruction for most of day" or "full-time regular education with support." If they indicate one of these selections, they were asked to continue in the study.

It is important to note that candidates must have met the criteria indicated for both Section III and Section IV. The design of this research to employ this third criterion was intentionally meant to be flexible to allow for different expressions of a commitment to inclusive education. The underlying factor is that the leader clearly positions inclusive education as a key commitment for providing special education services to students in the district. This research design purposefully allowed me to recruit this subset of leaders in order to understand the voices of participants who hold a commitment to inclusive education. I also recognized the degree of actual implementation and outcomes varied greatly within my participants.

Inclusive education in action. The fourth criterion is that the participant provided leadership in a district where there is explicit evidence of inclusive education in action. The design choice for including this criterion of inclusion *in action* is to acknowledge that work of developing, implementing, and improving inclusive schools is never done; administrators and districts are constantly adapting and implementing strategies to improve their capacity to meet the needs of students (McLeskey & Waldron, 2011). There are three ways to demonstrate this fourth criterion.

One way this could be demonstrated is that all children, regardless of category of disability, are included within general education contexts. This means that all students (e.g., students with autism, speech or language impairment, emotional disturbance, learning disability, multiple disabilities, intellectual disability, traumatic brain injury, etc.), are educated at their home-school. This home-school placement means the educational building they would attend if they were not classified with an educational disability (Turnbull et al., 2013).

A second way this criterion could be demonstrated is that students with disabilities are included within the general education contexts, alongside peers without disabilities, for academic

learning portions of the day, in addition to special areas (e.g., art, physical education, library, music) and socialization periods (e.g., lunch, recess, home room). The purpose of this criterion is to ensure that the district genuinely includes all students within all aspects (e.g., academic, social, nonacademic, and extracurricular activities) of the age- and grade-appropriate schooling, as is indicated is imperative in IDEA (2004). To meet this criterion, it could also be shown through the use of the principle of natural proportions. This means that students with disabilities should be placed in schools and classrooms in natural proportion to the occurrence of disability in that district population (Causton & Tracy-Bronson, 2014).

The third way this evidence could be demonstrated is by the district being at a stage where most students are included, yet currently undergoing a reform process. There must be a distinct timeline in place for completion for reaching the goal of providing inclusive special education services. This way to demonstrate evidence was a purposeful design choice intended to include those district leaders who have recently made restructuring decisions around special education, are clearly committed to inclusive education, but still are enacting changes.

I was interested in district-level leaders who philosophically view inclusive education as a right for all students. As shown in the aforementioned criteria, inclusive education used in this way means that all students have access to the general education contexts, including academic, nonacademic, and extracurricular aspects of schooling. Additionally, I was interested in understanding the advocacy, structural, and decision-making strategies the district-level leaders employed to enact and sustain inclusive education. In addition to explicit recruitment criteria, recruiting district-level leaders with this stated commitment and practical enactment requires sampling methods that allowed me to screen participants. The *Recruitment Screening Interview Protocol* and additional data collection methods are described in the next section.

Selection of Participants

I reached out to 26 individuals to schedule initial interviews (see Table 3.3). There were five individuals who did not provide written consent. Initial interviews were conducted with 21 district-level administrators of special education. To aid in understanding of the research data, initial participant files were created. Each contained the first interview audio file, the verbatim transcript, a scanned copy of the researcher's interview notes, and a filled-in Recruitment Screening Procedure (see Appendix 3.9) that contained the criteria met and descriptive information that lead to that decision.

Table 3.3 *Selection Criteria of Leaders*

Leader	Consent	Criteria 1	Criteria 2	Criteria 3	Criteria 4	Selected
1. Kora	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
2. Joslyn	Yes	No	N/A	N/A	N/A	No
3. Mia	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
4. Justin	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
5. Brionna	No	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	No
6. Jessica	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
7. Chloe	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
8. Sophie	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
9. Lucy	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
10. Brycin	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
11. Zack	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
12. Erin	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
13. Alison	No	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	No
14. Kelsey	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
15. Miller	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
16. Easton	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
17. Lisa	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
18. Jackie	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
19. Sam	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
20. Amanda	No	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	No
21. Crissy	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
22. Ryan	No	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	No
23. Charlotte	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
24. Peyton	No	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	No
25. Jack	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	N/A	No
26. Leah	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Note. Consent means signed the consent form to participate in the research study. Selected means that leader was selected as a research participant. The following descriptions outline each of the criteria.
Criteria 1: Does the participant work in a public school?
Criteria 2: Is the participant a member of district-level central office administration who is responsible for special education
Criteria 3: Does the participant have a publicly stated commitment or personal commitment to inclusive education?
Criteria 4: Is there evidence of inclusive educational practices in action?
Please note that all names are pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality of individuals.

Based on the first interview, one district-level special education leader did not meet

criteria one because she worked within a charter school, but was employed by a public district.

In other words, the students who received special education services under her administration

attended a charter school. Each of the administrators were members of the district-level central office administration responsible for special education; thus, all possible participants met criteria two. Criteria three provided an indication of participants' commitment to inclusive education. This could be evident through a publicly stated commitment or a personal commitment, as indicated by the Survey Sections III and IV. Through the survey, it was clear that two possible participants did not indicate favorable attitudes toward inclusion or appropriate placements for students with a range of disabilities, even though both were initially recommended for this study. After analysis of the interview data, there were twelve individuals who did not provide evidence of inclusive educational practices in action. This might have been shown though explanation of home school educational placements for students with disabilities, all students' primary educational placements being in general education classrooms, or their process in the midst of inclusive school reform. Based on these aforementioned screening procedures, seven participants were selected to participate in this research study. This chapter concludes with a rich discussion of the participants that were selected for this study. In the next section, I discuss data collection methods are discussed.

Data Collection

This qualitative research design seeks understanding through in-depth interviewing employed as the primary method to collect data (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The specific data, "or rough materials researchers collect from the world they are studying" (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 117), include transcripts and field notes. The following sections describe the data collection methods.

In-depth Interviewing

I employed in-depth interviewing (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) as a data collection method for the purpose of understanding the ways in which special education leaders make sense of their leadership role. As Bogdan and Biklen (2007) argue, "The interview is used to gather descriptive data in the subjects' own words so that the researcher can develop insights on how subjects interpret some piece of the world" (p. 103). Qualitative researchers take care in capturing participant perspectives and their interpretation accurately (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). In order to ensure that I captured the perspectives and actual words of the special education leaders precisely, the in-depth interviews were recorded using a digital audio recorder and then transcribed verbatim (Kvale, 2007). The type of data I collected are descriptive accounts.

First interview. The initial interview involved informal conservation and small talk aimed at developing rapport, trust, and a relationship. As Bogdan and Biklen (2007) suggest, "The purpose this chit-chat serves is to develop rapport: You search for common ground, for a topic that you have in common, for a place to begin building a relationship" (p. 103). My intention for this initial interview was to be human in this research study and develop connection to participants in this research. This was an intentional strategy to deconstruct the asymmetrical power relation of the interview that occurs as a result of the interviewer initiating the interview, determining the topic and research questions, and critically following up on responses (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). In addition to explicitly working to build this rapport, I ensured informants what my purpose of the conversations were and let them know that information will be kept confidential. This initial interview also served as my Recruitment Screening Interview.

After obtaining contact information for a participant in my study, I contacted them via email to set up an initial phone conversation. The initial conversation served as a recruitment

screening for me. For this interview, I developed and used the Recruitment Screening Protocol (See Appendix 3.9). This tool allowed me to determine which participants met the criteria for this study and offered starting points for conversations. As Bogdan and Biklen (2007) explain, "In keeping with the qualitative tradition of attempting to capture the subjects' own words and letting the analysis emerge, interview schedules…generally allow for open-ended responses and are flexible enough for the observer to note and collect data on unexpected dimensions of the topic" (p. 79). With the use of this interview schedule as a guide, it allowed initial conversation that allowed me to make recruitment decisions.

As explained above, during this first interview, I gave the *Inclusion Survey* (Appendix 3.8), Section I called *Demographic Information* and Section II called *Training and Experience* to participants. Prior to the Recruitment Screening Interview, I emailed a copy of the *Inclusion Survey* to each participant. Due to respecting participants' time and school commitments, I completed the survey questions orally with each via phone (as opposed to them filling it out independently on their own time). My decision was based on using this interview to gain rapport with selected participants. The purpose of collecting this data was that it provided demographic and experience background information that was used as a starting point for subsequent interviews. The first interview also included gathering evidence and data about the recruitment criteria (Appendix 3.10). Conversations around commitment to inclusive education, attitudes toward inclusion, and evidence of inclusive education in action are likely topics during this interview. After I conducted the initial screening interviews, I let participants that met my criteria know that I would like to interview them a second time.

Second interview. The questions for the second interview were open-ended in order to capture the participants' own words and follow their lead. A semi-structured interview guide

was used (see Appendix 3.11), as possible broad categories and questions to guide our conversations. An open-ended strategy and use of an interview guide as a tool ensures that a range of topics are discussed, allows the participants to lead the conversations, share the content in the order they desire, and have the freedom to respond openly (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). As Bogdan and Biklen (2007) note, "Even when an interview guide is employed, qualitative interviews offer the interviewer considerable latitude to pursue a range of topics and offer the subject a chance to shape the content of the interview" (p. 104). Some of the categories are regarding special education service delivery, instructional leadership, achievement, educational equity, leadership roles, decision-making, and collaboration. The goal throughout the interview, however, was "getting the informants to freely express their thoughts around particular topics" (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 3). The order of questions varied across interviews, as I encouraged participants' to take the lead. I altered the types of prompts and probing questions in order to elicit participants' explanations, details, or examples of practice.

Third interview. I also conducted a third interview. An interview protocol for Interview 3 was used (see Appendix 3.12). I intended for this interview to be completely open-ended (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007), but created a plan of action for the interview as my own research preparation. The purpose of this interview is to allow the participant to talk about any topics of particular interest and allow me to probe (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) areas that need a more in-depth discussion from the first two interviews. My goal was to learn how the participants think, and this open-ended conversation allowed the participant to take this lead of teaching me about his or her leadership. Next, I asked the participant any questions that I need more clarification on from the second interview. The participant was asked to explain and provide examples to help me understand these areas. Each of the interviews lasted for one to two hours each. After

each of the interviews were transcribed, I analyzed them. This helped me to develop categories that needed clarification during the third interview.

Member Checks

A member check is a strategy to ensure that the qualitative researcher accurately translated, interpreted, and constructed conclusions about the participants' perspectives and experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Participant validation demonstrates credibility of research findings. At the conclusion of the third set of interviews, I had an email conversation with the participants about the themes and analysis of their words. The purpose was to build in member checks into the cyclical data collection and analysis process to learn how participants made sense of findings that emerged.

I sent each participant the full text of the data chapters. 4 out of the 7 participants provided member checks (Leah, Mia, Charlotte, and Kora). 2 participants, Sophie and Miller, have retired from their school districts and I did not have their updated email contact information. Lucy did not respond to my member check email inquiries. Interpretations of the data that were connected to each of the research questions were shared with each participant. The participants who provided member checks reviewed, checked for accuracy, and provided feedback on the data and themes. Participants indicated points that resonated with them, written portions that did not make sense, and have alerted me to other ways of seeing the data.

Two participants edited the texts as they wrote. Both emailed me after to ask if I would have any interest in seeing their edits. Leah provided her review using track changes in the Word documents. She emailed, "The content is great, so I just made some edits related to the ease of reading and flow more than anything else." Mia added hand written notes and questions in the margins, scanned it, and emailed it to me. These were helpful around parts that did not

make sense from their point of view, as a participant in the study. It also shows the level of

attention put forth in their member check. For example, Leah had concerns about a longer quote

that did not make sense. She left a comment in the margins. She wrote, "This quote is a bit

choppy and hard to follow. Maybe just leave your summary text of it?" In another section she

asked for clarification in one of the quotations, "What do you mean by data, dat, dat?" This was

language that was in a statement spoken by a participant that did not make sense in its written

form. I used this feedback to add a clarifying note for future readers. Mia provided specific

changes to phrases and language I wrote in the data sections. She indicated clarity was needed in

four sentences, writing "Hard to understand this sentence," "I'm not sure what this means," and

leaving question marks to signal confusion. Mia also let me know that a quote was repeated

twice across the data chapters. These edits suggest a detailed read.

It was my hope that this research would also provide benefits for the participants through

offering a safe forum for reflective practice. Participants could also learn what others in similar

leadership roles believed and how they enacted tactics and practice in districts. Mia also

provided feedback through email.

Hi Chelsea,

I was able to take a look at the chapters last evening. I'm reminded of what a great topic

this was...it was so interesting to read through the themes and stories from each of the

leaders. As I was reading through, I thought of a few general pieces of feedback that I'll

share here, and then I sort of became lost in editing mode (which I don't think is what you

wanted). If it is, I'm happy to share PDFs of my editing notes.

Thoughts:

- In some places in Chapter 4, the quotes from the leaders are a bit clunky to read, probably because they are exact quotes of long conversations. I wonder if there are places to shorten and summarize those, and then pull out specific and more targeted quotes.

- Could subheadings be used more liberally in Chapter 5 to separate out the themes? It's really helpful to have each one summarized and then have examples from the leaders, but they start to blend together.

Again, really interesting work! If you think the edits would be helpful I'm happy to send them...but I also understand you probably have many people reading over for that kind of editing and sometimes that's plenty (speaking from experience!).

Best,

Mia

In her reading, Mia chose to focus on editing of the text, organization of themes, and clarity of longer verbatim quotes. It is also critical to notice that she mentions, "I'm reminded of what a great topic this was...it was so interesting to read through the themes and stories from each of the leaders." After reading most the data chapters, Charlotte sent a separate email from her edits. She wrote, "Almost done reading. Let me know when I can share this with colleagues!" This connects to the point Leah indicated. In one instance, she wrote,

> I think that your summaries are great. They capture the foundation of who we are and our why. Reading this has helped me reflect upon my own practice. The moral compass is such an interesting pattern to document. Not everyone has it, sad to say.

The hand written or typed feedback within the text offered specific feedback around the findings and analysis. For example, Leah provided specific feedback in response to a section that shared a summary of a theme to further explain her position. This was the summary paragraph that I wrote within the "Adept responses to self-contained" section:

> This section explained the ways in which administrators operated from a critical perspective in order to challenge the practice of a separate special education placement for students with disabilities. Through creation of neighborhood placement rules, remaining steadfast in student-centered decision-making, and facilitating parents' understanding of inequitable practices in separate placements, participants developed a multitude of tactics to advocate for students with complex needs. Although the tactics varied, data revealed participants had adept responses to others within the educational system, as well as outside the system to ensure that students with disabilities were not placed in restrictive settings.

Her feedback was:

> "The law is the Least restrictive environment, so maybe just reinforcing that they, we start from the premise that the if the student cannot access the general education classroom with his/her non-disabled peers, then we need to look at the supports, services and training needed in order for that student to be a meaningful member of the classroom and make meaningful progress in that gened class. (sic.)

Leah's feedback improved my research findings in that it helped me realize that although I was separating the advocacy tactics in sub-themes for ease of readership, the ideas really were intertwined as complex advocacy tactics. For instance, the next section titled "Enhancing Local

Knowledge" naturally connected to this idea that Leah explains as looking "at the supports, services, and training needed" for full membership and progress in the classroom. As a result of this feedback, I changed the overarching connecting theme of this chapter from "advocacy tactics" to "complex advocacy tactics," as a way of honoring the connectedness of the themes.

Utilizing member checks was a strategy I employed as a way to increase validity and credibility of the data collection and analysis process. The design of this study allowed for conducting three interviews with each participant. This is a way validity is built into and strengthens the data collection methods. Prolonged engagement happened as a result of data collection cycles, the written report, and member checks being spread out across four years.

Field Notes

After the interviews, I wrote out what happened in order to capture the meaning and context. These written notes formed my field notes. As (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) explain, I "render[ed] a description of people, objects, places, events, activities, and conversations" (p. 118) because the audio recorder "misses the sights, smells, impressions, and extra remarks said before and after the interview" (p. 119). My intention is that these field notes formed a "written account of what [the researcher] hears, sees, experiences, and thinks in the course of collecting and reflecting on the data in a qualitative study" (p. 119). As such, from each interview, my data includes the transcripts that the participants said verbatim and extensive field notes that include descriptive written accounts of the participant, memos regarding points emerging, and conversation pieces that happened apart from the recorded interview.

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Data Analysis and Interpretation

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In aligning with the tradition of qualitative research, data analysis occurred concurrently with data collection (Gibbs, 2007). Each informed and advanced the other. Analysis involved

developing coding categories, arranging and examining various types of data (e.g., interview transcripts and field notes), organizing that data, coding, synthesizing, and searching for patterns (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Analytic thinking occurred through methodological and analytical memo writing. Deductive qualitative analysis was employed as an "approach that begins with a conceptual framework that helps [the researcher] identify the social processes and attribute meaning to their [data and] texts but that researchers hope to transform through processes of doing research" (Gilgun, 2005, p. 41).

Analytic Memo Writing

Employing an "analysis-in-the-field mode" (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) allowed me to notice themes, alter interview questions, relate findings to theoretical literature and practical research, and create a log of my reflections during the research (see Appendix 3.13 and Appendix 3.14). My approach is to critically think and "relate what [I am] observing to ideas and findings in the literature" (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 163). Memos helped me capture thoughts, identify emerging themes, and begin constructing theoretical points. (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) explain, "From time to time, not as part of any particular set of notes, the researcher will write additional 'think pieces' about the progress of the research…these longer pieces, added to or placed at the end of a set of notes, are called memos" (p. 122). Additionally, I intended for these memos to be spaces where I reflected on analysis methods, research design, ethical dilemmas and conflicts, and points to further clarify with participants or in a review of the literature. These memos are intended to allow me to make sense of the research process, data collection, data analysis, emerging themes, and theoretical points.

The subsequent text offers two examples of my Researcher's Memos. This first demonstrates an instance where a specific interview lead to me think about theoretical framework enacted by district-level administrators.

Appendix 3.13: Researcher's Memo
Understanding the phenomenon in the data is becoming increasingly evident as I notice this reflectiveness. It's an advocacy tactic. In her descriptions of events that have happened and her leadership style, I notice that Mia asks a lot of questions. This style of conversation indicates her reflectiveness in practice. She is critically thinking about what has happened and about how to teach educators to think critically about what is happening. She asked, "But I am wondering what does that look like across schools?" and "What are you doing when you are co-teaching?" or "How will that program support kids or can we find a different strategy to support that kid right in the classroom?" It's constructive inquiry around structures. She went on to explain, "We have good strong professionals, and we just need to shift their thinking a little bit." She views her work as helping others develop their reflective lens. This is imperative to the reason the district administrators are connected with building-level decisions and implementation of special education. This is not only happening in Mia's interview—but in others as well. Go back through to see what I find around this.
Is this connected to what Freire calls "Praxis?" Are the administrators being reflective of their practice and taking action to challenge inequities? These questions allow critical thinking in action to ensure that structures and decisions are not made in a way that creates disparate outcomes for students with disabilities. It's critical self-reflection about potential decisions. Explore this idea of praxis and critically consciousness more. This is how the theoretical framework is enacted by district-leaders.

In a second example, I began to uncover initial ideas around assertive engagement as a dispositional trait after the initial coding process.

Appendix 3.14 Researcher's Memo 2

I notice that participants are naming being physically present and visible in both parent and building matters as being imperative to ensure district values are enacted. So what? Why does this matter? The subtext is that they are constructing an activist identity. Each participant is deliberating engaging in an assertive manner in contentious matters in order to carry out district goals around inclusion, access, and least restrictive environment. Ensuring alignment of operational decisions, serving all students, being there, allowing for opportunities for all professionals to ask questions, doing what is right over what is easy is all a way that these district-level administrators are enacting

social justice leadership. It is their advocacy strategy of being engaged, upfront, assertive, and present. These are identifying factors of their disposition.

Researcher Subjectivity

Gibbs (2007) states, "Inevitably qualitative analysis is guided, and framed by pre-existing ideas and concepts. Often what researchers are doing is checking hunches; that is, they are deducing particular explanations from general theories and seeing if the circumstances they observe actually correspond" (p.5). I approached data analysis with the acknowledgement of my philosophical core, orientation, and framework as a critical educational leader grounded within a social justice framework. As Bogdan and Biklen (2007) assert, "Some people do qualitative research guided by particular theories. These theories are influential before the data are collected and researchers working in this mode frame their project in the light of these views" (p. 183). This conceptual model and associated subjectivity is a tool that I employed in my data analysis. This strong desire to create inclusive communities, conduct research as an act of social justice, and tinker toward equitable educational environments for all learners influenced all aspects of this research. My prior explicit concepts, experiences, and lenses about education influence design, data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Gilgun (2005) explains that this conceptual model that a research brings to a study can be "composed of a loose set of ideas and concepts derived from one or more sources, such as previous research and theory, professional experience, and personal experiences" (p. 42). This overt orientation and framework I bring to the research was malleable and shifted, as I learned from participants. As Bogdan and Biklen (2007) argue, "They are not, however, binding" (p. 33). Rather, as Roman and Apple (1990) claim, the "prior theoretic and political commitments" I had are "informed and transformed by the lived experiences of the group" I researched (p. 34).

This researcher reflexivity guided my data analysis approach. Deductive qualitative data analysis allows researchers to expand conversations about existing theories. In this way, I intentionally expanded the conversations around social justice leadership (Capper et al., 2006; Theoharis, 2009b) and inclusive education leadership (Doyle, 2001; Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013; Kugelmass, 2003; Scanlan, 2009; Toson, Burrello, & Knollman, 2013).

Data Analysis

Reflexivity around my research design and process indicates a deductive qualitative analysis (Gilgun, 2005). I began with a loose collection of codes to approach the analysis. These codes were compiled in a list of Coding Categories from a literature search revolving around inclusive education and leadership. These codes were used as an initial way to sift through the data (See Appendix 3.15 for these Coding Categories). Gilgun (2005) refers to these prior codes as a "set of sensitizing concepts" that supported me to see certain aspects in my data that I might have otherwise overlooked. Codes are related to context, perspectives, and ways of thinking, process, events, strategies, social structure, and methods.

It is also important to note that although I approached the data with a clear mindset of codes that would emerge, data was also analyzed with an inductive approach, or open coding, as well (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). That is, if I noticed that codes are reoccurring through close analysis of the data, I examined the new phenomena from the informants' voices and understanding the leadership of special education from their point of view to uncover participant perspectives. This means that I expected my preliminary coding categories to be altered, improved, and be malleable throughout the data analysis process. New codes were developed when the raw data warranted it. Examples of this include the assertive engagement and aligned decision making and the leading against the grain with transparency themes. Based on the

literature, I specifically coded for ways that participants created a positive culture around reform actions. However, during the coding process, I began noticing the construct of dispositional traits as being imperative to participants' advocacy. With this in mind, I examined the transcriptions to understand ways in which leaders actively and unknowingly used dispositional traits in their advocacy. Codes were altered in the process of inquiry and developing a more nuanced understanding of participants' advocacy.

Deductive qualitative analysis is intended as an adaptable and open-ended tool (Gilgun, 2005). My purpose in selecting this approach to developing a coding system for data analysis aligns with qualitative research methodology. As Bogdan and Biklen (2007) explain, "Being theoretically engaged does not mean that gathering data is simply a process of filling in the blanks. Theory helps us to work through the contradictions we become aware of, and contradictions take us deeper into the important parts of our data and expand theory" (p. 184).

Specific Analysis Procedures

Researchers have noted the advantages of using a Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS), including: (1) ease of searching, retrieving, sorting, separating, and categorizing data and codes, (2) the ability to work at multiple levels of analysis, (3) visibility of data and analytic process, and (4) document-sharing capabilities (Kvale, 2007). For these data management advantages, the software program QSR NVIVO was used to organize transcriptions, field notes, and memos. All initial coding processes happened within this software program for ease of management of the many transcription, field notes, and memo pages. This software supported the organization, storage, retrieval, and coding process of this research project. "Qualitative analysis is a process that requires the exploration, organization, interpretation, and integration of research materials (data). These four components require that

researchers retrieve, rethink, compare subsets, and identify patterns and relationships" (Davidson & di Gregorio, 2011, p. 628) and this software program provided the technological infrastructure needed for me to conduct this study. Using QSR NVIVO for qualitative data analysis allowed me to "code easily the same segment of data in multiple ways, to compare data that have been coded differently but might be related to a similar theme or analytical frame, and to use different approaches for the same data" (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 189).

As data collection occurred, interviews were transcribed verbatim (Kvale, 2007). Interview transcriptions and field notes were uploaded to NVIVO and analyzed. The specific process of data analysis included inputting the Coding Categories (see Appendix 3.15) as nodes in NVIVO. The written data was read through and coded using these categories. As any major codes were uncovered, these were added as nodes. If a code contains data that would be helpful to break down for analysis, subcodes were developed and added as nodes. Once the codes and subcodes were developed through this process, the written data was read through again to ensure systematic coding. During the course of this data analysis, analytic memos were written after each set of analysis in Microsoft Word and uploaded into NVIVO (as explained in an aforementioned section). These analysis sections were also be coded.

The next step was to develop conceptual categories, merge codes, and develop thematic connections. Codes were compared to develop and determine broader conceptual categories. The intention was to see connections between the various codes and major categories that became concepts. In using deductive data analysis, some of these codes and concepts can be prior codes and some are new codes and concepts that I did not start with. It is these concepts that contribute to theory construction. Theory is really an abstract understanding of the relationship between concepts (Charmaz, 2003).

In order to visualize these connections between categories and concepts within each of the research questions, I employed three strategies. The first is that the QSR NVIVO software has tools that intentionally support visualization of data. The second was that I created graphic organizer concept maps for each of the data chapters, to aid in sifting data and the resulting analysis into major themes. The third was the creation of a synthesis table that helped organize themes, sub-themes, examples, analysis ideas, and connections to the research; this aided in the writing process to construct meaningful data chapters that connected to each of the research questions of this study. These three data analysis strategies are explained in the subsequent sections.

Visualization of data. Creation of a visual representation of the transcription data offered a tool for exploratory textual analysis. Using the QSR NVIVO word frequency query function to obtain a summary and subsequently construct a word cloud, it allowed me to notice frequent words in the interview data (Figure 3.3). I created multiple versions, adjusting the minimum letter length of words, in order to see different words that were prominently mentioned by participants. This aforementioned example shows a word cloud with a minimum letter length of 5 letters. The cluster organization aided my initial considerations about the data.

Figure 3.3. Visual Data Representation

Design of word clouds provided an initial tool for emergent understanding of the

phenomena the participants revealed. One idea that was prevalent was this word, "right" and in

the minimum of 4 letters word cloud—the word "just." Both utterances aligned with the

underlying construct of social justice that all students had the right to be in the district. In fact,

the word cloud also indicated "neighborhood" as a highly used word. Another word that allowed

me to understand the data is "think." This allowed me to begin seeing that intentional actions

grounded in this social justice framework was at the heart of the participant's practice. This line

of thought is infused in everything from intentionally being engaged, aligned decision making,

their dispositions they use to cultivate progress daily, and the process they use to engage in

change. Further, this construct of "think" is embedded within the core of their practice, and

relates to their work within a theoretical framework of being social justice leaders. That is, it was an indicator that they engaged in critical and analytical thinking necessary to understand forms of marginalization and make changes in their district communities. The visual representation of the words frequently used by participants in this study provided an exploratory strategy for me to start thinking about the data collected.

Concept maps. Concept maps aided in creation of constructs that connected the themes (Figure 3.4; Figure 3.5; Figure 3.6). Interconnections between these themes were displayed in a visual way. From here the key constructs (the center circles on Figure 3.5 and 3.6), or conceptual development, emerged for each chapter (e.g., complex advocacy tactics and district practice and procedures). This process of designing the concept maps allowed me to understand critical findings from individual themes and construct knowledge gleaned from the data. The visual display helped me understand the importance of the data and key findings. Furthermore, they contributed to an organized chapter during the writing process. In essence, the concept maps serve as a graphic representation of my interpretative understanding of participant experience.

Figure 3.4. Social Justice Findings

2.
Poignant Career Event

1.
Personal Family Experiences

3.
Intended to Prepare Students to Engage in Inclusive Society

Drive to do Social Justice Work
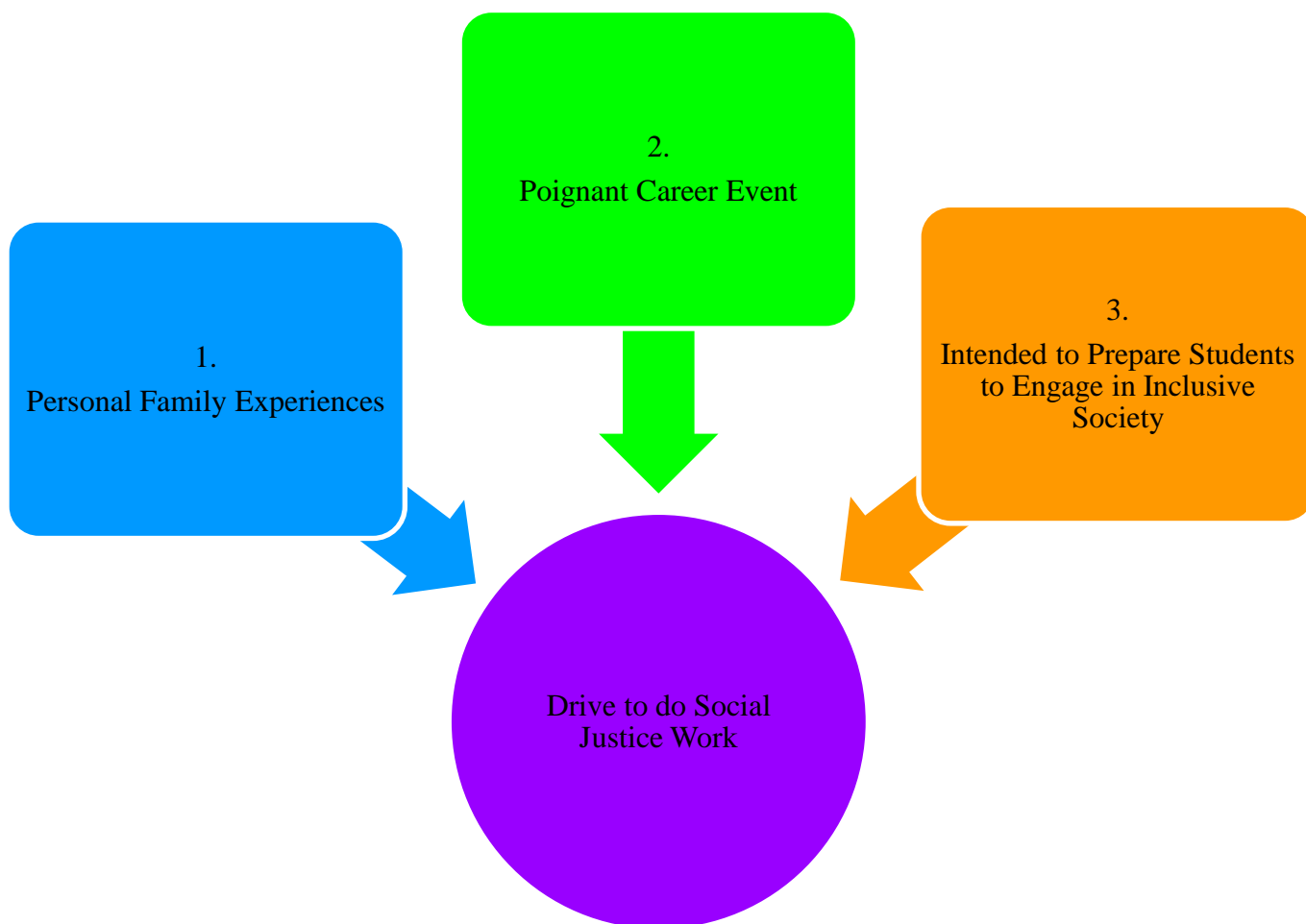
Figure 3.5. Advocacy Findings
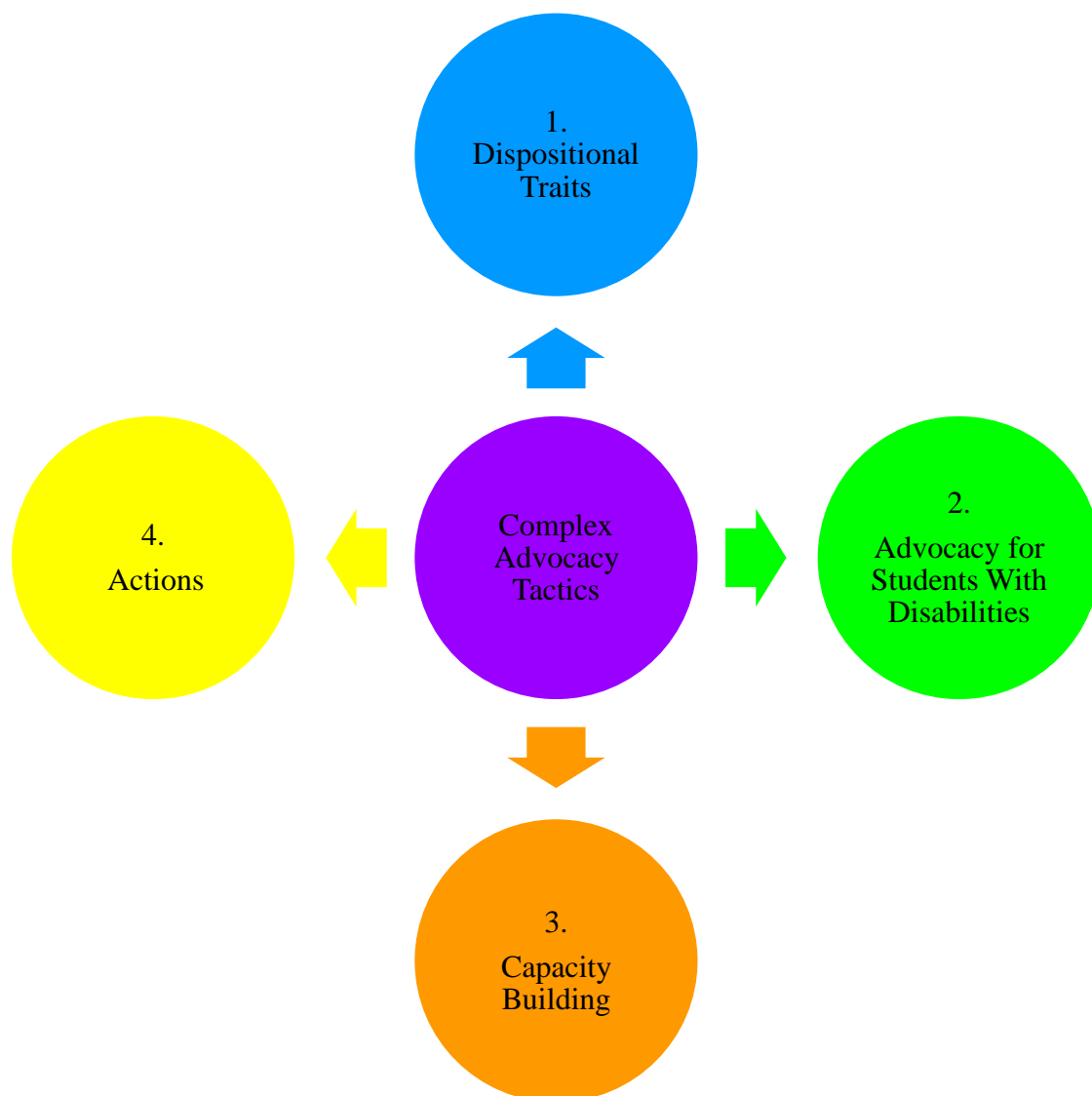
Figure 3.6. District Practice Findings
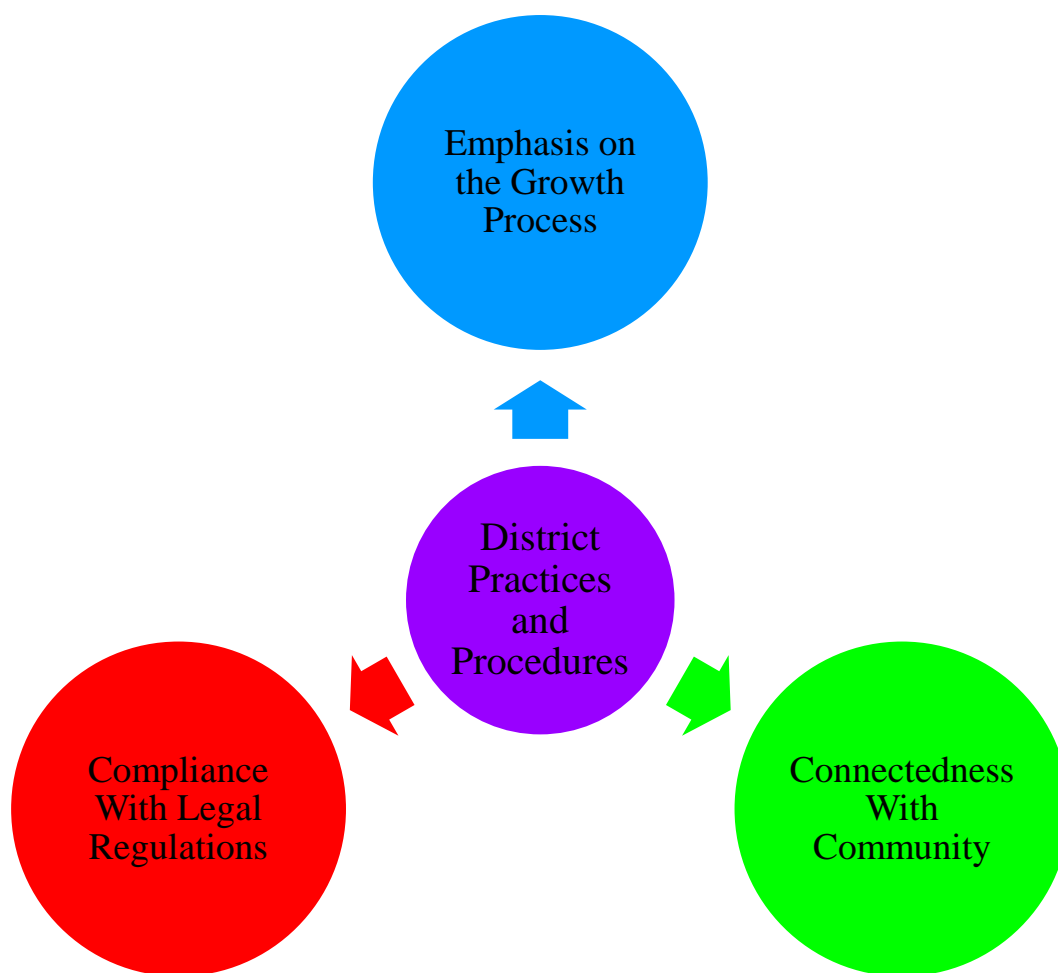
Synthesis chart. Once the themes were loosely connected and there was a way for the data to be organized as conceptualization derived from the aforementioned concept maps, a synthesis chart provided a structure to develop a sophisticated level of analysis (Figure 3.7). The purpose was to organize themes, sub-themes, examples, analysis ideas, and connections to the research. This transformed the ideas in the concept map into a detailed graphic organizer to aid in the writing process. Moreover, this provided writing structure to construct meaningful data chapters that connected to each of the research questions of this study.

Figure 3.7 Synthesis Chart

Themes	Example #1	Example #2	Example #3	Example #4	Analytical Piece: *This issue matters because…*
5.1.a **Dispositional Traits:** *Assertive Engagement and Aligned Decision Making*	Leah: If I know there is a high needs parent and by that I mean they get anxious about things, I meet with them individually quite a bit and I'm not sure a lot of people do that. They'll say it's not their place and refer them back to their building. So I meet with parents a lot for informational pieces or to help them.	Mia: Comes into play during tricky family and student situations.	Kora: I'm there, at whichever meeting, whichever building, whatever time, when a parent and school discrepancy occurs because access is on the line for many students.	Charlotte: I was inserting myself into situations that really were not situations in the role that I was in…would be things I would typically do…I would not typically sit in an IEP meeting. But what I knew the administrators involved in the IEP meeting didn't have the philosophical…the correct philosophical mindset [around access]. I asserted myself in their situations. When I knew that we were going to have a parent meeting and the parent was very anxious about this idea of returning their child to the neighborhood school or looking at their Least Restrictive Environment placement and really	• Met with high needs parents • Tricky family situations • There when discrepancy occurs-access on the line • Insert even when administrators didn't have the philosophical background or when parents weren't sure of a LRE decision *So what?* • The aforementioned examples are quite significant as they reveal explicit intentions the participants made to have visible presence as district-level administrators in the contentious building-level affairs as means of advocacy • These data uncover insight about participants' intentionality as agents of advocacy.

				discussing whether it was appropriate or not or whether we could be serving this child in a less restrictive environment. And we just weren't choosing to do that.	• Advocacy encompassed their dispositional identity as administrators to be present and assertive in family situations that some would argue typically fall in the realm of building administrative duties.
	Example # 5	Example #6	Example #7	Example #8	
	Lucy: Close collaboration. Work through issues that come up along the way, through meetings. If there's a student issue, we'll meet at the school, with the parents. With issues or questions about staffing, we'll meet here at the school board. But every tough issue is dealt with a face-to-face conversation.	Lucy: We do that with them. We collaborate. We will go to the school and sit down…we look at their numbers, their kids, and we try to figure out the best placements and we work on the scheduling together.	Miller: You have to be at the tough meetings. The ones that can go either way and really impact kids. Weighted system to place students and shared responsibility to enforce district idea of serving all students.	Sophie: You have to be in the buildings and know what's going on. I visit buildings regularly…I have focus group time with teachers. When teachers are planning, they have opportunities for all professionals to come and talk to me about what's going on.	*********************** • Meet with parents, school board. Tough issues dealt with through in person conversation. • Collaborate on best placements and scheduling • Enforce district idea of serving all kids • Be in buildings, know what is happening, and open opportunities for conversation • Need people to understand that this (anything around philosophy) is non-negotiable. • Sorry, it's what we do.
	Example #9	Example #10	Example #11		
	Charlotte: Team who all buy into philosophically what we are trying	Mia: All students need to be progressing towards the common	Leah: It's really about being there, during the meetings		

	to do. When they have a prickly situation, they come tell me about it. I'll insert myself because I need people to understand that this is not negotiable. We're not giving up on kids. We're not going back to a place where we're putting children in a resource room. We're not going to do what's easy for the adults. It's not what's easy for them. Our job is hard. No one ever said it wasn't going to be hard.	standards and that means taking the common core special elements and align it with the IEP academic goals so all kids, yes even kids with significant disabilities, progress academically. So in this case, the final push was really just, 'Sorry, it's required.' It's what we do.	anytime there is conversation about what's the best educational placement for a student. I can make sure to challenge the team to consider the least restrictive environment first, no matter if it's hard for the adults.		• Being there. LRE even if it's hard for the adults *So what?* • Being explicitly and physically engaged leader within tough situations demonstrates active construction of this trait • Visible presence lead to enforcement of district value of serving all students. • Be there • Opportunities for all professionals to talk with district administration • In the decision-making situations where the possibility of reverting to traditional special education placements and practices might require less effort, planning, or advocacy, Charlotte purposefully maintains a physical presence, an active engagement, during meetings and conversations with

					explicit intention to support, empower, and collaborate with allies to ensure that students with disabilities receive equitable access • Data uncovered narrative about the lived experience around what it means to advocate from a district-administrative role and one particular tactic is this dispositional identity of assertively engaging and aligning decisions to core values • Decisions sometimes came down to 'sorry it's what we do here.' • Being there. LRE even if it's hard for the adults • Not around content but rather the way they carry themselves
	Example #12	Example #13	Example #14	Example #15	
	Lucy: You absolutely have to have a vision and you have to be demanding about that. It is being	Sophie: It was [her] job as the director to keep people focused on [the district] goals…if people had ideas or wanted to do	Mia: Started by saying what we need to do is to develop a set of beliefs that are rooted in research about what worked		********************** • Be demanding about the vision. Then take action. • Keep people focused on district goals. All aligned to these district goals.

|					
	knowledgeable, patient, having a vision, and demanding about your vision. Then being able to take action.	things, if it helped with one of those goals, then yes. If it didn't…well…	for accelerating the growth of students because as a core this is about moving all students, including students with disabilities, so that we narrow the gap a little bit between their performance and their peers, and that they have not just access to curriculum but they had progressed. That's a big shift between just access and progression. So the guided principles were the collective work…to say what does the research tell us about what works, and what do we believe as a system…then every operational decision that we make from very big decisions to very small decisions, we make sure that our systems are		• Developed beliefs rooted in research about beyond just access to progression • Operational decisions made from these core values and ensure systems are doing this *So what?* • District-level administrators ensured that operational decisions were rooted in district goals and ensured that systems and professionals in their building were doing this. • This was an advocacy tactic to enact district values and ensure decisions were aligned.

			bringing them back to those best guiding principles.		
	• Assertive engagement as an advocacy-oriented leadership tactic, meaning participants were visible, actively present, and insistent to ensure alignment of vision to decision making • Advocacy topics or content of each instance varied, but what is important in this data analysis is the district administrator's leadership style at an individual-leader level. • Personal-level assertiveness around advocacy decision-making- to enact a sense of agency centered on their ongoing advocacy awareness and commitment to create inclusive learning contexts. • At times, this actively engaged style directly challenged cultural school politics around exclusionary practices, especially as it related to serving all students in the least restrictive environment "even if it's hard for adults." • Critically conscious leadership manifested through an intentional engaged demeanor, assertiveness, and aligned decisions to core values was purposeful and active; these participants were doing social justice leadership. • Corbett & Slee (2000) contend, enacting inclusive education is a "distinctly political" and "in your face" activity, and the advocacy style of the participants was an intentional, critical political act.				

Themes	Example #1	Example #2	Example #3	Example #4	Analytical Piece: *This issue matters because…*
5.1.b **Dispositional Traits:** *Leading Against the Grain with Transparency*	Leah: It's just sharing upfront, creating that relationship with people to say, 'Hey trust me. I'm going to put you through Hell reorganizing stuff and it's totally going to pay off.' And then explaining, 'Here's why.' So, I like to do all that basic,	Miller: Unless you have everybody at the table, they're going to sabotage you. And you might as well have the crucial conversation and the ugliness up front. I mean that's why people ask us all the time why did you reform the whole district? Why didn't you start with one	Mia: People that are cynical in the system will roll their eyes, but everyone knows that if I make a decision [the guiding principles are] what it's coming from. That is pretty universal at all levels. I think in a lot of ways people are appreciative of knowing that	Lucy: We jumped right in doing professional development, training people … We taught people how to collaborate around instruction, preparing and training regular education people on what are disabilities, what does a learning disability look like, how is this going to impact your	• Being transparent with the changes, the research that supports it, and that the process will be difficult was key. • This notion of being "up front" and "going public" signals transparency. • Knowing where decisions come from • Grounded in PD, articulating district vision, and going "public" indicated

	like quick, but meaningful transparency. Here is the research behind it and facilitate and get them to a point that they're so excited because they are like I can make an impact. It will be hard, but it will work and then I let them go.	building and pilot or why didn't you do K-2. My response is simple. It is, 'Why would you want to go through ugliness six times or eight times?' We are very up front. When we go into this, we know there's going to be bumps and we're going to have to gather the data of what works.	upfront, but in others it is a little tongue in cheek. But, that's part of the nature of this work.	classroom, your teaching. So they spent about a year doing that, giving the superintendent time to get everyone on the district side. Some went crazy. The superintendent said this is part of our vision. They had the school system, it became part of the vision and mission statement of the school system. That meant the school system was committed to making it happen. They weren't just saying it. We were actually committed to it and we went public with that commitment.	transparency even in the face of some going 'crazy.' • Plan to keep focus. Tearing down everything we built? Everyone knew plan *So what?* • Ugliness, bumps, and the transparent articulation of changes are concrete indicators that participants knowingly lead against the grain • District-level leaders were transparent in actively navigating a disruption of a district system that marginalized students. • Crystal clear the directions the district is going-aligned with guiding principles
	Example # 5	Example #6	Example #7	Example #8	• Transparent in practices that run contrary to district guiding principles, training, being very clear—this is where we are going
	Lucy: It is hard because it's getting people to shift the way that they're thinking …	Sophie: Others were so upset because they take it very personally. We showed them data	Mia: … contrary to the definition of adaptive PE because a physical therapist		

Hand coding. After developing a conceptual framework around the ways in which the data revealed insights about the research questions and having a sense of how the study narrative would be structured, I completed a fourth round of data analysis through hand coding on printed paper. The rationale for this additional layer of data analysis was to ensure my researcher insights were in-fact patterns across participants. This ensured that each construct, the resulting themes, and the subsequent sub-themes were key principles within the data. As a researcher who is technologically savvy, this process of manipulating the interview data on paper proved to be critical in the analytical stage of this study. NVIVO offered a formal system for coding data, but hand coding offered a more nuanced strategy for analysis (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). Codes were written in the margins, as were the constructs (e.g., advocacy or district policies and procedures). Sub-themes and specific quotations were highlighted in multiple colors. The highlighted pieces were evidence infused in the existing conceptual framework. This additional layer of open coding (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) and analysis led to additional evidence to demonstrate each theme and a closer understanding of the data. This was an unexpected data analysis method that was added during this study as an analysis strategy to allow me to understand the data in a deeper way. This method is representative of what others call "touch the data" in order to transform abstract data into concrete understanding (Graue & Walsh, 1998, p. 145).

Although a laborious data analysis process, these strategic actions aided in interpretation of the data set. Data collection and analysis occurred in a cyclical manner (Figure 3.8). Together, these strategies were used to help me with data analysis and interpretation, and the process of construction of a readable document.

Figure 3.8 Data Collection and Analysis
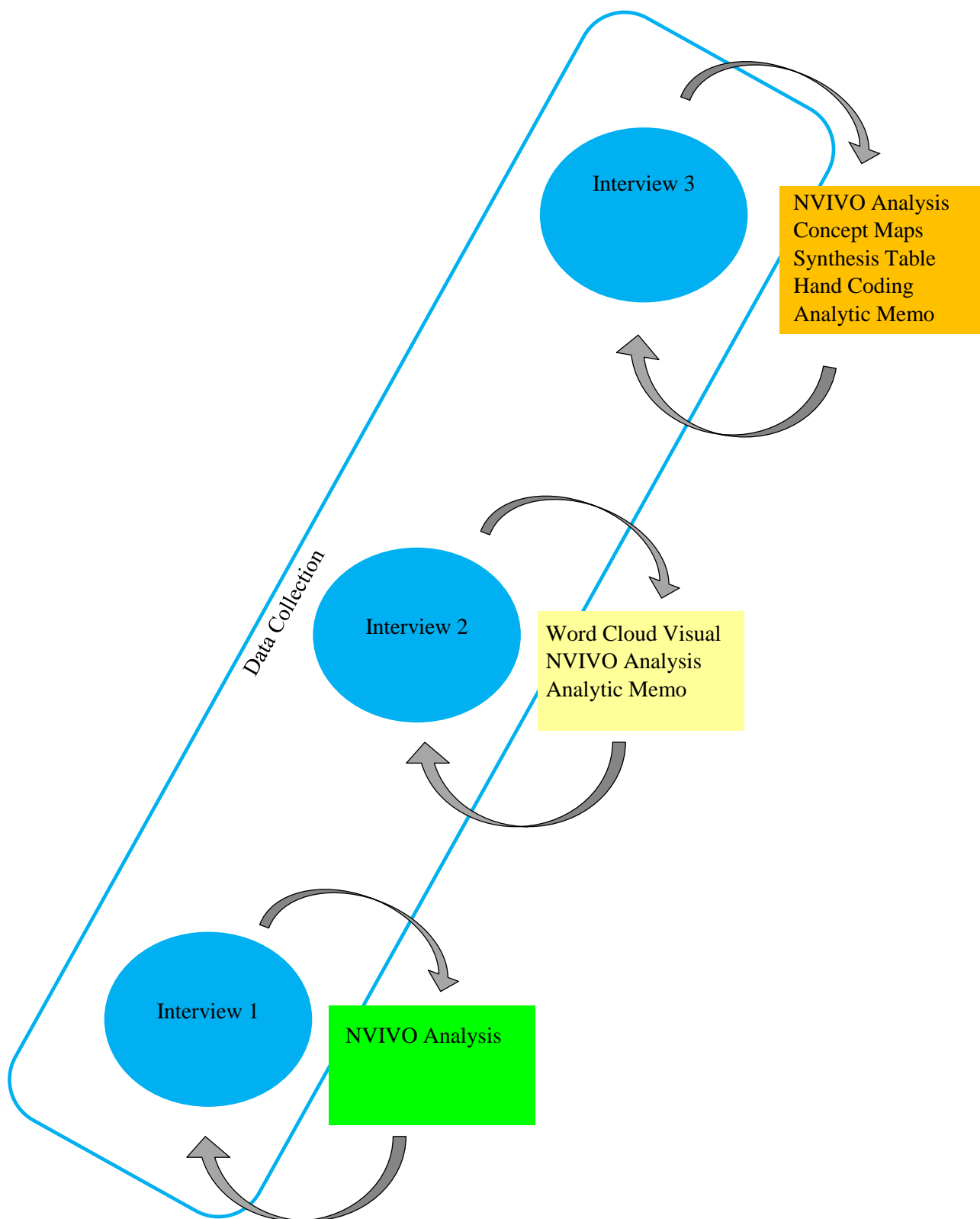
Researcher Trustworthiness

As a qualitative researcher, I approach this study with the idea that "while [I] would not claim that the data [I] collect contain 'the truth' or the only way of recording the empirical world, [I] do claim that [my] renderings can be evaluated in terms of accuracy" (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). In other words, although I do not assume these dissertation findings are the only valid "truth," I certainly approach the research with the idea that the data, evidence, and renderings have happened and were collected with upmost integrity. It is my interpretation of data that is grounded in the empirical school world (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). As a qualitative researcher, I believe "that the qualitative research tradition produces an interpretation of reality that is useful in understanding the human condition [of difference]…That is the logic in [my] claim to legitimacy" (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

With this notion of trustworthiness, I also built in measures of validity in four ways. The first is that there were three-interviews with each participant. These were all in-depth interviews that lasted for one to two hours each. Each of these interviews were transcribed to ensure integrity to participants' actual words. Participants' narration was quoted at length within the data chapters, to allow readers to form their own interpretation and analysis. The second strategy to cultivate validity in this study is that the third interviews also serve as member checks to share my connections between categories, developing analysis, and ask for any additional insight and clarification. This member check provided participant feedback and validation of the analysis of this study. Further, when there were portions of the interview data that I found multiple ways to interpret, I shared transcription sections directly with a participant and asked them to critically analyze them; this happened at two points during the data analysis section. The member check provided validity of my interpretation of the participants' experiences. Five participants have

contributed to this member check process. The fourth strategy is through the rhetoric in grounding this study within a certain theoretical framework. Biklen and Casella (2007) assert, "Narrators can gain authority through their rhetoric" (p. 23). Rhetoric involves "the putting to work of language in order to influence other people, either in terms of their future actions or their beliefs" (Edgar & Sedgwick, 1999, p. 340). Biklen and Casella (2007) explain, "You can gain narrative authority through the thoughtfulness with which you can describe those theories that explain your perspectives on your subjects and that account for how you see the world" (p. 23). The actions, beliefs, and explanations that leaders provide are explained through embedding understanding within a social justice framework. These are the strategies I employed in order to add to the authentic, validity, narrative authority, and trustworthiness of this study.

Ethical Considerations

An IRB application was submitted and accepted (prior to beginning research). The participants of this research study had the option to choose to withdraw at any time without any questions or repercussion. They also could choose to not answer any question in which they are not comfortable. Privacy of participants was ensured by letting them pick a private location for the phone-interview prior to our meeting time. Also, all digital recordings and written transcriptions of the interviews and the written field notes from the observations were maintained on a password-protected computer and locked desk drawer. The only people who have access to this information is myself, as the sole researcher, and the three members of my dissertation advising committee. A consent form was signed prior to conducting any interviews. The next section introduces the districts and participants in this study.

District-level Inclusive Special Education Leaders

District demographic information is presented next. Throughout the following chapters, pseudonyms are used. This upholds a "do no harm" stance as a researcher and encourages participants' expressive authenticity and openness (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). In addition, it protects the confidentiality of participants, as many continue providing leadership to their communities.

Seven district-level special education leaders participated in this study. Table 3.4 includes participant demographics and information about the district they work in. All seven are leaders in public schools. Each holds a position that is considered district-level administration of special education. As Boscardin et al. (2009) note, the federal regulations and statutes in IDEA (2004) do not reference director of special education qualifications, and therefore, in this study, given a multitude of states and district organizational structures, position scopes are varied. Their position titles range from Associate Superintendent of Education Services, Assistant to the Superintendent, Special Education Director, Supervisor of Special Education, and two are Directors of Student Support Services. One is also Coordinator of Positive Behavior Support, but is considered a member of the central office administration, as cross-checked to the district's organizational chart. Participants have had a range of administration experience, from four to 20 years, and prior special education teaching experiences that spanned from four years to 22 years. Six participants identify as women and one as male. Six participants identify as White and one as Latino.

Table 3.4. *Participant Demographics*

Leader	Age Range	Race	Gender	Special Education Teaching	Administrator Experience	State	Position in District
1. Kora	51-60	W	F	7-12	20	VA	Coordinator of Positive Behavior Support
2. Mia	31-40	W	F	7-12	6	VT	Director of Student Support Services
3. Sophie	61 or more	L	F	12	20	CA	Director of Special Education
4. Lucy	31-40	W	F	14	9	VA	Supervisor of Special Education
5. Miller	61 or more	W	M	15	9	AZ	Director of Student Services
6. Charlotte	31-40	W	F	0	8	MD	Associate Superintendent, Education Services
7. Leah	31-40	W	F	4	7	VT	Special Education Director

Note. Special Education Teaching refers to years of special education teaching experience. Administrator Experience means years of administrator experience. Within Race, W stands for White, L stands for Latino. Within Gender, M stands for male and F stands for female. Within State, VA is Virginia, VT is Vermont, CA is California, AZ is Arizona, and MD is Maryland.

The participants in this research study represent a range. Participants work in geographic regions across the United States, including districts in Maryland, Arizona, Virginia, Vermont, and California. Two participants each work in Virginia and Vermont. Given this geographic range, the interviews were conducted via skype or phone, based on participant preference. The district sizes range from small, medium, and large. Refer to table 3.5 for district demographics.

Table 3.5. *District Demographics*

Leader	Students	Grades	IEPs	Poverty	EL	Race	Included
1. Kora	9,533	K-12	10%	38%	2.7%	6% Asian, 4% Black 3% Hispanic, 1% other 86% White	81-100%
2. Mia	4,052	K-12	11.3%	14%	2.7%	9% Black, Asian, or Hispanic 91% White	80%
3. Sophie	132,000	PK-12	11.2%	59.4%	26.5%	46% Hispanic 23.4% White 10.2% Black 5.4% Filipino 4.9% Indo-Chinese 3.3% Asian .3% Native American .6% Pacific Islander 5.4% Multi Racial	N/A
4. Lucy	9,500	K-12	10%	38%	N/A	6% Asian 4% Black 3% Hispanic 1% other 86% White	81-100%
5. Miller	34,149	PK-12	8.1%	29.97%	1.6%	18% Hispanic 4% Asian 3% Black 1% Native American 3% two or more races 71% White	81-100%
6. Charlotte	15,963	PK-12	14.7%	43.95%	1.3%	2.2 % Asian, 27.3% Black, 12.8 % Hispanic, 48.1 % White, 9.6% other	84.5%
7. Leah	1,212	PK-8	13%	20%	3%	3% Asian, 2% Black, 0% Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, 92% White, 2% other	89%

Note. Students refers to the total students in the school district. Grades means the grade levels that attend the school district. IEPs means the percentage of students who have Individualized Education Programs. Poverty means students who are members of families in poverty, as indicated by the qualification for free or reduced price lunch. EL stands for English Learners who are members of the school district. Race refers to the percentage of students in racial groups. Included is a category that refers to the percentage of students with IEPs who are included in general education classrooms for at least 75% of the day. PK means pre-kindergarten.

The first district has 9,500 students enrolled in kindergarten through twelfth grade. As indicated through qualifying for free or reduced price lunch, there are 38% students in poverty. In this geographic area, it was indicated that parts are considered rural and others were considered suburban. There is a vastly "diverse economic situation and educational levels within one county," as well as multi-cultural communities, due to there being a University and a college, alongside county areas where students qualify for free or reduced priced lunch. The racial demographics indicate 6% of students are Asian, 5% are African American, 3% Hispanic, 1% identify in other categories, and 86% are white. There are 10% of students who have IEPs in the district. Of this percentage of students with IEPs, the percentage range that are included in general education classrooms for at least 80% of the day is 81-100%. There are two participants (Kora and Lucy) who both hold district-level special education administration positions in this district. These individuals serve in different capacities, hold different position titles, and possess different areas of expertise. Thus, since it did not conflict with criteria set forth prior to recruitment, I have made the conscious decision to select both as participants.

The second district, led by Mia, educates 4,052 students in grades Kindergarten to twelfth grade. There are 556 students district-wide who qualify for free and reduced lunch, meaning 14% of students are living in poverty. The number of students who are English language learners is 109 throughout the district. Data indicates there are 9% of students who are African American, Asian, or Hispanic. The majority of the student body is white, comprising 91%. There are 11% of students in the district who qualify for special education services and have an IEP. Of these students with IEPs, 61-80% are included in the general education classrooms for at least 80% of the day.

Miller is the administrator at a third district that provides education to 34,149 students in Pre-Kindergarten to twelfth grade. Currently, there are 8.1% of students in the district who have IEPs. Under the leadership of a participant in this study, this percentage decreased after noticing special education procedures in district-wide had historically led to over-identifying certain students with disabilities. The percentage changed from 16% to 8.1%. In this district, there are 18% Hispanic students, 4% Asian, 3% Black, 1% Native American, 3% who are two or more races, and 71% white. There are approximately 30% student who qualify for free or reduced price lunch. There are 550 students who are English language learners.

Another district has 1,300 students ranging from preschool to eighth grade. This is where Leah works. There is one building for Preschool to 2nd grade, one for 3rd to 5th, and one for 6th to 8th grade. Across the district, English Language Learners come from 38 different countries and speak 17 languages. This district has 13% of students with disabilities, as indicated by percentage of students with IEPs. This is a bit higher than previous years, and the administrator reports two reasons. The first is that families with disabilities started moving to the district because there are many resources available and students with disabilities are provided services within the schools. A second reason is that the district has revamped the multi-tiered system of support. Across this state, the district has the highest incidence of autism.

A fifth district has 132,000 students in preschool to twelfth grade and is led by Sophie. In this district, the student demographic composition is: 46% Hispanic, 23.4% White, 10.2% African American, 5.4% Filipino, 4.9% Indo-Chinese, 3.3% Asian, .3% Native American, .6% Pacific Islander, and 5.4% Multi Racial/Ethnicity. There are 117 traditional elementary schools, 9 kindergarten to eighth grade schools, 25 middle schools, 24 high schools, and 14 atypical or alternative schools. There are 14,787 students who receive special education services in this

urban district. This district is currently working toward improved special education services whereby educational professionals provide these services for an increasingly amount of time in the general education environment.

This district had previously been in the midst of a class action lawsuit when parents of students with disabilities banned together, requesting a legal examination of special education realities and placements. Parents asserted legal action because they believed that students with disabilities "had the right to attend their school of residence and there was no need to ship them off." With the support of researchers and consultants in the field of special education, the district took steps toward inclusive special education service provision where students would be provided instructional supports within their neighborhood schools.

Key findings emerge from the examination of demographic data across districts. The national average of students served through federally supported special education is 13.8% (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). In this sample, the percentage of students with Individualized Education Programs range from 8.1% to 14.7%. In Sophie's district, there was a higher percentage of students with educational labels. The administrator in charge of special education worked effortlessly to educate the administrative team and staff about over-representation and disproportionality. Thus, she implemented district-wide intervention support structures in efforts to more accurately identify students who needed special education services. Participants suggested that the percentage of students with individualized education programs that are included in general education classrooms for at least 80% of the day ranged from 61% to 100%.

Districts vary in the size of their student populations, the grades they serve, and their racial composition. Districts ranged in size from 1,212 to 132,000 students. One district served pre-kindergarten to eighth grade, while others served pre-kindergarten to twelfth grade. Most

districts were predominantly white as represented with 71% to 92% Caucasian students across the student body. One district has a 46% Hispanic student body. Across the districts, the percentages of students who are English language learners is low for most district, from 1.3% to 3%; there is an exception to this pattern with one district reporting educating 26.5% of ELLs. Overall, the racial and ELL demographics for the student population are not diverse.

In this chapter I outlined the research design and methods that guided this study. I shared my positionality that shaped the approach to this research. I also discussed ethical considerations, trustworthiness, and participant validity of the data. In the following chapters I present my findings and analysis of data. Next, I describe the participants' drive to do social justice work in the field of inclusive education.

CHAPTER 4: LEADERS' COMMITMENT TO INCLUSIVE EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES

A premise of this research study is that, as Theoharis (2009) conveys, administrators' conceptualization, or their personal experiences and beliefs, related to inclusive educational practices and social justice are critical to their commitment, the leadership provided, and the types of special education services that prevail within their district. This chapter examines the first research question: How do district-level special education leaders articulate their conceptualization and commitment to inclusive education? Participants in this study are committed to social justice work. The chapter will explore the social justice roots of participants' commitment to inclusive education that are embedded within their articulated belief systems. First, I present the participant data around their drive to do social justice work in the field of inclusive education. Then, I discuss the three themes that emerge from their statements (see Figure 4.1).

Participants' Drive to do Social Justice Work in the Field of Inclusive Education

Participants attributed their commitment to educational equity and social justice to various factors in their personal lives and poignant events in their careers. Charlotte has never been a special education teacher. Prior to serving as a district-level special education administrator, she was an elementary educator, an instructional support teacher, an assessment principal, and over the course of five years had served as a principal in two elementary schools. She attributed her mindset to a directive from her boss soon after she began her role as a principal. Because of this, she explained, she:

Figure 4.1. Leaders' Commitment to Inclusive Educational Practices
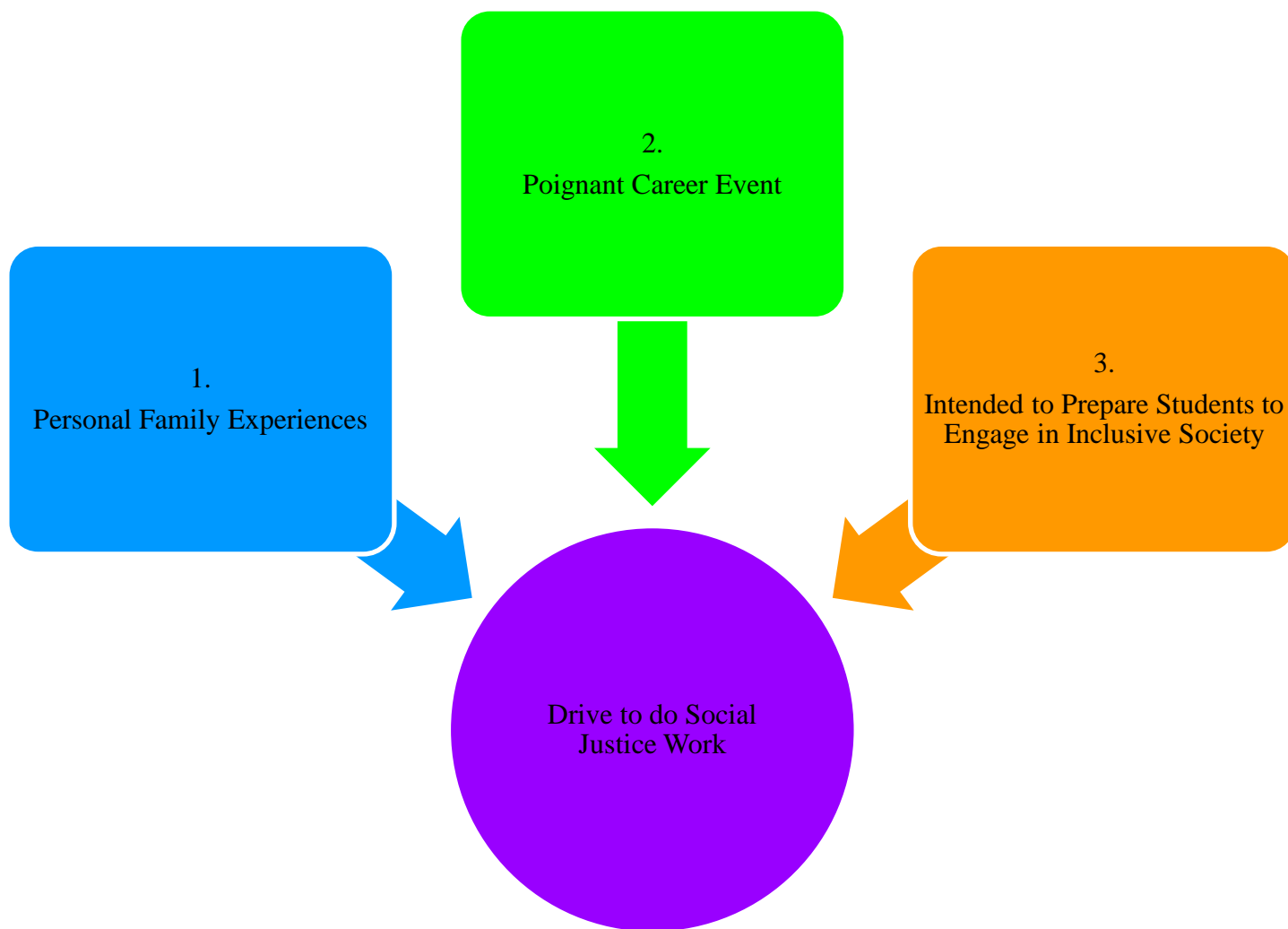
Figure 4.1. Visual representation of key findings that emerged around the following research

question: How do district-level special education leaders articulate their conceptualization and

commitment to inclusive education?

had a philosophical shift…. A complete change in the way that I saw … how I felt philosophically, about how we were servicing students with disabilities. So when I had that philosophical shift and I realized, oh my … you know, this is a civil rights issue. We are doing a disservice to these kids. They have rights and we're not giving them access to what they have the rights of access to.

Data related to her district's failure to live up to its obligation to provide LRE in accordance with IDEA was scrutinized by the state. Charlotte's boss charged her with leading the inclusive school reform initiative in her district. She described individual students with disabilities in the district whose stories inspired her to develop an intense calling for inclusive educational practices. She connected her drive to be a district-level administrator leading inclusive educational services to a strong calling to oppose discrimination.

This is our generation, my generation's civil rights issue. There's still a large school of thought that we should be segregating students with certain disabilities. I feel very strongly that it is fundamentally wrong. It is as wrong as segregating students with a different ethnicity or by race. I disagree with it. I'm hoping that we're raising a generation of children in our school system that, as they grow up as adults, won't tolerate that any more than our generation would tolerate discrimination because of race. But, it is still, I would say, it is still the minority who feel the way that I do. The majority feel that students [with disabilities] should be separated.

The stories Charlotte told about her progress in achieving her vision for her district echo this connection between disability and race as sites of segregation and injustice. She explained that integration "is a moral imperative" and required tough leadership decisions that involved

advocacy, policy change, and going against the educational status quo on her part.

Another administrator traced the inception of her social justice roots back to personal experiences. Lucy described vivid memories of her parents bringing students with disabilities into their home. Her mother was a teacher at a training institute for children with intellectual disabilities; her father taught special education in a self-contained classroom. She recalled:

> We met a lot of people with disabilities in and out of our home as a kid. I grew up in the 1970s. My parents were kind of like hippies. Crazy world. They were always bringing home stray dogs and stray kids. So even [when I was] a child, my siblings, and I were never really … people with disabilities were just welcomed. My parents didn't instill any type of knowledge … we were never told they were different. My parents had the perspective that people with disabilities had to be treated like everybody else. So, I was ingrained with that thinking as a child.

According to her recollection, Lucy's parents did not explicitly discuss their principles about individuals with disabilities; this was a value that came out in the way the family interacted with community members. Lucy also described her parents running summer camp programs for children who were economically disadvantaged and her own volunteerism. She credits these learning experiences with her decision to study special education in graduate school. She began working in the district where she became a district leader during graduate school, first as a substitute teacher and then in an instructional assistant position. The district had been moving toward full inclusion for all learners, and her job was to support students whose IEPs classified them as having emotional disturbance disabilities in general education classes. She became a full-time teacher in the same district upon graduation before eventually becoming the principal and then the supervisor of special education.

Lucy attributed her desire to be an advocate for inclusive education for individuals with disabilities to her realization that school is about more than teaching facts, that "relationship building" is a crucial aspect of a school's mission. She said:

> My personal perspective is that we all share the planet. I mean school, to me, is just preparation for what is on the other side, which is the real world.… I do not believe in segregated programming at all because it does not mirror the real world. But I do think that … because, you know, the bottom line is these people with disabilities … we all are members of the human race. And, we all live in the same fish bowl. So, we all have to learn how to live in the same fish bowl.

In Lucy's view, the experience of being in inclusive settings is important for all students because this provides the optimal preparation for the "real world."

Lucy also attributed her incremental successes in working toward inclusive education to the teaching position she assumed immediately after graduate school. She was hired to teach in a Middle School self-contained classroom of students who had an educational classification of emotional disturbance. There were twenty students with various emotional, mental, and behavioral needs. They had been placed in a self-contained classroom since their elementary school years. Students were not even allowed to each lunch in the cafeteria; they went there to pick up their cafeteria lunches and brought them back to the windowless classroom to eat. Lucy felt that this practice was unfair, unhealthy, and she let others know. She described her incremental success in convincing the school to change that practice and to find other opportunities for students to be included in general education classes throughout the school day. She remembered one student who was brilliant in math who entered higher-level math classes

because of her advocacy. Lucy saw her success in these areas as a driving force behind her leadership.

Lucy frequently connected inclusive education to social justice. She described inclusion as, "a civil rights issue intersecting with the social justice issue….It's all about leveling the playing field. It's all about providing people with free, fair access that is based on what they need." In essence, personal experiences that allowed Lucy to develop relationships with students with disabilities, coupled with small-scale changes in middle school where she had taught, gave Lucy an orienting mindset from which to operate.

Kora reflected that her religious upbringing lead her to summer experiences that allowed her to work with individuals that are traditionally marginalized from society.

> I think the roots of my interest in educational equity for children with disabilities goes back to my adolescence. I grew up in a Quaker family. And, I had some experiences as a teenager working at a Quaker summer program that focused on disenfranchised groups of people: a visit to an institution where people with developmental disabilities were living, in what seemed to me to be appalling conditions. The fear I felt of the people who lived there and their subsequent kindness and welcome to me were actually life changing. I was also fortunate to attend a university special education program that had a strong social justice focus.

The summer program was a defining moment in Kora's personal development in becoming a social justice advocate. She explained that the university teacher education program helped her to connect her summer program experiences to a larger social justice understanding.

Kora conveyed her beginning roots of social justice advocacy were further solidified by career events. She described the priorities and mission of the district where she works:

We accept the responsibility for the success of every student. That's what we are able to do and so we mean every student, you know, literally every student. A big thing for us is that inclusion is a philosophy, it is the way we see our kids. It's not a program. When we say we're fully inclusive, what we mean by that is our students attend the same schools that they would attend if they did not have a disability. They are in the same classes that they would be in if they did not have a disability. It does not mean that students spend one hundred percent of their time in the regular classroom, never leaving there for any specialized instruction. I mean kids, even kids without disabilities, if they need some individualized instruction in something can go out with a teacher to get that. And special education students are no different from that. So for us, it means that everybody has the same access. It doesn't mean the percentage of time that you sit at a desk in a regular classroom.

Kora describes the district's mission in terms of access to their home school:

I think for me and for a lot of us is the idea of the neighborhood school that is designed to meet the needs of the children that live in the attendance area. That's the core of it. So the idea is that children should be able to go to school with their neighbors near their homes and it is the responsibility of the school system to provide the resources that the kids who live in the attendance area need to be successful at school. And by doing that, it means our kids all attend their neighborhood schools. And so that that means we're dealing with a natural population of students in our school. So we don't have individual schools who have an overwhelming number of students with severe disabilities or overwhelming number of kids with problem behaviors because they're getting bused here.

The principle of natural proportions is evident when students attend schools that are geographically located near their homes. Research has suggested the system needs to reflect natural proportions, meaning the number of students with disabilities in any school should reflect the natural population of students with disabilities in the district (Causton-Theoharis & Theoharis, 2009). Natural proportions is one strategy to achieve educational equity.

Kora also attributed her social justice orientation to her religious upbringing and familial conversations about valuing every person. She described a sense of respect developed during the course of her career in working with families who had children with disabilities.

I am a firm believer that every child needs to be honored, respected, and taught in school. I have a very profound respect for students and their parents, students with disabilities and their parents of students with disabilities. I just came to respect what they were up against. I love all kids. I've never met a kid that I didn't like. And that was just me. But working with families when they had a child with disabilities, I just came to respect them and their hard work and their desires to have their children be respected and honored.

The kids themselves were very inspiring to Kora:

In working with students with disabilities, I realized how they were smart, engaging, and funny. They were typical kids who had to deal with things they had no control over. And why wouldn't somebody respect a kid for that? I mean I saw kids with disabilities doing things that I would not have the gumption to do that had I been in their shoes. And it just made me think they need the very best that we can give them. That is my guiding principle.

Kora expresses a genuine level of respect for every student and a desire to provide the supports they need. She described that working in inclusive schools provided first-hand accounts of

success stories for students with disabilities. Kora had held a coordinating special education position across the state years before. She had joined the large urban district after a class action lawsuit led to the discharge of the district management. In this capacity, Kora had significant communication with the group that had supported the lawsuit as well as other advocates, and she credited this collaboration with shaping her drive. This position had allowed her to put her belief that all students should be respected and taught in school into practice by collaborating with consultants and experts at a state policy level. This collaboration had shaped her underlying orientating framework.

Mia indicated that her vantage point is transparent and inherently connected to the broader district initiatives. She used a social justice perspective as an operational base of thinking. That is, she conveyed a sense of urgency in ensuring that students with disabilities make progress. She explained that the people who lead with her know and understand that public school districts serve all students:

> It is rooted in our system of collectively being responsible for teaching all of the students that come through the door. We're responsible for providing access to the curriculum and having an expectation that all kids meet progress levels.

> I have a social justice perspective about where we are going. We are going to close the gap between students who struggle and students with disabilities. I think that one of the things that is interesting is that we all pay a lot of attention sometimes to the poverty issue, and when it comes to the disability issue there is still this underlying belief that well we can't really expect those kids to make progress because after all, they haven't the capacity, or something like that. So that's why in my mind, I like the disability piece

because I think it's under … it's not as big of a focus problem in a lot of districts. Lots of

people talk about poverty, everybody knows that we have a poverty gap, and we are and I

believe, very strongly, that that is necessary. I try to bring that same level of urgency to

kids with disabilities.

According to Mia, other administrators in her district recognize the poverty gap, but they have a

certain resignation; they do not believe it can be fixed. By centering her advocacy on disability,

she calls both attention to an issue that other administrators are not addressing and one that they

tend to believe cannot be addressed. Mia emphasized that her colleagues in the district,

including the principals, the superintendent, the director of curricula, and the special education

directors have a "very strong collective core" and their core belief in social justice guides their

actions.

Miller has two sons who have disabilities, and they provided the roots of his commitment

to social justice.

I am fully committed to inclusive districts. I guess I have two sons that tell me. They

don't have special education churches and special education malls. I think, why should

this be any different? All kids are diverse from each other, and so kids need to learn from

each other in inclusive communities.

Miller understands the educational system as a microcosm of society. We live, interact, and

work in diverse, inclusive societies. There are not separate businesses for adults with

disabilities. Keeping with this line of thinking, Miller articulated the belief that schools support

students to interact with individuals who represent a variety of differences.

Discussion of Social Justice Roots

The participants all described the social justice roots of their interest and drive to cultivate educational equity and inclusive education. Three key themes emerge from their statements (see Figure 4.1). First, personal family experiences had an influence on several of them. Second, those who could not credit a family experience indicated a poignant career event that infused social justice and inclusive reform work at the district-level. Third, all of the administrators saw their work in the field of inclusive education as a purposeful social justice action intended to prepare students with and without disabilities to engage in the larger, inclusive society.

The effect of personal experiences, as a theme, results from the development of relationships with individuals with disabilities. Life-changing relationships had been core to administrators' stance on social justice and inclusiveness as they pursued their own education and professional careers. These beliefs were not let-go or discarded, as they grew educationally and throughout their career. This finding aligns with previous research that these administrators transcended leadership boundaries of merely being managers or instructional leaders (Boscardin, 2005; Harper, 2012; Pazey & Cole, 2012). Rather, participants were leaders who were committed social justice advocates (Theoharis, 2007).

Poignant career events had drastically shaped their convictions and inspired some to commit to social justice work in the field of inclusive education. While the circumstances varied, the common theme was that a situation caused them to examine and question their previously held beliefs critically to construct an educational setting that welcomes diverse learners.

All of the participants had an explicit focus on fostering an inclusive educational system as a means to further social justice and the civil rights for all students. They feel that public schools should prepare all students to participate in an increasingly diverse society. The interactions and friendships that students with and without disabilities form in schools are building blocks for developing respectful citizens who can navigate and embrace the broader inclusive society. An additional articulated belief was that students needed equitable access to contexts within neighborhood schools with age-appropriate peers. One participant explained:

> We're an inclusive system, which to us means that all students should have equal access to programs in their neighborhood schools with their age appropriate peers. So what we believe as a district is that every student should have access to every program that our system has to offer without having to go somewhere else to get it. So they participate in their neighborhood schools with their age appropriate peers.

Within the focus of creating an inclusive educational system as a professional strategy to enact their commitment to social justice and civil rights, district-level administrators clearly articulated that all students should have equitable access to district general educational contexts in order to thrive in our diverse society. This indicates their commitment to an inclusive stance as a model that supports students' transition from student to adult in the larger community more effectively. Participants used eloquent phrases to communicate these points, including, "We all share the planet," "We're living in the same fish bowl," and school's mission is to provide "preparation for the real world."

The three key themes that emerge in this chapter reflect their origins of social justice leadership. The roots of their interest and push for educational equity emerged from the

following: 1) factors in their personal lives; 2) poignant events in their careers; and, 3) the belief that the educational system that prepares all students to live in a diverse society.

In a seminal review of professional literature regarding the status of special education administration, researchers explained that most special education administrators emerged from special education backgrounds, making them knowledgeable as to the "assumptions, practices, and knowledge traditions of the disciplines of special education" (Lashley & Boscardin, 2003, p. 4). A more nuanced understanding of general education and educational administration is needed for the administration of special education. Thompson and O'Brian (2007) asserted, "A strictly special education orientation is too narrow to properly prepare an individual to address many of the most pressing issues associated with contemporary special education administration (e.g., accountability, school reform, and inclusive education" (p. 34). This suggests that the social justice orientation of participants may give them an advantage, as it goes beyond a "strictly special education orientation." Participants' commitment to inclusive education is evident, and this research aims to inspire others to create educational systems whereby *all* students can "swim in the same fish bowl" –and to prepare them to do so—as adults. In the next chapter, I explore the advocacy tactics used by participants to ensure the enactment of district inclusive special education services.

CHAPTER 5: LEADERS' MOMENTS OF ADVOCACY TO ENACT INCLUSIVE

EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES

The previous chapter provided an overview of the participants' social justice drive. Findings described the personal experiences or poignant events in the district-level special education administrators' careers as the roots of their commitment to inclusive education. They use a framework of inclusive education coupled with an orientation toward advocacy to support the educational access of students with disabilities.

This chapter discusses moments of advocacy that were crucial in participants' making sense of their enactment of inclusive educational practices. My analysis is grounded in DSE and social justice theory, with the understanding that participants are critically conscious agents who purposefully challenge systems of power and privilege, identify issues of marginalization, and place students with disabilities at the core of their leadership decisions (Capper et al., 2006; Theoharis, 2009a). It probes data connected to the second research question: What strategies of advocacy, grounded in social justice, are evident in the ways that district-level special education leaders make sense of their enactment of inclusive educational opportunities and service delivery for students with disabilities? Themes that emerge demonstrate advocacy strategies linked to: 1) personal leadership disposition; 2) advocacy for students with disabilities; 3) capacity-building of the administrative team; and 4) actions that district-level special education administrators employed (see Figure 5.1). These advocacy strategies were tactics to cultivate inclusive services and educational practices for all students with disabilities. The visual representation shows the sub-themes within this chapter (see Figure 5.2). In looking across the themes and teased out from this discussion of the data, this chapter concludes with an overarching analysis of the participants' critical questioning of the structure of special education.

Figure 5.1. Complex Advocacy Tactics
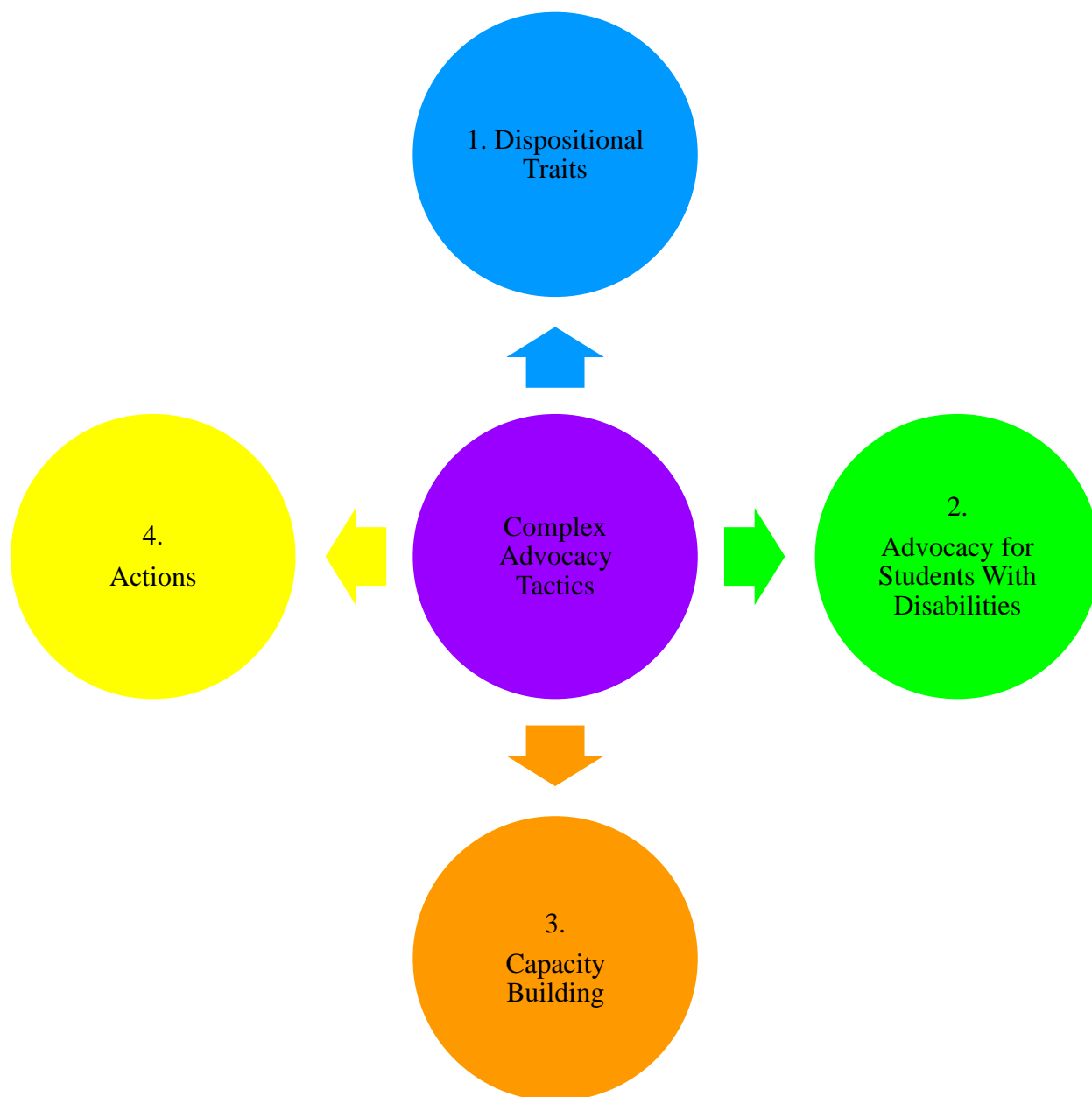
Figure 5.1. Visual representation of themes that emerged around the following research question: What strategies of advocacy, grounded in social justice, are evident in the ways that district-level   special education leaders make sense of their operationalization and enactment of inclusive educational opportunities and service delivery for students with disabilities?

Figure 5.2. Advocacy Tactics Themes and Sub-themes
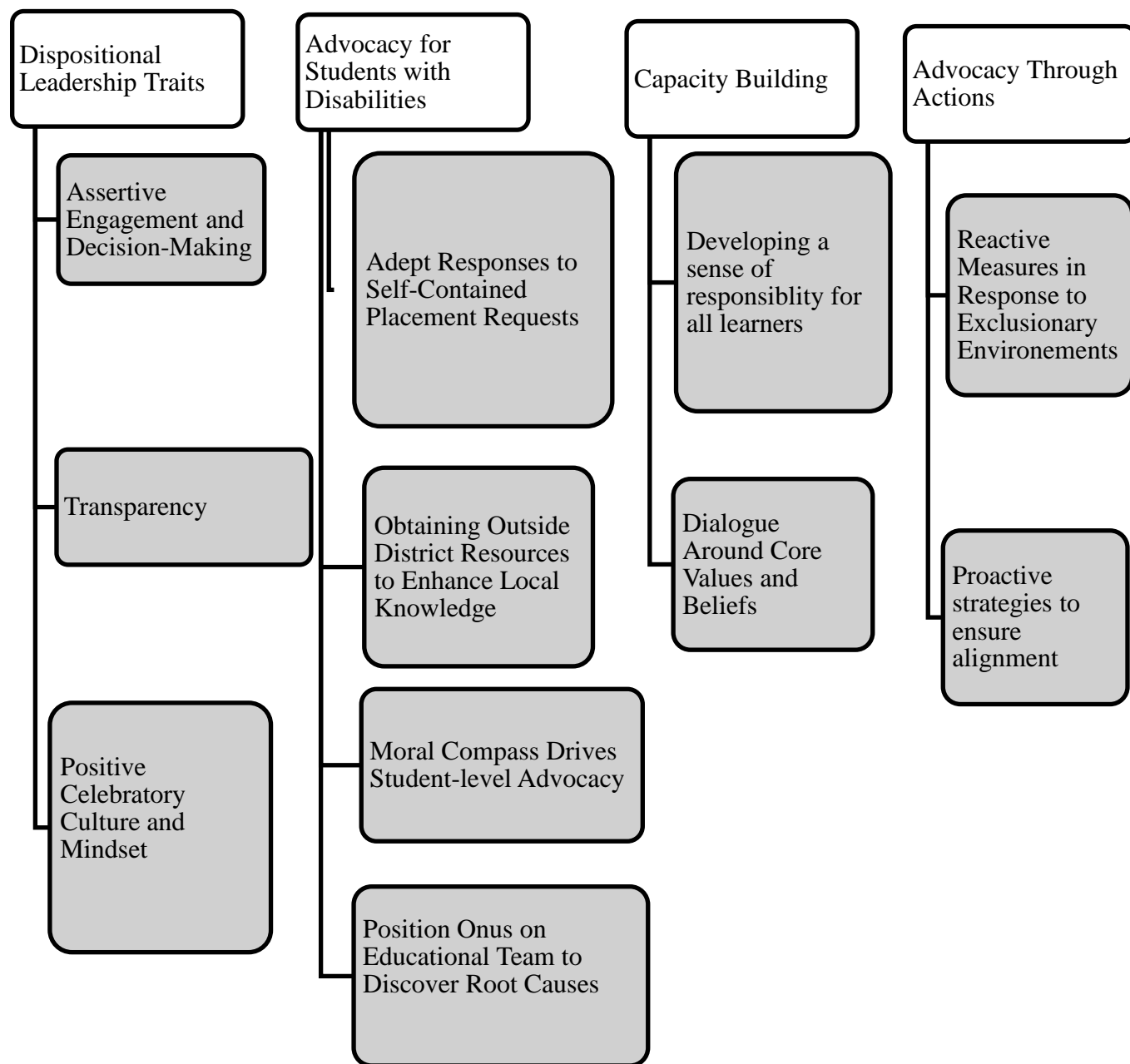
Figure 5.2. Visual representation of sub-themes within this chapter.

Dispositional Leadership Traits

Dispositional traits were employed as tactics or strategies in participants' advocacy. The first theme discussed in this section explores leaders' dispositional traits. It reveals patterns in the ways participants' professional commitments lead to leadership actions in their districts. The dispositional strategies that district-level special education administrators employ in their inclusive advocacy leadership are assertive engagement and aligned decision-making, leading against the grain with transparency, and cultivating a positive celebratory culture through using a coaching mindset.

Learning about the leaders' demeanor reveals that they construct a culture of inclusive environments through both active and passive means. In this study, dispositional traits are a construct of the manner and tendency by which administrators carry themselves, behave, and act in certain ways. It is their professional manner, presence, and navigation of interpersonal relationships, as it influences their ability to advocate for students with disabilities and create a culture of access. Participants revealed these district administrator dispositions through the instances of leadership they shared during the interviews.

Research reveals a correlation between dispositional affect, or one's personality traits, and ability to respond in situations and constructs, such as culture, decision making, negotiation, and coping with stressful events (Barsade & Gibson, 2007). Narrative that participants shared demonstrate an active construction of their professional disposition. Participants were cognizant of acting a certain way in order to progress inclusive education within their district's culture. In other situations, these dispositional traits within the data were extracted through inexplicit ways and without the participant identifying them specifically. Dispositional traits evident in certain

situations have the potential to support other leaders to process and respond to situations cognitively, or to understand how to act and make decisions within their districts.

Assertive Engagement and Aligned Decision-Making

Participants' comments suggested each employed an assertively engaged dispositional tactic in their advocacy. This leadership strategy, coded within the data set, required participants to insert themselves into building-level discussions and problem solving meetings physically to make decisions that aligned with district vision. Seven participants revealed experiences during the interviews related to assertive engagement. Data were coded as "engaged," "collaboration in buildings," "visible and assertive presence," "contentious meeting," and "aligned decision." These codes were collapsed to create this theme of assertive engagement and aligned decision-making, which is a construct that describes how leaders show up physically, with an activist orientation, and make decisions.

Active engagement was revealed in participants' interactions with parents. Leah explained:

> If I know there is a high needs parent, and by that I mean they get anxious about things, I meet with them individually quite a bit and I'm not sure a lot of [district administrators] do that. They'll say it's not their place and refer them back to their building. So I meet with parents a lot for informational pieces or to help them.

Similarly, Mia explained, she comes "into play during tricky family and student situations." Kora chuckled as she shared, "I'm there, at whichever meeting, whichever building, whatever time, when a parent and school discrepancy occurs because access is on the line for many students."

Charlotte indicated specific times that she purposefully inserted herself to ensure that administrators in her district made decisions that aligned with the philosophical shift of the district:

> I was inserting myself into situations that really were not situations in the role that I was in….I would not typically sit in an IEP meeting. But when I knew the administrators involved in the IEP meeting didn't have the philosophical…the correct philosophical mindset [around access], I asserted myself in their situations. When I knew that we were going to have a parent meeting and the parent was very anxious about this idea of returning their child to the neighborhood school or looking at their least restrictive environment placement and really discussing whether it was appropriate or not or whether we could be serving this child in a less restrictive environment. And we just weren't choosing to do that.

These "prickly" situations allowed Charlotte to be visible with the district-wide administrative team, teachers, and parents. Furthermore, she could have engaged conversations and therefore explicitly use an assertive advocacy leadership tactic that was rooted in taking a stand for the educational rights of students with disabilities, including non-negotiable educational placement decisions. That is, administrators need to make tough decisions in order for the district to continue to progress toward more inclusive practices and she inserted herself in order to be an advocate.

These examples reveal explicit interventions the participants made to have visible presence in contentious, building-level decisions. They reflect participants' intentionality as agents of advocacy. Advocacy encompassed their dispositional identity as administrators and

therefore they determined to be present and assertive in family situations, even if such meetings might be strictly speaking beyond their scope of obligation.

Similar narrative was embedded within the interview data around participants' enactment of building-level matters. All of the participants discussed this need to be physically present in decision-making conversations. Lucy explained that "close collaboration" allows everyone to be on the same page, the strong commitment to prevail, and the team to "work through issues that come up along the way, through meetings." She said, "If there's a student issue, we'll meet at the school, with the parents. With issues or questions about staffing, we'll meet here at the school board. But every tough issue is dealt with a face-to-face conversation." Through her commitment to being an explicitly and physically engaged leader within tough situations, Lucy demonstrates her active construction of an assertive aligned decision-making advocacy dispositional trait.

Participants played an active role in classroom placement decisions for students with disabilities. Lucy described this as a collaboration between herself, each principal in the district, and a lead special education teacher. She said, "We do that with them. We collaborate. We will go to the school and sit down…we look at their numbers, their kids, and we try to figure out the best placements and we work on the scheduling together." Miller explained, "You have to be at the tough meetings. The ones that can go either way and really impact kids." Here again he emphasized physical presence. He said he had developed a "weighted system to place kids" that is based on a "whole workload" idea to ensure there would be "shared responsibility" for students with complex needs among teachers. As he explained, this approach emphasized that the district and each teacher needed to serve all students, and that they must align decisions to the

district values. Due to administrative office duties, Sophie explained that it can be a challenge

for central office administrators to be visible in ongoing building-level matters:

> You have to be in the buildings and know what's going on. I visit buildings regularly…I
>
> have focus group time with teachers. When teachers are planning, they have
>
> opportunities to come and talk to me about what's going on.

Sophie explained that pressures from accountability standards, heightened curriculum standards,

and teacher and principal evaluation systems had created a lot of stress among her colleagues and

that it was therefore important for her to meet with teachers, supervisors, and administrators.

She intentionally inserted herself into the building discussions around challenging issues related

to inclusion. Similarly, Leah said:

> It's really about being there, during the meetings anytime there is conversation about the
>
> best placement for a student. I can make sure to challenge the team to consider the least
>
> restrictive environment first, no matter if it's hard for the adults.

There was wide agreement that being present made concerted advocacy possible.

Charlotte's advocacy focused on inclusive educational decisions that she thought were

critical in terms of progressive actions to provide increased access for students with disabilities

over time. Her district explicitly embraced inclusive education as a philosophical vision; more

importantly, Charlotte made complicated educational decisions with attention to educational

equity at the core. Charlotte described:

> My staff who are always in buildings, that's what they do. My special education team
>
> here and my coordinators who all buy into this [meaning inclusive education], my content
>
> people who all buy into this, and my executive directors who report to me, who all buy
>
> into philosophically what we are trying to do. When they have a prickly situation, they

come tell me about it. I'll insert myself because I need people to understand that this is

not negotiable. We're not giving up on kids. We're not going back to a place where

we're putting children in a resource room. We're not going to do what's easy for the

adults. It's not what's easy for them. Our job is hard. No one ever said it wasn't going

to be hard.

Charlotte's language, when she says that the district is not going to give up on kids, or

put students in a resource room, or do what's easy for adults, conveys a sense of deep

commitment and activism. To convey the point that her colleagues should not revert to

traditional special education placements and practices that might require less effort, planning, or

advocacy, Charlotte purposefully maintains a physical presence, an active engagement, during

meetings and conversations. She has an explicit intention to support, empower, and collaborate

with allies to ensure that students with disabilities receive equitable access.

Mia's assertive engagement was also evident. She explained:

All students need to be progressing towards the common standards and that means taking

the common core special elements and align it with the IEP academic goals so all kids,

yes even kids with significant disabilities, progress academically. So in this case, the

final push was really just, "Sorry, it's required." It's what we do.

As Mia suggests, the importance of the district-level administrators' presence is that they have

actual power to mandate expectations across the district.

Participants stress the critical act of being in decision-making spaces. Being an explicitly

and physically engaged leader within tough situations demonstrates active construction of this

advocacy trait. Visible presence led to enforcement of the district value of serving all students,

as did creating opportunities for all professionals to talk with the district administration.

Decisions sometimes came down to insistence that inclusion is a district value and that objections will not be heard. Close understanding of these data makes it clear that regardless of the meeting topic or the particular issue leading to an objection to inclusion policies, participants recognize value in their physical presence and commitment to inclusion. The subtext suggests that it matters how district-level administrators carry themselves in meetings. Their personal-level leadership demeanor is vital. Their narrative around their own lived experience reveals what it means to take on an activist identity as an advocate for inclusive learning.

Active engagement led to an activist orientation. Lucy explained, "You absolutely have to have a vision and you have to be demanding about that." She said that she had to be "knowledgeable, patient, [and] have a vision" as well as being "demanding about [her] vision" and "able to take action." Sophie echoed this sentiment as she explained building- and district-decisions needed to be aligned to the district's inclusion commitment. She reasoned that as the director of the district it was her job "to keep people focused on [the district] goals…if people had ideas or wanted to do things, if it helped with one of those goals, then yes. If it didn't…well…"

Mia also grounded decisions in the district values. As she described, in her conversations with other administrators and teachers, she would advance the need for them all

> to develop a set of beliefs that are rooted in research about what worked for accelerating
>
> the growth of students because as a core this is about moving all students, including
>
> students with disabilities, so that we narrow the gap a little bit between their performance
>
> and their peers, and that they have not just access to curriculum but they had progressed.

Mia explained why this is difficult:

That's a big shift between just access and progression. So the guided principles were the

collective work…to say what does the research tell us about what works, and what do we

believe as a system….Then, every operational decision that we make from very big

decisions to very small decisions, we make sure that our systems are bringing them back

to those best guiding principles.

Overt critical consciousness to engage in an assertive manner was a strategic means to ensure

aligned decisions to the guiding principles, vision, and district goals. Participants emphasized

being demanding, keeping others focused on, and aligning decisions to their district goals. These

district goals were rooted in research about best practices around access, inclusion, and ensuring

progression in the general education curriculum. These core values guided operational decisions.

In this way, participants' dispositional traits embodied a virtuous advocacy tactic. District-level

administrators ensured that operational decisions were rooted in district goals and ensured that

systems and professionals in their building were doing so as well. This was an advocacy tactic to

enact district values and ensure decisions were aligned with them.

In summary, this section discussed assertive engagement as an advocacy-oriented

leadership tactic, meaning participants were visible, actively present, and insistent to ensure

alignment of vision to decision making through critical dialogue. In each instance, the advocacy

topics that participants discussed varied, but his or her individual leadership style played an

important role. They had an overt assertively engaged disposition that they communicated in

parent situations and building-level concern. This finding emerged in a researcher's memo after

open coding (see Appendix 3.13). This idea of a personal-level assertiveness around advocacy

decision-making was a pattern that reoccurred. It was a way for participants to enact a sense of

agency centered on their ongoing advocacy awareness and commitment to create inclusive

learning contexts. At times, this actively engaged style directly challenged cultural school politics around exclusionary practices, especially as it related to serving all students in the LRE even if adults found it difficult, and prompting action that derived from having courage. The narrative makes it evident that this critically conscious leadership manifested through an intentional engaged demeanor, assertiveness, and decisions aligned to core values was purposeful and active; these participants were doing social justice leadership. The assertive engagement is an important leadership tactic because, as Corbett and Slee (2000) contend, enacting inclusive education is a "distinctly political" and "in your face" activity, and the advocacy style of the participants was intentional, courageous, and critically political.

Leading Against the Grain with Transparency

District-level inclusive special education administrators knowingly lead toward inclusion with uncertainty of how staff within the system might act, without a specific leadership path, and often against long-held district practices. Coupled with transparency, this allowed participants to make critical information explicitly accessible to all stakeholders (e.g., building-level administrators, faculty, staff, and community members). The climate in each district was challenging, as educators questioned leadership strategy and decision-making. Tension and challenge were constant and expected factors as leaders advocated and sustained changes in the district, and as researchers note, these are core components of transformative leadership aimed at creating inclusive organizations (Shields, 2011). In this study, participants described themselves as leading against the grain of traditional special education practices with transparency of the vision.

In the face of resistance, leaders articulated the need for transparency and engagement with various stakeholders. Being transparent with the changes, the research that supports it, and that the process will be difficult was key. Leah explained:

> It's just sharing upfront, creating that relationship with people to say, "Hey trust me. I'm going to put you through Hell reorganizing stuff and it's totally going to pay off." And then explaining, "Here's why." So, I like to do all that basic, like quick, but meaningful transparency. Here is the research behind it and facilitate and get them to a point that they're so excited because they are like I can make an impact. It will be hard, but it will work and then I let them go."

Miller described his approach in similar terms:

> Unless you have everybody at the table, they're going to sabotage you. And you might as well have the crucial conversation and the ugliness up front. I mean that's why people ask us all the time why did you reform the whole district? Why didn't you start with one building and pilot or why didn't you do [kindergarten through second-grade]. My response is simple. It is, 'Why would you want to go through ugliness six times or eight times?' We are very up front. When we go into this, we know there's going to be bumps and we're going to have to gather the data of what works.

This notion of being "up front" signals transparency. The vision was not open for discussion. The district moved forward with whole-school reform. Conversation was welcome; therefore participants employed a transparent process. Mia explained the value of transparency thus:

> People that are cynical in the system will roll their eyes, but everyone knows that if I make a decision [the guiding principles are] what it's coming from. That is pretty universal at all levels. I think in a lot of ways people are appreciative of knowing that

upfront, but in other [ways] it is a little tongue in cheek. But, that's part of the nature of this work.

Lucy described this transparency as imperative across the district-level team.

[The team] jumped right in doing professional development, training people … We taught people how to collaborate around instruction, preparing and training regular education people on what are disabilities, what does a learning disability look like, how is this going to impact your classroom, your teaching. So they spent about a year doing that, giving the superintendent time to get everyone on the district side. Some went crazy. The superintendent said this is part of our vision. They had the school system, it became part of the vision and mission statement of the school system. That meant the school system was committed to making it happen. They weren't just saying it. We were actually committed to it and we went public with that commitment.

Lucy's reference to the district going "public" with inclusive school reform through professional development, and training, and outlining it in the vision for the district suggests the importance of transparency. Operating in a transparent manner was a strategy that allowed the district to move toward a more inclusive vision.

Transparency was a tactic employed as the district leaders sought to work toward creating increased inclusive opportunities in the district. Leah explained the level of resistance she faced:

It is hard because it's getting people to shift the way that they're thinking … You can have some really strong personalities that are just sort of bucking old habit. Or, this is just another thing that's going to go by the wayside. We also have a community that's pretty political. Like [they'd] have a revolt. Like you're making us do this, what if the kids are from dat, dat, dat [meaning from a low socioeconomic background, diverse racial

or ethnic background, etc.]. So there's that sort of stuff too. It's not us; the whole nation

is doing this, you know…. I mean we are like, everything is aligned, people know about

the steps, [people] are trained. It's really moving forward with implementation.

Sophie described apprehension by other administrators as a cause of her transparency in the

change process:

Others were so upset because they take it very personally. We showed them data and

mapped out our plan to keep us focused. They'd say, "You're going to be tearing down

everything that we've built? All our [special education] programs?" And it's like, our

response was, "it's not working. Why wouldn't we tear it down?" So we had, the point

of all this, is what we had when we started was a plan to share with everyone that we

could then just flesh out. Everyone knew the plan.

Leaders revealed a sense of calmness and contentment around the change process. The

transparency manifested in an explicitness about the steps the district intended to take.

Mia provided a specific example of a school practice that ran contrary to the district

guiding principle and her transparent analysis of that practice:

From the very beginning, [the team] were sort of like they will get their PE [physical

education] by working with the physical therapist. Fundamentally that's contrary to the

definition of adaptive PE because a physical therapist does not have the background and

content that a PE teacher has and they shouldn't be the sole provider. But it all runs

contrary to what we believe and what our guiding principles tell us… We started a year-

long professional development sequence with our PE teachers to teach them about what

adaptive PE is and what their responsibility is. And we started that professional

development with the guiding principles and we presented them to them. … Some of

them just actually accommodated very well for kids with disabilities. But some of them

didn't think it was their job to have those students in their class. And now, it's pretty

clear to them, I would say a majority of them really understand what their role is now.

Everyone understands the direction we are going … really to adaptive PE. And I think

that it is crystal clear even for those that still don't quite believe it's the right thing. They

know this is where we're going. They know our guiding principles (developed by district

administration).

Overtly addressing the practice, providing training, and helping others understand that it

conflicted with district principles, Mia led with transparency and this had positive results.

Grounded in professional development, articulating the district vision, sharing the plan,

and going "public" indicated this construct of transparency even in the face of some school

personnel going "crazy" or taking "it very personally." Explicit knowledge of where decisions

came from was key. Transparency was a strategy used to ensure the districts' staff, including the

administrative team and teachers, knew the end goal, options for meandering paths to progress

toward that outcome, and to expect challenges along the way. The "ugliness," "bumps," and

transparent articulation of changes are concrete indicators that participants knowingly lead

against the grain. That is, the district-level leaders were transparent in actively navigating a

disruption of practices within the district system that marginalized students with disabilities.

Thus, transparency is an advocacy tactic employed in the enactment of creating enhanced

equitable inclusive opportunities in the district.

Positive Celebratory Culture and Coaching Mindset

District-level special education leaders actively constructed a positive celebratory culture.

Their personal leadership strategy was to share success stories. The purpose was to gain

momentum, display respect for teachers' hard work, and create a climate for sustained buy-in from the school staff. The sharing of success stories provided a focus on elements of inclusion that were working well and to illustrate the progress of efforts. Research suggests that leaders' explicit expression of positivity can serve as a mechanism for others in an organization to emulate, resulting in future positive outcomes (Barsade & Gibson, 2007).

> Leah proclaimed, of her job,
>
> A lot of it is really just people skills. Just getting in there and making people like, enjoy, and get excited about what they're doing … I feel like getting that buy-in and getting people excited about that work is really the important part cause once they're excited, then they'll hold it sacred.

Similarly, Sophie reported, "We also started recognizing the people that were really good at their jobs—whether it was a teacher, an assistant, a principal." She created a Making a Difference award to celebrate school professionals. Sophie noted, "I would go out with a few of the program managers and people always felt so honored … and we would talk about why they were nominated and why they deserved the award." Sophie explained that her goal was to create a celebratory culture around professionals "who do good work and give them recognition." Miller also used recognition as a way to create a celebratory culture around people who honored the district's inclusive values. He explained that he gives everyone on his leadership team and the core people at each school a $20 gift card for Starbucks on their birthday and as a holiday gift. He said this was his way of nurturing what he called "the cops"—the people who "are standing tall" in implementing the vision of inclusive education. This notion of buy-in and recognition for aligned values emerged from the data as an administrator advocacy tactic to further social justice.

Leaders knowingly cultivated a culture of recognition in order to celebrate participants who implemented practices aligned with social justice values. Participants actively honored actors within the school system who implemented practices aligned with a social justice belief system. I argue that this was an advocacy tactics they used to promote equity-aligned practices and disrupt an institution that once marginalized diverse learners.

Charlotte described the importance of talking about success:

> There are too many success stories to discount this work. There are too many places where we can say, look, we've saved this child's life. If we had our old [special education] model, this kid would have never been given the opportunity to access this essential curriculum, to be with their age appropriate peers, and look, this child is going to graduate on time with his peers. Diploma. There are too many success stories. Too many students who we would have lost. And so you can't be an educator or administrator, and be in education for the right reasons and not see it. Once you are doing it, you share the intricacies of these stories.

As an advocacy tool to empower educators, Charlotte used comparison stories to illustrate the incremental success the district experienced. In this way, she tactfully engaged in conversation around progress. On one hand, she supported reflective openness by which she related to the former approach by openly acknowledging that previous district practices and orienting mindsets served to segregate and further marginalize students. She directly references "the old special education model," "access," and students who "would have been lost." These statements demonstrate her direct and active resistance to continuing self-contained special education classes, models, or buildings, which is directly what literature (Rapp & Arndt, 2012) has called for to counter-balance the perpetuation of school segregation. This is a strategy of critical

reflective practice aimed at social justice. Through the stories that she shared in informal conversations, in professional development meetings with school staff, and with meetings with members of the board of education and community members, a separate and segregation-based mentality dissipated, as successful stories of inclusiveness were at the forefront. Charlotte described individuals shifting their thinking, resulting in educational practices that included all students and celebrated the strides toward educational justice. She emphasized that the district's team of administrators and educators now have the mindset and know the practical strategies the need to include students with disabilities within the grade-level environment and curriculum effectively.

Other administrators also described an active and explicit strategy of sharing successes to help adults change practices. Mia commented, "We have good, strong professionals. We remind them of their successes." Leah explained, "That's really what I do, I come in and sort of cheer them on. We just need to shift their thinking a little bit in some areas." Kora explained:

I am stubborn, but respectfully encourage [teachers and administrators]. When a team examined the sixth-grade curriculum and asked, "What's it going to look like for Sabrina if she masters this?" I let everyone know: For one kid it might be reading something off a card. For another it might be touch the right action between three choices. For another kid it might be to use an eye gaze to indicate the right [response]. This is responsive and individualizing learning. When the sixth-grade team examined what IEP mastery would look like for certain kids with complex needs, I let them know, let their administrator know, and even announced it at a faculty meeting. I capitalized on that one instance.

Kora reveals that this shift in thinking sometimes takes the form of coaching to help others envision ways that students with disabilities could access the curriculum. She then used this

meeting as an exemplar that indicated progress for the team in regards to curriculum design that is accessible for a range of learners within a specific grade-level.

> Sophie's description of employing advocacy brought more nuance to my understanding: I guess the other guiding principle, and I mainly learned this from [an expert on inclusive education], was that adults can change and adults basically…will want to do a good job. Some of us are just very misguided. What I didn't have or know before so much of was adults can change. You can help adults want to change. But [the expert on inclusive education] taught me that and when I can remember to work on changing [people's] mindset, then over time you saw those changes. I view myself as a coach. You have to come alongside people. If you start criticizing them, they spend their time defending themselves versus listening to you. So we used the data to begin to have those conversations because if you have a principal who may never have looked at the data, you start there. Here's where your kids are doing well, here's the progress for your kids with disabilities. What do you think is making the difference? They care about every kid in their school. They didn't realize [the learning progress] happened very often or some of them didn't expect those kids to learn.

Data was used to have transparency conversation about educating all learners. Sophie modeled best practice in examining academic progress with an equity lens.

> When we could show them how their kids could learn then they were like, 'oh,' and they felt bad that they weren't doing more. But not targeting people, but using data or showing them the best practice, or talking about them teaching all kids. Those types of things you engage them in and then you can coach them on how that might look for a student with disabilities.

Sophie found that when principals and teachers realized that students with disabilities in their

schools could learn, they felt responsibility for supporting such learning, and that it was

important to use data and describe best practices instead of directly criticizing other educators.

Sophie also mentioned being a coach. Sophie aimed to work alongside educators to

further their understanding that good teaching in general education often parallels best practices

in special education. She worked to change mindsets and centered conversations on data. She

explained that being a coach meant persuading and educating through the use of data, rather than

demanding or targeting. A persuasive leader, as we see, has greater influence of continuous

change than one who is demanding. A persuasive leader shares successes, viable student,

building, and district data, and observation to support her stance. Many participants referenced

similar coaching techniques. Mia reminded staff of successes. Leah saw it as her role to cheer

on staff as their thinking changed. Kora shared success with multiple stakeholders and

capitalized on instances of progress. These data suggest the often slow progression and

individual coaching attention aimed at creating a positive celebratory culture and acknowledging

successes needed to support the district's ability to set the stage for inclusive and socially just

special education services.

Lucy explained that she approached situations with the idea that adults can change. At

the outset, educators and administrators in the district where she worked had varying levels of

thought and practical experience with inclusive practices. With respect to the mindset across the

district she stated,

> Those are non-negotiables. The school system has to make the commitment and that
>
> starts with your superintendent and your school board.…I don't know necessarily what
>
> prompted the change, to tell you the truth, other than some of the people in this office had

previously taught self-contained classrooms for kids with significant disabilities. Then

one of the people in this office had a child with a significant disability. It started with a

conversation on how it would be really nice if these students didn't have to stay in that

one room all day. And then from that, this is what we got.

Lucy emphasized leading a cultural mindset shift and emphasizing growth in others' mindsets,

rather than assuming that initial mindset starting points were fixed. Leah also revealed this

progression in teachers' mindsets as important, "They were in tears constantly this year. And

this year, well it's still hard, and they are teetering on the fence sometimes." But she was

optimistic:

Next year the model is going to be fantastic so when they see the issues with this year,

they start messing with it. I don't say, "Hey I told you so…" They have to see what

works and what doesn't … I say, "I can meet with you. Let's figure it out." Instead of

[telling them to] try and solve it on their own.

According to Lucy, this stance of "figuring it out" to make progress was key to her incremental

success in supporting inclusive education.

Participants indicated growth in mindset and a coaching demeanor of "let's figure it out"

is critical to their leadership. They embraced their role of helping to bring instances of injustice

and marginalization to the forefront and helping other people within the institution to recognize

this. They actively navigated incremental progress toward creating more just systems.

In summary, understanding dispositional traits provide a context for the ways leaders

actively constructed their actions and professional manner used in cultivating equitable inclusive

learning opportunities. Assertive engagement meant participants were visible and physically

present to ensure operational decisions aligned with their core values. Their leadership was an

intentional and contentious political act aimed at cultivating school systems fit for learners with a range of differences. Their style involved transparency as means to enact upfront articulation of district progress toward ensuring access, participation, and equity for all learners. This involved going against the grain; that is, participants actively disrupted system practices that further marginalized students. Going against the grain meant that participants believed that district systems and practices had the potential to include or marginalize students, and each ensured district practices sought to include all students. Participants purposefully reminded faculty and other leaders of successes, cheered them on, and coached them to shift toward an equitable, inclusive mindset. These dispositional traits were used as a means to promote social justice within the school system.

Dispositional traits are imperative to understand because it is the leaders themselves who are active agents of change within their districts. Participants are required to make decisions, shift long-standing cultural attitudes and practices, and commit to the progression of inclusive educational services in their districts. Freire posits critical consciousness implies analysis, that it involves "a kind of reading the world rigorously...of reading how society works. It is to better understand the problem of interests, the question of power....a deeper reading of reality....Common sense goes beyond common sense" (Freire, 1998, p. 9). Participants engaged in critical consciousness as they negotiated their professional manners, actions, and navigation of interpersonal relationships. This was their way of doing social justice leadership through using dispositional tactics to advocate, all through a lens of educational equity. Participants exemplify critical social justice leaders who enact a transformative stance and align their work within a social justice framework as a means to promote an egalitarian school system that disrupts

traditional service models that consequentially marginalize students, especially students with disabilities.

Advocacy for Students with Disabilities

Using a social justice framework analysis to understand participants' advocacy tactics brought the theme of the importance of direct advocacy for students with disabilities into the coding of the data. This theme represents a construct of tangible strategies that leaders employed as a means to advocate on an individual basis or student-level. In this section, I discuss participants' responses to separate placement requests, attaining resources, discovering root causes, and their use of a moral compass as constructs that contribute to their direct advocacy for students with disabilities.

Adept Responses to Separate Special Education Placement Requests

Data indicated that participants used a form of advocacy when they responded to requests to place students with disabilities outside of the general education environment. Although each administrator described a district-wide commitment to including all learners fully, analysis revealed situations in which both professionals within the educational system and guardians of particular students questioned the vision and implementation of inclusive service delivery for students with disabilities. These requests required a particular form of advocacy in critically questioning and responding to these requests.

Participants had strong feelings about placement. Lucy stated, "I absolutely cannot stand it when people make placement decisions based on the label. I do not believe in that and I find it to be highly inappropriate, and I find it to be highly illegal if you really look at the intent of the law." Sophie shared, "About our third year, we just made up a rule that every child would go to their home school." Kora spoke of the importance of home school placement:

I would say the biggest one and every year that we go through a big administrative change, I hold my breath around it because it is the biggest one to maintain: The idea of the neighborhood school. It really takes a strong leader to not say, like I said, this year, like here's an example that I was just telling you about…how suddenly I got elementary kids with behavior problems. They're bombing out everywhere. You know, when I haven't had [challenging behavior] before. And, of course, everybody starts saying, we need an elementary class for these kids, we need a class for these kids. And it takes a strong administrator to go, "No." Get better at serving these kids here. We need to figure out what went wrong here and how we can fix it. That kind of pull that I think a lot of administrators get, in terms of talking about the continual placement. They think that they need to have, you know, having the whole continuum mean that we need to have some segregated classes, center based classes, some inclusive classes. And, I think that's just bullshit.

Kora said that if it would facilitate inclusion, she would spend time with students who were having difficulty at first, one-on-one.

We'll have a kid come into us from somewhere else and we have to basically it's just me and you in here buddy in this little room for a little while. Then we gradually work our way into the general [education] class. We work our way in there. It doesn't mean that everybody is just plunked into the general education class … sometimes we have really have to ease kids in. But that's different than creating a separate class and pressing kids to it.

Leah conveyed at her core she advocates:

For the kids.… How can our team function around the kid, so it's about kid, not the adult

or the program? A separate classroom is not the option. My questions always for the

case manager is, if there is something exploding with a request, I'm like, "Well how's the

kid doing?" Because they're in the process and we need to work out the system, the

communication, the who is doing what, or support, or resources….I'm advocating for

specific kids in that sense, to bring it back to a student-centered focus in decision making.

Mia explained:

It is rooted in our system. If [any separate placement or pull-out instruction] is

recommended, we remind everyone. Remember it is our collective responsibility to teach

all students who come through the door. We still hear, "This student doesn't read on

grade level. This student is such a problem behavior. This student doesn't talk." This

student is not an exception. It is our responsibility.

Charlotte echoed this in reference to students with intellectual disabilities at the secondary level:

We're constantly looking for ways to uniquely include students with intellectual

disabilities in secondary school…. Our response is not [to] put them in self-contained

[classrooms], even when a team suggests it. You know, it is saying to teachers, "How do

you pull that into hands-on learning opportunities, discussion circles?" You know, things

of those nature that would be appropriate but not frustrate them by having them sitting in

a setting that's going to be frustrating for them. So it's really the thought, planning, and

the time that it takes.

Every participant described educational placement as a critical factor in maintaining their district

values around inclusion. They emphasized the importance of placement in students'

neighborhood or home schools and that the disability label should not drive placement.

Participants saw it as their task to remind others of their collective responsibility to teach all learners, regardless of their academic and behavioral support needs. They emphasized changing teaching practice to meet support needs in general education classroom, rather than placing students with disabilities in different classroom settings. These data demonstrate the ways in which leaders negotiated maintaining inclusive district contexts through their responses to professionals within the educational system who proposed self-contained special education buildings or classrooms for students with complex support needs.

Miller explained he launched an inquiry to determine placement within the schools within his district. District policy stated that all students received education in their neighborhood school, but he was concerned that at the building-level schools were not practicing inclusion and students with disabilities were segregated within the buildings. Miller said,

> One year we looked at just because it's your neighborhood school, "Are certain students with disabilities still in a classroom for special education?" … We found out that this was not the case. They are with typical peers.

He was pleased to find this concern unfounded; students were educated with their typical peers in the schools within his district. This inquiry around placement in school buildings is an act advocacy for students with complex needs.

In contrast to the ways in which a social justice framework grounded their district leadership in the previous chapter, my content analysis of the data indicated that in working with families, there were, at times, disagreement of the value of inclusive special education services. Miller explained that in his district, he gets many calls about separate classrooms for special education, but that none exist,

> There's not a question anymore. I mean, we would get lots of calls from families that said, "We want a self-contained classroom." Or, "I want pull-out." Or, "Can you tell us a specific school in the district that would be better for a special education classroom? I mean, honestly, all of our schools are at different bases in making this work but we don't have separate classrooms. We just say, "We don't have what you want. Go look somewhere else." I mean we just tell them. We do say that quite a bit.

Miller reveals his strict response about not having separate special education classrooms, even when requested by families. This demonstrates his advocacy for students with disabilities to adhere to maintaining inclusive contexts, rather than simply appeasing family. Lucy said that some families advocated for restrictive special education settings, thinking that a private school might "save their child," but that the administrators and special education team in her district had become proficient in discouraging this point of view.

> We're at a place now in the district where we have a parent who wants a more restrictive setting and that happens. I am amazed by how many parents see some of these alternative non-public settings as the thing that's going to *save* their child. So my administrators and my special education team are now very proficient at having those conversations…. So they don't get intimidated by advocate lawyers who are trying to tell them that we haven't done the right thing or that we must make a more restrictive setting for this child. [The district special education team] know[s] if they have the data to show that this child is making growth in the general education setting, then that's not necessary. That we have to show that the child is progressing with success. That we don't have to put them in a more restrictive setting. Not only that but we are compelled *not* to, *even* if the parent or guardian wants it. I think we've gotten to a place [in the

district] where those kinds of conversations…. Well, people are more confident and

don't get scared by the idea of being sued or taken to due process or those sorts of things.

The discourse used to explain this situation reveals Lucy's critical questioning of separate special

education requests. Words and phrases such "going to *save* their child," "intimidated," and "we

are compelled *not* to, *even* if…" coupled with the tone in this narrative, signified Lucy's sense of

ownership in taking a critical perspective in the name of advocating and placing students with

disabilities at the core of her practice. It is clear that advocacy centered on the student, making

incremental progress in general education curriculum, and meeting individual students' needs.

The education placement for a specific student was more important than avoiding a lawsuit. For

the district, the goal was for students to learn and live in an inclusive environment, with

individualized and supplemental supports and services.

Other participants echoed Lucy's sentiments and used similar advocacy tactics of having

adept responses to parent requests for self-contained special education placements. Kora said

that parents of children with an identified educational disability often find it "shocking" that their

children will be placed in a general education classroom.

When families move into the area, sometimes they're really surprised when they bring a

student [who has an identified educational disability] into a school who has never been

and we say that we're going to [place] that student in a regular classroom. Sometimes

that's really shocking to parents. They sort of can't imagine that we're going to do that.

She acknowledges that the district's stance can be "shocking," in that there is a different

precedence for placement than other districts. The language to describe the parent reactions is

symbolic of Kora's underlying social justice framework, as she is challenging the practice of

special education as a separate place that other districts use. If a student with a more restrictive

placement listed on the IEP moved into the district, the special education team worked to change this immediately. This included educating the guardians to understand the importance of full access and participation in general education settings. She also emphasized how she explains the specialized support to families:

> We don't have anything that's automatic, like if you have a learning disability then you automatically get this, or if you have autism you automatically get this. It's individualized for individual students. So a student with a severe disability, I'll go back to my original example, might have an instructional assistant available across the day for a variety of things. They might have one of their periods instead of an instructional assistant their specialized teacher is in the class with them and [he or she] is co-teaching the class. The kids have a variety of kinds of support across the day, but it would look like 100% special education service.

Kora explained that other times, skillfully responding by facilitating a supportive connection between the family and parent center is useful. Kora explained that her district had a key resources for shocked parents:

> What we would mostly do is we would hook them up right away with our parent resource center. That center is run by parents that have kids with disabilities … in our school district. So they would talk with them right away. If they had some real worries we, of course, are going to have them sitting down with the teacher. We usually sit down. We look at the student. [We ask], "What are the needs of the student?" We kind of describe the way the class is sort of run [and] what kind of supports that we could offer. We listen to the parents' concerns and discuss ways that we would address those. A lot of times I

say to parents, "Give us a couple of months. We'll sit down again and if you're not

happy with this, then we'll talk about something else."

Kora explained that with children new to the district who might find inclusion overwhelming,

her team eases them into it:

Sometimes it depends on the kid's situation, and we have to ease kids in sort of slowly.

We've had children come to us who had never been in a regular class. We have to, if

that's kind of an overwhelming experience for them, sometimes we have to start off by

making them a little private home base. Then, just bringing them in and out of the

classroom for short periods of time, gradually increasing that, as they feel more

welcomed and the other kids get to know them better.

We have never had anybody that we haven't been able to come in and we haven't been

able to make it work.

Advocacy tactics were extensive and embedded into Kora's approach. She had a strategy to

respond to parent shock, questions, and need for further information. She challenged parents'

preconceived notions, supported their understanding of best practices, and demonstrated the

ways in which needs could be met in the classroom. Even in cases of guardian discomfort with

the district's inclusive values, administrators developed tactics to ensure students with

disabilities were not placed in self-contained settings.

This section explained the ways in which participants operated from a critical

perspective in order to challenge the practice of a separate special education placement for

students with disabilities. Through creation of neighborhood placement rules, remaining

steadfast in student-centered decision-making, and facilitating parents' understanding of

inequitable practices in separate placements, participants developed a multitude of tactics to advocate for students with complex needs. Although the tactics varied, data revealed participants had adept responses to others within the educational system, as well as outside the system to ensure that students with disabilities were not placed in restrictive settings.

Obtaining Outside District Resources to Enhance Local Knowledge

Participants emphasized the need to support teacher development if their district was to provide quality and equitable education for students with disabilities. Participants referred to this as "aligned professional development," "professional reading," and "building our capacity as a professional staff." Examination of this data with a social justice lens indicates that participants' did so by determining what enhanced local knowledge teachers needed in their work toward inclusive practices. This was an act of advocacy for students with disabilities.

Data indicated the ways in which district leaders attained outside resources as a means to enhance local knowledge around specific items related to educating students with disabilities within the general education context. Leah explained that "putting [teachers] in the right places" by "building capacities through the inside—instead of having outside providers and outside placements, really bringing kids back in. Get the consulting needed. Building our capacity as a professional staff." She said that special education services happened throughout pull-out and self-contained models when she came to her job. Leah further explained that when she came into the district "services were in place and people had their mental model of what should happen, how, and why." Her aim was "to get them to think in a different way about…the students who were the hardest to include at first." One tactic she used was to bring a former student who used a wheelchair to speak to teachers about the over-reliance on paraprofessionals. He would explain how a paraprofessional anticipated his needs throughout the school day, and

that he found that after he graduate from high school there were a lot of things he did not know how to do that he needed to know. Leah explained, "He said, 'Do you know what then happened? I realized when I got out in the real world as an adult, I didn't know how to do a lot of things for myself that would have been really easy for people to teach me." Her strategy was to teach educators how to teach students "to be their best advocates because teachers, by no fault of their own, want to do what's good for kids. I get asked by teachers or parents for a paraprofessional or this or that [in their IEP], and they think it's in the best interest for the kid and sometimes you're inadvertently doing something that could be detrimental." Through the voice of a former student with a disability, Leah facilitated the process of enhancing educators' knowledge of support and critical examination of the type of support provided to students with disabilities.

Miller described supporting educators who had been used to transferring students with complex needs to "cluster sites" and how resistant such teachers were to inclusion. He said, "You know, those buildings were the ones that had the biggest concerns, like 'oh no, this kid is coming in with multiple disabilities. We've never serviced a kid like this.'" He acknowledged that this was a change in practice and that enhancing teachers' knowledge was needed. His team had a specialist who worked alongside teachers to demonstrate, problem solve, and develop strategies to include students with multiple disabilities.

Some participants described hiring outside consultants to help with specific problems. Lucy said that her district hired a professor from a research university with expertise in supporting communication for students with complex communication needs.

> We hire consultants to come in and work with individual children. We've hired [Sue]
>
> from [a Research University]. She spent two weeks down here, like a year ago. I mean

we bring in consultants when it is needed, when we don't have the skills and need to

grow our skills as a professional community. We had her consult on a handful of

students who had previously … non-verbal students who were using some form of

assisted communication, in this case, FC [Facilitated Communication]. These particular

students were using FC and/or we were exploring whether FC would be an appropriate

communication method for them … Our goal is to get everyone independently typing and

we did meet that goal on some of our students.

Noticing that a group of learners did not have a reliable form of communication, she sought to

enhance local knowledge around increasing the communicative attempts and skills for specific

students. These students were members of the general education environments, gaining access to

the academic experiences and social and communication opportunities (Foreman et al., 2004);

however, teachers and administrators noticed that their participation was limited as a result of

inadequate communicative access. This administrator took action to locate a communication

specialist to support the district in this area of need for a particular group of learners with

disabilities.

Similarly, in discussing change of knowledge around supporting students with autism,

Kora noted,

We were seeing that we really needed to upgrade with what we were doing with kids with

autism…. We needed to get more consistent in our positive behavior supports. We had

RTI [Response to Intervention] expectations there that we hadn't dealt with before. So…

we created … some autism specialists positions and got those people a whole bunch of

outside training and got them better at autism programing. We took some positions that

we called intervention specialists and we gave those people a whole bunch of training in

positive behavior supports…. It keeps evolving. The field evolves so we have to change so we create positions for three or four years to make a change that we want to see, with the idea that afterwards, we're going to be able to fade them back out as they help build our collective knowledge and that expertise is going to be there in the building.

Kora identified a gap in district knowledge around supporting students with autism. She facilitated teacher development through outside training and created intervention positions whose role was to innovate and support inclusion. It is noteworthy that these positions evolved as district needs changed and the purpose was to build "collective knowledge." This indicates critical thought around district needs and the point that certain elements could be faded. Participants also described supporting continued training. Lucy expressed, for example, "We pay for them to take courses. We have two research universities within a twenty mile radius… we collaborate closely with both those schools of education and we bring people in from both universities on a regular basis." Sophie's district had Summer Institutes for teachers to support inclusive education. Sophie also echoed the importance,

We were able to have Summer Institutes where teams could come, as a school team and learn about best practice. That's another key factor in what helped us was being able to get in professional development and using really high quality of people to deliver that professional development…most of our professional development was good teaching in inclusive classrooms. That's what we focused on because that's what teachers do every day and it applies for both teachers in general education and special education.

Participants also referenced the importance of distributing written professional resources in their advocacy. Leah emphasized that "sharing such resources" creates a sense of community between teaching teams at different schools so that the teams "brainstorm with each other.

They're not [trying] to survive … with their own little caseload…. They develop common understandings." The focus is on the development of a common understanding about supporting students. Mia attained resources and read alongside a teacher about least dangerous assumption and presuming competence. She explained that a teacher in her district felt that certain students with disabilities could not work on academic skills. Mia stated, "Moving beyond access for kids with significant disabilities" was critical because:

> This particular teacher was one of the ones who said, 'that's all well and good for you to think that all kids should work on academics, but not for my kids.' [She thought they should work on life skills.] That kind of perspective. And we worked together on a case study [e.g., problem solving, developing strategies, and having discussions] in the context of a student on her case load. Through the course of two years of this learning, I think that professional educator is surprised to realize how much her student can access and show competence in academics simply by the fact that now she, this special educator, is required to write academic goals. It's unfortunate that they had to be required to write academic goals, but they did.

Attaining outside professional reading resources was a means for Mia to shift the cultural understanding for the special education team to make least dangerous assumptions and presume competence in academic growth for all learners. Leah emphasized her explicit commitment, "We're a system that supports all kids regardless of what their label is." Additionally, she expressed the importance of enhancing teachers' critical lens to notice and ask for specific types of training needed. She clarified, have teachers think "how you're best going to support [a specific student" and then figure out, 'I need training in this type of reading instruction or autism or some other specific information." This demonstrates a gradual release of responsibility to

teachers in noticing what types of resources and training were needed in order to enhance their knowledge.

Continuing education of teachers was clearly key to implementing inclusive education. Each of the participants used a tactic of obtaining outside resources to enhance local knowledge around educating students with disabilities in the general education context. An emphasis was on building the skills of all professionals within the system without sending students to outside providers or buildings. Participants sought external consulting, as needed, encouraged teachers to take courses, and brought in knowledgeable people to educate their staff. They prompted educators to think differently about students who might have been previously in a self-contained class and were seen as the most challenging to include. When the professional community did not have the skills or knowledge around specific disabilities, behavioral needs, or modes of communication, the participants sought outside consultants who could bring that expertise to the school district, model for educators in the classrooms, and grow the collective skills of professionals. They created positions so that a group of teachers could access training and teach these new ideas to colleagues. Course costs were covered by districts with the goal of increasing local knowledge around supports that students with disabilities would need. Professional development was provided. District level leaders saw it as their responsibility to help teachers know what type of specific training would be beneficial for them.

Participants' approach involved providing new resources from outside the district to help educators develop the skills, knowledge, and tools to support students with disabilities in general education settings. This proactive advocacy tactic around supporting specific students with disabilities and specific disability groups within the school that the team of teachers might not have previously had experience in including. This was an act of advocacy on the part of the

participants in that they were bringing best practices in special education to their district in order to equip educators with new skills.

Research states special education administrators have a role to train staff in an ongoing process, but as Carter (2011) notes, this research has largely addressed training to ensure compliance with state and federal regulations, mandates, and policies. This study indicates that district-level inclusive special education administrators play a far broader role in educating instructors to meet the needs of the learners in their districts. With this determination, leaders can advocate, fund, and arrange for outside resources to support teachers to develop and enhance their skills to provide an environment that provides full access.

Moral Compass Drives Student-Level Advocacy

This section explores participants' internal sense that distinguishes between right and wrong decisions in their pursuit of the larger mission of providing inclusive educational services. Their student-level advocacy was a symbol of their moral compass, an internalized set of beliefs, around the educational treatment of students with disabilities; this drove their leadership across the district.

Participants' moral compass was evident in the ways they spoke about what they believed to be right. Lucy advocated from "the perspective that people with disabilities had to be treated like everybody else." Miller explained, "It's all about students having the same opportunity." Kora explained that the district emphasizes

> what we do is going to line up with what we believe is right for kids, what we want for our students, and what we know about educational best practice. And that's still basically the same thing. I mean, we still constantly keep trying to do that.

Mia stressed, "I think that it is crystal clear even for those that still don't quite believe it's the right thing. But they know that this is where we're going." Miller explained,

> The first thing I need to know [about teachers] is their belief system. Do they believe in this or are they just doing it for a career move? I mean you got to believe in kids. Then it would be, 'Are you willing to take on the heat? And all the BS and all the hate mail, I mean, if you're not then don't start it.'

Leah described an internalize sense of rightness:

> I think two huge things really for teachers are have faith in kids and have high expectations for them. Don't say, well Johnny has never been able to read so he just can't so I'm going to make the lesson for him. Or have him sit out in the hall with someone less qualified. I mean that just breaks my heart, it's not right.

Sophie echoed this idea of "the right thing" for students with disabilities. She said:

> For instance, the first goal is to improve the outcomes for students with disabilities. Well that's a very broad one but it's a very easy one, if you start doing the right things. Because their special education students, they were in separate buildings, they were in separate classes, they were wherever. It was a totally segregated system.

Participants described a line that distinguished educational practices that were right from what was wrong. This line reflected participants' belief systems and showed their articulation of their strongest values. Participants referred often to this inner sense of treating students with disabilities like other students and ensuring that the district and teachers within the system would do the "right things" from an ethical core. This belief systems and sense of what is right guided their leadership practice.

Participants described advocacy for students with disabilities as a moral imperative. Mia discussed a conversation with a principal who implemented a practice around a specific student that did not align with her moral compass:

So we just sat down with [the principal] and said here's the deal, this is what people are saying. It's uncomfortable for us because we don't feel right endorsing what you are doing, and yet we also don't want to look like we're [stepping over your authority].

Mia's inner sense about what is right drove her to confront the principal. Charlotte described her moral imperative to be an advocate:

It became something that morally I felt like we need to fix this problem. When you have that philosophical shift and it becomes a moral imperative, it becomes your compelling why, then you do what you need to do to understand it as well as you can so that you can be successful in accomplishing the goal. Essentially what happened was, I had to start becoming an advocate for these kids at IEP meetings, in meetings with parents, in meetings with administrators, and you can't do that until you completely understand what is involved with that. You have to understand what the laws say. You have to understand, you know, what the rights of these students are [and] what the processes need to be for these students in terms of how we make decisions about them.

Participants' moral compasses drove their advocacy and conversations with principals and IEP teams. Mia confronted situations that did not match her inner sense of what is right for students with disabilities. Charlotte felt she had a moral obligation to understand special education law, student rights, and district and state processes in order to be an effective advocate. Participants' advocacy was their deliberate tactic of living out their core values.

Upholding their moral obligation often implied advocacy because there was an intense distinguishing line about what educational practices were right for students with disabilities. Participants' moral compass allowed them to judge what is right and wrong, taking a stance on specific matters and enacting decisions that aligned with their inner feelings. It was their belief system, their internalized set of values, and core foundation that drove their advocacy.

Position Onus on Educational Team to Discover Root Causes

Participants' advocacy is also evident in how they prompt the educational team to discover root causes of issues. Participants questioned exclusionary responses to challenging student issues. They placed onus on the educational team to think critically about complex situations.

Leah described the need for an educational team to have a sense of "heightened awareness" about the level of supports and specific needs of a particular student in order to be successful. She explained that problem solving should be around "how to promote independence for kids." In explaining this, she reasoned "because for a lot of folks, something will happen and they are like, 'well let's get a paraprofessional for the kid and that will help out.'" Her focus is on developing this heightened awareness on the root causes and needs of students.

Charlotte explained a challenge across the district in transitioning students with autism to middle school:

> We really struggle with that. And, we've planned around those kids. We plan for a year on those kids. We have a great plan in place and we have several instances each year when those students present such extreme behaviors. When they make that transition that even if we were able to get them back on track, they have created issues for themselves with their peers because behaviors are so atypical of what their age appropriate peers

would see as okay. It's hard for them to get away from the mindset that gets created

about them by their peers.

In this situation, Charlotte asked questions to get at the root causes that the "extreme behaviors"

communicate. She thought about limited access to communication, hormonal changes, and over-

stimulation of environmental factors that impact students with autism.

What happens in those situations is then the teachers start to complain. [Teachers say the

educational placement is] not appropriate. Why is this student in the school? I just went

into the school to have this conversation and, this is again, an example of why leadership

has to be engaged all the time. I said to them if we give up on this student, they will be

placed in [a] non-public [school], and that is a life sentence. So, we have to try

everything we can possibly try. I don't really care if it's uncomfortable for the adults.

We're the adults, that's our job. We're going to try every single thing we possibly can

for this child. We're not going to give up because once we give up, we never get them

back. They don't come back [to public school] from non-public. So what you're saying

to this sixth grader is that you're done with public school education. You no longer have

the right because once we place this child in non-public then getting him back will be

next to impossible.

To Charlotte, banishing a child from public school was a "life sentence"—a denial of his or her

right to inclusive, high-quality education. She explained that once a student has an educational

placement outside of public school that provides services only for students in special education,

the chances of returning to public neighborhood school is slim. She advocated for the

educational team to continue problem solving around students with autism as they transitioned to

middle school because at the heart of her leadership is the belief that students with a wide range

of academic, communication, and behavioral needs have the educational right to be included within general educational environments. She did not sugar-coat challenging behaviors students presented; instead of sending these students out of the school, she demanded the team of professionals determine the underlying causes of the behaviors, make plans, and maintain the long-term goal of providing access and educational equity at the core of each decision. Students had a right to inclusion; they did not need to earn it through compliant behavior, a set of academic skills, or the means to communicate verbally. Rather, it was about basic educational rights. The onus was on the educational team to problem-solve to support and include all learners.

One district administrator explained, "I mean there are many times when I advocate for students myself who people think that maybe they need to put at a school or they need a more restrictive placement." Lucy went on to explain that she would notice that "maybe the school hasn't completed a functional behavioral assessment. They are wanting to maybe look at a more restrictive placement based on behavior but they haven't even gone through trying to figure out what the root of the behavior is." She also said, "When I personally advocate for students it's usually based on behavioral reasons." Lucy further explained that she "personally advocate[s]" for students who demonstrate challenging behavior because others in the school system often quickly shift responsibility and do not purposefully examine the root causes. In other words, she advocates for students with complex behavior needs because others simply do not.

Leah described her approach to helping educational team discover root causes and creative remedies for behaviors:

So we had all these kids who were getting in trouble. I was like, "Well what if you just built it differently, or is that too distracting for you." And [the principal] was like, "What

do you mean?" I was like, "Well some kids like to be under the table. Think about it, if you are at a conference, some people are relaxed. Some people are knitting. Some are taking notes. People do all kinds of stuff." And so we set the classroom that way. We had standing desks. We had balls. We had T-stools. He had this kid [who] had so much energy, we put an exercise bike in there…. He would just read and go on the exercise bike. And otherwise, he would be bolting out of the classroom. In this case, it wasn't this kid's behavior; he just had sensory needs.

Leah facilitated the principal's understanding of the complexity of student behavior, learning focus, and sensory needs so that classroom situations would not automatically be dubbed as behavioral issues.

Charlotte revealed that she had to advocate for inclusion with parents and guardians as well as teachers. She described a situation with a grandparent, who was the student's guardian, thus:

We have a student who is extremely visually impaired. He uses a cane and he's blind. He's unbelievably functional in a sighted world. He doesn't even really need his cane to navigate the school because he's so familiar with it now. Granddad is raising the child…. He's eight. He's precocious. He's blind, but his blindness does not stop him from being a typical eight year-old student. Intellectually he's on grade-level or above. He's very bright. He's doing well academically.

Yet the grandfather felt the district should pay for his grandson to attend a school that focuses on the training individuals who are visually impaired to do what, as Charlotte saw it, his grandson could already do:

Granddad is insisting that he wants him in [the school for students who have a multitude of disabilities]. We've been fighting this battle all year long. He brings advocates. He brings lawyers. He brings examples of why his grandson should be in this other school. We've gone and observed in the school setting where this child would be and it's most inappropriate for him. He would be with students with extreme disabilities, with intellectual disabilities, and other disabilities. He would not be accessing the essential curriculum because they do not do as much academically in that building. They're working more on developing the ability of the student to navigate in a sighted world, which this child already does.

Charlotte noted that the grandfather's advocacy had a cost:

It's been a huge deal for my special education team, the principal at the school, the teachers at the school, to constantly come back to these meetings, navigate, and advocate for this child whose own guardian isn't navigating for him in the correct manner.

Charlotte felt that many other districts would just "give in" to the grandfather even though it would be "absolutely wrong" for the student. She was even sending the district's special education director to the school with the guardian in the hopes of convincing him. She was concerned, however, that the guardian had another motive for seeking placement: The specialized school offers respite and residential placements. The administrative team therefore connected the grandfather with community respite supports. Thus they employed an advocacy tactic that transcended the educational team, drawing on problem solving resources to ensure students were supported and included within their family and local community.

Lucy's district, like Kora's, had a parent resource center. She described a recent meeting with parents whose child had been diagnosed with autism and how she connected them with that

center, which is staffed by parents of children with disabilities. As she said, "When parents are struggling, we will connect them to an outside resource. Even though that's under the umbrella of our special education department, we try to stay out of that and staff that with parents so they can talk to each other parent to parent."

In their advocacy for students with disabilities, four tactics emerged in interviews: position onus on the educational team to understand the root causes of complex problems, developing adept responses to self-contained special education placement requests, obtaining external resources to enhance local knowledge, and having a moral compass that drove student-level advocacy. In summary, advocacy for students with disabilities meant fully supporting a particular student as districts moved toward increased levels of special education services in inclusive environments in the least restrictive manner. The student-level advocacy participants enacted necessitates an unbreakable and unshaken moral compass resulting in advocacy around educating students in inclusive settings.

Capacity-Building

Patterns of capacity building were evident as participants sought to enhance understanding of inclusive school systems among other administrators, the Board of Education, teachers, support staff, and community members. Capacity building means developing and furthering the awareness and level of understanding of actors in the educational system. This construct incudes the skills the professionals within the system have around including students with complex needs.

As Leah emphasized,

When I build capacity, I look at the system as a whole. It's not just training special

educators, but its training classroom teachers too. How do they provide good instruction

for kids even if [the teachers] are working on something totally different? It doesn't mean they can't be put in the classroom…. it's all about developing the heightened awareness piece to get people to use their thinking. It's the parents, teachers, administrators, everyone…. How do we best support them? They are coming in with variety of thoughts, and not blaming them or making excuses, but we have high expectations for kids…. I call it heightened awareness across the system.

This heightened awareness, or what is referred to as capacity building, is the third theme that emerged within this web of complex advocacy tactics revealed by participants.

Developing a Sense of Responsibility for All Currently Marginalized Learners

Building capacity meant strengthening the awareness, instinct, and skills for individuals in the school system centered on serving all students. Embedded within the interviews, participants relayed their intentions and actions that develop others' awareness regarding serving all kids, regardless of circumstance, label, or background. Leah shared a phrase that she often used. She said, "We're a system that supports all kids regardless of what their label is." Kora explained that in talking with teachers she emphasizes, "It's important for kids to be part of their community and to have the same opportunities that other people in their community have. It's what we do in this district." Lucy stated, "The policy is nobody will be segregated based on their disability." Mia echoes these sentiments:

We spend a lot of time reminding our many communities—so that's the full faculty, but it's also the board members, that when we talk about all students, this is what we mean. Also we have a strong emphasis and focus on developing understanding through professional development…. I think there's lots of little ways, faculty meetings, the language we use, modeling.

Miller said that professional development choices help faculty understand their responsibility to all the children in every classroom. He stated, "We developed modules to communicate that we all serve all kids. One was special education law, disability awareness training, one was inclusive education practices, you know whatever definitions were important, what does it look like, one was accommodations and modifications." Sophie explained her approach to this responsibility:

> We use data. We have wonderful data gathering systems in the district so we could sit down with principals and we could look at their data for English learners, general education students, students with special education services, and guide them based on what that [reading, writing, math, and other academic] data says. The schools that were data driven, you can see how their special education services were moving forward academically.

Participants reminded others of the district's responsibility for serving all learners. This also meant that through professional development, their language, modules, and data systems, conversations and decisions included awareness around including marginalized learners.

Leah has had experience transforming two districts to provide increased inclusive services. Her description of her initial approach makes it clear that building the capacity, or internal understanding, about what inclusive education entails and insisting that it goes beyond thinking only about students who qualify for special education services is fundamental to her approach. The success of the district's ability to implement, deliver, and sustain inclusive educational services is about the individuals in the district wholeheartedly believing that all students can learn and can be included within the general education environment. In order to build capacity, Leah described shifting the culture in regards to providing supportive services to

students with disabilities. She viewed her obligation as helping teachers understand that they can provide services to all students, regardless of labels indicating educational level, ability, family, or economic conditions. As she said:

> It's just interesting they are coming in and they have kids that are homeless and who are, experiencing trauma and have some pretty chaotic lives. [There are students] that don't qualify for special education. How and what I say is … in this district, we support all kids. I want everybody to have this base understanding and mental model so that you're not saying like, oh special education, I'll take care of that or their family is chaotic. I push them to just think differently about that kid that is coming into your school … into your classroom. And, how you're best going to support them. Then figure out, okay so I need training in this type of reading instruction or autism or something else but to have this heightened awareness that kids come in with all kinds of different backgrounds and needs. To really sort of have that mental model shift is to what I do a lot in the first year or so while I am new in the system.

Leah described an approach to capacity building that involves flipping thinking. The question is not, whether the teacher will allow the student into a certain general education classroom or whether they are responsible for the education of a specific learner. Rather, it is: How can we best support this student to experience success in inclusive education? This demonstrates a process of thinking that models to others that the purpose is not to make a determination to include or exclude. All faculty members have the responsibility to educate all learners.

 Miller chuckled when he said that his blanket response in meetings was, "Yes, that kid too." Then he explained how he modeled thinking about ensuring each student's success within the building, starting with conversations about equipment and curriculum. He said,

> We had to get changing tables, but I mean the bathrooms were accessible already.… These kids are coming to our schools, we needed these things. The equipment needed in every school building made it real. The other thing we did is we literally, because there are friends coming in, we literally ordered, I don't know how much equipment, but every building had something for students, some for vision, we had new things for sensory needs. We added assistive tech, like iPads.…We had a checklist for each campus that we aligned for them so they were ready for any type of disability.

Having equipment for a range of learners at every school building that ensured they could participate fully concretely communicates to the faculty in Miller's district this idea of responsibility for all learners. Juxtaposed with one school building having equipment and technology to serve students with complex needs, this meant building-level leaders and faculty across the district viewed it as their collective responsibility to educate all learners. Miller described how inclusion pervades his district thus:

> We have to look at every curriculum from [pre-kindergarten] to high school. We work with science specialists. We work with social studies. We work with math. I mean for high schools, we literally purchased online computerized supplements. For all [kindergarten through eighth-grade], we purchased all of the manipulatives. We trained people in specialized reading and math supplemental programs. We purchased and trained people in the Read 180, System 44. We wanted standardized supplements that were consistent across the district, so that one building wasn't over here doing this because what we have found is teachers are pulling something off the shelf to work with any kid. And we did not—we wanted to truly have the diagnostic or assessment to set every single kid up for success. When we started this, we were over-identifying kids.

We probably had 16% of our population identified as special education. Now that teachers have better understanding of reading and math interventions, they have the [resources] to teach them. Now it's like 8.1%—we cut it in half.

Training and curriculum in specialized programs provided faculty with the skills necessary to educate a range of learners. Another participant described that creating awareness around academic expectations communicated the idea that all learners needed to make progress within academic standards. Mia described developing capacity around the concept of least dangerous assumption and setting the expectation for academic goals for all learners. Leah described what happens when teachers think that the curriculum does not apply to a specific student with complex needs. She explained that she employs what she called "the strength-based model."

Don't think that [certain students] can't do it…. Try to think about it in a different way. Go from the strength-based model. So a lot of times, teachers will say, "Well, he can't read." So what? So he can read to someone else. Someone else can read for him. Or, [use] books on tape, now it is mp3s. It's like oh my God, can you say audiobooks? And it's just … so think about it in a different way. So she doesn't read well. Can she listen to an audio? Or write. Like, can they produce something else in a different way? There has to be an expectation for all learners.

Leah emphasized that it is possible to have academic goals and expectations and that this communicates that all teachers are responsible for teaching all students.

Leah developed a heightened awareness that involves analyzing students' needs in ways that allow them to identify and develop individualized educational supports. Rather than beginning with the question, "which educational placements might meet the student's needs," she overtly assumes that all students will have access to general education. Professionals,

including administrators and educators, should request training support needed to meet each student's unique needs. Thus Leah seeks to create a culture that allows educators, who are professionals, to ask for help and identify areas needed for growth in learning to educate all learners. She also challenges embedded district assumptions, as described:

> I've noticed, you come into a system and there are all these silos. Well, that kid is special education. That kid is ELL [an English Language Learner]. That kid is…. I say, it's our job to educate all kids. So let's talk about what skills you have. What are you uncomfortable doing? How can I support you in figuring out how to do that? What way do you work best? Do you want to work as a team with your team? Do you like to go read stuff and come back and talk about it?

Her rejection of the traditional silos that are prevalent within the field of education exemplifies her approach to building the internal mindset she seeks among actors within the district. Leah references the "silos" within the system, which others have noted divide the field of education into general education and special education (Frick et al., 2013). To mediate the idea that these silos call for a different set of expertise and skills, Leah emphasizes that it is the school's "job to educate all kids," establishing a culture of learning aimed to build level of understanding in relation to educational skills and practices.

The capacity building approach aims to shift the culture to develop awareness that all educational professionals are equally responsible for *all* students, most notably students who were underserved or left to the margins in the educational system. This advocacy tactic embodies the core of social justice leadership (Pazey & Cole, 2012) with its attention to equity. As Theoharis (2007) explains, they are making "historically and currently marginalizing conditions in the United Sates central to their advocacy, leadership, practice, and vision" –in this

case disabilities (p. 223). At the core of this mindset is the idea that inclusive education advocacy is itself an act of social justice aimed at eliminating marginalizing educational practices and replacing them with an enhanced level of understanding and responsibility to cultivate a sense of belonging for all learners. In this way, creating a district-wide system of inclusive education is, Sapon-Shevin (2003) argues, a model of social justice.

Dialogue Around Core Values and Beliefs

Participants indicated that open dialogue across faculty in the district around core values and beliefs was imperative. Through dialogue they brought the core values and beliefs to a conscious awareness level. Leah described this dialogue as being an important avenue to the capacity building process. She said, "When I come in to talk about the district services, they are in place and people have their mental model of what should happen, how, and why." She explained that she does "this baseline training so that they are talking about what they think before." Then she leads further conversation and the district values. Other participants also described this internal understanding as the critical starting point for inclusion. Miller explained:

> Well when we first started this, I will have to tell you, the first year I arrived, the first summer because I've got a leadership team like managers, like assistants. The first summer I had to just … well, one, I had to get them to know what their belief system was. Do you believe in all kids? [Do you] believe they can be with general education [students]? That was the first thing. I mean you really have to talk about your values, core values, and your beliefs.

Miller discussed the importance of believing in all students and that all students had the right to be included.

Then once we had that, we just went through training about system change. Forget

disability because they're going to pick us off one by one [meaning they will resist]….

We're retraining. 20% of the population is ready to go [forward with including all

students]. You got the 60% in the middle that can go either way. Then, 20% are going to

put their heels in, come dragging, and screaming. And where are we going to put our

energy? And they will pick us off. This is why systems never change because they pick

them off one by one. If it's not worth it, it's easier just to do what you've always done.

Miller describes having professionals in the school articulate their own belief systems. From

there, he begins influencing their internal understanding around students and provides training

about changing the educational system. Professional development on system change and

predictable consequences as a culture are examined. Miller fully acknowledges that 20% of the

teachers in the district will not hold favorable attitudes around moving toward inclusion.

Entrenched educational practices are scrutinized and critical actions toward equity are taken in

efforts to build capacity across district stakeholders.

Other participants described their sense of agency in transforming the thinking of other

administrators in the district. Their aim is to influence progressive thinking toward inclusive

educational practices. Mia said that study and learning with other administrators had been

transformative. She said,

I think the catalyst quite honestly is spending [time] studying and learning together.

[Pushing] people's perspectives, especially other administrators. That worked, that was

enough for people. There were a lot of people who were like wow, "I'm doing this

reading, and this pushed me. I've never thought about it this way. I'm going to go back

and do it differently."

Kora said that a new principal was coming from another county and came with an assumption that "certain populations need to be isolated."

> New people [arrive] from other systems. I have a new principal. One of my high school [principals] is coming from Bean County who has a center school, whose staff still believes that certain populations need to be isolated. I have to educate her. I have to make sure that she comes along in her thinking philosophically. First she's doing it because if you are working in this district that's the way we operate, but eventually I want her to get to a place where she sees why it's correct.

Her goal was first to have the principal understand how the district does things, but second to get her to understand that it was best for students. As new administrators enter the district, Kora intentionally takes time to understand their background, their leadership style, areas of passion, and general viewpoints around educating students with disabilities. This tactic is a strategy to advocate for individuals with disabilities in her district. Using this sense of agency to transform others' understanding around best practices for managing, configuring, and delivering special education services, in a similar fashion that other administrators in this study identified, she worked alongside new professionals to support their thinking in relation to inclusive special education. Mia said that the few principals who had not fully assimilated the value of inclusive education were "the most glaring obstacle" to success. She explained,

> I think it still comes back to the belief system. I sort of mentioned that we still have a principal or two who really can't quite wrap their heads around why certain kids would be expected to be in the classroom. That's probably the most glaring obstacle.

Mia said that building the capacity of administrators is the "tricky part." She continued:

If the thinking doesn't change then nothing that I am trying to do will ever come out. Yet, at the same time, it isn't enough for me to do it here just at my administrative level…the central office administrative level, I mean. So where that happens most is with the leaders at the building. And by leaders, I mean principals and special education directors. I actually think in many cases the principals are more influential in this area because people, good, bad, or indifferent, still perceive them, and rightfully so, as the leaders of their building. When you hear the leader of your building modeling what we want for kids and modeling collective responsibility, that's going to be pretty powerful. And the flip side of that is you also have the experience of principals putting language out or proposing practices that completely run contrary to where we are going and that's difficult. But again, some of our focal group is dealing with administrators and then their focal group is their teachers in the buildings.

Mia had direct contact with principals in order to shift their mindset and approach. Yet, she recognized that teachers and school staff focus on the importance of principals delivering the message and modeling good practices. She also spoke about the balance between this and principals whose message runs contrary to the district-level vision, and her role in working with this group.

Participants reveal two tactics that are imperative in their advocacy. The first is that they encourage dialogue among faculty members around their personal values and belief system. This allows for common understandings during transitions toward an inclusive approach in the district. The second is that district-level administrators stressed the importance of spending time with building-level administrators learning together and encouraging gradual shifts of thinking about how to best educate students with disabilities. This is critical, as principals have an

influential role as building leaders. Participants' dialogue around core values and beliefs with educators and building-level leaders was a way to build their understanding, awareness, and skills around including students with disabilities.

In summary, capacity-building was an intentional advocacy tactic participants employed to enhance the awareness and level of understanding of other actors in their educational system. Literature suggests that special education administrators must conduct ongoing training of staff in order to respond to state and federal compliance mandates, regulations, forms, and politics (Carter, 2011). Participants went beyond training staff regarding mandates to developing awareness and building the intellectual, philosophical, legal, and practical capacity across stakeholders. There were areas that were common across the participants: developing a sense of responsibility for all currently marginalized learners, dialogue around core values and beliefs, and cultivating a larger community that values inclusion. This marks a difference between their scope of their leadership activities and what other research has identified. In fact, it exemplifies what Sailor and McCart (2014) refer to as "one of school administration and capacity-building grounded in research" (p. 58) that is needed in order to create system change improvement to further inclusive education.

Much research has shown that capacity-building focused on instructional improvement can advance learning in schools. This study extends this, revealing that capacity-building needs to not only support instructional improvement of teachers, but also there needs to be a focus on mindset shift across school and community stakeholders, if they are to support inclusive education. This finding is significant, as it echoes other researchers who assert "an extensive cultural shift must occur in traditionally organized schools to actualize equity-based schoolwide inclusive education" (Sailor, 2015, p. 97). Developing a new habit of mind in which individuals

operate from is essential in creating inclusive schools. In fact, DiGennaro, Pace, Zolla, and

Aiello (2014) argue that "successful creation of inclusive environments requires critical

reflection on the beliefs and values underpinning the attitudes towards the practical

implementation and long-term sustainability on inclusive education" (55).

<div align="center">**Advocacy Through Actions**</div>

Participants described the connection between district philosophical culture and decision-

making and building practices. They would take formal actions when they saw discrepancy

between these. This complex advocacy tactic through actions is the fourth theme this chapter

identified. There were three common areas across the participants: reactive measures in response

to exclusionary environments, proactive strategies to ensure alignment, and nurturing and

sustaining an inclusive culture.

Reactive Measures in Response to Exclusionary Practices

Participants spoke about the importance of administrators being on same page and their

response to failures in this regard. According to Mia,

> The flip side [of the transition process] is that you also have the experience of principals
>
> putting language out or implementing practices that completely run contrary to where we
>
> are going and that's difficult. Our focal group is dealing with administrators. Letting
>
> them know that can't happen…. It isn't just me that needs to send that message, it's the
>
> central office leadership team.

Mia's advocacy involves rallying colleagues to back up the message of inclusion. Similarly,

Miller explained, "I'll probably never stop challenging every system and always questioning

that. My colleagues know they have to respond and explain to me any program that's set up."

Participants had serious conversations with building-level leaders if their language or practices created exclusionary experiences for students.

Beyond conversation, participants described disciplinary actions in the case of principals that would occur. Charlotte, for example, described writing building-level administrators up if they did not enact the district-level mission of LRE placements for students with disabilities. In this way, principals must adhere to a similar educational orientation. Thus she communicated the importance of inclusion. A reactive measure of writing people up communicated the importance of stakeholders enacting inclusion. Complementary to her moral directives is that the district is heavily committed to inclusive educational practices, as indicated by taking action when exclusionary practices are initiated or implemented. She provided an illustrative example:

> I found out a situation last year where one of my principals had created a basically seclusion environment. That's not okay. You are going to have disciplinary action occur, if I find out you're doing it. And, I will find out, because there are more people that buy in, than don't buy in. They get horrified when they see these situations. My entire Special Education department, who are regularly in buildings, they all in their guts, believe in inclusion. When they are out and they are at IEP meetings, they see what's happening in schools. They are observing instruction in classrooms; they will come back to me immediately if they find a situation that does not align with what we are trying to accomplish. Sometimes it's disciplinary action. Sometimes it's working with personnel [and human resources] because they don't belong here because philosophically, they don't believe in all children.

Charlotte took the principal's failure to enact inclusion very seriously and was withering in her description. But she also attributed the principal's failure to live up to district standards to his

history of working in a school system that allowed buildings to operate in ways that were not congruent to district-level mandates. Inclusion, she said, was not negotiable in her district.

Leah described a similarly hardline approach, saying that it was challenging, but she sometimes has to terminate employment of a principal who did not meet standards. She noted that it was vital to have everyone working in her school district on board with inclusion, that she made it clear that commitment to inclusion is a condition of employment in the district where she works. She explained:

Sometimes letting people go … that's that hard part about school districts. I don't mean this, as like, to be taken lightly, but some … but it's really being clear with that mission, vision, and that it's a lot of work. Some people who have been in the field 20 years or they're new and they believe in it or they don't want to do that work, the work it takes … like really have a conversation with them. Say, "Hey, here's what we're going to do over the next three years. You have to be on board. There's no bailing. You know, and maybe this isn't the district for you. Maybe this isn't the exact job for you." To really be clear about that because if you end up still having two people that aren't attending the meeting, they're dragging the team down. They're nonexistent and then they don't, they're not participating. It's like you have to have a building administrator—I do that as well. But it depends on, so I'm clear with the principals too. "Are you good at addressing that? Or, do you want to be like the day-to-day personal support?" And then I'll come in and be sort of the bad guy. Say, "Hey, we agreed on this. Get onboard." So you have to have the accountability piece to that. You can't let them sort of slack off. If they don't change, I have to report it. That's one of the hardest piece.

Leah describes the district mission to administrators in very clear terms and holds them accountable, taking formal disciplinary action or termination as necessary. Sometimes it means suggesting a different district, if that person is not willing to do the work. Based on such conversations, she felt she could hold others accountable. Disciplinary action involves making formal notation of the incident and briefing the Board of Education with the details of the matter. Drastic measures have included firing individuals so that their employment with the district is terminated. Participants understood such measures as very serious—and as signals of how seriously they took their role. This strategy allowed them to remain steadfast in their advocacy of educating students with disabilities in general education environments.

Some participants spoke about reactive measures they had been required to take in response to teachers not spending direct instructional time with students with more complex needs. Kora explained that she identified a problem in her district: special education teachers were ignoring students who had full-time instructional assistant support. She explains, "The other thing that we found is if you look at our kids that had full-time instructional assistance support, we're spending way too much time with just that instructional assistant and not enough teacher time. We gave principals one chance to fix it." Thus students were present in the classroom, but not fully included. She further discussed, "As teachers got more testing pressure, they were less likely invested in really learning about and getting to know the kids with more severe disabilities." The central office administrative team "made a little decree" to the building leadership. She said "it should have been this way anyways, it was said that every student with a disability is on a special education teacher's caseload. We said that if a student is on your caseload, you have to have direct instructional time with that student every week. You can't have anybody on your caseload that you're not seeing for instruction. And we made principals

follow-up on this and reported back to the superintendent." This added layer of reporting to the superintendent was viewed as a formal action by teachers and facilitated a shift in practice.

Mia identified the same problem. She discussed measures to reduce this issue: "After analysis of one school, we made the decision to reduce about twelve paraprofessionals and bring on board four additional professional specialist educators. Kids were spending all their time with aides. We told principals that this couldn't happen and made the change." Her team made a staffing change, reducing the paraprofessionals and hiring additional educators. In these examples, participants described human resource decisions they made in order to increase the amount of direct instruction with a certified special education teacher students with disabilities would have.

Participants indicated that they initiated reactive measures when implementation of practices resulted in exclusion for students with disabilities. Matters came to the forefront through dialogue with others in the district. They took actions such as writing up administrators and reporting to the superintendents about failures to implement the district mission. These measures suggest the depth of commitment of participants and demonstrates ways in which they were acting in name of advocacy for students with disabilities.

Proactive Strategies to Ensure Alignment

Participants revealed the importance of thinking ahead in order to ensure alignment to district values. For example, making human resource decisions was critical. Mia explained that this came into play both in hiring or changing people's roles. She said, "Even when we make staffing decisions, whether it's hiring or shifting people into new roles within the district, we make them in alignment." Leah emphasized, "If people don't love what they do, you can put all the [professional development] and your effort into it and it's not going to fly. So I really try to

find people who are really passionate about learning and making it work for kids."

Lucy explained that she and her team sought information about any candidate's philosophical framework and how they put it into practice. Lucy further articulated the rationale for the interview process with a principal:

It's actually one of the questions on the interview screen. It is, "What is your philosophy toward inclusion?" And another question is, "What do you know? Give us an example of how you implemented or observed an inclusive practice. What does that look like in practice?" So, that's sort of our interview process. Not only do they have to tell us what they think about it, they have to tell us what they see because your interpretation of inclusion may be very different than mine. Plus with the follow-up questions, you know what their vision is.

She said that it was common in her area for schools to be inclusive, although most nearby schools did not do it to the same degree as the schools in her district.

A lot of the neighboring schools … a lot of places are now becoming more inclusive, so it's not just this unique little thing that we do. We went full throttle, most places don't, but most places do it to some degree. It's not a special word that's only used by a certain number of people. It's really part of the vernacular of education now. The word that everybody uses. So, principals all had some exposure to some interpretation of what inclusive programming looks like. That's why we ask them to explain what their philosophical framework is but also what would it look like for them.

Everybody's had a little bit of experience. Most people have experience with mainstreaming and they think it is inclusion. But we are very clear about what we do

here. We are very clear about it. We're very clear about what we want. We know that

very few people are going to come to us from a background of working where kids are

one hundred percent included regardless of disability, but we're willing to work with

them, train them, as long as their philosophical framework says, "look I don't think

people should be segregated based on disability." I think everybody should have access

to a free and appropriate public education. We can work with them.

Lucy used the interview process as a way of identifying good candidates for the district without

expecting them to be fully knowledgeable about inclusion at the level that it occurred in her

district. Charlotte also described the interview process as way to ensure there is a good fit with

district goals for both incoming teachers and principals:

We talk about students with disabilities and what [candidates'] philosophy is about how

those students should receive services and the fact that we are an inclusive school system.

We are right up front in our interview process about that with teachers and administrators

because we don't want teachers or administrators that don't understand us. That we are

inclusive and that we're going to serve students in their neighborhood schools with their

age-appropriate peers in the least restrictive setting we can possibly provide for that child.

Charlotte explained that in her district, they refer to educational placements in terms of level of

restrictiveness. LRE A is an inclusive general education classroom with appropriate

supplementary aids and services. LRE B means the student is removed from general education

for some academic subjects or related services. LRE C means that the student is temporarily in a

more restrictive placement within their home school, but the district is providing the necessary

supports and services to move that student to a more inclusive setting.

We are always working towards LRE A so even if a child is in LRE C we are constantly

talking about what do we need to do to move them to LRE B? What do we need to do to

move them to LRE A? It's never off the table. It's always on the table. It's always in

the conversation.

She concluded with clarifying that her position, "Especially now, folks know that if you don't

agree with inclusive practices, that LRE A placement, that we are not the district for you. Now

did we get it right one hundred percent of the time? No. Do we have areas that we still need to

develop? Yes."

The interview process serves as a formal measure to gauge the fit between potential hires

and the existing vision and educational practices the district enacts. Research suggests, as Lucy

pointed out, the vernacular surrounding the practice of inclusive education is widely used with

variation in interpretation and enactment (Artiles, Harris-Murri, & Rostenberg, 2006a; Waitoller

& Artiles, 2013). This can complicate hiring as it allows job candidates to use inclusive

language without necessarily having the commitment it requires. Participants undertook

proactive advocacy tactics to ensure they hired people who could operate from an educational

equity and access perspective that understands that all students can learn in age-appropriate

general education environments.

Disconnect between the districts' philosophical core and district decision-making with

building-level practices caused participants to take formal actions. Through reactive measures in

response to exclusionary environments (e.g., making notations, reporting and writing up,

terminating employment) and proactive strategies to ensure alignment (e.g., consistent

conversations, placing the construct of educational equity at the core of interview screening

processes, nurturing a sustainable inclusive culture), administrators described formal measures they took to protect the educational equity of students with disabilities.

In this chapter I described findings that reveal a host of advocacy tactics that district-level administrators used in their leadership of implementing inclusive educational practices. The four strategies identified above were enactment of explicit dispositional traits, advocacy for individual students with disabilities, capacity building, and formal actions. Analysis of the data indicate that participants are intentional in the ways that they lead their districts so that all students can be academically involved and successful in the general education environment. Attention to cultivating inclusive education district systems that align to their core inclusive values requires the continual use of these complex advocacy tactics. In the next chapter, I discuss the implications of this advocacy on district policy and procedures.

CHAPTER 6: DISTRICT PRACTICES LEADERS' CONSTRUCT TO SUSTAIN

INCLUSIVE EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES

This chapter centers on data that reveals practices and procedures district-level special education leaders construct to improve and sustain inclusive educational practices as they work toward fostering social justice through education (Grogan, 2002; Marshall & Ward, 2004; Theoharis, 2009b). The findings will illuminate key issues related to the final research question of this project: What actions and decisions have district-level special education leaders adopted in order to continue to fulfill their district's enactment of inclusive education? These leaders provide educational equity and access for diverse learners through linking social justice to the critical issue of how to provide services for students with disabilities. Themes that emerge from the data suggest that district-level special education leaders worked toward school improvement through: 1) an emphasis on the growth process; 2) connectedness with building leadership; and, 3) compliance with legal regulations (see Figure 6.1). Based on this data, this chapter concludes with a discussion of the district practices and procedures that leaders initiate, employ, and refine as they work toward equity and social justice by providing educational access for students with disabilities through inclusive special education services.

Emphasis on the District Growth Process toward Inclusion

Participants emphasized that they seek to cultivate inclusive efforts through championing an idea of growth, thereby improving inclusive services, structures, and supports. They all knew that the districts where they worked were among the most inclusive districts in the nation, but all were aware of areas of possible improvement. They viewed inclusion as a process of providing access to students with disabilities that they could continually improve.

Figure 6.1. District Practices and Procedures
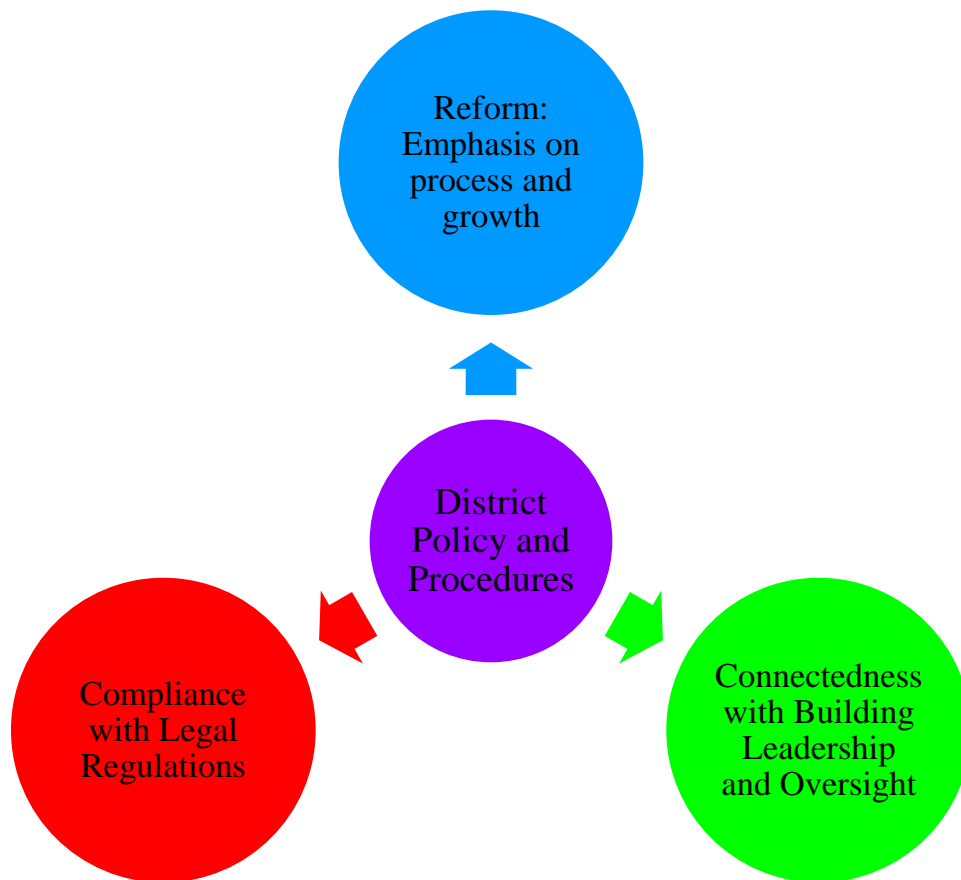
Figure 6.1. Visual representation of themes that emerged around the following research

question: What actions and decisions have special education leaders made in order to remain

committed to their district's enactment of inclusive education?

Mia, for example, said that the district that employs her:

> Sees itself as a growth organization, meaning that everyone commands that we continue
> to learn and evolve our thinking. That, I think, helps our system in being more receptive
> when we ask them to change. That doesn't mean that everybody just changes….change
> is hard, change is difficult for people, and not everyone changes evenly. But there is kind
> of this understanding that [in this district], you want to learn and you're going to shift
> thinking about certain practices a little bit.

As a result of the district positioning itself as an organization that grows and evolves, it has a
level of receptivity and openness around shifting thinking and improving practices. Mia also
stated:

> [The district] worked over the past number of years to develop a set of guiding principles
> and a pedagogy that we have about what makes for good inclusion and intervention.
> And, those guiding principles and the core mission of our work, that combination … they
> are the foundation that we use when we make improvements.

Mia positions the district as an organization that uses the guiding principles to evolve and grow.
These guided principles emphasize inclusion, access, and academic progress for all students.

Part of the ongoing process is data collection. The district collects data for all learners,
using a lens of inquiry to focus on the academic progress of students with disabilities. Miller
explained that the district engages in data projects every year as a systematic process for growth.
In explaining the process, Miller explained,

> I mean it is training and really thinking differently than just special education. So a lot, a
> lot of training…. We do a data project every year…. I mean, we have a long way to go.
> I can't tell you we are there. I mean we have a long ways to go. But then we go back

into the schools and get more data. That is what we focus our professional development

on. We have to do that to grow. We need to give teachers a toolbox.

This identifies the procedure and the course of action that the district takes that centers on using

data and training to initiate growth. Growth occurs because leaders identify areas of need and

support those with professional development in order to give teachers the needed training. Leah

explained, "I look at the system…. Analyze the system and then reorganize based on best

practice, as far as configure it." Leah explained that the data the district gathers thus:

We get [building-level administrators, teachers, and related service providers] together

and say, "What do you like and not like about the system? What works? What does not

work? What do we need to fix? What needs more support? What policy needs to be

revamped? What needs to happen?"

She described this as an annual event that she used to refine the system every year. It provides

an official forum to examine systemic procedures and practices in need of realignment. Miller

also explained that the process of training improved district cohesion:

You have to do more training about systems approach and changing a system than just

the whole disability kind of training…. For principals, we developed a toolkit [of

resources that answers] very specific questions.

Miller saw this training about system change as it relates to districts as part of the process. In his

view, the training involved understanding components of system change and supporting principal

leadership.

Participants revealed an emphasis on district inclusive practices being a systematic

process of examination. Process came into play in that participants felt that educators in the

district were still progressively assimilating inclusive practices. Mia stated, "I'll probably repeat

this line over and over again, but we're still working." Miller emphasized, "We're not there yet, [referring to being fully inclusive]. We're still learning." Lucy expressed, "The more you do this, the more you learn, and the better the district becomes." At meetings and during informal conversations, they undertook intentional inquiry around practices and training to shift thinking. This resulted in improvement and growth of practices that aligned with districts' mission.

Data related to this broader emphasis on the district process of improving procedures revealed the level of intentional leadership. Participants also described specific practices they had designed to change educational placements for students with disabilities. The districts were bussing many students away from their home schools, and participants had put in place practices to end this bussing, to include students with complex needs. Sophie explained such decisions:

> We were transporting a lot of kids away from their home school. And we started
>
> discussing this for a lot of reasons…. After about the third year, we just made up a rule, a
>
> new district policy. Every child would go to their home school. So, that allowed us, for
>
> instance, if the school was not fitting for a kid with a significant disability and they
>
> weren't used to have that kind of a child … that gave us great excuse to be on campus,
>
> you know, coaching them with what to do and all of that. And that really … once people
>
> lose the fear of, oh my, what do I do with a kid that can't talk? And we help them get
>
> over that fear. The policy made them get over that fear. Then, they were much more
>
> open to having other children like that on their campus.

In this case, the policy that all students would attend their home school created coaching and training opportunities to support stakeholders to get over their fears of educating specific students. Charlotte also described this process of supporting students who were not in their home schools:

I came into this [role] the first year of actual reform process … and what happened was we were a very dysfunctional school system when it comes to being inclusive. We were about as opposite of inclusive as you could have been. We had big center programs [that were separate spaces for educating students with disabilities]. Two for elementary. Two for middle and two high school…. We were challenged by the State because our LRE numbers were terrible…. So, we partnered with [a Coalition for Inclusive Education]…. We used their process for returning students from the center schools to their neighborhood school…. When you operate under the philosophy that students with disabilities have to get their instruction separately and that's somehow special, then you're moving to this inclusive model as educators in each building educate all of our students that live in our neighborhood, that's a complete shift in tradition. It took a tremendous amount of training, tons of conversations; parents were fearful, teachers are fearful, administrators are fearful. It was a lot of really hard work…. It completely transformed the way that we operate. I think it is part the reason that it's a cultural thing because we committed to doing it properly, and we committed to making certain that this became institutionalized.

Parents, teachers, and administrators all feared shifting the way the district educated students with disabilities who previously attended center site locations. The process of bringing students back to their neighborhood building required a shift in thinking and change of long-held district procedures. Participants made decisions with the intention of including all students. They emphasized the process of shifting and growing so that inclusive practices became district practice.

Data also facilitates growth initiatives. Leah explained, "[administrators] did a needs assessment by building and by district. I facilitated all of that for the first few days. And then we come together. What's the work that we want to do?" Miller referred to the specific data collection that lead to a change of district practice and provided examples of the data project the district used on a yearly basis. Sophie explained, "The annual data showed that the special education population had not shown academic progress in five years," and this spurred significant action. The district leadership team where Leah, Miller, and Sophie worked obtained support to improve the system. Participants created a cyclical procedure that involved collecting data and using the results to grow a specific area of need related to their inclusive efforts.

Miller described the cyclical nature of data-driven improvements, saying he created a rubric to guide analysis and conversations with building-level leaders of each school by district administration. He reflected,

We found that, yes, the students were in the general education and with typical peers, but what data we pulled from that is our teachers are pretty good at accommodating. We weren't doing very well with true modifications, truly getting access to the curriculum.

Miller spoke about gathering data on a range of subject areas and learning that across the district students needed further help with reading. Miller illustrated his analysis:

So that was looking at that data on such a population…. How [does the district] improve on that? How do we push our professional development forward? Last year we specifically looked at data regarding reading. Are all our kids across the board reading? Why are we not meeting [Adequate Yearly Progress standards], particularly for students with disabilities and most of those [students] have very mild disabilities?

Collecting data for all learners facilitated the district's improvement of education for students with disabilities. The lens of inquiry was around the academic progress of students with disabilities. Miller identified a key finding that made a significant difference in the year prior. Miller continued:

> Now I'm looking at, "What are those reading strategies [to support reading success]?" We found when we followed our data and students with disabilities were in general education, and in particular, [classrooms that utilized] co-teaching, their scores were much better. That has helped us tremendously in working toward improving practices by looking at the data. All of our data. Because the amazing thing of it is, our directors of curriculum are involved with our data analysis, and they're changing practices because what we were finding is we were sending kids down the hall for special education and they were missing ninety minutes of truly qualified reading instruction in general education settings in the name of getting specially designed instruction. Now, all of the students have to be in the ninety minutes. That's non-negotiable.

The district had implemented nominally inclusive education prior to this particular data gathering, yet Miller noticed a disparate reading achievement that a failure to include had caused. This example clarifies the need for a continual emphasis on progress the district process of examining and understanding its instructional practices and structures. Miller called team analysis of data, which allowed him to trace students' low achievement to missing good instruction in the general education setting. This demonstrates that inclusion is not binary, meaning this emphasis on the growth process urged the district to use the data analysis to increase inclusive opportunities. The data analysis created an opportunity for further growth around the delivery of reading instruction. This analysis was a lens of inquiry used in the

process the district used to determine a subsequent course of action.

These procedures that involved collecting data, using a lens of inquiry to determine impact for students with disabilities, and charting a new course of action demonstrates participants' social justice leadership. For example, this district process of investigating data revealing disparate educational outcomes and linking back to instructional practices at the building level demonstrates Miller's critical examination of the social constructions that create structures, including the intended and unintended consequences of decisions. This lens of inquiry is imperative, as social justice scholars assert (Goldfarb & Grinberg, 2002; Marshall & Ward, 2004; McKenzie et al., 2008; Theoharis, 2007). Miller's educational leadership practice explicitly disrupts arrangements that promote marginalization and he leads his team to alter and improve arrangements on a continual basis, leading to more equitable practices. Building-level administrators implemented practices that had created and justified specially designed instruction that conflicted with qualified reading instruction. Identifying this problem and addressing it required social justice leadership on Miller's part. Participants examine and improve district procedures and structures continually based on data driven changes to alter services to meet the needs of students with disabilities.

Participants embraced this process of examining institutional features that affect students with disabilities and making improvements as a critical course of action. As Miller identified, co-teaching had become central to this effort. The field offers various ways of thinking about and enacting co-teaching, and districts implemented a process of getting clear about the purpose of co-teaching.

Participants described establishing a common understanding of co-teaching as an ongoing process. Lucy said:

So we don't have a clear idea. We as a division, I don't know that we have clearly

identified what we want co-teaching to look like. And that's part of our…that's

something that the division is working on this summer as part of their actions for next

year. The division wants to identify what is co-teaching and then we're going to move

the training around that.

Other participants discussed the relationship between co-teaching and academic interventions.

Mia described a process of continually analyzing the service delivery models and interventions

her district had implemented in order to sustain an environment that would meet students' needs

in an inclusive manner. She conveyed this process of growth:

All across our [district-level] teams, they are studying what good intervention is. One of

the things that worried me about the word co-teaching is that there are people who think

that co-teaching in itself is an intervention. That's not true. Co-teaching is a service

delivery model and the model needs to provide this intervention. But when we hold it as

an intervention then we have people saying, "Oh, we co-teach." That's not inherently an

intervention…you co-teach so that you can provide good intervention.

Co-teaching is the service delivery model that facilitated good intervention within the general

education environment. But Mia had urged the district to establish a better understanding that

co-teaching does not replace good intervention instruction for students with disabilities. She

explained:

So, that's why we shifted the language to remind people that that's great that you co-

teach, but it's what you are doing with students in that co-teaching model that's going to

make the difference. And also because there are a lot of naysayers about co-

teaching…who [say] there isn't a lot of research to support co-teaching as an intervention

and that's because they're thinking of it as an intervention…. They're looking for the performance increases. You're not going to find a lot of research to support that.

So it also helps to push back on that a little bit. We're not saying that [co-teaching automatically results in performance improvements]…. [A]t the end of the day co-teaching has to allow us to provide good instruction and good first instruction…. So, that's why we have that change in semantics.

Participants described this evolution of thinking related to the nuance of co-teaching as a structure that allows for intervention in the classroom as critical for including students with disabilities. Participants reiterated this shift in thinking. Miller explained, "We shift between asking, 'How are you co-teaching? What is working with that collaboration?' And, 'How are you providing good intervention?'" Deeper analysis of this concern indicates that perhaps once administrators and educators focused on their culture of belonging and inclusive education, co-teaching became the primary focus in efforts to keep students with disabilities in the general education classroom, but it did not ensure academic progress.

Teasing apart the finer differences between service delivery models and intervention ensures that students with disabilities receive services that meet their needs and highlights the importance of academic progress. Participants emphasized the need to ensure the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom and that each student is making academic progress. This across-the-district emphasis had its roots in their equity-based concern that students receive the services they need to make academic progress. They ensured the district continued to offer the intervention and specially designed instruction that special education affords students even as it created an inclusive learning environment.

Other participants identified a process of increasing adoption of effective practices. They used a process to increase the quality of interventions and successful co-teaching. Kora explained:

> [I]n our district, we've been trying to get more evidence-based practices going on like Read 180 and some of these very specific instructional strategies. And so over the last two or three years, we have found that our programming has gotten away a little bit from the grade level model because of everybody learning all of these new things. So, we think on the one hand we really improved our instruction. On the other hand, though, we have really gotten, well we've made it very difficult for our teachers in terms of collaborating…. All of our focus next year is then to go back and start focusing in on co-teaching, making sure that we're getting back to that grade level model again. It kind of just keeps evolving, the field evolves, so we have to change.

The idea that district focus evolves as the field evolves is an element of this emphasis on continual growth. Mia noted that her district had achieved physical inclusion and that educators as well as administrators needed to focus on quality again. She said, "I think it's the finer elements of instruction…. We're in the middle of a three-year study…. Kids are physically in their classroom with the support of a paraprofessional, but we're not maximizing our ability to provide them with excellent curriculum." Under her leadership, the district was undertaking a three-year study to improve this. She explained that "we're working" to achieve a better understanding of the state of the field in terms of providing good instruction for students with complex disabilities.

Achieving a balance between co-teaching and collaboration with specialized instruction that will support academic progress required participants' constant attention. Kora explained the administrative team's focus when the district brings in inclusion facilitators thus:

> We create positions for three or four years to make a change that we want to see with the
> idea that after that we're going to be able to fade them back out and that expertise is
> going to be there in the building…. You have to be careful because the next thing you
> know, our kids are all in their neighborhood schools and they go to classes, but … the
> special education teachers are pulling them out for Read 180 or some specialized math
> intervention…. And we're doing less co-teaching with more and more of that very
> specialized stuff going on.

Kora explained that inclusion facilitators helped teachers learn to implement specialized reading and math intervention within the context of co-teaching. She saw these inclusion facilitators as a way of maintaining co-teaching. Her district was creating professional staff positions to promote growth around specific areas.

Lucy said that her district was also working on increasing co-teaching instead of pull-out, specialized instruction. She explained:

> Right now, if they get specialized instruction in reading, students can get that in a pull out
> setting. Like Wilson Reading, but it's usually small group. Occasionally you want kids
> to get that one-on-one. We need to figure it out as a district though. We've tried
> different things and I'm not sure what we're going to do next year. It just depends.
>
> But, see we've done [the specialized reading program] during language arts block okay,
> because they're a short thirty minute intervention. Our language arts block at the

elementary are an hour and a half. Ninety minutes or more. So sometimes we've done it like that. They've also done it during content science or social studies under the premise that it is more important to like … these students *have* to learn how to read.

We need to focus on teaching them how to read at any cost. I think next year, we're going to try and find a balance because we don't really want them to miss the language arts instruction that everybody is getting, we want them in the classroom for this, and we don't want them to miss the science and social studies because now they're going to be tested on it. Back in the day, they weren't tested in those areas. Now they're tested in those in those areas.

Lucy's spoke uneasily as she explained the district's approach to reading intervention. She appeared to be justifying, problem solving, and trying to grow the district approach to reading as she spoke. A sense of the complications of inclusive education while meeting an expectation of academic progress were palpable. Lucy explained that inclusion had always been a process:

I guess, probably, five years ago, we were seeing that we really needed to upgrade with what we were doing with kids with autism. We could see that we really needed to upgrade. We really needed to get more consistent in our positive behavior supports. We had [response to intervention] kind of expectations there that we hadn't dealt with before.

So what we did is we created a few designated special education positions…. [These were] autism specialist positions. [We] got those people a whole bunch of training and got them better at autism programming. We took some positions that we called intervention specialists and we gave those people a whole bunch of training in positive

behavior supports. And just recently we've been trying to improve what we're doing for our kids with some severe disabilities.

The administrative team created designated special education positions to emphasize the expectation of growth around the designated areas of need. Lucy examined the current state of educational practices implemented within the school with a careful understanding of areas in need. Based on this, she determined the change her district needed and created positions for a duration of time in order to develop educators' expertise in that area. This is important because it provides evidence of the importance of including all students. However, understanding this creation of designated special education positions from a DSE perspective problematizes Lucy's practice. The creation of the position essentializes autism by sending the message that select professionals will have specialized knowledge to support students with autism in the school, rather than training that supports all professional administrators, teachers, and related service providers to shift their understanding and attitudes around autism. Lucy, however, created these positions with the goal of providing support to specific educators around students with autism.

In summary, participants understood their districts as institutions that were in a state of continually improving process and growth. They emphasized that data gathering allowed them to determine future decisions based on their districts' needs as they guided the district in implementing inclusive education. Participants highlighted the growth process. Thus they were changing the system in their districts. The process of annual data collection and an intentional inquiry around specific elements led to practice changes, training, and the creation of new inclusion facilitator positions. Shifts in thinking and district practices were the result. They described how practices such as requiring inclusion, at the neighborhood school building and in the general education classroom, led to adaptation at the building level and transformed the way

educators in their district operated. This practice created change at district level and set precedents for new "norms" across the district. Participants revealed an overall emphasis on growth and inclusion as a process, and emphasized that their districts had not reached an ideal state.

The purpose of the research question this section has addressed was to understand the actions and decisions participants made to remain committed to their district's enactment of inclusive education. In the stories participants shared, it was clear they had engaged in an inclusive journey or process. Inclusion was not binary, meaning it was not something that their districts had reached. In other words, participants did not stop striving to enhance inclusive opportunities for students with disabilities. An emphasis on the growth process emerged as participants repeatedly placed students with disabilities at the center of their decision making process. Participants offered a nuanced understanding of inclusion as a district practice of inclusive opportunities that incorporated physical presence, access to specialized instruction and intervention, academic progress, and continual evolution of practices. Participants led their district in this journey, using a lens of inquiry about systematic practices.

Connectedness With School Community and the Public

District-level leaders have the responsibility to oversee the implementation of practices that guide for educators and principals. They use these practices to enforce the district's course of action in implementing inclusive education to guide future directions. This section describes a crucial part of participants' implementation of this mission: building connectedness with school and community to encourage district-wide inclusive educational practices and community inclusion. This community involves the internal school community, as well as the external public community. It will explore how participants stayed in sync with building leadership.

This complements research on building-level inclusive school practices and principals' role in cultivating buy-in among educators (Causton-Theoharis & Theoharis, 2009; Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013; McLeskey & Waldron, 2011; Theoharis, 2007, 2009a). The data in this study reveal that building-level leaders do not have complete ownership of decision-making, but determine the flexibility of the process. Participants use leadership processes collaboratively as a means to sustain inclusive educational practices. They described intricate connections to the building-level leadership in ways that provided oversight linked to the overarching intent of providing increasingly inclusive educational placements and services for students with disabilities. Participants had created procedures as a guide for individuals in the district. These procedures spelled out the district's course of action in line with inclusive education to guide future decisions.

Participants described connectedness to community as a strategy to support their enactment of inclusion. Kora, for example, said that connectedness between herself and principals "can be the biggest thing that makes it all work…. It's more important than anything." She explained, "The principal who believes in [inclusion] and wants to make it work is going to find a way."

Mia described structures she had put in place that build in connectedness. The district where she works has a common principal administrative team meeting. She said that this meeting provided "structure" for productive conversations, both about inclusion and about how her team can support principals and ensure they understand the districts' goals with respect to inclusion. She said that these meetings sensitized her team to consider key questions such as "So, how do we support principals? How do we make it clear where we're headed?" Another structure she had devised also supports inclusion, in her view:

Another structure is the superintendent, myself, and a curriculum coordinator, as a three-person team, go around to each of the buildings individually and meet with [the] leadership team [in those buildings] once a month. So, there's the opportunity to take those collective conversations and make them more specific to an individual building.

Leah says her support for principals involves helping them know procedures and regulations:

For anything that's intensive, like regulations, or funding, or handbooks, I'll tab it and do a visual version. I'll type up a cheat sheet for them to refer to. I do this for principals. I do a lot of process flowcharts and things like that that they can refer to. I mean I expect them to know timelines for IEPs and stuff like that, but [for] other stuff, give them resources. Other than that, I tell them to call me and I'll point them in the right direction.

Another way participants promoted building connectedness was to give building leaders freedom. Participants agreed that while practice requires building leaders to carry out the district mission of providing inclusive education, they had ownership of the process. Mia noted:

My job is really to bring the principals together so they can talk to each other about different ways to make it happen, but I definitely don't specify what it looks like. I think people are getting pretty creative about it.

Thus, for Mia connectedness also relates to cultivating connection between principals. There is flexibility in the process. Miller has created a taskforce of community members in order to ensure each building is developing solutions that align with the district mission:

We will put people in different committees. We call them a taskforce. For our taskforce, there is a time frame because sometimes committees and taskforces go on forever. We give a time frame to have it done and they are expected to have an outcome. I mean, we bring in parents and a couple of students. We will bring in teachers, both general

education and special education. We will bring in principals. We will bring in a whole

cadre of different people. And [say], "The next 6 weeks, you have to have this done."

Developing solutions required Miller to assemble taskforces. Miller also underscored the

flexibility of process or the path around district initiatives. He emphasized that creating a

timeline for such taskforces to develop solutions is key to their success.

Sophie described the connection between the special education office and principals and

teachers as replacing a connection that once cut out the people at the building level. She ensures

that building-level leaders and educators understand their responsibility for all students. Sophie

explained:

> The schools were used to calling the special education office. They'd think, "Come, and
>
> fix this kid. Come fix this situation. Come to this meeting." [It happened] because
>
> [principals and teachers] didn't feel qualified. Or, hadn't gotten training. Or, didn't want
>
> to.

Sophie felt that her job was to reestablish the connection between the principals and teachers and

students with IEPs:

> We put an end to all of it. We had a meeting with principals. These are your students.
>
> These are your parents. These are your IEPs. We will support and help you understand
>
> how to implement the IEP. [We will] coach your team on what they are to do. We will
>
> come and coach your teachers about what you do with this student, but we will not come
>
> and take over.

Communicating the practice that principals and educators had to take over problem solving for

all learners and implementing IEPs meant Sophie's team collaborated with and coached people

at the building level, but it was a building responsibility to educate all students.

Mia described a problem that occurred in her district and how she reconnected with the principal involved to address it. While noting that one of the schools in her district had "the most qualified person teaching the most complex students," another had decided to hire paraprofessionals and give them primary responsibility for implementing instruction. She explained:

> We have one of our systems, [meaning a school], that you'll notice one of the principals is about having the most qualified person teaching the most complex students and really narrowing the role of a paraprofessional. And yet, despite that, we had one of our [other] schools, at their tier II [response to] intervention model, [that] decided to review their professional staff and hire a cadre of paraprofessionals who were going to be their interventionists. So that on a number of levels, on the one level that's just in direct conflict with the message that we've been sending for many years. But that is frustrating and it's not going to be effective.

This showed Mia's analysis of the whole system and its effort to provide quality and equitable inclusive services. The way of thinking about providing instruction for students with disabilities was different in the two buildings, and this decision of hiring a cadre of paraprofessionals was in direct opposition to the district's core values. In this case, Mia described how she reestablished connectedness through a meeting where she asked the principal to tell her about his decision making and the context. She described the district stance around supporting students with complex needs, reiterated the need for equitable instruction provided by the most qualified certified professionals, and helped the principal understand different solutions to approach the original problem. As her next course of action, she provided written procedures for implementing academic interventions for this principal. Subsequently, her team drafted and

circulated a new district practice governing the use of certified professionals to use academic interventions for implementation. Connectedness was imperative to ensure principals' practices aligned with district values.

Charlotte described another situation that required her to call on connectedness with building leadership. The administrators in her district were thinking about creating an academy to support science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) design principles for high school learners, a typical emphasis predicated on the idea that employers need students who have technical and discipline-specific STEM skills in the 21st century economy (Capraro, Capraro, & Morgan, 2013). They were considering designing a magnet school with exclusivity criteria to offer the school only to academically elite students within the district. District administrators weighed the pros and cons of such a program in conjunction with the district's philosophical vision and instructional practices that would include all learners across programs. In an administrative meeting, Charlotte identified her concerns about whether the academy would jeopardize the culture of inclusive education:

> When we were making our decision about our high school STEM academy there was a discussion about the appropriateness of the program and we decided, "No, that's not what our district is about." Our district is about providing that program to all students who are eligible not just for the finite number of students, only high achieving students, to have them head off to some magnet program.
>
> So we had a STEM academy program in all of our comprehensive high schools and every student that qualifies for entry into that series of courses is eligible. So instead of moving

in the direction of a magnet which those districts have done for a small set of students with specific criteria, we made that program an inclusive program.

The decision emphasized inclusion because Charlotte's team has been successful in supporting connectedness between their office and other decision makers in the process. Charlotte ensured connectedness by making sure administrators' decisions or initiatives aligned with the district's inclusion stance. As she explained, she and other district-level administrators continued to think about accessibility for all students. She explained:

That's just an example when we make decisions. We're constantly talking about, "How do we make it certain that all students have access to the same opportunity?" So, if it is a student with disabilities, we feel it's essential for them to be involved in the general education setting, to have access to that particular curriculum, to be with their age appropriate peers. So, how do we then do that, given the fact that you haven't built a program within any of our schools across our district?

She had established an explicit expectation that administrators would ensure that all students have the opportunity to participate in any new programs. Charlotte explained:

The conversations are constant about how we provide this highest level of access as possible. Our district, across the board, procedures are directly tied to that. When we're making policies or we're making decisions, they are all based on this philosophical framework.

Administrators in Charlotte's district had rejected the notion that it would establish a program for elite students alone. Holding principles of access to curriculum for all learners at the core of district practice, they replicated multiple STEM programs across the high school buildings. Charlotte's district implemented a practice to vet innovative programs and offerings against the

outcomes they desired, as well as unintended consequences. Educators and administrators alike needed district-level administrators' approval to ensure alignment to inclusion. In this case, Charlotte and others realized creating a magnet program that accepted students from across high schools would have unintended consequences: denied access, especially for learners at the margins, including students with disabilities. As Lam, Doverspike, Zhao, Zhe, and Menzemer (2008) asserted, students with disabilities are disproportionately unlikely to earn bachelor degrees in STEM disciplines. Since the focus of the STEM program curriculum could benefit all learners and lead to a more diverse STEM workforce (AccessSTEM, 2007), Charlotte's district created an alternative that afforded each high school the opportunity to provide a specialized STEM curriculum.

Connectedness ensures that administrators' practice ensures access to quality education for all students. Charlotte's team charged administrators at buildings and on taskforces with developing solutions. They required administrators to take ownership and responsibility for students with disabilities. Administrators had to ensure certified educators implemented interventions for students with disabilities. Any new programs developed needed to be accessible for all learners. These practices demonstrate the actions participants implemented in order to enact inclusive education.

As Miller described, he saw it as his job to go beyond connections at the building level. Connectedness has multiple tiers, in his view:

> We had activities that we do as all principals because we meet with them every month. The other one was teachers…any support teachers, general education, special education, related services, itinerant, etc. Another group that we identified was parents. And the other groups that we identified were community people because why would you only

want inclusive education, you know, preschool services then to go to the age of 21, 22 and then you go out to the world. So we were inviting adult providers, community agencies. We were bringing in private preschools, we were bringing in businesses to really talk about what are inclusive practices. You can't do it in isolation. You also can't tell parents or students themselves, oh we're only inclusive between this grade and this grade.

Cross-professional meetings allowed the district-level administrators to meet with community agencies and businesses, as well as school staff. Kora also conveyed this need to have connectedness with the community:

But in our district we're organized by neighborhoods. Like I said, we serve four communities and we are a very geographically large county. And in the days that we were segregated, some of our students had to ride the bus an hour each way to get to their class, especially kids with low incidence disability. Kids that were kind of low incidence, they rode a long way. They didn't know anybody. They never saw kids that they went to school with outside of school.

When we got our kids back home to their neighborhood schools, we quickly, within the first couple of years, started getting calls from Parks and Recreation departments in those communities, from churches saying we've got these kids with disabilities and parents want them to be on the basketball team. Churches calling [to request support] saying, "Our 'special' Sunday school class, we have for these kids with disabilities. We've got families here that want their kids to be in a regular Sunday school class. Can you come and help us with that?" So it's really about membership in your community.

Increased interactions with community groups were a direct consequence of district inclusion policies. As families advocated for involvement and full participation with age-appropriate peers in recreational, community, and religious activities, Kora connected with community organizations so that school personnel could conduct inclusion training programs.

Lucy also observed that inclusion had consequences beyond the school walls. District practice impacted the community. She described the transition planning process and creating inclusive communities at post-secondary educational institutions. She explained:

When students with disabilities reach the age of eighteen and they are typically graduated from high school, they have an option of going to an inclusive program on the [local university] campus that is designed for our post-graduates. Or, they can go back to the high school. So for students with significant disabilities, they can choose. We have the same arrangement with [a second local university] so we have two post-graduate programs for kids 18-22 who have graduate high school and don't want to be, like 20 years old and hang out [or attend] in high school. Those are typical settings in our community where you would find people that age, which would be on the university campus.

Connections with universities created new options for students to transition into post-secondary education and social settings. Inter-organizational practices indicate an equity approach that transcends the district. The district intentionally created partnerships with local universities in order to provide age-appropriate educational, social, and recreational opportunities for students with disabilities who are eligible to continue receiving special education services. This is significant, as it indicates the fact that inclusive districts create procedures that sustain a culture of inclusion beyond the schools themselves and explicitly celebrate students' transition into fully

inclusive post-schooling settings. Further, it indicates evidence of "scaling up and sustainability

of exemplary practices" into other systems (Sailor, 2015). Thus, the aforementioned examples

demonstrate sustainability of district inclusion into community recreation, religious, and higher

education settings. The district where Lucy works has scaled up their local evidenced-based best

practice through collaboration and formal agreements to continue inclusive opportunities with

institutions of higher education. These partnerships include students with disabilities alongside

their age-appropriate college peers without disabilities in academic courses and recreational

experiences at universities. This connects to research that suggests inclusive post-secondary

educational institutions allow students with disabilities to take college classes with appropriate

adaptations, modifications, and supports, as well as to engage in extracurricular intellectual and

recreational campus activities (Rose, Harbour, Johnson, Daley, & Abarbanell, 2009; Wolanin &

Steele, 2004). Students with disabilities contribute to the university campus as students, calling

on others to presume competence. District-level administrators had used these "scaling up"

processes as structured forums in which the district demonstrated the positive effects of inclusive

communities where all members live, learn, and work together. At its core, this demonstrates the

sustainability of district practices.

In summary, connectedness with community makes implementation of district practice

possible. Participants used these practices to guide the course of action and future decisions.

Connectedness is a key part of the operational practices of inclusive districts. Participants use it

to ensure principals and educators take responsibility for carrying out the district mission and

implementing all IEPs, develop solutions to issues with a lens of equity, inclusion, and access for

students with disabilities, and ensure certified professionals, not paraprofessionals, implement

interventions for students with disabilities. Participants instilled a sense in their districts that all

new programs should provide access for all learners, not just sub-sections of academically savvy

students. Connectedness also went beyond the school system itself, as inclusive education led

recreational, community, and religious groups to include a range of students in the community

with age-appropriate peers. Partnerships with institutions of higher education offered options for

transition programs. The impact of inclusion in education has been dramatic in the communities

where participants operate, and their teams' willingness to facilitate inclusion has been a key

aspect of that.

Compliance with Special Education Legal Regulations

Participants provide legal rationales for decisions and practices they enact, generally

related to federal special education legislation (IDEA, 2004). This tactic is a way of combatting

opposition of inclusive practices. Emphasizing the legal underpinning was a strategy

participants employed to justify and extend district principles around inclusive educational

practices.

Charlotte explained she found it useful to reference legal regulations: all of the students

that administrators had assigned to center schools or self-contained classrooms had served had

"cookie cutter" IEPs—the forms all said the same thing, and only the names differed. It was

clear that the setting, rather than the student's need, had dictated the IEP, in violation of federal

law. Referencing this principle had been helpful. She helped parents understand the legal

rationale of district decisions:

When I knew that we were going to have a parent meeting and the parent was very

anxious about this idea of returning their child to their neighborhood school, or looking at

their LRE placement, and really discussing whether it was really appropriate or not. Or,

whether we could be serving this child in a less restrictive environment. And, we just

weren't choosing to [serve that student in the less restrictive environment]. When I

started reviewing these IEPs, I mean we looked at the IEPs in these center schools or

even in a self-contained classroom, or your typical resource room…that's compelling….

But you noticed that they're grouped IEPs. If you look…lay those IEPs out next to each

other. They were cookie cutter with just the name of the child changed.

It is evident that this participant really viewed educational placement as a choice that the

educational team makes. With her leadership, the district would not choose to segregate students

by educating them in more restrictive settings, even when parents had uncertainty about a LRE

placement. Charlotte found that if she embedded the legal foundation of LRE placement in

district decisions (IDEA, 2004), parents were more willing to work with her team. Further, by

demonstrating that the educators who wrote previous IEPs had based them on educational

placement instead of needs, she conveyed to parents that inclusion would involve IEPs to meet

their children's specific academic, social, behavior, or communication needs. Her district had set

up a library so that parents could develop their knowledge of the law and LRE principles. As she

described:

It's mostly a little library…like a resource center. A very small place that's run by, well

two parents run it together now, and then we also have like a network…parents of kids

who have other types of disabilities that they can call on. So they can set up meetings

with people, they can mediate if they have issues or problems in their school, they can be

there. It's sort of like having a knowledgeable parent who is very familiar with the legal

stuff, regulations, and rules in the school system. [They know] the way things run. They

are on your side.

The parent center supports families' understanding of the law and regulations, as well as their implications related to students with disabilities. This was a valuable tool in the district's quest to meet students' needs. In their practice, Charlotte's team analyzed IEPs as a method of critical reflective practice to determine whether the district was meeting students' educational, behavioral, and communication needs in the LRE. She continued to explain what she meant by "grouped IEP's":

> Really, what we were saying we were doing for student A was the same thing we were saying we were doing for student B because it was! They were all lumped in this one classroom, receiving the same services regardless of the actual present level performance. What it was…was their needs really were, whether or not we could really serve those needs in the regular setting. If you had Down syndrome, you were in this classroom with other students with the same disability.

She continued to explain the legal implications of placing students based on category. She explained her realization of the problems in the district's segregated special education programs in the past. She continued to demonstrate reflective questioning of this traditional practice in the district. Understanding and communicating the legal framework and intent was an approach to develop district practices. Charlotte said that referencing legal principles had been the foundation of her practice in the district. Because very few people in the district initially shared her philosophy about inclusion, she used the legal perspective. She explained:

> And, then I was very compelled to figure out how I was going to make change happen because at that time in our district there were very few people who shared philosophically where I was. It's trying to force feed this whole process and I had to come at it through

legally what was right. I had to come at it through, we're breaking the law. These children have rights and we are not going to do this anymore.

As a result of this insistence, Charlotte explained,

Then, what started to happen was, we started to return these students to their neighborhood schools. We started to return them in many cases to [the general education classroom] because we started with an elementary school and there are very few disabilities at the elementary level that you cannot serve in the [general education] setting because most students, even those that are the most severely disabled, you can accommodate.

The rationale was apparently successful, in that people at the building level felt empowered to stand up for inclusion:

So [principals and educators] don't get intimidated by advocate lawyers who are trying to tell them that we haven't done the right thing or that we must make a more restrictive setting for this child [anymore]. They know if they have the data to show that this child is making growth in the general education setting, that that's not necessary. That we have to show that the child is meeting IEP goals with success. That we don't have to put them in a more restrictive setting. Not only that, but we are compelled *not* to even if the parent wants it.

Grounding their arguments in legal principles made it easier for Charlotte's team to convince parents that their children should be educated in a less restrictive environment. Charlotte's actions represent a critical shift in advocacy within special education by professionals in the field of education. Historically the impetus for a shift in special education practice has been critical

questioning and change advocacy by parent advocacy groups (Osgood, 2005). This district-level administrator advocacy toward inclusive special educational services is critical.

Participants emphasized that IEPs do not just lay out the special education services a student with a disability will receive; they are legal documents (IDEA, 2004). The administrators in their districts engaged in critical reflective practice around the type of special education service students were receiving. Charlotte was not the only participant who compared the IEPs of students in particular programs and found that that the IEPs were "cookie cutter" rather than, as the name implies and the law requires, individualized to meet individual student needs. Participants used this analysis technique to create conversation around individualization, access, participation, and outcomes for students with disabilities. These processes identified issues of segregated special education placements and corresponding IEPs. As researchers have noted, the rationales provided for self-contained classrooms (e.g., community issues, environments with less distractions, curriculum and instruction that is specialized, supports for behavior) lack validation and administrators must strongly question the use of self-contained contexts (Causton-Theoharis, Theoharis, Orsati, et al., 2011). Participants used the legal status of IEPs to stimulate critical analysis of the individualization and the usefulness of the IEPs the schools had created.

Mia also described a reflective practice around IEP analysis and development. She expressed it this way:

> When it comes to IEPs, the way we write IEPs now is by services delivered. So, our kids are all based in regular education classrooms. But we would be looking at students, what we would call a self-contained level of service would be if they had more than fifty percent of their day with extra support in the classroom or they are served by a special

education teacher in the class or they are conducting some individual instruction in something. We look more at that percentage of the day that they receive special education service, rather than where the service is located.

Because of the practice Mia's team had embraced, they might assign a student with a complex disability might to a general education classroom even if he or she received special education services all day long. As Mia emphasized, special education is a service and not a place. She continued to explain this way of looking at service delivery:

For example a student, with let's say a severe disability, a student who might receive special education services one hundred percent of the day…they get special education service all day long. The way we do IEPs is we, kind of, spell it out…we don't do things label-based here, based on disability conditions.

Mia explains that special education is about the type of special education service students receive.

So, a student might have a constellation of special education services that range from being in a co-taught class for some periods, to being in a class with an instructional assistant available to help some periods, to having one-on-one individualized instruction or small group unit for something like reading. So, any given student can have a combination of those types of services. We don't have anything that's automatic. Like if you have a learning disability, then you automatically get this, or if you have autism, you automatically get this. It's individualized for individual students. So a student with a severe disability, I'll go back to my original example, might have an instructional assistant available across the day for a variety of things. They might have one of their periods instead of an instructional assistant their specialized teacher is in the class with

them and they are co-teaching the class. You know, the kids can have a variety of kinds

of support across the day but it would look like 100% special education service.

This is important because it reflects a view among the district-leaders that special education is a

service, rather than a place where specific students with disabilities receive instruction. It

reflects Mia's ability to use IDEA (2004) as a foundation for practice rationale. Special

education is about the level of service certified teachers, therapists, and sometimes

paraprofessionals provide. The district where Mia works provides flexible services, and as

researchers suggest asking, provide evidence of enactment of the question: "What is the best

instructional situation for this student to successfully engage the general curriculum?" (Sailor,

2015, p. 94).

With this knowledge about parents not quite believing their children could participate in a

less restrictive environment and the flaws in IEPs their districts had once used, participants

decided to create critical conversation, initiate change, and provide justification on the basis of

legal regulations. Using the federal special education law as the foundation for making

decisions, participants helped other administrators and educators realize what the law stated in

regards to LRE and students achieving growth. Mia, for example, let educators know that they

must document and collect data on "meaningful progress toward general education standards"

and attainment of individualized IEP goals. As Kluth, Villa, and Thousand (2002) suggest, she

was helping others understand the spirit and intent of the preference for inclusive educational

services encoded in the law. This represents a balance between district-level compliance with

the law as a basis to create changes in district practice with the district-level special education

administrator's responsibility to provide strong guidance about following the law in all district

special education processes, in order to cultivate and sustain a culture of inclusive education.

Other participants described examining the system as a whole and its compliance with legal regulations. As districts became trail blazers in their states, participants had to figure out ways to explain inclusive special education services to state officials, especially with respect to filling out state level forms that often did not fit with service delivery models that include all students. Miller explained the situation:

> We were the odd district out. [The state would say,] "You are not in compliance." Come and show me how we are not in compliance. We do offer [specialized instruction]. We had the whole conversation. What is meant by self-contained? [We looked at] that federal [percent of time the student spends in general education]. I will tell you even when they are in a general classroom, we look at aggregate services because they may have a paraprofessional, or a professional in there, or a speech therapist, who is co-teaching.

Miller needed to dissect the concept of a self-contained level of service in order to persuade state officials that his district was complying with the law. In fact, he urged the state-level leaders to use the federal percentages of time spent in general education and what type of supports (and by which school personnel—a certified educator, therapist, or a paraprofessional) schools were offering throughout the day. Further, Miller said:

> We had to have a lot of those conversations. Even defend our data to [the state] and even to the feds…. I mean people read the federal law. [They are talking about special education] like it is about a place or a classroom and it isn't. It is about that aggregate amount of services. This is why we had to put definitions [in any data the state collects] because [the state was] even coming to this district, saying, well, they need to be in a self-contained classroom. I'd ask, "Why are you talking about a place? How do you know

we can't do this in general education with appropriate support?" Because by federal

description, [these students] can be in general education and still have been in special

education 80% or more or 60% or more. You can't say it is about where [meaning the

place]. It is about services. So as you can probably tell, all these are very crucial

conversations. They were not easy conversations.

Miller was telling officials to read the federal law when they incorrectly thought special

education was about a place or classroom, rather than the services delivered. His solution, when

the state had forms that did not suit the service model administrators in his district had embraced,

was to add definitions to all forms and documentation. He recalls state officials even said that

the district had to provide a self-contained classroom for students with complex needs. He

pushed back, explaining the district's decisions and their grounding in IDEA. He showed that

students with disabilities in general education classrooms might have special education for 60%

of the time or 80% of the time. For these students, there was a special education teacher or

therapist in the classroom for 60% or 80% of the time. It was about the type, frequency, and

duration of services delivered; this is similar to the way Mia described special education services

earlier in this section. He stressed that his role was to help state officials understand the district's

practice of providing special education in light of the guiding inclusion mission, this

interpretation of the LRE regulations, and the need for state officials to revise the state forms to

account for this district practice aligned with IDEA.

Miller felt that state officials had initially opposed the district's inclusive mode. He

noted, "They knew that we couldn't fill out their forms." But ultimately the state had come

around. It was about special education services, he explained,

It has nothing to do with [disability] label. That was the hardest thing we had with the state. It helped us because we don't turn in stuff, like if you want him in a box and we don't have him in a box…. The state had to readjust and do things differently. For the first couple of years, they were like, "get [students with disabilities] out of [general education classrooms]." Now they send people to us all the time. They've added an inclusive person to the state to [increase inclusive education in the state] and they have been around here several times to learn themselves. … At first they thought we were just unique…. I mean, we challenged everything about special education.

Miller's direct approach to the state-level reporting forms had not only allowed the district to maintain its commitment to inclusion education; it also stimulated state-level officials to give greater support for inclusive practices.

Kora also experienced a mismatch between the district's practices with the state-level reporting needs. She had addressed this by inviting a state technical assistance officer to the district to help people in the technical office think about how to get their inclusive models to "fit" with the legal requirements of the state.

When we first started, one of the things we did is we had different principals that wanted to do things different ways with kids. [We] let them lay out how they would like to do things. And then we asked our technical assistance officer from the state compliance office to come and look at these three models and show us how to make this legal. How could these people be able to do these things? What kind of waiver would it take? You know, because at that time buildings were all staffed around… you had to have X many teachers by label. If you had kids with learning disabilities, you had to have…. We asked how [to] make this legal.

The way principals decided to create special education service delivery did not align with state reporting needs. Kora noticed the discrepancy and urged the technical assistance officer from the compliance office to help the principals understand how to write and submit a waiver because the reporting methods on the state forms did not fit their practice. At her request, the state officials helped the principals write waivers around legal regulations. Just as Miller described, the reason the state forms did not work is because they were centered on the use of specific disability labels to justify the number of teachers and the type of educational setting needed. Kora continued, "They showed us some ways to write waivers and get around it." Participants needed to justify their inclusive practices and figure out how to make sure they were in legal compliance.

Other participants worked in districts that, while still meeting the study's criteria as an inclusive district, continued to pull students out of the general education classroom for special instruction at times, typically individualized reading. This complicated the data. Lucy described:

> I think you can strike a balance. You know, I think people misinterpret the word inclusion to mean they can only be in here with everybody else and you better not ever pull them out. I'm thinking to me inclusion means access. And, at the opposite of inclusion, it is seclusion which means not access. So to me I interpret inclusion as access. And, I think that every kid that qualifies for special education services and has an IEP…that teams really have to look at it on an individual level. That's what they've been told to do, by the law. That's what they're supposed to do. I absolutely cannot stand it when people and districts make placement decisions based on the label. I do not believe

in that and I find it to be highly inappropriate, and I find it to be highly illegal, if you really look at the intent of the law.

So you know I say this to teachers and teams in an IEP meeting. Before we even get to services and labels…when it comes to kids with disabilities we really pay attention to what is their present level of performance and what are the needs to meet the goals, objectives, and then from there we figure out the type of place for this kid that supports him. I absolutely don't believe in seclusion or segregating a student at all. I think it's terrible.

At the same time, as Lucy explained:

The district has a fully inclusive policy. I mean we don't have any special education classes in this district. We never have, not since I've been teaching here. There is no— when I was a special education teacher [in this district], I shared a classroom with a regular education person. We didn't have a special education room. Now we do have rooms in our buildings if somebody wants to pull somebody out and do some Wilson reading intervention or something like that. I mean I'm not saying that kids don't get pulled in for some individualized instruction but this is in the classroom. But the policy is nobody will be segregated based on their disability. So everybody is in the mix and then what happens once they're in the mix, you know, what they come out for, what they stay in for, that's really based on what their IEP calls for.

This participant makes it clear that the district has an inclusive policy, meaning that students with disabilities are in the general education environment. That is their educational placement. There are no self-contained special education classrooms where students are educated for the entire

day. Lucy's description of "balance" in the area of inclusion, means that legally, students also need their teachers to individualize their education, particularly in terms of access to reading programs. At times, students receive specific individualized reading interventions outside of the general education classroom, but this intervention could occur for students with or without disabilities in the same setting. As a researcher, this complicated the data and I followed up with Lucy to understand this because it seemed like a contradiction of other interview conversations we had. Similarly, Kora explained that even for the small percentage of students who needed individualized reading, it was up to the IEP team to determine if they would receive it in the classroom or through a short pull-out instructional group. These students nonetheless were in the general education classroom for more than 80% of the school day. This is an important issue to recognize that the district has an inclusive practice of access, yet in striving to adhere to the spirit of the federal special education legislation to individualize education, the district sometimes provides targeted instruction outside general education. IDEA was used to justify this practice.

Sophie also described inclusion as a relative notion:

I am a firm believer that every child needs to be honored and respected and taught in school. But, I also came to the conclusion that not every child needs to be in general education all the time. And, I know there's a lot of purists in inclusion that think that. I didn't. After a while, I realized it's not fair to the child.

The implications of Sophie's, Kora's, and Lucy's statements are ambiguous. These participants work for districts that intentionally include all students with disabilities in their neighborhood schools within general education classrooms, focusing on participation and access to general education environment as a critical element to academic achievement. They described the practice by which some students with disabilities might have pull-out instruction as a means

of providing LRE, even as they were not in the general education classroom for every minute of the school day. A 30-minute intensive reading program nonetheless left them significant time in the general education classroom. Participants emphasized that this was a less restrictive option than being in a self-contained classroom or separate school for the entire day, the way their districts had once served students with complex needs.

Lucy, Kora, and Sophie describe a common observation: future research should continue to explore how educators might provide evidence-based reading intervention (such as Read 180 or Wilson) within general education classrooms. In the first section of this chapter, participants discussed the district focus and balance of co-teaching versus providing reading intervention. Participants described co-teaching as a service delivery model that allows two certified educators to deliver instruction in the classroom, but that in itself co-teaching is not an intervention. Districts struggled to implement intervention in the classroom given the general education structure. Their solution was to conduct small pull-out groups because the general education structure did not allow for focused reading intervention groups. Analysis of this dilemma causes participants to ask the question, "What might an equity-based design of the reading block look like?" Their comments evidenced that participants alternatively focus on co-teaching and intervention as the way to build academic progress. This section described pull-out reading intervention in reference to the district's maintaining their mission of including students with disabilities, and in the districts where the study took place that meant that students with complex needs spent at least 80% of their time in general education.

This section described how participants grounded district practices and decisions within the legal framework. They discussed students' legal rights to individualized IEPs that educators implement within general education. They also described their approach to addressing the

mismatch between their practices and definition of special education and state reporting forms. In relation to these forms, participants said that it was important that state officials recognize that special education is about the percentage of the day that students with disabilities receive services and not merely the location of the service. Participants invited state officials to visit their districts and urged them to adjust reporting mechanisms. They also explained that they balanced inclusion with delivering reading interventions, sometimes out of the classroom, and ensuring students with disabilities have access to the general education classroom for 80% or more of the school day. Remaining in compliance with legal regulations was a critical element as participants enacted their districts' inclusion practice.

Discussion of District Processes, Practices, and Procedures

Findings of this chapter reveal that participants initiated district improvement through approaching district practice and procedures as a fundamental tool to ensure progression of equity for all learners and to sustain inclusive education. In the discussion of district practices and procedures, three themes emerge as courses of actions that participants employ in order to provide equitable access to inclusive educational experiences. First, participants emphasized continual improvement and growth through intentional inquiry, creating new district practice, using data collection to improve specific elements, creating inclusive facilitators, and using an overall lens of inquiry. Second, participants upheld an intentional connectedness with community that made it possible for principals and educators at the building level to take responsibility for all learners, follow resource guides, and develop solutions. This connectedness also led to a practice whereby district-level administrators review all new district initiatives and programs to ensure equitable access and a focus on community, recreation, religious, and higher education inclusion for students with disabilities. Third, participants used legal regulations and

measures of compliance as orienting frameworks to initiate innovation and provide justification for district practice. Analysis suggests that in order to sustain a culture of inclusive education so that administrators and educators would place educational equity and access at the forefront, district-level leaders created and provided innovative district practice and procedures around these themes. These practices became the new "norm" and set precedents for future district decisions.

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION: TOWARD DISTRICT-LEVEL LEADERSHIP FOR INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

This dissertation started with story that shared a personal experience that led me to this research. I shared narrative about an administrative team's commitment to include Gina, a student with an intellectual disability, fully into general education. This process led them to understand that all students with disabilities in the district should have access and led to the formation of a collaborative partnership to enact inclusive education throughout the district. Point School District implemented the ideas, advocacy tactics, and policies embedded within this research study while I was writing it under the leadership of Isabella, the director of special education at Gina's school.

Isabella believed that inclusion was best for students with complex needs, but at times did not know where to turn as she sought to implement it. I shared participants' experiences from this study to guide her. After the first year of implementing inclusive services, she invited me to lead a professional development session with her special education administrator colleagues who worked at districts throughout the county. We described the structural changes to service delivery her district had made, using IDEA placement data before and after the process to demonstrate this change in inclusive special education. We shared the new policies adopted, advocacy actions, and challenges we faced. We also connected our message to the LRE class action lawsuit in New Jersey since it pertained to districts.

The change work was messy. Point School District faces many of the struggles that others have—having to dismiss teachers because of budget cuts, inability to attract top candidates because of a low salary compared to other districts in the state, and a challenge of continually building the capacity of the teachers, building-level administrators, and the

superintendent. Inclusion met resistance from some teachers and parents. Yet three years after the decision to include Gina in the general education classroom, the district has no pull-out classrooms, self-contained classrooms, or programs set up based on disability label. Students with a range of disabilities are fully included. This is the result of incremental progress. Isabella and others have done the work to create socially just access for students with disabilities that afford them equitable learning experiences with their peer counterparts.

Students with complex support needs, like Gina, reap the benefits. Gina is now fully included within a collaboratively taught fifth-grade classroom with a general education and special education teacher. She is included within all academic lessons. She is included in various recreational settings in the school and community. She successfully participated in the school's band as a percussionist because she wanted to, despite the fears of her family, teachers, and administrators that her sensory needs would make band unpleasant for her and drums intolerable. She has been successful in reaching her IEP goals and accessing the fifth-grade curriculum through authentic participation in academics. The full inclusion of students, like Gina, in social opportunities such as band and academic learning experiences represents the triumph of inclusion in Point School District.

I hope that the participants' experiences in this research can be an impetus for other districts' leaders who want to make changes toward inclusive education. Utilizing qualitative research methods, I explored the experience of inclusive special education leadership for seven district-level administrators through the use of multiple in-depth interviews. In this conclusion chapter, I provide a discussion and analysis of key findings within the data chapters. My analyses identified participants' commitment to social justice work, their use of complex advocacy tactics, and the policies and procedures enacted under their leadership. Next,

implications for administrator preparation programs, university teacher preparation programs, and state and federal policy are presented. The final section describes the limitations of this study and presents possible directions for future research extending this study.

Discussion and Analysis of Key Findings

This section describes key findings that emerged in each of the data chapters. In this dissertation, I explored the experiences of district-level special education administrators who have lead and sustained inclusive educational services for students with disabilities. Each data chapter revealed findings related to the research questions that guided my inquiry:

1) How do district-level special education leaders articulate their conceptualization and commitment to inclusive education?

2) What strategies of advocacy are evident in the ways that district-level special education leaders make sense of their enactment of inclusive educational opportunities and service delivery for students with disabilities?

3) What actions and decisions have special education leaders implemented in order to remain committed to their district's enactment of inclusive education?

Data demonstrates these leaders employ advocacy tactics to ensure students with disabilities receive appropriate special education services within general education, as well as re-shape and adhere critical district policies and procedures, as a means of doing social justice leadership.

Social Justice Leadership

I explored participants' articulated belief systems as an inquiry into their ideological commitment of educating all students through inclusive educational practices. This chapter answered the following research question: How do district-level special education leaders articulate their conceptualization and commitment to inclusive education? Within Chapter Four,

I described three findings that reveal participants' commitment to social justice work: 1) an inner drive that emerged from personal family experiences; 2) poignant career events that shaped their beliefs; and 3) understanding inclusive education as an action toward social justice.

Participants shared that personal family experiences and poignant career events collectively caused them to pause for critical reflection about who they are as a leader. Another key finding was the importance participants placed on relationships with an individual with a disability. The development of these relationships were life changing in that participants held their importance at the core of their practice as they pursued their own careers in administration. These relationships caused recognition and respect that translated into the presumption of the "worth, dignity, and civil rights of all children" (Baglieri & Shapiro, 2012, p. 19). This respect and valuing of individuals with disabilities caused participants to feel responsibility around students' educational experiences and shaped their approach to leadership of an inclusive school (Baglieri & Shapiro, 2012).

For other participants, there was a poignant situation in their career that infused social justice and inclusive reform work at the district-level. This caused pause to examine and question the manner in which district educational structures impact students with disabilities. Participants understood the district's arrangement and structures as a strategy to increase educational equity and build an environment that welcomes all learners. This finding positions the onus on leaders to understand and change structures as a means of social justice leadership. As Goldfarb and Grinberg (2002) asserted social justice is "the exercise of altering these arrangements (institutional and organization power arrangements) by actively engaging in reclaiming, appropriately, sustaining, and advancing inherent human rights of equity, equality, and fairness in social, economic, educational, and personal dimensions" (p. 162).

A key finding in this chapter was that participants approached their district leadership as an act of social justice. In the interviews, I asked participants to tell me about their personal and career background as it related to inclusion without specifically asking about social justice. This grounded theory approach allowed concepts to emerge and "let the data speak for themselves" and the theoretical concepts to "earn their way into the analysis" (Charmaz, 2003, p. 230). The beliefs and values these experiences and events instilled in participants called them to act as social justice leaders who create district systems that include all learners. This is an important finding because their leadership in an inclusive district was a purposeful action to enact social justice through their lived experience. Inclusion was a way of seeing students through a social justice lens, having an equity consciousness, and building a system of collective responsibility for all students. There was a sense of urgency that inclusion is a contemporary civil rights issue. Social justice leadership, as Theoharis (2007) stated, was about "issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically and currently marginalizing conditions in the United States central to their advocacy, leadership, practice, and vision" (p. 223). Leaders shared that public school systems need to oppose discrimination and ensure civil rights for all students, and this included for students with disabilities. This critical self-reflection revealed participants understood inclusive education as an ideological commitment toward ensuring the basic civil right of education to all students. Inclusion was a model of social justice (Sapon-Shevin, 2003).

In Chapter Four, participants revealed their larger vision of the mission of public schools to prepare students to engage in an increasingly diverse society. They placed responsibility on themselves to create equitable access for students with disabilities. A key finding was that participants' work in inclusive education illuminated their purposeful drive to enact social justice. Administrator preparation programs need to consider the ways in which candidates are

being prepared to lead public schools that prepare students to engage in an inclusive society.

Thompson and O'Brian (2007) asserted, "A strictly special education orientation is too narrow to

properly prepare an individual to address many of the most pressing issues associated with

contemporary special education administration (e.g., accountability, school reform, and inclusive

education" (p. 34). Each of the participants identified as inclusive socially just leaders who, as

the next sections discuss, advocate and create district practice as a way of enacting social justice.

Complex Advocacy Tactics

The findings within Chapter Five answer the second research question: What strategies of

advocacy are evident in the ways that district-level special education leaders make sense of their

enactment of inclusive education? Throughout the chapter, participants' advocacy strategies

impacted the nature of education for students with disabilities and it was through these tactics

that they were able to influence how their inclusive districts educated students. Four common

strategies were enactment of explicit dispositional traits, advocacy of individual students with

disabilities, capacity building, and formal actions.

In the first section, a construct of dispositional traits showed the professional manner,

presence, and navigation of relationships participants used in their advocacy. These dispositional

strategies participants used in their leadership are assertive engagement and aligned decision

making, transparency, and cultivating a positive celebratory culture through using a coaching

mindset. Assertive engagement meant that participants were visible, actively present in

contentious building-level decisions, insistent to ensure alignment of vision to decision making

through critical dialogue. This intentionally engaged demeanor, assertiveness, and aligned

decision making demonstrated a critical conscious leadership style as a means to ensure

educational equity. As Corbett and Slee (2000) contend, enacting inclusive education is a

"distinctly political" and "in your face" activity, and the advocacy style of the participants was an intentional, courageous, and critical political act. Another dispositional leadership trait was that participants were transparent in their values, decisions, and vision as they knowingly lead against the grain of traditional special education practices. Participants spoke with transparency in an open and public way with school and community members. A key finding was that this transparency and openness represented an active strategy of disrupting district practices that marginalized students with disabilities. Another dispositional trait was that participants created a culture of recognition in order to celebrate efforts that aligned with the district vision. Participants indicated that celebrating a growth in mindset and a coaching demeanor were critical to their leadership. This allowed them to celebrate others who were actively navigated incremental progress toward creating a more just system. These were the collective dispositional traits participants used.

A key finding that participants used dispositional traits, or their professional manner, is important because it indicates a reflectivity in their leadership as they sought to create change in their district. Freire posits critical consciousness implies analysis, that it involves "a kind of reading the world rigorously...of reading how society works. It is to better understand the problem of interests, the question of power....a deeper reading of reality....Common sense goes beyond common sense" (Freire, 1998, p. 9). Reading the system through their critical consciousness allowed participants to negotiate their professional manners, actions, and navigation of interpersonal relationships. Their advocacy happened through assertive engagement and aligned decision making, transparency in disrupting traditional special education ways of thinking and educating students, and celebrating growth in mindset.

The second section discussed participant's advocacy at the student-level. Participant's responses to separate placement requests, attaining resources, discovering root causes, and their use of a moral compass were areas that were prevalent in their experiences. Through ensuring neighborhood placement, making student-centered decisions, and facilitating parents' understanding of inequitable separate special education placements, participants challenged the practice of separate special education placement. A key finding was the use of a critical perspective in order to understand requests and develop adept responses to ensure LRE placements. Participants also attained outside resources as a tactic to enhance local knowledge around specific items related to educating students with complex support needs in the general education. A key finding in this section was that continuing education of teachers was key to the implementation of inclusive education. There was an emphasis on building the skills of professionals within the district through external consulting and teachers taking courses in order to eliminate the need to send students with disabilities out of the district. This was an act of advocacy to provide access to consultants and courses in order to bring best practices around supporting students with disabilities to their staff. A key finding is that leaders need to advocate, fund, and arrange for outside resources to support teachers to develop and enhance their skills in efforts to provide full access for all students. An act of advocacy was also evident in participants' experiences around upholding their moral obligation. This necessitated advocacy because there was a distinguishing line about what educational practices were right for students with disabilities. This allowed them to make advocacy-based decisions centered on their belief system, internalized set of values, and core foundation. The final advocacy tactic used was asking the educational team to discover root causes of issues. A key finding was that participants would question, problem solve, and think critically about complex issues in order to

develop a heightened awareness, figure out student needs, and offer family support. Across this section, a key finding is that participants described their experiences in advocating for specific students with disabilities at an individual-level, sometimes against other professionals within the district or a student's guardian. It is noteworthy that these participants who are all district-level administrators shared specific examples of advocacy around individual students.

This chapter also discussed a theme of capacity building that was evident as participants worked to increase the awareness and level of understanding of inclusive school systems across other administrators, teachers, and community members. A key finding was that through capacity building, participants worked to shift the culture that all educators are responsible for all students. Capacity building involved training of general and special educators, developing heightened awareness, developing professional development modules, ensuring everyone has a base understanding, helping teachers to flip their thinking to support needs, gaining needed classroom equipment, and examining curriculum. Participants would increase the shared level of understanding across the district by focusing on these aspects. A key finding is that in order to build capacity across general and special education teachers and administrators, professional development around mindset was needed, in addition to equipment and curriculum. Participants needed to know how to lead systems in terms of the people within the organization and the materials used. Dialogue around core values and beliefs was also an important part of capacity building because it brought these to the conscious awareness level. Participants encouraged dialogue among faculty members around their personal values and belief system. They also emphasized the importance of spending time with building-level administrators learning together and encouraging gradual shifts of thinking as it related to educating students with disabilities. This is an important finding because it demonstrates what Sailor and McCart (2014) refer to as

"one of school administration and capacity-building grounded in research" (p. 58) that is needed in order to create system change improvement to further inclusive education.

The fourth tactic discussed in this chapter was advocacy through formal actions when participants noticed disconnect between district philosophical culture and decision-making and building practices. Findings indicate that reactive measures in response to exclusionary practices were making notations, reporting and writing up, and terminating employment. Proactive strategies to ensure alignment included consistent conversations, placing the construct of educational equity at the core of interviews and district hiring processes, and nurturing a sustainable inclusive culture.

This study documents the ways in which participants intentionally used advocacy tactics in their leadership so that students with complex support needs are included within the general education environment. Participants enact social justice through positioning differences, diversity, and disability at the center of their practice, creating educational spaces that purposefully include a range of learners, and focusing on eliminating marginalizing practices. Participants advocated with a critical reflective practice and this led with an equity conscious leadership stance.

District Practice and Procedures

In Chapter Six, findings revealed insight regarding the third research question: What actions and decisions have district-level special education leaders implemented in order to remain committed to their district's enactment of inclusive education? In the first section, the discussion centered on participants' emphasis on the growth process. Participants used data collection, new district practice, and intentional inquiry in order to shift thinking, school practices, and district structures. This emphasis reveals that district-level administrators who

assume social justice leadership roles employ a lens of inquiry that analyzes the impact of district practices on students with disabilities. Experiences of participants who instituted practices that brought students with disabilities back to their home, neighborhood school building both from outside placements and separate buildings within the district were shared. Participants grappled with enacting practices that not only afforded students with disabilities physical access in the general education school building and classrooms, but also provided them with quality instruction and intervention in reading. These findings echoed research with special education directors who lead districts that produced much higher educational outcomes for students in special education than in comparable district; inclusion, access, and collaboration between special and general education teachers contributed to the performance outcomes (Huberman et al., 2012). Participants created inclusion facilitator positions that supported teachers with this aim. Overall, participants revealed that this lens of inquiry toward equitable education for students with disabilities resulted in educational rights for students with disabilities. That is, the right to be included in their home school district with grade-level peers and the right to progress academically.

This chapter also discussed the ways that the connectedness with various stakeholders led district's to alter their course of action and create practice to guide future decisions. Developing procedures around building-level actions meant that each building needed to implement the district mission and develop solutions instead of expecting the district office to address issues related to special education. This finding aligns with research that shows principals are increasingly in charge of the provision of special education services in their buildings (Lashley & Boscardin, 2003). Participants created resource guides, taskforces, and team meetings to help building leadership develop solutions in line with inclusion. Research demonstrates that district

special education administrators increasingly support principals to implement accessible

practices (Boscardin, 2005). Procedures around certified staff implementing academic

interventions and programs being vetted to ensure all students had access were created. The

district created training and support mechanisms for community, recreation, religious, and

business groups who requested support to include individuals with disabilities within their

programs because parents considered separate programs unacceptable. Partnerships with

institutions of higher education ensured meaningful transitions program options were available.

This connectedness, or what Hoppey and McLeskey (2013) refer to as "lubricating the human

machinery," allowed participants to listen, notice, and identify areas that needed support. The

connectedness that participants had with stakeholders allowed them to assess areas of need and

create practice or new course of actions, with the district's inclusive mission in mind, in order to

guide subsequent decisions.

In the final section of Chapter Six, findings demonstrate participants' use of legal

regulations to justify district decisions. Participants shared legal rationales with parents who

were understanding inclusive-oriented IEPs by sharing that previous "cookie cutter" IEPs lacked

individualization and specific academic, social, and behavioral goals tailored to meet their

children. This finding aligns with research that indicated special education administrators'

advocacy was often conducted to ensure legal IDEA (2004) provisions (Fiedler & Van Haren,

2009). Participants discussed state reporting forms that needed to be changed to reflect the spirit

of federal special education law. Research indicates that special education administrators were

less likely to engage in

Generic and global advocacy, such as advocating for improved governmental laws and

regulations pertaining to special education services for students with disabilities. This

type of advocacy would typically involve legislative and legal actions, and apparently,

most special education professionals either do not see this as a legitimate job

responsibility or feel ill-prepared to engage in such actions. (Fiedler & Van Haren, 2009,

p. 12)

However, in the current study, participants discussed urging state officials to change state

reporting forms. They also discussed their advocacy at the state level in reporting special

education services and creating waivers for districts that delivered services in ways that did not

align with self-contained classrooms, disability-based programs, and out-of-district placements.

Participants helped others understand that special education is about the percentage of the day

that students with disabilities receive services and not only about the location. Participants also

used the federal threshold of being in the general education classroom for 80% or more of the

school day to balance their district inclusion practice with reading intervention. The participants

struggled at times with providing full access and ensuring academic progress, which they

believed sometimes required pull-out small group reading interventions. This complicated the

data in that it contradicted the inclusive positionality that participants expressed and

demonstrated their thoughts in regards to the continuum debate (Taylor, 2001; Turnbull et al.,

2013). Research suggests within a multi-tiered system of supports, the tier two more intensive

instruction for students often involve a different evidence-based curriculum program (Sailor,

2015); this aligns with participants' beliefs that some students with disabilities needed an

intensive reading program such as Read 180 or Wilson. It is important to acknowledge the work

the districts have done to include all students and provide access across the district's general

education classrooms with grade-level peers across several school buildings, and maintaining a

general culture of inclusive education. Nevertheless, districts continued to operate on a readiness

model where students who do not follow the projected developmental skill acquisition move to a more restrictive reading intervention setting. Students with disabilities in Miller's and Kora's districts who fell outside, what researchers refer to as, the boundaries of normalcy were put into "specialized" spaces in order to normalize, fix, and remediate that academic area (Baglieri & Shapiro, 2012). As a result of there not being an institutional structure within the classroom that allowed for a variety of reading interventions to occur, student difference was used to justify exclusion and maintain a thread of inequity in the districts. This analysis aligns with other researchers', which found that any separate education yields inequitable education (Harry & Klinger, 2006; Lipsky & Gartner, 2004a). This construct of student difference in reading reinforced a categorical way of thinking about student learning.

This study documents how district-level leaders are enacting inclusive education. However, research suggests that access and time spent in general education positively correlates with increased reading and mathematical achievement, for students across disability categories (Cole et al., 2004; Cosier et al., 2013; Kurth & Mastergeorge, 2010; Sermier Dessemontet & Bless, 2013). Why does intensive reading instruction need to occur outside general education for some students with disabilities? Research demonstrates that segregated placements do not provide significant outcomes for students with disabilities (Gartner & Lipsky, 2004) and that students with disabilities do at least as well, or better, academically in inclusive environments than in resource room or self-contained instruction (Cole et al., 2004; Freeman & Alkin, 2000; Rea et al., 2002; Ryndak et al., 1999; Salend & Garrick Duhaney, 2007). As Taylor (2001) concluded, "What is needed are not new slots [in segregated education], but changes in how services and supports are conceptualized" (p. 29). In a similar manner, the current study calls for changes in how reading services are implemented. Additional research is needed on ways to

provide individualized reading to students with disabilities right within the context of their general education classrooms. Equipped with the body of research supporting inclusive education and linking to the wider question proposed in this chapter, districts need support in creating practices and procedures that involve special education instruction and related services. That is, they must enact the "principle of portability," that the Roncker Portability Test (*Roncker v. Walter,* 700 F2d. 1058 [6th Cir.]) established, meaning educational services are brought to students with disabilities and each receives individualized reading intervention by specialists right within the classroom.

Toward a Theory of District-Level Leadership for Inclusive Education

The aim of this research study was to understand the experiences participants had in building district-level inclusive schools. Examining how participants believed the creation of district-wide inclusion contributed to educational equity was important, as this research is grounded in a DSE and social justice theoretical framework. This theoretical grounding led me to understand participant's actions as advocacy tactics they used in specific situations to ensure equity in school practices. Experiences with advocating for specific students, capacity building around specific areas of need, and taking formal actions when others carried out practices that excluded were all seen as actions of advocacy. Through this lens of DSE and social justice, it allowed me to understand that participant's advocacy actions led to incremental changes for specific students or groups of students in a school. These advocacy tactics touched multiple areas within the schools and created small scale changes, but I also wondered about the district practices created as a response to this advocacy and as a course of action toward a more inclusive environment. This section describes analysis toward a theory of district leadership of inclusive education.

The participant's experiences also revealed practices and course of actions that led to future district practices. It was through the advocacy tactics that participants learned the state of implementation in each of the schools. The advocacy situations served as informal audits and mechanisms to collect information about what worked well, what needed to be changed, areas of need, and practices that needed to be created to continue to move the district forward. It was a method to move from an inclusive vision to enhanced implementation. Inclusive education in practice meant that participants frequently reflected on their own inclusive philosophical commitment, used multidimensional advocacy tactics with individuals within the system, and critically inquired about the state of implementation. Participants also created practices and procedures. This allowed the district to emphasize the growth process, make connections with community partners, and collaborate with state level officials in order to enact and enhance inclusive education in their schools, the district, community, and state. The future practices were drafted to create new standards, or "norms," and influence the community and state to enhance their understanding of inclusion. The practices were the force that created sustainable enactment of district-wide inclusive education.

Sailor (2017) argues that research needs to understand equity-based whole-school applications that distribute evidence-based supports to all students, not just to students with disabilities, as a way to reframe public education. This research study helps us to understand the process of leadership for inclusive education at the district-level. As Figure 7.1 depicts, this involved going back and forth through each of these embedded layers in order to critically reflect, enhance inclusion, and create practices that became the norm and set the precedence for future district practice. This visual represents participants' process for creating systems change at the district-level. For participants in this study, praxis involved this interplay between

Figure 7.1. Toward a Theory of District-Level Inclusive School Leadership
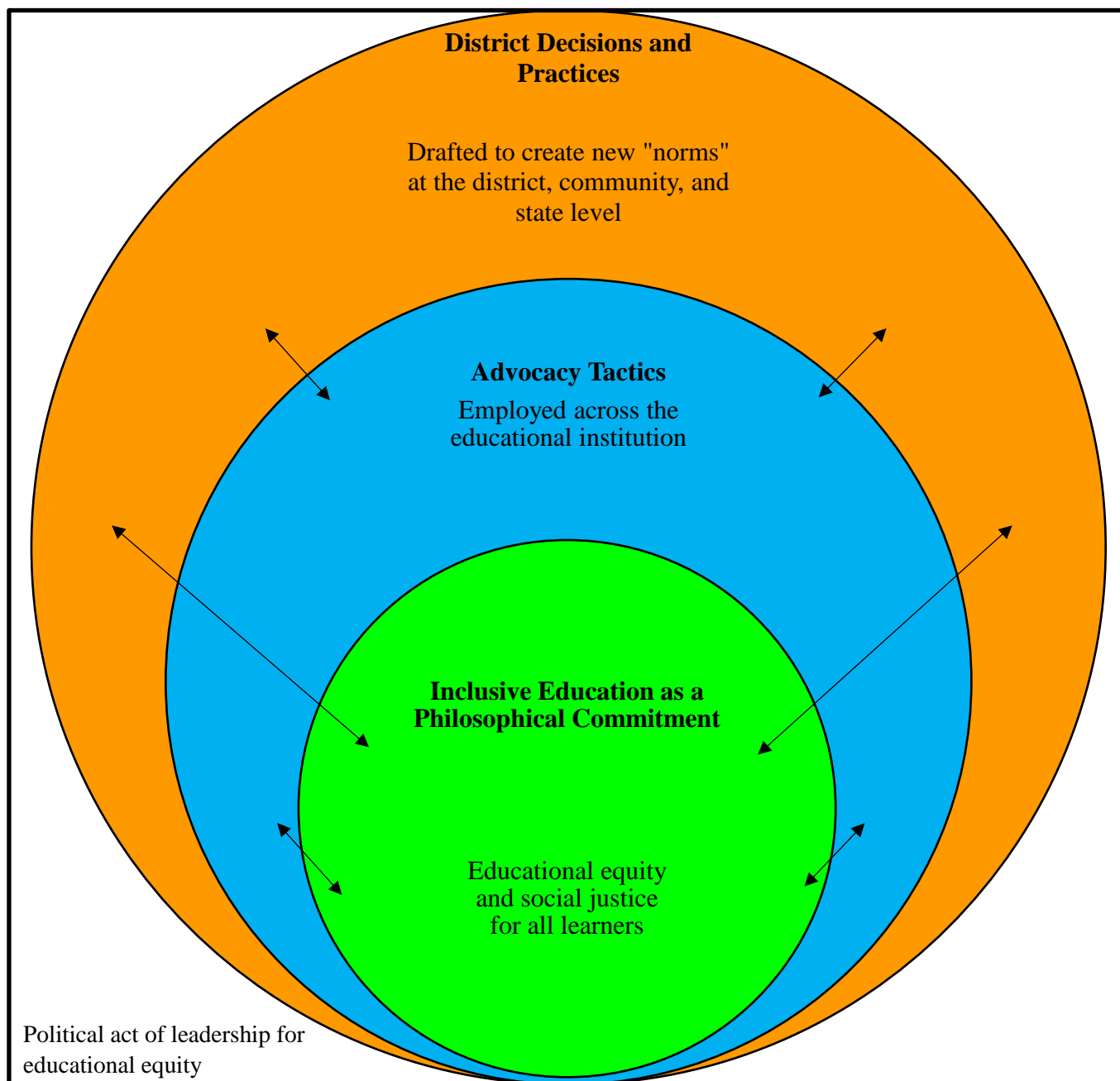
District Decisions and Practices

Drafted to create new "norms" at the district, community, and state level

Advocacy Tactics

Employed across the educational institution

Inclusive Education as a Philosophical Commitment

Educational equity and social justice for all learners

Political act of leadership for educational equity

Figure 7.1. Visual representation of the process of leadership for inclusive education at the district-level

Figure 7.2 Praxis Process Used to Create Inclusive Districts
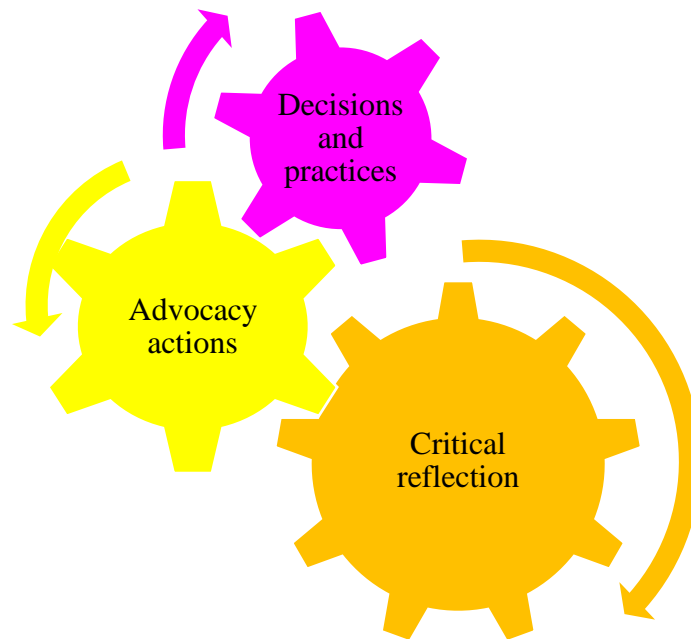
Figure 7.2. Visual representation of a pragmatic approach to praxis as district-level leaders who created equitable district-wide inclusion.

Reflection, multidimensional advocacy actions, and future district practices (see Figure 7.2).

Critical reflection involved analyzing the current state of practice. This reflective analysis

occurred around specific students with disabilities, around classroom-level practice, at the

school, and across schools with a lens of equity and social justice. Advocacy involved actions

intended to make small-scale changes to improve classroom or school building contexts.

Decisions and practices creation was the mode to set the precedence for the next course of action

or new "norm" across the district. These district-wide actions and decisions were a mechanism

to influence and lead community and state partners to enhance their understanding of inclusive

education. The interplay between critical reflection, advocacy actions, and district-wide practices creation reveal the commitment to process and sustainable inclusion. This praxis was the pragmatic method that district-level leaders used to enact equitable district-wide inclusive education.

Through this pragmatic method, participants positioned inclusive education as an approach to leadership that was ongoing and district specific. That is, there is not a step-by-step process that other district leaders doing this work can follow. There were a range of strategies used to sustain inclusive education in districts tailored to meet students', teachers', principals', and schools' needs. Further, inclusion is not necessarily ever complete. Participants led with a critical lens of educational equity at the core of their inclusive commitment. For participants in this study, educational leadership is a distinctly political act of equity and implementation is multidimensional. What united participants is that they made an internal commitment and took action, viewing each meeting, professional development opportunity, and district action as a process of continual improvement. They made a commitment grounded in equity to serve all learners within their inclusive district. In light of this process of leadership for inclusive education, implications are discussed next.

Implications

In the spirit of employing a transformative paradigm, it is my hope that this study contributes to conversations around inclusive school leadership and serves as an exemplar for other administrators to advocate and enact changes in their districts to include all students. This section provides suggestions for creating increased inclusive opportunities in order to improve social justice for students with disabilities. These implications fall into the categories of administrator preparation, teacher preparation, and federal and state policy.

Implications for Administrator Preparation

- Administrator preparation programs should infuse training on supporting the needs of students with disabilities from a building and district level. This training should be focused on leading schools and districts from an inclusive education perspective, focusing on access, equity, and the right to education for all learners within their neighborhood school. This means supporting leaders to examine the ways in which they can place students at the margin at the center of their advocacy, practice, and decisions.

- Administrator preparation programs should support leaders to develop the dispositional traits that will lead them to act as active agents of change within their districts to make decisions, shift long-standing cultural attitudes and practices, and commit to the progression of inclusive educational services. Administrators are the school officials who must navigate solutions when confronted with challenging school-wide issues. Dispositional traits, as discussed in this study, evident in advocacy situations have the potential to support other leaders to understand and respond to situations, or to understand how to present, act, and make decisions within their districts from a lens of educational equity.

- Administrator preparation programs should have leadership candidates critically reflect on the life changing relationships and poignant career events centered on individuals with disabilities that have influenced their core values. Critical reflection on these relationships and career situations could be used as a springboard for leadership candidates to develop their own commitment to social justice leadership.

- Administrator preparation programs should help leadership candidates become cognizant of the ways in which their disposition will affect school culture and can be utilized as an

advocacy strategy to disrupt school systems that once marginalized students based on ability, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, sex, and gender.

- Administrator preparation programs should ensure that future leaders are equipped with the background knowledge, research evidence, and practical skills to consider district decisions from a lens of inclusive education. As discussed in the analysis, leaders should be knowledgeable about how to develop a system of multi-tiered system of supports that merges academic intervention and behavioral supports for all students in a way that does not segregate students with complex support needs.

- Administrator preparation must educate candidates on ways to expand their scope of impact. For district-level administrator candidates, this includes discussion of strategies to create inclusive schoolwide inclusive practices across school buildings so that fully integrated educational practices reach the entire district. Furthermore, this scope includes partnering with community agencies, businesses, and universities to create fully inclusive community settings, where students with disabilities engage in typical age-appropriate activities, work experiences, or learning experiences. This will facilitate the scope of inclusive educational practices extending beyond districts, and more into communities and higher education. Administrators must understand that irrespective of barriers and challenges, the time to "scale up" (Sailor, 2015) inclusiveness in our communities is now.

- Administrator preparation programs need to train leadership candidates on organizational change. As data indicated, leaders need to understand a systems approach to organizational change in order develop and enact inclusive special education changes may affect all facets of the district, school, families, and community.

- Administrator preparation programs should develop candidates' understanding of the political underpinnings and unintended consequences of programs and service delivery options in districts. This would allow leaders to identify segregated systems of special education, navigate the change process, and build service delivery models that include all students.

- Administrator preparation programs need to provide specific training in special education law and how to navigate state-level regulations, which research shows is sparse within administrator preparation programs (Murkuria & Obiakor, 2006; Pazey & Cole, 2012). Participants in this study indicated that such understandings were key to their work.

Implications for Teacher Preparation

- Teacher preparation programs often educate candidates in either general education or special education. Programs need to ensure that all teacher education candidates gain strong content and pedagogical knowledge and the confidence to teach learners with a range of support needs. A bifurcated system of teacher education reinforces the idea that students with disabilities need "specialized" instruction with teachers who have specialized knowledge is needed (Kauffman et al., 2002). These separate teacher certification programs perpetuate the thinking that general education cannot serve students at the margins. This construct of "specialized" knowledge makes it difficult for general educators and special educators to share instructional responsibility. Administrators noted that in secondary education, where the general educator has the content knowledge expertise and the special educator is an expert with the process of modifying, adapting, and differentiating to meet a range of learner's needs, such sharing is particularly important. Training programs should provide more blending such that

teachers can gain knowledge around pedagogy for teaching students at the margins. This is how teachers will place students at the margins at the center of their thinking in the design, implementation, and data monitoring processes.

- Teacher preparation programs need to provide teacher candidates with effective examples of inclusive educational contexts to shape their vision, knowledge, and skills.

- Teacher preparation programs need to engage teacher candidates in conversations about their advocacy for students with disabilities and their collaboration with the administrative team. Specifically the ways that this advocacy and collaboration can create small-scale change within the classroom, grade-level, and school context. This would allow them to examine the ways in which their social justice framework can be used as a lens of inquiry to create change in their schools. Empowering teacher candidates to create circles of change affects students with disabilities directly.

Implications for Federal and State Policy

- Federal and state officials need to examine the forms and vocabulary used in state and federal reporting documents. Administrators who lead inclusive school districts have changed the conception of how special education can be delivered and current reporting mechanisms do not reflect these changes. Participants in this study have stated that policy should address aggregate amount of services rather than treating special education as a place.

- Federal officials need to examine funding at the federal government level. Funding must cut across general and special education systems. The state education agency's receipt of federal monies from two separate educational system sources creates a disparate system

arrangement that justifies educational silos for students with disabilities. The federal funding system must exemplify the intent of federal special education law.

- The data in this study indicate that district administrators are problem solving and continuing to work toward creating inclusive districts. Federal officials need to ensure that funding from the federal government continues to support the research and implementation of inclusive district practices at the national level. Technical assistance centers need the opportunity to continue working across states in order to initiate district changes. Research that prioritizes the implementation of inclusive special educational practices at the district level needs to be federally funded.

- State officials need to ensure that special education teacher endorsement or certification is not based on a specific disability category. Administrators spoke about a difficulty in providing inclusive special education services when states endorsed teachers with specific disability categories. A pool of people who are certified to teach all students with disabilities allows for more purposeful scheduling.

- State officials need to examine the funding for districts as it relates to special education. Funding for non-public school placements encourages districts to send students with complex disabilities out-of-district. Funding for segregated buildings based on behavior or cognitive disability needs to end. Instead, districts should be able to seek funding for consultants to help design inclusion that supports a range of learners. A finding of this study is that districts can learn and evolve when there is an emphasis on growth. Districts can learn to support students with disabilities right in the general education environment through using co-teaching service delivery models, providing access to the general education curriculum while providing specialized interventions to fit specific needs.

Federal and state-level support and funding is needed for training and technical assistance around supporting students in the least restrictive environment that they can serve them, which implies full inclusion.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study focuses on district-level special education leaders who are at the forefront in enactment of inclusive educational practices, which dictated a small sample size. Nonetheless a larger size might be more generalizable. However, the sample was large enough to address a gap in the literature in terms of focusing on a particular, key position of district-level administration in inclusive districts (Boscardin et al., 2009; Crockett et al., 2009; Pazey & Cole, 2012) and therefore may inform future practice (Bateman, 2007). The sample was large enough to provide data to analyze the ways in which leaders and their district enact inclusive services across school buildings in a district-wide manner. This research answers the call for research that is based on data-driven arguments (Crockett et al., 2009), rather than only theoretical or professional commentary. Future research, as inclusion continues to grow, may have access to a larger sample size. Nonetheless, generalizability was not necessarily the goal of this research; my aim was to "enlarge the conception of the phenomena" of the motivations, tactics, and actions that make district-level special education administrators effective (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 33). Given their backgrounds, teaching experiences, and contexts they lead, district-level special education administrators are different from one another. This study provides a glimpse into their differences and similarities.

Additional areas of inquiry and research that is needed to further understand the complexity of providing full access to general education classrooms in an era of educational standards and accountability would include participant observation of district-level leadership.

Such observations might provide deeper understanding of the complex organizations, regulations, and district procedures in which inclusive special education administrators' work. Case studies that address the collaborative relationships between inclusive special and general educators, principals at the building-level, and district leaders would provide deeper understanding into the leadership tactics that support inclusive environments. Understanding how inclusive special education is implemented in specific district contexts would provide examples of how services are delivered under the leadership of the participants in this study. It would also help future educators envision themselves as change agents and leaders in their contexts.

Conclusion

Inclusive schools have had success in attaining high achievement outcomes for all learners (Farrell et al., 2007; Huberman et al., 2012; McLeskey & Waldron, 2011; Waldron et al., 2011a). My intention for this dissertation was to examine the strategies and actions of district-level special education administrators as they enacted inclusive education. District leaders were selected because it is the attitudes and practices of these administrators that serve as an indicator of access for students with disabilities. I intentionally recruited participants who national experts and consultants, who are known for creating inclusive schools, had recommended. This purposeful sample was drawn from across the country to represent a variety of geographic locations and district population sizes. I wanted to understand how leaders created district practices that revolved around access and inclusion across multiple school buildings. The literature already illuminates the obstacles and challenges of doing social justice leadership work (Theoharis, 2007). This research was an inquiry to learn from exemplar district inclusive-oriented leaders so that other leaders can learn and replicate these tactics and policies.

I hope that the narratives of advocacy and district policies embedded within social justice leadership will benefit others who feel called to enact inclusive educational services with a vision of constructing public school districts that seek to educate and include all learners. As McLeskey et al. (2013) stated, "The rate of inclusion appears to depend on the extent to which inclusion is a priority in the individual schools and districts" (p. 35). Leaders in this study placed students with disabilities at the center of their practice, meaning their advocacy and actions created were viewed with a lens of ensuring inclusion for all learners. Considering this, I realize the importance of these findings as I work with administrators to develop reflective inquiry and a lens toward equity. For students with disabilities, like Gina, around the country, the advocacy and decisions made by district leaders affect their right to equitable education and full membership. As a field, we need to prioritize the national conversation around creating inclusive districts that advocate and create policy with attention toward creating equitable education for students who have been marginalized by the structures and systems within public schools. I am hopeful that this research will encourage other leaders to engage in social justice leadership such that equal education for all can become a reality in every district throughout the United States.

Appendices

Appendix 3.1. Positionality

My interest in learning about the perspectives of district-level special education leaders who have a commitment to inclusive education is a culmination of eight major influences in my professional career: (1) studying inclusive education within Syracuse University's undergraduate teacher preparation program and implementing co-teaching; (2) working intensively with a family to include their child with autism in academic, social, family, and community activities; (3) studying curriculum and teaching at Columbia University and implementing research; (4) teaching inclusive elementary classes where diverse learners had access to the general education curriculum and peers; (5) engaging in doctoral courses at Syracuse University that focused on leadership for inclusive education; (6) volunteering with inclusive school reform projects; (7) consulting as an inclusive education advocate to ensure inclusion of students with disabilities; and, (8) teaching undergraduate and graduate University courses in special education and teacher education. See Figure 3.1 called *History of Study* for a visual depiction of the major influences in my professional career described in this section. Detailed background information reveals my positionality (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) as a researcher and provides context for asking the research questions of this study.

Studying Inclusive Education and Implementing Co-Teaching

The conceptual vision of inclusive education was an underlying strand throughout my course work and teaching placements as an undergraduate student in Syracuse University's School of Education Inclusive Elementary and Special Education dual public teacher certification program. The School of Education was a pioneer in disability rights (Blatt, 1970, 1981; Blatt & Kaplan, 1966) and inclusive education (Biklen, 1989). Thus, embedded within the

courses in the School of Education, the program teaches that diverse student populations should

have physical access to the general education classroom and an emphasis was placed on

promoting belonging within general social and academic settings in schools. There are also

expectations that all students can access the curriculum when it is designed to be accessible and

accommodating. Attention to equity and social justice in education is imperative. Equipped

with these explicit theories of teaching and learning in my teaching toolbox, I evolved to become

an inclusive elementary and special educator deeply committed to issues around access, equity,

and creating school spaces that valued diverse learners.

My previous schooling experiences as an "honors student" within a mostly White,

working class school district was immeasurably limited by the lack of diversity in terms of

ability, race, culture, and socioeconomic status. My training allowed me to question my

responsibility as a future educator in ensuring that diverse learners had access to quality and

equitable schooling experiences that I was afforded. Growing up within New York State, I

recalled that students with educational labels[3] of multiple disabilities, emotional disturbance, and

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[3] For this dissertation, the disability categories used within PL108-446, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA, 2004) are used. While I recognize and believe these categories of disabilities are socially constructed, there are times when the specificity of the terminology is necessary to communicate and understand the actions of the administrators in this study. Person-first language is purposefully employed in order to be respectful for individuals with disabilities (Snow, 2013). Many disability rights advocates have demanded this respectful language be used, but I also recognized that there are vastly different beliefs on what disability language should be used by different identity groups and disability politics evolve (Baglieri, 2012). Person-first language means just that—people who happen to have a sensory, intellectual, physical, or emotional disability. The person is emphasized, not the impairment. I struggled around the politics of labeling, as well as using medical diagnoses and accompanying categories to describe groups of students; the language is not used with derogatory or negative connotation or to perpetuate stereotypes. The language used also reflects new legislation, such as the Rosa's law (2010) that changed the categorical label of mental retardation to intellectual disabilities.

autism were sent out of the district to a Board of Cooperative Educational Service (BOCES) program. Students who were labeled with intellectual disabilities were contained to a classroom at the end of the hallway. I remembered overhearing comments of ridicule toward students with learning disabilities. High school classes were tracked according to learning ability level. At Syracuse University, I learned to question unexamined schooling practices, especially in regards to special education. In my courses, professors shared stories, articles, and videos that taught me to develop a critical stance toward traditional methods of conducting special education and the endless possibilities associated with inclusion and equitable educational opportunities. In field experiences, professors challenged us to think critically about schooling practices around special education, advocate for at risk learners, and develop learning experiences that were accessible for a range of diverse students.

It was at Syracuse University that I learned to be a teacher advocate for inclusive education for *all* students. In co-taught courses called *Differentiation for Inclusive Education* and *Social Studies Methods* instructed by Dr. Julie Causton and Dr. George Theoharis, an assignment was to approach the lesson design process using a universal design for learning (UDL) (Causton-Theoharis et al., 2008; Rose & Meyer, 2006) mode of thinking in order to include adaptations, modifications, and rich social studies content, and then teach it in our host classroom. This course changed me. In the design process, I realized that during the social studies lesson time, all the students who had individualized educational programs (IEPs) left the classroom to receive remediated academic or related services support. This meant that three students with disabilities would consistently miss the social studies content. Thinking critically refusing to accept that these students with disabilities would be pulled out of the classroom and not be part of my instruction, I had invited each of the pull-out teachers and therapists to co-teach

with me. During this unit, these professionals joined our classroom lesson, providing

individualized academic and therapy support to students who were typically pulled-out for

instruction and co-taught by leading small-groups at station lessons. We had an extra reading

teacher and a speech and language pathologist. This was my initial experience leading a co-

taught classroom in an engaging and rich-content lesson. It was this experience that expanded

my understanding about the logistical operation of inclusive co-taught classrooms and planted a

seed of leadership for advocacy around inclusive education.

Studying Curriculum and Teaching and Research in a Diverse Urban Context

Advocating for Page's inclusive schooling taught me that as an educator I needed to

design strong learning experiences matched to curriculum standards that were accessible for a

range of learners. When I applied to graduate programs in teaching, I sought a University that

would allow me to gain skills in designing rich curriculum units and to work in a diverse, urban,

and inclusive classroom. My master's program at Columbia University's Teachers College

taught me to be a reflective teacher-researcher and curriculum designer. This experience in New

York City also heightened my commitment to working with linguistically and culturally diverse

student populations in inclusive classrooms. In my classroom, there were students of different

ethnicity, linguistic, family, and ability backgrounds. We had English-language learners,

students who had challenging behaviors and one labeled with an emotional disturbance, a student

with autism, and students with learning disabilities within our inclusive classroom.

This experience transformed my understanding of equity in education to become more

than merely cultivating genuine inclusion for students with disabilities. I began conceptualizing

inclusion as full participation in general education settings not only for students with and without

disabilities, but also for other students who are viewed as different by educational systems (e.g.,

students from families with low socioeconomic status, racial minorities, English language learners) and are subsequently denied access and participation in education based on these constructions of difference (Waitoller & Artiles, 2013).

Our curriculum needed to be differentiated to include this range of learners and focus was placed on academic outcomes of all learners, including those who represent the range of differences in race/ethnicity, culture, ability, and language. I co-taught alongside a seasoned first-grade teacher. We implemented action-research, as a "systematic process in solving educational problems and making improvements" (Tomal, 2003, p. 8). As Tomal (2003) explains, "Action research is conducted by a change agent (e.g., researcher or educator) who works with identified subjects within the context of a group (e.g., classroom or school) in conducting the study. The change agent acts as a catalyst in collecting data and then works with the group in a collaborative effort to develop actions to address the issues" (p. 9). One project aimed to incorporate educational and assistive technologies to support academic outcomes of diverse learners within the curriculum in our inclusive elementary classroom. Through this project, I found interest in identifying a problem, collecting data, making incremental changes to the classroom to increase access for diverse learners, reflecting on those changes, and continually implementing strategies that would allow for maximize academic and social inclusion for all students. At this point, I realized that small changes to classroom learning experiences significantly impact the inclusion of diverse learners. A culture of continual improvement and tinkering toward the fullest inclusion and participation was created through collaboration between us as teacher-researchers who sought to improve our practice. Being a reflective teacher-researcher in designing an inclusive classroom was the lens I took with me to my next

teaching position. This experience also demonstrated my interest in research around inclusive education.

Teaching Inclusive Elementary Classes where Diverse Learners had Access

In 2008, I applied for special education teaching jobs in upstate New York. As I learned about specific details of the positions during job interviews and offers with districts, each was for teaching in resource or self-contained special education classrooms. Special education was seen as a place, a specific location in the school, as opposed to a service delivered for students. It was clear that the districts that wanted me to hire me were not interested in changing their pull-out special education service provision. I decided to change my approach to job applications. I started applying to elementary teacher positions and being explicit with principals and hiring committees about my desire to have an inclusive classroom where special education and related services are provided within the classroom.

I was hired as a second-grade elementary teacher and later became a first-grade teacher. Diverse learners were included in the academic and social life of our classroom. I co-taught with special educators, teaching assistants, and reading teachers. Students' interests, needs, and differences were placed as the center of my curriculum planning in order to ensure access for all learners. I worked to advocate for the inclusion of students within my classroom. My students had genuine inclusive social and academic opportunities. It was during these years that I learned about facilitating inclusive classrooms, collaborating with multiple school professionals, the dance of co-teaching, designing and implementing solid, standards-based curriculum that welcomed all students, and advocating for diverse learners. I was able to enact genuine inclusive education at the classroom-level.

However, there was still much work to be done in this district. Since I taught at the primary grades, many of my young students were not yet identified with disabilities. I was often a member of the Child Study Team (CST), where the referral process and documentation of response to interventions (RTI) were reported to a school-wide committee. As students progressed in grades, individuals with multiple disabilities and autism were removed from their home-school to attend BOCES programs (e.g., special education services across districts that are offered at separate school buildings) that specialized in educating students with educational labels in these disability categories. Students with physical disabilities attended a self-contained classroom within the district. Students with intellectual disabilities were contained to a classroom within the school building. There were two middle-school BOCES classrooms for students with challenging behavior and emotional disturbance across from my elementary classroom. As I grew more comfortable implementing the daily curriculum and instruction, I learned about these separate and segregated programs. It quickly became clear that numerous sub-groups of students were marginalized and not provided access to general education curriculum, activities, and peers. In an attempt to process what was happening and express my dismay with the lack of educational equity, I discussed this with colleagues in my school and in other districts. I subtly questioned the special education practices and expressed this to administrators and colleagues in decision-making leadership positions (e.g., the reading specialist and coach, special education chair, teacher mentors, and grade level chairs). I realized that in my position I did not have the power to change the larger special education services, related services, or intervention structures within the school or district. At this point, I began thinking, reading, and investigating educational leadership, special education administration, and inclusive school reform.

It was this acknowledgement of inequitable special education service delivery that led me to enroll in a doctoral program to learn more about initiating and sustaining inclusive school reform, restructuring service delivery, and the role of administrators in this process. I had a clear understanding of the designing and implementing of curriculum needed from teachers at the classroom-level to ensure inclusive education. I set out to learn more about the leadership needed to improve access to education for all learners. I realized that I wanted my sphere of influence to impact entire schools and districts. This initial acknowledgement ultimately led me to embark on this dissertation investigation.

Engaging in Doctoral Courses that Focused on Leadership for Inclusive Education

In 2011 when I left the classroom to work on my doctorate, I enrolled in classes that would provide professional development for me on the leadership it takes to reform, create, and sustain inclusive education. In Dr. Theoharis' *Leadership for Inclusive Education* course, we learned about creating equitable schools for students from diverse populations. As a course assignment, I conducted case study audits based on school data and resources to examine inequities in practice. Gaining this awareness required a close look at the intersectionality of race, gender, income, language, and disability to determine if certain groups of students are being overrepresented in disproportionate, inequitable ways (i.e., in discipline referrals or special education) or through lower academic achievement (i.e., state test scores) or expectations (i.e., being tracked within classes). Administrators who are committed to enacting social justice are cognizant about and seek to transform inequities in schooling and opportunities that diverse learners experience. Instead of merely understanding the data as the reality of the school, Theoharis (2007) argues that a social justice leader "sees all data through a lens of equity" (252). This course equipped me with the theoretical framework of social justice, a more advanced

understanding of inclusive education as a philosophy of education, a method for analyzing school-level data, and strategies building-level administrators employ in equity-based leadership.

For three consecutive years, I also participated in Dr. Theoharis and Dr. Causton's *Summer Leadership Institutes* that aimed to provide educational leaders with current research, nationally recognized leaders in inclusive education, motivation to envision an equitable alternative, and strategies from real schools across the country that focus on educating students in equitable, high-achieving inclusive schools. Through these conferences, I learned methods to examine school-wide service delivery by looking at interruptions to student learning and classroom instruction as a result of reading, therapy, math, special education, and other pull-out programs. The focus is on leaders who aim to change service delivery models to create inclusion for students with disabilities.

I enrolled in other courses that have impacted my progression to this research study as well. These include Dr. Shed's *Leadership for Curriculum and Instruction* course that focused on understanding the national common core curriculum, the reform of K-12 curriculum and the state of instruction and curriculum within public education in America, and evaluating quality of teaching based on best practice implementation strategies. Within this course, I wrote and conducted presentations on the role administrator's play in differentiated curriculum and advocacy to ensure students with disabilities have access to this common core curriculum to ensure their career or college readiness. With its strong focus on disability studies, Dr. Taylor's *Social Policy and Disability* course offered a stark reminder that not too long ago students were denied access to public schooling and community inclusion, as they were often housed in institutions. This course provided a grounding of the history of disability oppression and educational marginalization that is integral to the current inclusive education movement. A

Disability Law course taught me the intricacies of the federal special education law in order to be an informed advocate with deep, concrete knowledge of the law. These courses on curriculum and instruction, disability studies, and educational law have shaped my understanding of leadership for equity and inclusion.

This constellation of courses has provided me a strong foundation of current aspects of public education. The studied topics are essential for leadership, including leadership for inclusive schools, strong curriculum and instruction, disability studies, and special education law. This is the background in educational leadership that I bring to this dissertation research.

Volunteering with Inclusive School Reform Projects

I participated in a University-School partnership that supported elementary schools within the Syracuse City School District to change their special education service delivery to create inclusive educational environments for all students. Within this project, we helped facilitate school special education professionals and administrators to construct a visual representation of current special education service delivery, including self-contained, resource, and class based support arrangements. Then collaboratively with the school team, we worked to restructure the human resources in the school in order to provide special education services within the context of general education classrooms. We provided professional development to educators around differentiation of curriculum, modification for individual students, social supports, and challenging behavior. This multi-year partnership resulted in an article titled, "Inclusive reform as a response to high-stakes pressure?: Leading toward inclusion in the age accountability" (Theoharis, Causton, & Tracy-Bronson, 2014). This research project and article based on inclusive reform, leadership, and academic outcomes for students with disabilities significantly impacted the knowledge and vision for this dissertation.

In addition, I was part of a consultation team that worked with Auburn Central School District and Chittenango Central School District to examine their special education models and restructure human resources to provide special education services in inclusive settings. At Auburn, we conducted observations of the school context where special education services were delivered, analyzed all elementary special education teachers' schedules and specific case loads, met with administrators to get information about their special education program, collected data on the number of students with disabilities, number of teachers and paraprofessionals, and the special education and related services that students with disabilities received. Working with Dr. Causton and Dr. Theoharis, we created an *Audit of Elementary Special Education Programs and Service* that contained detailed information about our general observations, recommendations for restructuring, professional development resources, and a timeline for implementing inclusive school reform based on changing the special education service delivery model. We reported this Audit to building- and district-level administrators, as well as to the Board of Education.

At Chittenango, we engaged in a similar process to understand their special education service delivery and offered suggestions for inclusive district reform of special education. Here we also mapped out current special education service delivery models in a visual format for each administrator. Then, we presented our findings to a school district leadership team comprised of teachers and administrators, and discussed next steps for inclusive school reform. We also provided professional development to the leadership team on co-teaching, collaboration, and differentiation. Afterwards, Dr. Causton and I co-taught a graduate course called *Collaboration and Cooperation in Inclusive Schools* and invited 30 teachers from the district to enroll.

In these experiences of inclusive school reform, I realized that the districts requested support from our University-based team because they needed guidance on how to change the

structure of special education services to create a climate of belonging and inclusive academic experiences for all students. Our role was capacity building around restructuring human resources, enacting principal tenets of inclusive reform, and providing professional development to various professionals in schools. Administrators are the key stakeholders who lead schools and districts, and they were requesting audits about their special education programs and recommendations about implementing inclusive services changes. It was paradoxical that upon taking a litmus test of the special education services, administrators realized they were creating instructional practices that separated students, yet needed support in creating, initiating, and enacting inclusive school change. I realized that both building-level and district-level administrators needed support and recommendations grounded in practice in order to initiate, engage, and sustain inclusive education. Through these reform projects and an understanding of the literature around inclusive school reform, I recognized there was a need for a qualitative study investigating the perspectives of special education administrators involved in inclusive education.

Consulting as an Inclusive Education Advocate

I have also worked extensively as an inclusive education advocate in consulting roles. Dr. Causton and I provided an independent education evaluation (IEE) (IDEIA, 34 CFR 300.503, 2004) for a student with multiple disabilities. We observed the student in his home environment, analyzed education, assistive technology, and therapy reports, reviewed his IEP, and constructed an evaluation of the student's communication and academic needs. It lead to Dr. Causton's expert witness testimony during a due process hearing that eventually allowed the student to be included within his home-school.

I served as an educational consult at a different district regarding the inclusion of a second-grade student with an intellectual disability. I observed the student in an inclusive education environment, met with teachers and administrators, and reviewed student documents. Then, I wrote an IEE of the student's academic, communication, and behavioral needs. I met with district administrators, school administrators, general educators, special educators, special area teachers, paraprofessionals, and the parents to discuss academic, communication, and behavioral strategies that would support the student. Originally, the teachers and administrators advised for a more restrictive educational placement within a self-contained classroom for this student for the following year. They wanted her to move to a separate special education classroom, meaning that she would not have access to the general education curriculum and peers. This IEE lead to the student to continue receiving special education services within the LRE and having maximum access to the general education context.

In the preceding consultant experiences, there were numerous interactions with building- and district-level administrators. The reason that families made contact was that the school officials were essentially advocating against the student with a disability and were justifying educational placement in segregated settings. It prompted me to reflect on the role of administrators in creating equitable environment for a range of learners with diverse abilities. It directly impacted my passion to learn, study, and interact with special education leaders with the opposite action. I wanted to research special education leaders who were advocates and paved paths for students with disabilities to be fully included within general settings in schools.

In another consulting project, I served as an evaluator in a Federal District Court class action case lead by four organizations: Disability Rights New Jersey (DRNJ); The Education Law Center of New Jersey (ELC); The Statewide Parent Advocacy Network (SPAN); and The

Arc of New Jersey (ARC). I aided in a large-scale systematic review of special education

placements in order to ensure that students with disabilities in New Jersey are educated in the

LRE. I personally analyzed twenty sets of materials, including IEPs, educational testing, and

reports for students with disabilities. Through this experience and the documentation I was

required to conduct, I realized that the educational programs for many students with disabilities

in this state was not individualized. The educational placements were restrictive and there was

no documentation of supplemental aids and services being used for many students. This

experience caused me to reflect on the special education administrators' role in advocating for

LRE placements and structuring schools in such a way that allows for special education services

to be conducted within inclusive contexts. I also began critically question the role of IEPs in

schools, the types of programs available, and the administrator's role in providing LRE.

While writing the data chapters, I continued my consulting. I provided support for six

families that led to their child being included in general education at their neighborhood districts.

I worked with administrators in three districts to engage in inclusive school reform. This work

allowed me to employ the advocacy, resistive tactics, and practices participants in this study

shared. This work allowed me to learn from the experiences of participants at the same time as

implementing these tactics, strategies, and practices. The simultaneous nature of conducting

research and enacting district-level inclusive education led me to understand the transformative

nature of the participants' work in their own districts.

Professor in Special Education and Teacher Education Programs

During this research, I have assumed a tenure-track Assistant Professor position at

Stockton University in New Jersey. In this role, my primary responsibility is to teach graduate

courses in the special education. These graduate students are pursuing their master's degree and

certification in special education. In this capacity, my work involves bringing a critical inclusive education perspective to teacher candidates who often work in schools that serve students with disabilities in self-contained programs, pull-out resource rooms, and in separate special classes that in different buildings. I also teach undergraduate courses in special education and disability studies in education for students in the teacher education program. This provides an opportunity to infuse DSE and critical inclusive education at the onset of teacher candidates' careers.

In addition to teaching courses, I also was selected to serve as a University Faculty Fellow charged with incorporating new ideas around educating students with disabilities within the teacher education program. In this capacity and in collaboration with faculty colleagues, an undergraduate course focusing on educating students with disabilities has changed its name from "Educating Students with Special Needs" to "Educating Students with Disabilities" to "Inclusive Learning in Education" to reflect faculty conversation and incorporation of inclusive practices within the program. Focus on supporting diverse students, regardless of academic, language, communication, behavioral needs, has been infused throughout program courses. There has been an increased focus on educating English learners and new course was approved. Furthermore, a professional development workshop on universal design for learning (UDL) conducted by the nationally-recognized CAST organization supported faculty capacity to meet the needs of diverse learners, adjust course assignments, and infuse new discussion around inclusive practices into methods courses. This work happened while writing the data chapters for this dissertation study and offered me a unique sense of urgency about the transformative work being done within institutions of higher education.

In sum, my research questions have undoubtedly been influenced by my initial course work at Syracuse University that prompted me to begin to see myself as an advocate, my

involvement with a family who advocated for the inclusion of their child with autism, the work I did as an inclusive classroom teacher, and my involvement in inclusive school reform with districts. My consulting projects provided direct access to interactions with school leaders and prompted unanswered questions that directly influenced this study.

My professional experiences have initiated a desire to learn about, explore, and hear the voices and perspectives of administrators who value and directly advocate for students with disabilities to be educated within inclusive educational environments. For this reason, this dissertation focuses on the powerful advocacy of administrators who are committed to providing all students with disabilities with an inclusive education. My meandering professional path prompted awareness that other administrators and those interested in inclusive education could learn from what they had to contribute.

Appendix 3.2. Recruitment Email

Hello! I am a doctoral candidate at Syracuse University in the School of Education studying

Leadership for Inclusive Education. I am quite familiar with your research, and am reaching out

to you to see if you might be able to make a connection for me.

I am contacting District-Level Administrators who are providing leadership for authentic

inclusion of students with disabilities in general education contexts in order to conduct a

qualitative interview study. Do you have any recommendations of district-level inclusive-

oriented leaders?

Sincerely,

Chelsea Tracy-Bronson

Syracuse University
School of Education

Appendix 3.3. Recruitment Flyer

SCHOOL OF EDUCATION
Department of Teaching and Leadership

RECRUITMENT

Administrators: If you provide district-level leadership in a school district that provides inclusive special education services to students with disabilities, I would like to interview you!

Note: This recruitment flyer and solicitation is for research purposes.

Purpose of Research: This research seeks to interview district-level administrators who provide leadership for authentic inclusion of students with disabilities in general education contexts. I want to hear your stories, experiences, advocacy actions, and about your leadership practice. I want to explore your stories about inclusive education, actions to eliminate traditional segregated special education spaces or classrooms, and struggles to sustain equitable educational opportunities. I want to hear your perspective.

Time Commitment: You will be interviewed separately in a confidential, private location. You will be able to choose where and when the interviews take place. Alternatively, you are welcome to have a phone interview. The interviews will last for no longer than two-hours. Each participant will be interviewed three separate times, for no longer than six hours.

Contact Information: Please contact Chelsea Tracy-Bronson at cptracyb@syr.edu to discuss your participation in this research project.

Chelsea P. Tracy-Bronson
Syracuse University
School of Education
Syracuse University

3.4 Participant Consent Form

Syracuse University IRB Approved

SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY   OCT 9 - 2013   OCT 8 - 2014

SCHOOL OF EDUCATION
Department of Teaching and Leadership

PARTICIPANT CONSENT LETTER

District-Level Leadership in Inclusive School Districts

Dear Participant,

Our names are Julie N. Causton-Theoharis (an assistant professor at Syracuse University) and Chelsea P. Tracy-Bronson (a graduate student at Syracuse University) and we are inviting you to participate in a research study. Involvement in the study is voluntary, so you may choose to participate or not. This sheet will explain the study to you and please feel free to ask questions about the research, if you have any. I will be happy to explain anything in detail if you wish.

We are interested in learning about the experiences of district-level administrators who work in a district that provides special education services within the context of a general education classroom. That is, we are interested in documenting the words, experiences, actions, and struggles of leaders in districts who provide inclusive special education services, without the use of traditional pull-out or self-contained special education. You have been selected because of your leadership of a school district that includes all children within the general education academic and social activities, and you have an important perspective about this work.

This research will consist of interviews. We will focus our data collection over this academic year, and would like you to participate in the following:

- An initial interview of a maximum two hours of your time.
- A second interview of a maximum two hours of your time.
- A third interview of a maximum two hours of your time.

Your participation in this research will consist of a maximum of six hours of your time over the course of one year.

The purpose of these interviews will focus on understanding your experiences as an administrator who provides leadership in a district that creates an inclusive educational environment.

Your cooperation in this study will make a vital contribution to understanding of inclusive schooling practices, specifically how inclusive-oriented leadership impacts the special education service provision for all learners.

Following the second interview, I may also ask you if you would be willing to allow me to spend a day with you, "shadowing" you at your work site. The purpose would be providing me with a "snapshot" or a day-in-the-life of a district-level leader. You will need to provide additional consent for this "shadowing day" at that time.

The study presents only minimal risks to you as a participant. The potential risks other than inconvenience and sharing emotional experiences are related to the controversial nature of inclusive schools. To protect against these risks, we will use a made-up name for you and your school to keep information confidential, and we will not reveal any identifiable details for any reports of this study. We will assign a made-up name and will have a key to indicate which pseudonym belongs to which participant. We will black-out your name on any related documents you provide to us. Also, in any articles, texts, or presentations we make, we will use made-up names for you. We will remind you of your right to not answer any question that makes you uncomfortable and your right to withdraw from the interview at any time.

Participation in the study is voluntary. You may stop or withdraw, either verbally or in writing, from this study at any time without penalty or loss. A signed copy of this consent form will be given to you for your records. We would like to audiotape the interviews with the purpose of transcribing the interviews in order to analyze it. All interview data, observation data and fieldnotes will be typed and stored electronically. All electronic information will be kept on a laptop that can be accessed only by the researchers' password. This data will be kept for 5 years and then will be destroyed.
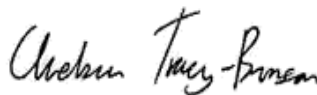
Please note that a copy of this consent form will be given to you, the participant, for ongoing reference. If you need information or have questions about the study, you can contact either of us at the phone, email, or addresses listed below. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, or you have any other questions, concerns, or complaints that you wish to address to someone other than the researchers, or you cannot reach the researchers, please contact the Syracuse University Internal Review Board at 315.443.3013.

Thank you very much for your interest in this project.

Sincerely,

Julie N. Causton-Theoharis, Ph.D.
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cptracyb@syr.edu

I am willing to participate in this study. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time without penalty. I also certify that I am at least 18 years of age.

☐ Yes: I consent to audio recording of the interviews.

☐ No: I do not consent to audio recording of the interviews.

I am willing to allow the researcher to ask me to spend a day "shadowing" at my work site after the second interview. I understand that I will need to give additional consent to allow this.

☐ Yes: I consent to allowing you to request permission to "shadow" me.

☐ No: I do not consent and do not wish for you to request permission for you to "shadow" me.

Printed Name of Participant:_____

Signature of Participant:_____

Date: _____

Printed Name of Researcher:_____

Signature of Researcher:_____

Date: _____

Syracuse University IRB Approved

OCT 9 - 2013   OCT 8 - 2014

Appendix 3.5 List of National and Regional Organizations

Organization Name	Description of Organization and Website Information
Maryland Coalition on Inclusive Education	An organization committed to supporting inclusive education and to providing equal opportunity for students with disabilities that provides services for individual families, school systems, professional development, and legal advocacy. Website Information: www.mcie.org
National Inclusion Project	The project "partners with communities and recreational programs to enable them to include children with disabilities in ALL of their activities" and believe that "ALL children can participate, ALL children can make a friend, and ALL children can succeed." Website Information: www.inclusionproject.org
School-wide Integrated Framework for Transformation	A federally funded center charged with using research based strategies (e.g., administrative leadership, multi-tiered system of support, community and family partnership and inclusive practices) to transform schools to cultivate effective inclusive education. According to the website the SWIFT center "provides academic and behavioral support to promote the learning and academic achievement of all students, including students with disabilities and those with the most extensive needs." Website Information: http://www.swiftschools.org

National Center for Educational Outcomes	There are five priority areas of the NCEO, according to their website: • "Working with states and federal agencies to identify important outcomes of education for students with disabilities, English language learners (ELLs), and ELLs with disabilities." • "Examining the participation of students in national and state assessments, including the use of accommodations and alternate assessments." • "Evaluating national and state practices in reporting assessment information on students with disabilities, ELLs, and ELLs with disabilities" • "Bridging general education, special education, English as a Second Language or bilingual education, and other systems as they work to increase accountability for results of education for all students." • "Conducting directed research in the area of assessment and accountability." Website Information: http://nceo.info/About
National Center of Inclusive Education	A national center that is committed to being a "leader in the transformation of schools so that students of all abilities are successfully learning in their home schools within general education settings." Website information: http://www.iod.unh.edu/inclusiveed.aspx

Appendix 3.6. Inclusion Survey (Praisner, 2000)

The purpose of this survey is to determine the opinions of elementary principals toward the inclusion movement and to gather information about the types of training and experience that administrators have. There are no right or wrong answers so please address the questions to the best of your knowledge and provide us with what **you believe**.

SECTION I- Demographic Information

The following information will be only be used to describe the population being studied.

1. Approximate number of all students in your building:
     _ 0-250 _ 251-500 _ 501-750 _ 751-1000 _ 1000 or more

2. Average class size for all students:
     _ 0-9 _ 10-19 _ 20-29 _ 30-39 _ 40 or more

3. Approximate percentage of students with IEPs in your building: (*Do not include gifted*)
     _ 0-5% _ 6-10% _ 11-15% _ 16-20% _ 21% or more

4. Approximate number of students with IEPs in your building that are included in regular education classrooms for at least 75% of their school day: (*Do not include gifted*)
     _ 0-20% _ 21-40% _ 41-60% _ 61-80% _ 81-100%

SECTION II- Training and Experience

1. Your age:
     _ 20-30 _ 31-40 _ 41-50 _ 51-60 _ 61 or more

2. Gender:
     _ Male _ Female

3. Years of full-time regular education teaching experience:
     _ 0 _ 1-6 _ 7-12 _ 13-18 _ 19 or more

4. Years of full-time special education teaching experience:
     _ 0 _ 1-6 _ 7-12 _ 13-18 _ 19 or more

5. Years as an elementary school principal:
     _ 0-5 _ 6-10 _ 11-15 _ 16-20 _ 21 or more

6. Approximate number of special education **credits** in your formal training:

_ 0 _ 1-9 _ 10-15 _ 16-21 _ 22 or more

7. Approximate number of in-service training **hours** in inclusive practices:
 _ 0 _ 1-8 _ 9-16 _ 17-24 _ 25 or more

8. Mark the areas below that were included in your formal training such as courses, workshops, and/or significant portions of courses **(10% of content or more)**.

 _ Characteristics of students with disabilities
 _ Behavior management class for working with students with disabilities
 _ Academic programming for students with disabilities
 _ Special education law
 _ Crisis intervention
 _ Life skills training for students with disabilities
 _ Teambuilding
 _ Interagency cooperation
 _ Family intervention training
 _ Supporting and training teachers to handle inclusion
 _ Change process
 _ Eliciting parent and community support for inclusion
 _ Fostering teacher collaboration
 _ Field based experiences with actual inclusion activities

9. Are you certified in special education?
 _ No _ Yes

10. Does your school have a specific plan to deal with crisis involving students with special needs?
 _ No _ Yes

11. Do you have personal experience with (an) individual(s) with a disability outside the school setting (i.e., family member, friend, etc.)?
 _ No _ Yes
If yes, please indicate relationship to you.
 _ Self _ Immediate family member _ Extended family member _ Friend
 _ Neighbor _ Other: _____

12. Does your school district's mission statement include a **vision** for the inclusion of students with disabilities?
 _ No _ Yes

13. In general, what has your experience been with the following types of students in the school setting? Mark one level of experience for each disability category.

Disability Type	Negative Experience	Somewhat Negative Experience	No Experience	Somewhat Positive Experience	Positive Experience
Specific learning disability					
Mental retardation					
Serious emotional disturbance					
Blindness/visual impairment					
Deafness/hearing impairment					
Speech and language impairment					
Other health impairment					
Physical disability					
Multihandicap					
Autism/pervasive developmental disorder					
Neurological impairment					

SECTION III- Attitudes Toward Inclusion of Students with Special Needs
Please mark your response to each item using the following scale:

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Uncertain	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. Only teachers with extensive special education experience can be expected to deal with students with severe/profound disabilities in a school setting.					
2. Schools with both students with severe and profound disabilities and students without disabilities enhance the learning experiences of students with severe/profound disabilities.					
3. Students with severe/profound disabilities are too impaired to benefit from the activities of a regular school.					
4. A good regular educator can do a lot to help a student with a severe/profound disability.					
5. In general, students with severe/profound disabilities should be placed in special classes/schools specifically designed for them.					
6. Students without disabilities can profit from contact with students with severe/profound disabilities.					
7. Regular education should be modified to meet the needs of all students including students with severe/profound disabilities.					
8. It is unfair to ask/expect regular teachers to accept students with severe/profound disabilities.					
9. No discretionary financial resources should be allocated for the integration of students with severe/profound disabilities.					
10. It should be policy and/or law that students with severe/profound disabilities are integrated into regular educational programs and activities.					

SECTION IV- Most Appropriate Placements for Students with Disabilities
Although individual characteristics would need to be considered, please mark the placement that, in general, **you believe** is most appropriate for students with the following disabilities:

Specific Learning Disability
_ Special education services outside regular school
_ Special class for most or all of the school day
_ Part-time special education class
_ Regular classroom instruction and resource room
_ Regular classroom instruction for most of day
_ Full-time regular education with support

Mental Retardation
_ Special education services outside regular school
_ Special class for most or all of the school day
_ Part-time special education class
_ Regular classroom instruction and resource room
_ Regular classroom instruction for most of day
_ Full-time regular education with support

Serious Emotional Disturbance
_ Special education services outside regular school
_ Special class for most or all of the school day
_ Part-time special education class
_ Regular classroom instruction and resource room
_ Regular classroom instruction for most of day
_ Full-time regular education with support

Blindness/visual impairment
_ Special education services outside regular school
_ Special class for most or all of the school day
_ Part-time special education class
_ Regular classroom instruction and resource room
_ Regular classroom instruction for most of day
_ Full-time regular education with support

Deafness/hearing impairment
_ Special education services outside regular school
_ Special class for most or all of the school day
_ Part-time special education class
_ Regular classroom instruction and resource room
_ Regular classroom instruction for most of day
_ Full-time regular education with support

Speech and language impairment
_ Special education services outside regular school
_ Special class for most or all of the school day
_ Part-time special education class
_ Regular classroom instruction and resource room
_ Regular classroom instruction for most of day
_ Full-time regular education with support

Other health impairment
_ Special education services outside regular school
_ Special class for most or all of the school day
_ Part-time special education class
_ Regular classroom instruction and resource room
_ Regular classroom instruction for most of day
_ Full-time regular education with support

Physical Disability
_ Special education services outside regular school
_ Special class for most or all of the school day
_ Part-time special education class
_ Regular classroom instruction and resource room
_ Regular classroom instruction for most of day
_ Full-time regular education with support

Multihandicap
_ Special education services outside regular school
_ Special class for most or all of the school day
_ Part-time special education class
_ Regular classroom instruction and resource room
_ Regular classroom instruction for most of day
_ Full-time regular education with support

Autism/pervasive developmental disorder
_ Special education services outside regular school
_ Special class for most or all of the school day
_ Part-time special education class
_ Regular classroom instruction and resource room
_ Regular classroom instruction for most of day
_ Full-time regular education with support

Neurological impairment
_ Special education services outside regular school
_ Special class for most or all of the school day
_ Part-time special education class
_ Regular classroom instruction and resource room
_ Regular classroom instruction for most of day
_ Full-time regular education with support

Thank you for taking the time to answer all of the questions on this survey. We appreciate your assistance with this study!

Appendix 3.7. Description of Inclusion Survey Changes

This survey was originally developed to administer to building-level principals. As a result, some of the language used in the questions do not apply to the participants of my research study. Therefore, I adapted the survey. The changes make each question relevant for district-level administrators. In the following paragraphs, I have detailed these changes.

In Section I called *Demographic Information*, the first question asked principals to indicate the number of students in their building. For this question, I will have district-level administrators report the category of population of their district as small, mid-size, or large. For question three, principals report the percentage of students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) in their building. Participants in my study will indicate how many students with IEPs in their district. Question four asked about the number of students with IEPs in the building that are included in regular education classrooms for at least 75% of their school day. This is changed to the number of students in the entire district.

In Section II called *Training and Experience*, principals needed to report the number of years they were an elementary school principal. The informants for the original study was elementary school principals (Praisner, 2000; Praisner, 2003). This was changed to have administrators in my study simply indicate years as a principal and the type (e.g., elementary, middle, or high). In question 8, it asks about topic areas included in administrator's training. I added three options to the original list. They are: inclusion, co-teaching, differentiation, instructional practices for students from diverse backgrounds, and technology to support inclusion. These options were purposefully added to reflect current effective practices (McLeskey et al., 2013).

There are no changes in Section III called *Attitudes toward Inclusion of Students with Special Needs*. In Section II, question 13 and Section IV called *Most Appropriate Placements for Students with Disabilities*, I changed language used to identify categories of disabilities. For example, since a law passed in 2010 by the U.S. Congress eliminates the term mental retardation and replaces it with intellectual disability in federal laws, I changed this in the survey. To reflect categories of disabilities in federal special education law (IDEA, 2004), Autism/pervasive developmental disorder was changed to autism. For the same rationale, Multihandicap was changed to multiple disabilities. Serious emotional disturbance was changed to emotional disturbance, to reflect respect utilizing a person-first orientation (Snow, 2013). My purpose in changing the language used in the survey is to closely align it with the language in IDEA (2004) and person-first language (Snow, 2013).

Appendix 3.8. Inclusion Survey (Praisner, 2000) Modified for District-Level Administrators

The purpose of this survey is to determine the opinions of administrators toward inclusive education and to gather information about the types of training and experience that administrators have. There are no right or wrong answers so please address the questions to the best of your knowledge and provide us with what **you believe**.

SECTION I- Demographic Information

The following information will be only be used to describe the population being studied.

1. How would you describe your district in terms of population:
   ☐ small   ☐ mid-size   ☐ large

2. Average class size for all students:
   ☐ 0-9   ☐ 10-19   ☐ 20-29   ☐ 30-39   ☐ 40 or more

3. Approximate percentage of students with IEPs in your district: (*Do not include gifted*)
   ☐ 0-5%   ☐ 6-10%   ☐ 11-15%   ☐ 16-20%   ☐ 21% or more

4. Approximate number of students with IEPs in your district that are included in regular education classrooms for at least 75% of their school day: (*Do not include gifted*)
   ☐ 0-20%   ☐ 21-40%   ☐ 41-60%   ☐ 61-80%   ☐ 81-100%

SECTION II- Training and Experience

1. Your age:
   ☐ 20-30   ☐ 31-40   ☐ 41-50   ☐ 51-60   ☐ 61 or more

2. Gender:
   ☐ Male   ☐ Female

3. Years of full-time regular education teaching experience:
   ☐ 0   ☐ 1-6   ☐ 7-12   ☐ 13-18   ☐ 19 or more

4. Years of full-time special education teaching experience:
   ☐ 0   ☐ 1-6   ☐ 7-12   ☐ 13-18   ☐ 19 or more

5. Years as a school principal:
   ☐ 0-5   ☐ 6-10   ☐ 11-15   ☐ 16-20   ☐ 21 or more

   ☐ elementary

☐ middle
☐ high

6. Approximate number of special education **credits** in your formal training:
☐ 0   ☐ 1-9   ☐ 10-15   ☐ 16-21   ☐ 22 or more

7. Approximate number of inservice training **hours** in inclusive practices:
☐ 0   ☐ 1-8   ☐ 9-16   ☐ 17-24   ☐ 25 or more

8. Mark the areas below that were included in your formal training such as courses, workshops, and/or significant portions of courses **(10% of content or more)**.

☐ Characteristics of students with disabilities
☐ Behavior management class for working with students with disabilities
☐ Academic programming for students with disabilities
☐ Special education law
☐ Crisis intervention
☐ Life skills training for students with disabilities
☐ Teambuilding
☐ Interagency cooperation
☐ Family intervention training
☐ Supporting and training teachers to handle inclusion
☐ Change process
☐ Eliciting parent and community support for inclusion
☐ Fostering teacher collaboration
☐ Field based experiences with actual inclusion activities
☐ Inclusion
☐ Co-teaching
☐ Differentiation
☐ Instructional practices for students from diverse backgrounds
☐ Technology to support inclusion

9. Are you certified in special education?
☐ No   ☐ Yes

10. Does your school have a specific plan to deal with crisis involving students with special needs?
☐ No   ☐ Yes

11. Do you have personal experience with (an) individual(s) with a disability outside the school setting (i.e., family member, friend, etc.)?
☐ No   ☐ Yes
If yes, please indicate relationship to you.
☐ Self   ☐ Immediate family member   ☐ Extended family member   ☐ Friend
☐ Neighbor ☐ Other: _____

12. Does your school district's mission statement include a **vision** for the inclusion of students with disabilities?

       ☐ No   ☐ Yes

13. In general, what has your experience been with the following types of students in the school setting? Mark one level of experience for each disability category.

Disability Type	Negative Experience	Somewhat Negative Experience	No Experience	Somewhat Positive Experience	Positive Experience
Specific learning disability					
Intellectual disability					
Emotional disturbance					
Blindness/visual impairment					
Deafness/hearing impairment					
Speech and language impairment					
Other health impairment					
Physical disability					
Multiple disabilities					
Autism					
Neurological impairment					

SECTION III- Attitudes Toward Inclusion of Students with Special Needs

Please mark your response to each item using the following scale:

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Uncertain	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. Only teachers with extensive special education experience can be expected to deal with students with severe/profound disabilities in a school setting.					
2. Schools with both students with severe and profound disabilities and students without disabilities enhance the learning experiences of students with severe/profound disabilities.					
3. Students with severe/profound disabilities are too impaired to benefit from the activities of a regular school.					
4. A good regular educator can do a lot to help a student with a severe/profound disability.					
5. In general, students with severe/profound disabilities should be placed in special classes/schools specifically designed for them.					
6. Students without disabilities can profit from contact with students with severe/profound disabilities.					
7. Regular education should be modified to meet the needs of all students including students with severe/profound disabilities.					
8. It is unfair to ask/expect regular teachers to accept students with severe/profound disabilities.					
9. No discretionary financial resources should be allocated for the integration of students with severe/profound disabilities.					
10. It should be policy and/or law that students with severe/profound disabilities are integrated into regular educational programs and activities.					

SECTION IV- Most Appropriate Placements for Students with Disabilities

Although individual characteristics would need to be considered, please mark the placement that, in general, **you believe** is most appropriate for students with the following disabilities:

Specific Learning Disability
☐ Special education services outside regular school
☐ Special class for most or all of the school day
☐ Part-time special education class
☐ Regular classroom instruction and resource room
☐ Regular classroom instruction for most of day
☐ Full-time regular education with support

Intellectual Disability
☐ Special education services outside regular school
☐ Special class for most or all of the school day
☐ Part-time special education class
☐ Regular classroom instruction and resource room
☐ Regular classroom instruction for most of day
☐ Full-time regular education with support

Emotional Disturbance
☐ Special education services outside regular school
☐ Special class for most or all of the school day
☐ Part-time special education class
☐ Regular classroom instruction and resource room
☐ Regular classroom instruction for most of day
☐ Full-time regular education with support

Blindness/Visual Impairment
☐ Special education services outside regular school
☐ Special class for most or all of the school day
☐ Part-time special education class
☐ Regular classroom instruction and resource room
☐ Regular classroom instruction for most of day
☐ Full-time regular education with support

Deafness/Hearing Impairment
☐ Special education services outside regular school
☐ Special class for most or all of the school day
☐ Part-time special education class
☐ Regular classroom instruction and resource room
☐ Regular classroom instruction for most of day
☐ Full-time regular education with support

Speech and Language Impairment
☐ Special education services outside regular school
☐ Special class for most or all of the school day
☐ Part-time special education class
☐ Regular classroom instruction and resource room
☐ Regular classroom instruction for most of day

☐ Full-time regular education with support
Other Health Impairment
☐ Special education services outside regular school
☐ Special class for most or all of the school day
☐ Part-time special education class
☐ Regular classroom instruction and resource room
☐ Regular classroom instruction for most of day
☐ Full-time regular education with support

Physical Disability
☐ Special education services outside regular school
☐ Special class for most or all of the school day
☐ Part-time special education class
☐ Regular classroom instruction and resource room
☐ Regular classroom instruction for most of day
☐ Full-time regular education with support

Multiple Disabilities
☐ Special education services outside regular school
☐ Special class for most or all of the school day
☐ Part-time special education class
☐ Regular classroom instruction and resource room
☐ Regular classroom instruction for most of day
☐ Full-time regular education with support

Autism
☐ Special education services outside regular school
☐ Special class for most or all of the school day
☐ Part-time special education class
☐ Regular classroom instruction and resource room
☐ Regular classroom instruction for most of day
☐ Full-time regular education with support

Neurological Impairment
☐ Special education services outside regular school
☐ Special class for most or all of the school day
☐ Part-time special education class
☐ Regular classroom instruction and resource room
☐ Regular classroom instruction for most of day
☐ Full-time regular education with support

Thank you for taking the time to answer all of the questions on this survey. We appreciate your assistance with this study!

Appendix 3.9. Recruitment Screening Procedure

See Appendix 3.10 called *Recruitment Screening Protocol* for detailed list of criteria.

Participant: _____

Criteria	Descriptive Information
1. Inclusion Survey	
1a. Demographic	
1b. Training & Experience	
2. Criteria 1: Public School?	
3. Criteria 2: District-level central office administration responsible for special education	
4. Criteria 3: Commitment to inclusive education	
a. Publicly stated commitment	
b. Personal commitment to inclusive education	
i. Survey Section III: Attitudes Toward Inclusion	
ii. Survey Section IV: Appropriate Placements	
iii. Meet the criteria for Sections III and IV	
5. Criteria 4: Evidence of Inclusive Education in Action	
a. Home school placement for all	
b. All students in general education classrooms	
i. parts that students are excluded from	
ii. Percentage that spend 80% or more in general education	
c. In process of inclusive school reform	

Criteria 1	Yes or No
Criteria 2	Yes or No
Criteria 3	Yes or No
Criteria 4	Yes or No

Appendix 3.10. Interview 1: Recruitment Screening Protocol

Interview 1: Sequence of Steps

1. Give *Inclusion Survey* (ask questions orally during interview, but also email participants

   a copy to look at)

   a. Section I called *Demographic Information*

   b. Section II called *Training and Experience*

2. Ensure leader is employed or previously employed at a public school (Criteria 1)

3. Ensure leader is a member of the district-level central office administration responsible

   for special education (Criteria 2)

4. Gather evidence of strong commitment to inclusive education (Criteria 3)

   a. Publicly stated commitment (Criteria 3, A)

      i. Stated on district webpage

      ii. Stated on special education webpage

      iii. Restructuring practices mentioned in School Improvement Plans

      iv. Actual practice in district (e.g., visual service delivery map)

   b. Personal commitment for inclusive education (Criteria 3, B)

      i. Give *Inclusion Survey*, Section III called *Attitudes Toward Inclusion of*

         Students with Special Needs

         1. Candidates who "strongly agree" or "agree" with 8 out of 10

            factors of inclusion will meet criteria

      ii. Give *Inclusion Survey*, Section IV called Most Appropriate Placements for

         Students with Disabilities

       1. Candidates who indicated students with disabilities should be indicated in "regular classroom instruction for most of day" or "full-time regular education with support" for 9 out of 11 of the categories of disability listed will be asked to continue with the study

   iii. Candidates need to meet the criteria for Section III and Section IV

5. Gather evidence of inclusive education in action (Criteria 4)

   a. Gather evidence to determine whether district includes all students with disabilities in home school.

   b. Gather evidence to determine whether district includes all student with disabilities within general education classrooms (no special schools, classrooms)

      i. Ask what students are excluded from

     ii. Ask about what percentage spend 80% or more in general education

   c. Gather evidence to determine whether district is at a stage where most students are included (in reform process)

      i. Ask about distinct timeline in place for completion of inclusive education placements

Appendix 3.11. Interview 2: Categories and Questions Protocol

Interview 2: Categories and Questions

Background

Personal

- Tell me about your special education background.

- Help me understand how you came to be interested in assuming a leadership position.

- Tell me about other positions you had in your career.

District

- Tell me about the background of the district's efforts to implement inclusive education

- Tell me about the history of this district

- How did this district and the schools become inclusive?

Conceptualization of Inclusive Education

- What is meant by inclusive education?

- Can you tell me about the mission statement of the district or schools?

- What does inclusive look like?

- What might be a metaphor of inclusive leadership? How would you describe it to a new leader?

Climate of Belonging, Culture, Acceptance, Safety

- Talk about the culture in your district.

- What types of district-wide activities are rituals here?

- What is your role in these?

- Are students with educational labels present at these?

- What are your mascots or symbols of the district? Do they relate to inclusion?

- What are the most important things children feel when they enter the school building?

- Describe what you think the connection is between climate, culture, and community and academic learning.

- What deeply entrenched taken-for-granted patterns of exclusion have you had to dismantle?

Special Education Service Delivery

- Tell me about the special education services

- What does a typical day look life for…a specific student (low incidence and high incidence disability)

- Scheduling

- Human Resources

Decision Making and Governance Processes

- How do you promote inclusive processes in decision-making?

- How do you make the process of leadership inclusive?

- What does leadership mean to you? (A collective process of social influence that is aimed at a particular end)

- How are teachers involved in decision-making?

- How are students involved in decision-making?

- How are other members of the school community involved?

- How are parents involved in school activities?

Curriculum and Instructional Leadership

- What is your role in terms of curriculum and instruction in this district?

- What professional development do teachers receive related to special education?

Student Achievement

- Tell me about student achievement in your district?

Family, Community Partnerships

- Talk about collaborating with families to make inclusive education work.

- Talk about collaborating with community partners to make inclusive education work.

Related Service Delivery

- Tell me about the related services in this district

- Scheduling

Special Education Referral Process & Meetings

- Can you describe what the special education referral process is like at your district

- What role do you have in this?

- Tell me about a time when there has been change in special education services what that was like.

Leadership Role

- Nuts and Bolts/Realities of the Job of District Special Education Leader

- Entry Plan

- Leadership Traits

Demographics of School

- Talk about the student population.

- What sorts of diversity are prominently represented?

Celebrating Successes

- Think about a time that you experienced satisfaction in your work and tell me about it.

- Tell me about a time you were proud of the progress made.

- What do you feel you learned from this?

Barriers

- Tell me about stories of barriers you've faced in your work.

- What kinds of staff conflicts, if any, have occurred here?

- Tell me about a time that frustrated you. What do you feel you learned from this?

- Tell me about school-level barriers to inclusion.

- Tell me about district-level barriers to inclusion.

- Tell me about institutional-level barriers to inclusion.

Global Obstacles (larger barriers that prevent inclusion)

- How does the structure of the education system contribute to a larger obstacle to promoting inclusion? (e.g., responsibility for everything going on—budgets, safety...but also vending machines)

- What existing perceptions about leadership make it difficult to enact inclusion?

- Describe the difficulties of linking leadership processes to wider inclusion practices?

- How does your style not align with the managerialism that is reflected in reform initiatives (e.g., standardized testing, teacher-proof curriculum)?

Co-curricular activities

- In what ways do students with disabilities participate in extracurricular and nonacademic activities?

Technology

- Educational technology

- Assistive technology

- How does it enhance access to curriculum?

Increasing Learning and School Improvement

- Talk about student achievement, especially for marginalized groups.

- Talk about how you have increased teacher capacity around teaching and learning.

- How do you empower staff?

- What type of professional development is provided to teachers around co-teaching, differentiation, collaboration, inclusion, and equity?

- How is inclusion connected to other reform projects or initiatives in the district?

Leadership Disposition, Values

- Can you tell me about a time when you had to take a strong stand about something?

- What are you most committed to as a leader?

- Talk about access and equity.

- How are the work of inclusion, social justice, and democracy linked?

- Talk about climate and the culture of the district.

- Talk about inclusive education.

- Tell me about a time when you felt great success.

District Values

- In terms of special education: Explicit representation? Inexplicit?

- Developing a shared vision with building leaders

- How is the district vision enacted?

- How is resistance toward this vision handled?

- How do decisions reflect a stance toward enactive inclusive education?

- What barriers are there to your vision?

- Describe how you are committed to inclusive leadership.

- Describe how inclusion is embedded into your governance.

Reform

- How has your district reformed or changed? Talk about the process and your action steps.

Increasing your personal knowledge

- What sorts of professional learning and reflection have you done around inclusion and educational equity?

- Equity and inclusion: How do you connect these?

Collaboration

- Talk about collaborating with other leaders to make inclusive education work.

- What are some ways that you create opportunities for principals to work on understanding and having a strong commitment to equity?

- How do you collaborate with other district-level administrators with a similar equity stance?

Sharing Knowledge

- If you were giving new administrators advice about inclusive special education service provision, what advice would you give?

- What strategies or ideas can you give to other administrators?

Budgets and Financial

- What are some ways that your annual budget reflects a concern for inclusion and equity?

- How are resources used to support inclusive education?

Policy

- What some ways that policy (State and Federal) support inclusive education?

- What are some ways that policy make it difficult to stay true to an equity-based vision and a socially just district?

Other Questions

- What advice would you give to other district leaders who want to implement inclusive education?

- Is there anything else I should be asking you or something that may add to this interview that is important to you?

Use the list of probes to extend conversation.

List of Probes to Use:

1. You mentioned…. Tell me more about that.

2. What about that interested you?

3. Can you describe that for me?

4. What was…like for you?

5. I'm not sure that I am following you. Can you tell me more?

6. What do you mean?

7. Would you explain that?

8. What did you say then?

9. What were you thinking at the time?

10. Please give me an example of…

Appendix 3.12. Interview 3: Open Conversation, Clarification, and Member Check Protocol

Interview 3: Sequence of Interview

1. Start by asking the participant if there are any areas from the last interview that they would like to add to. Ask the participant to take the lead of this conversation. Use the list of probes to extend conversation.

2. From the second interview, have categories and questions that I need more clarification on. Ask the participant to explain or give examples to support my understanding.

3. Have a conversation about themes and sub-themes that I notice emerging. The purpose is to have member checks build into the data collection and analysis process.

List of Probes to Use:

1. You mentioned…Tell me more about that.

2. What about that interested you?

3. Can you describe that for me?

4. What was…like for you?

5. I'm not sure that I am following you. Can you tell me more?

6. What do you mean?

7. Would you explain that?

8. What did you say then?

9. What were you thinking at the time?

10. Please give me an example of…

Appendix 3.13: Researcher's Memo

Understanding the phenomenon in the data is becoming increasingly evident as I notice this reflectiveness. It's an advocacy tactic. In her descriptions of events that have happened and her leadership style, I notice that Mia asks a lot of questions. This style of conversation indicates her reflectiveness in practice. She is critically thinking about what has happened and about how to teach educators to think critically about what is happening. She asked, "But I am wondering what does that look like across schools?" and "What are you doing when you are co-teaching?" or "How will that program support kids or can we find a different strategy to support that kid right in the classroom?" It's constructive inquiry around structures. She went on to explain, "We have good strong professionals, and we just need to shift their thinking a little bit." She views her work as helping others develop their reflective lens. This is imperative to the reason the district administrators are connected with building-level decisions and implementation of special education. This is not only happening in Mia's interview—but in others as well. Go back through to see what I find around this.

Is this connected to what Freire calls "Praxis?" Are the administrators being reflective of their practice and taking action to challenge inequities? These questions allow critical thinking in action to ensure that structures and decisions are not made in a way that creates disparate outcomes for students with disabilities. It's critical self-reflection about potential decisions. Explore this idea of praxis and critically consciousness more. This is how the theoretical framework is enacted by district-leaders.

Appendix 3.14: Researcher's Memo 2

I notice that participants are naming being physically present and visible in both parent and building matters as being imperative to ensure district values are enacted. So what? Why does this matter? The subtext is that they are constructing an activist identity. Each participant is deliberating engaging in an assertive manner in contentious matters in order to carry out district goals around inclusion, access, and least restrictive environment. Ensuring alignment of operational decisions, serving all students, being there, allowing for opportunities for all professionals to ask questions, doing what is right over what is easy is all a way that these district-level administrators are enacting social justice leadership. It is their advocacy strategy of being engaged, upfront, assertive, and present. These are identifying factors of their disposition.

Appendix 3.15: Coding Categories

Preliminary Code List

Coding Categories

Setting and Context Codes

- Continuum of Placements

- Inclusive Classroom

- Inclusive School

- Special Class

- Special School

- Description of the School

- Description of Students

- Reputation and History

- Location of Classes

Perspectives and Ways of Thinking

- Inclusive Education Definition

- Academic Outcomes/Benefits

- Social Outcomes/Benefits

- Behavior

- Benefits for Peers

- Sense of Belonging

- Equity

- Exclusion

- Whole-school

- School District Vision and Mission

Process

- Reform

- Restructuring

- Enacting and Action Steps

- Strategy

- Culture

- Training

- Outcome Data

- University-District Partnership

Special Education

- Service Delivery

- Placement Perceptions

- Special Education Teachers

Components of Inclusive Education

- Conceptualization

- Co-teaching

- Differentiation

- Universal Design for Learning

- Instruction

- Curriculum Design

- Natural Proportions

Roles, Responsibilities, and Activities

- Agent of Change

- Instructional Leader

- Manager

- Supporter/Cheerleader

- Collaboration

- Accountability

- Professional development

- Scheduling-planning time

Events

- Celebration

- Learning

Other Administrative Personnel

Parents and Community

- Family-school connection

- Community-school connection

Demographics

- Experience with different disability categories

- Personal experience with individual with a disability

- Certification

- Teaching experience

Figure 1.1 Educational Environments for Students Ages 6-21 served under IDEA, Part B
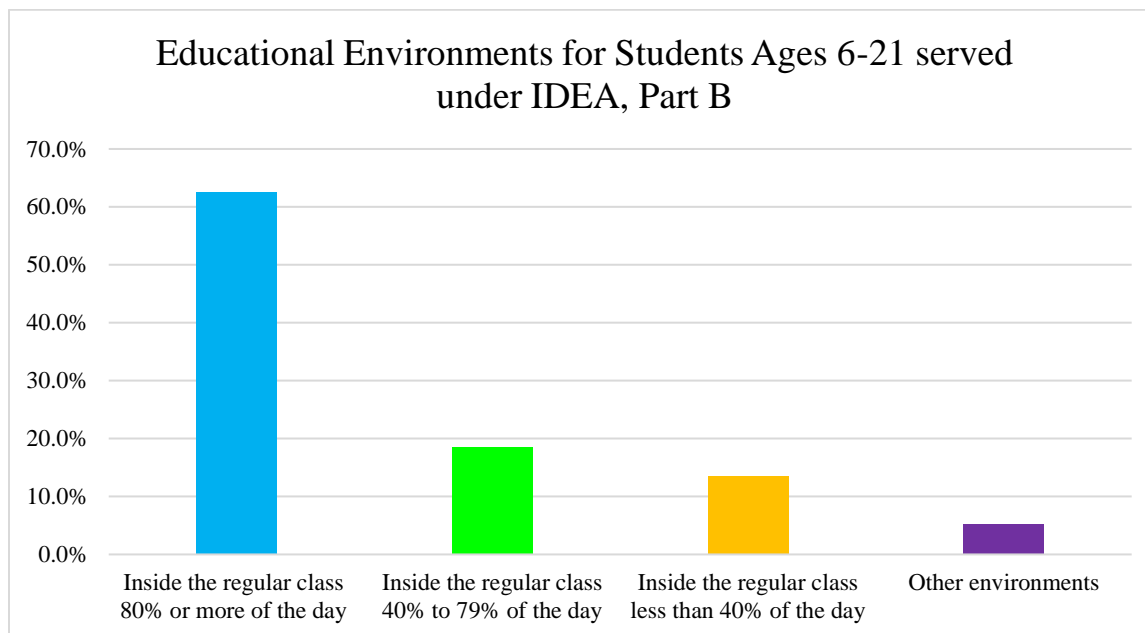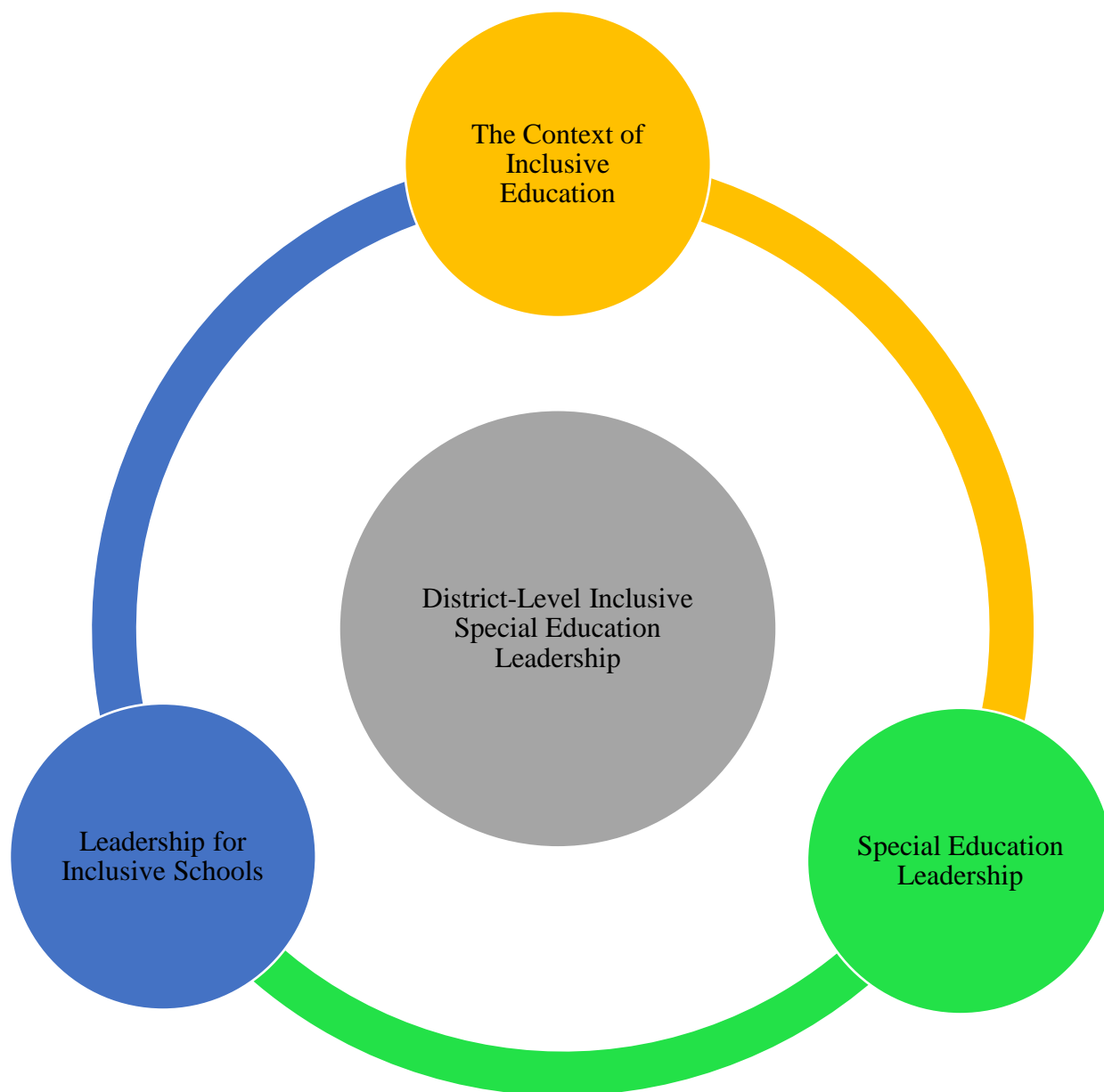

Figure 1.1. Educational Environments for Students Ages 6-21 served under IDEA, Part B

Note. Data is from U.S. Department of Education. (2017). *39th annual report to congress on the implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.* Washington, DC: Government Printing Office.

Figure 2.1. Literature Review

Figure 2.1. Visual representation of the literature reviewed that informs district-level inclusive special education leadership.

Figure 3.1. History of Study

Figure 3.2. Recruitment Strategies

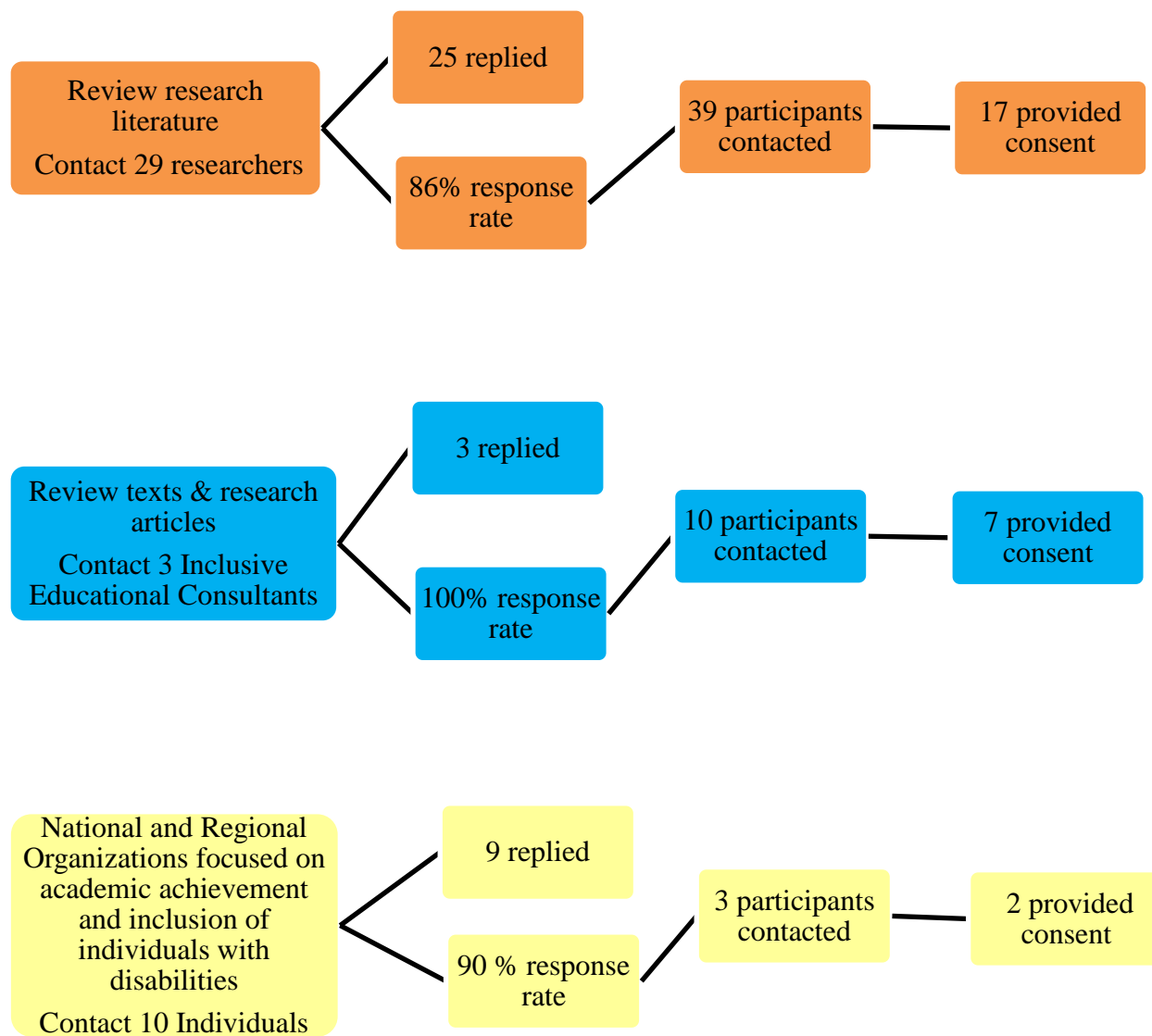Figure 3.3. Visual Data Representation

Figure 4.1. Leaders' Commitment to Inclusive Educational Practices
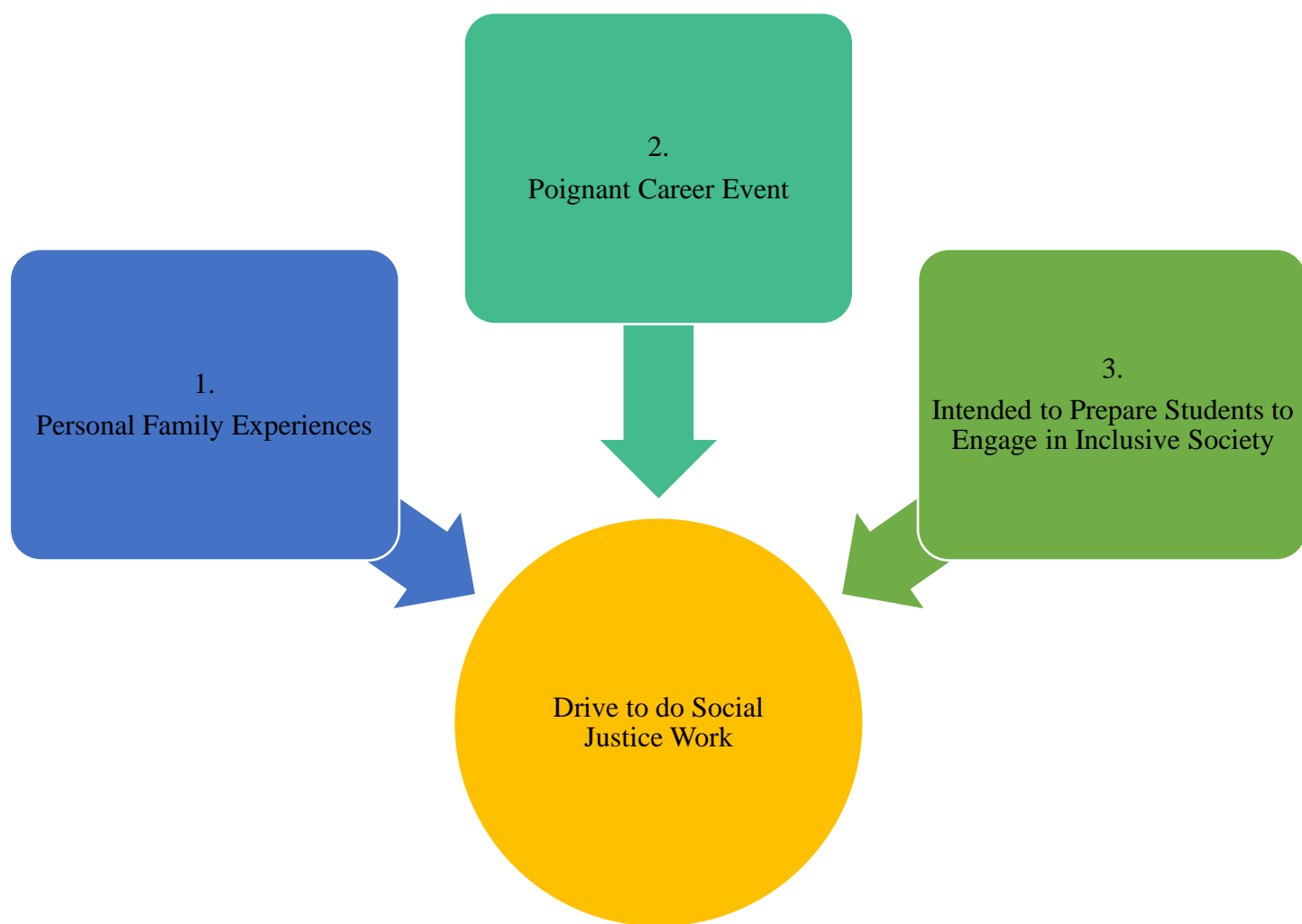
Figure 3.5. Complex Advocacy Tactics

What strategies of advocacy are evident in the ways that district-level special education leaders make sense of their enactment of inclusive educational opportunities and service delivery for students with disabilities?

Figure 3.6. District Practices and Procedures that Leaders Construct in order to sustain a culture of Inclusion

What actions and decisions have special education leaders made in order to remain committed to their district's enactment of inclusive education?

Figure 3.7 Synthesis Chart

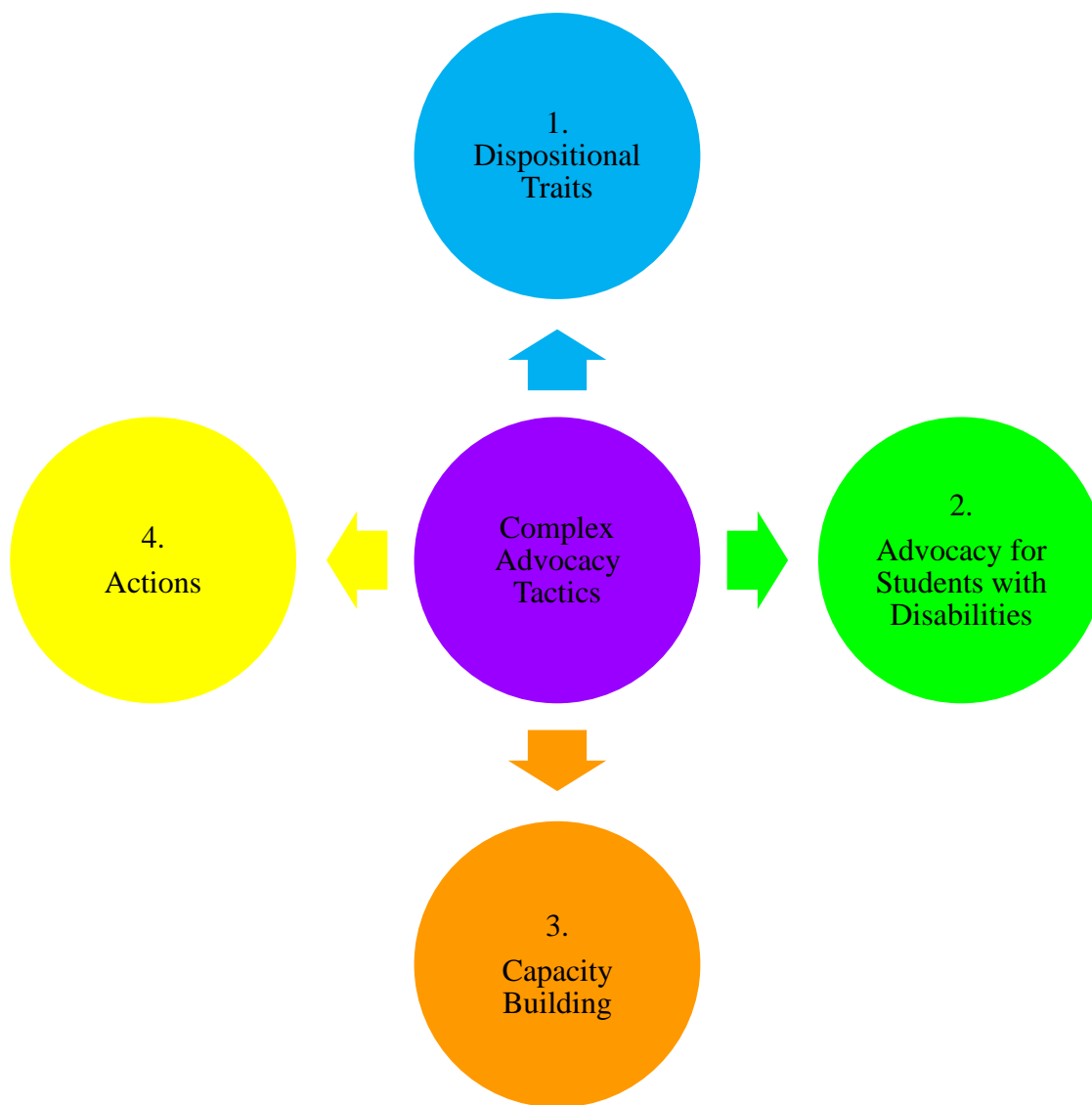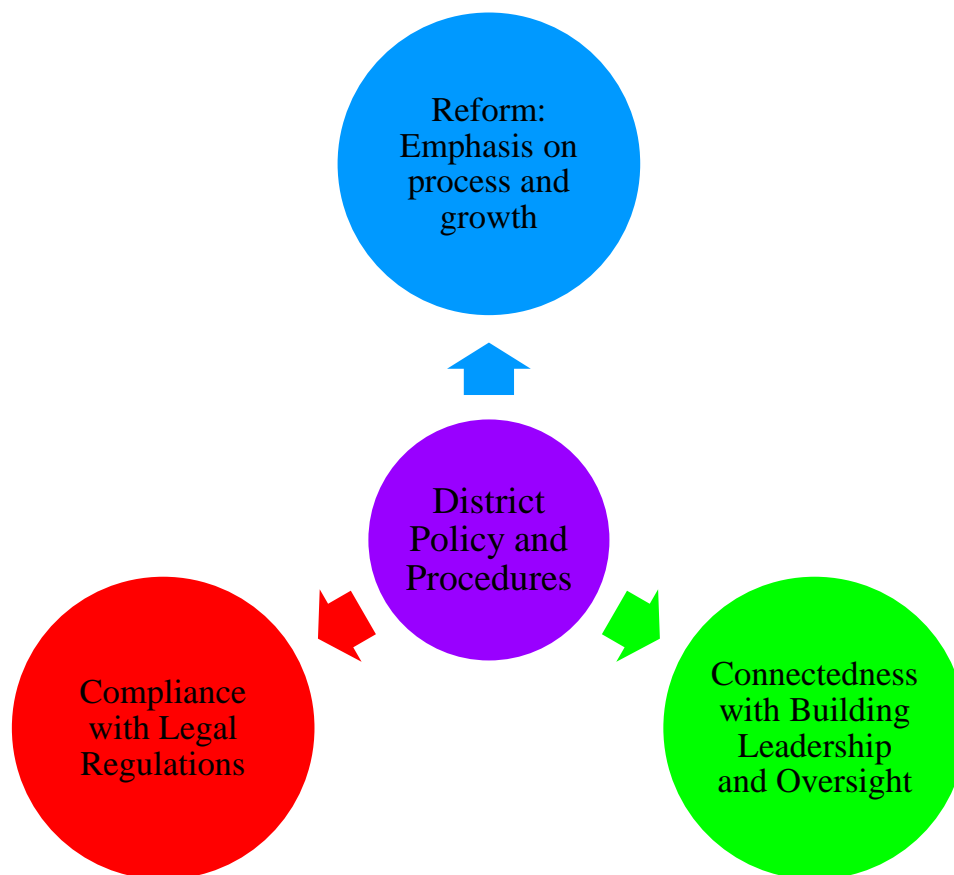| Themes	Example #1	Example #2	Example #3	Example #4	Analytical Piece: *This issue matters because…*
5.1.a **Dispositional Traits:** *Assertive Engagement and Aligned Decision Making*	Leah: If I know there is a high needs parent and by that I mean they get anxious about things, I meet with them individually quite a bit and I'm not sure a lot of people do that. They'll say it's not their place and refer them back to their building. So I meet with parents a lot for informational pieces or to help them.	Mia: Comes into play during tricky family and student situations.	Kora: I'm there, at whichever meeting, whichever building, whatever time, when a parent and school discrepancy occurs because access is on the line for many students.	Charlotte: I was inserting myself into situations that really were not situations in the role that I was in…would be things I would typically do…I would not typically sit in an IEP meeting. But what I knew the administrators involved in the IEP meeting didn't have the philosophical…the correct philosophical mindset [around access]. I asserted myself in their situations. When I knew that we were going to have a parent meeting and the parent was very anxious about this idea of returning their child to the neighborhood school or looking at their Least Restrictive Environment placement and really	• Met with high needs parents • Tricky family situations • There when discrepancy occurs-access on the line • Insert even when administrators didn't have the philosophical background or when parents weren't sure of a LRE decision *So what?* • The aforementioned examples are quite significant as they reveal explicit intentions the participants made to have visible presence as district-level administrators in the contentious building-level affairs as means of advocacy • These data uncover insight about participants' intentionality as agents of advocacy.

				discussing whether it was appropriate or not or whether we could be serving this child in a less restrictive environment. And we just weren't choosing to do that.	• Advocacy encompassed their dispositional identity as administrators to be present and assertive in family situations that some would argue typically fall in the realm of building administrative duties.
	Example # 5	Example #6	Example #7	Example #8	**********************
	Lucy: Close collaboration. Work through issues that come up along the way, through meetings. If there's a student issue, we'll meet at the school, with the parents. With issues or questions about staffing, we'll meet here at the school board. But every tough issue is dealt with a face-to-face conversation.	Lucy: We do that with them. We collaborate. We will go to the school and sit down…we look at their numbers, their kids, and we try to figure out the best placements and we work on the scheduling together.	Miller: You have to be at the tough meetings. The ones that can go either way and really impact kids. Weighted system to place students and shared responsibility to enforce district idea of serving all students.	Sophie: You have to be in the buildings and know what's going on. I visit buildings regularly…I have focus group time with teachers. When teachers are planning, they have opportunities for all professionals to come and talk to me about what's going on.	• Meet with parents, school board. Tough issues dealt with through in person conversation. • Collaborate on best placements and scheduling • Enforce district idea of serving all kids • Be in buildings, know what is happening, and open opportunities for conversation • Need people to understand that this (anything around philosophy) is non-negotiable. • Sorry, it's what we do.
	Example #9	Example #10	Example #11		
	Charlotte: Team who all buy into philosophically what we are trying	Mia: All students need to be progressing towards the common	Leah: It's really about being there, during the meetings		

	to do. When they have a prickly situation, they come tell me about it. I'll insert myself because I need people to understand that this is not negotiable. We're not giving up on kids. We're not going back to a place where we're putting children in a resource room. We're not going to do what's easy for the adults. It's not what's easy for them. Our job is hard. No one ever said it wasn't going to be hard.	standards and that means taking the common core special elements and align it with the IEP academic goals so all kids, yes even kids with significant disabilities, progress academically. So in this case, the final push was really just, 'Sorry, it's required.' It's what we do.	anytime there is conversation about what's the best educational placement for a student. I can make sure to challenge the team to consider the least restrictive environment first, no matter if it's hard for the adults.		• Being there. LRE even if it's hard for the adults *So what?* • Being explicitly and physically engaged leader within tough situations demonstrates active construction of this trait • Visible presence lead to enforcement of district value of serving all students. • Be there • Opportunities for all professionals to talk with district administration • In the decision-making situations where the possibility of reverting to traditional special education placements and practices might require less effort, planning, or advocacy, Charlotte purposefully maintains a physical presence, an active engagement, during meetings and conversations with

					explicit intention to support, empower, and collaborate with allies to ensure that students with disabilities receive equitable access • Data uncovered narrative about the lived experience around what it means to advocate from a district-administrative role and one particular tactic is this dispositional identity of assertively engaging and aligning decisions to core values • Decisions sometimes came down to 'sorry it's what we do here.' • Being there. LRE even if it's hard for the adults • Not around content but rather the way they carry themselves
	Example #12	Example #13	Example #14	Example #15	
	Lucy: You absolutely have to have a vision and you have to be demanding about that. It is being	Sophie: It was [her] job as the director to keep people focused on [the district] goals…if people had ideas or wanted to do	Mia: Started by saying what we need to do is to develop a set of beliefs that are rooted in research about what worked		********************** • Be demanding about the vision. Then take action. • Keep people focused on district goals. All aligned to these district goals.

Themes	Example #1	Example #2	Example #3	Example #4	Analytical Piece:
	knowledgeable, patient, having a vision, and demanding about your vision. Then being able to take action.	things, if it helped with one of those goals, then yes. If it didn't…well…	for accelerating the growth of students because as a core this is about moving all students, including students with disabilities, so that we narrow the gap a little bit between their performance and their peers, and that they have not just access to curriculum but they had progressed. That's a big shift between just access and progression. So the guided principles were the collective work…to say what does the research tell us about what works, and what do we believe as a system…then every operational decision that we make from very big decisions to very small decisions, we make sure that our systems are		• Developed beliefs rooted in research about beyond just access to progression • Operational decisions made from these core values and ensure systems are doing this *So what?* • District-level administrators ensured that operational decisions were rooted in district goals and ensured that systems and professionals in their building were doing this. • This was an advocacy tactic to enact district values and ensure decisions were aligned.

| | | | bringing them back to those best guiding principles. | | |

- Assertive engagement as an advocacy-oriented leadership tactic, meaning participants were visible, actively present, and insistent to ensure alignment of vision to decision making
- Advocacy topics or content of each instance varied, but what is important in this data analysis is the district administrator's leadership style at an individual-leader level.
- Personal-level assertiveness around advocacy decision-making- to enact a sense of agency centered on their ongoing advocacy awareness and commitment to create inclusive learning contexts.
- At times, this actively engaged style directly challenged cultural school politics around exclusionary practices, especially as it related to serving all students in the least restrictive environment "even if it's hard for adults."
- Critically conscious leadership manifested through an intentional engaged demeanor, assertiveness, and aligned decisions to core values was purposeful and active; these participants were doing social justice leadership.
- Corbett & Slee (2000) contend, enacting inclusive education is a "distinctly political" and "in your face" activity, and the advocacy style of the participants was an intentional, critical political act.

Themes	Example #1	Example #2	Example #3	Example #4	Analytical Piece: *This issue matters because…*
5.1.b **Dispositional Traits:** *Leading Against the Grain with Transparency*	Leah: It's just sharing upfront, creating that relationship with people to say, 'Hey trust me. I'm going to put you through Hell reorganizing stuff and it's totally going to pay off.' And then explaining, 'Here's why.' So, I like to do all that basic,	Miller: Unless you have everybody at the table, they're going to sabotage you. And you might as well have the crucial conversation and the ugliness up front. I mean that's why people ask us all the time why did you reform the whole district? Why didn't you start with one	Mia: People that are cynical in the system will roll their eyes, but everyone knows that if I make a decision [the guiding principles are] what it's coming from. That is pretty universal at all levels. I think in a lot of ways people are appreciative of knowing that	Lucy: We jumped right in doing professional development, training people … We taught people how to collaborate around instruction, preparing and training regular education people on what are disabilities, what does a learning disability look like, how is this going to impact your	• Being transparent with the changes, the research that supports it, and that the process will be difficult was key. • This notion of being "up front" and "going public" signals transparency. • Knowing where decisions come from • Grounded in PD, articulating district vision, and going "public" indicated

	like quick, but meaningful transparency. Here is the research behind it and facilitate and get them to a point that they're so excited because they are like I can make an impact. It will be hard, but it will work and then I let them go.	building and pilot or why didn't you do K-2. My response is simple. It is, 'Why would you want to go through ugliness six times or eight times?' We are very up front. When we go into this, we know there's going to be bumps and we're going to have to gather the data of what works.	upfront, but in others it is a little tongue in cheek. But, that's part of the nature of this work.	classroom, your teaching. So they spent about a year doing that, giving the superintendent time to get everyone on the district side. Some went crazy. The superintendent said this is part of our vision. They had the school system, it became part of the vision and mission statement of the school system. That meant the school system was committed to making it happen. They weren't just saying it. We were actually committed to it and we went public with that commitment.	transparency even in the face of some going 'crazy.' • Plan to keep focus. Tearing down everything we built? Everyone knew plan *So what?* • Ugliness, bumps, and the transparent articulation of changes are concrete indicators that participants knowingly lead against the grain • District-level leaders were transparent in actively navigating a disruption of a district system that marginalized students. • Crystal clear the directions the district is going-aligned with guiding principles
	Example # 5	Example #6	Example #7	Example #8	• Transparent in practices that run contrary to district guiding principles, training, being very clear—this is where we are going
	Lucy: It is hard because it's getting people to shift the way that they're thinking …	Sophie: Others were so upset because they take it very personally. We showed them data	Mia: … contrary to the definition of adaptive PE because a physical therapist		

Figure 3.8 Data Collection and Analysis

Figure 5.2. Advocacy Tactics Themes and Sub-themes
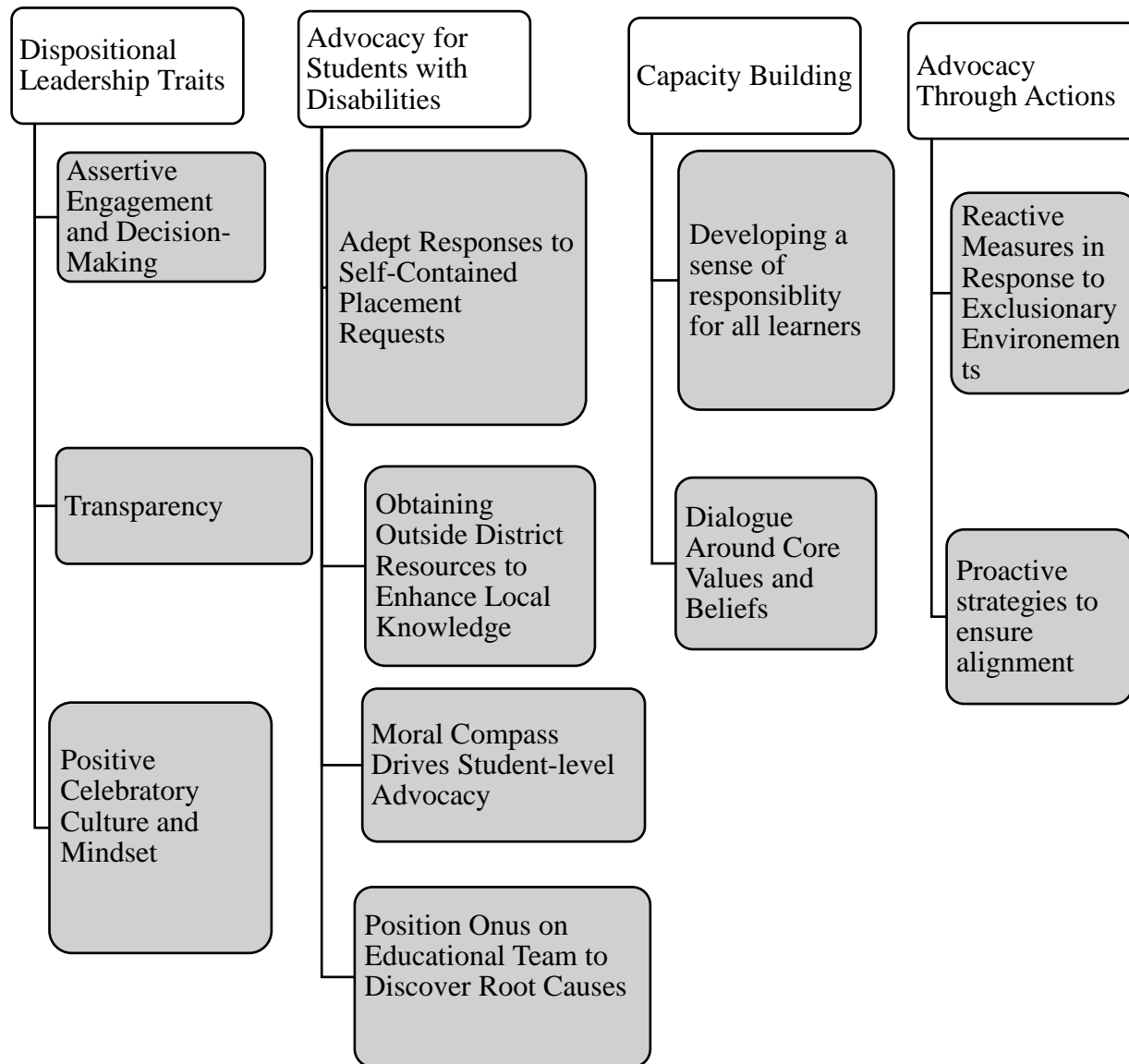
Figure 5.2. Visual representation of sub-themes within Chapter 5.

Figure 7.1. District-Level Inclusive School Leadership
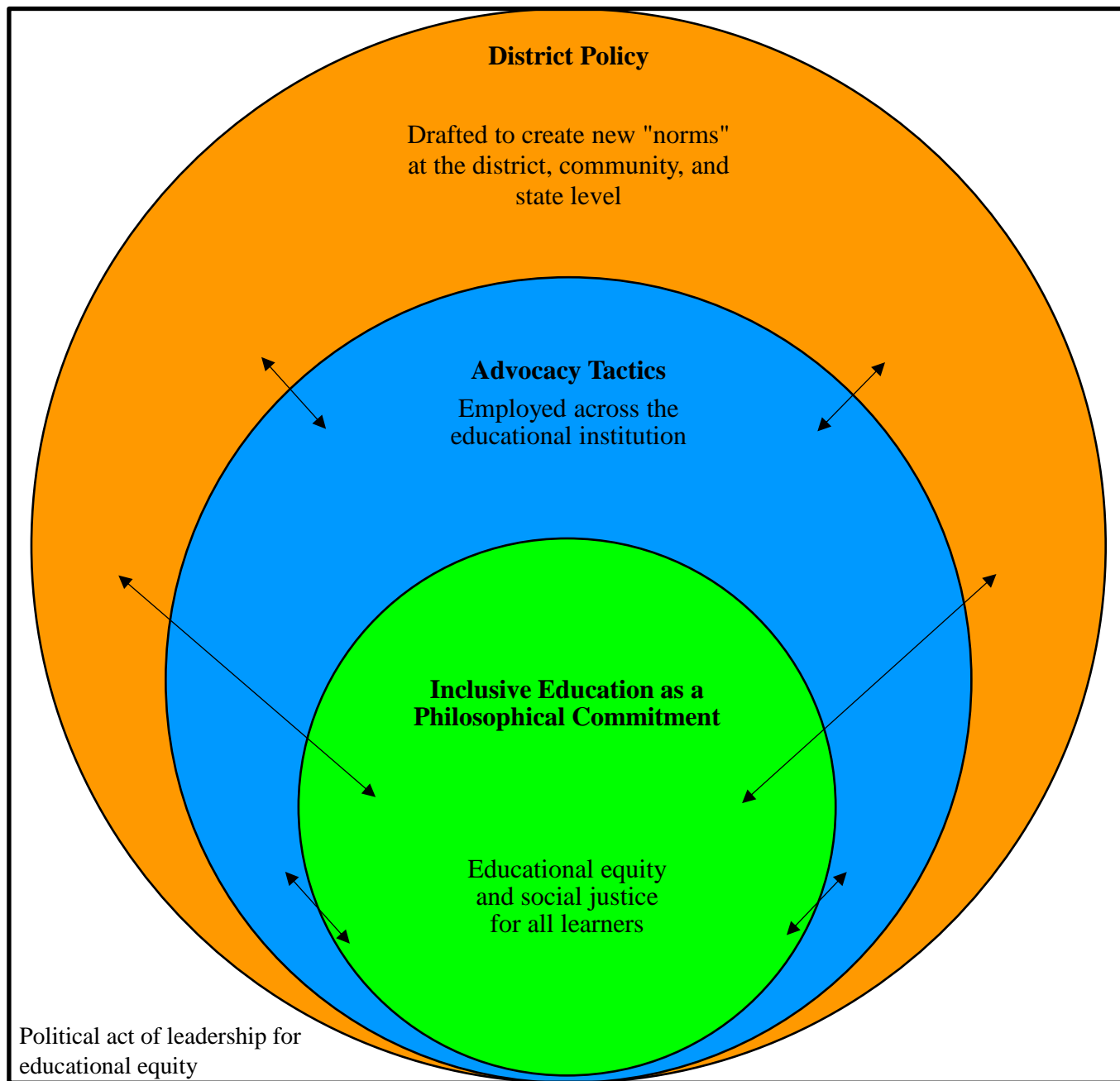
District Policy

Drafted to create new "norms"
at the district, community, and
state level

Advocacy Tactics

Employed across the
educational institution

**Inclusive Education as a
Philosophical Commitment**

Educational equity
and social justice
for all learners

Political act of leadership for
educational equity

Figure 7.1. Visual representation of the process of leadership for inclusive education at the
district-level

Figure 7.2 Praxis Process Used to Create Inclusive Districts

Figure 7.2. Visual representation of a pragmatic approach to praxis as district-level leaders who created equitable district-wide inclusion.

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Theoharis, G., Causton, J., & Tracy-Bronson, C. (2014). Leading Inclusive Special Education Reform: A Case Study of Two Urban Schools. *Submitted for Publication*.

Theoharis, G., Causton, J., & Tracy-Bronson, C. P. (2016). Inclusive reform as a response to high-stakes pressure? Leading toward inclusion in the age of accountability *Teachers College Record, 118*(14), 1-30.

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Waldron, N., & McLeskey, J. (2010). Establishing a collaborative school culture through comprehensive school reform. *Journal of Educational & Psychological Consultation, 20*(1), 58-74. doi: 10.1080/10474410903535364

Waldron, N., McLeskey, J., & Pacchiano, D. (1999). Giving teachers a voice: Teachers' perspectives regarding elementary inclusive school programs (ISPs). *Teacher Education and Special Education, 22*(1), 141-153.

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Waldron, N. L., McLeskey, J., & Redd, L. (2011b). Setting the direction: The role of the principal in developing an effective, inclusive school. *Journal of Special Education Leadership, 24*(2), 51-60.

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Wehmeyer, M. L. (2006). Beyond access: Ensuring progress in the general curriculum for students with severe disabilities. *Research and Practices for persons with Severe Disabilities, 31*(4), 322-326. doi: 10.1177/154079690603100405

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CHELSEA P. TRACY-BRONSON

Phone: 607.761.2192 *Office Phone*: 609.652.4495 *Email*: ChelseaTracy.Bronson@gmail.com

EDUCATION

Ph.D.	**Syracuse University**, School of Education Department of Teaching and Leadership Field: Special Education	May 2018
	Doctoral Dissertation: *Inclusive Education in Practice: District-Level Special Education Administrators' Leadership* Honored with Distinction	
C.A.S.	**Syracuse University**, School of Education Department of Cultural Foundations of Education Field: Disability Studies	May 2014
M.A.	**Columbia University**, Teachers College Department of Curriculum and Teaching Fields: Curriculum and Teaching, Educational Technologies	October 2008
	Thesis: *Learning to Navigate the Digital Superhighway: Incorporating Educational Technologies into an Inclusive Elementary Classroom*	
B.S.	**Syracuse University**, School of Education Department of Teaching and Leadership Fields: Inclusive Elementary, Special Education, and Sociology	May 2007
	Summa Cum Laude University Scholar Renée Crown University Honors Program	

PUBLICATIONS: Books

Causton, J., & **Tracy-Bronson, C.P.** (2015). *The educator's handbook for inclusive school practices.* Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.

Causton, J. & **Tracy-Bronson, C.P.** (2014). *The speech and language pathologist's handbook for effective support in inclusive classrooms.* Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.

Causton, J. & **Tracy-Bronson, C.P.** (2013). *The occupational therapist's handbook for effective support in inclusive classrooms.* Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.

PUBLICATIONS: Peer Reviewed Journal Articles

Theoharis, G., Causton, J., & **Tracy-Bronson, C.P.** (2016). *Inclusive reform as a response to high-stakes pressure? Leading toward inclusion in the age of accountability.* Teachers College Record, 118(14), 1-30.

> *Article also published in:* NSSE (National Society for the Study of Education), an annual yearbook published with *Teachers College Record*.

Causton, J., **Tracy-Bronson, C.P.,** & MacLeod, K. (2015). Beyond treats and timeouts: Humanistic behavioral supports in inclusive classrooms. *The International Journal of Whole Schooling, 11*(1), 68-84.

RESEARCH INTERESTS

The epicenter of my research is examining the implementation strategies that public school districts P-12 employ to build inclusive educational contexts and provide inclusive special education services. It is my aim to publish research that allows for better understanding of the inclusive teaching and learning environment that focuses on the access and achievement of *all* learners, and the district inclusive special education leadership required.

My scholarship can be understood as three research lines under the overarching agenda of creating equitable and quality inclusive educational environments for students:
1. The work and impact of inclusive education in schools and classrooms;
2. Inclusive whole school reform; and,
3. District-level inclusive special education leadership.

RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

Researcher for Formative Assessments to Improve Instruction   Fall 2014—Spring 2017
Using Formative Assessments to Improve Teaching and Learning
Funded $646,948 by New Jersey State Department of Education. (Principal Investigator: Kimberly Lebak)
- Conducted quantitative research and collected survey, curriculum based assessments, and state assessment data
- Collected qualitative research evidence including focus groups, anecdotal records of observation, and participant observation field work
- Compiled video data of instructional practices and led coaching sessions aimed to facilitate teachers' reflective analysis and metacognition of teaching
- In two high-needs urban districts, provided in-service professional development for special educators and general educators in the area of common core standards, formative assessment, interactive teaching strategies to include all learners, co-teaching and inclusive educational practices, and small group instructional practices

Researcher and Inclusion Facilitator for Schools of Promise   Fall 2011—Fall 2012
Promising Practices in Special Education: Identifying and Cultivating Inclusive Practices

Funded $942,620 by New York State Department of Education/VESID: School Personnel Development Grant (Co-Principal Investigators: Julie Causton, George Theoharis, and Christy Ashby)
- Conducted qualitative research on inclusive school reform, evidence-based practices, and student achievement in urban public schools.
- Provided in-service professional development for special educators, general educators, and other school staff on the inclusion of students with disabilities.

Research Apprenticeship   Fall 2012—Spring 2013
Inclusive Related Service Provision
- Conducted qualitative research, employing interviews and participant observation to understand the experiences of related service providers who conduct classroom-based service provision within inclusive educational contexts.

Research Assistant for the Institute on Communication and Inclusion   Fall 2011—Fall 2012
Funded by the John P. Hussman Foundation
- Conducted collaborative research with a study design that utilized mixed methods of traditional qualitative research with innovative video data analysis using software called *StudioCode* to explore the development of communication independence using participant observation, interview, survey, and document analysis.

Research Assistant   Spring 2008
Columbia University, Teachers College
- Pivotal member of a five-person team charged with piloting a teacher education research study to determine the effectiveness of Teachers College graduates in exemplifying the core NCATE stances and program philosophy.

Research Assistant   Fall 2007
Columbia University, Teachers College
- Assisted in comprehensive literature review and editing a grant to be submitted to the United States Department of Education on the characteristics that correlate with effective kindergarten and 1st grade elementary educators.

GRANTS

Tracy-Bronson, C.P. (2016). District-Level Inclusive Special Education leadership. Research Support. Stockton University Research and Professional Development Grant. Funded: $3,045.22

Research and Professional Development Grant. (2014, December).
Tracy-Bronson, C.P. & Haria, P. (2014). *Enhancing Literacy Development in an Inclusive Educational Setting: Implementation of Reading and Writing Common Core Standards.* Funded $1,600. Internal Research Grant at Stockton University.

Integrating Technology and Engagement through E-Learning Grant. (2014, November).
Tracy-Bronson, C.P. (2014). *Enhancing College Learning Experiences through Innovative Educational Technologies.* Unfunded $1,000.

Syracuse University Board of Visitors. (2013, September).
Causton, J. & **Tracy-Bronson, C.P.** (Presenters). *Extending Our Reach*. Presentation to the Syracuse University Board of Visitors Funding Committee aimed to secure monies for the School of Education at Syracuse University.

United States Department of Education. (2012, August).
Theoharis, G., & Causton, J. (Co-Principal Investigators). **Tracy-Bronson, C.P.** (Grant Writer). OSEP: Technical Assistance and Dissemination to Improve Services and Results for Children with Disabilities—Technical Assistance Center for Inclusive School-Wide Reform (CFDA 84.326Y). Unfunded: $24.9 million for the five years technical assistance center on inclusive education.

TRAVEL GRANTS & RESEARCH SUPPORT

Tracy-Bronson, C.P. (2013, April). Disability Studies in Education (DSE) Special Interest Group (SIG) of the American Educational Research Association (AERA) Travel Grant. Awarded by the DSE SIG Executive Committee for the 2013 AERA Meeting. San Francisco, CA. Funded: $250.

Tracy-Bronson, C.P. (2013, April). Institute on Communication and Inclusion Travel Grant. Awarded for Research Presentations at the 2013 American Educational Research Association (AERA) Association Meeting in San Francisco, CA. Funded: $400.

Tracy-Bronson, C.P. (2012, October). Leadership Institute Travel Grant. Awarded for Research Presentations at the 2012 TASH (The Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps) Conference in Long Beach, CA and the 2013 American Educational Research Association Meeting in San Francisco, CA. Funded: $800.

Tracy-Bronson, C.P. (2012, November). Graduate Student Organization at Syracuse University Travel Grant. Awarded for Research Presentations at the 2012 TASH (The Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps) Conference. Long Beach, CA. Funded: $300.

Tracy-Bronson, C.P. (2012, October). Teaching and Leadership Department at Syracuse University Travel Grant. Awarded for a Research Presentation at the 2012 TASH (The Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps) Conference. Long Beach, CA. Funded: $400.

Tracy-Bronson, C.P. (2012, May). Graduate Student Organization at Syracuse University Travel Grant. Awarded for a Research Presentation at the 2012 Disability Studies in Education Conference. New York, NY. Funded: $300.

Tracy-Bronson, C.P. (2012, May). Teaching and Leadership Department at Syracuse University Travel Grant. Awarded for a Research Presentation at the 2012 Disability Studies in Education Conference. New York, NY. Funded: $400.

RESEARCH PRESENTATIONS

*indicates competitively selected

***Tracy-Bronson, C.P. & Nechamkin, A.** (2018, June). *Embracing Inclusive Education: A School District's Journey.* Presentation at the New Jersey Coalition for Inclusive Education. Montclair, NJ.

***Tracy-Bronson, C.P.** (2017, June). *Working Collaboratively in Order to Increase the Number of Students with Disabilities in General Education.* Presentation at the New Jersey Coalition for Inclusive Education. Montclair, NJ.

*Lebak, K. & **Tracy-Bronson, C.P.** (2017, April). *Interactive Formative Assessment: Implementing the Concept*. Presentation at the American Education Research Association Meeting. San Antonio, TX.

***Tracy-Bronson, C.P.** (2016, June). *Inclusive Special Education: Legal Rights and Practical Educational Advice.* Presentation at the New Jersey Coalition for Inclusive Education. Montclair, NJ.

***Tracy-Bronson, C.P.** (2016, June). *Academic, Social, and Environmental Supports to Include in the IEP: Building Your Understanding of Adaptations and Accommodations that can Support Students.* Presentation at the New Jersey Coalition for Inclusive Education. Montclair, NJ.

***Tracy-Bronson, C.P.** (2016, June). *District-level Inclusive Special Education Leadership: Moments of Advocacy Grounded in Social Justice and Educational Equity.* Paper presentation at the Disability Studies in Education Conference. Des Moines, IA.

***Tracy-Bronson, C.P.** (2016, April). *District-level Inclusive Special Education Leadership: District Policies and Procedures Leaders Construct to Improve Inclusive Education Practices.* Paper presentation at the Pacific Rim International Conference on Disability. Honolulu, HI.

***Tracy-Bronson, C.P.** (2016, April). *Inclusive Related Service Provision: Perspectives of Practitioners.* Paper presentation at the American Education Research Association Meeting. Washington, D.C.

***Tracy-Bronson, C.P.** (2016, April). *District-level Inclusive Special Education Leadership: District Policies and Procedures Leaders Construct to Improve Inclusive Education Practices.* Paper presentation at the American Education Research Association Meeting. Washington, D.C.

Cydis, S., Holtzman, D. Hood, C.L., Meyers, S., **& Tracy-Bronson, C.P.** (2015, April). *Essential Learning Outcomes: 2020 Funded ELO/ePortfolio Pilot*. Presentation at Day of Scholarship, Stockton University. Galloway, NJ.

*Theoharis, G., Causton, J., **& Tracy-Bronson, C.P.** (2013, October*). Schools of Promise: Partnerships for Inclusive School Reform.* Paper presentation at the Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities. Louisville, KY.

*Theoharis, G., Causton, J., **& Tracy-Bronson, C.P.** (2013, April). *Leading Inclusive Special Education Services: Cases of School Reform for Students with Disabilities.* Paper presentation at the American Education Research Association Meeting. San Francisco, CA.

*Theoharis, G., Causton, J., **& Tracy-Bronson, C.P.** (2013, April). *Exploring Special Education Service Delivery.* Paper presentation at the American Education Research Association Meeting. San Francisco, CA.

*Theoharis, G., Causton, J., **& Tracy-Bronson, C.P.** (2012, November). *School Reform, Social Justice and Students with Disabilities*. Paper presentation at the University Council of Educational Administration Annual Conference. Denver, CO.

***Tracy-Bronson, C.P.** & Causton, J. (2012, November). *Universal Design for Learning in University Teaching: Transparent Inclusive Pedagogy.* Presentation at *TASH* (The Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps) Conference. Long Beach, CA.

***Tracy-Bronson, C.P.** & Causton, J. (2012, November). *Beyond Treats and Timeouts: Humanistic Behavioral Supports in Inclusive Classrooms.* Presentation at *TASH* (The Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps) Conference. Long Beach, CA.

***Tracy-Bronson, C.P.** & Causton, J. (2012, November). *Inclusive District Reform: Steps Toward Cultivating Inclusive Communities.* Presentation at *TASH* (The Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps) Conference. Long Beach, CA.

*Ashby, C., Jung, E.Y., Orsati, F.T., Reutemann, C.L., **& Tracy-Bronson, C.P.** (2012, November). *Making the Dance Look Easy: Lessons Learned from Highly Skilled Communication Trainers.* Presentation at *TASH* (The Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps) Conference. Long Beach, CA.

*Ashby, C., Jung, E.Y., Orsati, F.T., Reutemann, C.L., **& Tracy-Bronson, C.P.** (2012, November). *Achieving Greater Physical Independence When Typing To Communicate.* Presentation at *TASH* (The Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps) Conference. Long Beach, CA.

*Damiani, M.L., Reutemann, C.L., Rood, C.E., **& Tracy-Bronson, C.P.** (2012, May). *New teachers' knowledge of special education law beyond teacher preparation programs.* Presentation at Disability Studies in Education Conference. New York, NY.

*Patowe, S. & **Tracy-Bronson, C.P.** (2005, November). *The First Five Years of the OnCampus Program.* Presentation at *TASH* (The Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps) Conference. Milwaukee, WI.

TEACHING CERTIFICATE

Syracuse University Future Professoriate Program   2012, 2013, 2014
- Certificate in University Teaching [May 2014]

UNIVERSITY TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Stockton University: School of Education

Graduate Courses:
  EDUC 5410: **Inclusive Education**
  (Charged with new syllabus design; Fall 2018)
  EDUC 5321: **Education and Community Resources** (Fall 2014; Spring 2015; Fall 2015; Spring 2015; Spring 2016; Fall 2016; Fall 2017; Spring 2018; Summer 2018; Fall 2018; Spring 2019)
  EDUC 5330: **Learning Disabilities** (Fall 2014; Spring 2015; Fall 2015; Spring 2015; Spring 2016; Fall 2016; Spring 2017; Fall 2017; Spring 2018; Summer 2018; Fall 2018; Spring 2019)
  EDUC 5337: **Curriculum Based Assessment** (Spring 2015; Summer 2015; Fall 2015; Spring 2016; Summer 2016; Fall 2016; Fall 2017; Fall 2018)
  EDUC 5336: **Curriculum Adaptations** (Charged with syllabus design for professors)

Undergraduate Courses:
  EDUC 2231: **Development of the Learner** (Spring 2017 charged with syllabus design)
  GSS 1062: **Disabilities and Dignity** (Fall 2015; Spring 2016; Spring 2017; Spring 2018; Spring 2019)
  EDUC 2241: **Inclusive Learning in Education** (Spring 2017; Fall 2017; Spring 2018; Spring 2019)
  EDUC 2241: **Students with Disabilities** (Fall 2015; 2014 charged with syllabus design; Summer 2016; Fall 2016)
  EDUC 4110: **Elementary Methods of Teaching Reading and Writing** (Summer 2015)

Instructor
Syracuse University: School of Education

  Graduate Courses:
    SPE 634: **Collaboration and Cooperation in Inclusive** Schools (Fall 2012; Fall 2013)

  Undergraduate Courses:
    SPE 324: **Differentiation for Inclusive Schooling** (Fall 2012; Spring 2013)

Teaching Assistant
Syracuse University: School of Education

Graduate Courses:
SPE 705: **Psychoeducational Evaluation for Exceptional Children** (Spring 2014)
EDU 900: **Writing for Publication** (Spring 2013)

Undergraduate Courses:
SPE 311: **Perspectives in Disability** (Fall 2013)
SPE 324: **Differentiation for Inclusive Schooling** (Spring 2012)
EED 314: **Teaching Strategies for Inclusive Classrooms** (Fall 2011)

TEACHING & PRACTICUM SUPERVISION

Professional Development School (Summer 2015; Stockton University)
- Member of team that is comprised of University faculty and Galloway Public School administrators to pilot a Professional Development School that provides training for seasoned educators and pre-service teachers in the areas of differentiation, co-teaching, formative assessment, active learning and engagement strategies, and teaching strategies

Education and Community Resources for Individuals with Disabilities (Stockton University)
- Supervised service learning component of in-service special education graduate students course work that allowed them to learn in a different K-12 special education service delivery option or community based support organization (2015-present)
- Facilitated community agency or organization visit, along with accompanying portfolios, that were designed to empower in-service educators to connect families who have a child with a disability to community special education resources (2014-present)

Psychoeducational Evaluation for Exceptional Children (Spring 2014; Syracuse University)
- Facilitate practicum for a psychoeducational teaching laboratory team that consists of 20 graduate students who learn to evaluate and plan for students with puzzling learning and/or behavioral challenges, employing home, community, and school observations as well as formal, informal, and curriculum-based assessment strategies (SPE 705)

Perspectives in Disability (Fall 2013; Syracuse University)
- Coordinate practicum experience for 23 undergraduate students that allows pre-service teachers to get to develop a relationship with a student with a disability, plan inclusive recreational and social activities, support independence, and develop deeper understanding about disability (SPE 311)
- Serve as the University liaison between families, the individual with a disability, University students, and two community organizations (Exceptional Family Resources and the Peer to Peer Project at the Taishoff Center for Inclusive Higher Education)
- Provide detailed written feedback and evaluation through weekly journaling experience
- Lead reflective and analysis discussion during course aimed at understanding disability from a strengths-based approach

TEACHING CERTIFICATIONS

Permanent Public School Teaching Certification in New York State [2187521]
> Students with Disabilities, grades 1-6
> Childhood Education, grades 1-6

PUBLIC SCHOOL TEACHING AND PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Elementary Education Teacher (Rural), 1st and 2nd grade   2008-2011
Apalachin Elementary School
> Owego Apalachin Central School District (Owego, NY)

- Collaboratively designed and implemented differentiated curriculum units in an inclusive setting, utilizing multiple intelligences for diverse learners.
- Co-taught with technology teacher, embedding innovative technologies (e.g., SmartBoard, iPods, NetBooks, Digital Cameras, Digital Microscope, Audio Recorders) across curriculum-based experiences enabling students to actively create learning products.
- Conducted academic assessment for students referred for special education evaluation, participated in Initial and Annual Review Committee on Special Education Meetings, and facilitated Response to Intervention Meetings.
- Developed and implemented a cross-age peer-tutoring program (i.e., Reading Buddies) to support the decoding, vocabulary, and comprehension of students with disabilities and English language learners.
- Active leader and instructional coach on the Technology Committee, orchestrated Community Service Projects (e.g., Holiday Hope Chests, Food and Toy Drive, Bear Stories), and member of the Parent-Teacher Committee.
- Researched and piloted new investigatory, hands-on curriculum integration in mathematics (Investigations) and science (Full Option Science System).
- Member of team of teachers who adopted and implemented the Literacy Collaborative framework for reading and writing curriculum.

Inclusive Elementary Education Teacher (Urban), 1st grade   2007-2008
> William Sherman Public Elementary School 87
> New York City Department of Education
> New York, NY

- Co-taught universally designed curriculum to diverse students in a fully inclusive urban educational setting that included students with disabilities and English Language Learners.
- Conducted teacher action research focused on integrating educational technologies within curriculum units.
- Research led to a school-wide incremental change in the usage of educational technology.
- Wrote a grant to gain access to SmartBoards for usage by primary educators.

Teacher Center Instructor
Owego Apalachin Central School District (Owego, NY)   2011

- Designed and implemented professional development content knowledge, curriculum planning, strategies, and assessment classes for elementary teachers.
- Developed and facilitated study groups intended to increase collaboration and engage educators in ongoing teaching, learning, and reflection regarding students, curriculum, instructional methods, and management.

Enrichment Educator, 3rd-5th grades   2010
Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) (Owego, NY), 3rd-5th grades

- Taught Enrichment Courses to diverse learners seeking supplemental learning experiences.
- Designed and implemented Scrapbooking Stars course integrated digital photography, art, and creative writing to construct a memory keepsake of students' personal and school lives.
- Created and taught Techno-Writing course used the Digital Language Experience approach to help students construct photo essays; the process improved technology skills (used computers, Microsoft PowerPoint and Publisher, Kidspiration, and digital cameras) and descriptive writing.

Women's Soccer Coach   2008, 2009, 2010
Owego Apalachin Central School District (Owego, NY)

- Coaching led team to three winning seasons; instilled a sense of teamwork, healthy lifestyle, and sportsmanship.

Elementary Education Curriculum Researcher (Binghamton, NY)   2008, 2009, 2010

- Independently studied investigatory, hands-on K-2 reading, writing, science, and mathematics curriculum to pilot and disseminate new resources and ideas in school.

Workshop Facilitator   April 2009—August 2010
The Magic Paintbrush Project (Binghamton, NY)

- Facilitated art-based workshops infused with therapy, education, or social goals at this nonprofit organization for students with significant disabilities.
- Engaged families in creatively supporting an individual with a disability by focusing on abilities.
- Volunteered at Pain Chip Events, Binghamton Mets Promotional Days, and other community functions to disseminate information, promote, and raise money for this nonprofit organization.

Toggenberg Ski and Learn Program (Fabius, NY)   2006-2007
- Volunteer ski instructor for individuals with cognitive and physical disabilities.

Astride Horseback Riding Program (Lafayette, NY)   2004-2006

- Volunteer assistant; provided physical support for children with disabilities as they rode horses.

Office of Academic Support Services (Syracuse, NY)   August 2003—May 2007
- Constructed detailed notes for Syracuse University students with cognitive and physical disabilities, and served as liaison to professors so that these students could be successful in college coursework.

Academic Tutor (Lisle, NY)   Summers 1997-2002
- Taught core literacy, math, and science academic skills to an elementary student during summer months.
- Organized fitness activities and educated student on healthy nutrition and lifestyle habits.

INVITED PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PRESENTATIONS

Tracy-Bronson, C.P. (2018, February). *Writing Effective IEPs.* Greater Brunswick Charter School. New Brunswick, NJ.

Tracy-Bronson, C.P. (2018, February). *Differentiation for Inclusive Classrooms.* Greater Brunswick Charter School. New Brunswick, NJ.

Tracy-Bronson, C.P. (2017, October). *Specialized Instruction, Modifications, and Accommodations.* South River School District. South River, NJ

Tracy-Bronson, C.P. (2017, October). *Meeting the Needs of English Learners and Students with Disabilities through Co-Teaching and Specialized Instruction.* Greater Brunswick Charter School. New Brunswick, NJ.

Tracy-Bronson, C.P. (2017, September). *Training on Inclusive Education for the Child Study Team.* South River School District. South River, NJ.

Tracy-Bronson, C.P. (2017, August). *Providing Specialized Instruction for Students with Disabilities.* Milltown School District. Milltown, NJ.

Tracy-Bronson, C.P. (2017, June). *Co-Teaching at South River School District.* South River School District. South River, NJ.

Tracy-Bronson, C.P. (2017, June). *Leading Inclusive School Reform.* South River School District. South River, NJ.

Tracy-Bronson, C.P. (2017, June). *Co-teaching in Your Classroom.* Milltown School District. Milltown, NJ.

Tracy-Bronson, C.P. (2017, March). *Administration of Inclusive Special Education.* South River School District. South River, NJ.

Tracy-Bronson, C.P. (2017, February). *Inclusive Special Education: The Who, What, Why, When, and How of Creating Inclusive Learning Environments.* Middlesex County Special Education Directors Committee Meeting.

Tracy-Bronson, C.P. (2016, February). *Creating Inclusive Special Education Learning Environments.* Milltown School District. Milltown, NJ.

Tracy-Bronson, C.P. (2016, February). *Questioning Techniques and Higher Order Thinking: Engagement and Active Learning.* Egg Harbor Township District, Middle School. Egg Harbor Township, NJ.

Tracy-Bronson, C.P. (2016, January). *Co-teaching in Inclusive Classrooms.* Milltown School District. Milltown, NJ.

Tracy-Bronson, C.P. (2016, January). *Inclusive Education.* Milltown School District. Milltown, NJ.

Lebak, K. & **Tracy-Bronson, C.P.** (2015, June). *Galloway Public Schools and Stockton University Partnership.* Galloway Public School District. Galloway, NJ.

Lebak, K., Boakes, N., & **Tracy-Bronson, C.P.** (2015, December). *Building Teacher Leadership Capacity to Support Beginning Teachers.* Somers Point School District. Somers Point, NJ.

Lebak, K., Boakes, N., & **Tracy-Bronson, C.P.** (2015, December). *Building Teacher Leadership Capacity to Support Beginning Teachers.* Mainland Regional High School. Linwood, NJ.

Tracy-Bronson, C.P. (2015, July). *Engagement and Active Learning: Strategies for Questioning.* Galloway Public School District. Galloway, NJ.

Tracy-Bronson, C.P. (2015, July). *Engagement and Active Learning.* Galloway Public School District. Galloway, NJ.

Tracy-Bronson, C.P. (2015, July). *Formative Assessment Strategies.* Galloway Public School District. Galloway, NJ.

Lebak, K. & **Tracy-Bronson, C.P.** (2015, February). *Common Core State Standards Alignment: Creating Text Dependent Questions from Your Curriculum Resources.* Egg Harbor City School District. Egg Harbor, NJ.

Tracy-Bronson, C.P. (2015, February). *Analyzing and Using Assessment Data to Inform Instruction.* Pleasantville School District. Pleasantville, NJ.

Lebak, K. & **Tracy-Bronson, C.P.** (2015, January). *Instructional Strategies of Questioning and Feedback.* Somers Point School District (2-Day Professional Development). Somers Point, NJ.

Lebak, K. & **Tracy-Bronson, C.P.** (2015, January). *Instructional Dialogue, Academic Conversations, and Formative Assessments.* Somers Point School District (2-Day Professional Development). Somers Point, NJ.

Lebak, K. & **Tracy-Bronson, C.P.** (2015, January). *Building More Formative Assessment Strategies: Small and Whole Group Instructional Strategies.* Egg Harbor City School District. Egg Harbor, NJ.

Lebak, K., Haria, P., **Tracy-Bronson, C.P.**, & White, M. (2014, December). *Formative Assessment and Video Analysis of Questioning and Feedback.* Egg Harbor City School District. Egg Harbor, NJ.

Tracy-Bronson, C.P. & Lebak, K. (2014, November). *Focus on Small Groups: Differentiating Instruction.* Somers Point School District (2-Day Professional Development). Somers Point, NJ.

Lebak, K. & **Tracy-Bronson, C.P.** (2014, November). *Formative Assessment: Cohort II Kickoff.* Somers Point School District (2-Day Professional Development). Somers Point, NJ.

Tracy-Bronson, C.P. (2014, November). *Differentiation within Reader's and Writer's Workshop: Meeting Students' Learning Needs.* Toms River Regional Schools; North Dover Elementary School. Toms River, NJ**.**

Lebak, K. & **Tracy-Bronson, C.P.** (2014, October). *Data Driven Small Group Instruction.* Somers Point School District (2-Day Professional Development). Somers Point, NJ.

Lebak, K., Haria, P., **Tracy-Bronson, C.P.**, & White, M. (2014, October). *Data Driven Small Group Instruction.* Egg Harbor City School District. Egg Harbor, NJ.

Tracy-Bronson, C.P. (2013, December). *IEP 201: Involving your child in the IEP process. Syracuse University Parent Advocacy Center.* Syracuse University Parent Advocacy Center. Syracuse, NY.

Tracy-Bronson, C.P. & Radel, P. (2013, November). *Inclusive special education: Legal rights and practical educational advice.* Southern Tier Special Education Parent Center, Family Resource Network, and Syracuse University Parent Advocacy Center. Hamilton, NY.

Tracy-Bronson, C.P. & Radel, P. (2013, October). *Inclusive special education: Legal rights and practical educational advice.* Family Resource Network. Norwich, NY.

Tracy-Bronson, C.P. & O'Brien, K. (2013, September). *Meeting students' learning needs: Accommodations, modifications, and adaptations*. Syracuse University Parent Advocacy Center. Lansing, NY.

Causton, J. & **Tracy-Bronson, C.P.** (2013, March). *Providing effective inclusive supports: A workshop for paraprofessionals.* Shenendowa Central School District. Clifton Park, NY.

Causton, J. & **Tracy-Bronson, C.P.** (2013, January). *Differentiation for inclusive schooling: Providing engaging learning experiences.* Shenendowa Central School District. Clifton Park, NY.

Causton, J. & **Tracy-Bronson, C.** (2012, October). *Audit on Special Education Service Delivery.* Administrators and Staff. Auburn. NY.

Causton, J. (2012, October). Creating and Maintaining Inclusive Practices. Fairport, NY. **Tracy-Bronson, C.** Assisted in creation of presentation.

Causton, J. & **Tracy-Bronson, C.** (2012, June). *Inclusive Practices: Differentiation and Co-teaching.* Chittenango, NY.

Causton, J. (2012, June). *Staff Development on Inclusive Practices*. Homer, NY. **Tracy-Bronson, C.** Assisted in creation of presentation.

Tracy-Bronson, C.P., Reutemann, C.L., & Ashby, C. (2012, May). *Supporting Learning and Communication through iPad Technology.* Advocates Incorporated. Fayetteville, NY.

Causton, J. (2012, May). *Daring to Dream Inclusive Dreams: Utilizing our Collective Power.* Utica Down Syndrome Association, NY. **Tracy-Bronson, C.** Assisted in creation of presentation.

Carroll, M., Shallish, L., & **Tracy-Bronson, C.** (2012, April). *The Vision of Urban Education.* Leadership Greater Syracuse. Syracuse, NY.

Causton, J. & Theoharis, G. (2012, February). Creating and Maintaining Inclusive Schools. Chittenango, NY. **Tracy-Bronson, C.** Assisted during creation of presentation.

Tracy-Bronson, C.P. (2006, April). *Representative for the Inclusive Elementary and Special Education Program.* Presentation for National Council for Accreditation in Teacher Education (NCATE) Review. Syracuse, NY.

EDUCATIONAL CONSULTANCIES

South River Public School District   Spring 2017—Present

- Conducted a special education service delivery audit for the primary school, elementary school, middle school, and high school to determine current status of special education and recommendations for inclusive school reform
- Presented audit to the district-wide administrative team and facilitated structural next steps for the district to take in order to become an inclusive district that includes all students within general education classrooms
- Provided professional development session tailored to support administrators to lead inclusive school reform in their district and school buildings
- Provided professional development session with the Child Study Team to facilitate and write inclusive-oriented independent educational programs for students with disabilities, how to discuss a change to inclusive school placements with families and educators, and analyzed current placement and program options
- Provided a series of professional development sessions geared toward each school-level, including the high school, middle school, elementary school, and primary school to build teachers' capacity around the following topics: inclusive education, co-teaching, universal design for learning, academic and behavioral supports
- Consulted with new superintendent on district-wide goals and restructuring of special education service delivery
- Provided training, facilitated planning and scheduling session, and supported administration to make inclusive changes in the school schedules to allow for co-teaching. Examined current service delivery and created service and staffing plans to maximize time in general education for students with disabilities
- Consulted with the director of special education on academic, communication, and behavior needs for students with complex disabilities
- Conducted observation of a student with challenging behavior in academic, specials areas, and at recess, reviewed independent educational program goals, determined need for a functional behavioral assessment and social skill instruction, and led meeting with the director of special education, two building principals, and the Child Study Team in order to develop a plan of action. Reported to the superintendent on plan to support this student with challenging behavior.

Greater Brunswick Charter School   Spring 2017—Present

- Conducted a special education service delivery audit to determine effectiveness of special education co-teaching arrangement and case load
- Wrote report that included observations, recommendations for re-structuring, co-teaching needs, and resources for administrators to ensure strong inclusive educational placements for all students, specifically looking at education for English learners and students with disabilities
- Conducted meeting with administrators regarding special education service delivery, school needs, needs to improve curriculum, instruction, and co-teaching, and strategies to enhance support for students with disabilities

- Conduct professional development on inclusive education, co-teaching, writing effective independent educational programs, modifications and accommodations, and specialized instruction
- Consult with administrative team regarding the implications of mandatory budgets cuts on personnel and their ability to provide students with disabilities academic and behavioral support in their inclusive classrooms

Milltown School District   Fall 2015—Present
- Consultant on district inclusive school reform initiative aimed to include all students with disabilities within grade-level appropriate general education classrooms
- Consult with Committee on Special Education Team, administrators, and Director of Special Services to make educational placement decisions in the least restrictive environment
- Provide professional development to support teaching teams to co-teach using various models
- Facilitate problem solving sessions with administrators, special educators, and general educators to include students with disabilities within an inclusive classroom

Weston School District   Fall 2017—Spring 2018
- Conducted school observation of an elementary student with autism who uses a communication device within an inclusive classroom
- Provided written report of observations, recommendations, strategies, and resources for the student's general education teacher, special education teacher, related service providers, principal, and director of special education
- Conducted a meeting with the educational team to discuss the report and problem solved around the student's academic, communication, social, and behavioral needs and strategies to meet these in the general education classroom

County Special Education Directors   Spring 2017
- Provided professional development at the Middlesex County Special Education Directors Meeting to support their understanding of creating District-Level Inclusive Learning Environments
- Responded to administrators' questions regarding federal law and state regulations on educating students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment

East Brunswick School District   Fall 2016—Spring 2017
- Consult with Family to strengthen the Independent Educational Program for a 3rd grade student with an intellectual disability
- Facilitated full inclusion of this student who was previous educated outside of the district in a special services school district
- Supported general and special education teacher on structure of classroom, making modifications and accommodations, and facilitating inclusive education
- Advocated for LRE, co-teaching, and inclusive-based practices to be included within the new Independent Education Program

- Assisted in refocusing the conversation to curriculum based assessments as a means to monitor individual learning progress

Bedford School District   Spring 2016
- Observed a middle school student's classes, access to modifications and specialized instruction, support from educators and paraprofessionals, interaction with peers during structured and unstructured socialization times, and communicative attempts during the school day
- Observed and collected data on the student in the home setting, including interactions with a parent, caregiver, and a sibling, living skills, and communication style
- Reviewed and analyzed Psychoeducational Evaluation, Social History, Progress Reports, Home-School Communication Log used by the district and family, academic documents, school schedule, Alternative and Augmentative Communication Assessment, Speech and Language Assessment, and Tutoring Evaluation
- Observed the student across the school day, including in related services sessions, in the general education classroom, in a classroom designated for students with disabilities, during lunch, and during an afterschool activity
- Provided academic specific suggestions, school recommendations, and resources to support educators to provide modifications and accommodations given the student's academic, communication, and social needs

Fort Lee Public Schools   Spring 2016
- Observed and collected data on a middle school student in her educational setting, analyzed academic records and special education evaluations, and provided consultation to the educational team on modifications and accommodations to support the student's academic, communication, social, and behavioral needs
- Facilitated meetings with the learning consultant, case manager, special education administrator, educators, and parents to discuss recommendations and strategies to increase academic and social inclusive opportunities

Mainland High School and Somers Point School District   Fall 2015—Spring 2017
- Provide professional development and coaching to train teacher leaders to be mentors who will support beginning teachers
- The long-term goal of this grant is to help districts improve their student outcomes by building their capacity to improve beginning teacher practice, teacher retention, and school culture

Tinton Falls School District   Spring 2015—Fall 2015
- Educational consultant at independent educational program meetings around classroom placement for an elementary student
- Discussed placement options with school administrators and advocated for co-taught classroom placement with related services and access to paraprofessional in a general education setting
- Provided consultation to family during court case centered on least restrictive environment principle

Egg Harbor City School District   Fall 2014—Spring 2015
- Provide weekly coaching to a team of five special education teachers (grades 6-8) on evidence-based special education instructional methods, humanistic positive behavioral supports, and aligning objectives and assessments with the Common Core State Standards.
- Facilitate co-teaching planning and instruction to include a range of students with disabilities and English Language Learners
- Observe instruction with a particular lens of including students with disabilities and English Language Learners, using effective questioning and feedback, formative assessment, and small group instruction

Somers Point School District   Fall 2014—Spring 2015
Jordon Road School
Dawes Avenue School
- Provide professional development to five pre-school, elementary, and middle school educators in the areas of Common Core State Standards, the PARCC assessment, formative assessment, differentiation, and small group instruction to meet the range of learners in the classes
- Lead educators through video analysis coaching sessions to enhance their reflective capacity in relation to the professional development focus areas
- Model co-teaching, lesson design that aligns with Common Core State Standards, questioning, and formative assessment in classrooms.
- Lead Professional Learning Community around aligning Readers and Writers Workshop with Common Core State Standards

Utica City School District   Spring 2012—Spring 2014
Notre Dame Elementary School
- Observed an elementary student with a disability in various educational settings and wrote a report suggesting several educational recommendations to support this student's academic and behavioral needs in an inclusive classroom setting.
- Facilitated meeting with the general educator, special educator, paraprofessional, and family to explain the recommendations and solve current classroom issues.
- Reviewed projected Individualized Education Program, provided consultation about each area of the IEP for the family, and suggested amended student-specific educational goals.
- Provided consultation as an outside educational expert during the Committee on Special Education meeting.

Auburn Central School District   Fall 2012
Seward Elementary School
Herman Avenue Elementary School
Casey Park Elementary School
Genesee Elementary School
Owasco Elementary School

- Conducted observations of school contexts where special education services were delivered, including resource settings, general education classrooms, special class rooms, and self-contained classrooms.
- Analyzed all elementary special education teachers' schedules and specific case loads.
- Collected data on the number of students with disabilities, number of teachers, number of paraprofessionals, and the special education and related services students with disabilities received.
- Created an *Audit of Elementary Special Education Programs and Services* that contained sections about general observations, recommendations, professional development resources, and a timeline for implementing inclusive school reform based on changing the special education service delivery model.
- Reported Audit information to administrators and Board of Education.

Syracuse City School District   2011—2013
Roberts Elementary School
Salem Hyde Elementary School

- Consulted with these schools within an urban district to sustain whole school reform based on inclusive special education service delivery models.
- Provided professional development to prepare educators to support all learners in general education settings.

Chittenango Central School District   Spring 2012; Fall 2012
Bridgeport Elementary School
Lake Street Elementary School
Bolivar Road Elementary School
Chittenango Middle School

- Conducted observations in various educational settings based on co-teaching, differentiation, behavior, communication, staff schedules, and paraprofessionals.
- Presented findings to administrators, visually mapped out current special education service delivery models, and facilitated change in service delivery model towards providing special education services using inclusive methods.
- Presented findings to school district leadership team comprised on teachers and discussed next steps for inclusive school reform.
- Presented to leadership team on co-teaching, collaboration, and differentiation.
- Co-taught semester-long Collaboration and Cooperation in Inclusive Schools graduate level course (combined practicing teachers with graduate level students at Syracuse University).

Syracuse City School District   Spring 2012
McKinley-Brighton School

- Facilitated school special education staff to construct a visual representation of current special education service delivery, including self-contained, resource, and classroom based support models.

Jamesville Central School District   Spring 2012
Tecumseh Elementary School
- Reviewed transition plan from pre-school to kindergarten, solved transportation issues, and suggested amendments to the Individualized Education Program for the family.
- Served an outside educational consultant for a kindergarten student with autism at Committee on Special Education meeting.

Tully Central School District   Spring 2004-Spring 2007
Tully Elementary School
- Observed and provided consultation to support an elementary student with autism in inclusive educational contexts.
- Consulted and provided recommendations to teachers, therapists, and family members on sensory, communication, and movement differences in school and home settings.
- Worked as a team alongside physical therapists, occupational therapists, speech and language pathologists, and medical doctors to design implementation plans that met the child's specific needs.

LEGAL EDUCATIONAL CONSULTING EXPERIENCE

Independent Education Evaluator   Spring 2017—Present
Montville Township Public Schools: Montville, NJ
- Consult with family on the inclusion of their student with an intellectual disability in general education school building and increasing inclusive classroom settings for academic instruction
- Observe the student in home and school environments, analyze evaluation reports and school records, and conduct an Independent Educational Evaluation of educational placement, specialized instruction, and academic modifications needed

Educational Advocate   Fall 2015—Fall 2016
Bedford School District: Bedford, NY

- Conduct consults for family who is in the midst of due process and mediation with a school district. Observe middle school student with multiple disabilities in her classroom to offer the district practical strategies to include her.

Educational Advocate at Individualized Education Program Meeting   Spring 2015—Fall 2015
  Tinton Falls School District: Tinton Falls, NJ

- Provided legal and educational recommendations to the school district in transitioning a preschool student with Down syndrome to Kindergarten. Analyzed proposed Individualized Education Program, including educational placement, special education, related services, transportation, and individualized education and communication goals.

Provided consultation around mediation and due process for parents who sought to fully include their child within the neighborhood district.

Assistant to an Independent Education Evaluator   Spring 2013—Fall 2013
    West Genesee Central School District: Camillus, NY

- Observed student in home environment, analyzed school records, and assisted in the writing of an independent educational evaluation that addressed student's behavioral, communication, social, and educational needs that lead to expert witness testimony during due process hearing.

Independent Educational Evaluator   Spring 2012
    Fayetteville-Manlius Central School District: Manlius, NY
    Hearing Officer: James P. Walsh, Esq.

- Observed student in home environment, analyzed educational, assistive technology, and therapy reports, reviewed Individualized Educational Program, and wrote an independent educational evaluation of the student's communication and academic needs that lead to expert witness testimony during due process hearing.

Independent Educational Evaluator   Spring 2012
    Bath Central School District: Bath, NY

- Observed a student with down syndrome in an inclusive educational environment, wrote an independent educational evaluation of the student's academic, communication, and behavioral needs, and met with district administrators, school administrators, general educators, special educators, special area teachers, and paraprofessionals to discuss academic, social, and behavioral strategies that would support the student. Conducted meeting with administrators, educators, and therapists to share results from the Independent Education Evaluation. This lead to the student to continue receiving special education services within the general education context.

Independent Educational Evaluator   Fall 2011; Spring 2012
    Federal District Court
    Disability Rights New Jersey (DRNJ)
    The Education Law Center of New Jersey (ELC)
    The Statewide Parent Advocacy Network (SPAN)
    The Arc of New Jersey (The Arc)
    DRNJ, ELC, SPAN, and the Arc v. New Jersey Department of Education

- Assisted in a federal class action court case. Aided with systematic review of special education placements in order to ensure that students with disabilities in New Jersey are educated in the "least restrictive environment." Analyzed twenty sets of materials, including Independent Educational Plans (IEPs), educational testing, and reports for students with disabilities.

SERVICE

Service to the Profession:
- American Educational Research Association Conference Proposal Reviewer 2015, 2018
- Review for Book Proposal at Brookes Publishing 2017
- Manuscript Reviewer: *Journal of Special Education Leadership* 2013-2015
- Federal Court Case: Assisted federal class action lawsuit versus New Jersey Department of Education with Independent Education Program Document Review 2011—2012

Service to the School of Education: Stockton University
- TEDU Technology Taskforce 2017-2018
- TEDU edTPA Taskforce 2016-2018
- TEDU Curriculum Mapping of Teacher Education Courses Taskforces 2018
- TEDU Development of the Learner Taskforce 2017
- Master of Arts in Education (MAED) Program Committee 2014-2018
- Teacher Education Undergraduate (TEDU) Program Committee 2014-2018
- Search Committee Member for Instructor of Education position 2015-2016
- Facilitator for NJ Coalition on Inclusive Education Poster Contest 2016
- Presenter: New Jersey Future Educators Association Conference 2015
- Faculty Representative: Instant Decision Days, Undergraduate TEDU Program 2014-2017
- Faculty Representative: Open Houses, Undergraduate Education Program 2014-2018
- Faculty Representative: Research Symposium, Graduate MAED Program 2014-2018

Service to the School of Education: Syracuse University
- Presenter: Syracuse University Board of Visitors 2013
- Member & Assist the Chair: Inclusive Steering Committee 2011—2013
- Assist the Coordinator: Inclusive Elementary and Special Education Program 2012—2013
- Member: Second Professional Block Teaching Team 2012—2013
- Recruitment interviews with Masters Students for Syracuse University SUTR Program 2012
- Facilitated visiting Japanese scholars' tours of local inclusive schools 2011
- Member: First Professional Block Teaching Team 2011

Service to Stockton University
- Member: Office of E-Learning Advisory Board 2018
- Osprey Give Challenge Social Media Ambassador 2018
- Graduation Banner Carrier at the Graduate-level for the MAED Program 2017, 2018
- Faculty Fellow to Support Students with Disabilities 2016-2018
- Faculty Lead for Stockton Center for Community Engagement Videos 2016-2018
- ITTE Technology Committee 2015-2018
- Civic Action Plan Consultation 2016
- Mock Class Presenter: "A Day in the Life" Undergraduate Recruitment Event 2015
- Invited Consultant Adviser: Institute on Faculty Development Five Year Review 2015
- Advisory Council Member: Stockton Center for Community Engagement 2014-Present
- Member: Interprofessional Education Task Force 2014-2016

- Organizer: Interprofessional Panel on Supporting Students with Disabilities 2014-2015
- Member: Essential Learning Outcomes Study Group 2014-2015
- Member: Essential Learning Outcomes Pilot Group 2015

Service to the Community
- Volunteer Advocate: For a family to understand LRE and due process 2015
- Volunteer Advocate: Council on High School Individualized Education Program 2014
- Presenter: SUPAC Onondaga County, The IEP Process Presentation 2013
- Presenter: SUPAC Madison County, The Least Restrictive Environment 2013
- Presenter: Family Resource Network, Legal Rights and Educational Strategies 2013
- Presenter: SUPAC Tompkins County, Accommodations Presentation 2013
- Member: Schools of Promise: Inclusive School Reform 2011—2014
- Presenter: SU Parent Advocacy Center, Parent University Series 2012—2013

Academic Advising: Stockton University
- Advise 70-75 undergraduates and graduates in TEDU and MAED programs 2015-2018

PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS

American Educational Research Association
      Division A: Administration, Organization, and Leadership
      Disability Studies in Education Special Interest Group
      Critical Educators for Social Justice Special Interest Group

TASH (Formerly known as The Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps)
Society for Disability Studies
The Council for Exceptional Children

AWARDS

- **Doctor of Philosophy Dissertation at Syracuse University Honored with Distinction** - 2018
- **Syracuse University Educational Leadership Helen Jones Bradley Award** - 2014
- **Syracuse University Teaching Associate** - Future Professoriate Program 2011-2014
- **Columbia University, Teachers College** - sole Elementary Education Curriculum and Teaching Master's student to ever earn a 4.0 GPA on the Research Thesis (since developing rubric in Spring 2005) (1 of 1).
- **Columbia University, Teachers College** - recipient of the prestigious monetary merit scholarship.
- **Syracuse University Scholar** – highest academic honor bestowed by University across all majors (1 of 13).
- **Syracuse University Class Marshal** - selected to lead procession of graduates into Commencement.
- **Kreischer Education Leadership Scholarship** - distinguished leader of Syracuse University's School of Education (1 of 1).

- **Who's Who Among Students in Universities** - academic excellence honor awarded based on GPA, leadership in school organization and extracurricular activities, and future leadership potential (1 of 33 Syracuse University students).
- **Renée Crown University Honors Program** - selected member of enhanced educational program at Syracuse University designed to provide intellectual challenge and academic enrichment through rigorous Honors classes, seminars, and cultural events.
- **Syracuse University Scholastic Excellence Athletic Award** - highest commitment to Division 1 athletics and academics.
- **Big-East Academic All Star** - highest GPA for Syracuse Soccer Athletics Team every season.
- Golden Key International Honor Society and Alpha Kappa Delta: Sociology Honor Society.