2022

Elementary Principals' Instructional Leadership Challenges Supporting Inclusive Special Education Students' ELA Achievement

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Abstract

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MA, Hunter College, 2003

BS, New York City College of Technology, 2001

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Abstract

As instructional leaders, principals must apply leadership to ensure achievement of all students. There is a gap in practice involving challenges principals face while supporting the ELA achievement of their inclusive special education students. The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand instructional leadership challenges elementary principals perceived were necessary to overcome in order to support ELA achievement of inclusive special education students. The conceptual frameworks for this study were Weber's instructional leadership model and Hornby's theory of inclusive special education. The research question sought to explore the instructional leadership challenges elementary principals perceive as necessary to overcome in order to support ELA achievement of their inclusive special education populations in grades three through five? Nine Northeast school district elementary principals with inclusive special education students in grades three through five comprised the purposeful sample. Thematic content analysis of data from semistructured interviews led to identification of six major themes pertaining to time, staffing, structures, instructional strategies, data, and applied philosophies. Potential positive social change implications include the possibility of improved ELA achievement of inclusive special education students, which has the potential to increase literacy and improve quality of life. Findings led to recommendations for leaders within the district which may be transferable to other similar district settings. Results of the study can be useful to leaders who aim to understand, recognize, and address instructional leadership challenges to improving ELA achievement of inclusive special education students.

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Dedication

First, I give honor to God, who gave me the strength I needed not to quit! I dedicate this work to my mom, Terry Lynn Clark, who always believed in me and made me feel I could do anything. I know if you were still with us, you would be so proud of this achievement. Additionally, this work is dedicated to my siblings, who have been a consistent source of strength and love throughout my life; I love you! To my granddaughter, whose quality time with me was sacrificed countless times to complete my doctoral course work, grandma did it! Finally, I dedicate this work to my husband, Kareem, who always supported and encouraged my success. I love you and am grateful for your relentless examples of hard work and your impeccable work ethic.

Acknowledgments

This study could not have been completed without the patience, guidance, and expertise of my Chair, Dr. James Bailey. I would also like to acknowledge the other members of my committee, Dr. Salina Shrofel and Dr. Nicolae Nistor, for intently reviewing my study and advising me on how to improve it. My gratitude also goes to all principals who gave up their time participating in my study. I am humbly grateful to my school and district colleagues for your push and encouragement to continue writing and your belief in my ability to complete the process. I must recognize my editor for partnering and pushing me to stay the course and her positive words reaffirming my belief in myself.

Last, but not least, I would like to thank my family and friends for the love and patience you gave me when I was locked up in my room working. While we cannot get the time, we lost back; know that I will be present and available from here on out.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Principals in elementary schools are the most central source of leadership at school sites and are the main facilitators of inclusive programs for students with disabilities (Hoppey et al., 2018). The historical view of principals was that of leaders who focused on compliance with requirements, laws, and regulations (Gomez & McKee, 2020). With increased accountability and concerns for equity in the 21st century, principals build instructional capacity for all learners; 21st century principals must demonstrate a range of competencies that have positive influences on student achievement and long-term trajectories of students with disabilities (Schopp et al., 2017). Scholars and practitioners concerned with the role of leadership in terms of significantly influencing student achievement continue to rely on students' standardized test scores as indicators of student achievement.

Elementary school principals shape school culture, guide instructional processes, and influence educators' teaching practices, which ultimately impact achievements of all students (Gomez & McKee, 2020). Tan (2018) noted gaps in practice that may stem from a lack of leaders' understanding of challenges principals face when tasked with demonstrating special education student achievement, as measured by standardized test scores. An understanding of leadership and instructional challenges might lead to recommendations that enhance skills and knowledge required to effectively lead quality inclusive special education programs that positively impact student achievement. Because English and Language Arts (ELA) achievement, including reading and writing, influences every other subject, ELA is a primary learning goal of upmost importance to

teachers and principals. This study contributed to understanding leadership and instructional challenges that elementary school principals perceive are necessary to overcome in order to support ELA achievement of inclusive special education student populations.

Chapter 1 includes an introduction to this study. This is followed by the background, problem, and purpose of the study as well as research questions and nature of the study. I also discuss the significance of the study. I address the conceptual framework, limitations, scope, and definitions to clarify the context of the study.

Background

In 1994, representatives from 92 countries and 25 international organizations developed the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action calling for an inclusive education policy for students with disabilities. Turkey's elementary mainstream schools began to enroll all children in inclusive classrooms, barring compelling reasons prohibiting them from doing so, as elementary teachers strived to provide quality education to diverse students with varying needs (Sakiz, 2018). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004 also holds districts accountable for providing free and appropriate education to eligible students with disabilities in least restrictive environments (LREs; Morningstar et al., 2017). The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) mandated schools to protect disadvantaged and high-needs students and ensure that all students meet academic goals. Accountability involves data in the form of state standardized test scores depicting students' performance in reading, math, and science.

ELA achievement is foundational to students' successes in other academic subjects (Whitten et al., 2016).

Test score data reported by the State Department of Education (SDE) for students with disabilities in the urban Northeast School District (NESD, pseudonym) indicated less than expected gains for ELA achievement in grades three through five. In 2019, the SDE in the state where this district is located reported test scores for ELA proficiency in the district that were significantly lower than state scores for the same groups of students. According to this department, special education students as a group were unable to meet expected ELA growth measures according to the goals and accommodations written into their individual education plans (IEP).

Administrators of special education programs are vital to the implementation of successful inclusion in diverse environments; however, elementary school principals face leadership and instructional challenges while supporting inclusionary education that positively influences student achievement. Principals have to consider various student demographics and staff dynamics to create inclusive schools while drawing on extensive instructional leadership practices. As principals are consistently asked to do more with less, there is a lack of leadership understanding of the challenges they face while leading inclusive special education programs.

I addressed challenges of elementary principals in the NESD involving understanding instructional leadership practices they employ to support ELA achievement of inclusive special education students in grades three through five. Participating principals revealed challenges they faced which might lead to

implementation of supports and recommendations to close the practice gap and improve ELA achievement of inclusive special education populations. This study is important because leaders' understanding the instructional and leadership challenges elementary principals face may lead to the NESD and other districts implementing solutions to the challenges identified in this study, to better support ELA achievement of inclusive special education students in grades three through five.

Problem Statement

The problem examined in this study pertained to instructional leadership challenges that the NESD elementary school principals face while supporting ELA achievement of their inclusive special education populations in grades three through five. The NESD special education students in grades three through five lagged behind most other student groups and were unable to meet expected ELA growth measures according to the goals and accommodations written into their IEPs. I addressed a gap in practice regarding instructional leadership challenges that the NESD elementary principals perceive are necessary to overcome in order to support ELA achievement of their inclusive special education populations in grades three through five.

The NESD used the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) standardized assessments developed by a consortium twelve states plus the District of Columbia to measure reading and math performance for students in grades three through eight. The 2016 through 2019 Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) test data indicated less than expected gains for ELA achievement of special education students in the NESD in grades three through five.

Special education students lagged behind most other student groups and were unable to meet expected ELA growth measures, as measured by standardized tests, according to their IEPs. For example, while 10.8% of third grade students with disabilities were ELA proficient in 2019 across the state, only 5% in the NESD met the same proficiency standards; similar trends were observed for grades four and five. Principals must apply leadership and instructional practices to ensure special education students meet acceptable ELA target measures in elementary schools, and failures to meet those targets are evidence of the NESD elementary principals' need to overcome leadership and instructional challenges they face supporting inclusive special education students' ELA achievement. Several NESD principals claimed during informal communications and district meetings that there are leadership and instructional challenges supporting achievement of inclusive special education students. Accordingly, there is a need for educational leaders to understand leadership and instructional challenges that the NESD elementary school principals perceive are necessary to overcome to support ELA achievement of their inclusive special education populations.

The leadership that principals provide in special education is integral to the overall success of special education students. The National Policy Board for Educational Administration (2015) said improving student learning requires a holistic view of leadership that extends beyond supporting instruction by teachers. There are challenges elementary school principals perceive are necessary to overcome to support ELA achievement of their inclusive special education populations in grades three through five. The NESD leaders need more information regarding the challenges surrounding

leadership and instructional support for grades three through five students with disabilities in inclusive schools.

There have been studies involving how principals' behaviors, characteristics, skills, and knowledge are necessary for success in terms of supporting inclusive special education programs. However, there is less information regarding leadership and instructional challenges that elementary principals perceive are necessary to overcome to support ELA achievement of their inclusive special education populations.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore instructional leadership challenges that the NESD elementary principals face while supporting ELA achievement of their inclusive special education populations in grades three through five. A gap in practice stemmed from leaders' lack of understanding of leadership and instructional challenges that the NESD elementary principals perceive are necessary to overcome to support ELA achievement of their inclusive special education students in grades three through five. Findings of this study exposed ways to overcome challenges and design strategies to address the identified challenges. This study will lead to the NESD and other districts better understanding leadership and instructional challenges that elementary school principals perceive are necessary to overcome to support ELA achievement of their inclusive special education populations.

Research Questions

In this study, I used the following research question:

RQ: What are the instructional leadership challenges that the NESD elementary principals perceive as necessary to overcome in order to support ELA achievement of their inclusive special education populations in grades three through five?

Conceptual Framework

This study's conceptual framework was Weber's instructional leadership model and Hornby's theory of inclusive special education. Hornby (2015) said the theory of inclusive special education involves synthesis of the philosophy, values, and practices of interventions, strategies, and procedures of special education. Hornby's theory of inclusive special education posited to provide the philosophy and guidelines for inclusive special education policies, procedures and teaching strategies to facilitate effective education for students with disabilities in order to address confusions about inclusive special education policies and practices. The Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015, Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL) of the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA), used by the NESD to evaluate principals' leadership effectiveness, and IDEA which advances expectations that all students (including students with disabilities) will experience the same content, mandated standards, and achievement goals (Billingsley et al., 2017; Schopp et al., 2017). The Maryland Department of Education (2020) said special education enables students with disabilities "to have access to, and make progress in, the State curriculum in the regular classroom to the maximum extent appropriate" (para. 1). Theories of behaviorism, cognitivism, and constructivism underpin inclusive education, with educational practices oriented toward the needs of all students, including those with special needs (Al-

Shammari et al., 2019). According to Billingsley et al. (2017), principals serve the central role of developing and supporting inclusive school experiences that have the potential to improve instructional outcomes for students with disabilities.

Considered with the theory of inclusive special education was Weber's instructional leadership model that emphasizes six leadership domains in which principals demonstrate leadership daily: setting academic goals, organizing the instructional program, hiring, supervising, and evaluating, protecting instructional time and programs, creating a climate for learning, and monitoring achievement and evaluating programs. All six domains involve essential leadership behaviors of effective principals, which also underpin the PSEL and potentially affect student achievement outcomes. Weber (1987) said instructional leaders had to incorporate all leadership areas to effectively monitor instructional programs.

Because the study involved instructional leadership challenges principals face, I grounded it in the six domains of Weber's instructional leadership framework, alongside the theory of inclusive special education. Specifically, interview questions designed to elicit details regarding the challenges the NESD principals face supporting ELA achievement of the inclusive special education populations with the purpose of isolating major thematic findings involving the six major domains of Weber's instructional leadership model in terms of philosophy, values, and practices involving interventions, strategies, and procedures of inclusive special education.

Nature of the Study

This basic qualitative study is designed to address instructional leadership challenges elementary principals face while supporting ELA achievement of their inclusive special education populations in the NESD. Qualitative studies can be useful approaches to understanding situations occurring in contextually bounded settings. One-on-one semistructured interviews in a private comfortable setting allowed for collection of data from participants that was conversational in nature and involved in-depth descriptions of personal lived experiences of interviewees.

Nine participants were selected via a purposive sampling process and engaged in semistructured interviews lasting an average of 60 minutes to provide information about instructional leadership challenges they face while supporting ELA achievement of their inclusive special education populations. The research question was designed to obtain participants' candid responses about instructional leadership challenges they face while supporting their inclusive special education populations. Inductive coding and deductive coding help to maintain integrity of data and their connection to the study's purpose (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). During the inductive coding process, I analyzed interview data to uncover patterns of themes derived from participants' words and phrases; however, I read the data in order to reveal details specific to the interview protocol (see Appendix A) during the deductive coding process. First and second cycle coding aid in translating data from interview transcripts (Saldaña, 2016). NVivo assisted in coding; however, manual coding was the main way to identify variations, differences in emphasis, and meanings

that NVivo did not catch. An in-depth description of the research methodology is in Chapter 3.

Definitions

Elementary school: Elementary schools include early grade levels of standard public education before secondary school and include varying grade spans, typically prekindergarten through sixth or eighth grade (Jones et al., 2017).

English language arts (ELA): The district defines ELA literacy as foundational skills in Pre-K to grade 5 that include phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension, culminating in the development of expressive and interpretive reading and writing (District, 2014).

Inclusion: Inclusion is a process that involves eliminating exclusionary education practices by meeting diverse needs of students, increasing their access to least restrictive general education systems (Abawi et al., 2018).

Instructional leadership: Practices or behaviors of the school or assistant principal to promote student learning and includes the ability to foster relationships between individuals (Hitt & Tucker, 2016; Mestry, 2017).

Least restrictive environment (LRE): To the extent possible, children with disabilities are educated with their nondisabled peers in regular education environments (Morningstar et al., 2017).

Special education: Programs and services provided to students who are identified as having a disability and require accommodations and modifications to their instructional programs (Schopp et al., 2017).

Student achievement: Measure of students' performance outcomes on state and local assessments used to determine academic proficiency and growth (Mackey, 2016).

Students with disabilities: Learners with designated disabilities, such as a hearing, visual, speech, orthopedic, or language impairment, intellectual or cognitive disorders, behavioral or emotional disturbances, and other psychological or physical diagnoses that require accommodations for learning (Schopp et al., 2017).

Assumptions

In qualitative research, researchers identify assumptions, which are beliefs about research that are likely true but are unprovable (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I assumed that principals with 5 or more years of experience who lead inclusive special education programs would be knowledgeable. Another assumption was that participating principals were able to answer the interview questions truthfully. Further, I assumed enough principals from the population would participate willingly and voluntarily complete the interview processes, and data saturation. I assumed participants offered in-depth and unbiased data.

Scope and Delimitations

This study pertains to instructional leadership challenges that inclusive elementary school principals experience in a single school district in the Northeast US. There are 123 elementary schools with one principal at each school in the NESD that was the setting for this study. I focused on elementary school principals of inclusive schools, excluding secondary school principals and principals of schools that do not offer inclusive education programs for special education students. Participants included NESD

elementary school principals with a special education population of at least 5% of their total school population and document ELA achievement of grades three through five special education populations. Neither the population nor sample included principals from schools with other types of self-contained programs. I focused on challenges experienced in terms of support of ELA achievement and not challenges related to achievement in other subjects.

The study occurred in a single school district in the Northeast US and was qualitative in nature; therefore, results were not generalizable and may not transfer to other different settings. According to Ravitch and Carl (2016), transferability is the degree to which qualitative results are applicable to other settings and samples. While the results of this study may be of interest to other districts within the geographic region that are similar in terms of size and demographics, it may not be appropriately transferable to other districts operating without the same resource deficits and other cultural and environmental factors as the urban district represented in this study.

Limitations

Qualitative research has both strengths and limitations, which are those study elements that the researcher cannot control but could affect study findings (Munthe-Kaas et al., 2019). Limitations involved the narrow time frame for conducting the study and selection of a single urban district, which limited opportunities to expand data collection efforts and conduct research that might have had broader applications. Researcher bias is a threat to the validity of the study which could be a limitation. Researchers must be aware of and ensure measures are in place to combat bias to avoid jeopardizing the

trustworthiness of results (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Accordingly, I focused on setting aside preconceived notions and used a widely accepted steps and procedures for sampling, data collection, and analysis to minimize bias in the study. I used purposeful sampling to select elementary principals who met a specific set of criteria designed to identify persons with knowledge about the topic. To alleviate bias in this study, I transcribed interview transcripts verbatim and clarified statements when necessary. I used open coding for the initial coding process and invited principals to member check interpretations. The impending COVID-19 pandemic led to findings that were indicative of challenges specific to COVID-19 experiences. Although COVID-19 was not a focus of this study, and there was limited information about the impact of the pandemic on leadership and student achievement, the subject nevertheless surfaced in data.

Significance

This study involved addressing a gap in practice involving leaders' lack of understanding of instructional leadership challenges elementary school principals face while supporting ELA achievement of their inclusive special education populations. Insights gleaned from principals tasked with improving ELA achievement for all students, may lead to the NESD gaining a more complete understanding of instructional leadership challenges that help to inform others to close practice gaps in terms of support of ELA achievement of special education populations. The ESSA requires states to set achievement goals to measure special education students' improvement. Understanding gained from elementary school principals tasked with supporting ELA achievement of

inclusive special education populations could be useful to districts working toward positive social change.

There are educational, social, and economic justifications for improvement of special education ELA achievement in inclusive schools. In the local context, inclusive orientation and effective leadership that supports achievement of all students mitigates discriminatory attitudes, facilitates equity in education, and improves efficiency and cost-effectiveness of the education system (Ainscow, 2020). ELA achievement of inclusive special education students has the potential to enhance other academic subject areas, increasing literacy to improve quality of life of students with disabilities.

Summary

Principals are not responsible for providing direct instruction to students; however, they are accountable for implementing leadership within the school to support the academic environment as well as overall school improvement efforts to ensure that learning can take place. Thus, the principal's role is significant to teaching and learning. Federal and state regulations increased American schools' accountability in terms of providing a free and appropriate public education to all students, and principals are key in order to ensure safe and supportive environments for students with disabilities. Principals as instructional leaders must support the achievement of all students in their school programs. In the NESD district, less than 5% of the NESD special education students met expected ELA achievement. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore instructional leadership challenges elementary principals face while supporting the ELA achievement of inclusive special education populations in the NESD. In Chapter 2, I

address Weber's instructional leadership model and Hornby's inclusive education theory, to demonstrate why both were crucial to framing and addressing the study's problem and purpose. Chapter 2 includes a detailed review of literature pertaining to the topic of this study, culminating in the identification of a gap in related research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter includes a description and synthesis of the literature that is relevant to this study. In the NESD, inclusive special education students in grades three through five are not achieving in ELA as expected per 2016–2019 PARCC data. Leaders lack understanding of the district's elementary principals' perceptions of leadership challenges they experience in their efforts to support ELA achievement of their inclusive special education populations. A review of literature revealed topics related to perceptions of elementary school principals about challenges they face and how their leadership impacts student achievement, including ELA achievement of inclusive special education students.

This chapter includes a description of literature search strategies used to identify peer-reviewed studies. I discuss Weber's instructional leadership model and the theory of inclusive special education by Hornby. I address principals' roles in inclusive education, standards and competencies expected of educational leaders, principals' influence on student achievement, and related challenges. The chapter concludes with identification of the gap in research based on a summary of literature review findings.

Literature Search Strategy

The Walden University Library was used for retrieving articles for this literature review. I searched for peer-reviewed publications via SAGE Publications, ERIC, Google and Google Scholar. When I found articles on ERIC, I verified that the articles were peer-reviewed and then read through them for content related to my study. The terms I entered in search engines were *special education*, *elementary education students*, *students with*

disabilities, principal leadership, inclusion, inclusive leadership, academic achievement, special education achievement, influence of principal leadership on achievement, principal influence on special education achievement, special education ELA and reading achievement, instructional leadership theories, frameworks, and *models*. I adhered to Walden's EDD Dissertation Checklist for qualitative studies. I primarily selected peer-reviewed articles published between 2017 and 2021 with the exception of seminal works and articles such as those pertaining to Weber's framework.

Conceptual Framework

This study involved using Weber's instructional leadership model and Hornby's inclusive education theory. According to Weber (1987), effective leaders operate via six major leadership functions: setting academic goals, organizing the instructional program, hiring, supervising, and evaluating, protecting instructional time and programs, creating a climate for learning, and monitoring achievement and evaluating programs. Weber posited that the six functions of instructional leadership are interactive in that they all affect one another. Instructional leaders can articulate clear goals, encourage innovation, and support professional growth and collaboration while they monitor teacher learning for their schools overall (Weber, 1987; Kahn el al., 2009). Through the lens of Weber's six major functions of instructional leadership, I was able to examine leadership and instructional challenges elementary principals in the NESD face to support the ELA achievement of inclusive special education populations using this framework.

Khan et al (2009) said the principal is the main instructional leader, and as instructional leader, the principal is the pivotal within the school who affects the quality

of individual teacher instruction, the height of student achievement, and the degree of efficiency in school functioning. Theoharis et al. (2016) said when inclusion is seen as a school-wide philosophy that drives inclusive practices, and is pursued in a well-planned and thoughtful manner, it can result in equity and social justice and improved achievement. In a case study of two elementary schools' inclusive school reform efforts to create more inclusive school communities, principals stressed the significance of a school-wide inclusive vision and focus (Theoharis et al., (2016). The schools' reform began with a vision for inclusive special education followed by development of targets and collaborative work backed by the principals' belief in the promise of inclusion and a push for shifts in the schools' cultures and climates (Theoharis et al., 2016). Instructional leadership implemented by principals to support their inclusive special education programs align with Weber's major functions of instructional leadership and resulted in improvements in literacy data on standardized assessments for both schools after the first year of inclusion reforms.

Principals are responsible for advocating for equity and setting the example for educators to influence the culture of their schools that lead to inclusive instructional practices (Theoharis et al., 2016; Gomez & McKee 2020). Instructional leadership practices include issuance of resources, professional development, and time for educators to instruct special education students in the general education classroom setting. School leaders must also reinforce and support how the IEP is developed and implemented in accordance with IDEA guidelines to support inclusive and equitable schools for students with disabilities (Gomez & McKee, 2020).

Because the focus of this study is the instructional leadership challenges principals face while supporting their inclusive special education population, I incorporated Hornby's theory of inclusive education, which includes a synthesis of inclusive education philosophy, values and practices with interventions, strategies and procedures of special education to narrow my focus on the inclusive education phenomena for this study. Hornby (2015) emphasized coherent national and school policies based on five fundamental aspects of inclusive education: inclusive special education, monitoring the progress of students, evaluating the effectiveness of interventions, and school-wide practices based on evidence of effective facilitation of academic and social development of students. Hornby (2015) said policies and practices at both the national and school levels need to be in throughout all facets of schools. Poon-McBrayer (2018) said inclusive special education involves multifaceted changes occurring within the modern educational landscape influenced by both national and school policy. Morningstar et al. (2017) said access to general education settings is generally lacking for students with significant disabilities due to inconsistent application of placement practices and adherence to policies. However, there has been a steady increase in the percentage of time spent in general education classrooms from under forty to at least eighty percent of the school day, with variability across states. Urban districts were least likely to serve students in inclusive environments or place students with disabilities in general education for more than 80% of the day (Morningstar et al., 2017).

The success of inclusive schools depends on the dispositional skills and abilities to work collaboratively to meet the broad range of students' needs. Hornby (2015) emphasized close collaboration to help teachers and even parents to develop the skills for facilitating the students' development and success. Leadership practices foster new attitudes toward diversity, promote inclusive cultures within schools, and bridge schools and communities to realize the vision of inclusive education (Poon-McBrayer, 2018). According to Theoharis et al. (2016), schools can rely on outside university support and teacher leaders to help develop a level of critical mass to support the practical feasibility of inclusive education. Inclusive school instruction often includes less traditional strategies, including co-teaching, explicit and differentiated instruction, cooperative learning, and peer tutoring (Hoppey et al., 2018).

Hornby (2015) also included evidence-based practices for teaching strategies and techniques based on sound practical knowledge and guidelines in his theory of inclusive special education. The inclusive education model requires that school leaders provide guidance and support during change and brings together the resources and people to successfully sustain inclusive values (Poon-McBrayer, 2018). Hornby also discussed a vision to facilitate the provision of effective education for all children with special educational needs and disabilities. Hoppey et al. (2018) revealed in a case study of two elementary schools the cultural and organizational qualities of effective inclusive schools: (a) a unifying vision, (b) collaborative leadership, (c) data-informed problem-solving, and, (d) optimal use of resources. Hoppy et al (2018) said school leadership seeking to implement a purposeful vision for inclusion should systematically seeking to build

instructional capacity, foster professional disposition toward inclusion as an ethical stance, and provide spaces for data-informed decision making. Szeto et al. (2021) similarly conducted qualitative research that uncovered principal support that enhanced success of inclusive schools: a pattern of school leadership, a clear shared vision, support resources, collaboration, and teacher professional development.

Hornby (2015) also emphasized sufficient and adequate resources to effectively support students' academic and personal development. Effective inclusive schools essentially rely on human resources to ultimately meet students' needs (Hoppey et al., 2018). Hitt et al. (2018) broadly categorized them as cognitive (i.e. expertise and knowledge), psychological (initiative, creativity, responsible risk-taking, optimism, self-efficacy, and resilience), social (i.e. culture, values, emotional intelligence, relationships) and sociological (i.e. organizational and family). Along similar lines, a review of the literature revealed how effective inclusive schools have cultural, organizational, and instructional qualities that support the inclusion of students with disabilities in elementary school classrooms while improving outcomes for all students.

Literature Review Related to Key Variables and Concepts

Professional Standards for Educational Leaders

In response to increasing complexity in expectations and greater accountability demands, educational programs and professional associations developed standards for pre-service and practicing educational leaders (Farley et al., 2019). Competencies represent underlying, enduring characteristics, manifested by behaviors related to effective performance in an individual's job or role (Hitt et al., 2018). Competencies are

often expressed in terms of standards, encouraged by principals who engage in either a theory-to-practice approach or a knowledge-to-practice approach (Gray, 2018). Organizations widely use the standards or competency concept for accountability and development of leaders (Hitt et al., 2018). Standards such as the PSEL are continuously revised and updated due to a rapidly changing educational landscape and the related issues that school leaders confront, notably equity and justice concepts (Farley et al., 2018).

The NPBEA set forth a set of standards for educational leaders that reflects a holistic evidence-based and practice-oriented understanding of the relationship between school leadership and student learning. The culmination of these efforts includes the monitoring of student learning and school improvement progress. The standards embody interdependent domains that findings from research and practice indicate are integral to student success: (1) Mission, Vision, and Core Values, (2) Ethics and Professional Norms, (3) Equity and Cultural Responsiveness, (4) Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment, (5) Community of Care and Support for Students, (6) Professional Capacity of School Personnel, (7) Professional Community for Teachers and Staff, (8) Meaningful Engagement of Families and Community, (9) Operations and Management, (10) School Improvement. (NPBEA, 2015, p. 3).

These 10 professional standards coincide with ideals of inclusive schools and the claims about successful school leadership. Schopp et al. (2017) said effective principals effectively meet the standards to cultivate school environments where all students feel safe, supported, and included, and where students with disabilities can thrive. Leithwood

et al. (2020) said ways to meet such standards include setting directions for building, communicating, and modeling a shared vision that includes specific, short-term goals and high-performance expectations.

Developing the organization to support desired practices includes building a collaborative culture and productive relationships with families and communities require the development of cultural competence (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). Providing support includes demonstrating consideration for individual staff members, students, and parents (Leithwood et al., 2020). The synthesis of research by Darling-Hammond et al. confirmed that building trusting relationships helps to develop staff and stimulate professional capacity through growth. The PSEL standards similarly emphasize equity and cultural responsiveness; building a community of care and support for students, teachers, and staff; and meaningful engagement of families and community, which are especially relevant to the successful support of students with disabilities (Schopp et al., 2017).

Connecting schools to their wider environment, maintaining a safe and healthy school environment, buffering staff from distractions, and optimally allocating resources are leadership-driven, standards-based means to improving instructional support (Leithwood et al., 2020). However, despite widely agreed-upon standards for educational leaders, there has been a lack of established principal competencies related to special education leadership. Bateman et al. (2017) conducted an intense review of the foremost accrediting and professional agencies for principals and school leaders indicated they recognized the importance of special education without providing guidance or direction

about specific knowledge, standards, or competencies for special education leadership by school principals. Consequently, there is a lack of consistent basis for special education leadership standards at the elementary school principal level, so reliance is on the more explicitly discussed standards for general education, applied to inclusive school settings.

Schopp et al. (2017) recognized the disconnection between PSEL and its application to special education students, and attempted to isolate the aspects of leadership practice in PSEL that are particularly important for improving achievement and outcomes for students with disabilities. Specifically, Schopp et al. suggested working collaboratively to develop a mission and vision that includes students with disabilities, promoting the moral imperative to nonjudgmentally acknowledge inequities and promote equality, leading with interpersonal and social-emotional competencies, and developing multi-tiered systems of support, among other recommendations discussed in the following sections. Farley et al. (2019) posited that emphasis on students with disabilities is contained with the PSEL standards' expectation that school missions articulate the school's belief that all students can learn. However, the PSEL standards used to evaluate principals do not contain specific language about the education of students with disabilities.

Leadership in Inclusive Elementary Schools

Principals in elementary schools are the most central source of leadership at the school sites. In previous years, the view of principals was that of leaders who focused on compliance with requirements, laws, and regulations; more recently, the view expanded to include principals who build instructional capacity for the benefit of all students,

including ensuring that students with disabilities can attend college or prepare for 21st century careers (Schopp et al., 2017). Elementary school principals are leaders who shape school culture, guide instructional processes, and influence educators' teaching practices (Gomez & McKee, 2020).

School principals assume the responsibility for the results of special education programs in their schools, which has been a focus of qualitative investigations to understand principals' roles in cultivating effective learning environments (Bettini et al., 2017). Hoppey et al. (2018) noted, following a review and synthesis of the related peer-reviewed research, the widely accepted premise that principals are in unique and influential positions to improve opportunities for students with disabilities. Creating effective inclusive schools that serve students with disabilities is a major leadership responsibility for principals across the globe (DeMatthews et al., 2020).

Most conceptualizations of principal instructional leadership encompassed three dimensions for this role: defining the mission, managing instructional programs, and developing a positive climate for learning (Al-Mahdy et al., 2018). Typically, principals attempt to centralize decision-making while making informed decisions, mobilizing support, and depending on measures of accountability to justify change (Hitt et al., 2018). Within effective inclusive education, principals also promote inclusion as a core value and assume the responsibility for fostering the shared values and achievement of the school-wide goals that help staff realize their school's unifying vision (Hoppey et al., 2018). As the instructional leader for all programs in their schools, principals must generate buy into the school's mission, vision, values, and goals for their inclusive

special education programs (Sun & Xin, 2019). Schopp et al. (2017) recommended that principals work collaboratively toward a mission and vision that supports the success of all learners, including students with disabilities.

Principals' Beliefs

Principals' knowledge, attitude, and views of special areas of education shape the fidelity of the services special education students receive in the inclusive environments (Sun & Xin, 2019). A qualitative study of American school principals revealed that effective principals understand that the school must become what its students need (Hitt et al., 2018). Historically, inclusive schools were ideally led when principals questioned long-standing assumptions and demonstrated data-informed decision-making practices that increased teachers' problem-solving capacities and abilities to flexibly adjust pedagogical strategies (Hoppey et al., 2018). To positively influence the school culture and achievement, principals must believe that positive change is possible (Hitt et al., 2018).

In addition to believing positive change is possible, principals must create an inclusive environment by deploying resources, structuring organizations, and distributing workloads in ways that are conducive to student learning, equity, and social justice (Poon-McBrayer, 2018). Osiname (2018) integrated relevant literature with the lived experiences of five school principals regarding their leadership applied to building inclusive school cultures. Results were that principals considered reflective, critical, and dialogical actions as foundational to the facilitation and maintenance of strong, inclusive school cultures (Osiname, 2018). According to Theoharis et al. (2016), school leaders

must also be able to demonstrate the reality that equity and inclusion can exist alongside improved outcomes and increased excellence.

Schopp et al. (2017) advised educational leaders to adhere to an ethical and moral imperative to acknowledge inequities and promote equality in nonjudgmental ways. Schopp et al. recommended an ethical mindset of inclusive education where leaders address ethical dilemmas by "embodying the values of justice and care, equality and equity, and community in service of each student" (p. 8). Principals should also cultivate communication that exemplifies interpersonal and social-emotional competence that facilitates trusting relationships among staff, students, and parents (Schopp et al., 2017; Leithwood et al., 2020).

Professional Development

To improve school outcomes, instructional leadership is among the key roles of the principal that can lead to transformative learning experiences for teachers as well as students (Al-Mahdy et al., 2018). Hoppey et al. (2018) sustaining high-quality instruction and professional development to transform classroom teaching were among the instructional qualities principals perceived as necessary. Kim (2020) explored how 12 school principals in the United States experienced transformative learning in relation to leadership development, leadership practices, and perceptions. Analysis of data revealed that transformative learning experiences influenced their views of themselves and others and helped school principals to establish strong foundations of leadership (Kim, 2020). Hoppey et al. agreed that the principal's role includes shaping their schools' cultures, which involves professional development as a substantial support for teachers.

School leaders are responsible for supporting the development of teachers, students, and themselves, and therefore must be proactive in their own leadership and professional development (Kim, 2020). Hoppey et al. (2018) also claimed the principal's role includes shaping their schools' cultures involves principals' own development as well as substantial support for teachers. King and Stevenson (2017) investigated the contribution of professional development to the promotion of a more optimistic vision of leadership and organizational change, with a case study that included 20 participants in five inner-city disadvantaged elementary schools. Conclusions by King and Stevenson were that optimistic visions of leadership and organizational change can grow from professional development encompassing the processes, activities, and experiences that can foster the leadership expertise to drive organizational, instructional, and student learning improvements.

When effective inclusive school leaders rely on high-quality professional development to build instructional and leadership capacities among the staff, collaborative growth related to inclusion can enhance capacity building that supports everyone's efforts to meet diverse students' needs (Hoppey et al., 2018). Kim (2020) suggested that education for principal leadership development should provide opportunities to explore how relationships and school contexts shape leadership decision-making and how principals perceive themselves as leaders. Focusing on enhancing leadership to improve learning of students with disabilities, Schopp et al. (2017) similarly agreed that principals should incorporate multiple sources of meaningful high-quality professional development, while participating alongside staff.

Leadership Qualities

School leaders are continuously focused on opportunities that lead to meaningful school improvements, which requires leadership qualities that optimally help them manage the internal complexities of their work and the external demands for accountability and growth (Kim, 2020). Inclusive school principals' leadership qualities must encompass the abilities to nurture a supportive school culture that addresses students' and teachers' needs and that is also responsive to external accountability demands (Hoppey et al., 2018). Educational leaders must be able to envision the possibility for social change and improvement through a multiplicity of ideas that materialize through their leadership behaviors (Westheimer, 2017).

While striving to achieve organizational, instructional, and student learning improvements, principals must delegate many tasks to others who have critical roles in curriculum coordination and instructional success of schools (Al-Mahdy et al., 2018). Principals must be able to set goals and performance expectations, develop persistence and drive in others, and work collaboratively to emphasize achievement (Hitt et al., 2018). Principal leadership actions include developing, coordinating, and monitoring the quality of teaching and learning while maintaining the conditions that motivate and support teachers and students to productively engage in teaching, learning, and school improvements (Al-Mahdy et al., 2018).

Motivating and supporting teachers and students in inclusive schools require leadership qualities that foster equity and cooperation. Leadership qualities of school principals influence the way they use their scope of actions to promote the types of

collaboration that affect the experiences and learning of special education students (Lambrecht et al., 2020). Day and Sammons (2013) claimed that transformational leadership qualities foster productive relationships, such as supporting teachers, students, and parents by recognizing their contributions and fostering participation. Lambrecht et al. (2020) surveyed 135 primary and secondary school leaders, and reported significant relationships between transformational leadership qualities and successful collaboration of staff in the implementation of IEPs.

With a focus on transformational and transactional leadership, utilizing Q-sort methodology, Schulze and Boscardin (2018) investigated the perceptions of public elementary school principals with different special education backgrounds. Findings reported by Schulze and Boscardin were that prior special education experience did not predict leadership perceptions; instead, younger, less educated, and experienced principals in lower-performing schools valued instructional and transactional leadership, while older, more ethnically diverse, educated and experienced principals of higher-performing schools valued transformational-collaborative leadership.

Measures of Success

Historically, interests in the effects of principal instructional leadership revolved around narrowly defined student achievement outcomes. More recently, scholars identified dependent measures of school leadership effects at the school organizational and staff levels that have had observable associations with student achievement and school improvements (Al-Mahdy et al., 2018). Widening scholarly interests led to findings that school leadership influences teacher commitment (Al-Mahdy et al., 2018),

efficacy (Hosseingholizadeh et al., 2017), trust and professional learning (Piyaman et al., 2017), motivation and engagement, academic optimism, job satisfaction, capacity, and instructional practices (Al-Mahdy et al., 2018). These ideas were along the lines of those suggested by Wiley (2020), who studied 30 years of policy to determine what it means to be a principal. The conclusion offered by Wiley was that principals need to be connected and supported so that persistent performance issues can be resolved with collective contributions by working collaboratively together.

Principals' Roles in Student Achievement

There have been decades of numerous education reforms to raise the documented achievement levels and standards of students (Cruickshank, 2017). Morningstar et al. (2017) noted the importance of studying the achievement of students with disabilities because of the IDEA mandate for accountability requirements. IDEA mandates that students with disabilities learn in the least restrictive environment, demonstrate learning from their participation in the general education curriculum, and participate in state accountability measures (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004). Although the least restrictive environment is a broadly accepted principle, concerns continue to pertain to how it is interpreted, operationalized and influences student achievement (Morningstar et al., 2017). McKenna (2019) focused on literature pertaining to improving the academic performance of students with disabilities, noting that most studies did not disaggregate achievement outcomes for disability groups and there was a lack of causal inferences possible from the majority of studies reviewed.

Improvement is increasingly characterized as raised performance data from standardized assessments (King & Stevenson, 2017). At the same time, a major priority of most educational leaders and policymakers throughout the world is ensuring equitable outcomes through opportunities. Theoharis et al. (2016) interviewed principals of schools who described inclusion as a school-wide philosophy encompassing inclusive service delivery, pursued in well-planned and thoughtful manners, leading to equity and social justice that drives improved achievement. Data are necessary indicators used to determine equity and outcome achievements (Datnow & Park, 2018).

According to Datnow and Park (2018), data use for achieving equity is common but not well understood, driving their analysis of in-depth qualitative research to examine ways data influence school goals. Findings included data use for accountability-driven improvements, to confirm assumptions or challenge beliefs, and tracking or grouping to promote student growth and achievement (Datnow & Park, 2018). Conclusions drawn from related research are that active decision-makers use data from within and across contexts to make critical choices that can significantly affect students' everyday educational experiences and longer-term trajectories (Schopp et al., 2017).

Data, such as student test scores, are often used in research-oriented toward school improvements. Dhuey and Smith (2018) noted that most researchers examine the role of teachers in students' learning, but few focused on the influence or experiences of principals. Attempts to fill the gaps in the related body of knowledge about student achievement led to a greater focus on the role of leadership in significantly influencing the quality of teaching and learning, consequently raising student test scores

(Cruickshank, 2017). The authors set out to measure the effect of principals on elementary school students test scores in North Carolina. Findings reported by Dhuey and Smith were that principals accounted for a significant amount of value-added, while newer principals could have detrimental effects on measured outcomes due to their lack of experience. However, McCaffrey and Buzick (2021) warned that students with disabilities pose several challenges for calculating value-added, because scores may be especially low, unreliable, and incomparable to those of other students or across years.

Liebowitz and Porter (2019) conducted a systematic review and meta-analysis of the empirical educational research literature, based on the idea that principals are critical to the improvement of data-driven outcomes for all students. This analysis of 51 studies by Liebowitz and Porter revealed direct evidence of the relationship between principal behaviors and student achievement, teacher practices and wellbeing, and organizational health. Conclusions drawn were that principal behaviors beyond instructional management could help to improve student achievement outcomes, despite a lack of causal evidence. One way that principal behaviors beyond instructional management may help to improve student achievement outcomes is an investment in teachers. Investing in teachers as agents of change is a part of the collaborative model that King and Stevenson (2017) noted as supportive to school improvement and student achievement.

Achimugu and Obaka (2021) explored the influence of principals'' leadership styles on student achievement using a correlation survey research design with 264 student test scores and the Principals' Leadership Style Questionnaire. Findings of Achimugu and Obaka were that students learning under democratic leadership principals outperformed

those under authoritative and laissez-faire type principal leaders, with school climate and teacher job satisfaction mediating the relationship between principal leadership style and student achievement. Dutta and Sahney (2016) similarly used path modeling and cross-sectional survey data from 306 principals and 1,539 teachers to examine the role of teacher job satisfaction and school climate, which they concluded were mediators in the relationship between principals' instructional and transformational leadership practices and student achievement. Hitt et al. (2018) described similar findings as being the results of increasing the effectiveness of others by working with and through others. Dutta and Sahney concluded that their study represented empirical evidence that instructional leadership and principals' leadership behaviors impact student outcomes, and that research could lead to best practices for influencing student achievement levels.

Tan (2018) examined school leadership effects on student achievement due to contextual challenges and constraints. The focus of Tan was on the indirect effects of principal leadership on the mathematics achievement of 254,475 students in 10,313 schools, accounting for socioeconomic (disadvantaged versus non-disadvantaged), parental academic expectations, and school resources. Results reported by Tan were that principal leadership effects were greater among students considered disadvantaged, compared to students classified as not disadvantaged. Other findings reported by Tan included a negative effect of principal goal-setting, which might be considered counterintuitive to a predictable leadership–achievement relationship. Gomez & McKee (2020) said elementary principals positively impact student achievement as they shape school culture, guide instructional processes and influence educators' teaching practices.

Therefore, leaders need to understand the challenges elementary principals face setting goals to support achievement for all students to improve instructional leadership practices and ensure equity in achievement for all students despite their economical background.

Cruickshank (2017) emphasized the collaborative setting of school goals while engaging external support could enhance rather than undermine student achievement. Through Cruickshank's lens, principals who include the community in goal setting could positively influence student outcomes, measured through data on student achievement. Further supporting the premise of goal setting, Hitt et al. (2018) conducted intensive thematic coding of self-reported data from 19 public schools from multiple states to learn how principals were able to turn around low-performing schools and positively influence student achievement. Hitt et al.'s findings were that improving schools requires task-oriented and focused planning, persistent actions toward clear expectations, and the self-assured confidence and committed drive to achieve challenging goals despite barriers.

Principals' Roles in ELA Achievement

A foundation in English and Language Arts, including reading and writing, has been the basis of the American educational system, influencing the grasp of every other subject taught. Whitten et al., (2016) said discovering new ways to increase student interest and achievement in ELA is a primary learning goal of upmost importance to teachers and principals. A number of scholars considered specific grade levels (such as elementary or high school) or subject matter data (such as science, mathematics, or ELA) when discussing or researching leadership influence on student achievement, implicating matters of curriculum in student achievement. Across grade levels and subjects,

communicating high academic expectations for students with disabilities, promoting intellectually-challenging curricula, and providing high-quality multi-tiered support are the responsibilities of school leaders that promote student achievement (Schopp et al., 2017). With a focus on ELA achievement specifically, Taub et al. (2020) investigated the alignment between ELA curricula developed for students with disabilities and leadership and instructional support for student achievement. Findings included a need for a general alignment between standards, curriculum, and instructional leadership that ensures equitable opportunities to learn, due to the lack of robust evidence across settings and contexts to verify such an alignment.

Mestry (2017) analyzed data from open-ended questionnaires and personal interviews with eight school principals to investigate how principals perceived and experienced their instructional leadership to improve student performance. Among the findings reported by Mestry was that principals who expressed a greater emphasis on prioritizing curricular matters perceived that their actions positively influenced both teacher and student performance. Poon-McBrayer (2018) also interviewed principals of inclusive schools, who reported 20% to 65% improved performance among 60% of students with disabilities, felt to be the result of leadership practices that enhanced curriculum to support student outcomes, affirming direct links between effective school leadership and student achievement outcomes, such as ELA performance.

King and Stevenson (2017) described the planning and implementation process as among the pivotal roles of leadership that supports school improvement agendas, such as improved ELA achievement. Goldy (2016) investigated leadership support in high-

performing, diverse elementary schools, using document analysis and interviews, to identify replicable leadership strategies that could improve ELA achievement in other schools. Findings reported by Goldy were that the principals of high-performing elementary schools focused on curriculum alignment, data-driven instructional efforts, common assessments, professional learning communities, parent involvement, and optimal scheduling for professional development and instruction. Findings are consistent with the idea that principal support the powerful impact teachers have on student achievement can and can intensify and cultivate their effectiveness (Bettini et al., 2017).

Schools that are able to both include students with disabilities while simultaneously focusing on improving student achievement operate under specific ideals of inclusion that embed evidence-based instructional practices in the everyday routines of staff (Bettini et al., 2017). With this concept of inclusion, high-quality ELA instruction depends on well-designed and thoughtfully planned lessons aligned with achievable goals. A case study of two inclusive elementary schools which were considered models for improved outcomes for students with disabilities revealed that effective inclusive schools also embed collaborative problem-solving and professional development as core values that consequently help to improve student achievement (Hoppey et al., 2018). The culmination of these efforts is a professional learning community, where teachers develop the skills through the support of principals to help students learn.

Published research in the educational arena, focusing on school leadership, corroborates the principal's influence on student achievement. However, there is a lack of clarity about principals' roles and experiences with effectively engaging in and sustaining

the turnaround of low-performing schools or groups or achievement in particular subjects, such as ELA (Hitt et al., 2018). Growing concerns have pertained to what principals in lower-performing schools need to do to enhance school effectiveness to improve outcomes in subjects like ELA (Meyers & Hitt, 2017). Analysis of interviews of 19 principals whose schools demonstrated a rapid increase in student achievement substantiates elementary school principals' influence on student achievement, second only to teacher quality; principals might be accountable for up to 25% of the variation in ELA student achievement, and even more in chronically low-performing classes or schools where leadership can have much greater influence (Hitt et al., 2018).

The idea that subject matter might be departmentalized to enhance teaching effectiveness was also a subject of ELA research. For example, Baroody (2017) explored the contributions of classroom formats (including departmentalization) on teaching effectiveness and ELA achievement in elementary classrooms. Using secondary data from 464 inclusive American classrooms, regression models showed that departmentalization had a small positive association with higher teaching effectiveness ratings in ELA classes but was not a significant predictor of ELA achievement (Broody, 2017).

Goddard et al. (2019) collected data from 126 rural elementary schools in Michigan examining influence of instructional leadership on ELA student achievement measured by state standardized assessments. Reported findings by Goddard et al. suggested that instructional leadership positively and significantly related to teachers' reports of differentiated instruction (a positive and significant predictor of student

achievement), across demographics and student achievement levels. Schopp et al. (2017) similarly emphasized the roles of principals in evaluating teaching practice and building the professional capacity of school staff to instruct diverse learners through tools that optimally support students with disabilities. Conclusions drawn from the published body of knowledge are that leaders influence instructional practices that can improve student achievement in subjects measured by standardized exams, such as ELA.

Hitt et al. (2018) revealed thematic findings that principals also positively influence the standardized value of ELA test scores when they assert the following principal competencies: inspire and motivate; build capacity; hold others accountable for high standards; commit to and believe in students; and initiates, perseveres, and solves problems through critical inquiry. Similarly, Maponya (2020) applied a phenomenological research design to study the leadership of disadvantaged schools, concluding that the following instructional leadership elements were perceived as positively influencing learner academic achievement: motivation, creating a positive teaching and learning culture, student support, parental involvement, and flexible leadership styles.

Known Principal Challenges

As leaders, principals need to understand the challenges they face. A lack of understanding of challenges means there is an insufficient understanding of contexts and situations to enable effective leadership practice (Schopp et al., 2017). Open-ended questionnaires and personal interviews with eight school principals revealed the leaders' perceptions that they are confronting new demands, more complex decision-making and

added responsibilities than in past decades (Mestry, 2017). Principals' workdays are typically filled with numerous administrative and management tasks, such as procurement of resources, conflict resolution, and management of teacher-student crises, among other issues and challenges (Schopp et al., 2017). At the same time, it is imperative that school principals are able to accentuate their roles as transformative instructional leaders who emphasize best instructional practices and remain focused on curriculum, teaching, and assessments to meet diverse students' needs and enhance achievement (Lambrecht et al., 2020).

Evidence-Based Practices

Part of the increasing complexity pertains to special education students in inclusive classrooms who receive significant instruction in general education concepts with emphasis on vocational and college readiness standards by teachers tasked with using evidence-based teaching practices (Morningstar et al., 2017). The related challenges are identifying evidence-based practices that are necessary and appropriate, as every national, regional, and local context may differ. There has been considerable attention to conceptualizing principals' related experiences and challenges (DeMatthews et al., 2020). Bateman et al. (2017) cited a growing number of studies indicating principals want and need more special education knowledge, more meaningful data about EBPs, and were unaware of any specific guidelines or requirements for special education for principals.

Accountability

Sazik (2018) conducted a case study of two inclusive elementary schools to investigate the role of school management in the process of educating students with disabilities, interviewing stakeholders, making observations, and reviewing related documents. Thematic findings reported by Sazik pertained to concerns about narrow assessments guiding special education needs and educational content which could lead to suboptimal planning, coordination, and evaluation of the education provided to students with disabilities. Theoharis et al. (2016) noted how the reality for special education could be that, in an era of high-stakes accountability, many schools and districts could move away from inclusion and toward more exclusionary directions where students are tracked and segregated based on abilities or achievement levels. DeMatthews et al. (2020) discussed how special education had been a tool of racial segregation, most frequently in lower-income neighborhoods of color. Widening the view of special education practices, with a focus on ability and difference, rather than deficits, compels educational leaders to consider different pedagogy and curricula rather than relying on students to overcome their social disadvantages and learning disabilities (Gomez & McKee, 2020).

Leadership Tools and Training

DeMatthew et al. (2020) utilized an exploratory approach to study school leadership for effective inclusive schools, leading to common themes revolving around leadership practices that must account for and address organizational-level challenges and social conditions. Mette and Riegel (2018) also noted the ongoing reform efforts aimed at improving how students learn and demonstrate student achievement gains. The focus in

the case study by Mette and Riegel was on systems thinking pertaining to supervision (including formative feedback designed to support teachers' growth) and evaluations (summative feedback leading to employment-related decisions). The authors concluded that systems thinking and staff-related leadership tools can be well-applied leading to successful reforms, or misused in ways culminating in challenges contributing to principals' failed improvement initiatives.

Principals continually report a lack of knowledge and skills to effectively lead quality inclusive special education programs, in part because of little emphasis on training or implementable practical strategies (Murphy, 2018). Srivastavaa (2017) also discussed the great extent to which the preparedness and implementation of inclusive education remain elusive. Sun and Xin (2019) investigated 134 school principals' opinions about their knowledge, skills, and leadership roles in support of special needs students. Results reported by Sun and Xin were that the majority of principals expressed that they possessed limited or insufficient knowledge of special education and felt disengaged with special education in their leadership practices. Bateman et al. (2017) surveyed 462 principals in Virginia, the majority of whom also acknowledged their inadequate knowledge about special education laws and regulations.

There has been a lack of a clear definition, standards, and objectives for inclusion and least restrictive environments, which is a problem for many principals and school leaders. The lack of empirical studies on inclusion implementation and effectiveness also undermines opportunities for success (Francisco et al., 2020). Many principals lack an in-depth comprehension of special education laws, and according to the principals

interviewed by Theoharis et al. (2016), they too often feel that special education regulations make it difficult to move in more inclusive directions.

Teacher Training Deficits

One noted principal challenge pertains to the use of human resources to more flexibly build teams of educators who have the capacity to meet the widening range of student needs inclusively (Francisco et al., 2020). Mason-Williams et al. (2017) investigated the distribution of qualified special educators across elementary schools in public and private settings, generating a descriptive analysis of interest. Findings reported by Mason-Williams et al. were that in both types of schools, there is heavy reliance on special educators who lack qualifications in terms of experience, degrees, and certifications. Likewise, teachers' preparedness for special education inclusion received little attention, as well as their attitudes, knowledge about disabilities, and inclusive teaching methods (Srivastavaa, 2017). Hitt et al. (2018) similarly asserted that several factors contribute to the effectiveness of a principal, which might also represent challenges: school and district context, accountability environment, prior experience and preparation, and disposition.

Multidimensional Concerns

Some leadership roles of principals include establishing and communicating a shared vision, establishing collaborative relationships to allow for the provision of optimum supports, establishing systems and structures that protect instruction, securing staff, and providing supports to instructional programs via an effective monitoring and improvement process (Leithwood et al., 2019). Along with the accountability to the entire

school population, principals are responsible for securing LRE for students with disabilities that protect their services and promote their academic development (Sun & Xin, 2020). Some of the challenges principals face while applying leadership to support the achievement of their inclusive special education students are due to their simultaneous leadership roles of principals in general education (Sun & Xin, 2020).

Part of principal leadership challenges is the multi-dimensional nature of the job. Miller (2019) interviewed five retired special education administrators who left their jobs because of stress, family obligations, and organizational culture changes; challenges expressed included increasingly complex student and teacher needs, difficulties recruiting and retaining qualified staff, stress, longer hours, and more external mandates on the national or state levels. Sheng et al. (2017) collected and analyzed survey and focus group interview data to evaluate principals' management and instructional leadership, and school achievement. The results demonstrated that releasing principals from managerial responsibilities with the purpose of freeing up more time to devote to instructional leadership had a positive impact on management and instructional leadership at the elementary school level, with the greatest noted impact at the middle school level (Sheng et al., 2017).

Hoppey et al. (2018) noted that a particular challenge for principals of inclusive schools is discreetly buffering teachers from undue external pressures, with the purpose of helping teachers focus on teaching and learning in ways that meet the needs of every diverse student in the classroom. This implies that there may be a period of transformative change that is not focused on high-stakes testing as much as on teaching

strategies that support the needs of diverse learners. DeMatthews et al. (2020) collected data from inclusive elementary school principals that highlighted the role of principals in promoting equitable inclusion, and the different beliefs and approaches to creating inclusive schools - some leadership practices had an instructional focus while others more driven by transformational and social justice leadership concerns.

Embracing Culture

Competent inclusive school leaders must address instructional practices and social justice concerns, as well as foster a school culture that equitably encompasses a range of cultures, languages, backgrounds, and experiences (Schopp et al., 2017). Abawi et al. (2018) conducted a cross-cultural study of inclusive leadership practices over an extended time, interested in the norms and assumptions embedded in the school culture. Interview data from principals and teachers were analyzed with a refractive phenomenological approach, which led to impressions and insights into the complexities faced by staff. Findings included challenges understanding special needs or disabilities, supporting English language learners, being responsive to extreme trauma in students' lives, and attempting to collaborate with families experiencing varied difficulties (Abawi et al., 2018). Principals must consider numerous factors when creating inclusive schools and rely on a wide range of EBPs while confronting potential resistance to meaningful change (DeMatthews et al., 2020). These complexities contribute to the many principals' feelings of unpreparedness for their responsibilities in administering special education programs (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020).

Inclusive schools represent a shift toward more collaborative educational philosophies, requiring ongoing collaborative planning time that can represent a persistent schedule or time challenge for some inclusive schools (Hoppey et al., 2018). As school leaders, principals may struggle to define and shape the school culture in ways that provide consistent opportunities for the growth and development of all learners, including teachers and students with disabilities (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). Lowrey and Smith (2018) conducted interviews with 18 elementary school principals to learn about implementation efforts to support students with disabilities. Findings reported by Lowrey and Smith pertained to philosophies, curriculum, designs, assessments, change, support, and outcomes, drawing conclusions that new or different educational practice implementation is complex and success demands commitment and constituent buy-into the educational practices. Successful change depends upon how it is promoted, institutional context and culture, leadership support for the resources required, and leaders' abilities to overcome the challenges confronted in the course of their efforts.

Summary and Conclusions

The instructional leadership elementary principals employ to maintain effective inclusive special education environments is pivotal to academic achievement for students with disabilities. Bettini et al. (2017) said that principals of high performing inclusive schools shaped an inclusive culture in which all teachers took responsibility for ensuring students with disabilities achieved high standards. Principals develop the instructional capacity of their teachers which leads to academic achievement for their students and overall educational successes in schools. Through research efforts to understand

principals' roles in schools, principal challenges emerged as important to recognize and address to positively impact achievement. Additionally, the ESSA's increasing accountability for elementary principals to positively influence achievement for all students and the NESD's ELA achievement gaps for inclusive special education students in grades three through five further motivated my exploration into challenges elementary school principals must overcome to successfully lead inclusive schools and positively influence ELA achievement for students in grades three through five.

Student achievement is a multifaceted phenomenon, often discussed in terms of test scores. Factors that influence student achievement include but are not limited to teachers, instruction, curriculum, school culture, planning, resource utilization, and professional development, and NESDs principals are evaluated yearly via the PSEL which encompass each factor that influence student achievement. The PSEL mirror the instructional leadership domains described by Weber's instructional leadership model for effective leaders. NESD district leaders as well as other district leaders may need to advocate that specific language concerning students with disabilities to be added to the PSEL by which NESD elementary principals are evaluated. Sun & Xin (2020) said principals have struggled with meeting the needs of special education, while managing general education, and effectiveness of school leadership may affect all students' learning. Research to address challenges that principals of inclusive schools must overcome to positively influence ELA achievement is warranted and can help to fill a gap in knowledge. Because the NESD struggle with ELA achievement gaps involving students with disabilities, research involving challenges elementary principals face while

supporting the ELA achievement of their inclusive special education populations in grades three through five may lead to recommendations that could narrow these gaps and facilitate equitable learning outcomes for all students in the district.

Chapter 3 includes justifications for the selected research method and design. Included in the chapter are descriptions of the researcher's role, population, and sampling techniques, as well as explanations regarding the method and design and plans for data collection and analysis. I also addressed steps to enhance trustworthiness of the study and procedures to ensure ethical research.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore instructional leadership challenges the NESD elementary principals face while supporting the ELA achievement of their inclusive special education populations in grades three through five. Chapter 3 includes the rationale for the selected research method and design. I address the role of the researcher, population, and sampling techniques. I also address data collection and analysis as well as steps taken to enhance trustworthiness of the study and procedures to ensure ethical research.

Research Design and Rationale

The nature of this basic qualitative study was to address instructional leadership challenges that the NESD elementary principals face while supporting ELA achievement of their inclusive special education populations in grades three through five. The basic qualitative study design was an appropriate approach to understand this topic. The qualitative methodology was the choice selected for this research because it enables collection of in-depth data that facilitates discovery of real lived experiences.

A qualitative research methodology involves research processes used to examine, explore, discover, and understand perceptions, experiences, and events in institutional contexts (Alpo & Evans, 2019). The qualitative methodology involves collection of data in the form of rich texts gathered through conversations to gather information pertaining to a study's phenomenon (Kozleski, 2017). Conversely, quantitative data collection involves numerical or fixed answer choices leading to statistical data analysis and findings that are more generalizable than qualitative research results (Tobi & Kampen,

2018). However, the subject of this research could not have been readily studied through fixed or numerical answers because there leaders knew little about variables involving challenges of school principals supporting ELA achievement of students in inclusive special education classrooms. The quantitative approach would not have helped in terms of addressing those unknown challenges in sufficient depth to derive understanding from informed participants who are willing and able to describe their lived experiences. The mixed methods design encompasses both qualitative and quantitative approaches (Martiny et al., 2021). The mixed methodology was similarly unsuitable for this study because additional quantitative research would be unlikely to lead to an answer to the research question. Accordingly, the qualitative method best aligned with the purpose and research question for this study.

A basic qualitative research design was preferable to other research designs for this study. Qualitative research is widely applied to the study of experiences in bounded social contexts (Tobi & Kampen, 2018). I used a basic qualitative study design that was appropriate to better understand the participants' perspectives and lived experiences relating to instructional leadership and inclusive special education. This study involves multiple sites within a single school district with similar local contextual factors. The exploratory basic qualitative study was more suitable than an explanatory design. Exploratory research seeks to understand about the challenges elementary principal faced as little was known about the phenomenon, and explanatory or causal design seeks to explain causal processes with the phenomena (Ravitch & Carl (2016).

Other qualitative designs were less appropriate. The qualitative research methodology encompasses several designs, such as phenomenology, case study, narrative, and ethnographic designs (Rieger, 2019). Phenomenology is most appropriate when the goals of the research involve deriving meaning from the essence of experiences (Martiny et al., 2021). The research question in this study did not pertain to what it is like to be a principal but focused on particular challenges. Therefore, a phenomenological design was unsuitable for this study. The narrative design involves capturing narrated stories about individuals' experiences as expressed by individuals (Sharp et al., 2018). A narrative design would not likely have culminated in detailed findings about challenges involving the particular phenomenon as this study required a previously prepared interview protocol designed to extract specific and direct information relating to the study's phenomenon. Therefore, explanatory research alone would not have been suitable for this study. An ethnographic design requires in-person fieldwork and immersion, through participant observations, in a setting that could lead to meaningful insights (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). However, ethnography was less feasible during the pandemic and would have required more time and resources than a basic qualitative study. Case study research may have been too laborious and complex for this study's research question and purpose because a case study is an in-depth study of a case or multiple cases which tend to engage an assortment of data sources that can include observations, interviews, documents, artifacts, and other sources (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Role of the Researcher

The researcher completes many tasks, including selecting and justifying the method and design most suitable for addressing a problem, posing and answering research questions, recruiting participants, and collecting and analyzing data that leads to results (Ravitch et al., 2016). In qualitative research studies, researchers act as instruments of data collection as they capture expressed thoughts and perceived experiences of participants (Forero et al., 2018). Qualitative researchers interact with participants in a nonbiased conversational manner throughout interviews to build rapport and trust that can lead to more thorough and rich data (Garbarski et al., 2016). In this qualitative study, I facilitated the process of data collection by asking interview questions in a nonbiased manner while building rapport with participants. I recorded and transcribed verbatim data to also minimize bias. Following that process, I organized and analyzed data and reported findings in terms of answering the research question.

My experiences in educational leadership positions led to my own concerns and perspectives about the problem, which led to identification of the research topic and purpose. Although my familiarity with the topic and experiences may represent a source of bias, I documented and described selected contexts, populations, and sampling procedures, along with detailed reports about the methodology and design steps, in order to identify and report on possible sources of bias. From the district's 123 elementary principals, I refrained from purposefully sampling principals I knew or worked with personally to avoid bias due to preexisting relationships. During the interview process, my personal experiences helped me assess the potential value of additional probative

questions and build rapport with participants. Identifying sources of personal biases that may influence research results helped me to recognize and consciously set them aside while also acknowledging their potential influence on results. A thoughtful and well-reasoned data collection protocol with questions grounded in conceptual, theoretical, and peer-reviewed literature is helpful to reduce bias. I relied on Weber's instructional leadership model, Hornby's inclusive education theory and prior literature about the topic to create a nonbiased data collection protocol with interview questions that helped guide interviews in terms of pertinent lines of inquiry.

It is also the role of the researcher to act ethically. The foundation to modern ethical research is the Belmont Report, which described ethical research involving human participants as just, beneficial, and equitable. The basis of ethical research is informed consent (Denzin, 2017; Hokke et al., 2018). I sent an informed consent form to each prospective participant to communicate their rights and responsibilities as human research subjects. I was also willing to explain, answer questions, and clarify the terms of the informed consent form to ensure ethical research. I did not collect data until after Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval and did not conduct interviews with participants until they signed informed consent forms, indicating they understood the terms of their participation. I also protected their identities and ensured confidentiality by assigning participant numbers to deidentify data and report findings. Assigning pseudonyms (P1 through P10) is a way to ensure confidentiality of participants by separating data from informants' names and identities (Gani et al., 2020).

Methodology

The subsequent subsections include details about participant selection and procedures for recruitment and participation. The discussion of data collection leads to the details about instrumentation. Procedures for data analysis conclude this section.

Participant Selection

In the NESD, there are 123 elementary schools with one principal at each school. The district is among the nation's 20th largest school districts in the United States with a budget in the billions of dollars range. More than half of the students are Black or African American with the majority receiving free meals, and approximately one-third are Hispanic, and 20% are English language learners, with much lesser proportions of other races and categories. The special education student population comprises approximately 10% of the students in the district.

Principals, as participants in this study, were selected from this district via a purposeful sampling approach. Purposeful sampling is a nonprobability technique that involves the selection of uniquely qualified and informed people, per the selection criteria, who are most likely to provide the quality of data required to answer the research question (Palinkas et al., 2015). I contacted all the principals in the district who led inclusive special education programs and relied on the principals' self-report that they met the eligibility criteria. One could assume that principals with five or more years of experience and who led inclusive special education programs would be knowledgeable. An assumption was that principals would be honest in their self-report establishing their

eligibility to participate in the study. Further verification stemmed from publicly accessible reported student populations and recorded work history.

The eligibility criteria included the NESD elementary school principals with at least 5 years of experience, and a special education population, including grades three through five, which comprises at least 5% of their total school populations. I communicated with principals via an invitation to participate in the research (see Appendix A). Neither the population nor sample included principals of other types of self-contained programs. Through purposive sampling, I selected nine NESD elementary principals, who provided instructional leadership and supported ELA instruction for grades three through five special education students in inclusive environments. Recruitment efforts led to a sample of participants who signed the informed consent form and who voluntarily completed interviews.

At least eight participants who can offer in-depth data are likely to comprise a sample size that leads to data saturation (Hennick et al., 2019). Although I planned for a final sample of between eight and 12 participants, the final sample size was determined by data saturation. Accordingly, I recruited eight participants then checked for data saturation, which is the point at which data appears to become repetitive. Data saturation was not evident, so I continued to recruit and interview an additional principal, then was able to confirm that no new data appeared to emerge from ongoing data collection efforts.

Identification of the population occurred through publicly accessible information about the leadership of the school district. Publicly accessible information is characteristic of public school districts to provide transparency in leadership staff. I

identified schools with inclusive and special education populations through publicly available data about schools posted through the school district and state educational websites. With the ubiquity of the internet related technology, public availability of contact information helps to reduce the potential cost and time required for recruitment, making it more popular to rely on the publicly available contact information to recruit and engage participants (Hokke et al., 2018).

Instrumentation

Qualitative study designs include steps to collect data from multiple informants (Varpio et al., 2017). In this basic exploratory qualitative study, there was data collection by interviewing multiple principals who worked in different schools to understand the challenges they face while supporting the ELA achievement of their inclusive special education populations. Collecting data from multiple people who work within the same system is more likely to lead to holistic trustworthy findings than might result from a more narrow focus on less diverse experiences (Forero et al., 2018). Creating and utilizing a systematic interview protocol helps to engage multiple participants in a consistent, unbiased manner (Rashid et al., 2019). Appendix A includes the data collection protocol for this study.

The basis for the development of the interview protocols and questions was the published peer-reviewed literature. The foundation for this study were the findings in the published body of knowledge and the conceptual frameworks applied to this research. Accordingly, the 10 initial guiding interview questions revolved around the instructional leadership model of Weber (1987) and the Hornby (2015) theory of inclusive special

education and are sufficient to answer the research question. Questions were reviewed by a panel of four experts in qualitative and educational research to confirm that they are sensible, logical, comprehensible, and pertinent to the research and purpose of this study. The 10 initial guiding interview questions for this study are in Appendix A.

Researchers behave as “human instruments” for qualitative data collection, because they devise and ask questions in interviews and capture data, most often in the form of recordings (Forero et al., 2018, p. 120). Recording interviews frees up the interviewer to focus on participants, build rapport, and notice nonverbal cues, rather than writing down answers (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). As an instrument, I devised and asked questions during recorded interviews, remaining focused on the participants and the protocols established, then transcribed the audio-recordings to create verbatim accounts in the form of textual data.

The semistructured interviews with participants occurred by zoom. The expected duration of each interview was about 60 minutes. Each participant completed one one-on-one interview session and were invited to participate in member checking, which is reviewing the initial interpretations of data. During member checking, which occurred via email, participants could add, refute, or clarify initial interpretations of the data, which was also a way to confirm data saturation.

The interviews were in a semistructured format with 10 initial open-ended questions created after a comprehensive extensive review of the related theory, concepts, and literature. The semistructured interview format is a planned yet flexible process (Forero et al., 2018). According to Rohrer et al. (2017), semistructured interviews will

allow for follow-up, clarifications, explanations, and additional questions of probative values. Open-ended questions asked in a flexible semistructured format have the potential to lead to data saturation (Hennink et al., 2019). To apply these recommended practices, the 10 initial guiding questions in this study were open-ended and asked in a semistructured interview format, which led to additional questions of probative value.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

Using the publicly available contact information from district and state websites, I identified the email addresses of principals who were likely to meet the eligibility criteria, based on the online descriptions of their schools and the data offered to the public. I sent the principals with inclusive special education students totaling at least 5% of their total student populations an invitation to participate with an attached informed consent form. The invitation and consent form had my contact information with an encouragement to call or email me anytime with questions about participation. An individual becomes a participant when they signed the informed consent form and sent it back to me via email, fax, or by postal mail. After receiving a signed informed consent form, I scheduled a zoom interview, based on the availability of the participant.

Data collection included conducting semistructured interviews. Interviews occurred by zoom, to adhere to social distancing recommendations associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. The interviews took place at a mutually agreed upon time and discrete setting to allow participants comfortability with responding to the interview questions. Zoom and media communications have been more widely accepted means of data collection when face-to-face interviewing is not feasible (Basch et al., 2020).

Techniques to collect data from principals in the sample adhered to a data collection protocol (see Appendix A). The design of the data collection protocol is for semistructured interviews with open-ended questions, which is among the preferences noted by Rashid et al. (2019) for qualitative data collection. Semistructured interviews are common sources of data, which can be recorded and transcribed to produce a textual verbatim record of the participants' answers (Cleland, 2017). Accordingly, I recorded the interviews using MP3 files and transcribed the answers to the interview questions to obtain a verbatim record of participants' experiences. I transcribed audio-recordings by typing the words I heard into a Word Processing file as I listened to each MP3 recording. I read through the transcripts for errors and corrections.

The interview data collection process occurred during a two-month period, and each interview, which were semistructured in nature, lasted about an hour in duration. Semistructured interviews begin with a set of guiding questions as a part of the protocol, and then can continue more flexibly than structured interviews, adding probative value to interview efforts that can enrich initial answers to original questions (Gani et al., 2020). Open-ended questions are preferable in qualitative data collection interviews, because answers are more in-depth which can enhance the quality and richness of data that can lead to data saturation (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). Although semistructured interviews with open-ended questions are preferable to interviews that are structured or unstructured or that involve mostly close-ended questions, the data collected is predictably voluminous which requires time, effort, and expertise to analyze (Cleland, 2017).

Computer assisted qualitative data analysis software is a helpful tool to organize and analyze large segments of textual data regardless of the data form (Saldaña, 2016). I utilized NVivo to assist me with the data analysis process, but the thoughtful and reflective analytical process was my responsibility throughout the analysis process. Transcriptions of interviews, which are textual data, are up-loadable to software like NVivo to be able to perform data organization, sorting, coding, and analysis that can lead to trustworthy findings (Rashid et al., 2019). I used NVivo to assist me with the data organization and analysis following the data collection process and using software to upload enabled me to be aware of the nature of data to discern the point of data saturation and to generate reports, charts, tables, and visual depictions as necessary and appropriate for the goals of the research.

The data collected from nine participants resulted in data saturation, which is an indicator of data adequacy in qualitative studies. Data saturation is when no new data emerges from ongoing data collection (Badu et al., 2019). A larger sample may be necessary to recognize data saturation, although recognizing data saturation does depend on a researcher's keen attention to the data that emerges during the collection process (Saunders et al., 2018). I remained cognizant of the quality and richness of data throughout the collection process and was astute to be able to recognize the point at which no new concepts appear to emerge from ongoing data collection efforts. If data saturation was not evident, I would have continued to recruit and interview one principal at a time until able to confirm data saturation from ongoing data collection efforts.

When the participant had no further comments or questions, I thanked the participant a final time and stopped the recording. Participants were informed that it may be necessary to request additional time with them should I run into difficulty interpreting their data. I asked the participant how they felt after the interview, told them they did well, reminded them that they would receive initial interpretations and analysis for further review and comment, and said goodbye.

Data Analysis Plan

Systematic data analysis that leads to confirmable themes can add rigor and trustworthiness to qualitative studies (Gani et al., 2020). Unlike the statistical tests that apply to a quantitative method, qualitative data analysis requires conceptual approaches that can lead to sensible, relevant, thematic findings (Booth, 2016). Generating themes from systematic coding is a process that leads to an answer to the research question (Rashid et al., 2019). I followed systematic qualitative data analysis steps in a search for themes in the textual data that comprised an answer to the research question.

Qualitative thematic data analysis requires a reflective search through the texts to identify words, phrases, and expressed ideas that represent patterns that can be sensibly organized into themes (Fàbregues & Fetters, 2019). Content analysis is a process that also accounts for the frequency of words, phrases, and ideas that are convergent or divergent across the different participants' data, such as seen in first cycle of initial coding where grammatical, elemental, affective, literary and language, exploratory, and procedural coding methods occur (Saldaña, 2016). I began the analytical process of a thematic content analysis by inspecting, reading, and studying the transcribed interviews.

Thoughtful focus on the data facilitates an awareness of the holistic nature of the data and the potential categories and themes that may ultimately be identifiable from the group of texts (McGrath et al., 2018). During the first cycle coding, I broke down my interview data by assigning excerpts of datum tentative descriptive labels to give meaning to each code then sought connections between each code to begin capturing the phenomena across the data, in the coding process described by Saldaña (2016). Reading and studying data as part of the first steps of analysis promotes an appreciation for the breadth and depth of data, confirming data saturation and becoming cognizant of the codes that may appropriately apply in a search for common themes (Fàbregues & Fetters, 2019).

Coding requires isolating meaningful text into categorized units that would ultimately lead to the identification of themes (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017). The second cycle coding process included reorganizing and grouping the initial analytic details into categories through axial coding, as described by Saldaña (2016). I coded data, forming categories while notating patterns that were likely to lead to recognizable themes. Possible themes that may have emerged in this study included instructional leadership provided and specific challenges faced by principals. During this process, I noted discrepant findings and areas where the data from different participants appear to diverge.

The final data analysis step involved combining major emergent concepts and categories of texts into themes. Labelling of themes and evaluating those themes occurred considering the research question and position among the hierarchy of findings. The

report of the data analysis results included quotes from participants as exemplary data that supports the major thematic findings.

Assisting me in this data analysis process was computer software, including audio files, word processing files and NVivo, which scholars such as Houghton et al. (2017) and Bufoni et al. (2017) suggested is useful in facilitating the qualitative data analysis process. Zamawe (2015) emphasized that NVivo can be a useful tool to facilitate data organization, coding, and a search for thematic findings, but does not replace the researcher, who needs to engage fully in the data analysis process. Although I expected that NVivo would help me in the data organization, management, and analysis process, I also stayed engaged in thoughtfully recognizing and evaluating codes, categories, and themes.

Disconfirming Evidence

During the analysis phase of this study, I looked for and reported data that neither confirmed nor refuted the study's emerging patterns or themes. This involved transparency of the documentation, interpretation and analysis of data to provide an understanding of how meaning was extracted from the data. It will also be necessary to avoid qualitative analysis pitfalls described by Ravitch and Carl (2016), such as intermingling questions from an instrument with the analytic themes and forgoing the analytic process, using themes that overlap or make no sense, using data that do not support claims, and not attending to the conceptual framework. I assured transparency of the interpretation and analysis processes to include the description of disconfirming evidence so that readers can develop their own conclusions.

Trustworthiness

Credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability apply to qualitative research, indicative of the trustworthiness of the research process and findings (Saunders et al., 2018). As a researcher, I was attentive to issues of trustworthiness, and continuously considered how the steps in the research helped to enhance credibility, dependability, and confirmability, as further described below. By detailing the steps sampling, and context of the research, others have information necessary to make appropriate judgements about the transferability of findings.

Credibility

In this study, confirmation of data saturation and incorporation of a member checking process were steps to enhance credibility. Member checking involves feedback from the participants about the interpretations of data, representing a process of "respondent validation" (Yang et al., 2018, p. 1127). Member checking enhances the accuracy of findings by enlisting participants in adding to, confirming, refuting, or clarifying the initial interpretations of findings based on the data they offered (McGrath et al., 2018). I sent participants a summary of my initial interpretations of data and invited their review and further comment about the contents of that summary, asking for their additional input with the week that follows. This type of member checking process also is a way to confirm data saturation because participants have an opportunity to add to the data if they believe it insufficiently represents their experiences (Varpio et al., 2017).

Dependability

Dependability reflects the degree to which findings would be similar upon replication, which can be accomplished through well-documented research steps and descriptions of the sample and setting (Schloemer & Schröder-Bäck, 2018). Member-checking and data saturation enhance the credibility of qualitative research, which is a reflection of its truth and accuracy (Busetto et al., 2020). Dependability is similar to the reliability concerns addressed by quantitative researchers (Forero et al., 2018). In qualitative research, dependability is established when data remain stable and consistent over time (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Repeating the study using the same population, sampling strategies, data collection and analysis procedures should lead to similar results. Although replication of the study was not feasible in this case, I provided detailed audit trail of the methodology and design, which will help others be able to repeat these efforts. Additionally, I acknowledged and attempted to mitigate bias, which according to Gani et al. (2020), could increase dependability and lead to consistent findings from similar study efforts.

Triangulation of data is another method for achieving dependability (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Triangulation occurs when researchers join multiple and varying sources of information to form themes or categories in a study. Data sources included multiple informants who provided answers to open-ended questions asked in semistructured, one-on-one interviews. The collection of data from multiple informants enhanced the trustworthiness of qualitative study findings by providing varied experiences and perspectives about a phenomenon (Hyett et al., 2014). I examined the data from each of

the informants who provided their personal perspectives about the instructional leadership challenges elementary principals face while supporting the ELA achievement of their inclusive special education students. Interviewing nine elementary principals provided multiple perspectives relative to the phenomena that helped answer the research question.

Confirmability

Confirmability represents opportunities to verify findings through transparency (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Researchers must ensure the study's findings result from the lived experiences and ideas of the participants rather than those of the researcher by continuously reflecting on the research process (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I reflected on my personal biases as they related to the phenomena and capture raw data that is free from interpretation. Maintaining an audit trail and retaining data for a specified period of time are also ways to ensure confirmability (Hyett et al., 2014), which occurred in this study, according to the university IRB protocols for data security, storage, and destruction.

Transferability

Transferability is the extent to which findings might appropriately apply to other similar populations, settings, or samples; although transferability is similar in concept to the generalizability of quantitative findings, transferability depends on the keen judgements of readers, which requires sufficient details in the study report (Saunders et al., 2018). Basic qualitative study findings might or might not transfer appropriately to other settings, study contexts, populations, and samples, and is subject to the prudent judgment of others who need to consider the conditions and contexts of the research

(Cleland, 2017). To enable readers to make good decisions about transferability, I included thick descriptions of the setting, population, and sample, and will explain in detail the methodological steps applied in this study. Acknowledging biases, assumptions, scope, limitations, and delimitations, which I include in this dissertation, also assists others in judging the appropriateness of transferability (Page et al., 2018).

Ethical Procedures

I did not collect data until IRB approved the steps to the research, thereby adhering to ethical expectations. Ethical research is generally subject to the approval of a related IRB which enforces the guidelines of the Belmont Report (Hokke et al., 2018). The National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research (1979) created the Belmont Report to address concerns about human research and stressed the principles of respect, justice, and fairness. These principles are inherent to the process of individuals being able to read, discuss, and sign an informed consent form before agreeing to become a research participant (Guillemin et al., 2018). The informed consent process is a form of verification that the research subjects are voluntarily consenting to the terms of the research and fully understand their roles, rights, risks, and responsibilities associated with their participation in the study (Bromley et al., 2015; Rashid et al., 2019).

The informed consent form conveyed risks (which are minimal and no more than the discomfort of answering questions) and participants' rights to withdraw at any time (before, during, or after data collection) without penalties or consequences. The informed consent form also included the fact that there was no tangible incentives or compensation

nor deception, although interviews would be recorded. In addition to waiting for IRB approval, I ensured that each prospective participant received an IRB approved informed consent form, and that no data collection occurred with an individual who did not agree to the stated terms of the study by signing the form. During recruitment, I sent the informed consent form with the invitation emails and signed forms, to be returned to me by email, fax, or postal mail.

Widely applied steps for ethical research include fulfilling the responsibility to protect identities, ensure confidentiality, and safeguard data (Rashid et al., 2019). I assigned a participant number (also called a pseudonym, such as P1, P2, P3, through P8). Assigning pseudonyms conceals identities, allows data to be de-identified, and is a simple process that separates data from participants' names and identities (Gani et al., 2020). I assigned pseudonyms (participant numbers P1 through P8) in the order in which I received signed informed consent forms. I stored a list of pseudonyms assigned to names of participants in a locked cabinet in my home, separately from the data and informed consent form. I did not include names of participants, schools, districts, third parties, states or localities in the published report of findings or elsewhere for any other person to see.

Data remained secure. Electronic files remained in a computer that required that I use a password to access it. Nobody else knew the password. Forms, such as the informed consent forms, were locked in a cabinet in my home. The key to the pseudonyms was on paper, stored in a second locked cabinet in my home. I am the only person in possession of the key to the cabinets. The list that matches assigned pseudonyms to participants'

names was retained for the purposes of identifying data to immediately destroy it the event that a participant chose to withdraw from the study. I will keep other data for 3 years then destroy it. Destruction of computer-housed data will occur by permanent deletion. I will burn aforementioned papers stored in the cabinets.

Summary

This chapter included the rationale and details regarding the qualitative methodology and multiple basic qualitative study design to understand challenges elementary principals face while supporting the ELA achievement of their inclusive special education populations. I addressed recruitment, sampling, data collection, and data analysis. I also included steps for enhancing trustworthiness and ethical nature of research. Chapter 4 includes results of data collection from audio-recorded and transcribed semistructured interviews and thematic findings from content analysis.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore instructional leadership challenges that the NESD elementary principals face while supporting the ELA achievement of their inclusive special education populations in grades three through five. A gap in practice involved a lack of leaders' understanding of instructional leadership challenges that elementary principals perceive are necessary to overcome to support improvements in special education ELA achievement. I used the following overarching research question about the leadership and instructional challenges perceived by the NESD elementary school principals:

RQ: What are instructional leadership challenges that the NESD elementary principals perceive as necessary to overcome in order to support ELA achievement of their inclusive special education populations in grades three through five?

Chapter 4 includes a description of the setting, data collection, and analysis. Data collection included interviews with nine NESD elementary principals involving supporting the ELA achievement of their inclusive special education populations in grades three through five. Thematic analysis led to six major themes with supporting subthemes. Member checking, reaching data saturation, the purposeful sampling technique, and a rigorous peer review process inherent to doctoral research helped to enhance trustworthiness of the study.

Setting

There are 123 elementary schools with one principal at each school in the NESD that was the setting for this study. The district is among the nation's largest 20 school

districts. The Black or African American student population is 55.3% and 36.46% are Hispanic, with 20.59% English language learners and 66.46% qualifying for free meals. Special education students comprise approximately 10.54% of the student body served by the district.

Nine principals participated in the study, selected from the NESD using a purposeful sampling approach. Purposeful sampling involved selecting people who appeared to qualify for the sample and consented to terms of participation and agreed to share their experiences in interview processes. All principals in the district who led inclusive special education programs received an invitation to participate via their publicly accessible email addresses. Those principals who replied with interest self-reported that they met eligibility criteria.

All principals in the sample had between 5 and 9 years of experience leading inclusive special education programs for grades three through five, which was further confirmed via the NESD publically accessible information. All principals in the sample were women, and eight of the nine principals in the sample were Black. Two reported being from Nigeria. One of the principals was Caucasian. Two of the nine principals in the sample previously earned doctorate degrees, and two were completing programs at the time of interviews.

The initial recruitment process included selecting and interviewing the first eight principals who replied with interest and consented to the terms of participation. To ensure data saturation, one additional principal participated in an interview. Although all participants were aware they could withdraw from the study at any time before, during, or

after data collection, none of the principals in the sample withdrew from the study. After confirming eligibility, receiving informed consent forms, and scheduling interview times with each participant, interviews occurred via video and were audio-recorded using Zoom.

Data Collection

Data collection involved conducting semi-structured interviews. Interviews occurred via Zoom in order to adhere to social distancing recommendations because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Interviews took place during mutually agreed upon times and involved adhering to the data collection protocol (see Appendix A). The data collection protocol involved semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions. The interview data collection process occurred during a 2-month period, and each interview lasted about an hour in duration.

Interviewees' answers to the interview questions were recorded to MP3 files and transcribed in order to produce textual verbatim records of participants' answers. None of the recordings included participant names but were instead labelled by participant number P1 through P8. I transcribed interviews by listening to recordings and typing words I heard into a Microsoft Word document. The transcription process led to a total of 180 double-spaced typed pages of data, which included all interview answers from the nine participants. Following transcriptions, I read through and inspected transcripts for typos, errors, and corrections, and looked for signs of data saturation.

Data collected from eight participants appeared to result in data saturation, which is an indicator of data adequacy in qualitative studies. I remained cognizant of the quality

and richness of data throughout the collection process and believed I was able to recognize the point at which no new concepts appeared to emerge from ongoing data collection efforts. To ensure data saturation, I recruited and interviewed one additional principal.

After confirming data saturation and developing some initial interpretations of data, I sent a summary of interpretations to participants for member checking. I waited for about 2 weeks for participants to add to, refute, or further clarify initial interpretations of collected and transcribed data. No principals refuted, added to, or disputed initial interpretations of data. Following this member checking process was the thematic data analysis process, which led to the identification of six major themes.

Data Analysis

Systematic data analysis led to six relevant thematic findings that emerged from data. Generating themes from a holistic impression of data in combination with systematic coding and further content analysis, led to data answering to overarching research question. Qualitative thematic data analysis started with a reflective search through texts to identify words, phrases, and expressed ideas that represented patterns that could be sensibly organized into themes. I used NVivo for organization and management of data.

I began the analytical process of thematic content analysis by inspecting, reading, and studying transcribed interviews. I focused on content analysis to account for frequency of words, phrases, and ideas that were convergent and divergent across different participants' data. During initial coding, I isolated meaningful texts into

categorized units that ultimately led to identification of themes. The second cycle coding process included reorganizing and grouping initial analytic details through axial coding in order to form categories and patterns representing recognizable themes. During this process, I noted discrepant findings and areas where data from different participants appeared to diverge.

The final data analysis step involved combining major emergent concepts and categories of texts into themes, as well as noting subthemes, which were categories that were relevant to or supportive of the six major themes. Results that follow include quotes from participants in order to support major thematic findings.

Results

Analysis of data led to six major thematic findings about the instructional leadership challenges that the NESD elementary principals perceive are necessary to overcome to support ELA achievement of their inclusive special education populations in grades three through five. The major themes pertained to time, staffing, structures, instructional strategies, data, and applied philosophies. The major thematic findings each include several sub-themes.

Theme One: Time Management

A major challenge for the principals interviewed in this study included time-management. Reported by all the principals in the study was a time limitation. The challenges pertaining to time included not having enough time for the various elements deemed necessary for the successful support of ELA achievement among inclusive special education populations in grades three through five. Among the time management

problems identified, the limited time identified by the principals in this study created challenges across several essential areas, as described in the subsections below. P6 said:

> The challenge is that some of the job responsibilities that are put on an administrator are not reasonable. It's not a matter of someone not wanting to do the work, or not wanting to do the load, or feeling like it's not my job – it is just not reasonable…I am like over dedicated and for me to say that it's unreasonable everything that's expected of me to get done in the course of the day is the truth. So, it's time… having to be everywhere. It's just a challenge.

Teacher Training and Professional Development

In addition to general time constraints because of the volume and diversity of administrative responsibilities, time management challenges spanned across several different specific areas. Of the 282 occasions that the concept of time was mentioned by participants in the study, there were 21 references that emerged from the data that pertained to the idea of needing more time for teacher training and professional development. For example, P1 called for more time, “than what the training has been providing in terms of the district or pre-service.” P2 said that for strategies to work, teachers need more, “time to do safe practice [then] we want to see them embed that in lesson plans.” P3 discussed “extensive training being needed …As the instructional leader, do I want to work, one-on-one with them, of course… I can't be everywhere.” P4 claimed, “as for professional development, there's more training that has to take place... but all those trainings impact service hours.” P4 also explained that training teachers “impacts instructional time because they're not there servicing students. They’re at all

these trainings for these programs…That's been a challenge." P9 said, "I make it my business to have professional development [but] we need to increase service hours."

There was also mention of the professional development of principals, which was welcomed by the principals in the sample. However, some of the principals were conflicted over time taken from other responsibilities. P1 described a challenge as "making sure that we incorporate those opportunities and ideal times for our professional learning basically to address those gaps." For example, P7 said, "it is a challenge for me to attend additional trainings that my schedule just can't fit." P8 said, "I'm working around the clock, spending the time during the day being there for everyone, training those people that are new who don't have a clue… you're trying to do that and trying to make those mandatory deadlines."

IEP Development and Monitoring

Of the 119 references to IEPs that emerged from the interview data, focus was on making time to adequately plan and implement the IEP. References were to IEP meetings, implementation, and monitoring. For example, about meetings, P2 discussed, "a lot of meetings during the day… time that we need sometimes that IEPs require… we have certain specials that are an hour long… we really prioritize scheduling … so that kids don't miss instructional time for those meetings…" P3 said, "Time to have meetings with the special education team…. That's been a challenge, so what I did was I split it up between my professional school counselor, myself my AP. So, I don't go to every IEP meeting." P4 discussed "having meetings after school… one day a week that's designated for IEP meetings as best we can." P4 added that, "the other four days you can expect

them [the teachers] to be in there servicing the student…. you haven't been in there because you're making phone calls and scheduling IEP meetings."

Regarding IEP resources, prioritizing, and monitoring goals, P1 said, "we've got to prioritize people being in the right places and resources and things of that nature… how are we provisioning every day so that they can meet those targets." P5 said, "On paper it looks like it would be easy, but then when you look at the IEPs and requirements under the IEPs and the varying grade levels that you're dealing with, that makes the scheduling a little more difficult." P6 discussed a challenge of teachers as the "willingness to put in the time that's necessary to study the curriculum, to learn a student's IEP and then implement it on a consistent basis and to consistently provide the service that the child deserves and needs." P6 added, "I hold people accountable as far as following their schedule." P8 said, "The alignment comes in, to making sure that you are spending time, not just on the IEP goals, but also that you are spending time on integrating those goals within their curriculum which they'll be tested upon." P9 said, "There's just too much, and not enough hours in the day… I'm not able to get into classrooms consistently to monitor what's going on."

Data Collection and Monitoring

Dealing with data, mentioned 115 times by participants, was a challenged shared by all of the participants in the study. For example, P1 said, "we have to constantly collect data… gather data to prioritize our time and our work… monitoring data, having those data discussions and really identifying priorities and support based on data." P2 talked about needing more time to collect data on teachers: "The challenge with

evaluating teachers for me is getting accurate data by getting in their classrooms." P3 said, "We have data coming out of the woodworks but to really set the time aside to analyze it is a challenge." P8 claimed that dealing with data requires time: "We have data discussions once a week and it's done thoroughly." P9 said, "we do a quarterly data review …the challenge is the day-to-day monitoring … because of everything else we have to do. …it falls by the wayside because the management has to come first."

There were also expressed challenges related to the volume and format of data. Some principals considered the data they worked with to be overwhelming, unclear, or confusing. P4 shared, "it's not as easy to look at the data" because of the volume and formats. P5 similarly said, "data can be a mystery…but you do need that data." P6 said, "we're big on the data… we're looking at all the data…but I don't have the basic things that I need…to hold me responsible for your data." P1 shared, "we have a lot of data about students. Why aren't we using our data, leveraging that data to be proactive?"

Teamwork and Collaboration

All of the principals in the sample discussed teams and teamwork, mentioned 82 times throughout the interviews, in addition to 42 references to collaboration. Although all of the principals considered teamwork and collaboration as foundational and an essential part of their overall school and special education successes, P1 said, "building instructional leadership teams for reading has been a challenge… making progress as a team … a leadership team." P2 talked about needing, "Time to have meetings with the special education team… the challenge is me getting to the meeting that is scheduled with the SPED team on a regular basis, which has been a challenge because it's time." P3

explained, “Once the person or the team gets on board, it really is about time for setting clear goals and them being a part of the goals.” P5 mentioned, “trying to get your hours completed on behalf of the SPED team as a whole. I think the most difficult thing has been with ensuring the scheduling part, especially when I know I've exceeded my hours.”

Theme Two: Staffing

Staffing was a major instructional leadership challenge that all of the NESD elementary principals in this study perceived was necessary to overcome to support ELA achievement of inclusive special education populations in grades three through five. The staffing challenges, identified and discussed 70 times by the sample, pertained to teachers, specialists, support staff, and related leadership personnel. Challenges pertaining to staffing included both insufficient numbers of teachers and staff, inadequate hiring opportunities, a lack of experience of candidates, and staff turnover.

Insufficient Hiring of Teachers and Staff

Regarding hiring of teachers, P1 claimed, “Hiring this year has been a challenge for everyone... it hasn't been easy hiring but what I've done is partnered with the residency programs.” P4 said, “I hired from the resident teacher program because those teachers have gone through a certain set of training… The challenge was maybe they didn't know all the intricacies of special education.” P5 agreed that, “the hiring process was most difficult this year… the teacher shortage, and for whatever the reason, a lot of the inner possible candidates that I was able to reach plainly stated that they changed their minds.” P6 claimed, “Hiring is the issue…I don't have the ability to hire who I want to hire. I have to go with whoever the system offers me as candidate to interview.” P7

said, “It's important to make sure I hire the right people …all I want is someone that has the right philosophy about kids and learning and be willing to be coached and then I can help.” P9 similarly stated, “it's the hiring… I'm handed lists … then I call people, they either just don't call me back or I look at their resumes and they have absolutely no experience teaching, not even a teaching degree.”

Regarding qualifications, P9 added, “It is so difficult to find anyone who is qualified these days for almost any position, but especially for a position like special education.” P4 explained that new hires “aren't experienced… their ready, willing, able, but lack a skill set in special education … they're not familiar with that content [or] delivering instruction to those learners meeting their IEP goals and objectives without such extensive training being needed.” P5 similarly discussed, “The lack of experience for the new SPED educator,” explaining that, “she's coming straight from college. She's open for learning and wants to know what she's got to do, but there is a concern because there are certain things that she doesn't know for special education.” P7 said, “I think a challenge is not having enough staffing or allotment for those resources… when you find somebody and they're inexperienced, having someone to be able to train them so that they can better do the job.” P7 added, “The challenge is finding the right individual with the experience, the knowledge, and willingness to put in the time that's necessary to study the curriculum, to learn a student's IEP and then implement it on a consistent basis.”

High Staff and Teacher Turnover

Additional expressed challenges pertained to staff turnover. For example, P3 said, “the principal, myself, and the assistant principal have stepped in and tried to serve in

different roles. We've had high turnover in terms of staffing with our special education." P5 described the turnover as, "One left the county, one left the school district, the other one left the position of being a SPED educator, so that left one SPED teacher." P6 identified challenges as "time, resources, having people that you work with – a large turnover - so many people to train." P6 added, "My Chairperson wants to quit. She doesn't have the help… we don't have the resources…They took away a teacher from me and they still have not given me that resource back."

Theme Three: Systems and Structure

Structural supports and resources appeared to also be among the challenges identified by the NESD elementary principals in this study. The structural and resource supports discussed encompassed time and staffing, such that more time and better staffing could lead to better structure and resources. Considered as a challenge unto itself, structure of the systems depends on resources, and appear to influence the outcomes of support and resource investments. Specifically, systems arising from the structure revolve around the following:

Supporting Staff and Students

The principals in the study discussed structure to support staff. For example, P1 talked about "systems and structures we've put in place… systems and structures to support adult learning…[and] structures to support student learning." P2 discussed, "planning like putting that structure in place… it's constantly putting systems and structures in place." P3 said, "I'm really big on protocols and really want to have like a systematic way of doing things." P4 mentioned, "we've been able to structure things

…clarifying expectations, making sure that we have tight systems and structures in place." P6 similarly described, "structure I put in place."

Accountability

Structures and systems have been ways to promote accountability. P3 said, "meetings that our district has implemented over these last couple of years have been ideal … it creates systems and structures by which schools, if you really are authentically engaged in the process, can analyze data." P2 said, "my challenge of evaluation would just be evaluating them … just the whole system of evaluation - that we have as a system… everybody needs to follow the same systems that's in place." P3 described, "a collaborative effort and we will hold each other accountable, starting with that matrix (system and structure) then we want to see the evidence in the planning when we come around and do informal and formal observations." P4 said, "my biggest issue with policies and practices, has been more on a systemic level, not necessarily a school level besides the understanding of the snapshots." P7 explained, "I followed the school system systems policy and procedures with tracking and getting help … but it wasn't enough."

Planning, Programming, and Prioritizing

Structuring is about planning and prioritizing, which can be a challenge. P1 discussed, "the systems and structures, meeting times, what we're capturing, what we're prioritizing." P2 said, "people start off with great ideas and devotion to doing right by our neediest kids then get caught up in systems and compliance structures and that goes out the window -the needs of kids become second and third place." P2 talked more about prioritizing: "That's a serious challenge. It's time to structure… get to all these different

things and utilize the different people to make sure everything's going okay, with the program."

Theme Four: Instructional Strategies

Implementing consistent instructional strategies was another major challenge identified by the NESD elementary principals in this study. Challenges revolved around understanding, applications, consistency, and ideologies pertaining to the instructional strategies highlighted by the principals in the sample. Among the instructional strategies discussed, there was an emphasis on scaffolding, differentiation, accommodations, and pull-out processes, which together emerged from the data 108 times, with pull-out processes emphasized by all the principals in the study more often than the other concepts.

Regarding Scaffolding, P2 identified a challenge as, "making sure that the goals will set students up for success so that they're focused on learning grade level material …supports are used to scaffold to support that learning." P1 added that teachers must be "able to differentiate in ways so everyone can access the information." P5 said, "they're kids and sometimes they don't learn at the same rate…You just have to kind of meet the kids where they are. You have to take some different avenues. You have to actually use differentiation for your whole class." P5 added, "if you use differentiation for your whole class, all your kids will learn … 10 of them might get it today, five of them might get it tomorrow, and three more that might have to wait till Wednesday." P9 explained that teachers are, "expected to differentiate for all students, but especially for our special education students and our ELL students…we've lost two teachers, so now we're down to

a singleton. It's difficult, because we need more support." P9 added, "So, when we establish the goals for the kids, we really have to be clear and deliberate on who is providing the differentiated supports and how they are going to meet those goals."

Accommodations

Regarding challenges related to accommodations, some of the principals interviewed discussed challenges surrounding the role of accommodations in general. For example, P1 asked, "So what accommodations are appropriate if students haven't met those foundational reading skills, how do we continue to incorporate some of that in terms of interventions or interventions to use?" P1 added, "a lot of the work I've had to do was like that adaptive work around mindsets and expectations and understanding the importance of delivering specialized instruction. Not just a bunch of accommodations." P8 discussed the importance of, "Assuring that those accommodations for that child align in order that they can at least feel successful" then added, "But the problem is they'll say we can give text to speech for reading, but not in math. That's a roadblock … one of the biggest struggles… making sure accommodations match their needs … are appropriate and done consistently." P8 also mentioned challenges surrounding the concept of accommodations and posed related questions the principle felt needed answers: "Are their accommodations being met in their LRE? They can be in inclusion environments, but are you using their accommodations in that environment?"

Some of the principals in the sample discussed challenges pertaining to teachers' understanding and support of accommodations. For example, P2 said, "One of the challenges I had was really getting teachers to understand that the special education

students are their students and that they don't do not belong to the resource teachers." P2 explained, "It's their responsibility to know students' IEP goals, their supplemental services, and any accommodations to be made is their responsibility to not only know it but ensure those things are in place to help that student be successful." P3 said, "there was not enough accommodations made in the classroom" and a lack of "how to provide accommodations and modifications for students, using their IEP snapshots which they all have" but there is "an expectation that teachers are accommodating students." P4 explained, "Sometimes at the school level we think about teachers that sometimes don't give kids the accommodations that are on their IEP and then well." After a pause, P4 added, "I think some of it has been training and support around what general education teachers really understand and the legality of the IEP right." P5 and P6 also discussed accommodation challenges and P7 also stressed the challenge of "making sure that the regular classroom teacher implements the IEP and the strategies and accommodations for special ED students on a continuous basis within the room."

Pull-Out Processes

There were 62 references to pull-out processes that emerged from the data. There were also comments about pull out verses push in (also called plug in) services, and much of the references or concerns pertained to staffing, policies, and philosophies. For example, P3 said, "At our school, our models are depending on the IEP and staffing - the resource teachers either push into the general education classroom or pull the student out of the general education classroom." P4 said although "Lots of people like pull up services" a challenge is "making sure we're doing more pushing than pull out services so

kiddos are there with their classroom teacher getting that intensive reading instruction, especially since we are departmentalized." P6 claimed, "we do a lot of plugin" and explained that, "teachers don't want kids to be pulled out as much because you do have to protect the integrity of the program… It's a rarity they will pull out students, and that's on need. Normally, they plug into the classroom." P9 discussed "both plug in and pull out, depending on the kids' needs" and working "very closely with all the teachers in doing some plug in and then pull out for specifics with students [with]… greater challenges than others in learning. They might be in third grade, but still don't know all the letters."

About the general concept of pull-out services, two principals mentioned stigma. For example, P6 expressed concerns about the "stigma attached when the special ED person comes in" and pulls student out. P4 similarly shared, "I would rather work alongside my peers and not be stigmatized, in my mind that's my philosophy …Why can't you just do pushing services? That's part of my issue with the philosophies." For many similar reasons expressed, P1 claimed, "I'm not a fan." About pull-out program quality, P1 added, "Students qualify for special education services based on their needs in the classroom. I feel like sometimes we're getting a lot of watered down supports when you pull out."

Regarding staffing related pull-out challenges, P2 said, "We have trouble with personnel - we don't have enough people to like pull out these kids and really give them the time that we need sometimes that that IEPs require." To address such as problem, P6 said, "We're also working to do a lot of push in, to assist the general ed teacher in lesson planning. And then, we do pullouts also… we pull out groups… you can give them the

accommodations in a group." P7 described a challenge as not relying on pull out services and, "making sure the classroom teacher, not just a resource teacher, pushes into the classroom … making sure the regular classroom teacher implements the IEP - strategies and accommodations -for special ED students on a continuous basis within the room."

Ideal pull-out scheduling was also an expressed challenge. For example, P4 said "It really takes a strategic eye to figure out … when teachers can pull when they need to pull students for reading and math goals… working together so they're not pulling kids at the same time, the same day." P9 similarly shared, "So, when she is doing her schedule, she has to look at making sure that the kids aren't pulled out too much, and where she can plug in, and which students need that more intensive one-on-one for their goals." An example given by P9 about scheduling conflict challenges was, "they're being pulled out for ESOL, instrumental… we don't want the kids to miss in-classroom instructional time, but at the same time we need to make sure that we're providing them with what they need."

P7 similarly discussed a teacher shortage impacting their pull out and push in efforts, stating, "My colleagues have programs with they're self-contained and the special ED teacher is there with the students at all times every day all day. Whereas my program is a pullout program …the person pulls the student out." P9 also said, "it's just been a challenge with staffing, and then trying to get the kids to where they need to be when you don't have a lot of people and a lot of resources that pull out for small groups."

Theme Five: Data Collection and Analysis

The NESD elementary principals shared various challenges pertaining to data collection that were perceived as necessary to overcome to support ELA achievement of their inclusive special education populations in grades three through five. There were 81 references to data that emerged from the collective interview transcripts. Specifically, data was a concept emphasized by all of the principals in the study as a significant instructional leadership challenge. The collection of data, sources of data, the volume of data, meaning of data, and accountability surrounding the data were all related challenges expressed by the principals in the study.

The data pertained to the teachers and students, including major emphasis on the students, with challenges expressed with regard to collecting teacher-level data. For example, P2 discussed, “the challenge with evaluating teachers for me is getting accurate data by getting in their classrooms… Looking, talking, having time to talk about what's going on in the classroom with the student data around specific students.” However, the greater emphasis on data pertained to the volume, collection, and collaborative use of school-wide, student-level, and district data.

Data Volume and Analysis

The ideas expressed about data in general was that that were large amounts of data pertaining to many different aspects of student achievement, teaching and learning. The data itself could be overwhelming. P1 said, “we have to gather a lot of data … we have the most data about those kids” but the challenge is, “making sure the data gets

addressed." P3 described the challenge of "being aware of the data and the implications… you have to analyze your data because it's the right thing to do."

However, there were challenges described that were related to data analysis. P3 said, "A challenge has definitely been around data analysis …We have data coming out of the woodworks but to really set the time aside to analyze it. That's one of our big rocks to data analysis." P4 also described numerous data and shared, "I don't know the level of which the data is disaggregated on the county level or the school level, but I guess, we can do that as principals to see. That's why I want those separate data charts." Regarding data analysis, P7 discussed a "challenge anybody would have right now… the time to do it. I'm fortunate being a veteran principal I know what to do. … If it's something I don't know, I have a data coach in my building." P8 said, "I should probably attend the training on iReady to look at the data charts."

Collaborative Data

Data are the responsible of all the teachers, paraeducators, and administrators involved with influencing student achievement. Goals-setting and IEP targets revolve around data and a challenge is ensuring that there is shared responsibility for the data. For example, P5 said, "When we do meet for collaboratives, they have to bring their data with them, so that helps everyone to be able to know that data is not a mystery." P8 similarly discussed the teaching team and said, "They carry notebooks to track the data like, what happened at this time with the students. That helps us we go to a SIT (School Instructional Team) meeting that we have actual data points." P8 added, "We have data discussions once a week and it's done thoroughly." P9 shared, "I do attend collaboratives.

So, I do know what they're planning, and what they're doing with their analyzing as far as data and things like that."

Theme Six: Applied Philosophies

The principals in the study discussed differing philosophies among staff that pertained to the instruction of inclusive special education populations in grades three through five. There were 38 references to philosophies that emerged from the data. Specifically, there were different ideas, beliefs, and philosophies expressed by teachers and staff relative to the student populations and potential outcomes of their efforts.

Not surprisingly, there were different through about philosophies among the principals in the sample. According to P1, "philosophy" drives "behavior … decision-making … planning and …expectations." However, P2 said, "I think the philosophy is bs when it's not implemented to maximize achievement of our neediest kids." P5 claimed, "For me personally, I don't bite into any real philosophies like that."

A challenge of the majority of principals in the sample was managing different philosophies among staff and administration. For example, P3 explained, "The challenge has been our mindset as a school…in my tenure, I have had to challenge others mindsets and philosophies when it comes to expectations for children with special needs… it's also about culture." P4 similarly discussed diverse and often conflicting philosophies, stating a challenge is, "changing people's philosophies about what their work is and the impact that they need to have on every student." A difference also existed between school and higher level philosophies, as P1 explained: "My philosophy around providing instructional leadership is growth, growth, growth, …the real challenge and I've had this conversation

is with people at high levels in special education … We have to focus on improvement as it relates to specialized instruction."

Some of the principals in the sample did not believe that they had challenges with respect to philosophies. For example, P6 said, "Well, I don't have any challenges with the philosophies… I always talk to my teachers when we're having collaborative planning, that you're not only planning for those children that you have paper in front of you for." P6 added, "I look at it as, every child in that classroom has a special need. And if you address your classroom as such, your entire classroom will succeed. Plan for your students, don't look for paper." P7 also said, "when I think a philosophy, I think of your way of thinking." P7 added, "I don't see that as a challenge, because I screen very hard any staff members hired … to make sure their philosophy, their way of thinking is in line with our vision."

Evidence of Trustworthiness

In this study, member-checking and data saturation enhanced the trustworthiness of the study, which is a reflection of its truth and accuracy. Confirmation of data saturation and incorporation of a member checking process helped to enhance credibility. Member checking involved feedback from the participants about the interpretations of data and enhanced the accuracy of findings by enlisting participants in adding to, confirming, refuting, or clarifying the initial interpretations of findings based on the data they offered. This type of member checking process also helped to confirm data saturation because participants had an opportunity to add to the data if they believed it insufficiently represented their experiences. Data sources included multiple informants

who provided answers to open-ended questions asked in semistructured, one-on-one interviews. The collection of data from multiple informants enhanced the trustworthiness of this study by the collection and analysis of data representing varied experiences and perspectives. Repeating the study using the same population, sampling strategies, data collection and analysis procedures should lead to similar results. Although replication of the study is not feasible in this case, I provided detailed explanations of the methodology, design, and purposeful sampling strategy to help others repeat these efforts.

Summary

Chapter 4 included detailed results of the study. Data analysis led to six major thematic findings with supporting subthemes. Member checking, data saturation, purposeful sampling, and a rigorous peer-review process inherent to doctoral research were steps that helped to enhance trustworthiness of study findings.

Chapter 5 includes a discussion of six major thematic findings that emerged from the data, in terms of the research question, conceptual frameworks, and previously published related research findings. I discuss limitations and implications of findings, followed by further recommendations for leaders and suggestions for future research based on findings from this study.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the leadership and instructional challenges elementary principals in an urban school district perceived as necessary to overcome in order to support the ELA achievement of their inclusive special education populations. Gaining a better understanding of the challenges elementary principals face may help the NESD's leaders and leaders of other districts identify specific areas of support needed by the NESD's elementary principals to support ELA achievement of inclusive special education populations. This chapter includes a discussion of six major thematic findings that emerged from data. I discuss limitations and implications of findings. Recommendations include actions for leaders and suggestions for future research based on findings from this study.

Interpretation of the Findings

Overall, data analysis led to six major thematic findings involving instructional leadership challenges that the NESD elementary principals perceive are necessary to overcome to support ELA achievement of their inclusive special education populations in grades three through five. Major themes pertained to time, staffing, structures of inclusive programs, instructional strategies, data, and applied philosophies. I discuss findings involving theoretical underpinnings of this study and previously published research findings.

Theme One

A major challenge for principals interviewed in this study was time management. Challenges pertaining to time included not having enough time for successful support of

ELA achievement among inclusive special education populations in grades three through five due to conflicting responsibilities requiring principals to monitor instruction and manage the overall operation of the school. Time limitations precipitated by increased principal responsibilities during the COVID-19 pandemic represented challenges related to teacher training and professional development, IEP development and monitoring, data collection and monitoring, teamwork, collaboration, and conferencing, and teaching effectiveness in the classroom.

Findings were consistent with prior research that considered time a critical resource and time management a major challenge for special education leaders. Gomez & McKee (2020) said time was a resource needed to support everything from professional development to advocacy. Hoppey et al. (2018) said inclusive schools require ongoing collaborative planning time that can represent a persistent schedule challenge for some inclusive schools. Releasing principals from managerial responsibilities with the purpose of freeing up more time to devote to instructional leadership had a positive impact on management and instructional leadership in elementary schools resulting in perceived improvements in the frequency and quality of principal feedback to teachers, student supervision and student discipline management (Sheng et al., 2017).

Theme Two

Staffing was a major instructional leadership challenge that all NESD elementary principals in this study perceived was necessary to overcome to support ELA achievement of inclusive special education populations in grades three through five. Staffing challenges pertained to teachers, specialists, support staff, and related leadership

personnel. Challenges pertaining to staffing included insufficient numbers of teachers, inadequate volume of support staff, suboptimal staff qualifications, and high staff and teacher turnover.

Consistent with challenges reported by this study's participants, Mason-Williams et al. reported the need for well-qualified special educators to instruct students with disabilities although a shortage of qualified special educators resulted in schools relying heavily on special educators who lack qualifications in terms of experience, degrees, and certifications. Mason-Williams also reported reading gains for students with disabilities having well-qualified special educators.

Theme Three

The lack of structural supports and resources appeared to also be among the challenges identified by the NESD elementary principals in this study. More time and better staffing could lead to better structure and resources for special education inclusive programs.

Mette and Riegel (2018) said systems thinking involving the connection between instructional leadership theory and regimented practice can be applied leading to successful reforms, or misused in ways culminating in challenges contributing to principals' failed improvement initiatives. Poon-McBayer (2018) said in addition to believing positive change is possible, principals must create an inclusive environment by deploying resources, structuring organizations, and distributing workloads in ways that are conducive to student learning, equity, and social justice. Hitt et al. (2018) said improving schools requires task-oriented and focused planning, persistent actions toward

clear expectations, and self-assured confidence and committed drive to achieve challenging goals despite barriers. Principals in this sample expressed similar experiences when supporting the ELA achievement of special education students in their inclusive third through fifth grade classrooms.

Theme Four

Implementing consistent instructional strategies was another major challenge identified by the NESD elementary principals in this study. Challenges involved understanding instructional strategies and consistent application of ideologies pertaining to instructional strategies highlighted by principals in the sample. Among the instructional strategies discussed, there was an emphasis on scaffolding, differentiation, accommodations, and pull-out (versus push-in or plug-in) processes.

Hoppey et al. (2018) said inclusive school instruction often includes less traditional strategies, including coteaching, strategic scheduling, explicit and differentiated instruction, cooperative learning, and peer tutoring. These were among the instructional strategies identified by principals in the study as potential or real challenges. Principals in the study discussed several less traditional and evidence-based practices; however, there were challenges pertaining to implementation of those practices and strategies. One challenge pertained to prioritization and coordination of intervention pograms and people to successfully sustain inclusive values.

Theme Five

The NESD elementary principals shared various challenges pertaining to data collection that were perceived as necessary to overcome to support ELA achievement of

their inclusive special education populations in grades three through five. Specifically, data was a concept emphasized by all of the principals in the study as a significant instructional leadership challenge. The collection of data, sources of data, the volume of data, meaning of data, and accountability surrounding the data were all related challenges expressed by the principals in the study. The findings of challenges also pertained to data about teacher evaluations, goal-setting (IEP and School-Wide), and student and school-wide achievement data.

According to Weber (1987), effective leaders operate within six major leadership functions, which all of the principals described as being data-driven: setting academic goals, organizing the instructional program, hiring, supervising, and evaluating; protecting instructional time and programs, creating a climate for learning, and monitoring achievement and evaluating programs. The principals in the sample described data as necessary indicators, which Datnow and Park (2018) also claimed are helpful to determine equity and outcome achievements. One data related challenge shared by multiple principals in the sample pertained to data analysis. Cruickshank (2017) acknowledged similar challenges and emphasized a collaborative setting which could engage external support. Through Cruickshank's lens, principals can use data optimally to positively influence student outcomes, measured through data on student achievement, but may need additional support in doing so. Unfortunately, a related challenge principals expressed was a lack of time and resources to support such efforts.

Theme Six

The principals in the study discussed differing philosophies among staff that pertained to the instruction of inclusive special education populations in grades three through five. Specifically, there were different ideas, beliefs, and philosophies expressed by teachers and staff relative to the student populations and potential outcomes of their efforts. There was emphasis on the following concepts, as challenges to overcome with regard to ELA achievement in inclusive grade three through five classrooms:

This sixth major thematic finding is consistent with the previously stated theory and research findings pertaining to values, mission, and overall philosophy. Theoharis et al. (2016) reported principals' descriptions of inclusion as a school-wide philosophy, encompassing inclusive service delivery, pursued in well-planned and thoughtful manners, leading to equity and social justice that drives improved achievement. From a conceptual viewpoint, Hornby (2015) presented the theory of inclusive special education as a synthesis of the philosophy, values, and practices of interventions, strategies, and procedures of special education. All of the principals in the study expressed sentiments that were consistent with these previously published theoretical ideas and study findings.

Schopp et al. (2017) recommended that principals work collaboratively toward a mission and vision that supports the success of all learners, including students with disabilities, which was a stated goal of all the principals in this study. However, there were some differing thoughts about philosophy in general among the principals interviewed in this study. Nevertheless, the overall consensus in the data was that a

unifying philosophy (or culture, values, beliefs, and goals) were important to special education ELA achievement in inclusive elementary schools.

Hoppey et al. (2018) described the need for effective inclusive education principals to promote inclusion as a core value and to assume responsibilities for fostering shared values and a unifying vision for goal achievement (Hoppey et al., 2018). All of the principals in the sample acknowledged this responsibility. However, there was a consensus in the data that some aspects of philosophy were more challenging than others, particularly pull-out verses push-in or plug-in practices. Among the greatest of challenges of the principals in the study who were concerned with philosophy was ensuring a consistent philosophy practice.

Sun and Xin (2019) also claimed that, as the instructional leader for all programs in their schools, principals must generate buy into the school's mission, vision, values, and goals for their inclusive special education programs, which some of the principals in the study identified as a challenge. Others in the sample were unconcerned with the idea of philosophy and another screened teacher and staff candidates before hiring to ensure alignment of the new hire with the school philosophy.

Limitations of the Study

Limitations in this study included the narrow time frame for conducting the study and the selection of a single district, which limits opportunities to expand data collection efforts over time and conduct research that might have broader applications. Researcher bias is a threat to the validity of the study which could represent a limitation; however, I actively sought to recognize and set aside bias and preconceived notions and utilized

widely accepted steps and procedures for sampling, data collection, and analysis, to minimize bias in the study. Limitations of this study included a narrow focus on elementary principals on inclusive schools within a single urban school district in the Northeast United States, with an emphasis on challenges experienced supporting ELA achievement, and may not be transferrable to other geographic and non-urban districts, school types, or subject instruction. COVID-19 pandemic conditions and related changes in staffing and instructional delivery led to findings that were also indicative of challenges specific to, precipitated, or exacerbated by the unpredictable impact of the pandemic and not necessarily reflective of a more traditional and consistent school leadership experiences. Although COVID-19 was not an initial focus in this study, and there has been relatively limited information about the impact of the pandemic on leadership and student achievement, the subject nevertheless was apparent in the data that principals offered about the recent challenges they experienced.

Recommendations

There are recommendations for leaders based on the findings from this study. The recommendations are directed toward improved staffing and resources which could enhance training efforts without further narrowing the limited time to accomplish multiple tasks. Program planning and structure could be better understood and then optimally enhanced to achieve a more consistent instructional leadership approach that might be of benefit to a broader special educational population. Leadership can look at data and how it is presented and analyzed, to assist principals with their data driven efforts. Higher education leaders can also benefit from findings in this study because it

informs curriculum for leadership and educational administrative training. Much research regarding each of the major themes could help leaders develop more useful strategies for overcoming each of the challenges revealed in this study.

Recommendations for Leaders

The six major themes aligned with the result of the case study by Hoppey et al. (2018) which revealed the cultural and organizational qualities of effective inclusive elementary schools: (a) a unifying vision; (b) collaborative leadership; (c) data-informed problem-solving; and (d) optimal use of resources. Although the principals in the study cited each of these qualities as necessary for success, they also expressed related challenges. Several recommendations stem from the findings in this study.

Recommendations regarding the major challenge of time and time-management are also related to staffing challenges which principals also felt impacted strategies and data-driven efforts. Additional funding for adequate staffing is likely to help principals overcome all of the stated challenges noted, in particular, Special Education Resource candidates. Purposeful searches for the reasons for high turnover might also lead to recommendations for reducing turnover and retaining a high-quality, experienced staff who can effectively support and mentor new hires.

Further evaluations of the benefits and drawbacks of pullout and push-in services may be helpful to principals who aim to resolve the uncertainties and overcome the challenges related to those instructional strategies. Ongoing collaboration, based on optimal structuring and prioritization is likely to help build a model for classroom teachers, administration, and staff of how to effectively implement IEP goals and collect

and analyze data to monitor students' progress, considering the known time and resource challenges.

Suggestions for Future Research

Several recommendations for additional research are based on the results and limitations of this study. The first recommendation for future research on the same topic is to conduct the study considering the COVID-19 pandemic conditions that both peaked and subsided. All of the principal participants identified challenges specific to the pandemic. Undeniably, the pandemic created unprecedented challenges beyond the control of district and school leaders nationwide. Although it could be inferred that the pandemic adversely impacted, to some degree, all six major themes identified in this study, future research my reveal and disentangle challenges more specifically related to the pandemic in general.

The second recommendation for future research is to broaden the scope of the study to include other geographic and non-urban districts, school types, and subject areas, as indicated by the study's limitations and delimitations of this study. The purpose of the recommendation is based on the lack of generalizability of the results to other contexts and settings. A broader investigation effort pertinent to other contexts and settings can expand the body of knowledge and lead to opportunities for comparisons and related discussions of findings.

The third recommendation is to conduct a similar study with middle and high school principals. Elementary and secondary schools function under different systems and structures to accommodate the varying needs the students and district expectations.

The purpose of the recommendation for future studies is to determine whether the challenges relate only to elementary principals or if there is a need for a system-wide focus on the perceived challenges across all levels.

Implications

This study addressed a gap in practice that stemmed from leaders' lack of understanding of the instructional leadership challenges elementary school principals face while supporting ELA achievement of their inclusive special education populations. Insights gleaned from principals, tasked with demonstrating ELA achievement for all students, led to a more complete understanding of instructional leadership challenges that help to inform others who can help to close practice gaps in the support of ELA achievement of special education populations. According to Sun and Xin (2019), the ESSA requires states to set achievement goals to measure special education students' improvement. As ESSA requirements and expectations intensify, elementary administrators attempt to understand how to best provide leadership in special education (Luckner & Movahedazrhouligh, 2019). The understanding gained from the elementary school principals tasked with supporting ELA achievement of inclusive special education populations could help other leaders who work toward positive social change.

There are educational, social, and economic implications for the improvements of special education ELA achievement in inclusive schools. Research-based support for school leadership improvements is a driver for local, state, national, and even international school improvements (Armstrong & Ainscow, 2018). In the local context, an inclusive orientation and effective leadership that supports achievement of all students

combats discriminatory attitudes, facilitates equity in education, and improves the efficiency and cost-effectiveness of the education system (Ainscow, 2020). There are positive social implications from the understanding of the instructional leadership experiences of elementary principals of inclusive special education ELA students. ELA achievement of inclusive special education students has the potential to enhance other academic achievements and future educational successes, increasing literacy to improve quality of life.

Conclusion

Chapter 5 included a discussion of findings. This chapter includes a discussion of six major thematic findings that emerged from the data in terms of conceptual underpinnings and previously published related research findings. I discussed limitations and implications of study findings. Recommendations pertained to actions for leaders and suggestions for future research based on findings from this study.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Date:

Time:

Participant Pseudonym #:

Number of Years in current role:

% of special education:

Parts of the Interview	**Interview Questions**
Introduction	Hello, my name is Teresa Bey. Thank you for your time and willingness to be a participant in this study. The purpose of this interview was to understand the instructional leadership challenges elementary principals in your district face will supporting the ELA achievement of their inclusive special education students in grades three through five. This interview may last about an hour. Do I have your permission to record the interview and transcribe your answers? You can choose to stop this interview at any time. Before we start with the first question, do you have any other questions or concerns?

	Are you ready to begin?
	With regard to ELA achievement of your inclusive special education students, what instructional leadership challenges, if any, have you experienced setting academic goals? *Follow-up:* Tell me more about…
	With regard to ELA achievement of your inclusive special education students, what challenges, if any, have you experienced organizing the instructional program? *Follow-up:* Tell me more about…
	With regard to ELA achievement of your inclusive special education students, what challenges, if any, have you experienced hiring, supervising, and evaluating their teachers? *Follow-up:* Tell me more about…

	With regard to ELA achievement of your inclusive special education students, what challenges, if any, have you experienced protecting instructional time and programs? *Follow-up:* Tell me more about…
	With regard to ELA achievement of your inclusive special education students, what challenges, if any, have you experienced creating a climate for learning? *Follow-up:* Tell me more about…
	With regard to ELA achievement of your inclusive special education students, what challenges, if any, have you experienced monitoring achievement? *Follow-up:* Tell me more about…
	With regard to ELA achievement of your inclusive special education students, what challenges, if any, have you experienced monitoring and evaluating programs?

	Follow-up: Tell me more about…
	With regard to ELA achievement of your inclusive special education students, what challenges, if any, have you experienced with inclusive special education policies and practices? *Follow-up:* Tell me more about…
	With regard to ELA achievement of your inclusive special education students, what challenges, if any, have you experienced with inclusive special education philosophies? *Follow-up:* Tell me more about…
	What else would you like to share that you believe is important to understanding the instructional leadership challenges you perceive are necessary to overcome in supporting ELA achievement of the inclusive special education populations in grades three through five in your school?

Closing statement	Thank you for sharing your time with me. I will be in touch with you after I complete all of my interviews and transcriptions to send you my initial interpretations of the data I collect. I will be sending you those initial impressions of the data to invite your additions, clarifications, corrections, and other impressions you might have about my initial interpretations of the data. Do you have any other questions before we wrap up our time together? Thank you, again.