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Instructional Leadership Practices of Middle School Principals Regarding Students with Learning Disabilities

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Sharon Dixson

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
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Walden University

2021

Abstract

Instructional Leadership Practices of Middle School Principals Regarding Students with

Learning Disabilities

by

Sharon Dixson

MA, Cambridge College, 2012

BS, Clark Atlanta University, 1991

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Walden University

February 2021

Abstract

A problem existed among middle school principals in that they appeared to inconsistently apply instructional leadership practices while supporting their teachers teaching students with learning disabilities. How the principals perceived these inconsistencies and the possible effects on practice was not fully understood. The purpose of this study was to understand the perceptions of middle school principals regarding their instructional leadership practices to consistently support teachers who teach students with learning disabilities. The conceptual framework comprised the instructional leadership theory of Murphy, Hallinger, Weil, and Mitman. The research question addressed the perceptions of middle school principals regarding their instructional leadership practices to consistently support teachers who teach students with learning disabilities. Purposive sampling was used to select the participants for this basic qualitative research study. The participants were 12 middle school principals and assistant principals from a local school district. The data were collected using interviews conducted via Zoom and Microsoft Forms. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis for emergent themes. The themes were collaboration, modeling, balanced literacy interventions, and professional learning communities. All 12 participants agreed that professional learning was a key recommendation for the consistency of their instructional leadership practices. The implications for positive social change include the use of the themes for middle school principals to better support teachers of students with learning disabilities.

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Dedication

First and foremost, I thank my God for blessing me with the belief and the ability to complete this doctoral degree. This is my fourth and final degree and I am so thankful that what once was a dream, became a saying, to now becoming my reality. I thank my husband, Michael Anthony Dixson AKA Pastor Mike, for constantly saying, “You got this” and for all of the sacrifices made. My daughter, Taylor, I’ve witnessed your resilience and I am proud to be your mom. I am grateful for you always telling me, “I Can Do It.” We stated that there will be a doctor in our house, and I am excited to say that you were absolutely right. Remember, the race is not to the swift or the battle to the strong, nor does food come to the wise or wealth to the brilliant or favor to the learned; but time and chance happens to them all (Ecclesiastes 9:11). You got Next! I am honored and thankful for the D.E.W., my family, friends, and their unconditional love and support.

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I would like to thank Dr. Peter Kiriakidis for believing in me and pushing me to complete my EdD dissertation. You are definitely an angel sent to help others achieve their dreams. I am thankful you were my chairperson. I am glad to know that our paths crossed.

To my rock, my right-hand man, my husband, Mike, I am so thankful you chose me to be your wife. We are a perfect match and I thank you for rolling up your sleeves and taking on my share of the household duties. I thank you for reminding me of my why.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

According to the Office of Accountability of the local school district under study, middle school students with learning disabilities are underperforming at grade level as measured by standardized state tests in literacy and mathematics (see Table 1). The 2018–2019 state report card for the local state revealed that 56.4 % of students with disabilities performed at the beginners and developing level on the English language arts (ELA) assessment, which is below grade level. The 2017–2018 state report card revealed that 71% of students with disabilities performed below grade level (see Table 1). Table 1 also shows that 67% of students with disabilities performed below grade level in mathematics. The Office of Accountability reported that within the district, about 29% of students with learning disabilities passed the ELA state standardized tests (see Table 1) and about 33% passed state standardized tests in mathematics. Approximately 791,000 students were assessed in the state, and approximately 104,000 of that number were students with a learning disability.

Table 1

State Standardized Tests

Descriptions	2015–2016	2016–2017	2017–2018
English language arts	75.33%	73.03%	71.01%
Mathematics	73.33%	67.63%	66.88%

In 2015, the project site school district decided to place middle school students with learning disabilities in inclusion classroom settings to improve their state

standardized test scores in literacy and mathematics; however, per a senior school district administrator, the state standardized tests are still below average for these students.

According to the district board minutes documents, between 2015 and 2019, teachers have been complaining that school principals are inconsistently implementing instructional leadership practices to support teachers who teach students with learning disabilities in the inclusive classroom. The district superintendent of schools stated that senior district administrators evaluated the leadership capacity of the principals in 2018 by visiting the school sites and found that many school principals are inconsistently implementing instructional leadership practices to support teachers who teach students with learning disabilities. The superintendent continued, saying that district administrators reported to the board members that principals continue to struggle to support teachers who teach students with learning disabilities and state standardized scores continue to decrease . A lead principal in the district reported that as of 2019, district administrators were requiring that school principals make a commitment to support teachers who teach students with learning disabilities.

The problem addressed in this study was that middle school principals were inconsistent in applying instructional leadership practices supporting teachers who teach students with learning disabilities. The purpose of this study was to understand the perceptions of middle school principals regarding their instructional leadership practices to consistently support teachers who teach students with learning disabilities. The findings of this study revealed instructional leadership practices that middle school

principals can consistently use regarding students with learning disabilities. The implications for positive social change include instructional leadership practices, strategies, and interventions that middle school principals can use to improve their practices to support teachers of students with learning disabilities.

In Chapter 1, I provide a historical overview of the standard scores on the state and district assessments of students with learning disabilities. I also discuss the problem and purpose of the study, research question, conceptual framework, nature of the study, and significance of this research study. Definitions are also provided so the reader can better understand the key terms used in this study.

Background

In the United States, schools experience rapid and regular changes in the curricula. According to Wiles and Bondi (2015), the changes within the curricula require teachers to possess the skill set and knowledge to implement instruction with fidelity and to ensure that all students receive a quality education. The introduction of new laws, mandates, and standardized assessments create an ever-changing pedagogical environment in education (Avery, 2017). Every Student Succeeds Act was signed into legislation to support academic success (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). ESSA replaced the highly controversial No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, a federal mandate that required all states to administer standardized assessments to students in Grades 3–10 to determine grade-level proficiency. Under NCLB, all students were required to achieve grade-level proficiency by the 2013–2014 school year; however, the standardization of

education, providing a one-size-fits-all education for students, did not offer students within population subgroups, such as English for speakers of other languages and students with learning disabilities, the opportunity to be successful (Department of Education, 2019).

Teachers lack proper training for both the special education and general education (Achimugu, 2016). Principals of schools should be constantly assessed by their teachers and students, and the feedback should be used to improve the instructional leadership qualities of principals (Achimugu). Principals, in collaboration with government at various levels, should ensure the inclusion of trades in their schools' curriculum and the school principal should also ensure that they implement the same at the school level to help the students acquire the necessary entrepreneurial skills that would equip them or make them self-employed after their schooling (Achimugu).

According to a district administrator at the project site school district, teacher training is necessary for administrators to determine their instructional leadership practices to support teachers teaching students with learning disabilities. A senior district administrator at the project site district stated that school principals should provide students with opportunities to achieve their full academic potential. The senior school district administrators should use training to improve their leadership practices to support new principals. Students with learning disabilities can be successful in a variety of educational settings, if the environments include the appropriate supports (Watson, 2020).

Cherasaro et al. (2015) indicated that teachers who engage in specific learning strategies or take specific actions in classrooms have substantial effects on students. Fang (2016) expressed that specific learning strategies relate to effective classroom management and principals should provide teachers with flexibility to select a model that works best for them and their students. Reading and rereading is one of the teaching methods used as a strategy to help students with learning disabilities (Fang, 2016). In this study, I examined the instructional practices of middle school principals supporting teachers who teach students with learning disabilities.

Problem Statement

The problem addressed in this qualitative study was middle school principals' inconsistency in applying their instructional leadership practices while supporting teachers who teach students with learning disabilities. Students with learning disabilities often have significant difficulties and face unique challenges in the classroom. Teachers who teach student with learning disabilities require adequate training to implement effective strategies in the inclusion classroom (Hartmann, 2015). In this study, I examined the perceptions of middle school principals regarding their instructional leadership practices and their consistency supporting teachers of students with learning disabilities. The results include the instructional leadership practices of middle school principals that can be used to support teachers of students with learning disabilities increase their students' academic success. The themes identified through the coding

process were collaboration, modeling, balanced literacy, and professional learning communities.

Hartmann (2015) observed that general education teachers are teaching students with learning disabilities (SWDs) in classrooms and creating teaching and learning gaps because SWDs may not benefit in inclusion settings due to lack of teacher expertise and training. Researchers have stated that lack of professional development for general education and special education teachers on effectively teaching SWDs in inclusion settings may lead to a decline in academic success for SWDs (Hartmann). Hartmann explained the universal design for learning (UDL) framework as a method of understanding how to support access to the curriculum for SWDs to improve their quality of life. Middle school principals can provide instructional leadership strategies to teachers explaining how to modify the curricula for SWDs. Hartmann stated that SWDs are part of a natural diversity. Middle school principals can use the UDL framework to provide teachers with a clear way to ensure that SWDs have access to learning and develop the passion for learning with a mastery of knowledge (Hartmann, 2015). Expert learners are defined as being: (a) purposeful and motivated, (b) resourceful and knowledgeable, and (c) strategic and goal directed (Hartmann).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the perceptions of middle school principals regarding their instructional leadership practices to consistently support teachers who teach SWDs. This study was unique in that SWDs require learning

strategies to assist them with their learning. SWDs learn in a variety of ways, so teachers and principals must familiarize themselves with different modalities to support students with learning disabilities (Hartmann, 2015). Hartmann stated that general education teachers are now mandated and encouraged to take professional development to learn how to teach SWDs. Leena and Airi (2019) explored the long-term effects of difficulties in reading and mathematical skills on educational achievement and successful graduation from secondary education as well as the role of special education in successful graduation. They showed that there are negative longitudinal consequences of reading difficulties and mathematical difficulties on school achievement in literacy, mathematics, and rates of graduation. In this study, I used a basic qualitative research design to collect data via interviews from 12 middle school principals. The findings revealed instructional leadership practices that middle school principals can present to teachers to support SWDs.

Research Question

School principals should implement their instructional leadership practices to support teachers (Hartmann, 2015). Hartmann indicated that administrators' instructional practices influence teachers' practices. The implementation of instructional leadership practices may help the local school and district become better equipped in teaching SWDs. To gain a better understanding of how middle school principals implement instructional leadership practices to support SWDs, I conducted this study to answer the following research question: What are the perceptions of middle school principals

regarding their instructional leadership practices to consistently support teachers of SWDs?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study was the instructional leadership theory of Murphy et al. (1983). The three main sections of instructional leadership outlined in this theory are: (a) functions engaged by the principal, (b) the kinds of activities performed by the principal, and (c) procedures and practices of the school organization. I used this conceptual framework to understand how principals, as leaders in public middle schools within an urban school district, apply their instructional leadership practices to support teachers of SWDs. I analyzed the interview transcripts to understand the (a) functions of these school principals, (b) types of instructional leadership practices these school principals apply to support teachers, and (c) processes of the school organization regarding how middle school principals support teachers.

Murphy et al. (1983) combined and expanded upon previous perspectives of the instructional leadership in their theory. Over the past 3 decades, frameworks of instructional leadership have been present in the literature (Boyce & Bowers, 2018; Krüger & Scheerens, 2012; Terosky, 2016). Murphy et al. theorized that strategic leaders apply the same instructional leadership practices while managing their organizations.

In this study, I investigated urban school principals' instructional leadership practices within the context of Murphy et al.'s (1983) research. In their research, Murphy et al. focused on commendable leaders from various parts of the world and identified the

most effective instructional leadership experiences these leaders had in common, continually updating their findings over the years (Boyce & Bowers, 2018; Krüger & Scheerens, 2012). By merging significant research that has already been conducted, the combinations of the three main sections of the instructional leadership theory challenge the instructional leadership practices.

The first section of the theory is focused on aligning the functions engaged by the principal. Principals model this by establishing credibility through aligning their actions and objectives with state, federal, and local educational standards and guidelines (Şenol & Lesinger, 2018). The next two sections are focused on the kinds of activities performed by the principal and the procedures and practices of the school district. School principals should regularly develop and expand their instructional leadership practices to influence and support their students' academic achievement and to contribute to the staff's enhancement in teaching the content of their courses (Zepeda et al., 2015). Principals empower their students and staff by constructing trust and leadership expertise and developing procedures to enhance students' analytical thinking and encourage staff to maintain and adhere to the school's objectives of learning, standards, and teaching literacy across content areas (Thessin, 2019).

Nature of the Study

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), people conduct qualitative research in an ongoing manner to make meaning of activities, experiences, or phenomena. Jonsen et al. (2017) argued that qualitative research is critical to social sciences. Qualitative

research is based on the methodological pursuit of understanding the ways that people see, view, approach, and experience the world and make meaning of their experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Qualitative research is an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social problem (Yazan, 2015). The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting (Yazan, 2015).

Researchers use a basic qualitative research design to determine and gather participants' knowledge of perspectives, settings, and techniques (Kozleski, 2017). Conducting a basic qualitative study allows a researcher to concentrate on: (a) how people interpret their experiences, (b) how people construct their worlds, and (c) what meaning people attribute to their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Yazan (2015) demonstrated positivistic leanings and suggested that three notions are fundamental in the positivistic orientation in research: objectivity, validity, and generalizability. A basic qualitative research design was appropriate for this study to collect data through interviews with middle school principals to understand their perceptions regarding their instructional leadership practices to consistently support teachers of SWDs.

Definitions of Key Terms

Accommodations of SWD: Changes in schools that are used to assist students in working around their disabilities are known as accommodations. Accommodations can be additional time to get assignments done, one-on-one instruction, or adjusted outcomes.

There are several accommodations, and each accommodation can be unique to the individual student based on their needs (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA): ADA was signed into law in 1990 by President George H. W. Bush. The ADA is one of the United States' most comprehensive pieces of civil rights legislation that prohibits discrimination and guarantees that people with disabilities have the same opportunities as everyone else. The ADA is modeled from the Civil Rights Act of 1964 that prohibits discrimination on basis of gender, race, religion, or national origin. If a person has a physical or mental disability, they are protected under this law (U.S. Department of Education, 2002).

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA): The IDEA was passed in 1990 and updated in 1997 and 2004. The IDEA provides federal funding to state institutions to help support SWDs, whether they have physical or mental disabilities. The funds help the institutions to offset the cost of the additional services needed (Public Law 108-446 20 U.S.C 1400 et seq.). As stated by IDEA, the purpose of the law is:

1. To ensure that all children with a disability have access to a free, appropriate education.
2. Assist states with the implementation of a comprehensive statewide system to develop interventions for SWDs.
3. Ensure that educators and parents have the necessary tools to improve educational results of SWDs.

4. Assess and ensure effectiveness of and all efforts to educate children with disabilities.

Individualized Education Plan (IEP) for SWDs: A written statement, created by a committee of teachers, parent, counselors, and sometimes the student to develop, review, and revise the plan of action needed when educating a SWDs (IDEA, 2004, para. 1).

Modifications for SWDs: A change in what is being taught or expected from a SWDs (National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities, 2010).

NCLB: The NCLB passed overwhelmingly with support from all government parties. “This was a pledge to ensure educational quality for all children so that indeed, no child is left behind” (U.S. Department of Education, 2002, para. 3). Educational institutions are under pressure from politicians, community, and other stakeholders to convert to a learning community that centers on the subject and produces standard-based reform, resulting in increased test scores for all students including ones with a disability. To increase accountability and begin to decrease the achievement gap, NCLB requires education institutions to divide into subgroups for accountability. These subgroups are: (a) economically disadvantaged students, (b) students from major racial and ethnic groups, (c) SWDs under IDEA, and (d) students with limited English proficiency (U.S. Department of Education, 2002).

Assumptions

In this study, I assumed the participants would answer the interview questions honestly and openly. Another assumption was that the participants would provide

perceptions of instructional leadership practices appropriate for the SWDs in general education classrooms. I also assumed that the middle school principals would believe that their leadership practices were already consistent. I hoped that middle school principals would invite their assistant principals to participate in the study. The final assumption was that the middle school principals would outline their instructional leadership practices that were effective for teachers of SWDs.

Scope and Delimitations

I conducted this study at middle schools located in one local, public school district. The participants in this study consisted of 12 middle school principals. I chose to limit the participants to middle school principals to focus on their instructional leadership practices regarding SWDs because I have experience in a high school setting. The results of this qualitative study are relevant to other districts in the area with similar diversity in students and faculty. One delimitation is the middle school principals' leadership practices regarding SWDs. Middle school principals' perceptions of their instructional leadership practices might be different than the perceptions of the teachers they support.

Limitations

Qualitative studies include a certain amount of subjective interpretation and flexibility, which is frequently seen as a limitation by proponents of quantitative research (Yazan, 2015). In-depth interviews provide rich information and offer the opportunity to ask follow-up questions, probe for additional information, justify previous answers, and establish a connection between several topics (Almeida et al., 2017). The middle school

principals I interviewed for this study provided detailed responses about their perceptions of the implementation of instructional practices they have experienced and their instructional leadership practices.

Significance

The following four themes emerged through the coding process in this study: collaboration, modeling, balanced literacy interventions, and professional learning communities. The four themes included strategies that principals may consistently apply through their instructional leadership practices to support teachers of SWDs. School district administrators and policymakers may use the results of this study to improve instructional leadership practices to increase the academic achievement of middle school SWDs.

Summary

In this qualitative study, I examined the instructional practices of middle school principals regarding SWDs. The problem addressed in this study was that middle school principals have been inconsistent in applying instructional leadership practices supporting teachers of SWDs. The purpose of this study was to understand the perceptions of middle school principals regarding their instructional leadership practices to consistently support teachers of SWDs. The conceptual framework was the instructional leadership theory of Murphy et al. (1983). I chose to use the instructional leadership theory of Murphy et al. to understand if consistent implementation of middle school principals' leadership practices can provide support for SWDs. Understanding how to consistently implement leadership

practices can help educators plan more targeted instruction for the whole class, small groups, and individuals. Ultimately, aligning consistent leadership practices can help middle school principals effectively lead and guide teachers throughout their building. The research question that guided the study was: What are the perceptions of middle school principals regarding their instructional leadership practices to consistently support teachers of SWDs?

In Chapter 2, I will present the extant literature on the topic to establish the gap in knowledge. This chapter will also include evidence and the relevance of the problem at the local and state level. In Chapter 3, I will describe the sampling, data collection, and data analysis procedures used to answer the research question and address the local gap in knowledge. The ethical procedures followed in the study will also be included in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 will include the demographics and characteristics of the participants. I will also explain the coding for themes and gathering of further literature to review and analyze. The evidence of trustworthiness will be included to determine the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the study. In Chapter 5, the final chapter, I will provide my interpretation of the findings, an analysis, reflections, and recommendations for further research. In the conclusion, I will summarize the key findings of the study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The problem addressed in this study was that middle school principals have been inconsistent in applying instructional leadership practices supporting teachers of SWDs. The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the perceptions of middle school principals regarding their instructional leadership practices to consistently support teachers of SWDs. SWDs often have significant difficulties and face challenges in the inclusion classroom (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).

In this chapter, I examine current knowledge of instructional practices that would benefit teachers of SWDs. Specifically, I explore how middle school principals implemented instructional practices regarding SWDs. I also review and discuss peer-reviewed articles that are related to the research question and determine how the articles relate to the key concepts of the study.

Literature Search Strategy

To locate relevant articles, I searched the following four major databases for current, peer-reviewed journal articles related to the topic: SAGE, ERIC, Academic Search Complete, and Educational Research Complete. The following keyword search terms were used: *special education*, *mathematics instruction*, *disability*, *instructional practices*, and *English strategies to locate articles related to instruction for students with learning disabilities*. From the search results, I selected peer-reviewed articles that were published between 2015 and 2020 that were secondary sources with the focus on specific learning disabilities. I did not focus on elementary school and high school instruction

except for studies that were longitudinal in nature. Instead, I explored the general and instructional practices of middle school principals and assistant principals.

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts

Learning disability is defined as a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). The 2019 state report card revealed that students with learning disabilities require academic support to increase their test scores (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).

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empower their students and staff by constructing trust and leadership expertise and developing procedures to enhance students' analytical thinking and encourage staff to maintain and adhere to the school's objectives of learning, standards, and teaching literacy across content areas (Collins, 2015).

Factors Affecting SWDs

According to Timberlake (2016), SWDs should have the opportunity to be educated in the general education classroom with their peers. A distinct path to decision-making about academic access should include a context of aloneness, the influence of professionalism, and perceived barriers (Friend, 2016). Given the current working conditions in many schools, Adelman and Taylor (2018) revealed that hard work generated better results for students in the inclusive classroom. Adelman and Taylor highlighted new directions and systemic pathways for improving school outcomes and how to improve school results by addressing barriers to learning and teaching. Adelman and Taylor also provided suggestions for improvement with SWDs in the classroom, stating that educators should attend to SWDs' learning needs.

Principals should work together with teachers to help SWDs (Newman et al., 2016). Many SWDs require diverse, systematic educational support from the beginning of their education through upper secondary school to perform better academically (Newman et al.). Newman et al. discovered that students with education plans specifying accommodations were more likely to receive disability-related supports in higher education. Lang (2019) studied the perceptions of school administrators and teachers

regarding their instructional leadership practices towards implementation of differentiated instruction, finding that 4 out of 6 teachers were not in complete agreement with administrators. Lang suggested that school administrators may not be as attuned to the teachers' perceptions of their support for the practice of differentiated instruction. Tindal and Anderson (2019) studied services provided to students with specific learning disabilities and found that the accountability models for schools have changed. They reported that the state accountability systems did not need to be based on complex accountability models using time-varying student characteristics because students required different special education support over time.

The provision of a free and appropriate public education to students with disabilities has been a key tenet of special education legislation since the implementation of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (1975), and it has remained so in subsequent versions of the IDEA (1990, 2004). As Yell and Bateman (2018) described, the U.S. Courts of Appeals have interpreted that SWDs must have the opportunity for an educational benefit. Yell and Bateman stated that schools are now to be held accountable for monitoring SWD progress. Yell and Bateman also provided strategies and interventions to help SWDs gain their educational benefits and ensure that they are receiving free and appropriate public education.

Despite their instrumental roles in ensuring the success of inclusive special education in the schools they oversee, school principals continually report they lack the knowledge of and skills to effectively oversee quality inclusive special education

programs (Romanuck-Murphy, 2018). Understanding educational leaders' roles, responsibilities, and perceptions toward inclusive education may create appropriate programs for SWDs. Romanuck-Murphy stated that their findings regarding inclusive education can serve as a basis for discussion regarding the strengths and needs of current practices. Kouzes and Posner (2017) developed a transformational leadership model described as the five practices of exemplary leadership more than 30 years ago. Kouzes and Posner researched exemplary leaders from various fields and identified the most effective leadership experiences these leaders had in common, which led to the theory that the best leaders apply the same leadership practices while leading their organizations.

Sun and Xin (2020) investigated school principals' opinions of their knowledge, skills, and leadership roles in providing services and support to students with special needs. Responses were analyzed from a total of 134 respondents and the following four factors were identified: leadership in special education, leadership knowledge, leadership support, and leadership decision. Sun and Xin indicated that principals have limited knowledge of special education and have not been fully engaged in special education in their leadership practice. Sun and Xin indicated recommended education leadership programs including special education content to prepare more middle school principals to better support teachers and students in special education.

Inclusive education is providing appropriate educational practices to students with disabilities by classroom teachers in regular general education classrooms. Savage and Erten (2015) examined relationships between teachers' perceptions of inclusion and their

teaching practices, and their impact on student outcomes among 180 students in Grades 3 and 5 inclusive classrooms. Teachers who are effective in their teaching also have positive perceptions of inclusion (Savage & Erten, 2015). Correlational analyses showed that there is a relationship between teachers' effective teaching practices and their perceptions of inclusion when controlled for grade level. Teachers with higher scores on the classroom observation tool for effective teaching also had more positive attitudes towards inclusive education as observed by the teachers' perceptions of inclusion survey (Savage & Erten).

The Effects of Classroom Management

Classroom management involves all the aspects, efforts, and implications of rules, routines, settings, and environmental arrangements. Wong (2009) suggested classroom management is "all of the things that a teacher does to organize students, space, time, and materials so that student learning can take place" (p. 85). One of the most influential factors for teacher success is classroom management with an effect size of 0.52 (Hattie & Zierer, 2018). The most effective classrooms use preventative strategies to ensure learning occurs (Hattie & Zierer).

Classroom management involves setting clear behavioral and learning goals, expectations, and being supportive (Dion, 2016). Kozleski (2017) stated an effective teacher is an individual who can create a classroom management plan and implement the plan. Kozleski stated an effective teacher understands that classroom management begins on the first day of school. Teachers should implement classroom management strategies

at any grade level and in all subject areas (Kozleski). Kozleski stated that the learning environment within the classroom can reduce behaviors in order to improve academic engagement. Dion (2016) indicated effective planning and instructional strategies can create a more positive classroom environment influencing students' developmental outcomes. The learning environment should be supportive and engaging with high expectations (Dion).

Inclusive education should focus on the environment surrounding the students such as the classroom. Giles (2015) suggested classroom management strategies are needed for teachers to identify and distinguish between genuine and false behavioral problems. Classroom management strategies should prepare and train teachers to be able to teach students in areas of inadequate development, including teaching social emotional skills for both general and special education students (Giles). Educators should create opportunities for students to develop and improve skills through curiosity, asking questions, and pursuing clarification or redirection comfortably (Fisher et al., 2018). The perception of a conducive learning environment is visible through clearly articulated procedures and rules (Cherasaro et al., 2015). Chenoweth (2017) suggested teachers can maximize learning through the organization of their physical space. Successful classroom dynamics are observed when students discuss the topic and ask questions while the teacher circulates the room talking, questioning, and listening (Chenoweth). Classroom management strategies have proven to be effective when implemented.

Cherasaro et al. (2015) explained that when the classroom is relaxed and comfortable, the teacher will be able to continue building the teacher-to-student relationship while additionally building the student-to-student relationship. Through the normal flow of teaching and learning effective teachers connect and interact with every student every class (Wong, 2009). Gregory and Kaufeldt (2015) stated, “Laughter is of great use in the classroom. It relieves tension and stress, raises endorphins, sends oxygenated blood to the brain, boosts the immune system, and creates episodic memorable experiences” (p. 53). Gregory and Kaufeldt recommended that effective classroom management include the following: establish rules, give punishments, ignore behaviors, maintain contact with parents, facilitate motivations through activities, and establish a cause for the problem.

Skiba et al.(2016) identified positive classroom management and climate building strategies as a key element in developing and maintaining effective learning environments. Skiba et al. identified effective strategies that build classroom climates to maximize student learning and minimize disruption. Skiba et al. results indicated emphasis on instructional and preventive approaches, including setting clear expectations, appropriate curriculum to increase student engagement, positive acknowledgment, and building relationships between students and teachers. Classroom management systems are effective when a hierarchy of management is used to manage behavior. Skiba et al. recommended that teachers should shift away from being reactive and punitive consequences.

Instructional Leadership Practices

Instructional leadership is a term that generally incorporates three areas of practice for principals: (a) defining the school's mission and goals; (b) managing the instructional program; and (c) promoting a positive school learning environment (Lashley, 2007). Providing a supportive environment is very important in keeping the morale of the school positive (Lynch et al., 2012). Lynch et al. stated that a supportive environment and the mentality of students support learning of all students and offers the most academic potential of the student. Lynch et al. noted that instruction delivery is sometimes a problem for students with learning disabilities. Ineffective methods of teaching students with learning disabilities were caused by poor planning of instruction (Lynch et al.). Principals believed that teachers that do not teach to the end of the textbook have not taught all the content and those students need more from the teacher than the textbook (Lynch et al.). The funding to obtain special education teachers can be a real problem; the school districts are limited to the amount of money that can be allocated for special education teachers (Lynch et al.). Lynch et al. explained the importance of keeping students engaged with the curriculum actively and why just lecturing to students does not work. Lynch et al. reported that direct repetitive instruction was the best method of instruction for students with disabilities on a consistent basis (Lynch et al.). When asked about the most effective instructional strategies, principals noted students with disabilities were placed in general education classrooms and often should have been placed in self-contained classrooms (Lynch et al.). Teachers that teach

in the inclusive setting interpreted that a lack of support from principals may affect the climate of the school and ties into the effectiveness of instructional leadership (Lynch et al.).

The characteristics of the child must be considered when selecting strategies and during instruction. Teachers must find the effective solutions to personalize instruction based on the students' ability to understand and what they are able to do with and without support (Dion, 2016). Dion emphasized, "Socioemotional and cultural factors" of students must be understood and teachers must be knowledgeable to the individual needs of SWLD to provide students with accommodations to help with their individual growth (para. 2).

Professional Development for Teachers who Teach Students with Disabilities

School districts should develop and provide professional learning experiences that equip and empower teachers to increase student achievement. Administrators need to conduct an analysis of ongoing classroom practices, professional development experiences, and various instructional arrangement decisions to determine how such practices affect the learning of students with disabilities. Ekinici and Acar (2019) stated the development of differentiated curricula will require educators in classrooms and beyond to have the content and pedagogical knowledge necessary to be able to determine the specific need of students with disabilities. The teacher also needs to be able to identify and utilize the most effective evidence-based practices including instructional strategies necessary to facilitate opportunities for students with disabilities to be involved

in inclusive learning environments with their non-disabled peers (Ekinici & Acar). Students with poor academic records or those who do not benefit sufficiently from standard teaching practices are subject to varying degrees of modifications and accommodations to their daily schooling (Ekinici & Acar).

The opinions about the idea of professional development are in three sub-categories: change, experience, and burnout, views on the processes of ensuring professional development are in four sub-categories, physical conditions, technology, academic resource, and training process and opinions on the characteristics of effective professional development are being convenience to the needs, right of choice, appropriate content selection, development strategy, active learning environment, and cooperation (Ekinici & Acar, 2019). The results included effective professional development model categories are feeling a need, goal setting, planning, development process, and evaluation respectively and these categories constitute a cycle within itself (Ekinici & Acar). Ekinici and Acar revealed that perceptions, professional development for special education and general education teachers were factors that affected the academic success of students with learning disabilities. Ekinici and Acar stated that special education teachers required professional development in order to learn how to teach SWLD. Middle school principals' perceptions of special education training should be as important in understanding how to deliver lessons to SWLD.

According to Crawford et al. (2019), when professional development is implemented, the core intent is made explicit for teachers to learn. The core intent of the

intervention was to increase access to higher order learning opportunities for students with learning disabilities with difficulties in mathematics using research and practice from the fields of special education and mathematics education. Crawford et al. improved the conceptual understanding of SWLD and focused on these principles: (a) articulation of a logic model, (b) delineation of intervention components, (c) analysis of reliability data related to implementation fidelity, and (d) pilot testing to measure implementation fidelity and student outcomes. Crawford et al. revealed no significant effect for the component of technology; however, significant pre post differences were found in the performance of all groups on their conceptual understanding of fractions as numbers.

Teachers gain knowledge of the needs of SWDs coming into inclusion settings, especially when professional development is not available (Gavish, 2017; Mulholland & O'Connor, 2016). Gavish and Mulholland and O'Connor contended that teachers should work in a collaborative manner to ensure that all available resources concerning SWDs is available and to establish professional relationships in order to enhance the learning experience and success of SWDs in inclusion settings. Gavish and Mulholland and O'Connor stated if both special educators and general educators were available to provide both content and the instructional strategies, then there might not be a great need for general educators to have specialized training in meeting the needs of SWLD. The general education classroom provides an opportunity for SWDs to share a classroom with their nondisabled peers while increasing their skills academically and socially (Gavish).

Gavish discovered the integration of students with disabilities into the general education classroom came with some criticism.

Even though special education teachers believed that it was a step in the right direction, many general education teachers believed that students with disabilities should be taught in an environment that was separate from the general education setting, so they could work independently (Gavish, 2017). The general education teachers revealed they were unprepared to teach students with disabilities and that principals did not provide them with the support needed to teach special needs students (Gavish). Gavish stated that special education teachers provide support for students, build relationships with students, and offered a shoulder to lean and cry on when the student needed to communicate with someone. Building the relationships with student with disabilities helps the student become comfortable with their teacher (Gavish). Students felt comfortable to learn from a teacher that was understanding of their disability and seem to care that they learn. Special education teachers should provide empathy to the student because it improves the student's mental wellbeing and self-confidence (Gavish).

Donohue and Bornman (2018) stated that general education teachers become overwhelmed when assigned to teach SWDs without the proper training. With inclusion becoming the norm in many education settings, teachers must teach to a diverse group of students. Donohue and Bornman confirmed that most respondents required a need for PD for inclusion training for SWDs. Orchard and Winch (2015) stated that one purpose of teacher training is to introduce and engage new teachers with educational theories. When

teachers do not have the knowledge and skills it takes to assist students in improving academically, they do not feel confident in working with culturally diverse students (Yoo, 2016).

The NCLB made general education teachers' primary teachers for students with disabilities, placing more work on general education teachers. The NCLB stated that students with disabilities must be taught by teachers that are considered highly qualified, participate in high stakes testing and meet adequate yearly progress (AYP). With the enactment of IDEA 2004 and NCLB 2002 some school districts had difficulties with hiring highly qualified special education teachers due to limited funding, recruitment and retention which caused general education teachers with the task of educating more students with disabilities in the inclusive setting (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).

Principals placed students in the inclusion setting for the opportunity to receive a quality education with their peers. The inclusion setting is thought to provide the students an advantage because students have the expertise of two qualified professionals, a general education teacher that is knowledgeable in the content and a special education teacher, knowledgeable in providing support services to students with disabilities. Often special education teachers are also knowledgeable in the content area and are considered highly qualified (Department of Education, n.d.). In the United States, 68.2% students that have been classified as having a learning disability spend over 80% of their school day in the inclusive setting. True inclusion was created to help students transition to college, the

skills that students learn in the post-secondary setting will carry on through college (Borman & Dowling, 2017).

Muega (2016) stated that although placement of students with learning disabilities in the correct settings may be beneficial in enabling SWDs to gain equal access to the curriculum relative to their nondisabled peers, general education teachers may not have sufficient exposure or training that has adequately prepared them to teach such students with learning disabilities. Muega further noted that many general education teachers have concerns regarding their ability to teach students with learning disabilities in the inclusion settings. Researchers stated that it is important that teachers gain enough knowledge of the needs of students with learning disabilities coming into inclusion settings (Muega).

Special education teachers are designed to provide support in the general education classroom. Teachers can deliver instruction to students when provided the necessary tools that encourage teachers to succeed in teaching at a level that compliments 21st century learning (Romanuck-Murphy, 2018). Romanuck-Murphy examined both the contextual and individual factors regarding the implementation of PD content including word study and fluency. Romanuck-Murphy asserted that good PD assisted greatly in teachers using research-based strategies. Romanuck-Murphy discussed PD as having a significant effect on teacher practices and principals should provide PD to both general educators and special educators.

Teachers believes that PD is needed as the training contributes to the perceptions of teachers, influences teacher's satisfaction with their work, provides commitment to

their work, and the belief that the teaching profession is needed (Demir, 2016). The 21st - century, also called the era of knowledge expects that human resources have high-quality skills (Listiana et al., 2016). Due to the continual new development of SWLD and differences of strategies, teachers must stay abreast of the changes that inform instruction and assist in the PD of SWDs in inclusive settings (Listiana et al.). PD should be made available for teachers to learn how to teach SWLD.

While parallel teaching is designed to enhance learning in inclusive settings, researchers have found that the attitudes and personalities of teachers appear to be somewhat negative (Strogilos et al., 2016). Strogilos et al. presented information about a principal of a middle school, the findings concluded that co-teachers complained that time might not be well spent collaborating and planning. Strogilos et al. claimed that access to PD may encourage more support and practical implementation of coteaching and that administrative support may be necessary to support coteaching activities while moving in the direction of an inclusive culture. Strogilos et al. revealed the study has the potential to influence the quality of education for SWLD and enhance general education teachers' self-efficacy as successful teachers of all students.

Establishing learning communities to enhance professional development can have many benefits. PLC are described as groups engaging in ongoing collaborative activities to identify and work towards common goals, and share and disseminate knowledge (Tan & Caleon, 2016). PLC are typically characterized by shared values and vision, collective responsibility for student learning, reflection of practice, and collaborative as well as

individual teacher inquiry (Bowe & Gore, 2017). Learning communities support participants to engage rigorous and challenging inquiry into practice (Bowe & Gore).

Teachers involved in a PLC strive to reach common goals together, become involved in dialogue, generate opportunities for reflection, and are accountable for results (Svanbjornsdottir et al., 2016). According to Svanbjornsdottir et al., teachers felt that principals should offer more PD, and that they were also unaware of the teaching methods in the inclusive setting. Svanbjornsdottir et al. found that teachers felt that they lack proper training to work in the inclusive setting and that they did not do a good job collaborating with the special education teacher. Svanbjornsdottir et al. also found that special education teachers and general education teachers felt that if they had a good working relationship then the students with disabilities would experience success and that if they had a negative working relationship then the students would suffer academically.

According to Woodcock and Hardy (2017), teachers participate in a variety of PD throughout their career. These includes on-the-job training, which is considered informal PD, coursework and workshops, which is considered formal PD, and teachers that specialize in special education. Woodcock and Hardy found that general education teachers who had some sort of formal PD experience did not like working in the inclusive setting and found that student engagement to be a problem. General education teachers who had some on the job training felt concerned about their own ability to address all students' needs. Teachers with formal PD experiences exhibited a very positive attitude toward inclusion than the teachers that specialized in special education. The more PD

teachers receive the more aware they become with special educational issues and the more demanding the work becomes (Woodcock & Hardy, 2017).

PD for special education is used as reinforcement for inclusive education. A key finding is that two thirds of teachers who were either special education teachers, or who had formal special education PD, believed that the inclusive setting was not an effective means to educate all students (Whitworth & Chiu, 2015). Teachers with formal PD training was unenthusiastic about inclusion is an area of concern. Fifty special education teachers also expressed negative remarks about inclusion as the best way to educate all students (Whitworth & Chiu).

Brain research, cognition, and learning are the three principles of UDL. Nine guidelines and 31 checkpoints are related to UDL. The 31 checkpoints describe physical access, cognitive access, and engagement. UDL focuses on reducing barriers to make instruction inclusive for all students (Rao & Meo, 2016). The local district state standards examined UDL in the document under the title Application to Students with Disabilities; states that promoting a culture of high expectations for students is a fundamental goal (Department of Education, 2019). To participate with success in the general curriculum, SWDs may receive additional supports and services, such as instructional supports for learning, based on the principles of UDL, which foster student engagement by presenting information in multiple ways and allowing for diverse avenues of action and expression (Department of Education, 2019).

Building relationships are critical to the behavior management and help to solve problems within the classroom. Dion (2016) indicated the more time teachers invest in students, the more they know about the student, which allows for better classroom management. Teachers should start at the beginning of the school year building positive relationships with students to reduce behavioral issues (Dion). Dion detailed that students work for teachers who they feel respect them and with whom they have positive relationships. Dion suggested building a bond through empathy with students to cultivate a relationship and to develop a connection between student and teacher. This bond leads to an understanding between the teacher and the student where the teacher knows how to relate to the student, and the student is then less likely to cause disruptions (Dion).

Gregory and Kaufeldt (2015) added that classroom instruction must begin with an attention opener and then create meaningful connections with relevancy to the students' lives, or learning will not occur. Gregory and Kaufeldt suggested that students are more likely to be motivated by a learning activity when students understand that the lesson has value and relevance to their lives. Gregory and Kaufeldt defined learning as the construction of knowledge when students are able to connect their learning to the world around them. Gregory and Kaufeldt described the teachers' role transitioning from fact teller to facilitator of discovery, guiding students, and allowing for exploration.

According to Borman and Dowling (2017), PD among new teachers is very important and must be consistent throughout their first few years of teaching. The training must be structured and provide support from other teachers they can collaborate

with to ensure they are learning new skills. Borman and Dowling stated the need for special education students in the inclusive setting require skill and knowledge to ensure positive results. Preparation for inclusion must be effective to guarantee that general education teachers are not afraid to teach their students with disabilities (Borman & Dowling).

Tomlinson (2015) stated that teachers of students with disabilities must understand the teaching strategies of differentiated learning which involves the concept of change. Tomlinson elaborated that teachers who develop and implement a differentiated curriculum should do: (a) plan for student engagement through the lessons, (b) provide pretest assessment opportunities, (c) propose effective strategies to help students know, understand, and do lesson content, (d) promote teaching with high expectation for students, and (e) prepare students for posttests. Tomlinson believed that students' readiness occurs when teachers match students' needs with what they are expected to learn.

Reading and Mathematical Pedagogical Strategies for Teachers

Ejue and Orim (2018) asserted that providing quality pedagogical for children with learning disabilities begins with general assessment and progress to more specific assessment called neurological diagnosis also known as neurological assessment. Ejue and Orim revealed a relationship between neurological assessments and the education of learners with SWLD. Ejue and Orim stated that teaching charisma as positive behaviors of teachers, which can emotionally appeal students to learn. An emphasis throughout is to

constantly strive for superb teaching that excites and inspires. Although not every teacher can become charismatic, for each of the abstract principles of charismatic teaching, a set of operational tactics and strategies can be realized by training (Ejue & Orim).

Charismatic teachers are not only the masters of their subject areas but that they also have a keen understanding of group dynamics, develop excellent social skills, and learn how to display a range of motivating styles (Ejue & Orim).

Students with mathematics difficulty may struggle with their academics. Students without a diagnosed math disability have displayed lower self-concept than their peers with a diagnosed math learning disability or reading disability, which has led to lower academic achievement in all areas (Holopainen et al., 2017). SWDs with limited verbal competence who experienced play-based mathematics instruction in daycare showed an advantage over their peers who attended formal preschools with more structured instruction, but the growth was no longer visible after students had completed kindergarten (Hildenbrand et al.). Early intervention has been proven to support students with learning disabilities.

Built on the social-constructivism platform, enhanced anchored instruction (EAI) involves interactive and real-world experiences in mathematics as learning opportunities for underlying concepts. The concept is similar to problem-based learning, EAI is used to set up authentic learning situations where students view short context or situational videos, before solving real-world problems that allow them to acquire skills in related content areas (Bottge et al., 2015). A primary goal of EAI is to enhance real-world skills

such as collaboration and problem solving in mathematics in ways that cannot be taught using pencil and paper applications. In mathematics, teachers can use EAI to provide applications for traditionally taught concepts within an engaging context that motivates students and improves their maintenance of the concepts learned over time (Bottge et al.).

Bryant and Bryant (2016) reported that students demonstrate difficulty with mathematics over a span of grades. Many students with learning disabilities lack the ability to remember basic math facts and effective strategies for solving problems. Bryant and Bryant stated that understanding rational numbers, as well as having intensified instruction for SWLD, is crucial to their success in mathematics.

Dougherty et al.(2017) encouraged the necessity of using explicit, systematic mathematics instruction for students with math difficulties. Dougherty et al. also encouraged scaffolding as an instructional support and the use of graphic organizers, think-aloud (e.g., a strategy where the students speak out loud to describe their thought processes as they work through the math problem), and other cognitive strategies. SWLD require explicit teaching of deficit skills to create a habit of repetition to foster memorization and understanding.

Literacy education should be at the forefront of the classroom to ensure that each student receive proper instruction. Students should be able to read by the time they have moved ahead from third to fourth grade. According to Savage and Carless (2016), the achievement targets or goals in literacy is determined and measured by the opportunity to learn more about the problem by providing teachers with opportunities to empower their

students to become better readers. The National Assessment of Educational Progress reported that 37% of third graders in the United States were below proficient in reading achievement (Boyd, 2016).

Reading components need to be addressed effectively in order to establish a successful and motivated group of students. Edwards and Taub (2016) suggested that each reading component is important in alternative reading programs. Each component should be taught adequately with fidelity in order to support students with reading comprehension. Edwards and Taub examined a random sample of third graders in three schools in a local school district. In 13 classes, an initial sample of 168 students was selected to participate in two groups using block randomization methods. The final analysis sample consisted of 158 students. Edwards and Taub conducted six assessments using various domains. Edwards and Taub found a significant difference between the two reading groups.

Reading Coaches and PD for Literacy Teachers

Reading coaches are important in assisting general education teachers with monitoring reading. Kang and Martin (2018) agreed that reading coaches are needed to provide the necessary professional development and resources to literacy teachers in order to help students be successful. General education teachers and special education teachers should participate in the proposed PD, both groups of educators will have an opportunity to learn about reading programs and strategies (Kang & Martin, 2018).

Fang (2016) stated that the local state standards express the importance of another reading strategy, Close Reading teaches the students to look for the evidence of what they are reading in a short time. However, being able to select a method to teach students provides the teachers the opportunity to select a model that works best for them and their students. Reading and rereading is one of the methods used as a strategy to help students with learning disabilities (Fang). Coyne and Koriakin (2017) expressed that reading is one of the most important subjects that a teacher can teach because the ability to read is essential to school success.

Summary and Conclusions

Literature between 2015 and 2020 was collected and reviewed for this literature review. All the literature used in this study was related to students with learning disabilities. There were articles relating to methods and suggestions of how to perform effective instruction to SWLD including different teaching methods and barriers for general education teachers and special education teachers. These articles were included because some of the strategies used may have been experienced by the middle school principals and the teachers being interviewed in the study. The literature does not suggest if there is one reason as to why students with learning disabilities are not making the adequate progress on the state assessments or classroom assessment. The literature suggests that there are several reasons including barriers why middle school principals have been inconsistent in applying instructional leadership practices supporting teachers who teach SWLD.

Effective teachers can create a learning environment with a classroom management plan that allows instruction and learning to occur (Kozleski, 2017). Students with disabilities can be successful in a variety of educational environments or placements with supports (Kozleski). General education teachers have become responsible for teaching students with disabilities in the inclusive setting. Teachers should be given all the resources and support to help students on all levels. Most teachers feel that they are not adequately prepared to teach special education students and feel that they were not trained in undergraduate education programs to work specifically with special education students. Many responsibilities are placed on school principals, being able to support the teachers as well as the students in their school daily. As school principals prepare all students to be successful in the classroom, principals must prepare all teachers to work with students in the inclusive setting. Principals determine the direction of inclusive school setting and design the school with the students with disabilities in mind, by providing the teachers with the support they need. The principal must take the lead in ensuring that all teachers are prepared to work with students with disabilities and the teachers are continually receiving the support and training they need to be efficient in the inclusion classroom. PD is imperative for all teachers; it is needed for new teachers entering the field of education. Professional education training helps to reinforce what content teachers will be exposed to while in their classroom. School principals oversee having these PD opportunities available for their teachers. Teachers must take advantage of the various PD opportunities to ensure success in the classroom.

In Chapter 3, I include the methodology for the research study. I describe the role of the researcher and outline the participants in the study. The population and sample sizing are revealed along with the identifiable criteria of who was chosen to participate. I also list the interview protocol as the instrumentation of how the data were collected.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the perceptions of middle school principals regarding their instructional leadership practices to consistently support teachers of SWDs. In this chapter, I discuss the research method used in the study. I also provide information on the sample, selection criteria, and setting of the study. The role of the researcher is described to provide a background of the researcher as well as the participant selection criteria and the number of participants in the study. The instrumentation and the interview protocol are also outlined. Trustworthiness and ethical procedures are included in the chapter to establish the validity of the data.

Research Design and Rationale

Ravitch and Carl (2016) stated that a qualitative study begins with an interest, problem, or question. There is a growing concern about the performance of SWDs in the inclusion classroom and mastering the state-mandated assessments. The research question that guided this study asked: What are the perceptions of middle school principals regarding their instructional leadership practices to consistently support teachers of SWDs? Middle school principals had been inconsistent in applying instructional leadership practices supporting teachers of SWDs.

Role of the Researcher

One of my roles as the researcher was to maintain the privacy and confidentiality of the participants throughout the course of this study. I had 15 years of experience in special education in the district in which the study was conducted: 10 years in the

classroom as a teacher and 5 years as a special education administrator. Although the participants worked in the same school district, I did not work directly with any of them. I selected the participants from other schools in the district to eliminate any personal bias and maintained an objective point of view as I transcribed and coded the data. I asked open-ended interview questions to allow the participants to be comfortable and provide more detailed answers.

Methodology

Qualitative research consists of data sources and theoretical constructs, creating rigor and an abundance of complex information of the phenomena being studied (Drisko, 2016). For the purpose of this research study, I used a basic qualitative research design. Qualitative researchers recognize that there is no universal truth beyond the experience of the subjective or their personal perceptions and experiences of the phenomenon (Drisko). Qualitative research is a naturalistic approach whereby researchers examine and study participants' first-person reports and narratives (Drisko). I collected the qualitative data in this study via online interviews using Zoom conferences.

Participant Selection

I used the district's website to select the participants. The participants were middle school principals that had been employed at the school for at least 1 academic school year. The population was 42 middle school principals, and the sample size was 12 middle school principals and assistant principals. I created a list of the potential participants and invited them to complete an interview via Zoom. Those who consented

to participate in this study received a scheduled Zoom conference in which to conduct the interview. Those that decided to complete the interview protocol received an email link to answer the questions in their personal environment. Once the interviews were completed, I transcribed the interview data immediately to report the results and the perceptions of the middle school principals. The interviews were recorded to ensure that the data were kept in the proper context. After completing the interviews and before data analysis, the participants had an opportunity to review their answers to the interview questions to ensure integrity of the data. I analyzed the interview transcripts using thematic analysis to determine emergent themes.

Instrumentation

I created the interview protocol used in this study (see Appendix A). The 10 open-ended interview questions were developed based on the conceptual framework of the Murphey et al.'s (1983) instructional leadership theory, which outlines three main sections of instructional leadership: (a) functions engaged by the principal, (b) the kinds of activities performed by the principal, and (c) procedures and practices of the school organization. I used this conceptual framework to understand how principals, as leaders in public middle schools within an urban school district, apply their instructional leadership practices to support teachers who teach SWDs. The interview protocol was specific to the information needed to obtain answers for the research question.

I collected data from the participants in interviews via Zoom conferences and Microsoft Forms. Each interview was designed to take at least an hour. I created

measures to ensure that the participants had enough time to answer the interview questions and be comfortable with their answers. Participants had the opportunity to review their transcribed interview for content and accuracy and provide corrections where needed. Qualitative researchers often use observation data for triangulation purposes (Drisko, 2016). I used observational data, mostly in the form of field notes, to validate information collected from the interviews.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

I selected the participants from the district's website. The middle school principals were employed by the district for at least 1 academic school year. Each participant was invited to participate in the study via Zoom conference interviews. The participants provided their consent via email. Each participant had 1 hour to answer the interview questions and debrief prior to signing off the Zoom conference. During the interviews, I was focused on understanding the participants' perceptions of their instructional practices, the teachers' instruction and progress, their struggles, and their concerns regarding SWDs in the inclusion classroom. I notified participants via email if additional data or follow-up questions were needed to complete the study. The interviews were transcribed using thematic analysis to determine emerging themes. At the conclusion of each interview, the participants were asked if they were willing to participate in a follow-up interview for the purpose of member checking. For validity, participants had the opportunity to read the transcript of their interview and agree to the accuracy of their input prior to the data being analyzed.

Data Analysis Plan

Location and Frequency of Data Collection

I began data analysis after all participant interviews were completed via Zoom conferences. Zoom interviews were scheduled with participants as soon as provided me with consent. The Zoom interviews were set up based on the participants' availability. I allotted 1 hour for the interview process. In the interviews, each participant had the opportunity to answer the interview questions and elaborate on their answers. None of the participants required a time to start over or had to postpone the process. The data were collected within 1 week.

Duration of Data Collection

The data collection took place via Zoom conferences and Microsoft Forms. Each participant had at least 1 hour to answer the 10 interview questions. I gave each participant the opportunity to answer the interview questions, speak freely about their experiences, and determine if instructional leadership practices were consistent in their school. Each participant also had an opportunity to review their answers in case more feedback was necessary.

Recording of Data Collection

I recorded the Zoom interviews with the permission of each participant. Each participant had the opportunity to ask clarifying questions when necessary. I analyzed each interview transcript with the research question in mind to obtain the perceptions of

middle school principals under study regarding their instructional leadership practices to support teachers of SWDs.

Trustworthiness

Developing clarity and agreement on concepts and common methods and timelines at an early stage is critical to ensure alignment and focus in intercountry qualitative research and analysis processes (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Building good relationships and trust among network participants enhances the quality of qualitative research findings (Korstjens & Moser). To be trustworthy, qualitative research should be rooted in a strong understanding of the local context and the researchers' positionality as well as developed iteratively through multiple rounds of joint discussion (Nyirenda et al., 2020).

I established credibility in this study because the participants were all familiar with special education rules and procedures; whether they are middle school principals, special education teachers, or general education teachers who teach inclusion classes, educators understand that SWDs require direct, specialized instruction to learn new concepts. Transferability is established by providing readers with evidence that the study findings could be applicable to other contexts, situations, times, and populations (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). I decided to select the participants used in this study because of their knowledge of SWDs and instructional leadership practices. I ensured that the data were valid based on the current and prior knowledge of each participant.

Dependability includes the aspect of consistency (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Dependability is achieved by analysis of patterns and themes to reach saturation (Korstjens & Moser). All participants taught at Title I schools in the same school district, and some taught at affluent schools in the district. I collected data that included a variety of perceptions, experiences, and suggestions from the participants. Trustworthiness is necessary to establish confirmability (Korstjens & Moser). Confirmability can be established through reflexivity with qualitative studies (Korstjens & Moser). Reflexivity is an integral part of ensuring the transparency and quality of qualitative research (Korstjens & Moser). The participants in this study were able to reflect on their leadership practices and answer the interview questions based on their perceptions. To address reflexivity, I stayed self-aware of my role as researcher in the study (Korstjens & Moser).

Ethical Procedures

All participants were treated with respect, and I was transparent with them during this study. The data are kept in a locked filing cabinet. To ensure that all procedures were ethical and the participants were protected, all participants, school names, and the school district were assigned pseudonyms. Only information related to the study was collected from the participants during the interviews. Prior to recruiting participants, I obtained approval from Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB Approval No. 05-29-20-0971919) and the school district in which the participants were employed.

Summary

In this chapter, I discussed the methodology of this qualitative study by focusing on the participant selection, instrumentation, data collection, and the data analysis plan. The interview questions were geared towards the perceptions of middle school principals' instructional practices. The data are kept in a safe and secure filing cabinet within my office. To establish trustworthiness within the study, I explained the strategies and interventions used to determine credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. To ethically conduct this study, I followed the guidelines of Walden University's IRB and the local school district. Emerging themes were identified in the interview data to identify an area of needed support and strategies for teachers. Middle school principals may use the results of this study to help effectively implement instructional practices. In Chapter 4, I outline the setting of the Zoom conferences, describe the data collected, and present the results.

Chapter 4: Reflections and Conclusions

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the perceptions of middle school principals regarding their instructional leadership practices to consistently support teachers of SWDs. I developed and used an interview protocol specific to the information needed to address the following research question: What are the perceptions of middle school principals regarding their instructional leadership practices to consistently support teachers of SWDs? I interviewed 12 participants who responded to 10 interview questions (see Appendix A). In this chapter, I describe the setting, data collection and data analysis processes, results, and evidence of trustworthiness before concluding with a summary.

Setting of the Study

The interviews for this qualitative study took place via Microsoft Forms and Zoom due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants in this qualitative study were all employed by a public school district in the southern part of a U.S. state. The school district serves over 100,000 students in over 100 schools. The student demographics were 37% White, 30% Black, 22% Hispanic, 6% Asian, and 4% Other.

I purposefully selected middle school principals as the participants in this study. Middle school principals were selected to answer the interview questions at a time convenient for them via Zoom conference or Microsoft Form. Each participant answered 10 questions about their instructional leadership practices. The participants had between 1 and 22 years of experience. Three of the principals' schools were receiving Title I funds,

and three were non-Title I schools. Table 1 includes the demographics of the participants, the years of experiences, their education level, and their gender.

Table 2

Participants Demographic Information

Participant	Title	Years of experience	Education level	Gender
P1	AP	1	Doctorate	Female
P2	Principal	7	Doctorate	Female
P3	AP	9	Masters	Male
P4	AP	6	Specialist	Female
P5	AP	7	Doctorate	Male
P6	Principal	6	Doctorate	Male
P7	Principal	15	Specialist	Female
P8	Principal	22	Doctorate	Female
P9	Principal	17	Doctorate	Male
P10	Principal	13	Doctorate	Female
P11	AP	6	Specialist	Male
P12	AP	4	Doctorate	Female

Data Collection

The data collection process commenced after I received IRB approval (IRB Approval No. 05-29-20-0971919) from Walden University, created the interview

protocol, obtained approval from the local school district, received consent from the participants, and scheduled Zoom meetings for the interviews. I interviewed six principals and six assistant principals. I emailed the interview protocol to the participants prior to their scheduled interviews. Five of the participants decided to complete the Microsoft Form interview questions and did not participate in the scheduled Zoom sessions. In the Zoom interviews, I asked the interview questions and allowed the participants time and space to respond and expound as needed.

Participants were recruited after I determined they met the selection criteria. Participants had either taught special education or had been an administrator in charge of the special education department. Each principal was asked to refer their assistant principals who were familiar with special education for SWDs. Each participant answered the 10 interview questions.

Prior to the interviews taking place, the principals gave me permission to record the interviews. The interview data were recorded via Microsoft Forms or Zoom. The Microsoft Forms collection process was different from the original plan stated in Chapter 3 because principals decided whether they would participate in a Zoom interview or complete a Microsoft Form due to the pandemic. Because of the pandemic, the interviews could not be conducted in person or in focus groups. Zoom gave the participants an opportunity to be in their natural setting, whether that was in their home or at their school office. Therefore, the participants answered the interview questions in a comfortable place and at their own pace.

Data Analysis

First, I emailed the interview questions to each participant, allowing them an opportunity to read over the questions before the scheduled Zoom call. Upon completion of the interviews, I began the transcription process. The open coding process allowed me to identify themes. Ravitch and Carl (2016) stated that coding is a process of assigning meaning to data. Coding can be a word or phrase that explains what is going on with the data. Coding organizes and breaks data down into manageable segments and identifies those segments (Ravitch & Carl).

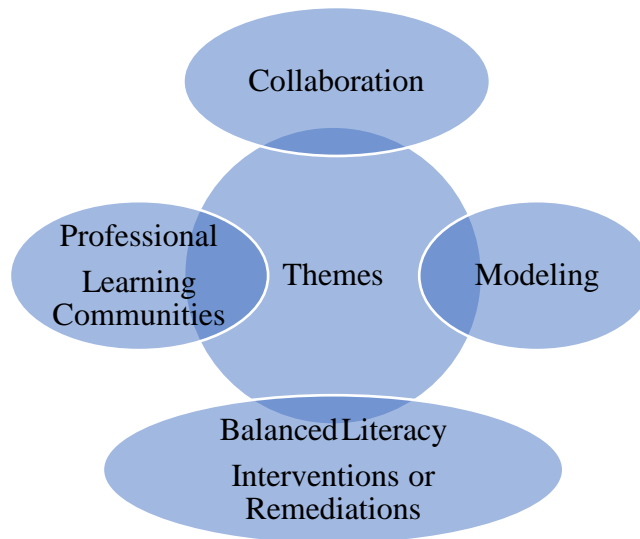
I downloaded the Microsoft Forms interview protocol into a Microsoft Word file that is password protected on my computer. The Zoom interviews were saved on my personal computer. I was able to identify that there were similarities and differences with the participants' responses even though the participants are all from the same local school district. While reviewing the data, I underlined and highlighted keywords and phrases that the participants used to respond to the same question to create categories based on commonalities.

Saldana (2016) stated that descriptive coding summarizes the data and codes are placed into categories because the data have similar characteristics or patterns. In analyzing the instructional leadership practices of middle school principals for SWDs, the following codes, categories, and themes emerged. I created the overarching categories of student achievement and leadership practice based on the commonalities from the

participants' interview responses. The final emergent themes were collaboration, modeling, balanced literacy interventions or remediations, and PLCs (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Common Themes



Results of the Study

The answers to the research question emerged in the form of four themes: collaboration, modeling, balanced literacy interventions or remediations, and PLCs. The thematic codes used to analyze and create the themes are presented in Table 3. Several of the participants used the same verbiage and that was part of the coding process to create the themes.

Table 3*Thematic Code Analysis*

Thematic codes	Themes	Interview questions
Data team Meetings/common planning	Collaboration	1, 2, and 4
Examples/expectations	Modeling	2 and 8
Implementation/resources	Balanced literacy interventions or remediations	6 and 7
Training/specially designed Instruction	Professional learning communities	3, 5, 9, and 10

Theme 1: Collaboration

All participants stated that collaboration was the main ingredient in applying instructional leadership practices in their school and with the support of their teachers of SWDs. Each participant reported that collaborating with each other as well as their team leaders allowed them to be more consistent in the delivery of the information provided to and for their teachers. P2 reported that their instructional leadership practices are applied through shared experts in the building. Teacher leaders have the opportunity to collaborate and redeliver professional training that they received to the entire staff during the expected collaboration time. P5 and P7 stated that they apply instructional leadership practices in their school by providing clear expectation of collaboration amongst the

entire staff and by working to shape the vision of high expectations and academic success for all students. Through collaboration, P8 set and maintained high standards for all teachers and promoted a growth mindset, which is continued improvement for all students and teachers by creating a collaborative environment where teachers and administrators can share best practices. P9 applied instructional leadership practices of collaboration by working with his administrators, team leads, and content leads to set procedures and protocols for the year. P9 stated that his main practice is listening to understand the teachers' needs, analyzing data, and asking the right questions to help teachers collaborate effectively. P10 said that one of their major instructional practices is the collaboration model. Each grade level is slated to collaborate on a weekly basis in order to ensure that they are consistent with their practices. P11 monitored collaboration by assigning an administrator to each grade level to support and model instructional practices. P12 made sure instruction is aligned with curricula by monitoring the collaboration process to ensure that teachers are all on the same page with the same goal in mind.

Collaboration is an effective leadership practice that leaders should implement to ensure that teachers who teach SWLD are implementing effective strategies to support their students. During collaboration, the goal is to make sure all administrators, teachers, and students are on the same page and everyone is consistent in their instructional leadership practices. P1, P2, P3, P4, and P7 responded by acknowledging that

collaboration time should be protected, planned out, and consistent across each core curriculum.

Theme 2: Modeling

Modeling behaviors of learning, focusing on learning objectives, and leading by example are crucial to the success of principals. The participants stated that modeling is the instructional leadership practice that both their teachers and students benefit from the most. P2 stated she modeled and participated in collaborative communities to ensure her teachers share her vision and expectations. P8 expressed, “I consistently provide support to teachers by demonstrating to them, the power of explicit modeling coupled by real-world experiences.” Reinforcing the importance of teachers incorporating differentiated instruction, flexible grouping, and writing across content areas are examples used in modeling. P8 also stated, “I challenge teachers to identify their students’ learning styles, accommodations needed for success. Teachers are then instructed to deliver instruction via modes that align to students’ learning styles and profiles.” Teachers create a learning profile for each of their students similar to what the administration team modeled. The learning profile is designed to provide a model so teachers can determine what specific interventions and strategies are important for their students. P8 stated it is also important that teachers not only provide interventions for learners who require additional support, but also offering academic challenge for those students who readily grasp the concepts. P8 stated, “We must serve all learners on the learning continuum.”

P2 stated that vision, mission, and expectations are shared, modeled, and monitored frequently. At every team meeting, vision, mission, and expectations for the outcome of the meeting are shared with the entire team. P4 believed that her students benefit from her instructional leadership by being visible and accessible. Leaders should be a positive and visible presence in schools. P5 reported that principals must be effective communicators to model effective instructional practices and current trends in education. Principals must be able to communicate their beliefs pertaining to education, including the conviction that all students are capable of learning. P5 reported serving as an instructional resource allows teachers to rely on the instructional leader who is a source of information related to instructional practices utilized within the school building. P6 stated that modeling strategies empower teachers and provide examples to support students. P9 reported that he is constantly modeling and learning what best serves students' needs and impact instruction. Then P9 worked to implement those strategies throughout the building. P9 is also changing and implementing different strategies that are proven to not be effective. P9 stated that he does not believe in "education dogma or practices that stay in place indefinitely with no effect."

Theme 3: Balanced Literacy via Interventions and/or Remediations

The balanced literacy approach is designed to help students achieve more with their strongest academic area while balancing the weakest area including reading and writing workshops, guided reading, shared reading, and interactive writing. P1 stated the district's intervention strategic plan to support teachers of SWLD include the Response to

Intervention process. P2 shared that the student's IEP must be followed, then provide opportunities to increase reading and literacy exposure and those resources should be tiered and relevant to help the student's access the curriculum at a level to promote success. P3, P7, and P8 simply stated balanced literacy interventions and remediations were their strategic literacy plan to support teachers who teach SWLD. Understanding that remediation is also part of the strategic plan, P12 revealed that the focus on writing throughout each content classroom provides the literacy application to reinforce the missing skills as well as address the deficits. P4, P10, and P11 shared the Read 180, System 44, Moby Max, and Orton-Gillingham interventions as their strategies to support teachers of students with learning disabilities. However, P5 stated that a multi-tiered approach is appropriate. The use of the tiered system allows the opportunity to provide different levels of support to struggling students while teachers focus on increasing student achievement. Interventions and remediations are critical elements of any instructional program. In reference to the implementation of the balanced literacy, P1 stated that the teams discuss students' needs, implement best practices, then collaborate to discuss next steps. P2, P3, P7, P8, and P12 stated that training on balanced literacy is important for teachers and that literacy is emphasized across all content areas. Literacy application is designed to reinforce reading, writing, and math skills for struggling students.

Theme 4: Professional Learning Communities

The fourth theme, PLC is the theme with the most responses to the interview questions. All 12 participants believe in PLC and strive to support the professional learning process. PLC should be done on a consistent basis and it should have a purpose with an expected outcome. Principals believed that PLC s should be intentional, and teachers should be able to develop strategies to implement. P5 stated, “Via PLC, I help teachers teaching SWLD to improve proficiency by ensuring that they use the strategies and interventions that we use in our building and share additional resources that students are able to use at home.” P5 also stated, “PLC practice has been beneficial to teachers because via PLC they learn concepts that we teach during the day and gain proficiency at home by reinforcing the strategies they were taught at school.” P4, P6, P7, and P8 discussed the need for PLC to provide the professional learning that is designed for them to be successful in implementing strategies based on student’s specific needs. P9 stated, “Proficiency via PLC sometimes is not the immediate goal, sometimes growth is the goal, but this all depends on correctly analyzing the data and results.” P9 stated that PLC is definitely the first step in determining the need of teachers and students.

P1 revealed that via PLC teachers helped students to improve their test scores. P5 agreed that PLC was a contributing factor. P5 stated, “Via PLC, the leadership practices that our team applied to improve state scores were to raise our level of expectations, motivate students, teach test taking strategies, take practice tests, analyze the data from the practice test results.” P2, P3, P4, P7, and P9 stated that they use PLC to develop

school-wide goals to implement for improvement of state scores. The participants also stated that they visit classrooms and provide specific feedback to teachers to discuss in their PLC and they also apply the professional learning process with fidelity with hopes that the PLC process will impact student growth. P8, P10, P11, and P12 stated that implementing PLC and looking at the data and understanding the individual subgroups are just as important when analyzing the progression of students. For example, P8 stated, “Using PLC, teachers can implement SMART goals for teachers and students. After assessments are administered, we engage in conversations to analyze data to identify trends in students’ performance.” P8 also stated, “We pay specific attention to PLC and form subgroups of students and our teachers share specific strategies regarding how they presented content and the responsiveness of learners.”

Ten out of the 12 participants stated that special education teachers are afforded the same or equal amount PLC opportunities as general education teachers. PLC is focused on students with disabilities and how they learn. P2 stated that with grade level PLC teams, content and subject teams, special education department, or the whole school; frequent PLC should be provided for all teachers including SWD teachers for content literacy, classroom management, coteaching models, strategies for grouping, regrouping, tiered levels, chunking, use of thinking organizers, use of formative and summative data, monitoring progress, making adjustments for remediation and mastery. P4 and P8 created local PLC within their staff, both schools have a specially designed instructional coach to support teachers within their individual school.

P1 believed that reading and discussing research-based articles during their protected time is how they promote PLC. P2 worked closely with the special education administrator and made sure that the special education teachers are implementing best practices to help access the curriculum and that they are striving for targeted proficiency and mastery. Looking at the data and breaking down the subgroups are important when you are determining the professional learning opportunity. P5 stated, "I promote PLC specifically for teachers teaching students with learning disabilities as a critical group that can have a positive impact on our bottom line or negatively impact it." P5 also stated, "We identify students that we feel can meet or exceed the state standards and work to ensure that these students have been identified, mentored, and supported for them to meet the expectations that we have for them." P5 reported, "Our goal is to have every student perform higher than they have previously performed." The time for PLC is agreed upon by all 12 participants. P10, P11, and P12 stated that this time is organic, and their experiences have proven that effective PLC is a must in their school. P10 did not promote PLC. P10 also stated, "PLC is just something we do, it's a natural part of our week, there is no need for me to sell professional learning, it's how we do business, teachers are eager to learn." All 12 participants agreed that due to COVID-19, the weekly PLC in each school has not happened this school year compared to previous years. Teachers are more readily able to participate in PLC when the training has been differentiated and the teachers have an opportunity to practice the strategies they have learned and utilize during their instruction time.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

According to Ravitch and Carl (2016), transparency and validity are vital in ensuring trustworthiness. The researcher must demonstrate a commitment to being clear and honest about the goals, expectations, and processes of the research as well as the roles and responsibilities of all the parties involved in the research process. The trustworthiness of a study relies upon the integrity of the researcher (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This section includes a discussion of the issues of credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability relating to the strategies that were used to ensure the trustworthiness of this qualitative research study.

Credibility

The credibility of the researcher is an essential component of ensuring the reliability of qualitative research, and the trustworthiness of the data is tied to the trustworthiness of the people who collect the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The method used in this study to provide credibility was participant review. I allowed each participant to review the transcript to check over their answers for clarity and determine if there were any errors. No errors or clarification were reported by any of the participants. I created the themes and codes. There were no adjustments to credibility strategies outlined in Chapter 3.

Transferability

Transferability was addressed within this qualitative research study by having principals and assistant principals participate that have a wide variety of experience. The

purpose of the study was to identify consistent instructional leadership practices of middle school principals. The final study will be presented to the local school district to determine if the results can be consistently implemented amongst the middle schools.

Dependability

Korstjens and Moser (2018) stated that dependability includes aspects of consistency. In this qualitative study, I provided an accurate account of how the data were collected and analyzed. I labeled the responses for easy retrieval in case I needed to review them again. Transcriptions of the interviews were saved electronically, and each participant was assigned a unique number to protect their anonymity.

Confirmability

As a former special education teacher, I needed to ensure that my personal opinion and bias would not influence the data. To guarantee that researcher bias was not included in this study, I transcribed the interviews words verbatim as they were shared with me during the interview process. The transcripts of exactly what was stated in the interviews helped me to achieve confirmability.

Summary

Hartmann (2015) indicated that administrators' instructional practices influence teachers' practices. The results of this qualitative study identified strategies that addressed the research question: What are the perceptions of middle school principals under study regarding their instructional leadership practices to consistently support teachers who teach SWLD? During the interview protocol, it was clear that all 12

participants believed that their perceptions of their instructional leadership practices were very important to their team.

The principals and assistant principals believed that stating a clear vision in the beginning of the year and making sure staff was familiar with their instructional leadership practices were key to having a successful school year. Each participant discussed that they were confident in their delivery of their vision, mission, and goals for the academic year. The discussion of consistency included the influential practices that were identified in the 4th theme of PLC. This theme received the most responses as principals and assistant principals alike stated that teachers should have weekly protected professional learning opportunities. Principals also stated, protecting the time for teacher to learn and grow is part of the framework this local district strives to obtain.

The main instructional practices identified was consistent PLC, balanced literacy for interventions or remediation, modeling, and collaboration. These themes outlined the perception that middle school principals exhibited regarding their instructional leadership practices to support teachers who teach students with learning disabilities. In Chapter 5 of this qualitative study, I provide the interpretations of the findings, limitations of the study, recommendations, implications to provide potential impact of social change, and the conclusion of the study.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the perceptions of middle school principals regarding their instructional leadership practices to consistently support teachers of SWDs. Conducting a basic qualitative study allows a researcher to concentrate on: (a) how people interpret their experiences, (b) how people construct their worlds, and (c) what meaning people attribute to their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I decided to use a basic qualitative design for this study to collect data through interviews from school principals. The research question asked: What are the perceptions of middle school principals regarding their instructional leadership practices to consistently support teachers of SWDs?

The four emergent themes were: collaboration, modeling, balanced literacy interventions or remediations, and PLCs. Each theme included key interventions that the participants used to consistently apply their instructional leadership practices to support teachers of SWDs. In this chapter, I present the results followed by my interpretations of the findings. A discussion of the limitations and my recommendations are also provided in Chapter 5.

Interpretation of the Findings

Classroom Management

In the literature review, Dion (2016) indicated effective planning and instructional strategies can create a more positive classroom environment influencing students' developmental outcomes. The learning environment should be supportive and engaging

with high expectations (Dion). P5 stated, “We apply instructional leadership practices within our school by working to shape a vision of high expectations and academic success for all students; we create a safe and inviting climate that is conducive for learning.” The results indicated that classroom management and the environment was important for students to learn. Most of the principals outlined their beliefs that classroom management was one of the interventions guided through the professional learning in the beginning of the school year.

Instructional Leadership Practices and PLCs

Dion (2016) emphasized, “Socioemotional and cultural factors of students must be understood and teachers must be knowledgeable to the individual needs of students with learning disabilities to provide students with accommodations to help with their individual growth” (para. 2). The findings suggested that teachers benefit from collaboration and PD geared toward the knowledge of their specific student needs. P7 stated, “If we want all students to succeed, we must focus on each student as a learner and address their particular needs and challenges.” Providing training to both the general educator and the special educator is an opportunity for teachers to become fluent in identifying students’ strengths and weaknesses to address the skill deficits. Both the general education teacher and the special education teacher must be knowledgeable of the students’ IEP for the student to be successful. Understanding and identifying student’s strengths and weaknesses allows the teacher to differentiate the materials and create accommodations to support SWDs.

The necessity of PLCs for teachers who teach SWDs was revealed in the findings. Donohue and Bornman (2018) stated that general education teachers become overwhelmed when assigned to teach SWDs without proper training. Ekinici and Acar (2019) revealed that perceptions and PLCs for special education and general education teachers were factors that affected the academic success of SWDs.

The participants felt strongly that PLCs were the key to applying instructional leadership practices. Furthermore, the participants understood that allowing teachers an opportunity to collaborate can increase their skill set and as a result, ultimately, the SWDs benefit the most. Thus, the principals in this study stated that PLCs are nonnegotiable and all teachers are required to attend them to learn and grow.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study was Murphy et al.'s (1983) instructional leadership theory, which contains the following three main sections of instructional leadership: (a) functions engaged by the principal, (b) the kinds of activities performed by the principal, and (c) procedures and practices of the school organization. Romanuck-Murphy (2018) stated leaders enhance inclusive programs in their schools by using PLCs. The participants in this qualitative study outlined their instructional leadership practices by explaining the use of PLCs to differentiate the necessary training for teachers. The emergent themes were collaboration, modeling, balanced literacy interventions or remediations, and PLCs.

The functions engaged by the principal included setting the vision for the school, modeling expectations, being visible within the school day, and teaching differentiation strategies and interventions to support teachers. The activities performed by the principal included being an active member in the PLCs, visiting classrooms to ensure consistency throughout the building, verbalizing expectations, and collaborating on best practices for interventions or remediation. The procedures and practices of the school organization were outlined as the use of balanced literacy, interventions, remediations, strategies, and specific programs to target reading, writing, and math deficits.

Throughout this qualitative study, the participants exhibited consistency in their instructional leadership practices by modeling, collaborating, applying balanced literacy interventions or remediation, and creating PLCs. Each participant answered the interview questions and outlined their knowledge of their school policies and procedures. My interpretations of the findings in this qualitative study were substantiated with the conceptual framework and the results of the literature review in Chapter 2.

Limitations of the Study

The sample size in this study was 12 participants, and the fact that only one school district was selected may present a limitation to this qualitative study. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I was unable to meet with the principals in person to conduct the interviews. I believe if the interviews were completed in person, the candidates would have expressed more of their experiences related to their instructional leadership practices. Some participants did not complete the interview protocol via Zoom and,

instead, opted to answer the Microsoft Forms questions. I was able to record and replay the interviews with those who participated via Zoom, which allowed me to minimize researcher bias.

Recommendations

The findings from this study can be beneficial for the district in which the study occurred. The district has a strategic plan in place to assist middle school principals with their instructional leadership practices. Based on the historical and current literature, collaboration, modeling, balanced literacy, and PLCs are beneficial to both teachers and SWDs. I recommend further research on the instructional leadership practices of middle school principals and how it affects teachers and students with their performance in the classroom by interviewing teachers of SWDs. I also recommend that research be conducted to determine teachers' perceptions of their principals' instructional leadership practices regarding supporting SWDs. Future research should also be conducted in which elementary and high school principals from other similar school districts are interviewed to compare and see if their instructional leadership practices are similar or different.

Implications

In this study, I determined that middle school principals can consistently implement instructional leadership practices. The findings revealed that the local school district has a strategic plan outlined for middle school principals to follow. Each participant was familiar with their school's plan and discussed how it correlates with the district's plan. If middle school principals are consistently implementing their

instructional leadership practices, I believe teachers and SWDs should be equipped to handle the academic rigor and perform better on standardized tests and graduate from high school.

Conclusion

The participants in this qualitative study revealed that collaboration, modeling, balanced literacy interventions, and PLCs were used as instructional leadership practices. While the instructional leadership practices were identified for all participants, it was clear that there were some practices that were specific to individual school principals, assistant principals, and individual schools. Although some of the assistant principals were from the same school, their leadership practices seemed to be focused in one area versus the entire school. Hallinger (2013) described this dimension as one that “focuses on the role of the principal in ‘managing the technical core’ of the school” (p. 15).

Not only must the instructional leader visit classrooms regularly to monitor instruction and the delivery of curriculum, the principal must also engage and inspire teachers and provide them with feedback regarding their practices (Gurley et al., 2015). Principals are responsible for the programs implemented in their school buildings and ensuring that those education programs meet the needs of SWDs. The findings of this study included modeling, collaboration, balanced literacy interventions, and developing PLCs in the beginning of the school year. The implications for positive social change include importance of the use of collaboration, modeling, balanced literacy interventions, and PLCs for middle school principals to better support teachers of SWDs.

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Appendix: Interview Protocol

Instructional Leadership Practices of Middle School Principals Regarding Students with Learning Disabilities

1. How do you apply your instructional leadership practices in your middle school?
2. Which instructional leadership practices do you apply to help teachers teaching students with learning disabilities?
3. How do you help teachers teaching students with learning disabilities assist students in improving proficiency?
4. How do you apply instructional leadership practices that support teacher's teaching students with learning disabilities across content curricula?
5. Which leadership practices have you applied to improve state scores?
6. What is your district's intervention strategic literacy plan to support teacher's teaching students with learning disabilities?
7. How do you use and implement this strategic literacy plan?
8. How do student's benefit from your leadership as an instructional leader?
9. What professional opportunities are available for teachers teaching students with learning disabilities?
10. How do you promote professional development specifically for teachers teaching students with learning disabilities?