

2023

## **Administrators' and Teachers' Perceptions of Administrators' Instructional Leadership in the Inclusive Classroom**

Tenesia Crook  
*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Education

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Tenesia Crook

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
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Walden University  
2023

Abstract

Administrators' and Teachers' Perceptions of Administrators' Instructional Leadership in  
the Inclusive Classroom

by

Tenesia Crook

M.Ed., American InterContinental University, 2007

BA, St. Mary's College, 1994

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Education

Walden University

May 2023

## Abstract

The number of students with disabilities educated in the general education classroom has increased over time. As a result, administrators in inclusive settings have more expectations and responsibilities as an instructional leader. Therefore, the research problem addressed is that administrators are struggling to provide instructional leadership for teachers in the inclusive classroom. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore administrators' and teachers' experiences and perceptions regarding administrators' instructional leadership for teachers in the inclusive classroom. The conceptual framework was based on Waters' theory of balanced leadership. There were two research questions that guided this study. The first addressed administrators' experiences and perceptions of the instructional leadership they provided to teachers in the inclusive classroom. The second addressed teachers' experiences and perceptions of the instructional leadership provided to them by their administrators in the inclusive classroom. Semistructured interviews were conducted with three certified administrators and seven certified teachers. Data were coded to identify central themes. The findings indicated that administrators provided teachers with support, such as feedback, assistance with modifying the curriculum and implementing differentiation. However, teachers continued to have challenges teaching in the inclusive classroom, including challenges with differentiation, managing behaviors, and implementing modifications and accommodations. The implications for positive social change include filling a gap in practice in administrators' instructional leadership and skillset centered around special education and addressing the local problem that administrators are struggling to provide instructional leadership for teachers in the inclusive classroom.

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## Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to the memory of my mother, Louella. You are the reason I took on this massive task. Your strength, passion, and love for all children are my "why." I didn't think I would be able to tackle this task without you physically being around. Still, my Angel, I could hear your voice whisper to me many nights when I wanted to quit. I did it, mom, and it is all because of everything you instilled in me. Lastly, I dedicate this dissertation to my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, for giving me the gift and passion for working with children, and a calling to be a change agent for children with disabilities. "For the race is not given to the swift nor the strong, but to the one who endures to the end" (Eccles. 9:11; Matt. 24:13).

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## Table of Contents

|                                           |    |
|-------------------------------------------|----|
| List of Tables .....                      | vi |
| Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study..... | 1  |
| Background .....                          | 2  |
| Problem Statement .....                   | 5  |
| Purpose of the Study .....                | 8  |
| Research Questions .....                  | 9  |
| Conceptual Framework.....                 | 9  |
| Nature of the Study .....                 | 10 |
| Definitions.....                          | 11 |
| Assumptions.....                          | 12 |
| Scope and Delimitations .....             | 13 |
| Limitations .....                         | 14 |
| Significance.....                         | 15 |
| Summary .....                             | 16 |
| Chapter 2: Literature Review .....        | 18 |
| Literature Search Strategy.....           | 18 |
| Conceptual Framework.....                 | 19 |

|                                                                      |    |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| Literature Review Related to Key Concepts.....                       | 21 |
| Instructional Leadership.....                                        | 21 |
| Instructional Leadership in Special Education .....                  | 27 |
| Barriers to Special Education and Inclusion.....                     | 31 |
| Resources and Support for Inclusion .....                            | 35 |
| Inclusive Classroom.....                                             | 37 |
| Summary and Conclusions .....                                        | 40 |
| Chapter 3: Research Method.....                                      | 42 |
| Research Design and Rationale .....                                  | 42 |
| Role of the Researcher .....                                         | 43 |
| Methodology.....                                                     | 44 |
| Participant Selection .....                                          | 44 |
| Instrumentation .....                                                | 44 |
| Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection ..... | 45 |
| Recruitment.....                                                     | 45 |
| Participation .....                                                  | 46 |
| Data Collection .....                                                | 46 |

|                          |    |
|--------------------------|----|
| Data Analysis Plan.....  | 48 |
| Codes .....              | 48 |
| Categories .....         | 49 |
| Themes.....              | 49 |
| Narrative .....          | 49 |
| Trustworthiness.....     | 50 |
| Credibility .....        | 50 |
| Transferability.....     | 51 |
| Dependability .....      | 51 |
| Confirmability.....      | 51 |
| Ethical Procedures ..... | 52 |
| Summary .....            | 53 |
| Chapter 4: Results.....  | 54 |
| Setting .....            | 54 |
| Demographics .....       | 55 |
| Data Collection .....    | 56 |
| Data Analysis .....      | 56 |

|                                                              |     |
|--------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Results.....                                                 | 59  |
| Research Question 1: Themes.....                             | 62  |
| Research Question 2: Themes.....                             | 79  |
| Evidence of Trustworthiness.....                             | 88  |
| Summary.....                                                 | 91  |
| Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations..... | 94  |
| Interpretation of the Findings.....                          | 95  |
| Findings Related to Research Question 1.....                 | 95  |
| Findings Related to Research Question 2.....                 | 99  |
| Summary of Findings.....                                     | 101 |
| Limitations of the Study.....                                | 103 |
| Recommendations.....                                         | 103 |
| Recommendations for Future Research.....                     | 104 |
| Recommendations for Practice Reform.....                     | 105 |
| Implications.....                                            | 106 |
| Conclusion.....                                              | 106 |
| References.....                                              | 108 |

Appendix: Interview Guide.....125

## List of Tables

|                                                                                                                                                                                                        |    |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| Table 1. Participant Demographics.....                                                                                                                                                                 | 55 |
| Table 2. Themes and Codes Related to Research Question 1: What are school administrators' experiences and perceptions of their instructional leadership for teachers in the inclusive classroom? ..... | 59 |
| Table 3. Themes and Codes Related to Research Question 2: What are school teachers' experiences and perceptions of their administrators' instructional leadership in the inclusive classroom? .....    | 60 |

## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

School administrators work closely with classroom teachers as instructional leaders to improve classroom instruction (Thessin, 2019). Administrators also play an essential role within the school, including providing support to all teachers, creating a positive school climate, and affecting the performance of all students within the building (Rigby et al., 2019). The role of the school administrator has changed over time. In recent decades, there has been a shift in the role of the school principal from administrator to instructional coach (Crockett, 2018). The topic of the study is elementary administrators' and teachers' experiences and perceptions regarding administrators' instructional leadership for teachers in the inclusive classroom. The school district included in the study is cutting its special education programs, and the expectation is that students receive their education in their general education boundary school. The change in special education services has brought about more expectations and responsibilities for school leaders. Therefore, this study is necessary to understand the experiences and perceptions of administrators and teachers regarding administrators' instructional leadership for teachers in the inclusive classroom.

School administrators should know the rights of special education students and parents, as well as the responsibilities of teachers to appropriately educate students with disabilities (DeMatthews et al., 2020). Principals and assistant principals have mainly become responsible for overseeing and implementing inclusive education programs in their schools (Murphy, 2018). The findings from this study may assist school administrators with the type of support they provide to teachers in the inclusive

classroom. Further, results from this study may promote social change by filling a gap in practice in administrators' instructional leadership and skillset centered around special education and addressing the local problem that administrators are struggling to provide instructional leadership for teachers in the inclusive classroom.

Chapter 1 is the introduction to this study and includes an overview of the history related to special education students in the inclusive classroom, as well as the need for instructional leadership in the inclusive classroom. This discussion is followed by the problem statement and the purpose of the study. The research questions are presented, along with a discussion of Waters' theory of balanced leadership, which was used to address the gap in practice pertaining to administrators' instructional leadership centered around the inclusive classroom. I also provide the nature of the study, definitions, assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, the significance of the study, and concludes with a summary of Chapter 2.

### **Background**

The inclusion of students with disabilities in the classroom has been a major topic of discussion for many years. According to Francisco et al. (2020), inclusion is defined as providing all students, including those with disabilities, equitable opportunities in the general education classroom, with supplementary aids and support as needed. In addition, inclusive education means that school districts, schools, and families support one another as all students are welcomed and included in their communities (Billingsley et al., 2018).

It is also important to note that inclusion is not just having special education students physically present in general education classrooms, but also having them

engaged in a program of instruction that is meaningful and challenging (Kauffman & Hornby, 2020). In fact, the goals of inclusive education are to ensure that disabled and non-disabled students both benefit and develop from one another, recognize and accept one another, communicate with one another to improve their communication skills, and develop good personal and social development (Ersoy, 2021). Although there are many benefits to inclusion, some students with disabilities continue to be placed in segregated settings (Billingsley et al., 2018).

The idea of providing services to special education students is not a new concept; however, how those services are provided has changed over time. Although there continues to be a need for some special education students to attend classes outside of the general education classroom, school districts are cutting their special education programs (Mason-Williams et al., 2020). As a result, students are expected to receive their education in their least restrictive environment, regardless of the available resources or the child's ability to cope with the general education curriculum (Draper, 2019).

On the positive side, according to Francisco et al. (2020), students with disabilities can benefit from accessing the general education curriculum and classroom, but only when resources are available to meet the needs of the student. Furthermore, knowledge of current special education policy is important to school administrators and both general and special education teachers. Unfortunately, general education teachers have limited knowledge on the provisions of special education (Francisco et al., 2020). Therefore, schools must reevaluate and restructure their general education learning

environment to ensure that their teachers are well equipped to handle individuals with disabilities in their classrooms (Lim, 2020).

The work of inclusive education is hard work (Thompson et al., 2020). According to Hansen et al. (2020) there is a need for different approaches, knowledge, skills, and competence, which are generally more than general education can provide. Therefore, collaboration between the general education teacher and resource teacher is needed. For example, the resource teacher works directly with the special education students in and outside of the classroom or works directly with the teacher on lesson planning or new strategies in relation to the student's education and development (Hansen et al., 2020). Furthermore, inclusive education requires that all school personnel, administration included, take responsibility for students with disabilities (Tracy-Bronson, 2020).

For years, students with disabilities were underrepresented in general education classrooms, and there was a noticeable need for legal rights for students with disabilities (Dieterich et al., 2019). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) advocated for using evidence-based materials to teach special education students in their general education classroom regardless of their disability (Wilcox et al., 2021). By the 2010-2011 school year, 95% of special education students attended general education schools; although, attending a mainstream school does not guarantee full inclusion if students with disabilities are not placed in classrooms with their general education peers (Egalite, 2019). Therefore, Congress included a system of legal checks and balances called procedural safeguards to protect the rights of children and their parents (Wright & Wright, 2019). Due to all the ongoing changes under IDEA, it can be a challenge for

school administrators to keep abreast of all the legal developments regarding special education and inclusion (Dieterich et al., 2019).

Educational leaders are influential but often unprepared for the various roles in leading schools, inclusive of special education students (Billingsley et al., 2019).

However, administrators are responsible for ensuring that special education students receive services and support from qualified teachers. They must also ensure that teachers develop pedagogy to implement strategies and interventions effectively; and hold teachers accountable for implementing those strategies with the goal of increasing the learning and growth of students with a wide range of needs (Crockett, 2018).

I addressed a gap in practice pertaining to administrators' instructional leadership centered around the inclusive classroom. This study explored administrators' and teachers' experiences and perceptions regarding administrators' instructional leadership for teachers in the inclusive classroom. The results of this study provided insight into what is needed of school administrators to support teachers in inclusive classrooms. This study was needed because school administrators are struggling to provide instructional leadership to teachers in the inclusive classroom.

### **Problem Statement**

School leaders must understand key special education concepts to ensure inclusive programs are implemented successfully in the schools they oversee (Crockett, 2018). However, school leaders report they struggle to effectively oversee quality inclusive special education programs (Murphy, 2018). This discrepancy has created a gap in practice that is addressed by this study, particularly in administrator's instructional

leadership centered around the inclusive classroom. The research problem addressed is that administrators are struggling to provide instructional leadership for teachers in the inclusive classroom, including providing guidance, supervision, professional development, support, and resources (see Pregot, 2021).

Current research also support the problem that administrators are struggling to provide instructional leadership for teachers in the inclusive classroom based on the issues and concerns that are steadily arising in inclusive classroom settings (Billingsley et al., 2018). Special education students are underachieving, and despite their disabilities, they should graduate at the same rate as their non-disabled peers (Butrymowicz & Mader, 2018). Although special education students in inclusive classroom settings have access to the general education curriculum, teachers rarely alter their instruction or management strategies to accommodate these students (Mitchell et al., 2019). According to Cormier et al. (2022), there is a high turnover rate of teachers who educate special education students due mainly to stress. Educators believe that they are left to fend for themselves and may even need to assist the administration in making decisions in the best interest of their special education students (Hughes et al., 2020). At times administrators believe they are unprepared to handle on-the-job challenges or the ability even to support teachers (DeMatthews et al., 2020). Preparing administrators to effectively support inclusive schools has the potential to significantly increase the number of students not only accessing inclusive settings but also having an opportunity for success (Billingsley et al., 2018).

With the increasing trend toward mainstreaming special education students, elementary school teachers now must work with a range of disabilities in their classrooms, and the number of special education students in their classrooms is steadily increasing (DeMatthews et al., 2020). According to Weiser et al. (2019), teachers benefit more when they are provided ongoing coaching, support, and collaboration; however, teachers have expressed there is an unmet need for ongoing professional development, assistance with accessing the curriculum, and implementation of school leadership structures (Pugach et al., 2020). For school leaders to address these gaps, they will need to better understand their roles in supporting educators (Billingsley, et al., 2019).

This problem exists at three local elementary schools under study, and each of which serve a diverse student population from urban, suburban, and rural communities. As a result of special education programs being phased out, there is an increase of general education teachers serving special education students in the inclusive classroom. Those general education teachers are often unprepared; thus, more guidance and leadership are needed.

Evidence that this problem exists locally comes from meeting notes from a 2019-2020 principals' meeting. The notes stated that the special education subgroup did not make the annual yearly process due to school leaders struggling to implement leadership standards in support of students with disabilities. In addition, providing effective special education support has become a challenge for building-level administrators (assistant principal, personal communication, May 10, 2019). Administrators have also expressed that they struggle with providing effective feedback to teachers centered around special

education (principal, personal communication, January 10, 2021). Consequently, teachers have indicated that they receive minimal support from their administrators regarding decisions made during special education meetings (teacher, personal conversation, May 12, 2019). During a county school board public hearing meeting, members of the education committee and the special education citizens' advisory committee also reported that schools face challenges such as unprepared teachers and administrators, lack of inclusive classroom techniques, and a need for inclusion training for teachers and administrators.

### **Purpose of the Study**

School administrators face many challenges, such as strict district directives, budget constraints, and teacher resistance. These challenges, along with a lack of special education knowledge, can sometimes lead to neglect of special education duties (DeMatthews et al., 2020). Despite the many challenges school administrators are faced with, they must ensure the academic success of all students. A critical factor in ensuring this success is the level at which a school leader provides instructional leadership (Sanchez & Watson, 2021). The purpose of this study was to explore administrators' and teachers' experiences and perceptions regarding administrators' instructional leadership for teachers in the inclusive classroom.

To explore the perspectives of administrators and teachers, a basic qualitative research design was used to obtain a greater understanding of the phenomenon by exploring how individuals create meaning through their experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Data were collected through interviews of teachers and administrators in three

different elementary schools to understand the struggles administrators face providing instructional leadership for teachers in the inclusive classroom.

### **Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to explore administrators' and teachers' experiences and perceptions regarding administrators' instructional leadership for teachers in the inclusive classroom. The research questions that guided this study were as follows.

RQ1: What are school administrators' experiences and perceptions of their instructional leadership for teachers in the inclusive classroom?

RQ2: What are school teachers' experiences and perceptions of their administrators' instructional leadership in the inclusive classroom?

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework that supported this study is based on Waters' theory of balanced leadership. The balanced leadership theory moves from broad leadership behaviors to more specific behaviors such as school culture, management of resources, knowledge of curriculum and instruction, and assessment practices. Balanced leadership is knowing what to do as a leader and why certain practices are essential, when they should be used, and how to implement them effectively (Waters & Cameron, 2007). Waters and Cameron (2007) conducted three quantitative studies on the effects of classroom, school, and leadership practices to support this theory. As a result of the studies, they developed the Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning balanced leadership framework, which is based on 21 principal behaviors related to student

performance. The 21 principal behavior responsibilities were grouped into four structures: leadership, focus, magnitude of change, and purposeful community. Additionally, the framework focused on administrators concentrating on specific areas for school improvement, helping the school community, and adjusting their leadership behaviors. I used this conceptual framework to gain an understanding of how administrators can provide instructional leadership for teachers in an inclusive classroom. With the increased need for guidance and leadership from administrators in special education, the balanced leadership theory provided a framework to identify leadership behaviors that can help support teachers in the inclusive classroom. A more thorough explanation of the conceptual framework and the balanced leadership theory is presented in Chapter 2.

### **Nature of the Study**

For this basic qualitative study, the research problem was that administrators are struggling to provide instructional leadership for teachers in the inclusive classroom. Examples of that leadership include providing guidance, supervision, professional development, support, and resources. I chose a basic qualitative research design for my study because of the study's purpose to explore administrators' and teachers' experiences and perceptions regarding administrators' instructional leadership for teachers in the inclusive classroom. According to Creswell and Creswell (2017), a basic qualitative approach can investigate and illustrate the importance of persons or groups attaching to a particular experience or crisis; this is the reason a basic qualitative approach was used for this study.

The goal of such research is to gain an understanding of a phenomenon by exploring how people create meaning from their experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). By conducting this study, I was able to collect data through interviews with administrators and teachers to gain an understanding of the struggles administrators face when providing instructional leadership for teachers in the inclusive classroom. I conducted semistructured interviews in the participants' neutral setting, which according to McLeod (2019) would allow participants to give detailed, in-depth answers regarding their perspectives. I used an interview guide (see Appendix) to guide the interview. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed.

I used thematic analysis as my approach to analysis of the qualitative data. Thematic analysis involves reading through a set of data and looking for patterns in the meaning of the data to find themes (Hatch, 2002). I reviewed the categories and associated codes to identify themes based on the interviews from teachers and administrators.

### **Definitions**

*Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)*: The ESSA was signed into law by President Barack Obama on December 10, 2015 to replace and update the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). This law was designed to provide all children with the same quality of education. It also allows for greater implementation flexibility and requires states to select another measure of school quality in addition to the four required academic indicators (Van Overschelde & Piatt, 2020).

*Free and appropriate education (FAPE):* Ensures that federally funded programs provide education and related services to students with disabilities and their parents or guardians at no cost (Murphy, 2018).

*Inclusion:* To provide equitable opportunities for all students, including those with disabilities, to receive effective educational services, including supplementary aids and support services as needed in age-appropriate general education classes in their neighborhood schools. (Francisco et al., 2020).

*Instructional leadership:* Administrators' behaviors and practices that are directed toward improving teaching and learning in their schools. (Liu et al., 2021).

*Special education (SPED):* Instruction that is designed specifically to respond to the learning needs of an individual with disabilities regardless of environment, whether in a classroom, home, or hospital (Francisco et al., 2020).

*Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA):* Instruction that is designed specifically to respond to the learning needs of an individual with disabilities regardless of environment, whether in a classroom, home, or hospital (Francisco et al., 2020).

*Inclusive Classroom:* A general education classroom where students with and without learning disabilities learn together (Bemiller, 2019).

### **Assumptions**

When conducting this study, I assumed the participating administrators and teachers would be open and honest when answering questions during the interviews. Another assumption was that the participants would share their experiences and perceptions regarding instructional leadership provided to teachers educating special

education students in the inclusive classroom. In addition, I assumed all administrators and teachers who participated would have a sincere interest in the study. This assumption was made because participation was voluntary with no consequences for nonparticipation.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

For the scope of this study, I explored the experiences and perceptions regarding administrators' instructional leadership for teachers in the inclusive classroom. I conducted this study in a large school district in Maryland, which serves a diverse student population from urban, suburban, and rural communities. There were three inclusive schools in this study, all in the same school district. This study included 10 participants: seven certified elementary general education teachers and three elementary administrators. All participants had at least 1 year of experience working with special education students in an inclusive setting.

There were several delimitations for this study. First, the sample for this study was limited to three public elementary schools. Due to time constraints, including all the elementary schools in this district would not be plausible. Second, an inclusion classroom consists of both disabled and non-disabled students in a general education classroom taught by a certified general education teacher. Therefore, this study included only certified general education teachers who had at least 1 year of experience working with special education students in an inclusive classroom setting. Requiring at least 1 year of experience would ensure that the participating teachers had experience receiving instructional leadership and that the participating principals or assistant principals would

have experience offering that leadership. Lastly, instructional leadership can be provided by assistant principals or principals. Therefore, this study included both assistant principals and principals.

### **Limitations**

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the first limitation was that interviews were conducted remotely in lieu of in-person. Interviewing remotely may have been a concern if all the participants did not have access to a computer, connectivity issues were possible, and the true personality of the participants may not have come across on the computer screen versus being in-person. The second limitation was that the inclusion criteria for participation called for elementary administrators and teachers with at least 1 year of experience working with special education students in an inclusive setting. Another limitation was sample size. I used a small sample size including three administrators and seven teachers who worked in an inclusive school setting. Therefore, the sample size and inclusion criteria could limit transferability of the study.

For this study, I intended to provide insight into the struggles administrators face in providing instructional leadership for teachers in the inclusive classroom and the support general education teachers need in the inclusive classroom. The findings identified administrators' and teachers' perceptions regarding the instructional leadership provided to teachers in the inclusive classroom. The findings applied to three different sites; however, the transferability of the findings increased because I included specific details about the context of the participants' responses. Other administrators struggling to provide instructional leadership to teachers in the inclusive classroom may benefit from

exploring how administrators at some of the local elementary schools perceived the challenges they face in providing instructional leadership for teachers in the inclusive classroom.

### **Significance**

A basic qualitative study of administrators' and teachers' perceptions of administrators' instructional leadership in the inclusive classroom is important for several reasons. Insights from the study could potentially provide administrators with information regarding the value of instructional leadership and the impact instructional leadership has on teaching and learning in the inclusive classroom. It might also give the teachers a voice to express themselves regarding the support they need from the administration to instruct special education students properly in an inclusive classroom. It could also provide the necessary evidence to make a positive and lasting impact on the teaching and learning of students in inclusive classes. This study is significant in that it could increase the understanding of administrators' struggle to provide instructional leadership for teachers educating special education students in the inclusive classroom. Addressing this problem could fill a gap in practice in administrator's instructional leadership and skillset centered around special education. It also has the potential to address the local problem with which administrators are struggling to provide instructional leadership for teachers in the inclusive classroom, including providing guidance, supervision, professional development, support, and resources. This study could also fill the gap in the existing literature by providing common instructional leadership practices of the school administrator in inclusive school environments. Lastly,

it could potentially increase resources for professional development for administrators and general education teachers in the inclusive classroom environment.

### **Summary**

In this basic qualitative study, I explored administrators' and teachers' experiences and perceptions regarding administrators' instructional leadership for teachers in the inclusive classroom. The problem I addressed in this study was that administrators are struggling to provide instructional leadership for teachers in the inclusive classroom, including providing guidance, supervision, professional development, support, and resources. The purpose of this study was to explore administrators' and teachers' experiences and perceptions regarding administrators' instructional leadership for teachers in the inclusive classroom. The conceptual framework that supported this study was based on Waters and Cameron's (2007) theory of balanced leadership. I chose to use the balanced leadership theory to gain an understanding of how administrators provide instructional leadership for teachers in an inclusive classroom. The research questions that guided this study are as follows: (a) What are elementary school administrators' experiences and perceptions of their instructional leadership for teachers in the inclusive classroom? (b) What are elementary school teachers' experiences and perceptions of their administrators' instructional leadership in the inclusive classroom? In Chapter 1 of this study, I presented an overview of the study's background, problem, and purpose. In Chapter 2, I include the review of the literature as it relates to the key concepts, thus establishing a gap in the literature. In

Chapter 3, I present the study's research methodology and evidence of trustworthiness, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

The research problem addressed in this study was administrators are struggling to provide instructional leadership for teachers in the inclusive classroom. The purpose of this study was to explore administrators' and teachers' experiences and perceptions regarding administrators' instructional leadership for teachers in the inclusive classroom. Simply, administrators must understand special education concepts to have a successful inclusion program (Crockett, 2018). Furthermore, school leadership is critical when instructing students with disabilities in inclusive schools; however, providing inclusive leadership is challenging work (Billingsley et al., 2018).

Chapter 2 includes information about the literature search strategy and conceptual framework used to complete this literature review. In addition, I discuss topics that support the problem and purpose of this study. The topics include instructional leadership, instructional leadership in special education, barriers to special education and inclusion, special education support and resources, inclusive classrooms, and teacher needs. Chapter 2 concludes with a summary of the chapter, and an overview of the research methods discussed in Chapter 3.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

To conduct a search of the literature related to inclusive education and instructional leadership, I used the Walden University Library, Google, and Google Scholar. Some of the databases I accessed through the Walden University Library include: Education Source, the Elton B Stephens Company, the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies, and ProQuest. The search was restricted to peer-reviewed

scholarly literature published in 2018 and later. Some of the key terms and combinations of terms used to conduct the literature search include but were not limited to *administrators, special education, instructional leadership, balanced leadership, special education resources, and special education leadership*. Although the participating schools in this study were elementary schools, I did not specifically focus on elementary teachers and administrators in the literature search. Instead, I explored elementary, middle, and high school teachers and administrators.

### **Conceptual Framework**

I based the conceptual framework for this study on Waters' theory of balanced leadership (see Waters & Cameron, 2007). The balanced leadership framework focuses on 21 behaviors associated with student achievement. The balanced leadership framework describes the knowledge, resources, and tools administrators need to improve student achievement. According to the balanced leadership framework, administrators need to know what to do to achieve academic excellence and when, how, and why to do it (Waters & Cameron, 2007).

Research was conducted from 1998 to 2003 to understand the effects of leadership practices on student achievement (Waters & Cameron, 2007). According to Waters and Cameron (2007), when administrators are focused on the right classroom and school practices, leaders can have a positive effect on student achievement. To ensure schools are successful, administrators need to know why some actions are necessary, when they need to be applied, and how to apply them (Webster et al., 2020). In addition, school administrators are faced with complex demands, and the balanced leadership

framework is a way for administrators to prioritize their responsibilities (Waters & Cameron, 2007).

Research has shown that effective school administrators substantially impact student achievement (Daily et al., 2020). The most significant impact on student achievement occurs when administrators establish a clear focus, lead and manage change, and cultivate a purposeful community (Rouleau, 2021). The balanced leadership framework identifies 21 behaviors and 66 practices that when put into practice, can result in student achievement (Waters & Cameron, 2007). However, when administrators fail to focus on practices that will improve student achievement or fail to understand the magnitude of change, they lead, they may use the wrong leadership practices and negatively impact student achievement (Waters & Cameron, 2007).

In the balanced leadership framework, there are two different orders of change. Changes are considered first order when they are consistent with existing values and standards, beneficial to stakeholders, and easy to implement with existing knowledge and resources. Changes become second order when stakeholders do not know how it will improve for them, and the change becomes secondary; must master new knowledge, practices, or methods to implement the change; or believe that the change conflicts with personal values or organizational norms (Waters & Cameron, 2007).

When conducting this study and collecting data on the experiences and perceptions of administrators and teachers, I used the 21 principal behaviors in the framework as a guide when analyzing and developing themes. The balanced leadership framework could act as a tool to help administrators identify leadership behaviors that

could help to support teachers in the inclusive classroom. I used this conceptual framework to gain an understanding of how administrators provide instructional leadership for teachers in the inclusive classroom. I also analyzed the teachers' and administrators' interview transcripts to understand administrators' struggles to provide instructional leadership for teachers in the inclusive classroom, including guidance, supervision, professional development, support, and resources.

### **Literature Review Related to Key Concepts**

In this literature review, I explored research regarding the instructional leadership of administrators for teachers in inclusive classrooms. The key concepts for this literature review included instructional leadership and instructional leadership in special education. In addition, barriers to special education and inclusion, special education support and resources, and the inclusive classroom are concepts included in this literature review.

#### **Instructional Leadership**

Instructional leadership focuses on curriculum, instruction, and assessment (Davis & Boudreaux, 2019). Kozleski and Choi (2018) interviewed principals and members of the leadership team of 59 schools, ultimately finding that administrative leadership was positively related to student academic outcomes. They found that when there was an increase in administrative leadership, it resulted in an increase of 35.06 points on the reading PARCC assessment and 51.79 points on the math PARCC assessment. Although this may be the case, administrators have many roles and responsibilities that need their attention. Administrators are finding themselves spending a good portion of their day focusing on other tasks unrelated to instruction. For example,

McBrayer et al. (2018) conducted a quantitative study and examined school leaders' time on instructional leadership versus managerial tasks. They found that between 30% and 50% of principals spent most of their time working at after-school events, working on paperwork, and handling student discipline; they also spent 32.5% of their time facilitating unexpected conferences and completing paperwork and only 2.5% of their time observing teaching. In addition, Sebastian et al. (2019) found that administrators spent about 27% of their time on administration work, 21% on management, 15% on internal relationships, and 5% on external relationships. These responsibilities are necessary to support the school's operation and the learning environment but are not directly related to student learning. Researchers have noted that administrators may have a better success rate at instructional leadership when their leadership responsibilities are distributed within the school (Bettini et al., 2019). For example, Ezzani (2021) interviewed principals and assistant principals and found that when administrators delegated some of their duties to their teacher leaders, teachers' attendance increased, they collaborated more, and they worked together to make data-informed decisions regarding instruction. As a result, student test scores improved.

Although administrators have many responsibilities within a school building, an intentional focus must center around teaching and learning. Davis and Boudreaux (2019) interviewed eight teacher leaders and found that school instructional leaders were influential by focusing on teaching through communicating with all stakeholders, providing professional development, making data-driven decisions to inform instructional practices, creating a vision statement, and maximizing and preserving instructional time

for teachers. During the focus group interviews, teacher leaders revealed that principals made announcements encouraging students to make good decisions, announced student academic progress, made calls, and met with parents to discuss student progress, and wrote personal comments on each student's report card (Davis & Boudreaux, 2019).

The instructional leadership role of administrators is essential to the academic success of schools. Davis and Boudreaux (2019) indicated that principals who created a productive and satisfying work environment and increased student learning conditions increased student achievement. The study's participants identified instructional leadership behaviors their principals displayed as school leaders, such as openly rewarding and acknowledging achievement in both students and teachers, sending emails regarding professional development, and identifying teacher strengths and teacher growth areas through one-on-one coaching.

In addition, administrators play a strategic role in improving the quality of school education. When conducting a regression analysis, Bafadal et al. (2018) found that the contribution of instructional leadership variables to the quality of teacher performance was 33.6%, while the remaining 63.4% came from other variables. The study participants also stated that there was a significant improvement in classroom management, lesson planning, and implementation of instruction. The researchers concluded that instructional leadership was a significant influence on the quality of teacher performance.

Administrators may not directly support each teacher's professional development, however, given the hectic schedule and the many responsibilities in their schools (Bredeson, 2000). From an in-depth analysis of teacher leaders' responses to the

interview questions regarding effective instructional leadership practices of their principals, Bafadal et al. (2018) revealed that administrators have many responsibilities such as providing resources, motivating teachers, promoting support learning, and interacting with and influencing all school staff to improve the quality of teaching and learning.

An additional role as an instructional leader is to ensure that the school has clear and measurable goals focusing on student academic progress (Lopez & Hossain, 2021). Boyce and Bowers (2018) used the Schools and Staffing Survey administered by the US National Center for Education Statistics to conduct a meta-narrative review of 109 studies that investigated at least one aspect of instructional leadership. They discovered that principals who focus on instructional leadership behaviors have a greater positive impact on student achievement than principals who focus on other types of leadership behavior (Boyce & Bowers, 2018). On the other hand, Sebastian and Allensworth (2019) found that most school leadership research has focused on the indirect role of principals in supporting high-quality instruction. The authors analyzed teacher and student survey data from the Chicago Consortium and Chicago Public School administrative records of student achievement, demographic background information, and school characteristics. They determined that principals spent the majority of their time on responsibilities not directly related to student learning: about 27% of the time on administration, 21% on organization management, 15% on internal relations, and 5% on external relations.

According to Lopez and Hossain (2021), there are many responsibilities school administrators are tasked to do; therefore, school leaders are called on to play a more

central role in teaching and learning as a way to improve student achievement and outcomes. The authors did a study review of four articles on differing aspects of instructional leadership as an approach to improving student learning and outcomes. As a result, they found that most administrators have embraced instructional leadership to improve student achievement and success. Although, most research has focused on the quality of teachers, not the quality of administrators (Dhuey & Smith, 2018).

As school leaders, principals can influence student achievement in several ways. For example, Lavigne (2020) reported that the leadership role administrators play within their buildings can be influenced by the school's culture and conditions. They interviewed principals and found that the relationship between administrators and their staff play a vital role in the effectiveness of instructional leadership. Furthermore, instructional leadership is based on formal roles, and it often derives from relationships between individuals, especially from teacher leaders who often provide support (Gordon et al., 2021). For example, Gordon et al. (2021) interviewed principals and teacher leaders and found that principals have increasingly come to rely on teachers performing in leadership roles.

The educational leadership standards emphasize the importance of administrators cultivating an inclusive, caring, and supportive school community that promotes each student's academic success and well-being (DeMatthews et al., 2019). On the negative side, Sam (2021) stated that just as ethical leaders may positively influence their organizations, unethical leaders may have a more significant negative influence. For example, in the study, Sam (2021) interviewed 40 teachers from various locations in the

United States. One negative issue that teachers reported they had with their principals was a lack of communication, which resulted in the teachers lacking in their ability to meet their responsibilities.

According to Swen (2020), the role of an administrator is complex and can be a massive shift for most new administrators. The authors interviewed 35 new Chicago public school principals and found that new principals consistently experienced responsibility shock because knowing that, ultimately, they are responsible for their school gave them an overwhelming feeling. In addition, there are many challenges that new principals encounter that outweigh the benefits of the position, such as stress, limited contact with students, inadequate funding, fear of failure and public disclosure of mistakes, the uncertainty of their ability to do the job, and lack of time with family (Bauer & Silver, 2018). As a result, the challenges of the administrator role have diminished the true goal of an instructional leader to have a clear and visible commitment to continuously improve teaching and learning (Kozleski & Choi, 2018). Although the job can be overwhelming, new administrators tend to focus on their traits as a leader, rather than develop new skills to help them succeed (Truong, 2019). For instance, Truong (2019) interviewed 15 charter school principals and found that inexperienced leaders believed that good principals were naturals, rather than knowledgeable educators.

As an instructional leader, there are five critical overarching leadership domains: establishing and conveying a vision; facilitating a high-quality learning experience for students; building professional capacity; creating a supportive organization for learning; and connecting with external partners (DeMatthews et al., 2020). In addition, the

administrator's role as an instructional leader requires consistent observation and feedback to teachers (Swen, 2020). As proof, Swen's (2020) study found that 21 out of 35 (60%) of the first-year principals' schools were currently, or in the past, on probation for low performance. Along with leadership domains, there are also several dominant instructional leadership theories: authentic, servant, transformational, and ethical leadership. To explain, administrators who display authentic leadership are transparent and ethical. Servant leadership emphasizes trust, and ethical leadership models ethical behavior such as justice, democracy, and equity (Sam, 2021). In contrast, transformative leadership focuses on academic and social justice needs (Lisak & Harush, 2021). According to Wilhelm (2021), instructional leadership behaviors such as monitoring student progress, protecting instructional time, providing incentives for learning, and providing incentives for teachers are more important than transformational leadership. For example, Davis and Boudreaux (2019) and Metz et al. (2019) interviewed principals and revealed that transformational leadership is the preferred leadership style affecting both teaching and learning, as transformational leaders' capacity-building perspectives are necessary for effective leadership to influence positive student achievement.

### **Instructional Leadership in Special Education**

According to Schulze and Boscardin (2018), school administrators play a critical role in delivering special education services; they must lead, administer, supervise, and manage their schools' special education programs and services. The authors used a Q-methodology to explore how principals with and without special education backgrounds prioritize leadership. They selected thirty principals, 15 with and 15 without backgrounds

in special education. The principals repeatedly returned to themes of instruction, curriculum, and student improvement.

Special education leadership is not like any other type of leadership; it is unique in that it is bound by specific laws (Schulze & Boscardin, 2018). Administrators who provide special education leadership must also ensure that their intentions and goals provide equitable access to appropriate and quality education for students with disabilities (Crockett, 2018). In addition, a significant leadership responsibility for administrators is creating inclusive schools for students with disabilities (DeMatthews et al., 2020).

Educational leaders are the primary special education leaders in schools today (Romanuck Murphy, 2018). However, according to Mason-Williams et al. (2020), teachers believe that administrators do not help improve their instruction or protect their instructional time. The authors surveyed a national sample of special education teachers in inclusive settings, and found that, special educators reported having insufficient planning time and spent more time planning outside of school and had limited access to curricular resources. The authors reported that school administrators should reflect on whether they are supporting teachers with the academic and behavioral needs of their special education students.

Administrators in effective inclusive schools not only support teachers but they share their leadership responsibility with teacher leaders to support inclusion (Billingsley et al., 2018). Furthermore, leadership for effective inclusive schools means the administrator fosters change in support of inclusive classrooms that increase

achievement. School leadership from this perspective uses traditional school improvement practices to support struggling learners (DeMatthews et al., 2020). For example, Romanuck Murphy (2018) interviewed administrators who described their role in inclusive settings as collaborators, problem solvers, professional developers, and facilitators. In addition, administrators conducting inclusive leadership are concerned first with inclusion, and should focus on collaborative, democratic, and advocacy-oriented approaches to education (DeMatthews et al., 2020). However, although qualitative research has shown there are great benefits for teachers who receive coaching, there is a lack of experimental research examining students' academic outcomes after their teachers received ongoing support from a knowledgeable and experienced coach (Mofield, 2020).

There is improvement of teacher capacity in inclusive schools when there is a commitment from the administrator to facilitate school-wide inclusive practices (Yang et al., 2021). Evidence for this point was provided by a survey that was given to teachers who attended in-service training and it was found that principal support had the strongest correlation with school-wide inclusive practices (Coviello & DeMatthews, 2021).. However, many principals reported being underprepared in the area of special education and needed to learn more about specific disabilities and effective practices. Similarly, Maggin et al. (2020) reported that school administrators have come to rely on their special education teachers to develop programs to support all students because administrators believe they content knowledge and commitment to supporting the inclusion of students with disabilities. The authors interviewed administrators and found that most of the administrators who participated in the study would reach out to the

special education teacher when handling behavior issues to seek guidance or learn more about the student.

A strong leader is very important when assessing and developing inclusive practices. According to Coviello and DeMatthews (2021), the role of the principal in inclusive settings should be focused on creating a vision, developing people, redesigning the organization, and managing the teaching and learning programs. For instance, the authors interviewed principals and found that principals reported their schools were successful with inclusion when they worked with families, communities, and districts to identify resources to support inclusion. According to Billingsley et al. (2018), school leadership is critical to provide students with disabilities opportunities to learn in inclusive schools. For example, the authors observed and interviewed six principals. Each principal reported teachers were not prepared to work in inclusive classrooms because special education teachers often lacked content knowledge; general education teachers often lacked special education knowledge; both groups of teachers were inexperienced with coteaching and co-planning; and both groups had limited ability to effectively participate in IEP meetings.

Principals in effective inclusive schools share their leadership responsibility with others and seek input from teachers about the creation of school structures to support inclusion. In addition, inclusive leadership requires changes to the curriculum and instruction, and teachers are responsible for most of this work (Billingsley et al., 2018). Whether from teachers or administrators, leadership is critical for schools to implement inclusive practices. Although teachers are expected to meet the needs of all students,

teachers are concerned that they are unable to accomplish this task. Maggin et al. (2020) interviewed teachers and administrators and found that general educators and administrators often lack knowledge of special education practice and policy. Similarly, Stites et al. (2018) interviewed teachers and found that teachers lacked a coherent understanding of inclusion and perceived themselves as needing additional development to be fully prepared to teach in an inclusive setting. Therefore, school leaders who want to implement a purposeful vision for inclusion should work to improve teachers' instructional capacity. (Hoppey et al., 2018).

### **Barriers to Special Education and Inclusion**

Instructional leadership in special education is critical. However, there are barriers that affect the effectiveness of schools providing special education services and inclusion (DeMatthews et al., 2020). This assumption is supported by Coviello and DeMatthews (2021), who studied the perspectives of principals on creating inclusive schools. The authors found that scholars and practitioners had difficulty agreeing upon a definition of inclusion. In addition, they noted that IDEA requires districts to create a continuum of placements, ranging from full inclusion in the general education classroom to segregated classrooms consisting of only special education students, to separate school environments. For example, Cavendish et al. (2020) interviewed teachers who reported there were challenges of meeting changing requirements set forth by policy mandates. One teacher expressed her frustration saying, "People making decisions in education are not educators." Therefore, guidance and support are needed for teachers to implement national policies and district mandates. There are also challenges that educators are faced

with daily in their respective school buildings. Bettini et al. (2020) surveyed a national sample of special education teachers in inclusive settings and found some of those challenges are a lack of planning time, difficult working conditions and insufficient instructional resources. According to Billingsley et al. (2018), continued efforts are needed to confront specific barriers to inclusive education, such as attitudes toward people with disabilities, myths about the negative impact of students with disabilities on other students, lack of a clear definition of inclusion, inadequate preparation for inclusion, and insufficient resources.

The lack of teacher pedagogy in special education and inclusion is also a challenge educators face. To improve teacher pedagogy, teachers must first admit that support and professional development are needed. Specifically, teachers must develop an understanding of their needs and experiences to best adapt instruction in order to provide the support special education students need (Hord et al., 2021). Overall, teachers do not believe they are adequately prepared for inclusion. As an example, Stites et al. (2018) interviewed a group of pre-service teachers who reported they lacked a coherent understanding of inclusion and believed they needed additional professional development to be fully prepared to teach in an inclusive setting.

Another challenge in special education is teacher turnover. Cormier et al. (2022) reported that one of the biggest causes of teacher turnover in special education is job-related stress. A cause of this stress is the lack of support teachers believe that they receive in special education. The authors used a questionnaire to survey teachers. The variables of the study *job itself, organization as a whole, promotion, and supervisor* were

all negatively correlated with “emotional exhaustion”. In addition, teachers are not being adequately supported, which have caused them to retire early, resign or the education field altogether. Thus, the field of education is losing outstanding teachers which is plaguing the education field. For instance, the authors interviewed teachers and found that about two out of three teachers who left the teaching profession stated the main reasons were too much paperwork, lack of administrative support, not enough supplies, too many students, and scarce collaboration with colleagues. For this reason, it has become urgent to prepare schools for inclusion (Manrique et al., 2019).

Barriers in special education include the difficulty teachers have differentiating instruction in inclusive classrooms. The difficulty with differentiation often results in denying literacy or math instruction to special education students or using instruction methods that do not meet their learning needs (Marks et al., 2021). Also, if a child with a disability has behavioral problems, these could cause class disruptions that not only hinder the learning of the special education student but the education of the other children as well (Yell et al., 2020). In addition, when districts lack the funding needed to provide support, expectations are lowered causing students more harm than good (Butrymowicz & Mader, 2018). In fact, DeMatthews et al. (2020) interviewed principals who reported they were unprepared to support students with disabilities. In order for the American education system to remain strong, democratic, and inclusive for all, students must receive the support they need (DeMatthews & Mueller, 2022). Unfortunately, the United States education system is failing special needs students. For instance, some of America’s correctional facilities presently hold high numbers of children and adults with disabilities

who have been failed by the public school system (Blanck, 2019). In addition, students with disabilities have lower college graduation rates than their peers; 65% of special education students graduate on time, well below the 83% 4-year graduation rate for American students overall (Butrymowicz & Mader, 2018).

Parents may consider class size, program or service offerings, and teacher preparation when deciding the preferred educational placement for their child. However, parents expressed concerns about their child's ability to receive appropriate support and services in inclusive settings, as well as the availability of educators qualified to work with students with disabilities in those settings. For example, Kurth et al. (2020) investigated parents' experiences in making educational decisions for their children with autism. The study's participants completed a survey and reported that schools generally do not solicit parent input, are not responsive to parent input, and are resistant to considering alternatives to plans or services recommended by school personnel.

Inclusive practices are not evident among all educational contexts. Many school districts are unable to hire, train, and retain teachers committed to inclusion. Principals are torn between creating inclusive schools when also dealing with restrictive district directives, resource deficits, teacher resistance, and disgruntled parents. In addition, numerous studies reported that principals lack training and experience in special education (DeMatthews et al., 2020; Romanuck Murphy, 2018). Teacher and principal preparation programs often failed to cover topics related to special education (Coviello & DeMatthews, 2021). When districts consistently fail to hire teachers that value inclusion and provide insufficient training to teachers, inclusion can be more time-consuming,

susceptible to teacher and parent resistance, and prone to underserving students regardless of placement (Billingsley et al., 2018).

### **Resources and Support for Inclusion**

Teachers viewed regularly scheduled meetings, instructional support, collaborative planning, and special education specific resources as the most beneficial support (Cornelius & Sandmel, 2018). To give one an idea, effective inclusive schools have used flexible scheduling practices for teachers and paraprofessionals to provide targeted instructions based primarily on student needs (Hoppey et al., 2018). However, teachers do not believe they receive the support needed for inclusion. For instance, Cornelius and Sandmel (2018) interviewed teachers and found that participants did not find that their administrators were supportive or understanding of special education instruction.

Resources and support are critical pieces to ensure teachers are adequately prepared for inclusion. As such, teachers can effectively instruct their special education students when they have access to quality instructional materials (Billingsley et al., 2019). Furthermore, teachers' instructional practice improves when school leaders use data to inform staff of their progress and provide next steps for improvement (Kozleski & Choi, 2018). The key is to continuously emphasize and integrate professional development (Bettini et al., 2019). In fact, high quality preservice preparation is essential to developing effective and committed special education teachers (Billingsley et al., 2019). School leaders have provided teachers and staff opportunities to learn about topics such as the effects of inclusion and differentiating instruction (Billingsley et al., 2018).

However, Butrymowicz and Mader (2018) interviewed teachers who reported they believed they were inadequately trained to support special education students. According to Cavendish et al. (2020), administrative support, ongoing training, professional development, and resources are key factors that affect successful implementation of new practices. For instance, the authors interviewed teachers who reported there was a lack of relevant professional learning opportunities provided within their schools to teachers in special education.

One of the primary tasks of school principals is to support teachers in creating and maintaining a positive, and healthy teaching and learning environment for everyone in the school. In a qualitative study with school administrators, Maggin et al. (2020) found that school principals are one of the most important sources of support for teachers in implementing inclusive education. They used a multidimensional school inclusion climate scale to gauge principal support and school-wide inclusive practices which resulted in a high mean score for principal support. The authors prioritized three skills related to effective inclusion of students with special needs: adaptation of instruction, modification of curriculum, and student discipline and classroom management. On the other hand, according to DeMatthews and Mueller (2022), an inclusive school not only emphasizes academics but also prioritizes school community and family engagement. The authors interviewed six principals who reported their priority was not only academic achievement but also supporting the family and community. Either way, in order to build teacher capacity, effective inclusive schools are committed to providing high-quality, learner-centered professional development. In addition, according to Hoppey et al.

(2018), effective inclusive schools offer support such as coaching, professional learning communities, and study groups to help teachers develop their leadership skills. The authors interviewed teachers who reported that the coaching they received enabled them to analyze data and modify their teaching practices to meet the needs of individual students. Thus, principals are critical to building the professional capacity of teachers which is especially important in the area of special education (Coviello & DeMatthews, 2021).

### **Inclusive Classroom**

If special education is going to continue to move forward in the 21st century, the successful implementation must continue to rest upon the belief that inclusive schooling for all students is a noble and moral obligation (DeMatthews & Mueller, 2022).

According to Billingsley et al. (2018), providing inclusive leadership is challenging work as leaders need clarity about what inclusion means and often have had little course work related to leadership for inclusive schools. The authors reported that only 53% of principals were required to take courses related to special education, and only eight states required preservice principals to receive training in special education. In addition, in order to implement a successful inclusive school, there are extra responsibilities and emergent responsibilities of the school leader that takes up a substantial amount of energy (Bettini et al., 2019).

All in all, inclusion only works when the school accepts that all students are equal participants and are pushed to reach their potential (Blanck, 2019). In interviews with 45 parents and students and 50 education experts, across 34 states, experts and parents

widely agreed that most students with disabilities do best academically and socially when they are given the same opportunities in the same classrooms as their nondisabled peers (Butrymowicz & Mader, 2018). This may be true, but school districts are not provided the same resources for special education depending on the district's wealth. Conlin and Jalilevand (2019) claim there are still inequities when it comes to the funding provided to schools for special education. As proof, the authors conducted a study using financial and enrollment data from local school districts in Michigan and found that a district with a 10% greater tax value was expected to have 3.26% more in unrestricted fund expenditures per special education student.

In general, according to Copeland and Griffin (2021), inclusive education refers to students with disabilities being educated in their neighborhood schools alongside their same aged peers in a general education setting to the maximum extent appropriate. In addition, the authors write that the least restrictive environment requirement in the IDEA emphasizes that special education consists of a set of services, not places. These individualized special education services can be provided in the general education classroom, and all students, regardless of their diagnosis or needs for support, must have access to instruction based on grade level standards (Copeland & Griffin, 2021). This information makes it clear that educating special education students in the general education classroom with specific support to meet their needs is exactly what inclusion means. According to Romanuck Murphy (2018), inclusive special education programming is not only required by federal law, but it is also shown to be more effective than traditional separated education programming. In fact, the authors reported that

inclusive special education provides benefits for both students with and without disabilities. They conducted e-mail interviews of four principals and three district leaders who reported that inclusive classrooms are beneficial for all students because they are provided the opportunity to work with their same age peers and learn from one another.

It is important to note that principals make an important difference in establishing high quality inclusive schools (DeMatthews et al., 2020). Because of the lack of special education training principals are provided, there is a need to establish a set of universal competencies for leaders to have in order to be effective at leading special education programs within schools (Thompson et al., 2020). By the same token, in the context of inclusive education, increasing research across the globe is being placed on preparing teachers as key players in the schooling of children with special needs (Wang & Zhang, 2021). In effective inclusive schools, principals, general and special educators and paraprofessionals all work together to meet the unique needs of students with disabilities (DeMatthews et al., 2020).

According to Coviello and DeMatthews (2021), inclusion is an ongoing process that views all students, including those with disabilities, as valued, accepted and actively participating members of a supportive school community. The authors state there are several steps that are included in the process of inclusion. For example, they interviewed principals who reported that inclusion was an ongoing process that includes instructional decisions to improve student learning. Those decisions are made at least annually by a team that includes the student's parents. In addition, the decision to remove a student from the general education classroom must be based on the student's individualized

educational plan (IEP) developed for the child justifying why the student's needs cannot be met in the general education classroom (Coviello & DeMatthews, 2021). As a case in point, researchers have learned that inclusion is a never-ending process of finding better ways of responding to diversity; when it comes to identifying and removing barriers and challenges that affect the presence, participation and achievement of all students; particularly a group of learners who may be at risk of marginalization, exclusion or underachievement (DeMatthews, et al., 2019).

### **Summary and Conclusions**

Major concepts of the literature review are instructional leadership, instructional leadership in special education, barriers to special education and inclusion, resources and support for inclusion, and the inclusive classroom. Principals play a critical role in leading and guiding schools, establishing the vision and mission, school improvement and establishing the culture in their school buildings. An effective inclusive principal knows special education policy and what effective inclusive instruction looks like and how to provide feedback to guide teachers in inclusive classrooms (DeMatthews et al., 2020). Providing inclusive leadership is challenging work and leaders need to understand what inclusion means, how to effectively supervise teachers, and provide effective feedback and professional development opportunities to help define and promote for all students (Billingsley et al., 2018).

A substantial body of research exists on the principals' impact on student academic achievement (Bafadal et al., 2018). Research also exists regarding resources needed to support inclusion; however, little is known as to how principals can effectively

provide instructional leadership to support the inclusive classroom. Thus, the purpose of this study was to explore administrators' and teachers' experiences and perceptions regarding administrators' instructional leadership for teachers in the inclusive classroom. Information in Chapter 3 includes a detailed account of the proposed design and methodology for the study. Chapter 3 also includes the interview protocol and how data were collected, managed, and analyzed.

### Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this study was to explore administrators' and teachers' experiences and perceptions regarding administrators' instructional leadership for teachers in the inclusive classroom. In Chapter 3, I present a description of the methodology and procedures in the study and justification of the research design. Second, I explain the selection process and how the data were collected and analyzed. Next, an explanation of the evidence of trustworthiness, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability is presented. Lastly, there is a summary of the chapter, as well as a transition to Chapter 4.

#### **Research Design and Rationale**

This study explored administrators' and teachers' experiences and perceptions regarding administrators' instructional leadership for teachers in the inclusive classroom. The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1: What are elementary school administrators' experiences and perceptions of their instructional leadership for teachers in the inclusive classroom?

RQ2: What are elementary school teachers' experiences and perceptions of their administrators' instructional leadership for teachers in the inclusive classroom?

For this study, I used a basic qualitative research methodology. According to Percy et al. (2015), researchers should consider a generic qualitative inquiry approach when investigating people's attitudes, opinions, or beliefs about a particular issue or experience. This method is appropriate because I explored elementary school administrators' and teachers' experiences and perceptions to understand the struggles

administrators face when providing consistent instructional leadership for teachers in the inclusive classroom. Through a basic qualitative design, knowledge was developed based on people's different perspectives and experiences (Kahlke, 2014). Therefore, I collected interview data from elementary administrators and teachers regarding their experiences and perceptions of administrators' instructional leadership for teachers in the inclusive classroom using this methodology.

### **Role of the Researcher**

I have worked in the education field for 23 years, nine of those years as an assistant principal. Before working in my current role as an assistant principal, I was a classroom teacher, talented and gifted coordinator, and instructional lead teacher. As an elementary school assistant principal, I am responsible for assisting with operating the instructional program and providing educational leadership for the staff, students, and community, while also managing school operations and resources. Some of the responsibilities include assisting the principal in leading and implementing a cohesive educational program, assisting in planning, implementing, and evaluating instructional programs, and conducting informal and formal observations of staff. Part of my duties also includes attending all special education individualized education program meetings. The schools selected were schools where I have not worked with the participants in any capacity, nor do I know them personally or know their perceptions regarding administrators' instructional leadership for teachers in the inclusive classroom.

## **Methodology**

### **Participant Selection**

I conducted individual interviews with administrators and teachers to explore their experiences and perceptions regarding administrators' instructional leadership for teachers in the inclusive classroom. The population that was sampled consisted of six administrators and 65 general education teachers from three elementary schools, all in the same school district, which serve a diverse student population from urban, suburban, and rural communities. I used purposive sampling to identify the population for this study. This study included 10 participants: seven certified elementary general education teachers and three elementary administrators. The inclusion criteria for participation called for all participants with at least 1 year of experience working with special education students in an inclusive setting (see Groenewald, 2004; Guest et al., 2006; van Manen, 1997).

### **Instrumentation**

I created an interview guide that aligned with the overall methodology and purpose of the study (see Appendix). This guide was helpful as it provided both structure and focus to the interview process (Roberts, 2020). The interview questions were based on the conceptual framework using Waters' theory of balanced leadership and a thorough review of the relevant literature. Following the suggestions of Creswell et al. (2007), the study was structured to collect statements and themes that describe the phenomenon's meaning of administrators' and teachers' experiences and perceptions regarding administrators' instructional leadership for teachers in the inclusive classroom. The interview guide was specific to the information needed to obtain answers to the research

questions. During the interview guide development, I asked several colleagues to conduct a peer review of my interview guide to make suggestions for improvement. I used the feedback from my peers to improve the wording of the teacher interview questions to make them more friendly. I also presented my interview guide to my committee members, who formed an expert panel and made recommendations for improvement. Recommendations were made to align all interview questions to the research questions. I then made the final adjustments to my guide and deleted interview questions that did not focus on instructional leadership.

### **Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection**

#### **Recruitment**

Once approval was granted, I started the recruitment process. I selected participants on a voluntary basis. After receiving the list of names and emails of teachers and administrators in the targeted buildings, I then sent a recruitment email to the teachers and administrators from three different elementary schools. The email sent to participants included a full explanation of the study and informed consent. Participants were asked to respond with “I agree” if they agreed to participate in the study and give permission to record the interview. To ensure participants met the required criteria of having at least 1 full school year experience, I asked them to provide the number of years they worked with special education students in an inclusive setting. After 2 weeks of not receiving any responses from the recruitment email that was sent to teachers and administrators in the targeted buildings, I sent another recruitment email, this time to all teachers and administrators in the selected school district. I received responses from

seven teachers and three administrators. No participants changed their minds after they agreed to participate.

### **Participation**

Inclusive education consists of special education students in a general education classroom and receiving individualized support from a general education teacher (Thompson et al., 2020). Therefore, I used purposeful sampling to select certified elementary general education teachers and elementary administrators from the different participating schools who had experience working with special education students in inclusive educational settings for at least 1 school year. General education teachers are not experts in modifying the curriculum and teaching to the individual needs of special education students (Byrd & Alexander, 2020). Therefore, general education teachers need more instructional support to educate special education students. Although special education teachers support general education teachers in the inclusive classroom, general educators are the primary educators (see Westwood, 2018). As a result, only general education teachers were included in this study. The inclusion criteria consisted of each participant meeting the following requirements: be employed at a local elementary school as a general education teacher or administrator, and have at least one year of experience working with the inclusion of special education students.

### **Data Collection**

Interviews took place over a span of 3 weeks. I scheduled interviews based on the participants' availability. Qualitative interviews allow for the exploration of the participants' experiences, thus allowing insight into how different phenomena of interest

is experienced and perceived (McGrath et al., 2019). Therefore, I conducted one face-to-face interview with each teacher and administrator who agreed to participate in the study. I also conducted a 20-minute follow-up interview with teachers and administrators for the purpose of member checking. Due to COVID restrictions, interviews took place on Zoom, a convenient alternative to in-person interviews (Gray et al., 2020). Conducting interviews online also offered flexibility when conducting follow-up interviews (Mirick & Wladkowski, 2019). I set the Zoom settings to automatically delete the recorded interview after 30 days (Archibald et al., 2019).

The interviews consisted of four demographic questions and eight open-ended questions that focused on gaining an understanding of administrators' and teachers' experiences and perceptions regarding administrators' instructional leadership for teachers in the inclusive classroom. The interviews started with a few simple questions, which allowed time to develop trust and reduce the likelihood that the questions would be perceived as threatening (Roberts, 2020). Each interview lasted no longer than 45 minutes. During the interviews, each participant had the opportunity to answer the questions fully and add to their responses at the end of the interviews if needed. For reliability, interviews were recorded and transcribed using the Zoom software. At the end of the interview, I notified participants that they would have an opportunity to participate in a 20-minute follow-up interview where I could share results of the study and ask them to provide feedback on how well the results captured their experiences. Immediately after each interview, I also took notes regarding my own personal feelings, biases, and insights. I then exported the transcripts into the Quirkos software, reviewed the

transcripts, and edited them as needed. Lastly, for the purpose of member checking, I emailed a summary of my findings to all the participants to review. Next, I sent another email to the participants and asked each participant if they would participate in a 20-minute follow-up interview on Zoom to discuss the study's findings. I conducted the interviews with one administrator and three teachers.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

Data analysis is a necessary step in qualitative research in which the researcher organizes the data in a way to make meaning of the phenomenon (Wong, 2008). I used thematic analysis to analyze the data collected in this study (Given, 2008). After the first interview was completed, I began data analysis and used the results to inform my future interviews to help decide when saturation was reached (Lester et al., 2020). I divided the overall data set into categories or groups based on predetermined codes (Hatch, 2002). The four structures from the balanced leadership theory, leadership, focus, the magnitude of change, and purposeful community served as the predetermined codes for the thematic analysis in this study (Waters & Cameron, 2007).

### **Codes**

I used coding to make meaning of the data collected in relation to the research questions (see Elliott, 2018). I read the interview transcripts, looked for patterns, relationships, and themes according to my predetermined codes, and broke the data into parts (see Hatch, 2002). During the coding process, common words and themes were highlighted. Next, I conducted a second round of coding line by line. In doing this, I was able to dig a little deeper into the data and assign additional codes to each line.

## **Categories**

After coding, the next step was to sort the codes into categories that answered who, what, when, or where. I then compared the codes and determined which codes belonged together or dealt with the same issue to form a category (see Elliott, 2018). After the categories were formed, I went back and reviewed the data again. If a category was too large, I separated it and formed smaller subcategories. If I found that some pieces of data could stand alone in a particular category, I moved the data into another category.

## **Themes**

Themes were developed to give a deeper meaning to the data that explained why something happened, what something meant, or how the interviewee felt about the matter (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Themes do not necessarily reflect commonalities or simply emerge from the data; the researcher actively constructs and develops the theme to communicate with the reader on an intellectual and emotional level (Elliott, 2018). I analyzed the codes and categories created to develop central themes based on Waters' balanced leadership model (see Waters & Cameron, 2007). Next, I organized the themes in a visual format that give the reader another way to understand how the concepts relate to each other. As the data became saturated, one theme became prominent as the central phenomenon.

## **Narrative**

Lastly, I used the most relevant information and the themes from the thematic research analysis to write the narrative of the data collected (see Hatch, 2002). There is a clear link between the original data and the final story. The information from the

interviews includes the interviews' location, the participants' beliefs, and direct quotes. During the analysis of the data, I looked for evidence of discrepant cases. Maxwell (2009) stated that discrepant cases are data that do not support the study's findings. I reviewed the data, the work products used in the analysis, and the findings and looked for data that did not fit the themes from my study. Examining the discrepant data provided a richer and deeper understanding of the phenomenon (see Hanson, 2017). I then discussed the discrepant data in the narrative so that the readers gain an understanding of the perspectives and experiences others have had with this phenomenon.

### **Trustworthiness**

#### **Credibility**

To establish credibility in this study, I used specific strategies to check for internal validity, such as triangulation and saturation (see Korstjens & Moser, 2018). I established triangulation by having two different sources of data, interviews with teachers and administrators. This technique helped ensure the credibility of the data gathered through the interviews of administrators and general education teachers. Credibility was also established in this study by only selecting participants who had experience with special education students in an inclusive setting. Saturation occurs in data collection when no additional categories emerge from the data; this signals that the emerging theory is comprehensive and credible (Hennink et al., 2017). To ensure data saturation had been established, I used a saturation grid to code and analyze the data until no more themes could be found. According to Fusch and Ness (2015), data triangulation is a method to get to data saturation and is one method to ensure the validity of the study's results.

**Transferability**

Transferability is the extent to which the study's findings will be applicable to other settings and populations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Transferability cannot be assumed in the case of qualitative research; readers need to know as much as possible about the actual research situation in order to determine whether it is similar to their own, mainly when conducted with a small number of participants and at a single setting (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). However, from the information provided, readers can take certain aspects of the experiences and perceptions of the teachers and administrators included in the study and apply them to other contexts and situations (Munthe-Kaas et al., 2019).

**Dependability**

Dependability includes the aspect of consistency (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). I achieved dependability by providing a detailed description of the data analysis process and presenting detailed and accurate results from the interviews of the participants in my study. To ensure dependability I established triangulation by having two different sources of data, interviews with teachers and administrators.

**Confirmability**

To achieve confirmability, member checking was used in this study. Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommended member checking to enhance the rigor of the research. Member checking is also a way to show that the study's findings are accurate and honest. According to Birt et al. (2016), the potential for researcher bias might be reduced by actively involving the research participant in checking and confirming the results. I used

member checking by meeting with a sample of participants to hold a second interview through Zoom to review the study's findings. Confirmability is also achieved when the study's findings reflect the participants' voices and not the researcher's biases (Nowell et al., 2017). Therefore, the participants in the study had an opportunity to reflect on their experiences and answer the interview questions based on their perceptions, and the researcher needs to consider how his or her preconceptions affected the research (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

### **Ethical Procedures**

Throughout the completion of this study, ethical procedures were addressed in every aspect of the study. I created a letter of cooperation to obtain approval from the district's institutional review board (IRB) to conduct the study. I then obtained final approval (Approval Number is 04-07-22-0998561) from the Walden University IRB. Next, I obtained a signed letter of cooperation from three administrators in the school district where the participants are also employed, granting approval to conduct the study. I stored the information collected from the interviews, and the only individuals with access to any of the stored data were members of my doctoral committee. The participants involved in the study, the names of the three schools where the participants work, and the school district were also kept confidential. To preserve confidentiality, I used numbers to reference the participants in place of their names. Although I work in the same school district as the participants, as part of the selection criteria, participants did not have a personal or professional relationship with me. Participants were not persuaded to participate by offering them monetary gifts, or were they be made to feel forced to

participate. I selected participants on a voluntary basis. Participants also were able to withdraw from the study at any time and I kept the names of the participants confidential.

### **Summary**

In Chapter 3, I included a description and justification of the research method used to conduct a basic qualitative study of administrators' and teachers' experiences and perceptions regarding administrators' instructional leadership for teachers in the inclusive classroom. Next, I provided a justification for selecting a basic qualitative research design to collect data through interviews to address the following research questions.

RQ1: What are elementary school administrators' experiences and perceptions of their instructional leadership for teachers in the inclusive classroom?

RQ2: What are elementary school teachers' experiences and perceptions of their administrators' instructional leadership for teachers in the inclusive classroom?

Then, I provided the methodology of the study which included the use of purposeful sampling to select two or three certified elementary general education teachers and elementary administrators from three different schools who had experience working with special education students in inclusive educational settings. Teachers and administrators who agreed to participate in the study took part in semistructured interviews. I analyzed the interview data to develop central themes based on Waters' theory of balanced leadership (Waters & Cameron, 2007). Lastly, I explained strategies to establish trustworthiness to address credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. In Chapter 4, I outline the setting of the interviews, describe the data collected, and present the results.

## Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore administrators' and teachers' experiences and perceptions regarding administrators' instructional leadership for teachers in the inclusive classroom. I used a basic qualitative design for this study and collected data from administrators and teachers using semistructured interviews. The research questions for this study were as follows.

RQ1: What are school administrators' experiences and perceptions of their instructional leadership for teachers in the inclusive classroom?

RQ2: What are school teachers' experiences and perceptions of their administrators' instructional leadership in the inclusive classroom?

In this chapter, I first describe the research setting and provide the demographics of the participants. Next, I discuss the data collection and analysis process and present evidence of trustworthiness. Lastly, I conclude the chapter with a discussion of the results and a summary of the findings.

### **Setting**

Following receiving local and Walden IRB approval (Approval Number is 04-07-22-0998561) in April 2022, I conducted semistructured interviews. Due to the COVID-19 global pandemic, interviews were conducted from my home office using Zoom. Participants were interviewed on Zoom either from their home or their school. One of the participants had to stop briefly during the interview when someone entered their classroom, and another participant's alarm went off during the interview; neither of those distractions took away from the quality of the interviews. I was able to use Zoom to video

record and transcribe the interviews. The recruitment process was completed over a period of 3 weeks in May of 2022, and the interview process took a little over 2 weeks to complete in June of 2022.

### **Demographics**

I interviewed 10 participants, one male and nine females, for this study. Three of the participants were administrators, and seven were teachers. Participants were from three different elementary schools all located in the same school district. Per the eligibility criteria, participants were all employed at a local elementary school as a general education teacher or administrator, and each had at least 1 year of experience working with the inclusion of special education students. As shown in Table 1, the years of experience in education ranged from 5 years to 28 years, and the years working in the school district ranged from 7 years to 28 years.

**Table 1**

*Participant Demographics*

| Participant | Gender | Role          | Years in Education | Years in the District |
|-------------|--------|---------------|--------------------|-----------------------|
| T1          | Male   | Teacher       | 19                 | 19                    |
| A1          | Female | Administrator | 18                 | 18                    |
| T2          | Female | Teacher       | 7                  | 7                     |
| T3          | Female | Teacher       | 17                 | 17                    |
| A2          | Female | Administrator | 28                 | 28                    |
| T4          | Female | Teacher       | 8                  | 11                    |
| T5          | Female | Teacher       | 5                  | 15                    |
| A3          | Female | Administrator | 13                 | 22                    |
| T6          | Female | Teacher       | 17                 | 17                    |
| T7          | Female | Teacher       | 9                  | 25                    |

### **Data Collection**

Upon receipt of IRB approval, I sent an email to all administrators in the district under study to gain permission to conduct my study at their site. Once I received permission from the first three principals to conduct my study at their schools, I then sent a recruitment email to all general education teachers at those sites. Teachers who were interested responded to my email. I followed up via email within 24 hours of the participant reaching out to me to confirm their interest. I then emailed a consent form to each participant, along with possible options for interview dates and times. Each participant chose the date and time that was most convenient for them.

I used Zoom to conduct and record one interview each with three administrators and seven general education teachers. The interviews were then downloaded and saved to an external hard drive that is safely stored in my home office. After saving the interviews to my external hard drive, the interviews were deleted from Zoom's database. Each interview lasted between 20 and 45 minutes. I used an interview guide and interview questions (see Appendix) to conduct the semistructured interviews. During the interview process, I also utilized and completed a reflective journal, which served as a tracking tool to manage the dependability and confirmability of the research study. No variation in the data collection from the plan outlined in Chapter 3 occurred, nor did I experience any unusual circumstances during the data collection process.

### **Data Analysis**

After the completion of each interview, the interviews were transcribed through the transcription service available on Zoom. Next, I downloaded the transcripts from

Zoom and uploaded them into Quirkos, a qualitative analysis software. Then, I listened to the interview recordings, reviewed the transcripts in Quirkos, and made corrections to any errors found in the transcripts. Most errors found pertained to proper nouns. Once data were verified for accuracy, I analyzed each transcript using a coding process to develop central themes based on Waters' balanced leadership (Waters & Cameron, 2007). Lastly, for the purpose of member checking, I emailed a summary of my findings to all the participants to review. Next, I sent another email to the participants and asked each participant if they would participate in a 20-minute follow-up interview on Zoom to discuss the study's findings. I conducted the interviews with one administrator and three teachers.

For this basic qualitative study, I focused on the purpose of the study and explored administrators' and teachers' experiences and perceptions regarding administrators' instructional leadership for teachers in the inclusive classroom. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data collected in this study, and the perspectives of both administrators and teachers were collected. Thematic analysis divides the overall data set into categories or groups based on predetermined codes (Hatch, 2002). I used a priori codes to code my data according to my conceptual framework. The four structures developed by Waters' balanced leadership theory (leadership, focus, the magnitude of change, and purposeful community) served as the a priori codes for the thematic analysis in this study (Waters & Cameron, 2007).

During my first round of coding, I used descriptive coding to summarize my data using a word or short phrase (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). I read through each transcript

line by line and used open coding. In the Quirkos program, I highlighted sections of the participants' responses and dragged them into the quirk, or code, to which it corresponded. I then used a priori codes to code my data according to my conceptual framework. For my second round of coding, I used pattern coding to group my first set of codes into categories and subcategories (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). As I highlighted and dragged words and phrases from the participants' interviews into the quirks, the quirks would increase in size as more sections of the text were added. I arranged the Quirkos to show the number of codes and then exported a report from Quirkos that allowed me to see the total number of Quirkos, codes, and participant quotes.

Next, I identified 68 codes and generated a table using Microsoft Word that presented the four a priori codes and 68 open codes. I determined each code according to individual participants' responses. From the codes, seven broad categories emerged. One example of a category that developed from the data was leadership support and strategies. This category was created from the codes *administrator's model expectations for their staff*, *administrators conduct observations*, *encourages collaboration*, and *provides in-house professional development*. As I coded data from the interview transcripts, I assigned categories to the data, and labeled the data with summarizing phrases. Next, I reviewed each group of codes and consolidated them to form themes. I identified seven themes by examining the similarities and differences between the teachers and administrators (Saldaña, 2016). The perspectives of both administrators and teachers were used to identify themes that assessed the instructional leadership of administrators provided to teachers in the inclusive classroom. Lastly, for the sake of member checking,

I emailed a summary of my findings to all the participants to review and provide written feedback (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Next, I sent another email to the participants and asked each participant if they would participate in a 20-minute follow-up interview on Zoom to discuss the study's findings. Then, I conducted follow-up interviews with a sample of the participants, which included one administrator and three teachers.

## **Results**

In this section, I present the findings of the study aligned with the research questions. The interview questions were structured to engage participants in dialogue that would provide insight about the experiences and perceptions of administrators' and teachers' regarding administrators' instructional leadership for teachers in the inclusive classroom. The research questions that guided this study were as follows.

RQ1: What are school administrators' experiences and perceptions of their instructional leadership for teachers in the inclusive classroom?

RQ2: What are school teachers' experiences and perceptions of their administrators' instructional leadership in the inclusive classroom?

A total of seven themes emerged from the data analysis and aligned with the two research questions. Table 2 shows 24 codes, four categories, and four themes related to Research Question 1, which addresses the experiences and perceptions of elementary school administrators regarding their instructional leadership for teachers in the inclusive classroom.

### **Table 2**

*Themes and Codes Related to Research Question 1: What are school administrators'*

*experiences and perceptions of their instructional leadership for teachers in the inclusive classroom?*

| Codes                                          | Categories                                      | Themes                                                                                                                                                                              |
|------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Model expectations                             |                                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| Conduct observations                           |                                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| Encourage collaboration                        |                                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| Advocate for students                          | Administrator leadership support and strategies | Theme 1. A common belief of administrators was that they provided a wide range of instructional support to teachers in the inclusive classroom.                                     |
| Build teacher capacity                         |                                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| Provide in-house professional development      |                                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| Classroom presence                             |                                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| Instructional resources for students           |                                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| Suggestions and feedback                       |                                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| Knowledge of current trends                    |                                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| Knowledge of curriculum changes                | Administrators' knowledge of inclusion          | Theme 2. Administrators believed they must be well versed and knowledgeable in the area of special education and inclusion.                                                         |
| Knowledge of IEP accommodations                |                                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| Attends IEP meetings                           |                                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| Assist with IEP process                        |                                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| Need for teacher support                       | Needs of the community                          | Theme 3. Administrators agreed there was a need for strong instructional leadership in their school community.                                                                      |
| Different student needs in the classroom       |                                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| Need for training and professional development |                                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| Communication with parents                     |                                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| Challenges due to COVID-19                     |                                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| Biases and mindset                             | Challenges and barriers for administrators      | Theme 4. Administrators believed they experienced many challenges that affected their ability to provide effective instructional leadership to teachers in the inclusive classroom. |
| Lack of time                                   |                                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| Need to prioritize duties                      |                                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| Budget concerns                                |                                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| County constraints                             |                                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                     |

Table 3 shows 44 codes, three categories, and three themes related to Research Question 2, which addresses the experiences and perceptions of elementary school teachers regarding the instructional leadership of administrators for teachers in the inclusive classroom.

### **Table 3**

*Themes and Codes Related to Research Question 2: What are school teachers'*

*experiences and perceptions of their administrators' instructional leadership in the inclusive classroom?*

| Codes                                         | Categories                           | Themes                                                                                                                                                        |
|-----------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Lack of staff                                 | Challenges and barriers for teachers | Theme 5. Teachers believed they were supported by their administrators but also believed they experienced many challenges teaching in the inclusive classroom |
| Teacher burnout                               |                                      |                                                                                                                                                               |
| Not enough resources                          |                                      |                                                                                                                                                               |
| Lack of consequences for SPED students        |                                      |                                                                                                                                                               |
| Teachers uncomfortable teaching               |                                      |                                                                                                                                                               |
| Lack of SPED course work in college           |                                      |                                                                                                                                                               |
| Lack of parental involvement                  |                                      |                                                                                                                                                               |
| Admin busy with daily operations              |                                      |                                                                                                                                                               |
| Struggle to differentiate for SPED            |                                      |                                                                                                                                                               |
| Increase of autism students                   |                                      |                                                                                                                                                               |
| Paraprofessionals not available consistently  |                                      |                                                                                                                                                               |
| Multiple needs in one class                   |                                      |                                                                                                                                                               |
| Large class sizes                             |                                      |                                                                                                                                                               |
| Pacing of curriculum                          |                                      |                                                                                                                                                               |
| Mixed abilities in one class                  | Inclusive classrooms                 | Theme 6. Teachers believed it was very difficult to teach in inclusive classrooms                                                                             |
| Long class periods                            |                                      |                                                                                                                                                               |
| Acting out due to academic struggle           |                                      |                                                                                                                                                               |
| Struggling students paired with SPED students |                                      |                                                                                                                                                               |
| Behaviors takes away from instruction         |                                      |                                                                                                                                                               |
| Teachers unable to attend IEP meetings        |                                      |                                                                                                                                                               |
| Focus only on math and reading                |                                      |                                                                                                                                                               |
| Lack of teacher input                         |                                      |                                                                                                                                                               |
| Hard to provide IEP accommodations            |                                      |                                                                                                                                                               |
| IEP is a distraction                          |                                      |                                                                                                                                                               |
| Retention of concepts                         |                                      |                                                                                                                                                               |
| Lack of teacher autonomy                      |                                      |                                                                                                                                                               |
| Lack of coverage to attend IEP meetings       |                                      |                                                                                                                                                               |

**Table 3 cont.**

| Codes | Categories | Themes |
|-------|------------|--------|
|-------|------------|--------|

|                                                 |                                                              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|-------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Teamwork                                        |                                                              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| Teachers as instructional leaders               |                                                              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| Open door policy                                |                                                              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| Approachable                                    |                                                              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| Consistent communication                        |                                                              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| Teachers empowered to make decisions            |                                                              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| Teachers encouraged to speak out                |                                                              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| Broad range of academic levels in one classroom |                                                              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| Conducts grade level planning meetings          |                                                              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| Conducts needs assessment for PD                |                                                              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| Outside PD is beneficial                        |                                                              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| Guidance from administration                    |                                                              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| Providing PD is a strength                      |                                                              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| Assist with lesson planning and differentiation |                                                              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| Conducts book studies                           |                                                              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| Input from everyone                             |                                                              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| Leadership changes from school to school        |                                                              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|                                                 | Leadership support<br>and strategies provided<br>to teachers | Theme 7. A common<br>belief of teachers was<br>that they were<br>provided with a wide<br>range of instructional<br>support to assist with<br>meeting the needs of<br>their students in the<br>inclusive classroom. |

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### Research Question 1: Themes

The first research question asked the following: What are school administrators' experiences and perceptions of their instructional leadership for teachers in the inclusive classroom? Through the interview process, I was able to elicit information about the experiences and perceptions of elementary principals regarding their instructional leadership, including guidance, supervision, professional development, support, and resources. I identified four themes that addressed Research Question 1. The four themes were as follows: (1) A common belief of administrators was that they provided a wide range of instructional support to teachers in the inclusive classroom; (2) administrators believed that they must be well-versed and knowledgeable in the area of special education and inclusion; (3) administrators agreed there was a need for strong

instructional leadership in their school community, and (4) administrators believed they experienced many challenges that affected their ability to provide effective instructional leadership to teachers in the inclusive classroom.

### *Theme 1*

The first theme was the common belief of administrators that they provided a wide range of instructional support to teachers in the inclusive classroom. This theme established a basis for understanding the varied perceptions and experiences of administrators regarding the instructional support they provide to teachers in the inclusive classroom. All administrators had a definition of what instructional leadership meant to them. Patterns emerged as participants described instructional leadership as supporting teachers with ways to meet and address the needs of their students, as well as having a clear understanding of what the expectations are for teachers and students to increase student performance and academic success. The data suggested that participants developed a definition of instructional leadership and the support needed of teachers in the inclusive classroom through their own experiences working with teachers in the inclusive classroom. Most participants' experiences were similar, and overall, administrators agreed that they provide a wide range of support to teachers in the inclusive classroom.

The data from the interviews revealed that the support administrators provide to teachers in the inclusive classroom varied from providing professional development, offering feedback and suggestions, providing resources, and attending collaborative planning meetings to offering first-hand assistance in the classroom. For instance,

providing feedback to teachers was a common theme amongst all administrators. During their interviews, administrators reported that feedback is an important component of being an instructional leader and could be provided to teachers in different ways. For example, Administrator 1 stated, “I support teachers, whether it’s in a feedback conference or in moments of crisis or frustration.” Similarly, Administrator 3 said, “As a result of my instructional leadership, I’m able to give them [teachers] feedback and suggestions and work very closely with our special education chairperson.” In another case, an administrator was more specific regarding the type of feedback given to teachers. Administrator 2 mentioned, “It’s important as an instructional leader to be in the curriculum, look at where kids need to go, look at the standards and give feedback on what the expectations are for students.” Regardless of the type of feedback given to teachers, administrators believe this effectively support teachers in inclusive classrooms. One participant reported that when teachers feel informed about their instruction and shifts, they can make in their delivery and are knowledgeable of different special education disabilities through coaching conversations and day-to-day feedback from the administration.

In addition to providing feedback to teachers, administrators believe they support teachers with special education students accessing the curriculum. The third interview question asked administrators how they applied instructional leadership to support teachers teaching special education students across content curriculum. Administrators agreed this was an essential step in ensuring special education students’ goals were being met in the inclusive classroom. Administrators reported that attending collaborative

planning, data meetings, and IEP meetings were effective ways of discussing strategies and best practices with teachers to assist with meeting the needs of their special education students. Administrator 1 stated:

The first thing for me happens outside of the actual classroom, which is attending the IEP [individualized education program] meetings, then I'm able to remind them about some of the things that were discussed and how we said as a team, we were going to put those things into practice for the students.

However, Administrator 2 discussed the importance of assisting teachers with differentiating the curriculum, "It is important to be a part of the conversations on how to differentiate instruction and look at the curriculum to see where students need to be based on the standards." On another note, Administrator 3 reported that they assist teachers with accessing the curriculum by attending collaborative planning and having discussions centered around data. Administrators agreed it is important to have those discussions around the curriculum and look at what is expected of students and how to differentiate instruction so that special education students are still moving towards grade-level goals.

Providing instructional resources that are not provided by the district is another support provided by administrators. There are materials such as textbooks and math manipulatives that are provided by the district. However, based on the needs of the students, there may be materials that are needed that have to come from the school's budget. For example, Administrator 2 said, "Manipulatives for math instruction are provided by the district, but if you have a student who is maybe sensitive to sound, you may have to purchase noise-canceling headphones for the student." Administrator 3

expressed, “I provide resources like manipulatives that support instruction and then provide professional development on how to effectively use those resources.”

Although there were many similarities regarding how administrators provided instructional support to teachers in the inclusive classroom, differences were also revealed as participants reported how they supported teachers with classroom management. The data revealed that some administrators treat class management the same regardless of the student’s disability. Some administrators reported they use school-wide discipline models such as positive behavioral interventions and support. When asked how they applied instructional leadership to support teachers with classroom management in the inclusive classroom, one administrator reported that they offer the same professional development on classroom management to all their staff.

Administrator 1 stated:

This is a biggie that we sometimes forget; if the management isn’t settled and in place, in the beginning, all the instructional skills and strategies that we had and were attempting to use may not be successful. Therefore, I spend a lot of time providing professional development and working with teachers to ensure they have a clear plan at the beginning of the year on how they are going to approach discipline and ensure they understand how they are going to communicate that plan to their students and parents.

Whereas other administrators reported that classroom behaviors could be a manifestation of the student’s disability; therefore, how you approach the student and handle the behavior should be different. Administrator 2 mentioned redirecting teachers

or giving suggestions like having a calm-down center for students who may have difficulty with self-regulation. One administrator reported that they take more of a hands-on approach when dealing with classroom management in inclusive classrooms and they go into the classroom and model for teachers what the expectations are and how to handle certain situations based on a student's disability code. Administrator 3 shared, "It's important to model for teacher's ways to work with and respond to students as it relates to some of those behavioral concerns." Similarly, Administrator 2 relayed, "I have no problem going in and kind of sitting with a student just to also be that additional person to kind of explain or help them out in the classrooms as well."

There were other variations that emerged from participants' responses regarding how the participants provided instructional support to teachers in the inclusive classroom. A difference that was revealed during the interviews was some administrators only discussed how the principal and assistant principal provided instructional support to teachers in the inclusive classroom. Whereas one administrator reported that they used teacher leaders to support teachers and help grow teachers' capacity, which in turn should increase student achievement. Administrator 2 reported:

I've worked hard to empower others to lead instruction. It's not just coming from me, the principal making all of the decisions, and everyone just does what the principal envisions, but it allows space for people to really think, and share ideas about shifts that may need to happen with instruction.

To conclude, based on the perceptions and experiences of administrators, administrators believe they provide a variety of support for teachers in the inclusive classroom, such as

modeling expectations, conducting observations, offering feedback, building teacher leaders, and providing in-house professional development. Although some of the support differed, many of the support were similar.

### *Theme 2*

Theme 2 was the following: Administrators believed that they must be well versed and knowledgeable in special education and inclusion. This theme addresses RQ1 in relation to the experiences and perceptions of administrators regarding their knowledge of inclusion. During the one-on-one interviews, patterns emerged as participants frequently emphasized the importance of administrators receiving training in special education. When asked what instructional leadership meant to them, most participants equated instructional leadership with being knowledgeable. Participants not only put an emphasis on administrators staying abreast of content and curriculum, but also having knowledge of special education policies and procedures.

Most participants' experiences and perceptions were similar, and overall, the data from the interviews revealed that when it comes to special education and inclusion, administrators should possess knowledge in the following areas: current trends, curriculum changes, IEP accommodations, and IEP meeting procedures. For example, Administrator 3 reported, "Leadership doesn't necessarily mean you have to be an expert in all areas, but you have to have some knowledge of special education educational policy and procedures." To add on, Administrator 2 said:

It's hard to lead something that you don't know. So, whether it's math or reading, science or social studies, you should know the curriculum and the demands that

are put upon teachers. This doesn't mean you have to be a guru, but you have to have a clear understanding of what the expectations are, especially in special education.

Participants stated that it is important to understand the curriculum in order to guide teacher practice, but it is equally important to be well-versed in the laws and regulations that impact students with special needs. Participants agreed that administrators should have a solid understanding of special education laws and policies. During the interview, participants reported that the policies and laws regarding special education are constantly changing, and as instructional leaders, administrators must keep up with all the changes in order to lead and guide staff. For example, Administrator 1 noted, "As an instructional leader, you have to stay well-versed and current in the trends around special education." Similarly, Administrator 3 mentioned, "There are a lot of laws and regulations that we have to abide by, so being familiar with those things allows me to stay on top of the special education chairperson to ensure we stay in compliance with the state."

In addition to staying current with special education trends and laws, administrators also believed they must be knowledgeable of curriculum changes. Participants reported that as an instructional leader, it is hard to lead something that you do not know. For example, Administrator 2 revealed:

It's important to know the curriculum and know where kids need to go, and to be able to look at the standards and know what the expectations are for students.

Knowing the curriculum helps you to understand what teachers have to deliver, what they need to do in their instruction in order to for students to be successful,

and if you're going to lead, you really have to be in the weeds with the teachers and fully understand how they need to plan, prepare and deliver instruction.

Participants said that it is important for administrators of inclusion schools to be knowledgeable of IEP accommodations and IEP meeting procedures. For example, Administrator 2 expressed:

In our administrative role, we are here to protect every child, so we must really understand what their disability is and how we need to move forward in the building to support that child and the teacher.

Similarly, Administrator 3 stated, "You have to know what the IEP is saying so that you can provide those support and suggestions to the teachers."

In addition to knowing students' IEP accommodations, the data revealed that administrators believe that having knowledge of IEP meetings is also important as an instructional leader. For example, Administrator 3 shared, "I'm very hands-on with the IEP process. I attend all the IEP meetings, and my reason for that is I want to be able to help the teachers any way I can." Administrators also mentioned that attending the IEP meetings helps in understanding the student's IEP. For instance, Administrator 1 reported:

Everyone should attend the IEP meetings and become familiar with the IEP; it helps you with knowing the goals and needs of the students, so you are comfortable making suggestions and advocating for what the student needs.

Although there were many similarities regarding administrators' belief that they must be well-versed and knowledgeable in special education and inclusion, differences were also

revealed regarding the participants' educational training in the area of special education. A major difference was in educational training and certification. One administrator revealed that they had a vast amount of training in special education, which assisted with teachers having confidence in the feedback and suggestions that were offered.

Administrator 1 noted:

Because I am certified in special education, I think it gives some additional credibility because they know it is my background, and I am willing to share my experiences, and they listen to my suggestions because they are grounded in a true understanding of the different disabilities and learner profiles.

Similarly, Administrator 2 reported, "If it's not your strength, as the leader, you have to go and get the knowledge and training you need." On the other hand, Administrator 3 stated, "You don't have to be an expert because you have other instructional leaders in your building to rely on." In addition, when asked if they held any additional certifications, such as a special education endorsement, Administrator 3 could not remember and reported they did not know because it had been so long since they received their certification, and they had not looked at their certification in a while. To conclude, there were many similarities regarding administrators' belief that they must be well-versed and knowledgeable in special education and inclusion; however, the perception regarding their personal, educational training in the area of special education differed.

### ***Theme 3***

Theme 3 was the following: Administrators agreed there was a need for strong instructional leadership in their school community. An important skill of an instructional

leader is to be able to conduct a needs assessment of their school. From the interviews with participants, the data revealed that administrators agreed that there is a need for strong instructional leadership in their school community. Patterns emerged as participants reported a need for teacher support, student support in the classroom, the need for staff professional development, and communication with parents. One similarity was the need for teacher support in each school site under study. Administrators expressed during their interviews that teachers need a leader who can offer suggestions and feedback and support them in their thinking around special education and inclusion. For example, Administrator 2 mentioned, “It’s really important that my presence is there to support teachers in their thinking regarding students’ progress on their IEP goals or lack thereof.” Similarly, the data also revealed that teachers feel inadequate to properly meet the needs of their students; therefore, support is needed from their leaders. For example, Administrator 1 stated, “General education teachers take one or two required courses in special education, but not everyone feels comfortable that they can meet the needs of their students.” Administrators also expressed that it was equally important for administrators to provide professional development for teachers based on school-wide data, particularly the special education sub-group data. For example, Administrator 3 said, “It’s important to support teachers and provide them with resources, some of the resources I provide is professional development based on student data and what I observe in the classrooms.” Administrators also revealed that teachers need assistance from administrators to ensure that special education teachers collaborate with the general

educator to ensure everyone's schedules are in sync. For instance, Administrator 1 mentioned:

I have really worked with our special educators to take a closer look at their schedule to make sure that we're thinking smart about how we're supporting the students, and so I have heard from the teachers that they feel much more on the same page with the special educator and vice versa, due to some of my work with them.

In addition to the need for teacher support, administrators also revealed that there was a need for administrators to support students in the classroom. One important need that was revealed through the interviews was the need for a strong teacher-student relationship. For example, Administrator 3 stated:

From the different strategies and techniques that I have provided to teachers they have been able to build stronger relationships with students and when you connect with students, they're willing to do more, and you're able to educate them more when you have those relationships.

During the interviews, it was also expressed by administrators that there was an educational gap that must be filled for students to be successful in the classroom. For example, Administrator 2 reported:

We need to make sure that children are receiving what they need in order to fill the gap, and as an administrator, that is our job to support them and give them the resources that they need to fill those gaps.

Although there were many similarities regarding why administrators agree there is a need for strong instructional leadership in their school communities, there were also differences regarding how administrators met those needs. One major difference shared during the interviews was administrators being physically present in the classrooms to support students. In fact, there was only one administrator who mentioned physically being present in the classroom to support students. For example, Administrator 1 relayed:

I have no problem going in and sitting with the student and being the additional person to explain or help them out with a task. Especially with our younger students, I'm much more comfortable getting in there and sitting on the carpet beside the student in a small group.

Assisting teachers and students was not the only need of the school community revealed during the interviews but also having clear and consistent communication with parents was a strong need reported by administrators. Administrators mentioned during their interviews that parents need support regarding what the IEP process entails. For example, Administrator 2 stated, "Sometimes I don't feel like our parents are always fully educated around what it means to have an IEP and their rights as a parent." In fact, it was said that when you build relationships with parents, the parents are more open to listening to the administration during IEP meetings. For example, Administrator 3 relayed, "Because of the relationships I have with parents, they are more open to the suggestions that I provide the team regarding their child." To conclude, based on the perceptions and experiences of administrators, administrators believe there is a need for

strong instructional leadership in their school community for teachers, students, and parents.

#### ***Theme 4***

Theme 4 was the following: Administrators believed they experienced many challenges that affected their ability to provide effective instructional leadership to teachers in the inclusive classroom. Although there is a need for strong instructional leadership, the administrators in this study reported facing many challenges that they perceived as obstacles that affected their ability to provide effective instructional leadership to teachers in the inclusive classroom. The seventh interview question asked administrators what challenges they faced when providing instructional leadership to teachers in the inclusive classroom. The challenges that were revealed during the interviews varied from challenges due to COVID-19, teacher biases and mindset, lack of time, to budget constraints. As a result of the various challenges, all administrators agreed that the challenges affected their ability to provide effective instructional leadership to teachers in the inclusive classroom. For instance, lack of time was a common theme amongst all administrators. Administrators reported that the workload and the number of hours in a workday made it difficult to accomplish all the required duties and effectively support teachers through their instructional leadership. For example, Administrator 1 stated:

A big challenge is being able to devote the time and attention to not only going in and seeing what teachers are doing but then scheduling meaningful feedback

conversations. Oftentimes our formal observations take much longer, and it's difficult to find the time to give meaningful feedback.

Additionally, Administrator 2 mentioned, "We have weekly collaborative planning meetings, but it's really hard to find the time to attend the meetings consistently." In addition to the time constraints, another challenge reported by administrators was the challenges from COVID-19. The administrators all agreed that the effects of COVID-19 affected the way they provided instructional leadership to teachers. It was reported that there was a distinct distinction between the instructional leadership provided to teachers before COVID-19 and the leadership provided to teachers post-COVID-19. For example, Administrator 1 shared:

The first semester was spent really trying to figure out ways to keep everyone safe. We had to make sure that we were keeping up with the paperwork and all of the requirements that came along with those new changes due to COVID-19, and so I would say it definitely impacted our instructional leadership.

In addition, administrators shared that because of COVID-19 it was difficult to provide IEP service hours to students due to staff absences from COVID-19. For example, Administrator 2 stated:

I think the biggest challenge is making sure we have the coverage that is needed to ensure that we're giving and covering all of the service hours that children need, this has been a very difficult time with limited staff vacancies and absences due to COVID-19.

Although time constraints and COVID-19 challenges have impacted administrators' instructional leadership provided to teachers in the inclusive classroom, administrators reported that teacher mindset and biases regarding inclusion and special education have also been a challenge. Administrators noted that teacher biases and the lack of a growth mindset around inclusion sometimes limit the rigor and academic standards in the inclusion classroom. For example, Administrator 3 mentioned:

It's difficult dealing with teachers having a fixed mindset, and when it's fixed like that, when you're bringing suggestions and ideas and having these conversations, sometimes it's hard to get them to be willing to try it and open up to trying it because they have that fixed mindset.

During the interviews administrators reported that in an inclusion school it is important to ensure that all staff believe in the school's vision and mission. It was expressed by administrators that it becomes a challenge when teachers have a fixed mindset and are not reflective of their practice or believe they should change their practice. For instance, Administrator 1 stated, "It's a challenge to get teachers to change their mindset to align to our shared purpose." In addition, Administrator 3 reported:

When teachers have a fixed mindset, you have to really do some work where you're forcing them to be reflective, and you're hoping that through their own reflection, they will begin to be more open to your ideas and suggestions.

Another challenge administrators face when providing instructional leadership to teachers in the inclusion classroom is budget concerns. Although administrators identify a

need in the school community, they reported that budget constraints could sometimes hinder them from fulfilling the need. For example, Administrator 3 stated:

We provide resources, but we just don't have enough physical resources in terms of bodies to support teachers, as well as the fiscal resources in terms of being able to buy supplemental materials that you would want to buy, so that's definitely been a challenge.

In inclusive classrooms, paraprofessionals support teachers and students to ensure special education students receive their IEP service hours. Administrators reported that it becomes difficult to hire the required personnel to adequately support the schools' special education program due to budget constraints. In fact, Administrator 1 expressed, "The challenge as an administrator comes down to what we are limited to based on our budget and teaching allotment. Ensuring we have the right number of positions and people in those positions challenges my instructional leadership."

Although administrators faced similar challenges that affected their ability to provide effective instructional leadership to teachers in the inclusive classroom, there were differences regarding how they worked around those challenges. One administrator reported that due to budget constraints, they use all out-of-classroom personnel to provide IEP accommodations to special education students in the inclusive classroom. Another administrator reported that they are creative with creating the master schedule to ensure staff can assist teachers with small group instruction and special education pull-out services. To conclude, the participating administrators were faced with many similar challenges that affected their ability to provide effective instructional leadership to

teachers in the inclusive classroom; however, they found different solutions to resolving those challenges.

### **Research Question 2: Themes**

The second research question asked the following: What are school teachers' experiences and perceptions of their administrators' instructional leadership in the inclusive classroom? Through the interview process, I was able to elicit information about the experiences and perceptions of elementary teachers regarding their administrators' instructional leadership. I identified three themes that addressed Research Question 2. The three themes were as follows: (5) Teachers believed they were supported by their administrators but also believed they experienced many challenges teaching in the inclusive classroom; (6) Teachers believed that it was very difficult to teach in inclusive classroom settings; and (7) A common belief of teachers was that they were provided with a wide range of instructional support to assist with meeting the needs of their students in the inclusive classroom.

#### ***Theme 5***

Theme 5 was the following: Teachers believed they were supported by their administrators but they also believed they experienced many challenges teaching in the inclusive classroom. Some of the challenges they reported included: a lack of staff, teacher burnout, insufficient resources, lack of consequences for SPED students, teachers uncomfortable teaching SPED students, and lack of parental involvement. Patterns emerged as all participants described instructional leadership as administrators leading and guiding staff. The data suggested that participants developed a definition of

instructional leadership through their experiences with their administrators. Most participants' experiences were similar, and overall, teachers agreed that they receive support from their administrators. Participants reported they can talk to their administration, receive feedback from them, bounce ideas off of them, and receive resources from them to support students in the classroom. For example, Teacher 3 stated:

We have really good leadership at my school. We have an assistant principal and a principal. I feel like they really do encourage us to do our best, we get valuable feedback from them when they do their observations, and if I ever need something, I can always reach out to them, and they'll give me the resources that I need.

Similarly, Teacher 2 shared, "They really do support us as teachers in the classroom. So, if I have a need or concern, I am able to go to my administrators for support." In addition, Teacher 1 mentioned, "The professional development that's one thing they always try to provide." Likewise, Teacher 6 said, "In the family meetings, at least one of our administrators is always present. I don't think I've ever been in a meeting personally where someone wasn't represented by the administration so that they always know what's happening. Additionally, Teacher 4 noted:

If you feel like you're struggling with something that you're supposed to do, they're [administration] always open to any questions their doors are literally never closed unless it's a private conversation. If you have a question, you can email them, or you can go to them and ask, and you also get honest feedback.

Although the teacher participants felt supported by their administrators, they indicated that they still had many challenges regarding teaching in the inclusive classroom. Some of the challenges they reported included; a lack of staff, teacher burnout, insufficient resources, lack of consequences for SPED students, teachers uncomfortable teaching SPED students, and lack of parental involvement. Regardless of the support teachers received, they still had challenges that affected their ability to effectively meet the needs of special education students in an inclusive classroom. During the interviews, teachers expressed that they struggle with teaching in the inclusive classroom. For example, Teacher 10 stated, “I really appreciate the support I receive from my administrator because this job is not easy.” During their interviews, teachers reported that teaching in the inclusive classroom is challenging due to the wide range of skill set and needs of the students. For example, Teacher 1 relayed:

Sometimes I have students who are below grade level mixed in with special education students along with students who are ESOL [English to Speakers of Other Languages] meaning they just came into the country for the first time and they speak no English. So you already see that’s three different groups right there. Also, class size is an issue. I may have 25 or more students to one teacher.

Class size was a major challenge, coupled with the fact that many of the students had different disabilities and different needs in the classroom. For instance, Teacher 10 revealed, “Last year, I had seven students who had an IEP, and it was challenging for me because each one of them had different goals.” Additionally, Teacher 4 said, “Having to connect with students on different levels of learning development can be very

challenging.” As a result, the demands in the inclusive classroom can be very challenging for a teacher. Therefore, participants expressed the need for additional personnel to assist with meeting the needs of special education students. For example, Teacher 10 stated:

It would be good to be able to assign a teacher or an itinerant special education assistant (ISEA) or a knowledgeable paraprofessional that would help us in the classroom to be aware of the needs and the goals and the activities that our students with IEPs should be involved in.

Similarly, Teacher 4 noted, “I wish we had more people in our building to assist; it would make our jobs a lot easier.” As a result of the lack of staff, teachers are starting to burn out. For example, Participants reported that teachers receive low compensation, are burnt out, and do not want to do the job. For example, Teacher 6 stated:

Sometimes we are not always compensated for the work that we do. Teacher pay is a big issue right now and teachers are burnt out and don’t want to do the work if they are not being paid for it.

Lack of staff and teacher burn out are not the only challenges teachers reported during their interviews. Many teachers reported that it is challenging teaching in the inclusive classroom due to the lack of teacher and student resources. For example, Teacher 3 stated, “Students need extra support for example, in math, they may need hands-on manipulatives to help them work through their math problems, but manipulatives are unavailable.” Teachers also reported that behavior problems are a challenge because they don’t have the resources in the classroom to support the students. For instance, Teacher 4 expressed, “It gets hard if students have behavioral problems and

they've been identified as special education, and we don't have enough resources to support them in the classroom.”

Although there were many similarities regarding challenges teachers believed they experienced teaching in the inclusive classroom, differences were also revealed as participants reported how their administrators responded to those challenges. One administrator revealed that their administrator used teacher leaders to make up for the shortage of personnel. For example, Teacher 10 stated that their administrator looks for leadership skills among the staff and tries to nurture those skills by assigning them leadership duties. On the other hand, Teacher 6 said that their administrator has helped with teacher burnout by having an open-door policy and allowing the teachers to come and talk and ask questions whenever needed. Because of the challenges they face, teachers also find it very difficult to teach in an inclusive classroom, which leads to the next theme.

### ***Theme 6***

Theme 6 was the following: Teachers believed that it was very difficult to teach in inclusive classroom settings. Patterns emerged as participants described a variety of reasons that teachers felt this way, such as differentiation for special education students, an increase of autistic students, paraprofessionals not being available consistently, multiple needs in one classroom, large class sizes, the pacing of the curriculum, and behavior concerns that take away from instruction. Because of the wide range of academic abilities in one classroom, teachers expressed that they find it very difficult to

differentiate instruction in order to meet the needs of all their students, particularly their special education students. For example, Teacher 1 said:

My administrator emphasizes differentiation, but it's tough. For example, if you're teaching science and you have an advanced group and a SPED group, your instruction should not look the same; it should be tailored to the needs of the students. But how do you break it down for your SPED group? You may be teaching a topic that has a lot of abstract concepts, and your advanced students may get it but not your SPED students."

Similarly, Teacher 10 agreed and noted, "It was difficult having to connect with students on different levels of learning development; that has made it extremely challenging."

Teachers reported that having mixed abilities in one classroom was a challenge, but also reported that it was highly challenging when that classroom had many students in it. For example, Administrator 1 stated, "I have 25 or more students in each class period, and I am only one teacher how am I supposed to address all of the needs." The large class sizes coupled with the mixed abilities of students, also made it difficult for teachers to keep up with the pacing of the curriculum. For example, Teacher 2 shared, "We have a massive task; we have to make sure that we're on target with our pacing of the curriculum, make sure we're addressing the standards, and looking at our data." In addition, Teacher 1 expressed:

Everyone has to try and move at the same pace, and you have some students falling behind; you may have one student whose writing skills are terrible, but

she's very good in terms of comprehension, while another student reads excellent but also has issues with math and science.

The fourth interview question asked teachers how the instructional leadership provided by their administrators helped support behavioral challenges they faced in the inclusive classroom. When sharing their experiences, teachers agreed that as a result of their challenges, they had a difficult time teaching in the inclusive classroom. The interviews revealed that when students are struggling academically; they can sometimes get bored, which will lead to them acting out inappropriately in the classroom. For example, Teacher 1 stated, "Sometimes the student wants to move ahead, but they can't because they are struggling with the content, and they are just left there with nothing to do, and they get into all sorts of trouble." On another note, some of the behavior challenges can not only interfere with instruction but can also be a safety concern. In fact, Teacher 5 said, "There was a child who was not mine; he was in another classroom, and he is no longer at the school because he ended up assaulting the teacher."

Although there were many similarities regarding why teachers believed teaching in the inclusive classroom was difficult, teachers also revealed differences as they expressed their thoughts toward IEPs. First, some teachers reported that IEPs were a distraction. For example, Teacher 1 reported that IEPs could be a distraction because the IEP applied to only one student. However, teachers have other students in the classroom that they are responsible for educating. On the other hand, other teachers reported that IEPs were beneficial and were used as a guide to support special education student needs.

For example, Teacher 5 stated, “The IEP is there so that the teacher is aware of the needs, goals, and activities that their special education students should be involved in.”

### ***Theme 7***

Theme 7 was the following: Teachers believed they were provided with a wide range of instructional support to assist with meeting the needs of their students in the inclusive classroom. This theme established a basis for understanding teachers’ varied perceptions and experiences regarding the instructional support they received from administrators in the inclusive classroom. Most participants’ experiences were similar. Overall, teachers agreed that they received instructional support such as in-house and out-of-school professional development, feedback in planning meetings, assistance with lesson planning and differentiation, behavior strategies, and feedback from formal and informal observations.

Several participants reported that in their preservice education they received minimal coursework on special education and inclusion. For example, Teacher 5 said, “As general education teachers, we only take one or two courses in special education, which are required courses in the college of education.” In addition, Teacher 3 stated, “I do not recall taking classes to equip me to handle the different disabilities I have in my classroom.” For this reason, teachers agreed that professional development was effective support provided by their administrators. Teachers reported that they received two types of professional development. The first type of professional development offered was through the school district. Some teachers reported that they found this type of professional development beneficial. For example, Teacher 6 mentioned that sometimes

it was more beneficial to receive information from people in the school district rather than staff at their school. Similarly, Teacher 4 said, “We have a bunch of PDs we can sign up for through our county.” However, the second type of professional development offered is in the school building. Teachers reported that some administrators assigned teacher leaders to conduct professional development held in the school building. For example, Teacher 6 reported:

Instead of the administrator making all of the decisions, my administrator felt it was important for teachers to help with professional development, conduct book studies, lead professional development, and run staff meetings.

Teachers also reported needing professional development in specific areas. For instance, Teacher 2 mentioned that professional development on behavior challenges would be beneficial.

Participants also expressed during the interviews that feedback from administrators in planning meetings was an effective instructional support offered to teachers. For instance, Teacher 4 stated:

We have planning meetings where the administration, the SPED coordinator, and general education teachers collaborate once a month. We look at student work samples and where students should be and discuss the best strategies.

Similarly, Teacher 5 said, “We have monthly inclusion meetings where teachers lead the meetings and administration is there for support.” Teachers reported that not only do administrators support teachers through planning meetings, but they [administrators] also assist teachers with lesson planning and differentiation. For instance, Teacher 10 reported

Administrators have a lot on their plate, but the fact that they take the time to go to collaborative planning and give feedback on lesson plans or to check to see how a student is doing or review their IEP goals is amazing.

Although there were many similarities regarding the belief of teachers of the wide range of instructional support they received from their administrators, there were also differences revealed as some teachers expressed their beliefs regarding the lack of instructional support they received from their administrators. For example, some teachers did not believe that their [teachers] classes were created proportionately. In fact, Teacher 1 said:

I have a problem with the way administrators put the classes together, everyone has to try and move at the same pace but you have students who are falling behind because of the way the class was constructed. You have different behaviors and reading levels it's not a lot of support there.

Some teachers reported that their administrators attend meetings but offer little feedback or suggestions. For example, Teacher 5 mentioned, "We have inclusion meetings led by teachers. The principals might be there, but I do not recall them saying, Hey, try this, do this, or I am suggesting this; it is the teachers who lead the meetings."

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness is essential to a qualitative study (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Trustworthiness was achieved by attending to the concepts of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. For the findings presented, it was important that methods were put in place that would ensure the credibility of the data. To establish

credibility in this study, I interviewed participants who had experience with special education students in inclusive settings. In addition, all participants were from the same school district; however, there were general education teachers and elementary administrators from three different school sites to allow for different data sources of information to increase the validity of the study. As mentioned in Chapter 3, data triangulation was one method to ensure the validity of the study's results (Fusch & Ness, 2015). For the first data source I interviewed administrators who worked in inclusive elementary schools. The second data source I interviewed were elementary teachers who worked in inclusive elementary schools. There were similarities between the two sources of data. Both sources agreed that administrators provided a wide range of support to teachers. However, teachers reported that although they receive support from their administrators, they still have challenges and struggle teaching in the inclusive setting.

Transferability was also established in this study. To encourage transferability, I prompted participants during the interview to provide descriptions of their experiences. I also asked follow-up questions if the participants answers were too vague. From the data provided, readers can take certain aspects of the experiences and perceptions of the teachers and administrators included in the study and apply them to their school settings. By asking detailed questions of the participants, other administrators may find the information useful in working with their teachers in inclusive settings.

Next, dependability was achieved by providing a detailed description of the data analysis process and presenting detailed and accurate results from the interviews of the

participants in the study. To ensure dependability, triangulation was established by having two different sources of data, interviews with teachers and administrators.

Finally, confirmability was reached within the study through the process of reflexivity and member checking. Member checking was a method I used to confirm the accuracy of my findings (Saldaña, 2016). First, I emailed a summary of my findings to all the participants and asked them to respond to the email with their feedback of the findings. However, none of the participants responded to the email with feedback. Next, I sent another email to the participants and asked each participant if they would participate in a 20-minute follow-up interview on Zoom to discuss the study's findings. I received responses from four participants who agreed to a follow-up interview. Before conducting the interviews, I emailed the participants a summary of the findings and recommendations from the study and asked them to read over the information prior to the interviews. I conducted interviews with four of my study participants for 20 minutes through Zoom where I shared the codes, categories and themes discovered in my study.

All four participants gave a verbal agreement to my findings during the follow-up interviews and even provided additional details to build a better understanding of the finding. When asked if my findings mirrored their experiences, one participant said: "You did a great job capturing my experiences, I totally agree with your findings." Another participant reported, "Yes, this is exactly right, there is nothing more for me to add." In reference to the finding related to the challenges teachers faced teaching in the inclusive classroom, one participant stated the following:

This is sad to actually see it in writing and to see everyone is going through the same challenges. I wish staff from the area office were also included in your study. I would love to hear how they perceive things.

I also used a reflective journal to write down details, thoughts, and feelings about each interview to help eliminate any unwanted biases. First, I took notes of my reactions and thoughts in a journal during each interview. Next, after each interview, I uploaded the transcripts created by Zoom to Quirkos. I then read through each transcript and made memo notes of my thoughts on the participants' verbal and non-verbal responses. Last, I used this information as a tool for reflection while coding the data. I assured confirmability by using my reflective journal, which helped eliminate bias. There were many accepted methods of assuring that the findings of my study are trustworthy and can be trusted.

### **Summary**

In Chapter 4, I reported the results of the study. This study explored administrators' and teachers' experiences and perceptions regarding administrators' instructional leadership for teachers in the inclusive classroom. I was able to find patterns, variations, similarities, and differences among the responses provided by the three administrators and seven general education teachers during the semistructured interviews. I used the analysis from the participants' responses to address the following research questions.

RQ1: What are school administrators' experiences and perceptions of their instructional leadership for teachers in the inclusive classroom?

RQ2: What are school teachers' experiences and perceptions of their administrators' instructional leadership in the inclusive classroom?

As I conducted interviews and analyzed the data, a total of seven categories emerged. Four categories and four themes were related to Research Question 1, which addressed the experiences and perceptions of elementary school administrators regarding their instructional leadership for teachers in the inclusive classroom. The four themes were: (1) A common belief of administrators was that they provided a wide range of instructional support to teachers in the inclusive classroom; (2) Administrators believed that they must be well-versed and knowledgeable in the area of special education and inclusion; (3) Administrators agreed there was a need for strong instructional leadership in their school community, and (4) Administrators believed they experienced many challenges that affected their ability to provide effective instructional leadership to teachers in the inclusive classroom.

The first research question addressed the administrators' experiences and perceptions of their instructional leadership for teachers in the inclusive classroom. The participants' responses revealed that it is essential for inclusion schools to have administrators that are solid instructional leaders for the school to be successful. To succeed in leading an inclusive school, it is also important for administrators to understand the curriculum to guide teacher practice. However, being well-versed in the laws and regulations that impact students with special needs is equally important. Although the administrators believed they provided a wide range of support to teachers,

they also believed they had many challenges that prohibited them from effectively providing instructional leadership to their teachers.

Next, I identified three categories and three themes that addressed Research Question 2. The three themes were as follows: (5) Teachers believed they were supported by their administrators but also believed they experienced many challenges teaching in the inclusive classroom; (6) Teachers believed that it was very difficult to teach in inclusive classroom settings; and (7) A common belief of teachers was that they were provided with a wide range of instructional support to assist with meeting the needs of their students in the inclusive classroom. The second research question addressed the teachers' experiences and perceptions of their administrators' instructional leadership in the inclusive classroom. The participants' responses revealed that most teachers believed they were supported by their administrators through having open dialogue, valuing their opinions, and collaborating with them to make school-based decisions. They also believed that their administrators provided a wide range of instructional support, such as instructional materials, additional personnel, feedback, and suggestions, and being present in the classroom to assist with students. Although teachers believed they were supported by their administrators, they still believed they experienced challenges teaching in the inclusive classroom, from inappropriate student behaviors and large class sizes to differentiating the curriculum. In Chapter 5, I will interpret the findings from my study, examine the limitations of the study, describe recommendations for future research and discuss how this study can contribute to positive social change.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

In this chapter, I reintroduce the purpose, nature of the study and why the study was conducted. I then discuss the interpretations of the findings according to the two research questions. This chapter also includes a discussion of the limitations of the study, recommendations for future research and implications of my study related to positive social change.

The purpose of this study was to explore administrators' and teachers' experiences and perceptions regarding administrators' instructional leadership for teachers in the inclusive classroom. I conducted this study to address a gap in practice of school administrators providing instructional leadership practices in inclusive school environments. The conceptual framework undergirding the study was based on Waters' theory of balanced leadership (Waters & Cameron, 2007). I conducted 10 interviews of seven teachers and three administrators who worked with special education students in an inclusive setting. From the interviews conducted, seven themes emerged: (1) A common belief of administrators was that they provided a wide range of instructional support to teachers in the inclusive classroom; (2) administrators believed that they must be well-versed and knowledgeable in the area of special education and inclusion; (3) administrators agreed there was a need for strong instructional leadership in their school community; (4) administrators believed they experienced many challenges that affected their ability to provide effective instructional leadership to teachers in the inclusive classroom; (5) teachers believed they were supported by their administrators but also believed they experienced many challenges teaching in the inclusive classroom; (6)

teachers believed that it was very difficult to teach in inclusive classroom settings, and (7) a common belief of teachers was that they were provided with a wide range of instructional support to assist with meeting the needs of their students in the inclusive classroom. The above themes are described in further detail in the interpretation of the findings section.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

In this section, I describe how my findings confirm, disconfirm, and extend knowledge in this discipline by comparing them with what has been found in the literature described in Chapter 2. I also interpret the findings through the context of the conceptual framework for this study, Waters' theory of balanced leadership (Waters & Cameron, 2007). This framework describes the knowledge, skills, strategies, resources, and tools administrators need to improve student achievement. The framework is based on the notion that effective leadership means more than knowing what to do; it means knowing when, how, and why to do it (Waters & Cameron, 2007). This section is arranged by research question and corresponding themes. I examine the seven themes in relation to the literature review and the conceptual framework.

#### **Findings Related to Research Question 1**

##### ***Finding 1***

The first finding was that administrators provided a range of instructional support to teachers in the inclusive classroom. First, the participants indicated that feedback to teachers was an essential support that helped teachers guide their instruction in the inclusive classroom. Second, some administrators reported helping teachers with

accessing and modifying the curriculum. My findings confirmed those of two studies that suggested that if administrators want to improve teaching, they should focus on conducting observations of teachers and providing feedback (Lavigne, 2020; Swen, 2020). Participants also expressed that assisting teachers with implementing and differentiating the curriculum were key support to ensure special education students were successful in the inclusive classroom. In addition, several studies also included recommendations that administrators should prioritize the task of helping teachers to understand the curriculum and effectively modify it to meet the needs of the wide range of levels of students in their inclusive classrooms (Davis & Boudreaux, 2019; Kozleski & Choi, 2018; Schulze & Boscardin, 2018).

This finding connected to Waters' theory of balanced leadership, as administrators recognized that there was a need to support teachers with adapting the curriculum to meet the needs of their special education students. Thus, they provided feedback to teachers with modifying and implementing the curriculum. According to the balanced leadership framework, it is important for leaders to know why some actions are necessary, when they need to be applied, and how to apply them in classes and schools skillfully (Waters & Cameron, 2007). In addition, administrators should focus on research-based classroom and school practices that have statistically significant effects on student achievement.

### ***Finding 2***

The second finding was that administrators must be well-versed and knowledgeable in special education and inclusion. It is important to note that special

education laws and policies are constantly changing. Therefore, to effectively support teachers in the inclusive setting, administrators must stay abreast of the changes in special education. DeMatthews et al., (2020) also reported that school administrators should be knowledgeable of special education laws and policies, as well as the responsibilities of teachers to appropriately educate students with disabilities.

In this study, the administrators defined instructional leadership as having a clear understanding of what the expectations are for teachers and students to increase student performance and academic success. Therefore, the administrators found that to guide and support teachers, they must also be knowledgeable of the curriculum, as well as special education trends and laws. This theme is aligned with Billingsley et al. (2018), who stated that for administrators to effectively guide teachers, they must be knowledgeable of inclusion. In addition, DeMatthews et al. (2020) reported that principals in inclusive settings must know special education policy and what effective inclusive instruction looks like; however, there are several studies that suggest that administrators unfortunately lack special education knowledge and experience (Coviello & DeMatthews, 2021; DeMatthews & Mueller, 2022; Maggin et al., 2020; Romanuck Murphy, 2018;).

### ***Finding 3***

The third finding was that there was a need for strong instructional leadership in schools to support teachers, students, and parents. In this study, administrators reported there was a need for professional development for teachers due to the lack of knowledge and experience teachers had in special education. The participants' perceptions concurred

with Billingsley et al. (2018), who conducted a study and interviewed six principals who reported that teachers were not prepared to work in inclusive classrooms because general education teachers lacked special education knowledge, were inexperienced with coteaching and co-planning, and had limited ability to effectively participate in IEP meetings. On the other hand, Wang and Zhang (2021) expressed that administrators struggle with supporting teachers' professional development due to their other responsibilities and busy schedules.

In this study, administrators also expressed that special education students require support to help close the educational gap that they are experiencing in the inclusive classroom. For example, DeMatthews and Mueller (2022) reported that the success of the entire educational system depends on whether students receive the support they need. However, studies revealed that schools are failing special education students (Blanck, 2019).

#### ***Finding 4***

The fourth finding connected to Research Question 1 was that administrators experienced many challenges that affected their ability to provide effective instructional leadership to teachers in the inclusive classroom. In this study administrators stated that the lack of time due to their heavy workload was a major obstacle that affected their ability to provide effective instructional leadership to teachers in the inclusive classroom. For example, McBrayer et al. (2018), interviewed school leaders who reported that principals spent most of their time working on other responsibilities other than teaching and learning.

Another challenge that administrators in this study reported facing was the fixed mindset and biases of teachers regarding special education and inclusion. Administrators expressed having difficulty working with teachers who were not open to changing their practice. My study's findings confirmed those of Stites et al. (2018), who found that general education teachers lacked a coherent understanding of inclusion. For this reason, Manrique et al. (2019) expressed that it is urgent to prepare schools for inclusion.

### **Findings Related to Research Question 2**

In addressing Research Question 2, I focused on the teachers' experiences and perceptions of their administrators' instructional leadership in the inclusive classroom. I identified findings specifically aligned with Research Question 2. The findings tied to Research Question 2 confirm and extend knowledge in this discipline when compared to the studies discussed in Chapter 2.

#### ***Finding 5***

The fifth finding connected to Research Question 2 was that although teachers were supported by their administrators, they experienced many challenges teaching in the inclusive classroom. In this study, teachers stated that they can talk to their administrators; they receive feedback from them, and they receive resources from them to support students in the classroom. The findings from my study were not in agreement with those of Sam (2021), who reported that teachers had a lack of communication with their principals, which resulted in the lack of ability to meet their responsibilities.

In my study, teachers also shared that although they received support from their administrators, they still had challenges teaching in the inclusive classroom. First,

teachers reported that they did not believe they had enough special education knowledge to meet the needs of their special education students. My study's findings confirmed those of Maggin et al. (2020), who interviewed teachers and administrators and found that general educators and administrators often lack knowledge of special education practice and policy. Similarly, Stites et al. (2018) interviewed teachers and found that teachers lacked a coherent understanding of inclusion and perceived themselves as needing additional development to be fully prepared to teach in an inclusive setting.

In addition, teachers also reported that behavior problems are a challenge because they don't have the resources in the classroom to support the students. My study's findings confirmed those of Yell et al. (2020), who reported that special education students with behavioral problems could cause class disruptions that not only hinder the learning of the special education student but the education of the other children. In addition, Butrymowicz and Mader (2018) stated that when districts lack resources and support needed in the inclusive classroom; it causes students more harm than good.

### ***Finding 6***

The sixth finding connected to Research Question 2 was that teachers have many difficulties teaching in inclusive classroom. First, teachers reported that teaching in the inclusive classroom was challenging due to having to differentiate instruction to meet all the different needs and abilities of the students. My study's findings supported those of Copeland and Griffin (2021), who expressed teachers had difficulty with differentiating instruction in inclusive classrooms, which resulted in denying literacy or math instruction to special education students or using instructional methods that did not meet their

learning needs. Next, teachers reported being overwhelmed due to all the demands in the inclusive learning environment. In addition, my findings confirmed those of Cormier et al. (2022), who surveyed teachers and found that teachers were stressed, which is causing a high turnover rate, early retirement, or resignation from the field of education.

### ***Finding 7***

The seventh finding connected to Research Question 2 was that teachers were provided with a wide range of instructional support to assist with meeting the needs of their students in the inclusive classroom. First, teachers agreed that professional development was effective support provided by their administrators. My study's findings were not in agreement with those of Cavendish et al. (2020), who interviewed teachers who reported that professional development is one of the key factors that affect successful implementation of new practices; however, there was a lack of relevant professional learning opportunities provided within their schools to teachers in special education. Next, teachers also expressed during the interviews that feedback was an effective support from their administrators. My study's findings confirmed those of Kozleski and Choi (2018), who interviewed teachers and found that teachers' instructional practice improved when school leaders used data to inform staff of their progress and provide next steps for improvement.

### **Summary of Findings**

The major findings of this study included a wide range of support and resources provided to teachers by administrators, barriers and challenges hindering administrators from providing instructional leadership to teachers, and teachers receiving support but

still having challenges in the inclusive classroom. As I examined the insight administrators and teachers gave concerning the perceptions and experiences of instructional leadership implemented by school administrators in the inclusive classroom, it became clear that although there were instructional leadership practices evident in the schools, administrators and teachers still experienced struggles and challenges in the inclusive setting. Although there were many similarities between the administrator responses and the teacher responses, there were also clear differences that were specific to individual school sites.

Regarding the support administrators provided teachers, there were similarities between the two data sources. Both teachers and administrators agreed that administrators provided a wide range of support to teachers such as feedback, professional development, assistance with lesson planning, and behavior strategies. However, teachers reported that although they received support from their administrators, they still had challenges and struggled teaching in the inclusive setting. In addition, some differences between administrators and teachers included the effectiveness of the instructional support received. Although administrators believed that the instructional support provided were effective, teachers, however, believed that the support were not enough to support the challenges and demands they were experiencing in the inclusive classroom. Both sources agreed, however, they believed the instructional support provided were not done on a consistent basis due to the high demand of role of the administrator. My study's findings confirmed those of Sebastian and Allensworth (2019). These authors analyzed teacher and student survey data from the Chicago Consortium and Chicago Public School

administrative records and found that principals spent the majority of their time on responsibilities not directly related to student learning. In addition, both administrators and teachers agreed that they need more knowledge for a successful inclusion school. Previous research also reported similar findings that general educators and administrators often lacked knowledge of special education practice and policy (Maggin et al., 2020; Stites et al., 2018).

### **Limitations of the Study**

I identified several limitations within this basic qualitative study. First, due to the current pandemic, the coronavirus disease, interviews were conducted remotely in lieu of in person. Second, the inclusion criteria for participation called for elementary administrators and teachers with at least 1 year of experience working with special education students in an inclusive setting. The participants were selected on a voluntary basis. Last, I used a small sample size including three administrators and seven teachers who worked in an inclusive school setting. Therefore, the sample size and inclusion criteria could limit transferability of the study.

### **Recommendations**

The findings of this study support and extend existing research on the instructional leadership of administrators of teachers in the inclusive classroom. In this study, I focused on administrators' and teachers' experiences and perceptions regarding administrators' instructional leadership for teachers in the inclusive classroom, a topic about which there is a gap in the practice. Current research also support the problem that

administrators are struggling to provide instructional leadership for teachers in the inclusive classroom (Billingsley et al., 2018).

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The instructional leadership role of administrators is essential to the academic success of schools (Davis & Boudreaux, 2019). However, administrators in my study stated they were struggling to provide instructional leadership to teachers in the inclusive classroom. Future research could be conducted to understand further administrators' and teachers' experiences and perceptions regarding administrators' instructional leadership for teachers in the inclusive classroom. I developed the following recommendations for future research:

The first recommendation for future research is to expand the participants in the study to include parents and district level leaders to provide a broader insight into the instructional leadership practices that affect student achievement. The second recommendation for future research is to conduct a similar study at the middle and high school level. The purpose of the recommendation is to determine if middle and high school administrators and teachers have similar perspectives and experiences of instructional leadership of administrators for teachers in inclusive settings.

The last recommendation for future research is to conduct research using a larger sample size including subjects nationwide. This recommendation could address one limitation of this study which was the small sample size of 10 participants. Also, including participants nationwide could give readers different perspectives of administrators and teachers from different school districts across the United States.

### **Recommendations for Practice Reform**

Through interviews with elementary school administrators and teachers, I was able to identify seven themes. From these seven themes, I developed the following recommendations for school administrators and teachers in inclusive settings:

- Administrators and teachers should be provided with special education courses included in their certification programs.
- Inclusive schools need access to additional personnel resources to help support teachers and students in the inclusive classroom.
- Inclusive schools need access to additional funding for resources in inclusive schools.
- Professional development on inclusive practices should be a consistent component of a school district's training program for teachers in inclusive settings.
- Professional development on instructional leadership practices should be a consistent component of a school district's training program for administrators in inclusive settings.
- Teachers in inclusive classrooms would benefit from additional planning time in order to differentiate instruction, review IEPs, collaborate with special education teachers, and reflect on teaching.
- Administrators should prioritize time spent on instructional leadership versus managerial tasks.

By implementing these recommendations, administrators could provide ongoing instructional leadership to teachers in the inclusive classroom. Next, teachers could have the support needed to effectively instruct students in the inclusive classroom. Additionally, educational policymakers could use these suggestions to support school districts with inclusion best practices.

### **Implications**

This basic qualitative study contributed to research about administrators' and teachers' experiences and perceptions of administrators' instructional leadership of teachers in the inclusive classroom. The findings from this study can promote social change by potentially providing administrators with information regarding the value of instructional leadership and the effect instructional leadership has on teaching and learning in the inclusive classroom. School administrators may also use the findings from this study to improve the support they provide to general education teachers in order to implement instructional best practices in the inclusive classroom. It could also provide the necessary evidence to make a positive and lasting impact on the teaching and learning of students in inclusive classes. Thus, social change may occur by improving the quality of instruction for special education students in the general education classroom.

### **Conclusion**

Administrators are struggling to provide instructional leadership for teachers in the inclusive classroom, including providing guidance, supervision, professional development, support, and resources. To better understand administrators' difficulties, I designed a study of administrators' and teachers' experiences and perceptions of

administrators' instructional leadership of teachers in the inclusive classroom. After conducting data analysis from interviews with 10 participants: seven certified elementary general education teachers and three elementary administrators, I was able to identify seven themes. The seven themes were as follows: (1) A common belief of administrators was that they provided a wide range of instructional support to teachers in the inclusive classroom; (2) Administrators believed that they must be well-versed and knowledgeable in the area of special education and inclusion; (3) Administrators agreed there was a need for strong instructional leadership in their school community; (4) Administrators believed they experienced many challenges that affected their ability to provide effective instructional leadership to teachers in the inclusive classroom; (5) Teachers believed they were supported by their administrators but also believed they experienced many challenges teaching in the inclusive classroom; (6) Teachers believed that it was very difficult to teach in inclusive classroom settings, and (7) A common belief of teachers was that they were provided with a wide range of instructional support to assist with meeting the needs of their students in the inclusive classroom. By identifying the seven themes, I developed seven recommendations administrators could use to provide ongoing instructional leadership to teachers in the inclusive classroom; teachers could have the support needed to effectively instruct students in the inclusive classroom, and educational policymakers could use these suggestions to support school districts with inclusion best practices.

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## Appendix: Interview Guide

Study Topic: Administrators' and Teachers' Perceptions of Administrators' Instructional Leadership in Special Education.

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview for my doctoral study. My name is Tenesia Crook, and I will be conducting this interview. The purpose of this interview is to further my understanding of the experiences and perceptions of administrators and teachers regarding administrators' instructional leadership of teachers in the inclusive classroom. By participating in this interview, you will assist me in collecting the necessary information associated with my study.

You are invited to participate in this study because your experiences are valuable and will contribute to the study. I want to remind you that your participation in this study is completely voluntary, and any information shared will be kept confidential. You can also stop the interview any time that you feel uncomfortable or no longer wish to participate. Your honesty is greatly appreciated, and any answers you provide will not be looked at negatively.

The duration of this interview will be 40-60 minutes, and with your consent, it will be audio recorded. By recording the interview session, I will be able to effectively transcribe your exact words, thereby assuring greater accuracy in capturing your responses. I will also invite you to look over your interview transcription to confirm your responses once the data are analyzed. To ensure your responses are recorded appropriately, please speak loudly and clearly during the interview.

### **Administrator Interview Questions**

Demographic Question:

1. What certifications and teaching endorsements do you currently hold?
2. State your gender.
3. How long have you been employed in this school district?
4. How long have you been in education?

RQ1: What are elementary school administrators' experiences and perceptions of their instructional leadership for teachers in the inclusive classroom?

1. What does instructional leadership mean to you?
2. How would you describe the instructional leadership in your school?
3. In what ways does your instructional leadership help teachers teaching special education students in the inclusive classroom?
4. How do you apply instructional leadership to support teachers teaching special education students across content curricula?
5. How do you apply instructional leadership to support teachers with classroom management teaching special education students in the inclusive classroom?
6. How have teachers' practices changed from your instructional leadership?
7. What challenges do you face when providing instructional leadership to teachers in inclusive classrooms?
8. How does your instructional leadership assist teachers in providing IEP accommodations?

Demographic Question:

**Teacher Interview Questions**

1. What certifications and teaching endorsements you currently hold?
2. State your gender.
3. How long have you been employed in this school district?
4. How long have you been in education?

RQ2: What are elementary school teachers' experiences and perceptions of their administrators' instructional leadership for teachers in the inclusive classroom?

1. What does instructional leadership mean to you?
2. How would you describe the instructional leadership in your school?
3. In what ways do administrators provide you with support for instructional practice with teaching special education students in the inclusive classroom?
4. How does the instructional leadership provided by the administrators in your school help support behavioral challenges you face in the inclusive classroom?
5. How does the instructional leadership provided by the administrators in your school help to support you teaching special education students across content curricula?
6. How do you benefit from the instructional leadership provided by the administrators in your school?
7. How does the instructional leadership provided by the administrators in your school affect your teaching practices in the inclusive classroom?

8. How does the instructional leadership provided by the administrators in your school assist you in providing IEP accommodations?