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High School Principals Supporting the Academic Achievement of Students With Disabilities

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This is to certify that the doctoral study by

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has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
and that any and all revisions required by
the review committee have been made.

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Abstract

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MA, Goucher College, 2002

BS, University of Maryland Eastern Shore, 1998

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Abstract

In the United States, legislators have created policies to hold school personnel accountable for the academic success of all students. However, many students with disabilities working toward a high school diploma have not demonstrated progress on local or national standardized assessments. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the ways that high school principals in a Mid-Atlantic school district provided leadership practices to support the academic achievement of students with disabilities. Burns and Bass's transformational leadership theory informed this study. Data were collected via semistructured interviews with eight high school principals and a review of archival test data. A priori and open coding were used to distill specifics related to the barriers facing high school principals and the practices they employed to lead school improvement of special education outcomes. Participants identified leadership actions and behaviors aligned with transformational leadership and best practices for overall school improvement. They indicated they needed to address special education support more specifically. Some principals indicated staff needed more capacity to address the needs of special education students; others felt time was the primary barrier because teachers were overwhelmed with paperwork and other tasks. Additional preparation and ongoing training for principals and teachers focused on improving instruction, monitoring, and accountability related to the needs of students with disabilities were desired. These results may encourage positive social change by enhancing how principals support students with special needs and by informing district leaders of ways they can support principals to improve the academic outcomes of students with disabilities.

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this work to my family. To my husband, Tony, without your love, support, and patience, I would not have been able to complete this lifelong goal. To London, thank you for always checking in on my status and continuing to give me motivation to be a role model of what you can accomplish when you put in the hard work. Lastly, to my parents, Drs. Henry and Carolyn Brooks, you were my inspiration. Thank you for always instilling in me the importance of education and the need to always keep working for another goal in life.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), also known as Pub. Law 108-446, required school personnel to educate all students, including students with disabilities, in general education to the maximum extent possible. Enactment of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2001 initiated a dramatic shift in accountability for all students (Aronson et al., 2016). In 2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) strengthened previous legislation mandating that schools provide equity and a focus on the achievement of all student groups (Choi et al., 2019).

Legislation required that students not only have access to the general education curriculum but also make progress and demonstrate their learning through standardized assessments (Davies et al., 2016). The rigorous requirements led to public school concerns about the ability of students to reach such high-stakes goals (Aronson et al., 2016). As schools attempted to meet these mandates, there was a push for inclusive education. Despite efforts to provide instruction to students with disabilities inside the general education environment and improve instructional practices, according to state department of education reports, students with disabilities working toward a high school diploma have shown little academic progress on district and state assessments.

As of 2019, state-level education personnel reported that diploma-seeking students with disabilities in a large urban district in a Mid-Atlantic state had made little to no progress toward academic proficiency on the required reading and mathematics high school state assessments in the past 5 years. Strong instructional leadership skills are critical to school and student productivity, and there has been agreement among

researchers that improvements in school leader preparation are needed to improve the outcomes for students with disabilities (Cetin & Kinik, 2016; Dutta & Sahney, 2016; Esposito et al., 2019; Jambo & Hongde, 2020; Lynch, 2016). There has been a gap in practice and the literature on leadership effectiveness in addressing academic achievement, specifically for students with disabilities (Quin et al., 2015; Wu et al., 2020), and the need to understand the ways that high school principals have provided leadership to support the academic achievement of students with disabilities (Cetin & Kinik, 2016). To meet the needs of all students and improve the school outcomes of students with disabilities, an enhanced focus on the academic achievement of students with disabilities must be implemented through effective leadership.

Closing the achievement gap for students with disabilities by improving positive outcomes will develop social change for students with disabilities by increasing postsecondary outcomes and community productivity (Beard, 2018). Through this study, I identified the direct and indirect leadership practices of high school principals to improve the academic outcomes of students with disabilities and guide improvements in principal preparation around evidence-based practices (EBPs) to support and encourage access and opportunity for students with disabilities. I provided valuable information on the barriers faced by high school principals that might be useful in determining how district-level leadership can support high school principals in improving the academic achievement of students with disabilities.

This chapter provides information about the problem and purpose, as guided by the investigation into leadership practices implemented by high school principals to

demonstrate academic achievement proficiency through state assessments for students with disabilities. Two research questions (RQs) framed this case study to investigate the implementation of and barriers to leadership practices that a sample of high school principals faced in improving the academic achievement of students with disabilities. The conceptual framework of transformational leadership, as defined by Bass in 1985, guided this study. I used a qualitative case study as the methodology for conducting interviews with eight high school principals employed in a large urban district. This chapter also presents information about the key definitions, assumptions and limitations, and significance of this study.

Background

The U.S. Department of Education (USDoE, n.d.) estimated that in the 2017–2018 school year, 13.7% of public school students received special education services. Teachers provide direct instruction to students, but administrators' leadership styles contribute to the instructional practices in schools and districts (Roberts et al., 2018). The National Council for Disability found that "when school leaders have a vision and commitment to increasing expectations for students with disabilities, teachers hold similar views" (as cited in Esposito et al., 2019, p. 46).

School administration play a vital role in teaching and learning, and the leadership styles of principals contribute to the instructional improvement of all students, including students with disabilities. School leadership helps to define and foster a culture of inclusion and sets high expectations for all students (Esposito et al., 2019). Day et al. (2016) asserted that leadership values, qualities, and strategies are defining qualities that

can explain variations in student outcomes among various schools. Researchers such as Day et al. and Esposito et al. (2019) have found that school leadership is one of the most important factors to student outcomes; however, there has been a lack of understanding of the ways that school leaders directly influence the outcomes of high school special education students. Although these researchers have identified the importance of leadership, outcomes have shown that students with disabilities are not performing, despite renewed leadership accountability for student outcomes.

Given the federal mandates at the time of this study that ensured the success of all students, there also is more emphasis on the accountability of school leaders to focus on the achievement of special education students (Theoharis et al., 2016). ESSA, enacted in 2015, provided funding for school leadership, specifically recruitment, preparation, and professional development, to support school leadership and improve current practices (Young et al., 2017). Leadership training, which has primarily focused on academics, has lacked courses and experiences related to students with disabilities (Aronson et al., 2016).

Trend data from the state department of education report card has shown an achievement gap between students with disabilities and students who do not have disabilities at the state and district levels. Specifically, data from a large urban district in a Mid-Atlantic state have shown that students with disabilities working toward a high school diploma have not met proficiency rates for the last 5 years. However, students with disabilities have shown improvement when meaningfully included in the general education classroom (Choi et al., 2020).

High school principals have addressed the mandated district initiatives started in 2015 to increase inclusive opportunities for students with disabilities through flexible master scheduling. However, despite these efforts to increase access to the general education curriculum by providing instruction to students with disabilities inside the general education environment, data have shown no improvement on state assessment results. From 2014 to 2019, special education students demonstrated the lowest possible percentage of proficiency at less than or equal to 5% in Algebra I and Grade 10 Reading/English Language Arts. In contrast, students without disabilities met proficiency on average of 14% in Algebra I and 28% in the Grade 10 Reading/English Language Arts.

Through this qualitative study, I built upon the current research in the field of educational leadership with an emphasis on how principals can meet the needs of students with disabilities. I gained an understanding of the leadership practices that are essential to prepare leaders to support schools and improve outcomes for all students, specifically students with disabilities. Increasing the focus on the academic performance of students in special education can improve overall school outcomes.

Problem Statement

The underlying issue that led to this study is the continuing gap in the achievement levels of students with disabilities who are working toward a high school diploma. There has been a gap in practice and the research literature identifying the ways that high school principals' leadership practices support the academic achievement of students with disabilities. The problem addressed in the study was the lack of

understanding of the leadership practices that a sample of eight principals identified as they dealt with the challenges of supporting students with disabilities to improve their academic achievement.

Public school personnel in a state in the Mid-Atlantic serve more than 95,000 students with disabilities. In 2019, 8% of students with disabilities in the state met proficiency in Grade 10 Reading/English Language Arts; in comparison, 43% of all Grade 10 students met proficiency. In Algebra I, approximately 4% of students with disabilities met the proficiency standard, whereas 27% of all Algebra I students met proficiency. Although these results demonstrated an achievement gap, the state results showed a level of some proficiency for students with disabilities across the state.

In contrast, the large district that was the focus of this study serves approximately 15,000 special education students and has demonstrated the lowest possible state proficiency level at less than or equal to 5% in Grade 10 Reading/English Language Arts and Algebra I. According to state reports, this rating indicates that percentages for the category are less than or equal to 5% and the corresponding counts have been suppressed to prevent identifying specific students.

Even though progress has been made in serving students with disabilities, much work remains to address the achievement gaps and lack of progress shown on state assessments. In the U.S. Supreme Court decision of *Endrew F v. Douglass Count School District* (as cited in Esposito et al., 2019), schools received the clear message that students with disabilities must get more than "de minimus," or trivial benefits. This court ruling also pointed out the low expectations that schools have for students with

disabilities (Fuchs et al., 2018). Students may be demonstrating benefits on their

individualized educational programs (IEPs), but they are not demonstrating proficiency to

meet the standards outlined by legislation. There has been no evidence that legislative

policies have improved learning or have closed achievement gaps for students, so

concerns linger that the demands and pressures are unrealistic for special education

populations (Castro-Villarreal & Nichols, 2016).

During this study, the expectations remained that all students had to show

proficiency on state high school assessments in reading and mathematics if they were

working toward a high school diploma. Lewis et al. (2016) indicated that student

achievement has shown an increase when school leaders are committed to developing a

culture of improvement and collaboration; therefore, I conducted this study to investigate

the ways that school leaders can help in this process. I explored the leadership practices

that a sample of eight principals thought influenced the achievement of students with

disabilities.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the ways that a sample

of eight high school principals in a Mid-Atlantic school district provided leadership

practices to support the academic achievement of students with disabilities. Specifically, I

explored the ways that practicing high school principals described their leadership

practices and challenges when working to support academic achievement, particularly

when supporting students with disabilities. An analysis of the interview responses, along

with archived school assessment data, assisted in exploring the ways that high school principals thought their leadership practices influenced student outcomes.

Through this study, principal preparation programs and continual leadership development focused on best leadership practices specific to the ways that leaders engaged with the curriculum and instruction, as well as program development and support of special education teachers to improve the academic outcomes of students with disabilities. I believed that there was a need to understand the barriers that high school principals faced and the protocols and tools that needed to be developed by central office administration to help to train principals to serve and meet the needs of their special education student populations. The research paradigm for this research was constructivism, which does not assume a single reality (Burkholder et al., 2016). Reality and truth can change based on individuals' experience and interactions. I investigated the reality of principals' experiences and the ways that their day-to-day behaviors influenced their truths about school leadership related to improving outcomes for students with disabilities.

Research Questions

I designed the two RQs to investigate the challenges that eight high school principals faced in supporting the academic achievement of students with disabilities.

RQ1: How do high school principals describe their leadership practices used to support the academic achievement for students with disabilities?

RQ2: What challenges do principals face in supporting the academic achievement of students with disabilities?

Conceptual Framework

After passage of NCLB in 2001, the role of principal shifted from that of manager and primary disciplinarian to that of instructional leader. Principals play an essential role in advancing academic achievement by having high expectations for all students (Esposito et al., 2019). For years, leadership practices have been found to be critical to students' academic success (Cetin & Kinik, 2016). Specifically, school leadership that improves the school climate has demonstrated gains in student academic performance (Sebastian & Allensworth, 2019). To review those leadership strategies, the framework for this study was informed by Bass's (1985) transformational leadership based on the influence of leaders on followers.

Bass's (1985) framework identified four domains to describe transformational leadership: (a) idealized influence, (b) inspirational motivation, (c) intellectual stimulation, and (d) individualized consideration. Transformational leadership focuses on a style of leadership wanting change. Through these four leadership domains, the followers become leaders themselves in hopes of accomplishing the desired change (Baptiste, 2019). Through the design of the interview questions (see Appendix), I identified the practices that a sample of eight high school principals implemented to support the academic achievement of students with disabilities and to find out how these practices fit into the domains of transformational leadership. I added instructional leadership to the framework. I provide more details about this leadership style in Chapter 2.

Nature of the Study

A qualitative case study design guided this research, which focused on the leadership practices of eight high school principals to support the academic achievement of students with disabilities. I sought to discover what the principals experienced in their schools and what the leadership practices that were implemented meant to the academic achievement of students with disabilities. I used purposeful sampling to invite high school principals in the identified district to join the study. My goal was to receive participation from eight principals. Each school had one principal and additional assistant principals on the leadership team. For this study, I interviewed only the principals of the schools. I used semistructured interviews to obtain responses from the principals. Thematic analysis was used to identify themes and patterns. In addition to the interviews, I used archived school assessment data to explore any increase or decline in academic achievement. I reviewed published school improvement plans to determine whether the school plans identified a focus on achievement for students with disabilities. I designed a study to ensure the confidentiality of the participants and that all ethical standards were met.

Definitions

Some terms used throughout this study required specific clarifications.

Achievement gap: when a subgroup of students outperforms another subgroup in academic achievement, demonstrating underperformance of a particular subgroup (Hung et al., 2020). I examined the pattern of achievement gap specific to the subgroups of

students with disabilities working toward a high school diploma and students without
disabilities.

Evidence-based practices (*EBPs*): strategies supported by systematic research that
demonstrates effectiveness in the implementation to produce learning outcomes (Spooner
et al., 2017). Although teachers often implement instructional practices, leaders can
influence and emphasize the selected EBPs that can affect student performance (Lynch,
2016). Research has also described various leaders' practices that can influence student
achievement (Hitt & Tucker, 2016). For this study, instructional EBPs were used in
relation to teachers; leadership practices were related to leaders' implementation. Both of
these terms could still be EBPs.

Inclusion: Students with disabilities were required to be included with
nondisabled peers to the extent possible by legislative policy. Inclusion means being
included in a group, specifically within a heterogeneous general education setting
(Theoharis et al., 2016). This study focused on students with various disabilities included
in the general education working toward a high school diploma.

Assumptions

I assumed that meeting proficiency levels for students with disabilities on state
assessments was challenging for many students with disabilities, despite some increases
in achievement with policy mandates (Aronson et al., 2016). These unreasonable
demands caused leadership pressures and resulted in a focus and reliance on single test
scores (Castro-Villarreal & Nichols, 2016). I also assumed that the principals in the study
were challenged to meet the needs of larger subgroups who were not performing with

success while developing improvement plans and focusing on students with disabilities, who may only have accounted for a small segment of the student population. Because the principals were challenged to meet the needs of many subgroups, another assumption was that the principals' reality of the effectiveness of their leadership skills was subjective and could have been shaped by their experiences. I also assumed that the principals would be forthcoming and honest when describing their experiences and instructional practices related to educating students with disabilities and discussing the obstacles that they, the principals, faced.

Scope and Delimitations

I focused on exploring the perceptions of eight high school principals of their leadership practices that influenced the academic achievement of students with disabilities. Because the data used in the study were state assessments taken by diploma-seeking students, only data from students with various disabilities who were working toward a high school diploma were used in this study. I conducted the study in an urban district in the Mid-Atlantic area of the United States with eight high school principals. The interviews were conducted through videoconferencing using Zoom (https://zoom.us/) and were recorded to assist in transcribing the interview responses as well as coding. The principals had to have completed at least 3 full years at their current schools, which limited the pool of potential participants because, across the school district, there were a limited number of high school principals with more than 5 years of experience at their current schools.

Delimitations are choices that researchers make to narrow the scope of their studies (Burkholder et al., 2016). This study was limited to including only principals from one Mid-Atlantic district. Despite students with disabilities not performing at proficiency level, the district was not demonstrating proficiency rates at a level comparable to that of the rest of the state. After the selection of principals, there was some variation in special education performance that demonstrated that some schools may have been outperforming the district results. To address this delimitation, I gathered data for each school's performance to identify leadership practices that resulted in improved scores. I also explored successful and unsuccessful practices that may have influenced the achievement of special education students to address this delimitation and the low performance across the district. As a district leader, I work collaboratively with all high school principals in some aspect; therefore, I had working relationships with all of the participants. To decrease any biases while conducting interviews, I recorded the interviews and reviewed the videoconference transcriptions of the interview responses.

Limitations

There are approximately 20 neighborhood high schools in the district that was the focus of this study. Of those schools, more than 50% of the principals have had less than 3 years of experience at their schools. A purposeful sample selection process was used to address this limitation, and an established criterion excluded any first- or second-year principals. Because of the frequent turnover in school leadership, the pool of principals for selection was limited, so third-year principals were included. Another limitation was the diversity of staff and students. According to state reports, the district serves a

population that is about half African American and one-third Hispanic. The principals serving as leaders in these neighborhood high schools are 95% African American.

Significance

This study addressed the gap in the practice and understanding of the ways that high school principals implemented leadership practices to support underperforming subgroups, specifically students with disabilities. Data patterns were consistent at the state and district levels, demonstrating an achievement gap between students with disabilities and students without disabilities. The achievement gap has been used to determine whether students with disabilities have been accessing the general education curriculum and have been provided with the support and services required to succeed (Gilmour et al., 2019). To meet the needs of all students and improve school outcomes for students with disabilities, school personnel need to develop specific systems and structures with an enhanced focus on student achievement for all students through effective leadership.

The results of this study may contribute to positive social change by determining what effective leadership practices high school principals were not implementing. Effective practices were identified that other principals could implement and that could guide training for new principals on ways to support the needs of students with disabilities. I provided useful information on the challenges that a sample of eight high school principals faced to help determine how district-level leadership could better support building principals to improve outcomes for students with disabilities.

Summary

Leadership is a key factor in determining school success. Using the responses from the high school principals and placing them in the framework of transformational leadership allowed me to conduct a more in-depth investigation of EBPs that could improve the academic achievement of students with disabilities. Understanding the principals' perceptions and the ways that they supported the needs of the teachers and students may guide district leaders to prepare future principals to be successful in promoting the achievement of all students, specifically those with disabilities. This qualitative case study provided insight into the focus on students with disabilities to determine what barriers required district support to overcome. In Chapter 2, the literature review includes details about the literature search strategies, conceptual framework, and key variables supporting this case study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The problem that I addressed was the lack of understanding of the leadership practices principals have used as they dealt with the challenges of supporting students with disabilities to improve academic achievement. Despite all the legislation to improve outcomes for students with disabilities, no data have shown that postgraduation outcomes and the quality of life of students with disabilities have been improving (Choi et al., 2020). Allen et al. (2015) discerned ways that the efforts of school administrators could be effective in closing the achievement gap. However, research has been inconclusive, and evidence has been lacking on the connection between students' academic achievement and administrative leadership.

Studies of more than 180 schools have identified a connection between school leadership, specifically principals, and students' learning (Day et al., 2016). Cansoy (2019) concurred that better student outcomes happen when leaders focus on leading instruction and having cohesive staff members. Dutta and Sahney (2016) indicated the principal behaviors do not correlate directly to student achievement instead, their research found an indirect effect on principal behaviors on maintaining teacher satisfaction. Allen et al. (2015) specifically looked at transformational leadership and determined that insufficient evidence relating to student achievement existed. Schulze and Boscardin (2018) agreed with this understanding that despite direct effects to improve instruction, the collaboration with teachers created job satisfaction that increased student achievement.

Although there has been controversy about the influence of leadership, the number of studies specifically on the leadership practices or styles to create positive change and increase students' achievement has been limited (Anderson, 2017; Quin et al., 2015). Schools continue to face incredible accountability to demonstrate student achievement at the local, state, and federal levels (Anderson, 2017). School leadership can create a culture of inclusion and set high expectations for all students, including the achievement of students with disabilities (Esposito et al., 2019).

Enacted legislation has mandated higher expectations for all students over the years; however, it was not until the 2017 U.S. Supreme Court decision of *Endrew F v. Douglass Count School District* (as cited in Fuchs et al., 2018) that there was a focus on the poor performance of students with disabilities. Fuchs et al. (2018) described the poor performance and found that students with learning disabilities performed on average 3 years behind grade level in reading and mathematics. This poor performance brought an enhanced focus on improving the academic achievement of students with disabilities. This focus shifted to building leadership that could affect the outcomes of students with disabilities. However, a gap in practice and the literature regarding the ways that high school principals' leadership behaviors can support this effort remains. This chapter includes the key terms used in the library databases and search engines to support the research.

Literature Search Strategy

I retrieved the literature for this study through the Walden Library. I used search engines such as Google Scholar, Sage, Eric, and ProQuest to find peer-reviewed articles

within specific word search criteria. I included relevant studies and articles published within the last 5 years to support the conceptual framework around transformational leadership. Key terms used during the search were *transformational leadership*, *special education leadership*, *special education achievement*, *impact of leadership on student achievement and inclusion*, and *principal preparation*.

Conceptual Framework

Although there has been debate about the influence of leadership on students' academic achievement, there have also been inquiries about which leadership style is the most effective for school leaders. Research on the effects of leadership models on student achievement has been "ambiguous and inconsistent" (Wu et al., 2020, p. 316). Instructional leadership has shown effectiveness in many successful schools where the leaders have focused on teaching and learning and evaluating teacher effectiveness (Makgato & Mudzanani, 2019; Wu et al., 2020). Although instructional leadership has demonstrated positive effects, data have shown a stronger link between leadership and student achievement when leadership has promoted motivation (Jambo & Hongde, 2020). The term *transformational leadership* was coined in Burns (1978), who asserted that leaders' effectiveness is based on their ability to create social change. Burns's (1978) work defined leadership as having two highly distinctive leadership styles: transformational and transactional. Transactional leaders use specific agreements to exchange something of value with their followers, whereas transformational leaders inspire and motivate their followers (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Stewart, 2006).

Bass (1985) discussed the differences between transactional and transformational leadership to explain the ways that leaders can improve the productivity and achievement levels of their organizations. Bass (1985) examined the previous work of Burns and expanded the transformational theory by looking at the leadership styles in business, other agencies, and the military. Transformational leadership was the conceptual framework explored throughout this case study to understand the leadership behaviors of principals that influenced the academic achievement of students with disabilities. Bass's expansion of transformational leadership in 1985 was one of the most significant educational models to advance leadership in the classroom (Anderson, 2017). Although Bass's theory looked at both transformational and transactional leadership styles, transformational leadership was the focus of the literature review and theme development in my study.

While Bass was exploring the ways that transformational and transactional leadership built upon one another, he also distinguished between managers and leaders (Stewart, 2006). Fayol developed the four functions of management: planning, organizing, leading, and controlling (as cited in Conkright, 2015). Using these four management functions, school leaders must plan visions that align with procedures, organize resources and staff, lead through motivation toward a shared goal, and control through evaluations of teachers and initiatives (Conkright, 2015). Leadership competencies are one component of management functions.

Not all managers have good leadership competencies, and not all leaders have management qualities. Valentine and Prater (2011) asserted that even though many

leadership factors are involved in being successful principals, effective high school principals still need a foundation of strong day-to-day managerial skills. Hitt and Tucker (2016) confirmed that principals must have knowledge of curriculum and instruction and that they must have organizational management skills. Bass (1985) discussed Zaleznik's (1983) work of mangers who display transactional leadership and transformational leadership at different times and levels. Stewart (2006) reviewed the literature from Zaleznik's (1992) article describing the ways that managers and leaders need to succeed, despite having different roles. While there are distinct differences in the role of managers, transactional, and transformational leaders, there is overlap in reaching a common goal.

Transformational Leadership

Bass's (1985) transformational model holds four domains: charisma or idealized influence, inspiration motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. Leaders using these concepts work to gain the trust and confidence of employees to inspire them to work for the good of the group (Bass, 1990; Shatzer et al., 2014). The ideas of transformational leaders create an environment where there is a collective goal to improve (Hitt & Tucker, 2016). Each component of transformational leadership explores an aspect of leaders that could contribute to their influence on followers.

Charisma, or Idealized Influence

The component of charisma, also known as idealized influence, focuses on leaders' relationships with followers. Leaders must gain a sense of trust and develop respect from those whom they lead (Baptiste, 2019). Idealized influence has been

identified as one of the core qualities of transformational leaders "which castes a strong impact on the followers and they share/own the higher objectives" (Munir & Aboidullah, 2018, p. 102). Leaders with charisma serve as role models and are admired for behaving in accordance with their values (Allen et al., 2015; Cetin & Kinik, 2016). Once leaders have developed a sense of trust, they can influence behaviors and have the power to convince staff that they can take risks and accomplish anything that they set out to do (Bass, 1990; Cetin & Kinik, 2016). Allen et al. (2015) found a statistically significant influence on school climate when principals' moral and ethical behaviors influence the purpose of goals developed through respect toward and shared power with teachers.

A collection of research reviewed by McCarley et al. (2016) found that transformational behaviors led to climates where teachers felt supported. When teachers are faced with the overwhelming tasks of instructing students at various levels and upholding the guidelines established in policies, the leaders must provide a relationship of trust for teachers to feel safe and valued. The feeling of confidence allowed teachers to feel empowered and have a sense of comfort in their work that led to job satisfaction.

Inspiration Motivation

Inspiration motivation gives a sense of meaning to the work (Baptiste, 2019). Empowering teachers can have a positive influence on the workplace climate and motivate others to work toward goals that everyone rallies around to accomplish (Allen et al., 2015). When there are many competing priorities in the school setting, there is a need to have leaders whom one can trust to lead and develop a vision for the schools. A vision

needs to be clearly articulated and focused on the school while celebrating the accomplishments along the way (Mombourquette, 2017).

School leaders must develop a vision of high expectations for all students' academic success (Yeigh et al., 2019). Transformational leaders strive to have others carry out those priorities beyond their expectations that align with the goals and vision (Supriyanto et al., 2020). Leaders using inspirational motivation motivate others and challenge followers to be excited about the future and working toward common goals (Cetin & Kinik, 2016). The goal is to have students with disabilities achieve at the same levels as peers who are not disabled. Without motivation to reach the high expectations of academic success, teachers and students will continue to work at their current levels. Transformational leaders employ behaviors that motivate and inspire teachers to strive for goals beyond expectations (McCarley et al., 2016). Allen et al. (2015) contributed to finding a statistically significant relationship between inspirational motivation and school climate. When teachers are encouraged and optimistic in the vision, they work to perform and met expectations.

Intellectual Stimulation

Transformational leaders gather new ideas and work with followers to be creative in developing ideas for change without fear of failure or punishment (Baptiste, 2019). Having teachers and staff revisit problems to create alternative solutions or try new ideas is key to leaders stimulating followers (Allen et al., 2015; Cetin & Kinik, 2016). When challenging others to think of solutions and strategies to problem solve, the results are continued trust and satisfaction from staff (Balwant et al., 2019). Although evidence-

based strategies that influence learning exist, there has been an ongoing question of addressing the academic achievement of underperforming groups. Leaders must become creative and work with teachers to develop new ways to address the needs of all learners. Even though researchers have continued to investigate the lack of evidence that principals have been able to improve the academic outcomes of students with disabilities, leaders can still create solutions to meet the needs of their student populations. Allen et al. (2015) found a positive relationship between intellectual stimulation and a positive school climate that encourages and develops teachers' strengths. This positive climate allows teachers to implement new strategies and initiatives (Allen et al., 2015).

Individual Consideration

Understanding ways to support differences in teachers' personalities and instructional strategies are key characteristics of transformational leaders. Teachers feel positivity in their work when they believe that they are valued as partners by the leaders (Allen et al., 2015). New special education teachers are 2.5 times more likely to leave the profession, making it critical for leaders to be intentional in their support to retain special educators (Sweigart & Collins, 2017).

Transformational leaders establish support systems that meet the need of each individual and are aware of each individual's needs (Stewart, 2006). Transformational leaders have interactions as "active" listeners with individuals and are aware of the individual concerns of followers (Cetin & Kinik, 2016). All teachers have strengths and areas in which to grow. Having leaders who are aware of those qualities and place teachers and staff in positions where their talents are used encourages and creates respect.

Understanding and open communication also can help to foster confidence in themselves as followers and leaders (Baptiste, 2019).

Principals have acknowledged the need to build teacher capacity, mentor, and provide professional learning opportunities to teachers. However, principals have reported the limited time available to them to address these needs because of the need to address other nonteaching matters (Yeigh et al., 2019). The four components of transformational leadership are key to the effectiveness of leaders. Goor and Schwenn (1997) shared that leaders must be able to use "collaborative skills such as establishing mutual goals, solving problems, modeling positive attitudes, and building trust" (p. 133). These all encompass the characteristics of effective transformational leaders.

Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire

The four components of idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration are key aspects of transformational leaders, but understanding leaders' specific behaviors is also critical to knowing if and how leaders' behaviors support transformational leadership. Bycio et al. (1995) described Bass's Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ), which examined the behaviors outlined by transformational and transactional leadership theories. The initial questionnaire had multiple statements that were scored on a Likert scale (Stewart, 2006). Researchers have used this MLQ to determine the frequency of behaviors manifested by transformational leaders. The MLQ has been modified over the years to fit more recent research needs, and current questionnaires have as few as 36 items and require about 15 minutes to complete. The MLQ Form 5X measures transformational, transactional, and

passive/avoidant leadership behaviors. Overall scores can be averaged in the four transformational domains (Shatzer et al., 2014). Several researchers have used various versions of the MLQ to determine the statistical variance of transformational leadership and its impact on influence.

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts and Variable

Special Education Achievement

As awareness and advocacy for special education have improved, the number of special education students receiving services in the U.S. public school systems has been increasing continuously (Castro-Villarreal & Nichols, 2016). With the reauthorization of IDEA in 2004 and the 2015 ESSA legislation, schools were required to report outcomes and progress for students with disabilities compared to peers without disabilities (Gilmour et al., 2019). Despite more students being served under IDEA guidelines, students with disabilities have continued to demonstrate a lack of progress by not meeting proficiency standards on state assessments (Fuchs et al., 2018; Gilmour et al., 2019; Lynch, 2016). Gilmour et al. (2019) found a 1.17 standard deviation difference in students with disabilities performing below peers without disabilities. The argument could be made that the goals for students with disabilities to obtain the same proficiency as students without disabilities are unreasonable, given the equally important burden of demonstrated progress on skills-based IEP goals (Aronson et al., 2016; Castro-Villarreal & Nichols, 2016). Even though many researchers have disagreed with the appropriateness of the standards placed on special education students, research has shown that students with disabilities appropriately educated in inclusive settings have

demonstrated higher standardized assessments scores and grades than those students educated in more restrictive environments (Lynch, 2016).

As demonstrated on state and national assessments, an achievement gap ranging from 5 to 58 points has shown that students with disabilities have not accessed the general education curriculum successfully (Gilmour et al., 2019). For the 2016–2017 school year, national data showed that the median percentage for students with disabilities in Grades 3 to 8 and high school who were proficient on math assessments ranged from 6.5 to 22.9%. The USDoE (n.d.) reported that in 2019, the median proficiency on reading assessments ranged from 10% to 18.4%. Although academic achievement is important to show progress, the ultimate goal of schools is to prepare students for college and careers.

An important aspect of special education is to prepare students with disabilities for postsecondary outcomes. Even though achievement is low, data are showing improvements for students graduating with high school diplomas. The USDoE (n.d.) noted that the percentage of students who were receiving special education services and who exited from high school with a regular high school diploma increased from 59% in the 2007–2008 school year to 70.5% in the 2016–2017 school year.
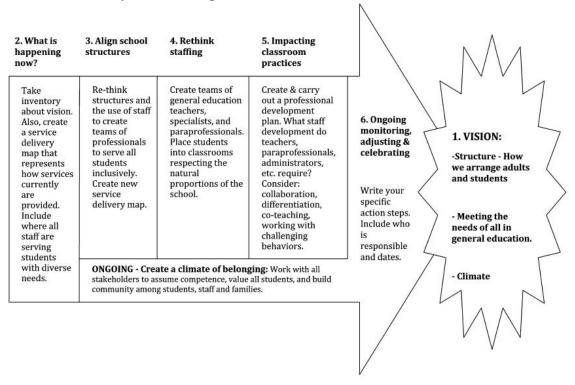
Special Education Inclusion

Passage of IDEA required schools to educate all students, including students with disabilities, in the general education setting to the maximum extent possible (IDEA: Pub. Law 108-446). This legislation required schools to place students with peers without disabilities to the extent possible, also referenced as the least restrictive environment

(Esposito et al., 2019; O'Laughlin & Lindle, 2015). Although data have shown that inclusion is one factor in improving the academic outcomes of students with disabilities, intensive instruction also is needed to address academic achievement (Choi et al., 2020; Fuchs et al., 2018). Having students in more inclusive settings was confirmed with a meta-analysis of 24 studies from 1980 to 2013 showing a significant difference in academic achievement on assessments of students with disabilities included inside general education more than those in more restrictive settings (Oh-Young & Filler, 2015). Theoharis and Causton (2014) reported that every additional hour spent in general education resulted in gains in the academic achievement of students with disabilities. Theoharis and Causton went on to identify a seven-part process for inclusion reform (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Inclusive School Reform Planning Tool

Note: From "Leading Inclusive Reform for Students With Disabilities: A School- and Systemwide Approach," by G. Theoharis & J. Causton, 2014, *Theory Into Practice*, 53(3), p.84 (doi:10.1080/004005841.2014.885808). Reprinted with permission

Leadership Influence on Achievement

Researchers have agreed that school leadership is a key factor in the influence of classroom teachers on students' academic achievement (Beard, 2018; Day et al., 2016; Dutta & Sahney, 2016; Lynch, 2016; Roberts et al., 2018). School leaders are responsible for meeting the academic, social, emotional, and behavioral needs of all students (Jones, 2020). Although school leaders do not provide direct instruction, the culture and climate for high expectations greatly influence the vision and commitment to improving the academic outcomes of students with disabilities (Esposito et al., 2019).

Hallinger completed 30 years of research on the indirect effects of school leaders on student achievement and found that the factors of collaborative learning, structures, and positive culture led to the promotion of motivation, engagement, and achievement (as cited in Day et al., 2016). Schulze and Boscardin (2018) confirmed that principals could improve instruction, students' academic performance, and teachers' job satisfaction by encouraging collaboration with the teachers. Efforts to improve collaboration and professional development cannot happen when there is no shared vision of instruction between teachers and school leaders (Roberts et al., 2018). Dutta and Sahney (2016) found no statistical evidence of a direct impact of leadership on student outcomes; rather, student outcomes are more directly related to having a supportive school climate and culture.

Lewis et al. (2016) confirmed that climate and culture have important roles in higher academic achievement, as demonstrated when students are connected through engagement, motivation, attendance, and a collaborative professional learning community for teachers. Sebastian and Allensworth (2019) pointed out the difficulty linking school leadership to student outcomes because of the complex nature of the role of principal. The need to focus on so many competing priorities makes it difficult to link specific achievements to the leaders, but when schools have a culture that supports high expectations, there are likely to be positive outcome for all student groups.

Research has focused on various leadership models that have been evident in successful schools. Two models in particular that have been reviewed are the instructional and transformational leadership models. In the instructional leadership

model, school leaders focus on educational goals, planning and curriculum, and teacher evaluations (Day et al., 2016). The instructional model requires principals to know evidence-based instructional strategies and effective inclusive practices that best support students with disabilities (Lynch, 2016). A focus of instructional practices is the provision of support for high-quality instruction. Although the instructional model has as many components as the transformational leadership model, one aspect of the support for high-quality instruction is specific to the instructional leadership model (Sebastian et al., 2017). The support of high-quality instruction would include providing professional learning, observing, and monitoring teacher practice (Sebastian & Allensworth, 2019). When school leaders encourage teachers to provide effective instructional practices, there is the potential for increased academic achievement (Lynch, 2016).

School leaders must lead, supervise, and ensure that provisions of special education services are available to students with disabilities (Lyons, 2016; Tudryn et al., 2016). Jones (2020) found that school leaders' involvement in working with students with disabilities was based on their personal beliefs and attitudes toward students with disabilities. Transformational leadership takes a slightly different approach by motivating organizational change for the greater good of the entire school population (Lewis et al., 2016). Transformational leaders work to impact perceptions of school conditions and foster a commitment to change.

Special Education Leadership

School leaders with special education populations must develop a vision for their schools, supervise instruction, demonstrate school improvement, improve achievement,

and ensure compliance with regulations (Sun & Xin, 2020). Despite the many roles required of building principals, there is an added layer of special education responsibilities for students with IEPs. Jones (2020) found that retired principals reported that their involvement often was based on their personal beliefs about students with disabilities. These beliefs and attitudes also influenced the ability of the principals to support the needs of students with disabilities successfully and affect those students in special programs (Goor & Schwenn, 1997). However, when principals had negative attitudes and perceptions of students with disabilities, Goor and Schwenn (1997) found that it hindered the administration of special education.

Although some principals have had little involvement with the regular operations of special education, others have reported feeling unprepared and having little understanding of special education (Billingsley et al., 2018; Sun & Xin, 2020). Despite principals feeling unprepared to work with the needs of students in special education, researchers have agreed that the role of effective principals is critical to enhance instruction for students with disabilities (Billingsley et al., 2018; Lynch, 2016; Lyons, 2016; Sun & Xin, 2020). Effective principals build a vision and commitment among the staff of inclusion and high expectations (Billingsley et al., 2018).

Principal Preparation

School leaders who demonstrate a knowledge of special education have an advantage in supporting the services and programs that serve special education students. This knowledge results in high-quality instructional practices that improve the academic outcomes of students with disabilities (Schulze & Boscardin, 2018). However, principal

preparation programs have not prepared school leaders with the leadership skills to lead successful schools (Quin et al., 2015). Principal preparation programs also have not provided an emphasis on leading schools that have students with disabilities included in the general education population. Programs also have not addressed principals' beliefs that affect their leadership behaviors (Goor & Schwenn, 1997). Additional training is needed for principals to understand the special education population, understand the laws that influence special education services, and understand the multiple roles that principals with students in special education must juggle. Many principals have reported feeling unprepared to create change (Billingsley et al., 2018). The required preparation of principals has been confirmed by previous research that administrators had a knowledge base of the legal implications of IEPs but lacked knowledge about the utilization of best practices and instructional programming for students with disabilities (Roberts et al., 2018).

In some small school districts, special education due process hearing officers have reported having principals testify because there were no central office special education administrators. This testimony highlighted that principals were unaware of the basic special education requirements (Samuels, 2018). Schulze and Boscardin (2018) indicated that "as principals gain expertise and experience, their leadership repertoires evolve" (p. 25). At the time, more than one third of the principals indicated that they had little to no experience in their principal preparation working with students with disabilities. In 2015, there was a report from principals on principal preparation that one-third percentage

dropped. However, four of five principals reported having taken only one course in special education, still limited in their perception of preparation (Samuels, 2018).

Summary and Conclusions

The research has been clear that students with disabilities are still not making sufficient progress, and there has been discourse understanding ways to influence achievement effectively. Fuchs et al. (2018) stated, "Schools fail to provide sufficiently intensive instruction- not because they willfully withhold it, but because they fail to recognize a need for it, and they have lost the know-how to provide it" (p. 129). Although a gap in the literature and practice of ways to support students with disabilities remains, the use of data to recognize the need for change and the strategic planning to provide it are the responsibilities of successful school leaders. Leaders who use the strategies and behaviors from the transformational theory can create a culture of trust and respect that, in working together as a school, they can accomplish to improve outcomes for all students, including students with disabilities. In Chapter 3, I provide an overview of the research methods used to conduct this study, including the research design and rationale, my role as the researcher, methodology, trustworthiness, and ethical procedures.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Mid-Atlantic school district personnel and community members have had a problem understanding the leadership practices that principals have identified when dealing with the challenges of supporting students with disabilities to improve academic achievement. This qualitative case study was an exploration into the ways that practicing high school principals described their leadership practices and challenges when working to support the academic achievement of students with disabilities. In this chapter, I outline the research design and rationale, which defined the study phenomenon; describe my role as the researcher; and detail the methodology I used to conduct this study. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the trustworthiness of the study and the ethical procedures followed to meet all required validity and reliability of research.

Research Design and Rationale

Two RQs guided the study:

- RQ1: How do high school principals describe their leadership practices used to support the academic achievement for students with disabilities?

- RQ2: What challenges do principals face in supporting the academic achievement of students with disabilities?

Many qualitative research designs allow researchers to explore or understand the phenomena under investigation through the RQs. Qualitative research allows researchers to collect words through interviews, observations, and textual artifacts through documents that can be analyzed to establish patterns and themes. The qualitative design of phenomenology can be used to describe the real experiences of the participants;

grounded theory design looks to develop a theory of a process or action (Creswell, 2014). Although both designs are useful in research and have similarities in the analysis process, a case study design was used for this particular study, which focused on high school principals in an identified local district to provide a more in-depth analysis of this district's problem of practice (Creswell, 2014). Burkholder et al. (2016) described the core factor in a case study as one that uses a "bounded" unit that focuses on a particular group, institution, or community (p. 68). Because of the specific nature of this study, use of a case study design was the most appropriate to understand in more detail the practices and actions that a sample of eight high school principals took that influenced the academic achievement of students with disabilities. This qualitative case study focused on a specific district with a problem of practice at the district's high school level. Using a case study design allowed me to focus on the interviews and archival data to provide an in-depth analysis of the district's leadership practices influencing special education achievement (Creswell, 2014; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

Ravitch and Carl's (2016) results supported my rationale for using a qualitative study design because this study was a problem of practice and there was a gap in the literature. The literature guided the research, and as I analyzed the data, the literature helped me clarify the findings to answer the RQs (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Qualitative researchers typically use the naturalistic approach and study participants in their natural setting (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017). Investigating principal leadership helped me to determine how the behaviors and practices fit into the transformational leadership framework.

Role of the Researcher

At the time of this study, I held a state certification in special education for children in kindergarten until they reach the age of 21 years and taught for 10 years prior to taking various roles within special education. I am currently a special education central office employee. I work closely with middle and high school administrators to provide instructional support and programming and to monitor compliance with IDEA and state regulations related to special education students. I provide support to all high schools, but I do not directly work with all high school principals regularly. Rather, I oversee specialists who provide direct support to building administration. I interact directly with principals only when required to address specific concerns or support district initiatives within the schools. In selecting the principals for interviews, I ensured that all participants understood that their participation was voluntary and that their identities would remain confidential. As a central office employee, I work closely with the individuals who supervise principals. I do not supervise principals or have authority over district principals; therefore, any principal who met the selection criterion was invited to participate in the study.

As an administrator of special education, I understand the importance of the role of building principals, who focus on the needs of special education students. Students with disabilities have IEPs, which are legally binding documents, placing schools in possible litigious circumstances when appropriate student progress is not obtained. Strategies that support students with the most needs are oftentimes the same strategies that can help to address the needs of all learners (Theoharis & Causton, 2014). As the

state monitors student progress, the students who could demonstrate the most progress are working several grade levels below. These students often are identified as students with disabilities. After working in special education for many years, I have witnessed the growth that students can make when the appropriate supports are put in place with fidelity. Understanding the connection that leadership can play in providing those supports is critical to unlocking the challenges that schools face.

Methodology

For this case study, I investigated the problem in a large urban district in a Mid-Atlantic state. According to state reports, this district is among the largest districts in the United States. At the time of the study, district personnel served approximately 130,000 students with a high minority population, with about half of the students of African American descent and about one third of Hispanic descent. The special education population (ages 3–21 years) accounted for about 10% of the total student population. For the purposes of this study, I focused on the special education programs at 20 local community high schools. Each of these schools was led by only one principal. Fourteen of the 20 principals met the criteria to join the study. Details about the final sample are provided later in the study.

Participant Selection

I selected the participants from a pool of high school principals who had been working in their current schools for a minimum of 3 years. Although some principals may have had more seniority than others, I expected that after 3 years in their schools, the principals would have implemented some practices to address the low achievement of

students with disabilities. I used purposeful sampling to select individuals specifically because they served as principals in this selected district (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

I sent emails to all eligible principals to gain participant volunteers; I anticipated being able to interview eight to 12 principals. I then sent the selected principals a follow-up email with an overview of the study, clearance from the district to conduct the study, and the consent form. Phone calls were also made as a follow-up to the email for further clarification and verification of the principals' willingness to participate in the study. Based on the responses received for participation, additional recommendations of principal colleagues were not required.

Instrumentation

The primary instrument was the interview guide (see Appendix) that I developed from the Walden University template. I used the interview guide to facilitate the opening, questioning, and closing of the interviews. The interview guide served as a space to capture the notetaking material. I conducted semistructured interviews that allowed interview questioning and follow-up responses (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I used an interview protocol approved by Walden University and the district research office personnel to create consistency and validity in the interview process. I recorded the interviews using Zoom videoconferencing. I used a transcription service to transcribe all interview recordings for data analysis. After receiving the transcribed responses back from the transcription service, I reviewed them for accuracy before giving them to the participants for member checking.

Once the interview transcriptions were completed, I coded them using MAXQDA (https://www.maxqda.com/) coding software to find emergent themes and patterns. Along with the interview data, I also collected archival school and district data from the state report card to compare the achievement data of students with disabilities in each school. The state captures the data and keeps all archival data on the state website available to the public, which provides a foundation for understanding the proficiency levels of students with disabilities. Using the state data provided the same assessment measures over a span of several years. The state provides a yearly report on performance indicators for special education departments with measurable outcomes and archival data. I analyzed these data points along with other data points to determine factors that may have influenced the academic achievement of students with disabilities. I used peer debriefing to ensure the progress of the study. A fellow Walden University doctoral student who has been a special education leader tested the interview guide by reading the questions for clarity and developed responses to answer the RQs. We also conducted a mock interview to monitor the time needed to conduct the interviews with the principals.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

I gathered the names of potential participants from the district website. Once participants were identified, I completed verification of the established criteria using district data and information obtained from each participant. Prior to the initial meetings with the participants, I shared information that summarized the purpose of the study, provided information on the approval process to conduct the study, and advising the participants of the need to respond to the consent electronically. During the first

conversations, we reviewed this information verbally to ensure their willingness for full participation and set mutually agreeable dates and times for the interviews. Before starting the interviews, I again ensured the willingness of the participants to be in the study and then obtained their electronic consent to begin the interview process. Interviews were scheduled for 1 hour each. Additional interviews were not required for follow-up or further information gathering.

Data Collection

Once I received approval from Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB approval #03-12-21-0110887) to begin the research, I scheduled the interviews with the participants via Zoom videoconferences. Interviews were conducted at the participants' preferred locations. They were not conducted in person because of COVID-19 restrictions that occurred during the time of the research. Participants conducted transcription reviews and member checking to ensure the accuracy of their responses prior to my beginning the analysis of their responses to the interview questions. I reviewed the archival state assessment data following the conclusion of all interviews to add information to the participants' responses regarding their specific schools.

Data Analysis Plan

I conducted the interviews via the Zoom videoconference platform. I recorded the participants' responses to the interview questions using the platform; I also took notes and made reflections during the after the interviews. I used the interview transcriptions to capture any additional notes before beginning the coding process to identify patterns and themes. These patterns helped to develop the themes relevant to the ways that the high

school principals felt that they provided leadership to influence the academic achievement of students with disabilities.

Qualitative research typically uses an inductive approach that provides an understanding of the raw data (Burkholder et al., 2016). An inductive analysis approach allows the data to be synthesized into a summary that connects to the RQs (Thomas, 2003). Coding is assigned to symbolize the data to create further analysis (Saldaña, 2016). I used the interview transcriptions to complete the coding process with multiple coding rounds to do a thematic analysis. The transcriptions were coded using MAXQDA computerized software for assistance.

Archival state academic data available on the state report card website provided trend data for each school. These data included indicators such as state assessment performance by subgroup, attendance, graduation, and other key metrics in rating school performance. I obtained specific school data after confirming principal participation in the study. I examined the emergent themes and the school-specific data to identify any further patterns supporting the behaviors of principals that might have influenced the academic achievement of students with disabilities.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is the assurance level of the results (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Trustworthiness has four components: credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Shenton, 2004). Credibility is the most vital because it determines the level of confidence in the truth of the study. Dependability determines whether the data are stable over time and under different conditions. Confirmability relies on the

consistency of the data specific to study participants' experiences of the phenomena under investigations, and transferability is the usefulness of the data to be transferred to other settings or studies (Connelly, 2016).

Credibility

Trustworthiness of the results is essential for any research to be credible. The internal validity, which establishes credibility, can be implemented through strategies such as triangulation, member checking, multiple coding, discussion of negative cases, peer debriefers, and so on (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 188). While investigating administrators' practices influencing the academic achievement of students with disabilities, there were a few ways to ensure creditability. Data that I collected through interviews included transcription reviews and member checking by having the participants examine the transcriptions to ensure that the information captured reflected the accuracy of their responses. To provide additional credibility to the study, I used peer debriefing throughout the process. I worked with a fellow Walden doctoral student who had previously been a school-based leader in special education to assist in the research progress and limit researcher bias (Burkholder et al., 2016).

Transferability

The participant selection had a range of seniority of high school principals. Researchers may argue that case studies that focus on particular group are not easily transferable, but the poor academic achievement of special education students was a concern affecting many school districts. The leadership practices and behaviors that the principals implemented had an influence on instruction across districts and grade levels.

Using thick descriptions to demonstrate the findings adequately through the interview responses and evidence found in the literature demonstrated the transferability of the study (Burkholder et al., 2016).

Dependability

I used triangulation of multiple data sources from interview responses and school data to build the criteria for trustworthiness (Burkholder et al., 2016). Using notes, interview responses, and the analysis of the school data facilitated the development of the themes and allowed me to keep an audit trail that enhanced the dependability and confirmability of the study (Burkholder et al., 2016; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

Confirmability

At the time of this study, I was a special education administrator. Using an audit trail, peer debriefing, and reflexive journals assisted in reviewing the conclusions and decisions made to ensure confirmability and limit biases as much as possible (Burkholder et al., 2016).

Ethical Procedures

Researchers have the responsibility of ensuring that ethical concerns are considered before conducting their studies. Given that I employed by the district at the time of this study, I knew that it was imperative to ensure that the participants were informed of the research and the data that were used, along with how I would protect their privacy. Participants were aware that all data used outside of their interviews were public data available on the state website to address any ethical concerns about my role as a district special education administrator. IRB approval from Walden University allowed

me to proceed with the study, and approval from district administrators gave me permission to contact school principals. Confidentiality was maintained when reporting all of the results (Burkholder et al., 2016).

Interview data were captured through online Zoom video recordings and any archival data collected directly from the state website. All data were secured through a password-protected folder. The data were not shared, and I loaded them into MAXQDA for coding purposes only. I identified all schools and principals using pseudonyms to ensure the confidentiality of all parties and the district host for the case study.

Summary

The research methods outlined in this chapter met the criteria of qualitative case studies. The review of the qualitative research design, my role as the researcher, and the collection and analysis of the data were explained, along with assurances of the trustworthiness of the study. In Chapter 4, I outline the results as they were related to the RQs. The chapter also includes a more in-depth description of the setting, data collection, data analysis, and evidence of trustworthiness.

Chapter 4: Results

In this qualitative case study I explored the ways that a sample of eight high school principals in a Mid-Atlantic school district provided leadership practices to support the academic achievement of students with disabilities. Specifically, I explored the ways that practicing high school principals described their leadership practices and challenges when working to support academic achievement, particularly when supporting students with disabilities.

Two RQs guided this study:

- RQ1: How do high school principals describe their leadership practices used to support the academic achievement for students with disabilities?

- RQ2: What challenges do principals face in supporting the academic achievement of students with disabilities?

Chapter 4 includes details about the setting of the study, data collection, and data analysis, and the results. The chapter concludes with a summary.

Setting

The setting of this study was a large urban Mid-Atlantic school district. At the time of the study, the district served approximately 130,000 students, with about 10% of the population receiving special education services. During this study, the COVID-19 pandemic affected not only this district but also schools across the world. The district opened for hybrid learning for the first time after 13 months. Principals were faced with the overwhelming task of maintaining appropriate instruction while adhering to Centers for Disease Control and Prevention protocols to ensure the safety of students and staff.

The study was open to 14 high school principals who met the criterion of having a minimum of 3 years of experience as principals at their respective schools. The consenting principals sent emails directly to me, and we selected mutually agreeable dates and times for their virtual interviews. Eight participants, five women and three men, consented to being interviewed. The principals had an average of 7 years of experience. The least amount of experience as a current principal was 4 years, with the most being 14 years. The experience of being administrator was different, with the average administrator experience being 16 years (see Table 1).

Table 1

Participant Pseudonym, Gender, Principal at Current School, Years as Administrator

Participant pseudonym	Gender	Principal at current school	Years as administrator
Teresa	Female	8 years	12 years
Kelly	Female	5 years	15 years
Eric	Male	7 years	17 years
Robert	Male	14 years	24 years
Roxanne	Female	4 years	20 years
Nicholas	Male	5 years	14 years
Margret	Female	4 years	9 years
Terry	Female	6 years	18 years

Data Collection

Eight individual semistructured interviews were conducted using Zoom. The interviews, which comprised five questions and additional probing questions, were scheduled with the participants during mutually agreeable dates and times after their work hours. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes. All interviews were recorded via Zoom and saved on a password-protected drive. I captured notes during each interview using the interview guide. I conducted the interviews over 4 weeks to accommodate the high school principals' preparation for graduations and closure of the

school year. Some principals requested to wait until after graduation, but one principal chose to proceed with the interview prior to the school's graduation. All other participants were interviewed after graduation but while school was still in session. All expectations followed the protocols of the data collection process.

I had created the consent forms for the 14 principals who met the criterion of a minimum of 3 years of experience at their current schools. Eight principals responded with emails of consent. I set up an appointment link for the principals to sign up during a time slot with availability to ensure mutually agreeable dates and times. I used a transcription company, Rev.com (https://www.rev.com/), to transcribe all interview recordings for data analysis.

Data Analysis

After completing the interviews, I used Rev.com transcription services to transcribe all of the interview responses. I then reviewed the transcriptions for accuracy and shared them with the participants and asked for their feedback. I then uploaded the transcriptions into MAXQDA 2020, which supported coding and identifying the most frequently used terms.

I assigned pseudonyms to all of the participants to ensure anonymity. I began by looking at all interview transcriptions and identifying regularly occurring phrases that the participants had stated in terms of actions and behaviors, and barriers (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). This open coding process was done with the support of MAXQDA 2020 by highlighting terms in each transcription. After identifying all of the actions and behaviors, I reviewed the conceptual framework of transformational leadership to see if any actions

and behaviors were specially aligned to the four domains. Based on the first coding cycle, I identified frequent concepts and agreements among the participants (see Tables 2 & 3). Another round of coding allowed me to identify the organization of codes and place them into categories. In the review of the codes and categories, I also gave consideration to the literature review, and categories were aligned with the emergent themes of leadership practices, principal training, and leadership challenges.

Table 2

Conceptual Framework Codes, Categories, and Themes Used in Data Analysis

Codes	Categories	Themes
• Supportive • Accountable • Humble • Culture • Detailed Communication • Democratic • Willing to listen	Charisma/Idealized influence	
• Coplanning, constructing next steps • Collaborate as a team • Rely on experts • Student-focused	Inspirational motivation	
• Allowing opposing opinions • Professional learning • Relying on experts • Learning walks • Informed decision making	Intellectual stimulation	Transformational leadership practices
• Proactively addressing needs • Strategy implementation • Professional learning • Coaching and feedback • Placement consideration	Individual consideration	

Theme 1: Transformational Leadership Practices

Transformational leadership is defined by the four domains that describe successful leadership as idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. These four domains were mentioned in all of the interviews. The participants shared the behaviors and actions that contributed to their leadership style. Hitt and Tucker (2016) asserted that transformational leaders set an environment with a collective goal to improve.

Kelly shared, "I keep my focus on what is best for children." She further went on to discuss the importance of collaboration and using experts to meet the needs of students, but the leadership may differ in the approach to meet student needs.

Terry discussed that she had to advocate for students and ensure that she provided tiered levels of support for everybody, including students, staff, and parents. This focus on student success and support established a school goal to improve outcomes for students.

Margret reported, "A shift that needs to occur is around our support. We have done some work around that and building a culture where teachers feel comfortable or really understand how they can leverage that extra support."

Communication was mentioned frequently in terms of leadership action and behaviors. Three participants emphasized the importance of communication in their leadership style. Robert mentioned that it was important not only to communicate but also to communicate in detail, and Terry shared the importance of "making sure that you are clear and concise in your communication."

Nicholas indicated that communication had to be open with others. Although many leadership behaviors fell under the four domains, the domain discussed by all eight participants was the need for individual consideration. Teresa, Margret, and Nicholas discussed the ways that learning walks supported the need to collect data, provided feedback, and looked at the implementation of strategies. Learning walks allowed the principals, other administrative staff, or teachers to observe in nonevaluative manners where they could build teacher capacity and provide professional learning based on observed teachers' needs. Some participants reported that because of school closures resulting from COVID-19, they had more opportunities to get into the classroom and focus on instructional practices that teachers had been given.

Table 3

Codes, Categories, and Themes Used in Data Analysis

Codes	Categories	Themes
• System and structures • Master scheduling • Placement consideration (teachers and students) • Individualized strategies • Professional learning • Learning walks • Accountability	Planning, Implementation, Monitoring	School organization
• Special education student strategies • Compliance and timeline expectations • IEP implementation • Scheduling • Monitoring expectations	Principal expectations	Principal training
• Staffing- formula • Time • Paperwork • Scheduling • Placement options • Differentiation • Teacher expectations • Teacher knowledge and capacity to support special education students	Barriers	Challenges in organization and instruction

Theme 2: School Organization

This theme of leadership practices looked at the planning, implementation, and monitoring that the principals felt that they applied in their day-to-day actions. All eight the participants discussed the planning of leadership. Teresa mentioned the need to have operations in place and feeling comfortable when she was out, knowing that she had the people in the right place to continue the work. Robert shared that there was a focus on looking at data to ensure that students had been placed with the best teachers who would follow up. Roxanne said, "As a leader, my goal is to put staff members in place." As a

leader, she relied on experts to be experts. She had a big picture lens and could ask and dialogue with others when she was unsure. Eric discussed the need to work on a master schedule to support the requirements of students with disabilities. He worked to ensure there was a master schedule that allowed for coteaching assignments based on the content knowledge of the special educators. The implementation of strategies and actions was another category that emerged from the analysis.

Kelly remarked, "We did a focus on teacher behavior, which was a shift because we always talk about what kids can't do. We got to address us." Teresa shared, "When our teachers fall short, it is definitely providing professional development to them to build their skill sets and give them a better foundation to meet the needs of students." Terry discussed the need for everyone doing professional development, and sometimes it has to be self-initiated. Professional development is key because the traditional way of doing things does not always work for students anymore. As Kelly explained, "I provide opportunities for professional development, and then I observe, then I critique, or I give feedback, and I come back hoping that the strategies that we discussed are innovative, and we give people an opportunity to grow." Margret and Teresa shared, principals should constantly be integrating, adopting and adapting, and just changing to ensure that students experience a level of success. Principals and teachers need to continue to review research and always think of different strategies to keep students involved.

As strategies were reviewed, leaders moved into accountability. Margret discussed the need to review implemented strategies frequently to determine what went well, what should be enhanced, and what should be abandoned using an after action

protocol. This review would monitor the implementation of ideas and ensure that the school was moving forward in the right direction. Kelly shared that accountability was a difference maker. Nicholas said that "you have to be responsible when things hit your plate as principal." Nicholas went on to say, "If you are not accountable, why would teachers and students respect you or think you are going to operate in their best interest?"

Theme 3: Principal Training

The third theme also was addressed directly in the literature review. Roberts et al. (2018) stated that principals have confirmed from previous research that administrators lack knowledge around the utilization of best practices and instructional programming for students with disabilities. This lack of knowledge also was evident when interviewing the principals who participated in my case study. Most principals reported on-the-job experience having experts such as their special education department chairs support their understanding and decision making. Teresa said that outside of being in IEP meetings themselves, she had very little training on special education. Kelly stated, "I need more specific strategies to support teachers who teach students with disabilities." She also shared that whereas other areas and subgroups such as English for speakers of other languages had extensive tools and repertoires, she had very little to support her special education teachers.

Based on the interviews, it became clear that training to support principals with special education students often was reactive when cases arose or when parents complained about the lack of services. Roxanne said, "The reactive response was not specific to special education. That is often the case with many departments working more

as a reactive district." Teresa indicated, "There is a need to know about the compliance, deadlines, and how we would get in trouble if we are not providing services to students."

Eric was the only principal who recalled specific special education training in his previous district. He was provided with monthly to bimonthly professional development for principals. He stated, "There's not enough quantitative data that I can point to, to say that I was adequately prepared to lead special education." Other principals recalled very periodic training sessions, but they indicated they were not frequent enough and needed to address a more specific instructional focus.

Theme 4: Challenges in Organization and Instruction

Barriers in K-12 education are inevitable. Principals face many challenges daily, but when asked about barriers in supporting special education, the principals in my study expressed a range of thoughts. Some principals felt that the staffing formula and lack of staffing influenced their ability to improve the academic achievement of students with disabilities. Robert, Teresa, and Kelly indicated that the lack of staffing affected their ability to support the needs of students with disabilities. Robert said, "Understanding how much paperwork there is, I just can't understand why there are not more people in special education."

Margret and Nicholas felt that it was more about the teaching capacity of staff who were available and their mind set to support students with disabilities. Margret stated that "there is always a pocket of teachers that may not stretch kids the way they can be stretched because of implicit biases they have around students with disabilities." Nicholas shared, "Teachers don't take the time to read IEPs; consequently, they don't understand

them. If they don't understand the student and their accommodations, teachers begin to marginalize students."

All eight principals indicated that time was a barrier to supporting the needs of students with disabilities. As Terry commented, "There is just not enough time in the school day. After a while, everybody gets burned out." Whether it was time for teachers to provide small-group instruction, pull away for paperwork and meetings, collaborate with general education teachers, interpret and analyze data, do pull-out direct instruction, or time for the administration to focus on special education instruction, time constraints were recognized by the participants as a significant barrier for most principals.

Findings

Following is a summary of the interview data and the archival state assessment results to address the RQs. I reviewed the archival state assessment for the individual schools to collaborate the effectiveness of leadership practices related to general education and special education student achievement.

Research Question 1

How do high school principals describe their leadership practices used to support the academic achievement for students with disabilities? Based on the review of the interview responses, it was evident that the participants had similar views of the implementation of leadership behaviors that supported not only their special education students but also all students. One participant indicated that all student groups were not performing in their school; therefore, special education was not a focus. The plan to improve student success included all student groups. Two other participants indicated that

their special education subgroups were not the target population because other subgroups also were not performing. Nicholas shared that special education students were included in their overall school plans "because our data does not reflect that there's a distinct difference as far as accomplishments in our Algebra I data."

Each principal discussed various practices that fell into transformational leadership practices and school organization. There was a clear indication that the principals feel that developing a positive culture and setting up systems and structures for planning and preparation, implementation, monitoring, and then accountability were key factors in supporting students' academic achievement. Even though all of principals discussed school organization practices, many of the principals also included behaviors associated with culture. The principals discussed the importance of ensuring a culture of supportiveness, open communication, teamwork, and accountability. Nicolas said, "I'm a democratic leader where everybody has a voice. It doesn't mean I'm going to agree with your voice, but you'll have a voice within my leadership style."

Margret explained:

I'm a leader that builds leaders. I use a coaching model with teachers and administrators and coach them around their behaviors, actions, and goals. My ultimate goal is to enhance their capacity. If you can build leaders and coach them instead of being directive, they will follow your vision.

Overall, there was very little difference in the principals' leadership actions for students with disabilities versus their actions for their overall student populations. Many of the principals described using similar transformational leadership practices in their

overall leadership style as the same that would help to address the needs of students with disabilities. However, it should be noted that after a review of the archival data of the eight specific schools, evidence arose that as a district, mathematics was an area where all students, not only special education students, were struggling. Two schools had the lowest possible state proficiency level at less than or equal to 5% for special education as well as general education students in Algebra I for the reporting data of 2015 to 2019. This rating indicated that percentages for the category were less than or equal to 5% and that corresponding counts had been suppressed. Nicholas indicated that there was not a distinct difference as far as an accomplishment for any subgroup of students. He explained that "we are not scoring as high as we could, so it is not just my special education or English speakers of a second language students; it's a problem overall."

I found that throughout the interviews, school performance was a frequent discussion of general school needs; therefore, special education students were wrapped into the overall school plans of supporting all students. School performance could not be assessed because of the COVID-19 pandemic, meaning that state testing has not occurred over the last 2 years; therefore, there are few current data reflecting the effectiveness of the practices that have been implemented by the principals.

There was a clear theme of transformational leadership practices that had been implemented consistently by the interviewed principals. The transformational element of individual consideration was evident in the responses of several participants. For example, Teresa stated, "I noticed when I began to go into his class, it was a lot of dead

time, so I spoke to him, gave him my feedback, presented him with some data and then set him up with coaching."

Another principal summarized that professional development is key. It takes everyone doing professional development to get better and to change with the times and understand what students really need. Another transformational element that had been implemented by the high school principals was idealized influence. Baptiste (2019) described leaders who were role models as humble, willing to listen, and supportive. Nicholas commented, "You have to be humble. When you're humble, you're able to listen to others and be supportive. Sometimes people have the idea that they believe in so much. You have to be supportive in allowing them to move forward."

In summary, the principals discussed many practices such as being supportive, accountable, collaborative that all led to the theme of transformational leadership. All of the principals felt that their leadership style was transformational, and they identified many characteristics that they employed on a regular basis. However, there was little focus on differentiating their transformational leadership practices specific to their impact on the achievement of special education students. The theme of transformational leadership practices evolved as the interview moved into challenges that the principals faced, which was the focus of RQ2.

Research Question 2

What challenges do principals face in supporting the academic achievement of students with disabilities? The principals reported several barriers that they faced in supporting the academic achievement of students with disabilities. All of the principals

discussed staffing in some fashion. They believed that they were not adequately staffed or had a difficult time finding staff to fill their positions. The staffing issue impacted many aspects of their leadership and led to master schedule concerns, large class sizes, teachers having to teach multiple areas of curriculum content, no time for planning and collaboration, and increased caseloads and paperwork.

Robert reported, "Teachers spend so much time on the paperwork that they have little time to develop instructional strategies with their general education teachers, and they are becoming burnt out." Eric shared that time also was impacted by his teachers having to juggle multiple initiatives. There also was strong agreement among the principals around the barrier of teacher capacity. Margret mentioned that teachers lacked the capacity to provide differentiation, and Kelly stated, "Professional development is one-size-fits-all."

There should be differentiation in the professional development of teachers and principals based on their understanding of special education. Nicholas shared that teachers did not always read the IEPs of the students to understand what accommodations and modifications they might have needed during instruction. Teachers also lacked strategies to support the needs of students with disabilities. Eric shared that "over time, with retirements and attrition, there is more turnover in staff, so it is hard to build teacher capacity."

There was a frequent need to continue coaching the staff to build the capacity to improve instruction. The theme of challenges in organization and instruction evolved from the barriers that principals identified as ones that they faced daily. The responses

around staffing, paperwork, and the capacity of teachers to know and be able to implement effective strategies to support students with disabilities were very consistent.

These identified codes continued to evolve into a clear theme of challenges that the principals faced in influencing the achievement of students with disabilities. Although challenges were brought to the forefront, additional themes of principal preparation and school organization also had to be considered in determining the influence on lack of achievement of students with disabilities. Most of the principals reported having little to no training specific to special education prior to becoming principals. Eric indicated that he had only had "job embedded staff development." Roxanne responded, "We are very reactive, and it's almost like we don't have the time to prepare because it's always something different and new."

The principals' understanding of special education also influenced the ability of teachers to plan and implement appropriate instruction for students with disabilities. This inability to meet the needs of students with disabilities influenced overall school organization to make improvements to systems and structures to improve instruction.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Credibility

Burkholder et al. (2016) stated that studies are believable based on the credibility of the data. I asked the interview questions regarding leadership behaviors, actions, and barriers faced to ensure credibility, along with peer debriefing and member checking. I used MAXQDA to organize the codes into categories and identify themes. As already mentioned, the participants from the identified school district responded with emails

giving their electronic consent to participate and choosing mutually agreed upon dates and times for the interviews.

Transferability

The applicability of studies to other broader contexts ensures their transferability (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The selection of high school principals with at least 3 years of experience could easily be replicated in other districts at schools with various grade levels to identify the academic struggles of subgroups of students. Although I made all attempts to maintain diversity because of the school district's profile, only African American principals met the criterion to be in the study. Although this lack of diversity in the sample should not impact the ability to replicate the study, it should be noted that experiences may vary.

Dependability

I used triangulation for dependability in reviewing the transcriptions of the interview responses and the specific school data, which led to building criteria for trustworthiness (Burkholder et al., 2016). Using MAXQDA software allowed me to organize the data into codes and categories. After the analysis was complete, I compared the principals' leadership strategies to archival school data to determine if any correlations of student performance could be attributed to leadership strategy implementation. I also kept a journal of tasks completed during the study to monitor reflections through an audit trail, which assisted in maintaining dependability and confirmability (Burkholder et al., 2016; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

Confirmability

I worked diligently to disassociate any researcher bias based on my role in the school district as a special education administrator. While reviewing the data, I considered my own bias and any implicit biases that I may have had around particular administrators based on my professional interactions with them. I spent considerable time reviewing the transcriptions and the data analysis to ensure the accuracy of the results. These strategies helped to ensure confirmability and limit biases as much as possible (Burkholder et al., 2016).

Summary

I conducted this case study to explore the leadership practices that a sample of eight high school principals believed influence the academic achievement of students with disabilities. The RQs looked at two specific factors: the principals' behaviors and actions and what barriers hindered the principals' ability to support students with disabilities. Through the research, I found that the high school principals implemented several leadership behaviors that research has supported as effective strategies; however, their strategies were more focused on general student achievement. Barriers also appeared to outweigh the strategies, an issue that limited the principals' focus on improving the outcomes for students with disabilities. Time constraints were mentioned multiple times, meaning that the principals had to multitask while also prioritizing their larger school plans for improvement. The principals were focused on the need and ability to provide teachers and administrators with coaching and support, but they needed more professional development on strategies to provide the appropriate support to teachers.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the ways that high school principals in a Mid-Atlantic school district provided leadership practices to support the academic achievement of students with disabilities. I was seeking to discover what the principals experienced in their schools, what leadership practices had been implemented, and what the challenges that they faced may have meant to the achievement of students with disabilities. By conducting this study, I gained insight into ways that the district could better support new and veteran principals to improve the academic achievement of students with disabilities.

I found that the principals implemented many leadership actions and behaviors that aligned with transformational leadership and were good practices for overall school improvement. The principals were faced with the overwhelming task of improving the academic achievement for all students; therefore, there was little focus on special education students and their academic improvement. Many of the principals reported that special education students fell into other subgroups of underperforming students, so they were included in improvement plans. Most of the eight principals whom I interviewed had special education populations of approximately 10% of students; however, most of the principals reported that upwards of 90% to 100% of their general education student populations were not performing proficiently. This underachievement clearly was on the minds of the eight principals, so their focus on overall school improvement was understandable. The principals also expressed the challenges that they faced in supporting

special education that appeared to outweigh many of the overall leadership practices that they had implemented.

Interpretation of the Findings

Included in Chapter 5 is a discussion of the case study's key findings based on the data analysis. Recent research has shown that using state assessments may not be the most effective way to determine the academic achievement of special education students (Hurwitz et al., 2020). The findings may contribute to understanding how high school principals believed that their behaviors influenced the academic achievement of students with disabilities and provide solutions to the barriers that these eight principals face in accomplishing that goal.

First Key Finding

Based on the data analysis, I identified a need for professional learning for administrators and teachers in providing specially designed instruction for students with disabilities. The principals reported that teachers did not have the ability to understand individualized student needs and needed more instructional strategies. Although some instructional strategies are good for all students, without teachers implementing purposeful specially designed instruction with students with disabilities, students' academic outcomes will continue to be less than optimal (Hedin et al., 2020).

Developing professional learning plans for teachers and administrators to monitor, coach, and evaluate is vital to ensure a focus on students with disabilities. The unique nature of each student's disability requires data analysis to know student's strengths and weaknesses and then develop an IEP that address their deficit areas. Even though the

principals were employing transformational practices in their overall school plans, every student with a disability fit into their overall school plans. Principals and teachers needed more professional development on high-leverage practices.

A list of 22 high-leverage practices was released in 2014 by the Council of Exceptional Children that was shown to make a positive difference in the academic achievement of students with disabilities (Hedin et al., 2020). As Hitt and Tucker (2016) shared, knowledge of curriculum and instruction were not enough and that organizational management skills also impacted the ability of principals to lead. The principals needed to include some of instructional practices in their school improvement plans to align more closely with the individualized needs of special education students. They also had to develop systems and structures that can create positive climates and optimize the school organization.

Second Key Finding

The ideas of transformational leaders create environments where there is a collective goal to improve (Hitt & Tucker, 2016). As Yeigh et al. (2019) found, the principals in their study knew that there was a need to build teacher capacity, mentor, and provide professional learning opportunities to teachers, but as evidenced in the interview responses in my study, time constraints restricted the consistency and effectiveness of the principals. Principals were tasked with preparing overall school improvement plans to improve academic achievement; however, many of the principals reported using transformational leadership practices such as supporting teachers and staff, having open communication, providing professional learning, and building leaders among their staff.

McCarley et al. (2016) reported that transformational leadership behaviors led to climates in which the teachers felt supported and innovation was promoted. Allen et al. (2015) found that although transformational leadership behaviors were evident in high-performing schools and impacted school climate, there was insufficient evidence of a direct influence on achievement.

Implementation of leadership strategies alone was not sufficient to improve academic achievement. For the principals to improve the academic achievement of students with disabilities, they would have to focus more on the implementation of effective evidence-based instructional practices. The principals also mentioned time constraints in their interview responses. There was not enough time for teachers to work with students to meet their individual needs and for principals to monitor and support instruction. It will be imperative for the principals to develop systems and structure that can create time to meet the need of teachers and students. As principals develop their school plans, they will need to consider master scheduling, identification of school priorities, and use of resources to influence the academic achievement of students with disabilities.

Limitations of the Study

This case study took place in the spring and summer of 2021. During this time, the COVID-19 pandemic was a global health catastrophe. Students in this district moved to a virtual school model in March of 2020, with limited hybrid learning occurring in April 2021 after a year of virtual schooling. Although the principals may have been implementing leadership strategies, the full implementation of leadership looks

drastically different from a virtual and/or hybrid teaching model. Several participants responded to questions with "before or after COVID," which indicated that their leadership behaviors had been required to shift and adapt to evolving circumstances. The assessments to monitor student growth and what I used in this study as archival data have not been administered in 2 years because of COVID-19. Therefore, it was difficult to determine if the leadership strategies had influenced the academic outcomes of students with disabilities. Although the principals were not overwhelmed with addressing behaviors and other day-to-day operations, now, for the first time, the principals have had to create new systems and structures to deal with the health and safety of their staff and students because of the ongoing global pandemic.

During school closures, federal and state special education requirements were not waived, requiring district and schools to find ways to continue services virtually to comply with all requirements. Principals are now faced with handling the emotional and mental impact of the pandemic on families and communities. These new job responsibilities have taken priority over the implementation of leadership strategies specific to addressing the subgroup of special education students.

Although the COVID-19 pandemic has influenced the structure of schools and instruction, the district that participated in this case study has a history of low academic performance. My study focused on students in special education, and in 2019, during the last assessment administration, approximately 25% of students in the district demonstrated proficiency on the English 10 test and 10% on the Algebra I test. Many general and special education students continue to not perform proficiently. Using a

single district that was demonstrating limited proficiency for all students limits generalization of findings. The focus on moving all students rather than a limited focus on special education students presented a limitation in this study. Because of the timing of the study at the end of the school year, there also was limited participation from the target population of principals in the school district; however, the number of principals interviewed still fell within the expected target range.

Recommendations

I recommend that future researchers explore leadership strategies that could influence the academic achievement of students in special education, including additional district and school personnel showing proficiency with both general and special education student populations. Such research would accurately compare principals' leadership strategies and their effectiveness on special education student populations. Another recommendation is to conduct a longitudinal study using pre- and post-skills-based academic measure to determine whether the implemented strategies have resulted in academic improvement of students. Often researchers have looked at the achievement gap as a measure of effectiveness; however, using the growth-based measure to determine mastery of skills over time may show effectiveness more accurately (Hurwitz et al., 2020). Although previous research by Allen et al. (2015) indicated that transformational leadership practices have no direct influence on student achievement, Day et al. (2016) argued that the leaders of effective and improving schools used both transformational and instructional leadership strategies. In future studies, researchers should also consider examining the use of transformational and leadership strategies in

combination to determine their influence on the academic achievement of students with disabilities.

Implications

The implications of the findings derived from my study highlight the need for professional development to give school leaders and teachers more specific strategies to meet the needs of students with disabilities. In this study, the principals indicated that their teachers were not equipped to provide specially designed instruction to meet the needs of individual students. However, they also indicated that, as administrators, they had limited tool banks to support and provide feedback to teachers. Although the results of this study showed that the principals were more focused on improving the academic achievement of all students, they also believed that being able to provide feedback and support to special educators may lead to improved instruction, monitoring, and accountability of special educators.

Another implication was the need for the district to review the use and needs of special education staff. Although some principals indicated that they did not have enough staffing to support the needs of special education students, others felt that time was a concern because of the teachers' overwhelming task to deal with paperwork. If teachers were focused on paperwork or the need to serve multiple classes, the needs of special education students may have been limited.

This reanalysis of staffing and responsibility may provide additional instructional time, which would improve the academic achievement of students with disabilities. A revisit of staffing also would allow the schools to have an enhanced focus on adhering to

state and federal guidelines, resulting in less funding being directed to litigation and compensatory services needed to correct violations. Increasing the academic achievement of students with disabilities could lead to improved postsecondary outcomes of students being college and career ready, along with improved 4-year cohort high school graduation rates for students with disabilities. Increasing the academic achievement levels of students with disabilities also would make it less likely that the students would have to take remedial courses at the college level and more likely that they would graduate.

Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the ways that a sample of eight high school principals provided leadership practices to support the academic achievement of students with disabilities. By analyzing the archival assessment data and interview transcriptions of school leaders, I gathered information on principals' perspectives regarding the ways that they supported students with disabilities. Cetin and Kinik (2016) argued that leadership practices are critical to student success; however, my results showed little correlation between identified research-based strategies and students' academic success. The principals mentioned many strategies that they had implemented; however, they were general to the school population, not specific to students with disabilities. There has to be a focus on improving instructional strategies as well as the monitoring and evaluating of teacher effectiveness for students with disabilities to see gains in their academic achievement.

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Appendix: Interview Guide

Date:
Time:
Interviewee Code #:
Location of Interview:

Parts of the interview	Interview questions and notes
Introduction	• Hi, my name is Toni Brooks. Thank you very much for participating in this interview today. As you know, the purpose of this interview is to explore the practices and actions of high school principals that you feel influence student achievement of students with disabilities. This should last about 45-60 minutes. After the interview, I will be examining your answers for data analysis purposes. However, I will not identify you in my documents, and no one will be able to identify you with your answers. You can choose to stop this interview at any time. Also, I need to let you know that this interview will be recorded for transcription purposes. • Do you have any questions? • Are you ready to begin?
Question 1	Describe your experience as a school leader? Probing questions: 1. How many years have you been a principal at your current school? 2. How many years have you worked in an administrative role? 3. What is your experience in leading special education instruction and/or programming?
Question 2	How would you describe your leadership style? Why? Probing questions: 1. How would you include instructional, transformational, or transactional leadership practices in what you use? 2. What behaviors or actions do you align to a particular leadership style? 3. Please describe how you implement different actions or practices for specific student groups.
Question 3	What practices or actions have you implemented to address the instructional needs of students with disabilities? Probing questions: 1. How are students with disabilities included in your overall school improvement plan (or have you addressed this subgroup separately)? 2. Have you found any school improvement practices that have shown success in improving achievement for students with disabilities? How do you monitor the effectiveness of the practices or actions implemented within your school?

Question 4	What preparation did you receive around supporting special education before becoming a principal? 1. Probing questions: Did you find this preparation successful in understanding instruction and monitoring of the legal requirements for students with disabilities? 2. Since becoming a principal have, you received additional supports in supporting students with disabilities? If so, what did those additional supports look like? 3. What training would have been beneficial to you prior to becoming a principal?
Question 5	What barriers do you face in supporting the improvement of academic achievement of students with disabilities? Probing questions: 1. How do you think these barriers could be addressed to improve student performance? 2. What resources/support would you need to overcome these barriers?
Close	Thank you for your answers. Do you have anything else you'd like to share? Do you have any questions for me? Thank you for your time. Goodbye.