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Using Distributed Leadership at the Middle School Level to Improve Academic Outcomes for Students with Disabilities

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This is to certify that the doctoral study by

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Walden University
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Abstract

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MEd, Coppin State University, 2001

BA, North Carolina A&T State University, 1996

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Abstract

The achievement gap between students with disabilities and their nondisabled peers continues to be a major issue in most school systems across the United States, with this gap expanding as students move from elementary to middle school. Using the distributed leadership framework, the purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore middle school principals' perspectives on leadership practices within their instructional leadership teams that improved the academic achievement of students with disabilities. Researchers have demonstrated that distributed leadership is embodied through the collaboration of school leaders, followers, and their situation to influence organizational and instructional changes. The research question focused on middle school principals' perspectives on distributed leadership practices to increase academic achievement for students with disabilities. The data were collected through semistructured interviews with eight middle school principals in a Mid-Atlantic urban school district who were selected using purposive sampling and demonstrated positive academic growth trends for students with disabilities. Data were analyzed using axial coding for emergent themes. Results showed that middle school principals used collaboration, co-planning, formal and informal leadership roles, schoolwide tools and routines, and the use of a master schedule to distribute leadership within their instructional leadership teams to increase the academic performance of students with disabilities. Middle school principals can use the strategies identified in this study to assist with narrowing the achievement gap for students with disabilities by focusing on collaborative approaches, which allow students to learn more effectively and efficiently, creating positive social change.

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Dedication

First, I want to give honor to God for giving me the strength to continue this journey. Competing this doctoral degree was one of the toughest accomplishments of my life, especially while leading a school through a pandemic. Completing this journey has shown me that I can overcome any obstacle that I put my mind to. As I completed this journey, I always remembered, Philippians 4:13: *I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.*

I would like to dedicate this doctoral study to my husband, George, who has been my greatest cheerleader. Thank you for your patience, love, and unwavering belief in me throughout this process, even when I did not believe in myself. I appreciate you making the sacrifice by being Mr. Mom and letting me have my quiet time. I love you!

To my beautiful daughters, Kayla, and Hannah, I hope I have demonstrated that through hard work and perseverance you can accomplish anything you set out to do. You both are my inspiration; I live each day to make you both proud of me. Thank you for choosing me to be your mother. I love you with all my heart!

To my mother, Constance Tarrance, thank you for your sacrifice as a single mother to ensure that education was my foundation to have a better life. Thank you for always believing in me and knowing that I had something to offer this world. I love you!

To my grandmother, Bernice Anderson, thank you for always believing in me, but more importantly, for always praying for me. As the matriarch of the family, you are my role model and the person I most admire. I love you!

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

School leadership has become increasingly complex during the 21st century

requiring principals to collaborate with people demonstrating various levels of expertise

to meet the challenge of teaching and learning processes (Harris & Spillane, 2008).

Middle school principals should seek out and enact alternative ways of engaging others in

schools because historical school-based leaders are being replaced with leadership

focused on teams rather than individuals (Bagwell, 2019). To meet this shift to teams

rather than individuals, the practice of distributed leadership places significant

importance upon shared responsibility from teachers, support staff, and students who

perform as leaders (Harris & Spillane, 2008). Researchers have attempted to identify

distributed leadership's major characteristics (Bagwell, 2019; Harris & Spillane, 2008).

The role of school leadership is to create and sustain an environment that

maximizes the teaching and learning process by initially focusing on people, then

focusing on organizational structure and policies, and finally focusing on academic

achievement (Jambo & Hongde, 2020). Distributed leadership focuses on people by

promoting a close relationship and interaction between leaders and situational factors. By

highlighting cognitive activities among staff, distributed leadership is spread throughout

school cultures and school structures and involves meaningful dialogue (Joo, 2020).

Although middle school principals face unrelenting pressure to increase outcomes

for all students, a special interest exists in increasing outcomes for students with

disabilities because significant achievement gaps exist between students with disabilities

and their non-disabled peers, and this gap continues to grow with each passing year

(Gilmour et al., 2019). As such, schools in the United States that have a significant achievement gap between students with disabilities and their nondisabled peers grapple with how to close the achievement gap while improving student outcomes for all students (Albus et al., 2014). Albus et al. (2014) reported that the achievement gap between students with disabilities and their nondisabled peers at the middle and high school levels in reading and mathematics was substantial; the average gap across all states in the United States spanned from 37% to 40%. Innovative and effective middle school principals explore instructional leadership practices that may increase achievement outcomes for students with disabilities. While some proactive leadership styles have been shown to promote improved student outcomes, recent research identifies instructional leadership as a key factor (Bagwell, 2019). Modern-day evidence suggests that the importance of instructional leadership that focuses on identifying and supporting emerging leaders and their ability to lead results in better learning outcomes (Harris, 2014). According to Harris and Spillane (2008), distributed leadership is not the only solution nor the sole blueprint for leadership, but rather a method to understand leadership practices by employing leadership differently to promote opportunities for organizational transformation. Distributed leadership may provide middle school principals with a perspective on leadership practices and efforts to close the opportunity gap, which will improve academic achievement of culturally diverse students and students with disabilities (Bagwell, 2019).

In this chapter, I describe the background for the research study that lays the foundation for the problem statement, using a local problem that prompted this

qualitative study. I provide the purpose of the study, the research question, and the conceptual framework that was used to guide this qualitative study. In addition, I describe the nature of the study as well as special terms associated with the problem. Finally, I conclude with the assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, and significance of this research study.

Background

Researchers suggest that the achievement gap between students with disabilities and their nondisabled peers continues to be a major issue in most school systems across the United States, with this gap expanding as students move from elementary to middle school (Gilmour et al., 2019). Students with disabilities continue to perform at lower rates than their nondisabled peers on the National Assessment of Educational Programs (NAEP). In 2019, only 9% of students with disabilities were proficient in NAEP Reading compared to 37% of students without disabilities. Trend data reveals that the performance of students with disabilities is not improving over time, as there was a one percent decrease in the proficiency rate between 2017 and 2019 (see Table 1).

Table 1

NAEP Reading Proficiency Trend Data

Year	All Students	Students with Disabilities
2017	36%	10%
2019	34%	9%

Note. Data source: https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/.

Using a goal of increasing accountability for the achievement of students with disabilities, school systems intentionally began to focus on increasing academic rigor with greater exposure to the general education curriculum for students with disabilities. Data from the large urban-suburban school district located in a Mid-Atlantic state, which was used in this qualitative study, revealed that in 2019, approximately 6.0% of students with disabilities were proficient in Grade 8 on the statewide reading assessment compared to 45.0% of nondisabled students. While the Mid-Atlantic state data does show improvement of achievement between 2016 and 2019 from 4.0% to 6.0%, the gap in achievement continues to grow for students with disabilities (see Table 2).

Table 2

Grade 8 Reading Results 2016–2019

Year	All Students	Students with Disabilities
2016	38.0%	4.0%
2017	37.0%	5.0%
2018	40.0%	4.5%
2019	45.0%	6.0%

Note. Data were obtained from the Department of Education specific to the state where this study was conducted.

The ongoing achievement gap between students with disabilities and their nondisabled peers continue to challenge middle school principals daily. Research reveals that through effective school leadership, achievement gaps can be reduced or closed (Brown & Green, 2014). Middle school principals play a key role in improving student

outcomes for students with disabilities and are considered second only to the role of a teacher in the impact on student learning (Roberts & Guerra, Jr., 2017). To be effective in the implementation of strategies to close the achievement gap between students with disabilities and their nondisabled peers, diverse forms of leadership must be identified, supported, and utilized to meet changing challenges and new demands (Harris & Spillane, 2008). Distributed leadership does not advocate for a changed role of the school principal but suggests that an addition to the thought process necessary to accomplish missions by effective principals be considered. Middle school principals must embrace distributed leadership as a fundamental change in their understanding of leadership and how they enact their leadership roles (Harris, 2012). Distributed leadership requires that middle school principals relinquish some authority and power to adopt a form of leadership that focuses on brokering, facilitating, and supporting others in leading innovation and change (Harris, 2012). Middle school principals seek new models that require collaboration, networking, and multiagency work, which requires more responsive leadership approaches (Harris & Spillane, 2008). As distributed leadership provides a close relationship and interaction between leaders and situational factors, it not only emphasizes leaders, followers, and collaboration, but it also provides attention to leadership situations and leadership interactions within a school.

Distributed leadership is a term that has been around for a while; however, it is a new concept in the field of leadership and organizational performance, especially in schools (Bagwell, 2019). A distributed perspective of leadership provides a theoretical structure that can be examined and may present more accurate measures of representing

historical school-based patterns of leadership (Bagwell, 2019). Prominent researchers have developed conceptual frameworks for analyzing distributed leadership practices in schools. However, scholars like Spillane, Halverson, Diamond, and Gronn have offered conceptual frameworks that differ (Bagwell, 2019). Gronn (2000) conceptualized distributed leadership into three observable actions that can be observed in school leadership. Spontaneous collaboration is a leadership action that is the result of collective interactions of individuals with different skills and expertise to accomplish a task. Shared roles are a leadership action where leadership emerges between two or more individuals coordinating their efforts to accomplish a task. Institutional structures are a leadership action where leadership practice is dictated by formal organizational structures or roles. Gronn (2000, 2002) conceptualized distributed leadership as the result of the interactions of people in a group or groups of people acting as one connected network with a specific purpose. Hence, distributed leadership, according to Gronn (2000, 2002) is a concerted action to be explored from a broader understanding of leadership practice rather than a collective of each person enacting tasks. By collaborating efforts and expertise, the collective outcome of the group becomes greater than the individual efforts or actions of each person alone (Bagwell, 2019).

A middle school's leadership practice provides insightful perspective into how that middle school's leadership is enacted in schools and includes networking groups, responsibilities, and why they do the work that they do (Bagwell, 2019). Gronn (2000, 2002) focuses on distributed leadership that is centered around the interactions of people in a group acting as one connected network with a specific purpose. In contrast, Spillane

(2006) conceptualized leadership practice from a distributed perspective, where leadership practice is the focus of the analysis. From a distributed leadership perspective, leadership practice in schools is viewed as an outcome of the interactions of formal and informal leaders, their situational context, and their use of tools to constrain or influence their inactions (Diamond & Spillane, 2016; Spillane & Healey, 2010). Consequently, the distributed perspective of leadership practices is always the starting point for understanding the *how* of leadership in the work of schools (Diamond & Spillane, 2016; Huggins et al., 2017; Spillane & Healey, 2010). Distributed leadership provides an alternative way of examining the complexities of how multiple individuals and principals engage in the work of improving teacher practice and student learning outcomes (Halverson & Clifford, 2013; Huggins et al., 2017; Spillane, 2015). This shift provides a more integrated understanding of the leadership practice of school leaders instead of a narrow examination of isolated individuals lacking any situated context (Diamond & Spillane, 2016; Dimmock, 2012; Spillane & Healey, 2010).

Distributed leadership can provide middle school principals with a perspective on leadership practices and efforts to close the opportunity gap, which will improve academic achievement of culturally diverse students and students with disabilities (Bagwell, 2019). Distributed leadership does not advocate for a changed role of the middle school principal. Implementing a distributed leadership practice may present a fundamental change in their perception of leadership and the implementation of leadership responsibilities (Harris, 2012). Distributed leadership requires that middle school principals relinquish some authority and power, thus adapting a form of leadership

that focuses on brokering, facilitating, and supporting others in leading innovation and change (Harris, 2012). Middle school principals are looking for new models that require collaboration, networking, and multiagency work, which requires more responsive leadership approaches (Harris & Spillane, 2008).

Middle School Movement

Historically in the United States, beginning in the early 1900s, junior high schools were specific educational programs designed to address the needs of adolescent learners (Ellerbrock et al., 2018); however, the junior high model was exposed with flaws because it did not provide the support needed for young adolescents. The middle school movement began in the United States in 1963 when scholars exchanged ideas used to propose the middle school's name and promote its emergence (Schaefer et al., 2016). In 1965, William Alexander and Emmett Williams proposed middle school for students in Grades 5-8, with interdisciplinary teams and units that form a school within a school, where teachers from various disciplines work together to provide cross-curricular instruction (Schaefer et al., 2016). The middle school concept was created to have a developmentally responsive learning environment for young adolescents (Ellerbrock et al., 2018). Adolescent students biologically experience significant emotional, physical, and intellectual changes in their developmental and academic trajectory during their late childhood and early adolescent years (Alley, 2018). The middle school movement has gone through several themes throughout different decades to promote successful middle schools (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Themes of the Middle School Movement

Decades	Themes of the Middle School Movement
1963–1979	The middle school movement begins Name change Emergent identity
1980–1989	The movement advances Practice and exploration Progress and change Policy and politics
1990–1999	Hope in the midst of storms Middle school structures Middle school practices The curriculum conundrum
2000–2009	Research-based models of middle School practice The middle school concept Interdisciplinary teams A signature middle school pedagogy
2010–2015	Restrictions and innovations National mandates International voices International influences Comparisons of middle school settings and practices Descriptive reports from abroad

Note. Adapted from "An Historical Overview of the Middle School Movement, 1963-2015," by Mary Beth Schaefer, Kathleen F. Malu, and Bogum Yoon, 2016, *Research in Middle Level Education*, *39*(5) p. 5 (http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19404476.2016.1165036).

The middle school model focused on teaming and advising, flexible grouping opportunities, community service learning, supporting character development, and multiple and alternative assessments (Alley, 2018). The middle school movement recognizes that the organizational structure is one of the most critical aspects of middle

school. Researchers suggest that middle school organizational structure has three

categories: people (interdisciplinary teams), place (public school, magnet school, and

charter school) and time (block schedule, traditional schedule) that should be included in

middle school (Ellerbrock et al., 2018). World-wide consensus of middle school

advocates recognizes the necessity for a specific approach to the teaching and learning

process for adolescent students that should address the adolescent student's physical,

intellectual/cognitive, moral, psychological, social-emotional, and spiritual needs

(Ellerbrock et al., 2018). In 1973, the National Middle School Association was the first

national organization that was dedicated exclusively to the growth of middle level

education (Ellerbrock et al., 2018). The Association for Middle Level Education

promotes school philosophy and organizational structures that support young

adolescents' unique developmental characteristics and offers guiding principles, essential

attributes, goals, and characteristics of exemplary middle schools (Ruppert, 2020).

There are only a few studies that have explicitly explored the relationship between

distributed leadership and student learning outcomes in middle schools. One study by

Leithwood and Jantzi (2000, as cited in Harris, 2012) revealed that distributing

proportions of leadership activity to teachers has a position of influence on teacher

effectiveness and student engagement. Silins and Mulford (2002, as cited in Harris, 2012)

concluded that when leadership sources are distributed throughout the school community,

teacher's investment in the teaching and learning process increases, and student outcomes

are more likely to improve.

The relationship between distributed leadership and student learning outcomes for students with disabilities is the gap in practice that this qualitative study addressed. I analyzed the connection between instructional leadership teams (ILTs) and the distributed leadership practices used to increase achievement for students with disabilities. Effective instructional leadership must include the need to recognize the capability of educational leaders to make significant and meaningful contributions to student performance and performance gains (Harris, 2014). The results of this basic qualitative study could contribute to academic, social change and positively affect the overall lives of students with disabilities. Achievement disparities across subgroups have existed historically in the United States. Academic and social performance gaps for students with disabilities significantly limit educational success and overall life opportunities for this population (Hock et al., 2017). Findings may provide research to school district senior administrators to determine if distributed leadership practices used by middle school principals, can support the increased academic achievement of students with disabilities. Consequently, this increase in achievement can impact social change, which may include higher levels of education for students with disabilities, and increased sense of community, and expanded job sustainability which could promote additional opportunities for students with disabilities to thrive in their local community.

Special Education at the Middle School Level

Research suggests that the achievement gap between students with disabilities and their nondisabled peers continue to be a major issue in most school systems across the United States, with this gap expanding as students move from elementary to middle

school (Gilmour et al., 2019). As middle schools face the increasing responsibility to improve the academic outcomes of students with disabilities, principals play a key role in this transformation. The middle school principals' role is more critical for students with disabilities as many of these students fail to meet performance standards and achieve desired educational outcome (Lynch, 2016). Students with disabilities need effective instructional leadership, as they continually fail to meet proficiency standards on standardized assessments; at the middle school level, the content knowledge that students must exhibit to be proficient becomes increasingly hard for middle school students with disabilities (Lynch, 2016). Middle school students often struggle to find social and emotional support and have a decreased sense of belonging in school, which diverts students from promising academic and career trajectories (Ellerbrock et al., 2018). This phenomenon is increased for middle school students with a disability, which leads to a decrease in academic achievement. Middle school principals should expand their instructional knowledge of special education to become instructional leaders in improving the academic performance of students with disabilities.

Problem Statement

This basic qualitative study addressed the gap in practice by exploring how eight middle school principals applied distributed leadership practices within their ILTs to improve the academic achievement of students with disabilities. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 2001 (ESEA) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires the inclusion of students with disabilities in state accountability systems (Thurlow et al., 2016). The key goal of ESEA was to narrow the

achievement gap between subgroups, including the gap between students who receive special education services and students who do not, by increasing the accountability of school systems to require increased academic rigor and greater exposure to the general education curriculum for students with disabilities. Historically, achievement gaps among subgroups have existed; however, although some research has been conducted, achievement gaps between students with disabilities and their nondisabled peers have received less attention (Thurlow et al., 2016).

Federal mandates such as ESEA have applied more accountability measures to schools, which has created a sense of urgency among public school principals regarding the lagging academic of students with disabilities. Consequently, middle school principals struggle to find ways to support their special education teachers in helping students with disabilities (Lynch, 2016). A middle school principal's responsibility may become more important for students with disabilities as many students with disabilities fail to meet performance standards and achieve desired educational outcomes (Lynch, 2016). Students with disabilities need effective instructional leadership practices as they continually fail to meet proficiency standards on standardized assessments; therefore, educational theorists cite instructional leadership as one of the most critical responsibilities of today's principal (Lynch, 2016). Principals may increase the academic performance of students with disability by examining nonhistorical leadership approaches and promoting new leadership practices to address the challenges of improving student achievement and closing the opportunity gap for diverse student populations (Bagwell, 2019). Distributed leadership moves beyond the single charismatic leader who transforms

an organization to the idea that leadership is stretched over many individuals in the organization and is referred to as leadership sharing, spreading, and distributing, involving multiple actors across multiple roles and multiple levels of school organization (Angelle, 2010). According to Angelle (2010), distributed leadership is the task of leadership performed through the interaction of multiple individual leaders. Therefore, as the needs of schools change, some middle school principals are using distributed leadership to build leadership capacity in their ILTs to provide effective instructional support (Bagwell, 2019). Academic achievement for students with disabilities in middle school has been an issue for the large, urban-suburban public school district where this study was conducted. With only eight out of 25 middle schools displaying any growth for students with disabilities, this is a problem the district must grapple with and find ways to improve academic achievement for this population (see Table 3). Consequently, most students with disabilities in middle school and this district are not achieving and are following farther behind their nondisabled peers, which puts them at risk of dropping out of school. The research problem explored eight middle school principals' perspectives on distributed leadership practices used by their ILTs that contributed to the academic growth of students with disabilities.

Table 3

Middle Schools that Demonstrated Improved Academic Achievement for Students With

Disabilities in Statewide Assessments in Math and Reading

School	Subject	2017	2018	2019
School A	Math	5.0%	5.9%	14.3%
	Reading	8.3%	11.8%	13.0%
School B	Math	5.0%	8.5%	12.5%
	Reading	4.9%	5.0%	11.3%
School C	Math	5.0%	6.3%	7.9%
	Reading	5.0%	8.3%	10.7%
School D	Math	1.7%	5.0%	5.5%
	Reading	5.0%	5.5%	6.5%
School E	Math	5.0%	6.3%	15.0%
	Reading	5.0%	6.3%	12.6%
School F	Math	8.0%	10.4%	19.0%
	Reading	5.3%	16.5%	17.5%
School G	Math	3.1%	5.7%	6.5%
	Reading	6.8%	7.5%	14.3%
School H	Math	5.0%	9.6%	14.6%
	Reading	5.0%	6.4%	8.4%

Note. Data were obtained from the Department of Education in the state where this study was conducted.

According to the state's assessment data, 13% of the total student population in the state where this study took place were identified as students with disabilities, and performance data revealed that in 2019, only 6.0% of students with disabilities scored proficient on the English Language Arts, Grade 8 statewide assessment, compared to 45.0% of nondisabled students who scored proficient on the same assessment. The

achievement gap between students with disabilities and their nondisabled peers in middle

schools has become a major challenge for this large, urban-suburban public school

district. Out of the 25 middle schools, only a small percentage of middle schools are

showing any growth for students with disabilities, resulting in the achievement gap

growing more for students with disabilities at the middle school level in this district.

There are eight middle schools in this large, urban-suburban public school district in a

mid-Atlantic state that have demonstrated a pattern of growth in reading and math for

students with disabilities on the statewide assessment. In contrast, the other 17 middle

schools in the district have not (see Table 3). The gap in practice was to explore how the

eight middle school principals had demonstrated a pattern of growth in academic

achievement for students with disabilities on statewide assessments in reading and math

for the last 3 years while others had not. Purposive sampling was used to select the eight

middle school principals who had demonstrated academic growth of students with

disabilities in reading and math for the last 3 years on statewide assessments. The sample

size was determined based on 2017-2019 statewide assessment data in reading and math.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, statewide assessments were not conducted in 2020 or

2021. Data revealed that out of the 25 middle schools, eight middle schools showed

increased academic achievement for students with disabilities on statewide assessments

in reading and math. The middle schools that showed an improvement in the academic

achievement of students with disabilities were chosen in the sample size of eight middle

school principals. The middle school principals who met the criteria were interviewed

until data saturation was met. The results of this basic qualitative study may provide

strategies and coaching opportunities for other middle school principals whose schools show students with disabilities are not achieving academic growth in reading and math.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore middle school principals' perspectives on distributed leadership practices within their ILTs that improved academic achievement of students with disabilities. The achievement gap between students with disabilities and their nondisabled peers in middle schools has become a major challenge for this large, urban-suburban public school district. However, there are eight middle schools in this district that had demonstrated a pattern of growth in reading and math for students with disabilities on statewide assessment, while other middle schools in the district had not.

This basic qualitative study addressed the gap in practice by exploring how eight middle school principals had demonstrated a pattern of growth in academic achievement for students with disabilities for at least 3 years while others had not. The findings from this basic qualitative study may provide principals with leadership practices that can be implemented to increase the academic achievement of students with disabilities and move students with disabilities closer to achievement levels of their nondisabled peers. In addition, effective distributed leadership practices could become part of this district's leadership model for middle school principals.

Research Question

RQ1: What are urban middle school principals' perspectives on the distributed leadership practices used by their instructional leadership teams that contributed to increased academic achievement of students with disabilities?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this basic qualitative study was the distributed leadership framework model developed by Spillane et al. (2004), which is used to study leadership practices. This framework recognizes that multiple leaders and leadership activities are widely shared within and between organizations (Harris & Spillane, 2008). Spillane et al. (2004) created a distributed leadership framework (see Figure 2) to understand a school's day-to-day leadership practices. Using this framework to conceptualize leadership practices, leaders are identified as the individuals within the school who work to organize the school community to improve instruction. Followers are identified as the individuals influenced by leaders to improve their instructional practices and who then influence the leaders. The terms *leaders* and *followers* are fluid terms as any individual who is a follower in one activity can be a leader in another activity. While the leaders' roles, functions, routines, or structures are not part of the primary focus of distributed leadership, a higher emphasis on distributed leadership is placed on the leadership practice (Harris & Spillane, 2008). This qualitative study explored middle school principals' perspectives and the effective implementation of distributed leadership practices that may contribute to increased academic achievement of students with disabilities.

Figure 2

Distributed Leadership Framework
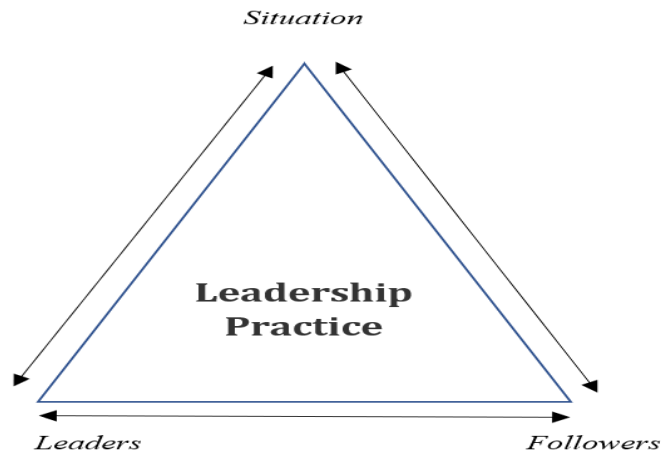
Note. Adapted from "Towards a theory of leadership practice: A distributed perspective,"

by J. P. Spillane, R. Halverson, and J. B. Diamond, 2004, *Journal of Curriculum Studies*,

36(1), p. 11 (https://www.doi.org/10.1080/0022027032000106726). Copyright 2004 by

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      The distributed leadership framework is grounded in the model of distributed

leadership and focuses on interactions rather than the actions of those in formal and

informal leadership roles. Concentrating on identifying, nurturing, and employing

expertise from nontraditional stakeholders within the organization rather than assigning

leadership roles solely based on position or role is the basis of distributed leadership

(Bush & Ng, 2019). According to Harris and Spillane (2008), distributed leadership is

primarily concerned with specific leadership practices and how leadership decisions

influence organizational and instructional improvement in a particular way. As such,

distributed leadership is embodied by the collaboration of school leaders, followers, and

their situation (Spillane, 2005).

When analyzing school leadership from a distributed lens, leadership practices are an outcome of the interactions of formal and informal leaders, situational context, use of tools in facilitating interactions, and organizational structures that influence the interactions (Bagwell, 2019). This basic qualitative study focused on the performance of students with disabilities based on their respective middle school principal leadership decisions. Addressing multifaceted and changing educational challenges by building the capacity of stakeholders, middle school principals must consider the collective performance of leadership responsibilities within the school and creating structures to support the stakeholders (Klar et al., 2016). Middle school principals build leadership capacity through leadership practices and situational influences that can influence school improvement and increase student achievement. According to Bagwell (2019), distributed leadership begins with understanding how leadership is manifested in the work of schools, and by continuously enhancing distributed leadership practices for their ILTs and teacher leaders to influence leadership practices and organizational routines, these practices can influence organizational and instructional improvement (Harris & Spillane, 2008). When middle school principals effectively use distributed leadership, organizational capacity and school improvement can disseminate through formal or informal leadership roles. According to Klar et al. (2016), middle school principals must identify potential leaders, create leadership opportunities, facilitate role transition, and provide continuous support to new leaders. School leadership teams must improve school climate and culture to motivate staff and students to achieve higher academic achievement.

Using distributed leadership practices, the middle school principals build leadership capacity of their ILTs, which increases school improvement through formal and informal leadership roles. Leadership capacity is built through leadership practices and situational interactions with teachers. This capacity influences practices and organizational routines and ultimately increases academic outcomes for students with disabilities. This framework and analysis of corresponding data are being used to explore how middle school principals conceptualize their role in building leadership capacity of ILT staff. The study explored how leadership reaches beyond the titled leaders and supports an understanding of leadership through structures, tools, and routines, and identifies leadership practices that involve elements of leaders, followers, and situations.

Nature of the Study

The research design for this study was a basic qualitative study. Qualitative research explores individuals, groups, and phenomena to contextualize and reflect how experiences are perceived (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The phenomenon addressed in this basic qualitative study was the pattern of increased academic achievement for students with disabilities on statewide assessments in reading and math for eight middle schools in a large district, while other middle school principals in the same district had not seen increased achievement. Researchers use qualitative research to understand better the phenomena they are studying through observations. Qualitative researchers attempt to place themselves as an observer within the world of the phenomena and use a variety of tools such as case studies, interviews, and observations to try and understand the phenomena (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). Since qualitative research uses multiple tools for

data collection, it involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). According to Ravitch and Carl (2016), the process of researching qualitatively is not a linear but is fluid by cyclically interacting and building off one another.

A basic qualitative study identifies a small participant pool that allows the researcher to draw conclusions only about that participant group and only in that specific context and is understood as bounded by time and place, involving a case of real-life events (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). This basic qualitative study was bounded around the ILTs at each of the selected middle schools. I studied the phenomenon in context so that the research findings produce insight into how the phenomenon occurs within a given situation (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

The location of this qualitative study was a large, urban-suburban public school district in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Although the school district has 25 middle schools, criteria were used for purposive sampling to select middle school principals who demonstrated academic growth in reading and math for students with disabilities for 3 years on statewide assessments. The rights of the participants were protected by informed consent, confidentiality, and the absence of any identifying data that could reveal the participant or their school, school division, or county.

Data were analyzed through open coding and thematic analysis to develop overarching themes aligned to the study's conceptual framework. Thematic analysis of interview data requires a deep interpretation and involvement by the researcher, which consists of statements that bring meaning and identify the participant's lived experience

(Saldaña, 2015). In addition, the review of archival data and document review (principal memos and special education improvement plans developed at each middle school) assisted in answering the research question, which was specific to distributed leadership practices that may contribute to academic growth for students with disabilities.

Definitions

Achievement gap: When a group of students significantly outperforms other student groups on average in education achievement, with educational achievement being assessed through standardized test scores and/or grade point average (Hung et al., 2020).

Distributed leadership: A way to understand leadership practices and situations, seeing leadership differently to brighten the possibilities for organizational transformation (Harris & Spillane, 2008). Distributed leadership is focused on the leadership practices and how these practices can influence organizational and instructional improvement (Harris & Spillane, 2008). Distributed leadership is a conceptual framework by which the *how* of leadership practice can be examined and may serve as a more accurate way of representing patterns of leadership that occur in schools (Bagwell, 2019).

Formal leadership role: Designated by the school's formal structure and includes principals, assistant principals, department chairs, and instructional coaches. These leaders have the potential to influence other teachers' behaviors or beliefs by the authority attached to their formal positions (Sun et al., 2013)

Informal leadership role: Leaders who do not have any formal leadership positions in the organization but influence other teachers' practices by providing

resources (e.g., teaching strategies and knowledge of their implementation) and values in the process of professional interactions (Sun et al., 2013).

Instructional leadership teams: One model that attempts to facilitate collaborative decision-making focused on both instruction and school governance issues is the Instructional Leadership Team (ILT). An ILT is tasked with engaging in leadership for learning. ILT members lead by collaboratively determining the school's reform strategy, making decisions regarding resource allocation to ensure the strategy's success, and engaging others in implementing this strategy (Weiner, 2014).

Middle school movement: Proposed by William Alexander and Emmett Williams in 1965 for students in grades 5-8, with interdisciplinary teams and units that form a school within a school, where teachers from various disciplines work together to provide cross-curricular instruction (Schaefer et al., 2016). The middle school model is focused on teaming and advising, flexible grouping opportunities, community service learning, supporting character development, and multiple and alternative assessments. The middle school movement recognizes that the organizational structure is one of the most critical aspects of middle school (Alley, 2018).

Special Education: Programs and services offered to students who have unique intellectual, physical, emotional, or social needs that require nonstandard instructional methods (Cramer et al., 2018).

Students with disabilities: A student with a disability means a child with mental retardation, hearing impairments (including deafness), speech or language impairments, visual impairments (including blindness), serious emotional disturbance, orthopedic

impairments, autism, traumatic brain injury, other health impairments, or specific learning disabilities, and who, by reason thereof, needs special education and related services (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004).

Assumptions

There are several assumptions that were made regarding this research study. One assumption in this research study was that middle school principals understood the scope of the study and the language I used. Further, I assumed participants responded honestly, objectively, and accurately to interview questions. A second assumption was that middle school principals had a sincere interest in participating in the research study to provide honest feedback about school leadership. By having a shared concern among participants to support students with disabilities and by individually sharing insight that may be common, a wider range of perspectives and experiences may have been discovered. (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). An assumption was also made that principals provided input into school leadership that can add to the research in this field of study, which in turn can improve student academic achievement. In addition, I assumed that the sample population of middle school principals have all experienced the same or similar phenomenon of the study, using distributed leadership practices with their ILTs to increase academic outcomes for students with disabilities. Distributed leadership encourages others in each respective middle school to increase their school's capacities for improving educational outcomes for students (Klar et al., 2016).

Another assumption is the knowledge of the respondents about distributed leadership practices and effective components of middle schools. The knowledge level of

respondents could be varied based upon their formalized training, preparation, and experiences. Some respondents may have intuitively embraced distributed leadership practices within their administrative practice without having become formally exposed to this concept. The final assumption is that district leadership and school based ILTs may use the findings of this research study to promote improvement of academic achievement of students with disabilities at the middle school level.

Scope and Delimitations

The scope of this research study was limited to selected middle school principals in a large, urban-suburban public school district in a mid-Atlantic state who had demonstrated academic growth of students with disabilities in reading and math for 3 years on statewide assessments. The middle school principals were identified through annual state reports and school profile data provided by the school district's research and accountability office. The initial criteria that middle school principals met were the increase of academic achievement of students with disabilities in either reading or math for at least 3 years. After meeting the initial criteria, participants must have served in the role of principal at the middle school selected for at least 3 school years.

Middle schools were selected for this basic qualitative study because academic achievement for students with disabilities tends to decline in middle school (Thurlow & Ysseldyke, 2016). As a result, school districts are exploring ways to ensure academic achievement does not decline in middle school students. Research points to many different reasons for the decline in achievement at the middle school level, such as transitions, environment, and middle school configurations (concept versus environment)

(Starks et al., 2018). Based on the obstacles facing middle school students on life's developmental continuum, many middle school students experience a lower level of connection to the school community, often struggle to find social and emotional support, and may have their academic and career trajectories negatively affected (Borman et al., 2019). Middle school principals must possess leadership skills and knowledge that address the challenges they face in closing the opportunity gap for middle school students (Bagwell, 2019). Distributed leadership was selected for this qualitative study because it is a leadership framework that conceptualizes leadership practice, where the leadership practice is the focus of the analysis (Bagwell, 2019). The distributed leadership framework also recognizes that leadership can be based on formal or informal roles. Most leadership frameworks require that the leader be in a formalized role to carry out the leadership function. Distributed leadership recognizes effective work because of interactions between stakeholders, situational context, the use of resources to support interactions, and the organizational structures that present obstacles and impact interactions (Bagwell, 2019). The distributed leadership framework conceptualizes leadership practices and efforts to close the opportunity gap and improve academic achievement for diverse students, such as students with disabilities (Bagwell, 2019).

Limitations

Generalizability is limited due to purposive sampling of only middle school principals who meet the criteria. The subjects included in this purposive sample may not be representative of the entire population and may introduce unknown bias into their responses. Therefore, the findings may not be generalized to the entire population of

middle schools meeting the criteria for inclusion in this qualitative study. This basic qualitative study was limited to the information acquired from a review of the literature, data gathered through semistructured interviews, and artifact review. Another limitation of this qualitative study was using 3 years of data to identify the school principals. In addition, the data used does not include the most current school year. With COVID-19 temporarily closing school systems across the United States, some school districts did not have state assessments in the Spring of 2020 or Spring of 2021. This basic qualitative study was based on a single means of investigating distributed leadership in middle-level schools, and these findings may not exactly reflect the current situation in all public middle schools.

Researcher bias is another limitation of this qualitative study. As a middle school principal, I understand the structure of middle schools, how middle schools operate, and how middle school principals think about leadership. In this basic qualitative study, I limited this bias by triangulating interview data with academic data to support the interpretations, which provided more confidence in the findings. In addition, all the data obtained were analyzed with a clear and unbiased mind through the process of re-evaluating the responses and ensuring that pre-existing assumptions were not present. Interview questions were framed for open-ended responses to restrict participants from answering yes or no, guiding them to provide honest answers. The interview questions were structured to allow for follow-up questions of the participants.

Significance

I addressed a local problem to understand how eight middle principals had demonstrated a pattern of growth in academic achievement for students with disabilities in reading and math on statewide assessments for 3 years while others had not. This research study was unique because I investigated to what capacity middle school principals are becoming successful in narrowing the achievement gap using distributed leadership practices to build leadership capacity in their ILTs to improve academic achievement for students with disabilities. This study could provide important findings for students with disabilities, providing strategies and leadership practices to teachers and district leaders. In addition, it could provide middle school principals with a leadership framework that could be used to narrow the achievement gap between students with disabilities and their nondisabled peers.

The findings may provide an understanding of how middle school principals use ILTs to provide instructional leadership to ensure standards-based education to improve academic achievement for students with disabilities. The results of this research could provide information to school district senior administrators to access the leadership practices of middle school principals as they engaged and distributed leadership to their ILTs to improve the academic outcomes for students with disabilities.

The findings of this basic qualitative study may provide important findings that influence the academic outcomes for students with disabilities, which could result in better life outcomes for students with disabilities. Research has shown that the education system presents an opportunity gap that leads to unequal outcomes, such as achievement

gaps (Ladson-Billings, 2013); consequently, the study findings could provide key recommendations that can influence students with disabilities and their families. When students with disabilities have improved academic outcomes, it can increase their graduation rates and lower dropout rates, which provides students with better life opportunities (Gilmour et al., 2019).

Summary

This basic qualitative study addressed a gap in practice by exploring how eight middle school principals and their ILTs demonstrated a pattern of growth in academic achievement for students with disabilities in reading and math on statewide assessments for 3 years. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore middle school principals' perspectives on distributed leadership practices within their ILTs that improved the academic achievement of students with disabilities. The findings of this research study may provide principals and senior leadership with strategies and leadership practices that middle school principals can use to narrow the achievement gap between students with disabilities and their nondisabled peers. In addition, the results of this research could provide information to school district senior administrators to determine if the distributed leadership model using ILTs can support middle school principals by providing instructional leadership to improve the academic outcomes for students with disabilities.

This basic qualitative study may contribute to positive social change by increasing academic achievement for students with disabilities, which may directly align with improved graduation rates for this population. Increasing the academic achievement of

students with disabilities may motivate students with disabilities to stay in school, graduate, and examine postsecondary educational options. The achievement of students with disabilities has been a long-standing concern and correlates with research showing that students with disabilities are not achieving at the same rate as their nondisabled peers. This basic qualitative study could provide information to school district senior administrators to determine if using distributed leadership practices within ILTs can support middle school principals by improving instructional leadership, which may improve the academic outcomes of students with disabilities. In addition, this study may contribute to positive social change by recognizing effective distributed leadership practices for middle school principals. These effective distributed leadership practices can be taught and replicated for other middle school principals to increase the academic achievement for students with disabilities. The results of this qualitative study could positively effect social change by increasing academic achievement for students with disabilities, which closes the opportunity gap and provides more opportunities for students with disabilities in the future.

In Chapter 2, I review current literature to establish the relevance to the research problem of this study. My review of literature focused on distributed leadership and how this framework can be applied to school leadership, specifically principals. Second, the literature review focused on instructional leadership and how it has played a role in school improvement and improving student achievement. Finally, the literature review focused on special education and the current trends in the academic achievement of this subgroup.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The role of the school principal has changed over time from being a manager to operating as an instructional leader who can drive the vision of the institution and focus on school improvement (Naidoo, 2019). Twenty-first century structures to address learning requirements are very different than historical organizational practices (Harris & Spillane, 2008). For example, middle school principals in the 21st century must engage in new and complex forms of leadership, which requires more responsive leadership approaches to address students' academic needs. As such, student populations are changing demographically, so school leaders must acquire and implement leadership practices that allow leaders to close existing gaps, face obstacles, and create schools that are responsive to the demographic shift (Bagwell, 2019). The task of leading today's schools is so complex that one individual cannot be expected to accomplish this task alone. The research problem explored in this basic qualitative study was understanding the gap in practice by exploring how some middle school principals and their ILTs have demonstrated a pattern of growth in academic achievement for students with disabilities for at least 3 years. The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain an understanding of middle school principals' perspectives on distributed leadership practices within their ILTs that may improve the academic achievement of students with disabilities. Selected middle school principals served in schools that had demonstrated increased student achievement for students with disabilities for at least 3 years on statewide assessments. This basic qualitative study could provide invaluable information to school district senior administrators supporting the need to implement the distributed leadership model to

improve the academic outcomes of students with disabilities. Since the discovered effective leadership practices can be taught and replicated to other middle school principals, this study may contribute to positive social change by recognizing effective leadership practices for middle school principals that increase the achievement of students with disabilities such that these practices can then be applied elsewhere.

Although there may be claims that middle schools that demonstrate positive trends in scholastic performance are successful due to a variety of factors, research suggests that the role of leadership is the most significant factor in school effectiveness and students' academic achievement (Jambo & Hongde, 2020). As such, the need for effective leadership to address the complex nature of leading schools in the 21st century challenges many middle school principals to evaluate historical and current leadership styles and practices. Fortunately, new models of leadership have emerged based on collaboration, networking, and multiagency leadership (Jambo & Hongde, 2020). Distributed leadership, among the new models of leadership, addresses a school's enormous multitude of needs by appropriating leadership responsibilities since distributed leadership is based on collective decision-making from stakeholders and is fueled by joint collaborations (Joo, 2020). Consequently, the middle school structure may be well suited for implementing distributed leadership due to the unique characteristics identified for a successful middle school organization. Structures such as building in-service learning and community partnerships, interdisciplinary teaming, and supporting character development provide internal mechanisms that encourage collaboration and distributed leadership practices among all staff members throughout the school

(Ellerbrock et al., 2018). Research suggests that since middle school years are significant in adolescent growth, scholars must purposefully research topics such as organizational structures and leadership practices (including distributed leadership) to ensure research findings are shared that can create policy and enact practices that improve student achievement (Ellerbrock et al., 2018).

In this review of the literature, I explored, categorized, and summarized the literature on distributed leadership, instructional leadership, and special education. I focused on how middle school principals may build instructional leadership capacity to use distributed leadership as a practice to increase achievement for students with disabilities. The theory of distributed leadership is an emerging concept, especially in education; however, a growing number of scholars have begun to investigate this topic. While there is not a formal or universally accepted definition of distributed leadership, researchers have made attempts to identify the major characteristics encompassing distributed leadership (Bagwell, 2019). Distributed leadership can be described as an analytical framework for understanding leadership practice necessary to influence organizational change and improve students' academic outcomes. Distributed leadership provides a close relationship and interaction between leaders and situational factors.

Literature Search Strategy

I conducted a comprehensive and systematic search of current literature using different online databases through Walden University's library. Peer-reviewed journal articles that aligned with the research topic were gathered using the databases of Education Source, Emerald Management, Education Database, ERIC, EBSCO Host,

ProQuest, and Sage. Keywords included *distributed leadership, instructional leadership, educational leadership, school principals, principal leadership practices, transformational leadership practices, principals' beliefs, middle school, middle school reform, middle school concept, special education,* and *student achievement gap.* In addition, I studied additional literature related to the conceptual framework of this qualitative study, which included reading educational books, reading peer-reviewed articles cited by other articles, and accessing references cited in other dissertations. The articles were reviewed and selected based on alignment to the study's problem, purpose, and research question, along with relevant constructs of the conceptual framework for this qualitative study. Literature significant to the research topic was selected.

Conceptual Framework

Research from education scholars suggests that middle school principals are responsible for setting the tone of the school and providing effective instructional leadership (Naidoo, 2019). In addition to effective instructional leadership, middle school principals must ensure school improvement, leading to improved academic achievement for all students. Twenty-first century middle school principals' roles are complex with responsibilities that are demanding, challenging, overburdened and ambiguous (Naidoo, 2019). Due to the complex nature of school leadership in the twenty-first century, leaders are searching for new and creative ways to lead schools. Distributed leadership practices beyond those in formal and historical educational leadership represent some of the most innovative ideas to develop in the educational leadership arena in the recent past (Harris, 2012). Principals must find ways to expand leadership roles to run an effective school.

Using teacher leaders to build capacity and develop organizational capacity speaks to the heart of the distributed leadership framework.

Distributed leadership is a collaborative leadership practice when stakeholders cultivate capacities by collaborating and synergizing the combined capabilities within an organization (Harris, 2004) and has evolved from the broader theory of sociocultural learning. Based on the idea that a learner's environment plays a pivotal role in their learning development, this theory suggests that knowledge and learning are socially constructed and occur through social interactions with other adult learners in an environment in which knowledge is both created and shared (Klar, 2012). Social learning theory highlights two important features relevant to department chair learning: learning occurs within a social context, and people learn with and from one another through various social interactions; thus, social interaction is critical to the acquisition of new knowledge (Hart & Bredeson, 1996). According to Spillane et al. (2004), human activity is distributed in the collaborative web of actors and artifacts, and the situation is the appropriate unit of analysis for studying practice.

Distributed leadership challenges researchers to expand the study of leadership beyond the characteristics of individual leaders. Grounded in the notion of interactions, researchers use distributed leadership theory to explore how leaders interact with other organization members. From a distributed perspective, how leaders interact around the leadership functions is more important than the nature of their leadership roles, responsibilities, and functions (Harris, 2012). The process of influencing others can be accomplished by any member of the organization. The ability to influence others is not

reserved for those who have titles such as principal, administrator, or leader/leadership team member (Connolly et al., 2019). When analyzing school leadership from a distributed lens, leadership practices are an outcome of the interactions of formal and informal leaders, situational context, use of tools in facilitating interactions, and organizational structures that influence the interactions (Bagwell, 2019). Distributed leadership encourages others in the school to increase their school's capacities for improving educational outcomes for students (Klar et al., 2016). Middle school principals can develop individual and group capacity to respond to ever-changing educational demands by serving as capacity builders (Klar et al., 2016). Distributed leadership recognizes that leadership processes encompass the whole group, not the individual. Effective leadership is a coordinated effort performed by the synchronized movements of individuals of the group effectively executed in harmony (Akdemir & Ayik, 2017). As part of the ever-changing role of the school principal, principals are now developing the capabilities of other leaders to engage in distributed leadership.

Distributed leadership is a conceptual framework for how leadership practices are examined and provides a way of analyzing patterns of leadership that occur in schools (Bagwell, 2019) and is not underpinned by a clear definition; however, researchers have made attempts to identify the major characteristics encompassing distributed leadership. According to Gronn (2000), distributed leadership emerges because of the interactions of people in a group acting as one connected network with a specific purpose. Since effective leadership is not a sum of individuals performing isolated tasks, a concerted action may be exported from a broader understanding of specific leadership practices

(Bagwell, 2019, p. 86). Distributed leadership must focus on concerted actions, which improve school management and student achievement since the basic assumption of distributed leadership is based on shared judgment and leadership that is grounded on a joint network (Joo, 2020).

Distributed leadership can also be described as an analytical frame for understanding leadership practice necessary to influence organizational change to improve academic outcomes for students. According to Harris and Spillane (2008), distributed leadership is not a panacea, a blueprint, or a recipe: it is a method to understand leadership practices and situations, seeing leadership differently to brighten the possibilities for organizational transformation. When leadership is distributed, the work of all individuals who contribute to the leadership practice is recognized, whether in formal or informal leadership roles.

Using the distributed leadership framework to study leadership shifts the focus from leaders to leadership activity (Gronn, 2000). School leaders continue to build their leadership practices in many ways, as they are influenced by internal and external factors. School leaders use these internal (expertise and human capital) and external (consultants and educational research) factors to make instructional decisions. The tools that school leaders use in their practice, and the routines they create or perpetuate, are elements of their ongoing construction of leadership practice. Consequently, the roles leaders play, the priorities leaders define, and the tasks leaders undertake to impact the leaders' construction of their leadership practice. Using this framework, I seek to demonstrate that leadership does not rely solely on school principals and their individual characteristics,

but effective leadership may evolve to ILTs and other leaders within the school organizations.

Leaders and Followers

The middle school principal is ultimately the leader of a school; however, there are other individuals who can embrace leadership roles to support the school. In this qualitative study, there are several terms that will be used to differentiate between various types of leaders. Formal leaders are administrators and other leaders with formal titles such as the professional development coordinator and the literacy coach. Department chairs are teacher leaders who act in a leadership capacity, such as being part of the instructional leadership team (ILT), as leadership roles in a school are fluid. An individual may be the math department chair but become a follower in a grade-level meeting facilitated by the assistant principal.

Situation

Situation comes from a complex mix of material and social aspects of the environment, such as history, culture, and policy environment, and is a main concept within the distributed leadership framework. According to Spillane (2005), situation is not only important to leadership practice, but it also constitutes leadership practice, as situation defines leadership practice in interaction with leaders and followers. In studying leadership practice, one must study the relationship between leaders, followers, and elements of the situation (Halverson, 2003; Spillane, 2005). There are many elements identified in situation; however, this basic qualitative study focused on three aspects of situation: structures, tools, and routines.

Structure

Structure can be defined in many ways across different disciplines. For this qualitative study, the structure will be identified as a formally defined or recognized way of organizing because it will identify how middle school principals organize their ILTs to promote increased academic achievement for all students, emphasizing students with disabilities. The structure is distinct from tools and routines in that it is the frame within which the tools and routines exist (Feldman & Pentland, 2003). According to Spillane (2005), the use of structure in this sense will focus on the concept of institutional structure, which refers to the cultural or normative ideas that organize how people interact with one another, as well as structure as a cultural phenomenon that guides social action-roles, positions, and expectations. For example, middle school principals may use ILTs to provide a second level of leadership in their schools to promote academic achievement across all contents.

Tools

The concept of a tool is important in sociocultural theory. Tools can be defined as objects designed to enable some action (Spillane, 2005). For example, a tool may be a rubric for assessing learning or analyzing data and can help focus the user's attention. They are not accessories or incidentals, and they enable and constrain practice. Norman (1988) defined tools as externalized representations of ideas and intentions used by practitioners in their practice that serve as mediating devices to shape action in certain ways.

How school leaders use structures, routines, and tools varies based on the situation. For example, schools can design their structures, tools, and routines based on the unique needs of the school. Conversely, there are structures, routines, and tools that have been created by external agencies or agents such as the local school district or the state department of education. When a principal is new to a school, they may assume the previous principal's structures, tools, and routines; however, the principal may modify or create new structures, routines, and tools to implement under their leadership. A new principal may inherit the bell schedule from the previous principal but may also decide to implement a new structure, such as interdisciplinary team teaching, when they assume the role of principal.

Routines

Routines are repetitive actions that are part of an organization. For example, monitoring and evaluating teacher practice is a routine that involves the principal and assistant principals (Spillane, 2005). Routines are essential to the work of schools; hence, literature on routines is utilized to frame the ways in which the activity of leadership is studied. Some may believe that routines inhibit growth and change; however, others believe that routines create flexibility and promote change. The work of schools, like any other organization, occurs in multiple routines that coexist simultaneously.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain an understanding of middle school principals' perspectives on distributed leadership practices within their ILTs that may improve the academic achievement of students with disabilities. This qualitative study explored what structures, tools and routines are used by middle school principals to

distribute leadership to improve student achievement and explored how leadership

extends individual leaders, and seeks to develop an understanding of the structures, tools,

and routines of middle school principals use to lead.

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts

The literature review is organized into three sections. In the first section, I focused

on the literature on distributed leadership and how this applies to school leadership,

specifically middle school principals. Included in this section is a review of three

components of distributed leadership, including leaders and followers, situation, and

practice. Three types of leadership distribution are discussed: collaborated, collective,

and coordinated distribution. The dimensions of distributed leadership theory are

outlined, including elements of emergent property and leadership according to expertise.

Literature is highlighted that focused on teacher leadership as a distributed practice,

barriers to teacher leadership, and distributed leadership teacher teams. In the second

section, I focused on an overview of instructional leadership. Included in the second

section is a review of instructional leadership models. Literature is highlighted that

focuses on shared instructional leadership at the school level. In the third section, I

focused on special education. Included in this section is literature that highlights the

history of special education access in public schools, the principal's role in special

education, and special education achievement.

Distributed Leadership

Leadership can be defined as a process of influence leading to the achievement of

desired purposes (Bush & Ng, 2019). Distributed leadership encourages others in the

school to increase their school's capacities for improving educational outcomes for students (Klar et al., 2016). Since middle school principals may promote the individual and organizational capacity to reply to intricate and changing aspects of education, middle school principals must serve as capacity builders (Klar et al., 2016). Distributed leadership recognizes that leadership processes are about the whole group, not the individual. As such, leadership is an orchestrated effort performed by members of the group collaborating in sync so responsibilities are carried out efficiently (Akdemir & Ayik, 2017). As part of the ever-changing role of the school principal, principals are now developing the capabilities of other leaders to engage in distributed leadership.

Since there are different interpretations of distributed leadership, the definition and conceptualization of this leadership practice vary. According to Spillane et al. (2004), distributed leadership is a way of understanding leadership that focuses on interaction and the exploration of complex social processes. Harris (2004) defined distributed leadership as a form of collective agency incorporating the activities of many individuals in a school who work on mobilizing and guiding other teachers in the process of instructional change. Gronn (2000) believed that the reconceptualization of leadership is a socially distributed activity theory in which the activity connects the organizational structures with the agency, or actions and agents, suggesting that distributed leadership may be viewed from two broad perspectives—the *numerical perspective* and the *holistic perspective*.

The holistic perspective argues that distributed leadership is understood as the aggregated leadership behavior of some, many, or all the members of an organization and

views distributed leadership as an all-inclusive phenomenon that encompasses the practice of delegation, sharing, collaboration, dispersion, and democratizing leadership in schools (Gronn, 2000). Spillane et al. (2004) identified *leader plus* and *activity theory* as conceptual foundations in their account of distributed leadership. Leadership distribution is the synergistic interaction of the leader, subordinates, and situation involving people with expertise and skills in school leadership roles whenever necessary.

While there is no universally accepted definition of distributed leadership, a simplified definition encompasses leadership that is disseminated where the work of all individuals who contribute to the leadership practice is recognized, whether they are in official or informal leadership roles. At its base, the rudimentary idea of distributed leadership is immersed in collective decision-making and systemic leadership grounded on joint networking (Joo, 2020). Distributed leadership is focused on leadership practices and how these practices can influence organizational and instructional improvement (Harris & Spillane, 2008).

While other researchers have examined distributed leadership, Spillane's definition and concept of distributed leadership have recently guided other research studies exploring the distribution of leadership. Spillane (2006) conceptualized leadership practice from a distributed perspective, where leadership practice is the focus of the analysis. When leadership is distributed, the work of all individuals who contribute to the leadership practice is recognized, whether in formal or informal leadership roles. According to Harris and Spillane (2008), distributed leadership is not a panacea, blueprint, or recipe: it is a way to understand leadership practices and situations, seeing

leadership differently to brighten the possibilities for organizational transformation. From a distributed perspective, how leaders interact is more important than the nature of their leadership roles, responsibilities, and functions (Harris, 2012).

Research shows that when schools practice distributed leadership, they create a more positive school culture and individual emotion, promoting cooperative efforts and improving teacher professionalism (Joo, 2020). According to Joo (2020), teacher professionalism can be linked to increased student achievement because improving student achievement is the responsibility of the staff hired to facilitate the teaching and learning process for students. While there are limited studies on the relationship between distributed leadership and student learning outcomes, some evidence supports a positive relationship between the two. One study by Silins and Mulford concluded that student performances are more likely to increase when leadership sources are disseminated to stakeholders in the school community and when teachers are encouraged in areas of importance to them (as cited in Harris, 2012). Silins and Mulford examined the nature of organizational learning and the system-wide processes that foster organizational learning in high schools, particularly in the relationship between system, teacher, and student learning (Silins & Mulford, 2002). The Leadership for Organizational Learning and Student Outcomes (LOLSO) was a collaborative research project funded over 3 years (1997–1999) by the Australian Research Council. This project involved 96 secondary schools, more than 5,000 students, and 3,700 teachers and their respective principals as it provided a rich source of information on schools conceptualized as learning organizations. The LOLSO project focused on three aspects of high school functioning:

leadership, organizational learning, and the impact on student outcomes (Silins &

Mulford, 2002). This research study established a relationship between the system factors

of leadership and organizational learning and student outcomes, as measured by student

levels of participation in and engagement with school. The study also highlighted the

importance of teachers playing a key role in embedding organizational learning into the

school culture. Teachers become a profession of learners who employ inquiry, reflective

practice, and continuous problem solving while building leadership capacity when they

are empowered in areas important to them (Silins & Mulford, 2002). The study found that

principals must create a trusting and collaborative environment. Processes and structures

that support transparency, collaboration, and inclusive decision-making are essential for a

school to exist as a team of learners and build capacity for organizational learning (Silins

& Mulford, 2002). According to Silins and Mulford (2002), schools require structures

that encourage the development of learning communities that value differences, support

critical reflection, and encourage members to question, challenge, and debate teaching

and learning issues.

A study by Leithwood and Jantzi (2000) suggested that distributing a larger

proportion of leadership to teachers positively influenced teacher effectiveness and

student engagement. The purpose of the Leithwood and Jantzi study was to inquire about

the effects of transformational leadership practices on organizational conditions and

student engagement within schools. All elementary and junior high school teachers ($n =$

$2, 465$) in a district in Canada were surveyed using *The Organizational Conditions and

School Leadership Survey*. This survey contained 214 items measuring five sets of school

conditions, two sets of classroom conditions, and the perceived influence of teacher and principal leadership in the school. The study's results demonstrated a strong significant effect of transformational leadership on organizational conditions and moderate but still significant effects on student engagement (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000). Innovative and non-traditional leadership practices have been supported and observed as effective under certain conditions, and evidence suggests that these practices contribute to increased capacity and commitment (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000).

According to Spillane (2006), the critical issue is not that leadership is distributed but how it is distributed. Distributed leadership is not just the actions of the principal or other school leaders. Leadership practice is formed from collaboration as opposed to the actions of an individual leader (Spillane, 2004). Consequently, Spillane et al. (2004) explained that effective principals do not just put together a series of individual actions but systemically distribute leadership by building it into the fabric of the school. Distributed leadership is not simply delegated; instead, it weaves together people, materials, and organizational structures in a common cause of school improvement. Consequently, decision-making and influential systems executed by stakeholders at various organizational positions embody the spirit of distributed leadership (Bellibas & Liu, 2018).

The concept of distributing leadership among others in an organization does not suggest, however, that no one is responsible for a school's overall performance. According to Harris (2012), a distributed perspective on leadership does not suggest a changed role for the principal; rather, it implies the relinquishing of some authority and

power and repositioning of the role from exclusive leadership to a form of leadership that is more concerned with brokering, facilitating, and supporting others in leading innovation and change. According to the National Association of Secondary School Principals (2006), the principal should provide leadership by building and maintaining a vision, direction, and focus for student learning but also argues that a principal should never act alone. For principals, distributed leadership is a fundamental change in their understanding of leadership and how they can enact their leadership role in the school.

Components of Distributed Leadership

Distributed leadership can also be described as a single activity or result based on the actions of multiple stakeholders in a school who work at organizing others in the name of instructional change (Harris, 2004). Consequently, the foundation of a distributed conceptual framework is the relationship between leaders, followers, and the leadership practice. Leaders are identified as the individuals within the school who work to organize the school community to improve instruction. Followers are identified as the individuals influenced by leaders to improve their instructional practices and who then influence the leaders. The terms *leaders* and *followers* are fluid terms—an individual who is a follower in one activity can be a leader in another activity. Spillane et al. (2004) also believed that leadership activity in a school involves three essential constituting elements: leaders, followers, and situations. A distributed leadership framework can be used to understand the day-to-day leadership practices within middle schools and to conceptualize leadership practices.

Based on the distributed leadership framework, the symbols, tools, and other artifacts are part of the daily leadership practice and are integral to investigations of leadership activity (Spillane et al., 2004). Based on this distributed leadership framework, school leadership is extended to individuals other than the principal. Spillane et al. (2004) defined school leadership as the identification, acquisition, allocation, coordination, and use of the social, material, and cultural resources necessary to establish the conditions for the possibility of teaching and learning. A system of leaders, followers, their situations, and leadership practices describes leadership through a distributed lens (Spillane et al., 2004).

Leaders and Followers

Essential components to the distributed leadership framework are leaders who extend beyond traditional leadership roles historically established in schools and represent the shift from the traditional leadership role to the importance of identifying individuals with expertise in the leadership process. Distributed leadership promotes a unified relationship and interactions between "leader-plus" and situational factors, noting that rational decisions are based on situational aspects of school organization (Joo, 2020). According to Spillane (2006), using the *leader-plus* aspect, the framework recognizes that managing and leading schools involves a group of individuals beyond those in formal leadership roles. As it relates to the distributed model in schools, teachers become a critical component in this net. Distributed leadership is asserted to widen the limitations of leadership beyond those in formal leadership positions and confronts historical leadership structures in schools (Kılıçoğlu, 2018).

In this distributed leadership framework, followers also play a key role in shaping the interaction within a school and, consequently, help define leadership practice. The ultimate purpose of leadership is to impact the method and achievement of desired goals (Bush & Ng, 2019). The relationship and interactions between leaders and followers are more fluid in a distributed framework than in a traditional model, emphasizing the mobility and transfer of these roles according to the emerging needs of the school. According to Spillane and Diamond (2007), leaders influence followers by motivating actions, enhancing knowledge, and potentially shaping the practice of followers. Followers play a critical role of influence in a distributed framework within a school. When the role of followers is understood, a deeper understanding of leadership interactions and practices is developed, and learning how leadership evolves at both the school and classroom levels is revealed. Since fluidity is critical in a distributed perspective, followers are potential leaders in development, ready to lead based on the given situation.

Situation

In a distributed framework, the situation involves tools, organizational routines, structures, and other aspects of the organization. Situation is both the method and result of practice. As the method, situation presents obstacles and offers affordance. As a practice and over time, leadership can change components of the situation (Spillane & Diamond, 2007). Spillane (2005) argued that leaders' actions are based on others' actions, and these interactions construct leadership practice. In a distributed leadership model, situation and practice are intertwined closely; consequently, leadership practice

can transform aspects of situation over time. Spillane et al. (2004) identified their approach to situation, and it differs from contingency theorists in four ways: the positioning of situation vis-à-vis leadership activity, the relations between situation and leadership, the aspects of the situation that are critical, and the aspects of leadership that merit attention.

Situation elements are constitutive of human practice, which highlights how difficult it is to separate the capacity for action from the context of the action (Spillane et al., 2004). The situation represents the ability to enhance or deprive leadership ability, motivation, and actions among leaders, potential leaders, and followers. From a distributed perspective, aspects of the situation enable leadership activity, which can transform aspects of the situation over time. Spillane and Diamond (2007) stressed the importance of identifying and researching aspects of the situation that limit and facilitate practice while documenting the forms in which these aspects are changed. The distributed model concerns day-to-day leadership activity, not just broad leadership styles, organizational structures, and roles. Introducing new tools and artifacts can help make the work of leaders more efficient and transform the nature of the leadership activity.

Practice

The development of leadership practice is an elemental component of a distributed leadership model; however, it is commonly misunderstood. Effective leadership is not the result of one leader's action but rather the interactions between leaders and followers (Spillane, 2005). The interaction represents the core of the practice in this leadership approach. Consequently, the form of the practice must be analyzed and

researched as a form of collective leadership. A critical challenge involves discovering how leadership practice is disseminated across multiple stakeholders by analyzing the collaboration between leaders' actions (Spillane, 2006). Distributed leadership entails tapping into talents, ideas, and suggestions wherever it exists within the organization rather than solely using talents, ideas, and suggestions from a specific titled position or role (Harris, 2004). Teachers and administrators add to the organization's multiple leader effects, bringing diverse capabilities and experiences that complement the leadership process toward a common culture of expectations (Spillane & Diamond, 2007).

Types of Leadership Distribution

According to Gronn (2000), distributed leadership emerges because of the interaction of people in a group or groups of people acting as one connected network with a specific purpose. Focused leadership involves only one individual, usually the leader, whereas distributed leadership involves the collected efforts dispersed among numerous stakeholders (Gronn, 2002). Gronn (2000) proposed the reconceptualization of leadership as a socially distributed activity theory, in which the activity connects the organizational structures with the agency, actions, or agents. Consequently, people in an organization work in tandem to merge efforts and expertise so that the collective outcome of the group is greater than the efforts or actions of one person alone (Bagwell, 2019). Gronn (2000) stated organizational influence is frequently reciprocal. Tasks are identified by their detailed components, with each person dependent on others to complete overall tasks. Gronn (2000) described three patterns of collective actions in the practice of distributed leadership: spontaneous collaboration, intuitive working relations, and institutionalized

practices. Spontaneous collaboration occurs when individuals with different skills and

abilities use their expertise to solve a problem. In spontaneous collaboration, once the

problem has been solved, the group may be disbanded and return to working in their

areas. Spontaneous collaboration provides for a burst of synergy, which may be the

extent of the engagement; however, it could trigger ongoing collaboration (Gronn, 2002).

Intuitive working relations emerge between two or more individuals coordinating their

efforts to accomplish a task. In intuitive working relations, leadership is manifested by

the shared role of the partnership. Collective responsibilities thrive when members take

advantage of their collaboration or are compelled to do so (Gronn, 2002). Intuitive

working relations rely on interpersonal skills and force the members to act as a unit

within the implicit framework of understanding. Finally, institutionalized practices are

structural relations and instructional structures, where formal organizational structures or

roles dictate leadership practice. Researchers acknowledge that structural relations in

organizations are formalized by design or adaptation; consequently, new structures can be

mandated (Gronn, 2002).

Influenced by and building on Gronn's (2000) socially distributed activity

principles, Spillane (2006) identified three leadership practice distribution categories:

collaborative, collective, and coordinated distribution. The categories assist in clarifying

essential practices in a distributed perspective and, more importantly, aid in setting this

conceptual framework apart from other types of leadership. These leadership activities

are dynamic and situated; thus, these three categories do not correspond with any

activities or duties. This part of the framework centers on leadership activities and all individuals who contribute, avoiding the tendency to focus solely on designated leaders.

Collaborated Distribution

Collaborated distribution can also be described as two or more individuals working together in time and place to accomplish the same leadership routine. Collaborated distribution involves interdependence when various stakeholders collaborate to perform a unified routine. Reciprocal interdependencies involve synergetic performance as stakeholders depend on each other (Spillane, 2006). Collaborated distribution is commonly found in routine activities, such as grade-level meetings, content meetings, and instructional leadership meetings, rather than evaluative leadership tasks, such as teacher evaluations. This type of leadership distribution facilitates leadership that is stretched over interacting leaders within the school.

Collective Distribution

Collective distribution occurs when two or more individuals work separately but interdependently to perform a leadership routine. While their actions are independent of each other, they are not confined to a common place or time. Collective distribution provides a conceptual lens into teachers' leadership motivation, ability, and action. For example, instructional leadership team members work independently in their contents, yet toward the shared mission and goals of school improvement and increasing student achievement. This type of distribution is parallel to the organizational routines carried out daily in a school, including analysis and assessment of student performance, teaching and learning process, and grade-level committees. These activities can stretch co-performance

leadership more effectively, inciting teacher motivation and capacity and developing

leadership skills and performance (Spillane, 2004; Spillane & Diamond, 2007).

Coordinated Distribution

Coordinated distribution happens when two or more individuals work in sequence

to complete a leadership routine. Under coordinated distribution, leaders can perform

their leadership tasks together or independently; however, the tasks must be performed in

a specific sequence. Educationally, school leadership is embedded in coordinated

distributed practices, as dictated by the interactions of leaders, followers, and their

situations (Spillane, 2006). Interdependence is maintained in coordinated distribution

since the completion of the leadership activity is a prerequisite for initiating the task that

follows. Leaders do not have to agree but must be both attentive and alert to other

leaders' actions (Spillane, 2006; Spillane et al., 2004). Distributed leadership offers a

conceptual lens to understand better, unify, and organize leadership within the school

context. The basic assumption of distributed leadership is shared decision-making and

system-based leadership that is rounded on a reciprocal network (Joo, 2020). Leadership

activities become more effective when they are spread across stakeholders in the school

because their components and principles are more likely to be understood by all in the

organization.

Dimensions of Distributed Leadership Theory

While the concept of distributed leadership can be traced back to the 1950s in the

field of school psychology (Gronn, 2002), currently, there is significant interest from

scholars in the field of school leadership. School leadership has become a priority in

educational policy because it plays an essential role in improving the school environment by influencing the motivation and capacity of teachers (Jambo & Hongde, 2020). A distributed leadership model provides opportunities to understand better leadership practices that are carried out in organizations and how leadership activities are allocated to stakeholders (Modeste & Kelley, 2020). Scholars have analyzed and described the elements of distributed leadership and have identified important features of the distributed conceptual framework that make it unique (Gronn, 2000, 2002; Harris, 2004; Spillane, 2006; Spillane & Diamond, 2007; Spillane et al., 2004).

Emergent Property

Distributed leadership is shaped by the interactions of leaders and followers in different situations, at different times, and under various situations, making the nature of the leadership emergent. Distributed leadership is emergent because of the cooperation between leaders and followers, which can be defined by their exchanges and willingness to produce positive organizational change. Consequently, distributed leadership has fluidity and plasticity. A key point in the emergent property of distributed leadership was identified in Gronn's (2002):

> The notion of "concerted action" is defined as the: additional dynamic, which is the product of conjoint activity. Where people work together in such a way that they pool their initiative and expertise, the outcome is a product or energy which is greater than the sum of their individual actions. (p. 441)

In a distributed model, leadership roles are not static, allowing for more flexible dynamics between those with formal and informal leadership roles. Distributed

leadership opens the boundaries of leadership beyond those in formal leadership positions and challenges hierarchies in school organizations (Kılıçoğlu, 2018). The interactions between leaders, followers, and their situation create interdependence of thinking and actions, allowing flexibility and changes over time. Therefore, this openness of boundaries inspires the leadership team to adjust to the changes and expand membership if necessary.

Leadership According to Expertise

The distributed leadership framework simultaneously emphasizes leaders and followers, as well as situations and their interactions, as key components (Joo, 2020). The framework allows leaders to emerge based on the different situations and the leadership practices that surface based on these interactions. This flexibility, associated with the emergent property, requires the expertise of diverse individuals at various times, depending on the situation. Consequently, this characteristic of the distributed framework allows the knowledge, skills, and expertise of the members of a school community to spread across a wide range of individuals. Teachers with the greatest skill in an area can provide leadership to other teachers, who can then transfer their expertise to their colleagues.

According to Harris & Spillane (2008), distributed leadership is assumed to enhance opportunities for the organization to benefit from the capacities of more of its members, to capitalize on the range of their strengths, and allow staff a greater appreciation of interdependence and how one's behavior affects the organization. A key component of a distributed perspective is that leadership is shared and extended to

various members of the organization (Harris & Spillane, 2008). This characteristic differentiates distributed leadership from conventional types of school leadership, as it broadens the scope of leadership to include different school community members. Establishing a culture of shared duty and leadership in schools with assorted stakeholders plays an important role" (Kılıçoğlu, 2018). The dimensions of distributed leadership change and transcend in schools through the organizational structures and individuals' actions or agency and, therefore, shape and influence the distribution of leadership. Researchers suggest that structure and agency are equally important and are affected by contextual push and pull factors (Gronn, 2000), which also help determine how leadership is dispersed. Critical to the success and likelihood of achieving goals and promoting organization-wide competencies, the development of institutional and individual capacities is essential (Joo, 2020).

Teacher Leadership as a Distributed Practice

Teacher leadership is not a new concept or model for distributed leadership. Educational organizations focus on people and depend on human relations; therefore, the relationship among stakeholders is paramount to school effectiveness (Atik & Celik, 2020). While distributed leadership is a more expansive concept, teacher leadership is a subset of distributed leadership, represents a valuable resource to principals, and is a viable option for any school improvement effort and a part of school culture. Teachers tend to be retained in schools with positive school cultures, where teachers have a voice and collaboration is valued (Nappi, 2019).

In the past, teacher isolation traditionally developed as the norm in many schools; however, teacher leadership has emerged to create an environment that promotes collaboration and provides a professional community for teachers. Empowering leadership involves distributing authority and responsibility among employees, promoting their involvement in decision-making, and informing them about organizational processes (Atik & Celik, 2020).

Teacher leadership empowers teachers and may allow teachers to understand organizational processes that teachers might not typically understand or conceptualize. According to Atik and Celik (2020), teachers who are involved in the decision-making process, whose autonomy is supported, and with whom information is shared will have increased self-esteem and psychological strength. The concept of distributing leadership to teachers may be consistent with effective leadership (Boylan, 2016).

Barriers to Teacher Leadership

Current literature suggests that there are some barriers and obstacles associated with teacher leadership in schools (Tahir et al., 2016). One barrier to teacher leadership is the resistance to lead. Teachers themselves may be one of the most significant barriers to the success of any program that encourages them to assume leadership roles and may have skepticism toward the idea of taking on leadership responsibility for several reasons. Teachers are aware of the high level of energy and commitment required to accomplish leadership tasks; consequently, teachers are reluctant to accept leadership roles (Tahir et al., 2016). Providing teachers with leadership responsibilities without a formal

appointment can cause some teachers to reject leadership opportunities that are presented to them.

Secondly, having an additional workload may decrease a teacher's willingness to become a leader. Tackling school-wide issues on top of regularly assigned duties can cause teachers to feel overwhelmed and overworked. When teachers become leaders, they do not give up one responsibility to assume the extra leadership tasks. In addition, they cannot necessarily simply shift precious minutes from one task into another, especially when they have instructional responsibilities for students assigned to their classrooms.

Another barrier to teacher leadership is a lack of confidence in making decisions. Principals cannot simply give teachers leadership roles and responsibilities without giving them proper training. When teacher leaders do not have the training to become leaders, they may not be confident in their ability to make decisions. Tahir et al. (2016) suggested that specific programs related to leadership skills and knowledge for teachers be part of the early phase of leadership. Principals must develop routines that engage teachers in inquiry and knowledge building, and collaboration among peers. This will allow principals to develop teachers through a structured system, which provides leadership and challenges that enable teacher leaders to perform to the best of their ability (Tahir et al., 2016).

Finally, principals can be barriers to teacher leadership when they are reluctant to devolve their formal authority and decision-making powers to teacher leaders. Distributed leadership means a fundamental change in a principal's understanding of

leadership and how they enact their leadership roles (Harris, 2012). Principals move from being someone at the organization's apex, making decisions, to seeing their core role as developing the leadership capacity and capability in others. It implies relinquishing some authority and power, which is not an easy task, and shifting the role from exclusive leadership to a form of leadership that is more concerned with brokering, facilitating, and supporting others in leading innovation and change. (Harris, 2012).

Distributed Leadership Teacher Teams

Education legislation, which has led to the educational challenge designed to increase student achievement, did not specifically target leadership as a key factor; however, leadership has been identified as a variable (Nappi, 2019). *The Wallace Foundation Report* (Louis et al., 2010) collected 6 years of quantitative data and concluded that student achievement could be linked to effective leadership skills. Since the complexity and size of school systems today are such that one leader alone cannot meet the demands of daily tasks and problems, principals are moving toward distributing leadership to teams, specifically, instructional leadership teams (ILTs). One method to evolve the practice of including stakeholders in leadership is to form teams that will provide authentic input designed to improve the education process (Nappi, 2019). The literature focusing on distributed leadership, specifically as it relates to teacher teams, suggests that this leadership practice contributes to improving teacher team performance. When principals use teacher teams, such as ILTs, these teams can provide coaching (both formal and informal), determine professional development needs, design professional

development, problem solve, assist with communication, and be a resource to both teachers and administrators (Nappi, 2019).

Three central points must be considered when examining engagement with teacher teams: resources, focus, and structure. Resources include human capital as well as physical resources, with human capital being the greatest expenditure that school districts make. Resources are vital to realizing educational goals and objectives because they offer students equal opportunities by reducing the impact of socioeconomic influences on student achievement (Nappi, 2019). The focus on education should be student based; accordingly, teachers must have a solid understanding of standards, develop student learning goals that are aligned to the standards, and communicate expectations to students (Nappi, 2019). Remembering that students' success is a major component, all stakeholders should collaborate to promote the success of all students (Nappi, 2019). School principals must ensure that the school's structure or processes are aligned with goals and objectives. Each corner is dependent on the others and is driven by the vision, beliefs, and goals established by stakeholders (see Figure 3).

Figure 3

Three Corners of Engagement
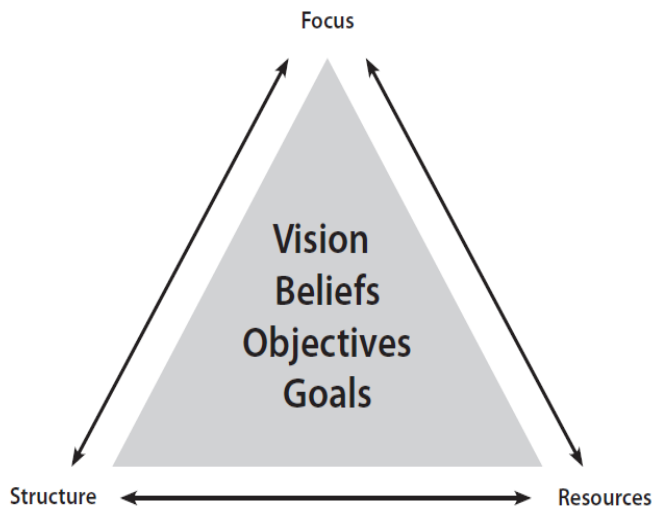
Establishing productive teams can lead to the staff's implementation of initiatives with fidelity because teachers have been given a voice in the process (Nappi, 2019). When solutions are designed collaboratively with stakeholders, a greater change of reform is sustained because it becomes the fabric of the school (Nappi, 2019). Utilizing a team approach, such as ILTs, is a method to guarantee that the various leadership responsibilities required for school success are fulfilled in a competent manner. Successful leaders can create an educational setting conducive to student learning that supports teachers by creating a welcoming work environment through the practices and established procedures (Nappi, 2019). Instructional leadership teams create

an environment where teachers work collaboratively to perfect their craft and impact student achievement, which leads to a supportive environment where teachers learn from one another to build upon their core skills (Nappi, 2019). While building an effective leadership team can take time, it can assist with the many leadership responsibilities essential for a school's success.

With the role of the school principal becoming more demanding, a singular leader school cannot operate as effectively as one in which leadership roles are distributed. School leaders must possess leadership skills and knowledge to address the challenges they face in closing the opportunity gap and creating schools responsive to the demographic shifts in student populations. (Bagwell, 2019). Consequently, the distributed leadership perspective has emerged as a leadership practice revealing an organizational structure in which school personnel works collaboratively to meet these demanding expectations. The framework for distributed leadership has been developed to potentially allow all members of the organization to participate in leadership tasks as they work toward the common goal of school improvement.

This section of the literature review focused on defining distributed leadership. The review featured three distributed leadership components: leaders and followers, situation, and practice. Three types of leadership distribution were discussed collaborated, collective, and coordinated distribution. The dimensions of distributed leadership theory were outlined, including elements such as emergent property, leadership according to expertise, teacher leadership as a distributed practice, barriers to teacher leadership, and distributed leadership teacher teams. Finally, literature was

highlighted that focused on teacher leadership as a distributed practice, barriers to teacher

leadership, and distributed leadership and teacher teams.

According to research, a distributed perspective on leadership is an effective

framework for examining and analyzing leadership. However, distributed leadership is

not a prescription nor a recipe for how to lead. Distributed leadership is a conceptual or

diagnostic tool for thinking about school leadership in new ways (Spillane & Orlina,

2005) and "offers a conceptual frame for researchers to focus their investigations and for

practitioners to focus their diagnosis of leadership" (Spillane & Orlina, 2005, p. 173).

What is seemingly understood is that leadership roles, functions, and structures are

important in distributed leadership, but leadership practice is paramount. As such,

distributed leadership provides researchers and practitioners with another viable option

for thinking about leadership practice. In the distributed leadership model, school leaders

are important; however, school leaders are not the sole element that contributes to

defining leadership practice. Therefore, interpersonal interactions become important to

unlocking this effective leadership practice. Spillane (2006) and others have contended

that the foundation of a distributed conceptual framework lies in the relationship between

leaders, followers, and the leadership practice. Exploring, examining, and analyzing the

collaboration among stakeholders should start with stakeholders at the group level

(Spillane & Orlina, 2005). Most of the research surrounding distributed leadership is

theory-based; as a result, we have yet to discover the link that distributed leadership has

on student outcomes. Although there have been some studies, Silins and Mulford (2002)

suggested that using more distributed leadership practices influences students' learning

achievement; more research should be done to link distributed leadership to student learning outcomes.

Instructional Leadership

Throughout the years, education reform in the United States has focused on shifting existing educational practices to a system that closes the achievement gaps among diverse populations (Ross & Cozzens, 2016). Improving school outcomes related to teaching and learning is now at the forefront of education reform due to increasing high expectations and the demands of rising standards for equity, excellence, and greater accountability to increase student performance in schools (Kalman & Arslan, 2016). Research concerning sustainable leadership and the effectiveness of school leaders in the teaching and learning process has evolved based partly on the growing need to define effective leadership practices influencing student learning (Ross & Cozzens, 2016). Researchers in education often compare transformational leadership to instructional leadership.

According to Day et al. (2016), transformational leadership emphasizes vision and inspiration, while instructional leadership focuses on establishing educational goals, planning the curriculum, and evaluating teachers and teaching. Instructional leadership has been the most frequently studied model of school leadership over the past 25 years (Hallinger, 2005). Edmonds (1979) reported that instructional leadership theory had its practical study in elementary schools of poor urban communities, where students succeeded under effective instructional leaders who restricted disruptions and stakeholders who valued high expectations for teaching and learning (as cited in Ross &

Cozzens, 2016). Instructional leaders work to maintain a positive working relationship with all stakeholders, focusing on school climate, which affects the school's culture and student achievement (Ross & Cozzens, 2016).

Researchers have conceptualized and defined instructional leadership in varying ways; however, the broad definition of instructional leadership involves improving teaching and learning with improved educational outcomes for all students (Mayes & Gethers, 2018; Pietsch & Tulowitzki, 2017). Leadership in the education field may be defined in theory or actuality to facilitate the teaching and learning process and has evolved to lead much of the understanding of the school leadership practices (Grissom & Loeb, 2011). Principals in instructionally effective schools provide strong instructional leadership by focusing on direct classroom supervision, coaching teachers, solving instructional problems collaboratively, helping teachers secure resources, and providing staff development activities that align with the instructional goals of the school (Bellibas & Liu, 2018). Instructional leadership aims to achieve success in the teaching-learning process and raise successful students for society. Consequently, providing the desired conditions for learning and teaching, increasing the satisfaction of schools and transformation of the school into a productive environment (Özdemir et al., 2020). Researchers suggest that principals who practice instructional leadership have a more direct and indirect effect on student outcomes than transformational leadership (Shatzer et al., 2014). Effective instructional leaders align their strategies and activities with the school's academic mission; therefore, instructional leaders focus not only on leading but also on creating a positive climate for learning, as well as managing instructional

practices (Hallinger, 2005). Pietsch and Tulowitzki (2017) proposed that instructional leadership may improve teacher instructional delivery and classroom management, classroom climate focused on students, and students' cognitive engagement with rigorous content and student assignments. While instruction remains the primary focus of instructional leadership, principals must create a shared vision and positive school climate that can be operationalized through school leadership teams (Hooper & Bernhardt, 2016). According to Terosky (2016), instructional leaders are focused on student learning, collaborative planning time for teachers, and empowering teachers and staff to take ownership.

Instructional Leadership Models

At the turn of the century, education reform shifted to focus more on performance standards, which has caused principals to be at the nexus of accountability and school improvement with an increasingly explicit expectation that they will function as instructional leaders (Hallinger, 2005). Research has found a distinct programmatic emphasis on ensuring principals can fulfill their instructional leadership role. According to Hallinger (2005), an effective instructional leader aligns the school's strategies and activities with the school's academic mission. Instructional leaders lead from a combination of expertise and charisma. Instructional leaders are hands-on principals who are deep in curriculum and instruction and work directly with teachers to improve teaching and learning. There are several notable models of instructional leadership; however, the most common model of instructional leadership was developed by Hallinger and Murphy (1985) and has been used most frequently in empirical investigations

(Hallinger, 2005). This model identifies three dimensions for the instructional leadership role of the principal: defining the school's mission, managing the instructional program, and promoting a positive school climate (see Appendix A)

Defining the school's mission has two functions: framing the school's goals and communicating the school's goals. This dimension involves the principal's role in determining the school's central purpose and communicating that central purpose with stakeholders. It focuses on the "principal's role in working with staff to ensure that the school has clear, measurable, time-based goals focused on the academic progress of students (Hallinger, 2005). Consequently, it is also the principal's responsibility to communicate the goals so that all stakeholders know the goals and the goals are supported throughout the school community. To be effective, schools must have clear academic goals that all stakeholders can support and make part of their daily practices. Hallinger and Murphy (1986) conducted a study of effective California elementary schools where they observed teachers in their classrooms for several days. The study concluded there are several characteristics of the instructional leader's role in defining a clear mission: (a) the school mission must be absolutely clear, (b) the school mission must be focused on academic development appropriate to the needs of the particular school population, (c) the mission must set a priority for the work of the teachers, (d) the mission should be known and accepted as legitimate by teachers throughout the school, and (e) the mission should be articulated, actively supported, and modeled by the principal (Hallinger & Murphy, 1986). Instructional leaders facilitate through theoretical

and practical measures with the intention of aligning activities with that purpose (Hallinger, 2005).

Managing the instructional program focuses on coordination and control of instruction and curriculum. This dimension focuses on three leadership functions: supervising and evaluating instruction, coordinating the curriculum, and monitoring student progress. Fulfilling these functions requires that the principal be deeply engaged in the instructional program, requiring stimulating, supervising, and monitoring the teaching and learning process in the school. For principals to monitor the instructional program, they must have expertise in the teaching and learning process and a commitment to the school's improvement (Hallinger, 2005). As no principal can be an expert in every content, secondary principals use the instructional leadership team model to support their expertise in the teaching and learning process, which in turn supports student achievement. An instructional leader provides meaningful feedback to teachers on the teaching and learning process, evaluates teacher effectiveness, and builds the capacity of the school staff to implement evidence-based practices (Hooper & Bernhardt, 2016). In addition, instructional leaders focus on student outcomes, always seeking to develop and sustain a school staff that is committed to supporting student learning with an emphasis on equity and student engagement in the learning process (Hooper & Bernhardt, 2016). Hallinger and Heck (1996a, 1996b, 1998, 2002) conducted a review of the instructional leadership literature. Studies have concluded that school principals who employ an instructional leadership style may influence student outcomes, usually through the teacher or organizational means.

Promoting a positive school learning climate includes several functions: protecting instructional time, promoting professional development, maintaining high visibility, providing incentives for teachers, and providing incentives for learning. The third dimension of the instructional leadership model is broader in scope and purpose than the other two dimensions. The third dimension implies that effective schools create high expectations by designing high standards and expectations for stakeholders (Hallinger, 2005). For schools to be instructionally sound, the school must develop a culture of continuous improvement in which rewards are realigned with purposes and practices (Hallinger, 2005). Effective principals model values and practices that create a climate and support the continuous improvement of teaching and learning in their schools (Hallinger, 2005).

Another instructional leadership model was developed by Grissom and Loeb (2011), which focused on three of the principal's roles: developing teaching instructional capacities, evaluation of classroom instruction, and management of instruction via professional development and program evaluation. Grissom and Loeb (2011) focused on principal self-ratings of their effectiveness in these domains rather than behavioral frequency. This is unaligned with previous research. This model stresses that behavior frequency and effectiveness may be mutually exclusive, but effectiveness is more important for school success (Sebastian et al., 2019). Another instructional leadership model was proposed by the Center for Educational Leadership, University of Washington, College of Education (2019), which suggested that school leaders should focus on learning for both students and adults while measuring improvement in both. In

this model, principals are recognized as the lead learner who is reflective and adjusts based on the diverse needs of the school community. Principals who focused on instructional leadership and created structures for teacher collaboration facilitated improved academic outcomes for students (Ross & Cozzens, 2016). Consequently, Ross and Cozzens (2016) recommended that school leaders enhance their instructional leadership by practicing increased collaboration, professionalism, understanding of diversity, innovation, and reflection of leadership practices.

Researchers suggest that school principals contribute indirectly to school effectiveness and student achievement through actions that influence school and classroom conditions (Hallinger, 2005). A review of literature on instructional leadership that has emerged over the past 25 years reconceptualizes the instructional leadership model to include

- creating a shared sense of purpose in the school, including clear goals focused on student learning
- fostering the continuous improvement of the school through cyclical school development planning that involves a wide range of stakeholders
- developing a climate of high expectations and a school culture aimed at innovation and improvement of teaching and learning
- coordinating the curriculum and monitoring student learning outcomes
- shaping the reward structure of the school to reflect the school's mission
- organizing and monitoring a wide range of activities aimed at the continuous development of staff

- being a visible presence in the school and modeling the desired values of the

    school's culture. (Ross & Cozzens, 2016)

Instructional leadership models assist principals in making decisions that will lead to effective changes in their schools. Principals can select the instructional leadership model that best suits their building to change the instructional program.

Shared Instructional Leadership

Research has shown that instructional leadership is pivotal in effective schools (Bellibas & Liu, 2018). Instructional leadership has moved from principal-directed leadership to a shared instructional leadership model, in which teacher leaders participate and collaborate to enhance instructional leadership (Shatzer et al., 2014). One model that attempts to facilitate collaborative decision-making focused on teaching and learning is the instructional leadership team (ILT). According to Wahlstom et al. (2010), ILTs provide direction and exercise influence over others, collaborate in determining the school's reform strategy, make decisions regarding resource allocation to ensure the strategy's success, and engage others in implementing this strategy. For an ILT to be successful, principals must pay attention to how they are structured from the beginning, including ensuring that members have the skills and knowledge to meet the potential challenge (Weiner, 2014). Instructional leadership teams are present to empower teachers' decision-making and enhance teacher willingness to implement instructional reforms, improve instructional practice, and raise student achievement (Weiner, 2014). Wageman et al. (2008) created a taxonomy of four distinct functions of ILTs: informational, consultative, coordinating, and decision-making. Principals must build

ILTs that are able to effectively implement the four functions to influence school improvement and improve student achievement.

According to Shatzer et al. (2014), recent research has broadened the focus of instructional leadership to include collaboration among teachers, creating opportunities for professional growth, and developing professional learning communities. The shift in the research has a different conceptualization of leadership that researchers are calling shared instructional leadership and distributed leadership. Instructional leadership teams represent the interest in using distributed leadership to explicitly acknowledge such leadership's presence to better understand its contribution to organizational functioning (Leithwood et al., 2007). Instructional leadership can be aligned to distributed leadership because leaders and followers should participate in understood practices as the context or situation in which they collaborate impacts both leaders and followers (Leithwood et al., 2007). Using the instructional leadership model with distributed leadership, principals must set direction, develop staff, restructure the organization, and manage the instructional program (Leithwood et al., 2007). Instructionally sound principals encourage distributed forms of leadership when they create problem-solving teams to substitute for administrative leadership. In schools with high-quality teaching and professional learning, distributed leadership can be a stable pattern that manifests in teachers and school leaders who regularly interact with each other in the performance of leadership tasks (Harris, 2014; Spillane et al., 2004).

Research suggests that instructional leadership practices are more effective than transformational leadership (Shatzer et al., 2014). Schools that are instructionally

effective have strong instructional leadership that focuses on direct classroom supervision, working with teachers on the instructional program, and solving instructional problems collaboratively (Bellibas & Liu, 2018). The role of an instructional leader in shaping the context for teaching and learning is not new; however, research has evolved to reflect and respond to the growing need to define the doctrines of school leadership that influence student learning (Ross & Cozzens, 2016). The goal of instructional leadership is to increase the school's climate and culture through effective leadership skills and instructional best practices, thus stimulating student achievement (Ross & Cozzens, 2016). Effective school leaders must support their teams, restructure the organization to improve effectiveness, and share responsibility as data-driven leaders (Ross & Cozzens, 2016).

Special Education Access in Federal Policy

In 1975, Public Law 94-142, known as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA), was passed and guaranteed a free appropriate public education to each child with a disability. Prior to EAHCA students with disabilities were traditionally excluded from public schools, which created unequal treatment for students with disabilities. The authors of Public Law 94-142 explained that schools failed to identify children who had disabilities, and, as a result, the parents of the children were burdened with finding alternative placements beyond the public school system, despite evidence that the public school system could meet the children's needs (Gilmour et al., 2019). EAHCA had four primary purposes: to ensure all children with disabilities have available to them a free and appropriate public education; to assure the rights of children

with disabilities and their parents were protected; to assist states and localities in providing for the education of all children with disabilities; and to assess and assure the effectiveness of efforts to educate all children with disabilities (EAHCA, 1975). Schools and states were required to report the number of students with disabilities identified in each disability category and the school setting in which they spent their days (Gilmour et al., 2019). In addition, students with disabilities were given the right to have specialized instruction through an individualized education program (IEP). While this law had an immediate and positive impact on students with disabilities in every state and each local community across the United States, it did not hold schools accountable for students' academic gains. Under Public Law 94-142, access and accountability were defined as the identification of services and the physical locations where students with disabilities were educated.

In the 1990s, states began to adopt standards-based policies for general education students. Standards-based reforms are intended to improve student outcomes as measured by standardized assessment. States would start annually testing the student on their knowledge of specific content and skills based on implemented educational standards (Gilmour et al., 2019). While general education students were being monitored for their academic growth, students with disabilities were excluded from these assessments. In 1997, Public Law 94-142 was reauthorized as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments of 1997 (IDEA), which aimed to facilitate access to curriculum standards and participation in high-stakes testing for students with disabilities. IDEA expanded the impact of Public Law 94-142 through the intent and expectation that

schools should prepare students with disabilities for employment and independent living. IDEA introduced student access as a necessary component of improving student outcomes (Gilmour et al., 2019). IDEA required states to collect data on students with disabilities performance on state and district assessments, dropout rates, and graduation rates; however, the accountability requirements in IDEA were primarily for students with disabilities participation in state assessments rather than their academic growth on these assessments.

In 2001, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was reauthorized as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), which expanded the standards-based movement from state and local levels to the national level. NCLB had more ambitious standards and accountability levels for improving outcomes for all students, especially those from traditionally disadvantaged backgrounds. To keep traditionally disadvantaged student performances buried in the larger group's general assessment data, NCLB required a disaggregation of assessment data to highlight gaps in achievement for student subgroups categorized by race, economic disadvantage, and disability status (Gilmour et al., 2019). NCLB held schools accountable for both the inclusion of students with disabilities in testing programs and their academic achievement. After the passing of NCLB, there were many concerns that NCLB accountability requirements conflicted with IDEA and created problems for schools; however, the 2004 reauthorization of IDEA reinforced the importance of assessing and reporting outcomes for students with disabilities. IDEA introduced mandatory inclusion of students with disabilities assessment data and required states to report both students with disabilities and their

nondisabled peers (Gilmour et al., 2019). Under the 2004 reauthorization of IDEA, there was an implicit understanding that access to the general education curriculum required students with disabilities to achieve higher than previously expected. In 2015, the ESEA was reauthorized to Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). Both IDEA and ESSA require that schools adhere to and establish access for students with disabilities in terms of how much students with disabilities learn" (Gilmour et al., 2019, p. 331). Currently, the achievement gap between students with disabilities and their nondisabled peers is a standard for determining the level of access that students with disabilities have to the general education curriculum. Students with disabilities significantly underperforming their nondisabled peers support the theory that students with disabilities are not accessing the services and support they need to succeed in school (Gilmour et al., 2019). Special education researchers believe that the goal of access to the general education curriculum for students with disabilities is commendable, but access will only be achieved when special education is special and, therefore, individualized and intensive for students who require this support (Gilmour et al., 2019).

Principal Role in Special Education

Research has established that a significant portion of the variance in student learning is explained at the classroom level; however, federal policies emphasize student standardized test scores as proxies of teacher effectiveness (Crowe et al., 2017). However, educational research reveals that the significance of principal leadership is second only to the teacher's impact on student learning (Roberts & Guerra, 2017). Federal education policy has shifted the principal's role from disciplinarian and

supervisor of the building to the instructional leader responsible for implementing IDEA and ESSA requirements; consequently, principals have a vital role in education and the lives of students with disabilities (Roberts & Guerra, 2017). The principal is the instructional leader of all regular and special education programs and services within a school building (Bateman et al., 2017). Playing a unique role in the delivery of special education services, principals are special education leaders, administrators, and supervisors, and they manage the provision of special education programs and services while ensuring that students with disabilities are provided a free appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment (Lashley & Boscardin, 2003). While the role of the principal has evolved, the training principals receive has not; therefore, most principals are not prepared to supervise special education programs in their schools. Principals must have the knowledge and skills to advocate for appropriate placement and services for all students enrolled in their schools; however, school principals do not innately possess the capacity to effectively supervise special education programs (Roberts & Guerra, 2017). Principals' routines include effectively and efficiently meeting the requirements of state and federal legislation, which include a mandate for accountability. However, school principals are not adequately equipped to oversee special education services due to the deficiency of special education courses in the curriculum and internship of their university preparation programs (Roberts & Guerra, 2017). To prepare principals to meet the challenges they face in being effective leaders for special education students, principal preparation programs need to adjust their programs. Principal

preparation programs must change to ensure principals are adequately prepared to oversee special education services for their students.

As middle schools face increasing responsibility to improve the academic outcomes of students with disabilities, principals play a key role in this transformation. When students with disabilities performance data indicate they underperform on accessed standards and do not achieve desired educational outcomes, the role of the principal becomes even more critical (Lynch, 2016). Students with disabilities need effective instructional leadership, as they continually fail to meet proficiency standards on standardized assessments. Educational theorists cite instructional leadership as one of the most critical responsibilities of today's principal (Lynch, 2016).

DiPaola et al. (2004) noted that most principals do not have adequate academic instruction or field-based experience from their preparation programs to effectively administer all aspects of a special education program, including legal compliance. Research by Wakeman et al. (2006) suggests that school principals are deficient in abilities essential to creating and maintaining educational support teams to address special education issues. This shift in the role of the principal has allowed principals to delegate many of the responsibilities related to the provision of special education services through distributed leadership. However, effective principals must understand special education and processes used in identification and implementation and a basic understanding of the law governing these processes (Bateman et al., 2017). Understanding how principals responsible for delivering special education prioritize leadership attributes is important because attention is being directed toward improving

instruction and increasing achievement outcomes for students with disabilities (Schulze & Boscardin, 2018). To be effective instructional leaders, principals must know and advocate for evidence-based delivery methods and inclusive practices (Lynch, 2016). Research has shown that this knowledge is more important in middle school settings, where teachers are less likely to believe middle school students with disabilities can succeed in the general education setting (Lynch, 2016). Middle school principals must expand their instructional knowledge of special education to become instructional leaders in improving the academic performance of students with disabilities. Middle school principals should become proficient in evidence-based strategies that support increased academic achievement for students with disabilities, consequently supporting teachers in implementing these evidence-based strategies in the classroom.

Special Education Achievement Gap

In 1966, James Coleman published a report titled *Equity of Educational Opportunity*, which was based on a government-sponsored survey regarding which students of differing races, religions, and national origins were provided an equal educational opportunity. Educational researchers refer to this publication as the *Coleman Report*; in the report, Coleman demonstrated significant inequity in opportunity. More recent reports by Rowan et al. (2010) and Shin et al. (2013) indicate that the disparities cited in the *Coleman Report* continue to exist. Most literature surrounding achievement gaps has focused on whether the gap is a function of race/ethnicity or poverty. Achievement gaps for students with disabilities versus their nondisabled peers have received less attention, although some research has been conducted (Eckes & Swando,

2009; Wei et al., 2013). Most research has focused on the effectiveness of special education services or the ability of students with disabilities to learn.

Albus et al. (2014) reported that the achievement gap between students with and without disabilities at or above a proficiency cut point on state assessments ranged from 5 to 58 points across states. Research of the achievement gap involving state and national assessments shows that many students with disabilities are not accessing the curriculum, as measured by academic outcomes (Gilmour et al., 2019). Gilmour et al. (2019) conducted a meta-analysis of 180 effect sizes from 23 studies and examined access as outcomes by estimating the size of the gap in reading achievement between students with disabilities and those without. Findings from this study indicated that students with disabilities performed 1.17 standard deviations, or more than 3.3 years, below typically developing peers. The reading gap varied by individual disabilities but not by other student and assessment characteristics. The implications of the Gilmour et al. (2019) analysis raise concerns about the access students with disabilities have to the general curriculum. According to Gilmour et al. (2019),

> The magnitude of this gap is particularly concerning, given evidence from the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (2017) that 60% of fourth and eighth-grade students without disabilities are performing below grade level in reading. In other words, students without disabilities are reading at unacceptable levels, and students with disabilities are reading worse. (p. 341)

Although students with disabilities are provided with supplemental services and instruction, reading instruction for students with disabilities may not include the

instructional practices researchers have identified as effective for improving the abilities of students with disabilities (Lindström, 2018). Lindström (2018) reported in her recent review of observational research regarding reading instruction for students with or at risk for disabilities that effective instructional strategies are rarely used, as teachers spend less time on literacy instruction than other classroom activities. As a result, instruction often does not address foundational reading skills for multiple reasons. Effective changes to access to the curriculum are needed to support students with disabilities, but changes are unlikely if teachers choose not to use evidence-based practices or simply do not know how to improve students with disabilities outcomes (Gilmour et al., 2019).

Researchers have a variety of explanations for the achievement gap between students with disabilities and their nondisabled peers and for changes over time in the achievement gap (Thurlow & Ysseldyke, 2016). Some researchers believe that the gap exists because special education students who drop out of school are those who are among the higher achieving special education students (McMillen, & Kauffman, 1997) and that the tests given in higher grades are less valid for students with disabilities (Thurlow et al., 2016). Ysseldyke and Bielinski (2002) argued that another source of the achievement gap was that lower functioning non-special education students are reassigned to special education each year and that higher functioning special education students are reassigned to the non-special education group (exited special education). The Ysseldye and Bielinski (2002) study investigated the extent to which the decline in performance by special education students over time and the increase in the achievement gap were due to the types of data used and comparisons made across groups. The study

argued that fair comparison involved using clearly defined and consistent comparison groups and that special education status complicates the reporting due to status changes over time (Ysseldyke & Bielinski, 2002). Their study used three methods to analyze trends in performance: cross-sectional, cohort-static, and cohort-dynamic. *Cross-sectional* refers to using data from the same grade level across several years, where the individual students change over the years, but the grade level remains constant. The *cohort-static* method kept group membership constant across grades and based the categorization on each student's status in the first year of the study. In the *cohort-dynamic* method, group membership was determined by a student's special education status each year. Ysseldyke and Bielinski (2002) examined how student movement in and out of special education (reclassification) affected the size of the gap between special education and non-disabled peers. The pertinent findings from Ysseldyke and Bielinski revealed that students who move from special education to non-special education tended to be the higher performing special education students and those who move from non-special education to special education tend to be the lower performing non-special education students.

Thurlow et al. (2016) refined and extended the methods used in the study by Ysseldyke and Bielinski (2002). Thurlow et al. (2016) examined how achievement trends are influenced by three reporting methods: cross-sectional, cohort-static, and cohort-dynamic. In addition, the study investigated how achievement gaps change when different analytical techniques are used and the relationship between student achievement and the extent to which students' special education status changes over the years. The

findings of Ysseldyke and Belinski (2002) were confirmed and expanded by the results of the Thurlow et al. (2016) research. Specifically, the findings agreed with the Ysseldyke and Belinski finding that students who move from special education to non-special education tend to be the higher performing special education students, and those who move from non-special education to special education tend to be the lower performing non-special education students. The results showed that the achievement gap increased across grade levels when the cohort-dynamic method was used to calculate the gap because students who exit special education tend to perform higher than those who enter it. The Thurlow et al. (2016) study also confirmed Ysseldyke and Belinski's findings that the highest performing group was the non-special education, followed by the special education to non-special education, then the back-and-forth students, then non-special education to special education, and finally the special education only group.

Achievement disparities across subgroups have existed significantly in the United States. Achievement gaps have long been a concern of educational researchers and practitioners because education is often referred to as the great equalizer, as taught by Horace Mann in 1848 (as cited in Hung et al., 2020). The recognition of structural inequalities in society along racial, gender, socioeconomic, and identity lines has translated into a discussion that the education system presents an opportunity gap that leads to unequal outcomes, such as achievement gaps (Ladson-Billings, 2013). An achievement gap occurs when specific or identified subgroups of students significantly underperform other subgroups (Hung et al., 2020). Academic and social performance gaps for students with disabilities significantly limit this population's educational success

and overall life opportunities (Hock et al., 2017). Effective leaders must find the appropriate method necessary to hold their teachers accountable, particularly among teachers serving students with disabilities (Crowe et al., 2017).

Summary and Conclusions

Twenty-first-century principals must explore innovative and complex forms of leadership that require more responsive leadership approaches to address students' academic needs. Middle school leaders must acquire the leadership aptitude to effectively address obstacles, close opportunity gaps, and create schools that reflect student demographic shifts (Bagwell, 2019). Empirical research suggests that the principal is second only to teachers in influencing student achievement; therefore, principals must demonstrate effective leadership skills to meet the changing and complex demands of being a principal (Shatzer et al., 2014). The evolving role of the principal suggests that with increasing requirements to demonstrate evidence of student learning, the demands placed upon today's principals make the job increasingly complex, challenging, and unmanageable for one individual, regardless of their qualifications, experience, and levels of commitment. A distributed leadership framework demonstrates promise as a systematic approach to contending with the everchanging needs of school systems, specifically middle-level schools.

While there is no universally accepted definition of distributed leadership, Spillane et al. (2004) defined distributed leadership as a way of thinking systematically about leadership practices. A distributed leadership framework involves delegating and redistributing the principal's responsibilities and authority to other staff members.

Consequently, Spillane (2006) believed that a distributed conceptual framework's foundation rests in the relationship between leaders, followers, and the leadership practice. Distributed leadership pushes researchers to expand the study of leadership beyond the characteristics of individual leaders. Educational organizations thrive on collaborations; therefore, relationships among stakeholders are paramount in effective schools (Atik & Celik, 2020). Developing teacher leadership practices as a form of distributed leadership may assist in creating an environment more conducive to developing a professional community among teaching staff in a school building.

Achievement disparities across subgroups have existed historically in the United States. Academic and social performance gaps for students with disabilities significantly limit this population's educational success and overall life opportunities (Hock et al., 2017). Playing a unique role in the delivery of special education services at the building level, principals are special education leaders, administrators, and supervisors, and they manage the provision of special education programs and services while ensuring that students with disabilities are provided a free appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment (Lashley & Boscardin, 2003). Middle school principals should expand their instructional knowledge of special education to become instructional leaders in improving the academic performance of students with disabilities.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore middle school principals' perspectives on distributed leadership practices within their ILTs that may improve the academic achievement of students with disabilities. Aligned with the purpose of the study, the literature review described the conceptual framework of distributed leadership

that grounds this basic qualitative study. An overview of the literature on distributed leadership and how this applies to school leadership, specifically principals, was included, as well as a review of instructional leadership that focused on shared instructional leadership at the school level. Finally, a synopsis of the history of special education access in public schools, the principal's role in special education, and special education achievement was presented. This area of research represents a gap in the current literature on distributed leadership and middle level schools, and as the distributed framework of leadership rises in favor, more research is needed from both an academic and practitioner perspective.

In Chapter 3, I describe the methodology used to gather data to answer the research questions, discuss the research design and rationale and the role of the researcher in this basic qualitative study, and discuss the data analysis plan used in this qualitative study.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore middle school principals' perspectives on distributed leadership practices within their ILTs that improved the academic achievement of students with disabilities. This basic qualitative study explored how some middle school principals and their ILTs have demonstrated a pattern of academic growth for students with disabilities in reading and math for 3 years on statewide assessments. This area of research represents a gap in the current literature on distributed leadership, and middle-level schools, and the study filled that gap. The findings of this qualitative study may provide middle school principals and senior leadership with strategies and leadership practices they can employ to narrow the achievement gap between students with disabilities and their nondisabled peers. In addition, this research could provide information to school district senior administrators to determine if the distributed leadership model, using ILTs, can support middle school principals in providing instructional leadership to improve the academic outcomes for students with disabilities.

In this chapter, I outline the research design and rationale, the role of the researchers, methodology, trustworthiness, and ethical procedures of this qualitative study. The methodology section includes details on the participant selection process, instrumentation, procedures for recruitment, participation and data collection, and the data analysis plan. Each section explains how these components will be applied in the research study. A basic qualitative study approach was used to identify individual principals' beliefs or actions to understand their perspectives better. I interviewed eight

middle school principals from a large, urban–suburban public school district in the mid-Atlantic states, who lead schools that have demonstrated increased academic achievement for students with disabilities in reading and math on statewide assessments over the past 3 years.

Research Design and Rationale

The phenomenon of this basic qualitative study was that there are eight middle schools in a large, urban-suburban public school district in a mid-Atlantic state that had demonstrated a positive trend of academic growth for students with disabilities in reading and math on statewide assessments for 3 years, while other middle schools in this district had not. The research design for this study was a basic qualitative study of these schools and was selected to explore, study, and describe how middle school principals used distributed leadership practices to enhance their ILTs capacity to improve student outcomes for students with disabilities.

Research questions in qualitative studies are broad and directly aligned to understanding, explaining, and describing the phenomenon under study and are informed by the conceptual framework of the study (Burkholder et al., 2016; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The research question in this basic qualitative study was:

What are mid-Atlantic urban middle school principals' perspectives on the distributed leadership practices used by their instructional leadership teams that contributed to increased academic achievement of students with disabilities?

A concern with a qualitative study approach involves findings that may be overly generalized because there could be other reasonable explanations for the results (Yin,

2018). This concern of rival explanations was addressed by interviewing enough participants to reach saturation and strengthen the findings' trustworthiness. However, instead of looking to generalize findings, qualitative researchers should consider whether the findings are transferable to other situations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this research study, distributed leadership practices extrapolated from the study may be effective for other middle school principals and provide a better understanding of leadership practices needed to improve the achievement of students with disabilities.

Role of the Researcher

The role of the researcher is the primary instrument in qualitative research (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). In understanding the role of the researcher in qualitative research, positionality and social location must be understood at every stage of the research process. According to Ravitch and Carl (2016), positionality is the researcher's role and identify as they intersect and are in relationship to the context and setting of the research. Positionality can be defined as the different roles and relationships between the researcher and the participants. Social location or identity is also important in understanding the role of the researcher in qualitative studies. Social location refers to the researcher's gender, social class, race, culture, and ethnicity and how these intersections and other identity factors impact research (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Interview questions were designed to align with the research question for the study, and semistructured interviews were conducted to gather data through video conferencing with selected middle school principals who met the study's criteria. According to Ravitch and Carl (2016), semistructured interviews serve to guide the

interview with specific questions and allow for follow-up questions based on participants' responses to gather additional information. I collected, analyzed, and reported all information in this qualitative study and interpreted the findings and results of data collection and analysis through the lens of a researcher and the conceptual framework for distributed leadership.

The role of the researcher is critical in qualitative research; therefore, the researcher must make deliberate methodological choices to acknowledge, account for, and approach researcher bias (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). I have 25 years of experience in education as a teacher, department chair, assistant principal, principal, and director of special education. Positionality and social location are central components of researcher identity and are critical to understanding the researcher's role in every state of the research process (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Although I am a middle school principal in the school district under study and acquainted with some of the participants, I have no influence over them or evaluative responsibility for them. To conduct an ethical research study, I was critical and reflexive during data collection and analysis (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I obtained university approval from an Institutional Review Board prior to beginning the research study (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

Researcher bias may be reduced by accurately representing data that is collected and avoiding personal biases. A reflexivity journal was kept during the process of interviewing and analysis to document my perspectives and attempts to accurately reflect the data. Reflexivity refers to the researcher's identity, positionality, and subjectivities (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). To address the researcher's role, there must be an active and

ongoing process throughout the research process to address the influence in the construction of a relational contribution to meaning and interpretation (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). In addition, the interview responses from each middle school principal were triangulated with archival data and existing documents from the individual schools.

Prior to interviewing study participants, I explained the purpose of this research study to each participant, and confidentiality agreements were signed prior to their interviews. I reviewed and explained the consent forms to each participant prior to participants signing the forms and shared with each participant the interview and analysis process. I checked in with the participants regarding the accuracy of their responses during the interview, and all participants had an opportunity to review the transcripts of the interview to confirm their accuracy (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The rights of participants were protected by informed consent, confidentiality, and the absence of any identifying data that could reveal the participant or their school (Creswell & Poth, 2017). I collected and stored information on a flash drive without identifying the names or schools of any participants, and alphanumeric codes were assigned to each interview participant and to their school.

Methodology

Methodology includes the specific research methods used to collect data for the research study. Qualitative methodology is where ideology and epistemology connect the research approach, design, methods, and implementation (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). In this section, I described the methodology used for this research study, which included the participant selection process, procedures for recruitment, participation, and data

collection, the instrumentation, and the data analysis plan. Finally, I discussed how issues of trustworthiness were addressed, as well as ethical considerations.

Participant Selection

The location of the study is a large, urban-suburban public school district in a mid-Atlantic state. There are 25 middle schools in this large, urban-suburban public school district; however, purposive sampling was used to select middle school principals who demonstrated academic growth of students with disabilities in reading and math on statewide assessments for 3 years. The sample size was determined based on 2017-2019 statewide assessment data, and statewide assessments were not conducted in 2020-2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The sample size was eight middle school principals. The middle school principals who met the criteria were interviewed until data saturation was met. Purposeful sampling allows researchers to select participants who provide the context to help answer the research questions of the specific research study (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Selection of participants for the study focused on the following criteria: (a) middle school principals leading schools that have demonstrated a recent 3 years growth pattern in statewide assessment data for students with disabilities; and (b) middle school principals who have served in their current assignment for at least 3 years. This sampling strategy is more desirable because it focuses on a specific subgroup of middle school principals who have demonstrated a recent 3-year academic growth pattern in reading and math on statewide assessment for students with disabilities. Consequently, it was the focus to increase the potential for understanding what leadership practices these middle

school principals used within their ILT that had a positive influence on student achievement at their schools.

Based on statewide assessment data in reading and math from the Research and Accountability Office in the study school district, an email was sent to the middle school principals who met the criteria for this research study. The email included a description and purpose of the study, along with the research questions and research study approval letter from the school district. Participants were asked to respond to an invitation to participate in the study through email, and the interview was scheduled through Zoom video conferencing during a time specified by the responding middle school principal.

Data was collected through one-on-one, semistructured interviews with the selected middle school principals whose schools have shown an increase in student achievement for students with disabilities over the past 3 years. In addition, the interview responses from each middle school principal were triangulated with archival data and existing documents from the individual schools to enhance the validity of the results of this basic qualitative study.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

Participants for my study were recruited using the participant's school district email address, which is approved by the school district once approval was granted to conduct research. An email was crafted using the consent template from Walden University that provided an overview of my doctoral dissertation purpose, methodology, background information, procedures, sample interview questions, the voluntary nature of the study, the risks, and benefits of being in the study, and steps taken to ensure privacy

and confidentiality. In addition, my contact information was provided, and informed consent was obtained in a reply email from the participant with a response of "I consent." Signed consent forms were completed at the beginning of each interview. Once I received an email consent response, interviews were scheduled with each participant at a mutually agreed upon time through video conferencing. The data collection instruction that was used was the semistructured interview, and there was an audio recording of each interview. The data were transcribed, and then member checking occurred. Participants were asked to review the transcript of their responses to the interview questions for accuracy. Member checking is a process for participants to review and validate the research's interpretations of the responses they will provide during the data collection interview process (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

Instrumentation

In qualitative research, according to Ravitch and Carl (2016), instrumentation refers to the tools developed to gather data. The instruments to collect data for this qualitative study were semi-structured interviews using an interview question guide (see Appendix A). Semistructured interviewing was used because highly formalized structured interviews may prohibit the researcher from truly understanding the perceptions and experiences of the participants; conversely, highly formalized structured interviews include more rigid questioning, while informal, unstructured interviews may not provide common themes and findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I specifically designed my interview questions to answer the research questions for this qualitative study. Interviews seek the specificity of each discussion through individualizing follow-

up questions and probes for specifics within each interview (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). In qualitative research, the researcher collects data to understand the phenomena. Qualitative researchers try to place themselves as an observer within the world of the phenomena and use a variety of tools, such as case studies, interviews, and observations, to try and understand the phenomena (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). Since qualitative research uses multiple tools for data collection, it involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). As stated in Ravitch and Carl (2016), qualitative research is not a linear process but a fluid process, continuously interacting and building in a cyclical fashion.

The conceptual framework for this basic qualitative study was based on distributed leadership, which is a framework for studying leadership practices. The framework is grounded in the model of distributed leadership that focuses on the interactions rather than the actions of those in formal and informal leadership roles. Distributed leadership focuses on engaging expertise within the organization rather than seeking it only through a formal position or role (Bush & Ng, 2019). To ensure content validity of the instrumentation, I asked professional colleagues, Executive Directors of School Support, who have an EdD in Educational Leadership, to review the interview questions for clarity and content.

Data Analysis Plan

The goal of qualitative research is to develop descriptive statements about a context-specific phenomenon that may be applied or useful to broader contexts (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Qualitative data analysis draws conclusions logically from the data

collected and compares the findings against other situations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Thematic analysis of interview data requires a deep interpretation and involvement by the

researcher, which consists of statements that bring meaning and identify the participant's

lived experience (Saldaña, 2015). During the data collection process, emerging themes

and patterns were examined through interview responses, as well as the review of

archival data and document review to help answer the research questions, which are

specific to distributed leadership practices that may contribute to academic growth for

students with disabilities.

Coding, a data analysis management strategy in which a researcher assigns a short

description or identification to more readily allow the researcher to access data and find

patterns (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2014; Saldaña, 2015), was used when

reviewing the interview data. While coding the interview data using Dedoose, categories

were constructed, sorted, and named, and patterns and themes were identified and formed

(Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Saldaña, 2015; Yin, 2018). According to Burkholder et al.

(2016), open coding is a system to organize common themes in the data and subsequently

categorize these themes using a label. Themes emerged through the examination of data.

Interview data were analyzed in this qualitative study through thematic analysis and

opening coding to develop common themes in the data and thick descriptions. Thick

descriptions are when researchers describe and interpret observed social action (or

behavior) within its particular context, providing clear descriptions of that context so that

readers can understand participants' thoughts and feelings (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Interview responses were contextualized so that contextual factors were understood in the presented and discussed quotes.

School systems are data rich environments in which data already exits that can be used to answer the research questions in this study. The review of contextual documents is a critical component of the data collection and analysis process (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Using exiting documents and archival data were important sources of context and history that provided a better understanding of the complexities of studying distributed leadership at the middle school level by providing a form of data triangulation to interview first-person accounts. Triangulation allows for data collection using different sampling strategies and examining data at varying times and places, as well as with different individuals (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). In this qualitative study, archival data (statewide assessment data) and existing documents (memos and special education achievement plans developed at each middle school) supplemented the study's data by interviewing participants. Researchers use triangulation to enhance the validity of a research study (Ravitch & Carl, p. 195, 2016). Data from interviews, archival data, and document reviews were used to enhance the validity of the results of this qualitative study.

Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, the credibility and trustworthiness of the researcher are crucial to the research study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Trustworthiness, as defined by Ravitch and Carl (2016), refers to the credibility and rigor of a study and whether the findings accurately reflect the participants' experiences. "To study individuals' lived

experiences and understand them in truly complex and contextualized ways requires a faithful attention to methodological rigor" (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 17). When a qualitative research project is rigorous, the results become more trustworthy. The four elements of trustworthiness for qualitative research include credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, which will be applied to this qualitative study.

Credibility

According to Ravitch and Carl (2016), credibility is the researcher's ability to consider all the complexities in a story and deal with patterns that are not easily explained. Ravitch and Carl further explained, "in qualitative research, internal validity, or credibility, is directly related to research design and the researcher's instruments and data" (p. 188). This basic qualitative study involved peer review, member checking, thick descriptions, and reflexivity to ensure credibility. A reflexivity journal was maintained during the interviewing process and data analysis. Reflexivity means examining one's own thinking and feeling during the different phases of a research study (Patton, 2014). The purpose of keeping a reflexivity journal was to record my predispositions, emotions, and reactions while data were collected and analyzed to notice, reduce, and avoid biases and reactivity.

I received solicited input from three qualified colleagues, who are Executive Directors of School Support who have an EdD in Educational Leadership to engage in peer review of the interview questions. Colleagues were provided the interview questions to provide feedback on the alignment to the research questions of the study. According to Burkholder et al. (2016), peer review is a process where the researcher solicits input from

trusted and qualified colleagues on the study's progress in terms of data analysis and potential findings. Research participants were provided a transcript of their interview to obtain feedback on my interpretation of the data. In addition, I developed thick descriptions that included detailed descriptions of the setting, participants, and evidence to justify the findings (Burkholder et al., 2016).

Transferability

Transferability is how qualitative studies can be applied or transferable to broader contexts while maintaining their context-specific richness (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). A concern with a qualitative study approach when considering trustworthiness is that findings can be generalized or transferred to other situations because there can be other reasonable explanations for the results that are noted (Yin, 2018). Merriam & Tisdell (2016) recommended that instead of looking to generalize findings, qualitative researchers should consider whether the findings are transferable to other situations. In this research, distributed leadership practices learned from the study may also be effective for other principals by illustrating a better understanding of the leadership practices needed to close the achievement gap between students with disabilities and their nondisabled peers.

Dependability

Dependability is the structure for how data is collected and aligned to a research problem and purpose and whether the data is stable over time (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). As a researcher, you must have a reasoned argument for how you collect the data, and the data must be consistent with your argument (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I kept a reflexivity

journal to document possible biases during the data collection and analysis phase. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The methods for achieving dependability are the triangulation and sequencing of methods, which create a well-articulated rationale for these choices to confirm that you have created the appropriate data collection plan given your research questions (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I strengthen the dependability of the findings by checking in with participants during all aspects of the interview process and allowing all participants to review the interview transcripts to confirm accuracy (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Confirmability

The qualitative researcher brings varying levels of subjectivity to the study, and the methods applied to the study must be grounded in confirmable procedures, data analysis, and explanation of the findings (Burkholder et al., 2016). Qualitative researchers do not claim to be objective; however, qualitative researchers seek to have confirmable data and reasonable freedom from unacknowledged researcher biases (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). According to Burkholder et al. (2016), confirmability of a study exists when other researchers would make similar conclusions about the data analysis and findings. Qualitative researchers need to understand how their biases may influence data interpretation (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I used peer review and reflexivity to mitigate potential bias and ensure confirmability in this qualitative study. One example of the peer review method used in this qualitative study was to ask peer reviewers to review the interview questions to ensure they were aligned with the purpose of this qualitative study. In addition, peer reviewers would be asked to review the data to see if the theme codes

that have been developed make sense to another educator. Using these processes will require engagement and self-reflection to understand my own set and potential biases during all parts of the research study.

Ethical Procedures

According to Burkholder et al. (2016), ethical procedures require that the participants be provided with information about the study before their participation through informed consent. Informed consent was obtained from participants regarding the specific purpose of the study, the expected duration of the study, the participants' expectations, the procedures for data collection, and the steps taken to maintain confidentiality. Clear instructions indicated that a participant might withdraw from the study without repercussion. The rights of participants were protected by informed consent, confidentiality, and the absence of any identifying data that could reveal the participant or their school, school division, or county (Creswell & Poth, 2017). All identifying information, such as participants' names and schools, was kept confidential. Transcripts of the interviews were collected and stored on a flash drive for 3 years and will not be accessible to anyone except me. At the end of the 3 years, the flash drives will be destroyed using a shredder, which will permanently destroy the data. Once the final dissertation is completed, an executive summary will be provided to the participants. The middle school principals interviewed were identified by alphanumeric codes. Walden University approval from an Institutional Review Board was obtained prior to the beginning of data collection.

While middle school principals' profile information was collected, including length of service as a principal and number of students with disabilities at the school, the information generally shared did not identify with a specific school or principal. The completed transcript of each interview was shared with the participant for member checking, comment, and input prior to completing the research study.

Summary

In Chapter 3, I identified the methodology of this basic qualitative research study and the research design as a qualitative study. The basic qualitative study will include semistructured interviews with principals in different settings. The phenomenon studied was the distributed leadership practices of middle school principals who demonstrated a pattern of academic growth for students with disabilities in reading and math on statewide assessments for 3 years, while other middle schools in this district have not. This basic qualitative study included interviews with a purposeful sampling of eight middle school principals who met the criteria of demonstrating an increase in the academic achievement of students with disabilities in reading and math statewide assessments for 3 years. I concluded Chapter 3 with a discussion on the constructs of trustworthiness and ethical procedures that were adhered to during this basic qualitative study.

Chapter 4: Results

In this chapter, I describe the setting where data collection took place, data collection and analysis methods, results, and evidence of trustworthiness. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore middle school principals' perspectives on the distributed leadership practices within ILTs that improved the academic achievement of students with disabilities. I applied a basic qualitative research approach to answer the following research question:

What are mid-Atlantic urban middle school principals' perspectives on the distributed leadership practices used by their instructional leadership teams that contributed to increased academic achievement of students with disabilities?

Setting

The research site was in a large suburban-urban school district in the mid-Atlantic region. The school district had over 110,000 students, with 176 schools, centers, and programs, with approximately 56% of students being students of color or self-identified as mixed race. Economically disadvantaged students accounted for approximately 45% of the total student population, and students with disabilities accounted for approximately 13% of the total student population in this district. The district included urban, suburban, and rural areas with various housing types, including single-family homes, apartments, condominiums, and farms. According to state-reported data, student achievement showed that students with disabilities were not meeting state standards for mathematics and English language arts across the tested grade bands. The graduation rate was approximately 88% for all students and 70% for students with disabilities.

For this study, eight middle school principals were interviewed. The sample consisted of four middle school principals who identified as male and four who identified as female. The participants' experience as middle school principals ranged from 4 to 11 years. Only one principal interviewed had a background in special education, while the other seven principals did not. Table 3 shows administrators' gender, years of experience, and background in special education.

Table 4

Research Participants Demographics

Participant	Title	Gender	Principal Experience (years)	Middle School Principal Experience (years)	Background in Special Education
P1	MS Principal	Male	4	4	No
P2	MS Principal	Male	10	4	No
P3	MS Principal	Female	11	11	No
P4	MS Principal	Male	11	11	No
P5	MS Principal	Female	9	9	No
P6	MS Principal	Male	10	10	No
P7	MS Principal	Female	10	10	No
P8	MS Principal	Female	11	11	Yes

Data Collection

After receiving approval from Walden University's IRB (number 07-26-21-0995617), I began recruiting and selecting study participants. The recruitment process began with reviewing state-wide testing data to identify middle school principals in this district whose schools' demonstrated growth in academic achievement for students with disabilities. Once I identified the middle school principals whose schools had demonstrated growth, I began to recruit through personal phone calls and emails to these

identified middle school principals. An email was sent to the participants that included my introduction as a doctoral student at Walden University, the purpose of the research, and the informed consent form. Participants were allowed to ask questions about the research study before consenting, and none of the participants had any initial questions before being interviewed. Each participant sent a confirmation email with "I consent," agreeing to participate in the study. This information was kept in a password-protected electronic file to protect their identity and ensure confidentiality.

Once I received the participants' confirmation email agreeing to participate in the research study, I sent a follow-up email to schedule the respective individual interview at a mutually agreed-upon time. Before each interview, each participant provided verbal recording consent for the interview to be recorded. All electronic, hard copy and audio recorded consents are securely stored and locked in password-protected electronic files. Eight middle school principals participated in the interview during a 23-day period between September 24, 2021, and October 18, 2021. All participants were middle school principals whose schools had demonstrated growth in academic achievement for students with disabilities. Semistructured interviews consisted of one-time only one-on-one interviews with each participant to gather data. Participation was voluntary, and all interviews were confidential.

Through virtual conferencing, data were collected, and the interview setting was quiet and free from distractions. Using Zoom, interview sessions lasted 30 to 40 minutes, depending on the length of the responses to the interview questions. Using the recording feature on Zoom, each interview was recorded and then transcribed using the Zoom

transcription feature, followed by a review of the transcript to ensure the transcription accurately captured what was stated in the interview. Following each interview, I listened to the recording for clarity and took notes on the interview. This process allowed me to correct any minor errors in the transcription and become increasingly familiar with the content of the interview, supporting a more reliable data analysis later in the research study. There were no unusual circumstances that were encountered in collecting the data.

Data Analysis

After reading and examining interview transcripts and using open coding with thematic analysis, the research question was answered once saturation was achieved. Thematic analysis of interview data requires deep interpretation and involvement by the researcher, which consists of statements that bring meaning and identify the participant's lived experience (Saldaña, 2015). I started the process of coding by first organizing the interviews and transferring the transcription from Zoom into a Microsoft Word document. After the transcripts were uploaded to Microsoft Word, I reviewed the transcripts to identify any words or phrases that were misinterpreted by reviewing the audio recordings. Each participant's name was substituted with an alphanumeric code to protect their confidentiality and allow for attributable quotes in later sections of this research study.

Transcripts were loaded into Dedoose software for coding, allowing me to read line-by-line to identify codes, subcategories, categories, and then themes and concepts. First coding included using value coding by identifying keywords or phrases representing the participants' values, attitudes, beliefs, and perspectives on distributed leadership

practices used by their ILTs (Saldaña, 2015). Throughout the interviews, participants expressed how they used distributed leadership daily to ensure the academic needs of students were being met in their school building. Similar words and phrases were then categorized to reflect the collective meaning of the participants' perspectives on distributed leadership, and eventually, themes emerged.

In the first coding cycle, I used my analytic memos to examine how participants' unique experiences influence their perspectives. Using the values coding method, commonalities among the participants emerged to explore their perspectives about distributed leadership and its impact on achievement for students with disabilities. After analyzing the codes, subcategories emerged: leadership practices, roles of ILTs, special education achievement, actions of ILTs, structure or tools used to improve special education achievement, special education staffing, principal experience with special education, and time.

I used axial coding for the second coding cycle, which was applied to the interview data to condense results into smaller categories. The results from the transcripts were saved into Microsoft Excel to sort similar codes into categories due to their similar characteristics to identify patterns in the data. During the second coding process, my subcategories became more defined and shaped how middle school principals' perspectives aligned with the conceptual framework. The second coding of data offered a deeper connection to the research topic, as I was able to restructure and reclassify the codes and subcategories into 3 major categories: leadership practices, ways of

distributing leadership, and barriers to distributed leadership, which aligned to the conceptual framework of this study.

The interpretation of the data consisted of developing the meaning of the participants' perspectives, personal experiences, descriptions, and conclusions related to distributed leadership. No discrepant cases needed to be addressed as all interviews and archival data contributed to the results and conclusions of the study. However, some discrepant responses were provided on the level of training for distributed leadership. Some participants (P3, P7, P8) felt that principal training programs did not explicitly teach distributed leadership, which resulted in participants spending at least 2 to 3 years developing effective distributed leadership practices in their school sites. Table 5 provides an example of subcategories used and examples from the data.

Table 5

Subcategories Related to Research Question

Subcategories	Data Examples
Roles of ILT	"Share data analysis, feedback from their departments, content and collaborative planning so that teachers can talk about instruction."
	"Roles vary by the task they are assigned."
	"Informal role based on leadership task. Some people are better at public speaking or being able to communicate our vision, for example, the special area department chair may be the person to communicate our plan for language arts, because the person is a better communicator than the language arts department chair, so they are assigned that role."
Actions of ILT	"Determine what our strengths are, then talk about how leadership team is going to distribute based on what people's strengths are and how we are going to create opportunities for people to work on things that they identified as things that they are not strong in."
Leadership practices	"Collaborate with their teachers and make decisions based on feedback from their teachers rather than saying this is what we should do."
	"Being a servant leader and being able to empower others to help to make decisions that are in the best interests of students."
Special education achievement	"Leveraging staffing to ensure the best teachers are teaching special education students."
	"Splitting the IEP chair and special education department chair to have one focus only on instruction."
	"Staffing starts with our special education students; we create a schedule that special education serves as the basis and then from there we build parallels to general education classes."
Barriers and challenges	"Time is a huge barrier."
	"Sometimes teachers don't want anything distributed to them because they feel like they already have enough on their plate."
	"Staffing is a barrier; the staffing model does not allow us to offer teacher leaders the among of time they need to really do the distributive leadership practices."
	"Lack of training around distributive leadership practices."

Table 6 reflects the codes, subcategories, and categories that informed the overall themes based on the data collected. The three major categories were more defined and became the major themes of this study: leadership practices used by instructional leadership teams to support special education achievement, structures, tools, or routines used to distribute leadership within instructional leadership teams to improve special education achievement, and barriers and challenges principal face when implementing distributed leadership to improve academic achievement for special education. Special education achievement is complex and requires principals to use different approaches to meet the needs of special education students. This study's eight middle school principals used distributed leadership within their ILTs to improve academic achievement for students with disabilities. The study revealed that these eight middle school principals used collaboration, co-planning, schoolwide tools and routines, and the master schedule to distribute leadership within their ILTs to increase the academic performance of students with disabilities. The study also revealed barriers and challenges to implementing distributed leadership, such as special education staffing and principal experience with distributed leadership, that principals must face when using distributed leadership to improve academic achievement for students with disabilities.

Table 6

Themes Related to the Research Question

Codes	Subcategories	Categories	Themes
Collaboration Communication Formal leadership roles Informal leadership roles	Leadership Practices Roles of ILT Members Special Education Achievement	Leadership Practices	Leadership Practices used by instructional leadership teams to support special education achievement.
Protocol/Procedures of ILT Co-Planning (general and special education) Schoolwide structures Classroom structures Teacher feedback Master Schedule	Actions of ILT Structure or tools used to improve special education achievement	Ways of Distributing leadership	Structures, tools, or routines use to distributed leadership within instructional leadership teams to improve special education achievement.
Staffing Time Use of Special Education staff Experience of principal	Special Education Staffing Principal experience with distributed leadership Time	Barriers	Barriers and challenges principals face when implementing distributed leadership to improve academic achievement for special education

Results

Theme 1: Leadership Practices Used by Instructional Leadership Teams to Support Special Education Achievement

In the distributed leadership framework, followers (in this case, middle school teachers) played a role in increasing academic achievement for special education students. All the participants stated that effective collaboration is an extremely important leadership practice that not only instructional leadership teams must exhibit, but all teachers in the school site must exhibit to improve achievement for students with disabilities.

Collaboration

Collaboration was a common word used throughout the interviews to describe leadership practices used by ILTs to improve academic achievement for students with disabilities. Collaboration must be present in a school site to foster distributing leadership. Middle principals described how general and special education teachers must collaborate to meet special education students' needs. Due to the complicated nature of special education, achievement cannot improve without everyone (general educators, special educators, ILT) working collaboratively to improve achievement. Through collaboration, middle school principals could distribute leadership to their ILT members to oversee their departments using a collaborative approach. Middle school principals believed this type of collaboration had to be modeled by the ILT for teachers to understand the collaborative nature needed to improve special education achievement. P1 shared, "Being collaborative is a leadership practice that my instructional leadership team must exhibit daily to facilitate collaboration within their departments to improve student achievement." P3 stated, "Collaborating with teachers in their departments and making decisions based on feedback from their teachers rather than saying 'this is what we should do'." In addition, P6 shared, "Being able to empower teachers in their department to make decisions that are in the best interest of students." Furthermore, P2 shared, "Almost every important decision I make as a principal, as it relates to academic achievement and instruction, is a collaborative decision, thus modeling for my staff how to be collaborative."

In a distributed leadership framework, collaboration is critical because the relationship and interactions between leaders and followers are fluid and emphasizes the mobility and transfer of these roles according to the needs of the school (Spillane et al., 2004). For leaders to be collaborative, they must build relationships with their followers. For example, P4 stated, "It's all about trust and relationships, when teachers trust leaders, they are motivated to collaborate to unpack decisions and to figure it out." Improving academic achievement of special education students is difficult, therefore, all staff must work together for the common goal of improving academic outcomes for students, which requires effective collaboration. For collaboration to be effective, staff must have effective communication. P3 shared, "Communication is key, there must be a common language that everyone understands to move achievement forward." In addition, P8 stated, "teachers must be able to communicate the needs of their students effectively so that instructional decisions can be made to meet students' needs." The collaboration between the different departments in a school is also critical to improving academic achievement for students with disabilites. P8 shared, "talking across departments about what the data is showing us and how we can support the students." P1 also shared, "we have collaboration amongst ILT member where they work jointly to support school wide initiatives, which support special education achievement." When leadership is distributed, the work of all individuals who contribute to the leadership practice is recognized, where they serve in formal or informal leadership roles. Improving academic outcomes for students with disabilities takes effective collaboration and communication from all staff, because it is complicated. Members of ILT must learn how to be collaborative not only

with their departments, but also with other ILT members' departments to foster a collaborative environment to improve special education achievement. For example, the math department chair must work collaboratively with the ELA department chair to improving the way students answer extended response questions in math, as it relies on the writing process. The middle school principals have distributed this leadership to the department chairs to collaboratively work together to improve academic achievement for students with disabilities. Special education teachers must coordinate with other teachers and providers to have ongoing communication and collaboration, which is critical to improving academic outcomes for students with disabilities.

Roles of ILT Members

When discussing the roles of ILT, participants shared that their ILT members had formal and informal leadership roles that supported the school. When leadership is distributed, the work of all individuals who contribute to the leadership practice is recognized, whether they serve in formal or informal roles (Spillane et al.,2004). The formal roles of ILT members are the roles given to them by virtue of their position as a department chair, which is a teacher leader position. For example, P6 stated, "department chairs are the leaders of their department, they manage their department and participate in informal observation of their department members." According to P3, "department chairs share updates with regards to their respective departments, it could be updates from the curriculum and instruction office, or school updates." In addition, P7 provided an additional perspective "department chairs are responsible for sharing data analysis, feedback from their departments with ILT, and facilitating content and collaborative

planning so that they are able to focus on instruction in their departments." P1 believed that the role of ILT members is to "revisit the school progress plan, provide support as well as leadership on how each ILT member is supporting initiatives and strategies that are in the school progress plan." All participants believed that conducting informal observations and providing direct feedback to their teachers is a formal role that all department chairs play in any school building. Special education department chairs provide specialized support to their content colleagues on differentiation and modifying grade level standards to ensure students with disabilities can access the content.

Informal leadership roles, which are leaders who do not have formal leadership positions in the organization but have influence over teachers are just as important as formal roles in the distributed leadership framework. The collaboration between departments is also critical when it comes to informal roles for members of the ILT. P8 shared, "talking across departments about what we are seeing, how one can support the other." P1 also shared, "sometimes we do have a collaboration amongst ILT members where they work jointly to support school wide initiatives." Informal roles are based on individual strengths and the leadership situation that are presented. For example, P2 stated,

> The department chair for special areas might be the person to communicate what our plan is for language arts because that person is a better communicator than the language arts department chair or any of the administrators that might be available to communicate the plan.

The informal roles provide leaders with an opportunity to shine based on their individual strengths, as well as contribute their leadership to the larger organization.

Distributed Leadership that Supports Academic Achievement of Special Education Students

Only one of the participants (P8) indicated a background in special education; hence, most of the participants felt that distributing leadership was critical to supporting academic achievement of special education students. P2 shared, "I don't have a background in special education, I have no choice to distributed leadership if I want to achieve the goals that we have for our special education subgroup." Furthermore, P7 suggested, "without distributing leadership, I would not be able to improve academic achievements for special education because I don't have the background and skill set to be able to do so." In addition, P6 shared how distributing leadership looks for leaders who do not have a background in special education,

> While my math department chair doesn't have a background in special education, he has a varied skill set as it relates to differentiating math instruction and a deep understanding of the math content. He is the person who would lead the way in supporting our special educators and general educators in understanding the math content and differentiating instruction for special education students.

Participants (P1, P3, P7) shared that it was critical to ensure that teachers with content knowledge are the teachers who lead the work in improving academic outcomes for special education students, whether that teacher is a general education teacher or a special education teacher. The work is distributed to those with the content knowledge, to

ensure special education students have access to the grade level curriculum to improve achievement. On the other hand, the work is also distributed to those with knowledge around differentiation to ensure that the grade level content can be modified to meet the needs of special education students. P5 shared, "it's about making sure teachers in their departments understand what differentiation really means and how to modify assignments for students with disabilities." Teachers with expertise in differentiation, may not be in a formal leadership role, but their informal leadership role provides influence over other teachers through teaching strategies and knowledge that can improve academic achievement students with disabilities.

Theme 2: Structures, Tools, or Routines Used to Distribute Leadership Within Instructional Leadership Teams to Improve Special Education Achievement

In this qualitative study, structures were identified regarding how middle school principals organize their ILTs to promote increased academic achievement for all students, with an emphasis on students with disabilities. How structures, routines, and tools were used by school leaders varied based on the situation. For example, middle school principals can design their own structures, routines, and tools, based on the unique needs of their school and this supports distributed leadership. Allowing principals to have independence to develop these structures for their schools, supports the process of being able to engage their teacher leaders in leading the structures, routines, and tools for the school. When structures are mandated to principals by the district and the state department of education, the rigid structures, limit distributed leadership because rigid

structures do not allow principals autonomy to make decisions that are unique for their individual schools.

Actions Taken to Distribute Leadership

A distributed leadership framework allows leaders to emerge based on different situations and leadership practices to surface based on these interactions. The data suggest that middle school principals use different roles and responsibilities among their ILT members to distribute leadership to improve special education academic achievement. For example, P2 shared, "I determine what their strengths are and then talk about how the leadership will be distributed based on their strengths to improve academic achievement for special education." In addition, P6 shared, "allowing ILT members to bring their skill, talent and creativity to the table, and then in turn distributing the leadership based on that skill and talent." Furthermore, P5 stated,

> I have really pushed the leadership of the building down to a core group of teacher leaders. So, when a decision must be made, I distributed the leadership by calling the group together to have them weigh in on what decision should be made.

Likewise, P8 shared, "as a leadership team, we have a certain agenda and a protocol and norms that allow the team to distribute leadership within that meeting and leaders take on different roles, based on their strengths and the core idea of improving student achievement."

Using their ILTs, middle school principals have been able to provide leadership opportunities to a variety of teachers in their building, who may not have formal

leadership roles. P1 shared, "finding teachers and putting them in leadership roles is one action that I used to distributed leadership within my ILT and my entire staff." P4 also said, "looking at my ILT to lead in different areas to supporting distributing leadership within the building, with a focus on student achievement." So, P5 stated, "building the belief that teachers are the frontline people who know more of what needs to be done, therefore, distributing leadership to teachers to have them make decisions for the building." Finally, P4 shared, "distributing leadership by building the muscle of the ILT to then go back to their contents and make decisions that align to the vision of the school."

Co-Planning

Co-planning with general and special educators was a structural approach that all participants found to be critical to their work of increasing academic achievement for students with disabilities. Co-planning is led by the content department chair, which is a leadership role that is distributed by the middle school principal. The middle school principals trust their department chairs as content experts; therefore, they distributed this role to the department chairs, who are members of their ILTs. The ILT members led their departments through the co-planning process to ensure that a focus is placed on ensuring that strategies are put in place to improve special education achievement in every lesson plan. For example, P3 shared that, "incorporating shared planning between special educators and general educators so that there is a shared responsibility for improving student achievement for special education students." In addition, P2 stated, "interdisciplinary teams are a key structure in supporting where special educators are

placed to support students." Furthermore, P1 shared that, "co-planning provides a structure for general education and special education teachers to collaboratively work to modify grade level curriculum to meet the needs of special education students." Finally, P3 shared, "collaborative planning meetings have been the key to improving academic achievement for special education students."

Ensuring that general education and special education teachers had the same expectation, (grading, modifying assignments, communication with families, etc), was a key paradigm that all participants shared in improving academic achievement for special education students. P4 shared, "teachers are given similar structures, routines and procedures across the school to move instruction in a more positive direction." Furthermore, P1 shared, "the routine of analyzing student data to make informed decisions has moved academic achievement for special education students in the right direction." Meeting frequently as an ILT was an important routine that was in place in all the participants schools. For example, "bi-weekly ILT meetings ensure that we are staying focus on academic achievement, with a focus on special education achievement."

Tools

Tools are important in helping to measure the effectiveness at the school level. P1 shared, "the use of tools embedded in the evaluation system and the teacher reflection activities help provide feedback on the teaching and learning process for students and teachers." In addition, P8 stated, "instructional expectations for each department, an instructional framework for teachers to follow to look at effective first instruction, has been beneficial for special education students." Further, P2 shared that "schoolwide

communication protocol is in place to make sure staff understand expectations." P6 also shared, "instructional frameworks have been systemically done for every content, which ensures everyone is on the same page." Participants shared that ILT agendas are in place to make sure that they stay on topic and to provide feedback to their members. For example, P4 shared, "agendas for ILT meetings, used as a guide to ensure we don't get off topic and stay focused on student achievement." Having consistent structures, tools or routines in place that focused on student outcomes assisted these 8 middle school principals in making sure the focus of special education achievement was always a theme in their instructional leadership teams.

Master Schedule

Since most of the participants (P2, P3, P4, P5, P7, P8) shared that when distributing leadership to improve academic achievement for students with disabilities, special education staffing and the master schedule is a critical component to improving academic achievement. P7 suggested that "our master schedule starts with our special education students. We create a schedule for self-contained students that serves as the basis, and then from there we build parallels to ensure student can have access to general education classes." P1 added, "we look at our staffing for special education. Who is providing the service to students? Is it the strongest content teacher?" Participants shared that it was a delicate system to ensure that students with disabilities are scheduled and staff with the strongest teachers. For example, P2 shared, "it's not just putting special education students in any class. It really is prescriptive of who we are going to have teach our special education students and who we think can best meet their needs." The master

schedule is a process that is usually distributed to an assistant principal; however, the assistant principal collaborates with content and special education department chairs to build a master schedule that meets the needs of students with disabilities. Participants shared that to improve academic achievement for students with disabilities, special education staffing and the master schedule are two items that were distributed to other leaders, who worked collaboratively together to ensure that the best fit and combination is made for students with disabilities to create an environment that fosters improved academic achievement.

Theme 3: Barriers and Challenges Principals Face When Implementing Distributed Leadership to Improve Academic Achievement for Special Education

While distributing leadership is a practice that all participants have used with their ILTs to improve academic achievement for students, all participants noted barriers using distributed leadership. A common major barrier that all participants discussed was time. Middle school principals believed that special education teachers have so many legal obligations (testing, writing IEPs, case management, attending IEP meetings, etc.) that special educators do not have time to become teacher leaders in their area of expertise.

Time

Special education teachers have an increased workload due to legal requirements; therefore, there is a resistance for special education teachers to take leadership roles in a school. Special education teachers have the expertise on differentiation and how to scaffold instruction to meet the needs of special education students; however, special education teacher mindsets may become a major barrier in distributed leadership, as they

may have skepticism toward the ideas of taking on leadership responsibility. P8 shared, "sometimes special education teachers don't want anything distributed to them because they feel like they already have enough on their plate." P2 also shared, "trying to harness the strengths of those who are really good at what they do to support their colleagues who need support, without feeling overwhelmed by the extra duty". Middle school principals are looking for ways to distribute leadership to their special educators with expertise in differentiation, scaffolding, and modifying lessons. Some participants (P2, P4, P7, P8) believed that academic gains would grow if there were ways to distribute more leadership around special education achievement to special educators.

Special Education Staffing

The barrier of time led the middle school principals to special education staffing as a major barrier to distributed leadership. Special education staffing directly impacts the achievement of special education students because special education teachers must spend so much time on the legal requirements (paperwork) that they cannot spend time on the teaching and learning process, which includes differentiation, scaffolding and modifying lessons. Most school districts do not have enough special educators to ensure that schools are staffed with special educators who can focus on the paperwork, while other special educators are focusing on the teaching and learning process. P1, shared, "staffing is a barrier; the special education staffing model does not allow us to have special educators for paperwork and special educators for instruction." P6 also shared, "human resources are a challenge, which causes you to be deliberate and be intentional about who you hire." Participants shared that it is difficult to distribute leadership to special educators

who have the expertise to improve achievement without the proper staffing. Special education staffing affects ILTs because those in special education leadership positions often must miss meetings, or do not have time to collaborate with content department chairs to discuss improving special education achievement. Special education leaders often must focus on supporting special education teachers on the paperwork side of being a special educator, which reduces the amount of time spent on the teaching and learning process and is the heart of improving academic achievement.

Principal Experience with Distributed Leadership

Most principals (P2, P3, P5, P6, P7, P8) shared that they did not have any formal training around distributed leadership, especially when it came to improving the achievement of special education students. P7 shared, "it has been difficult to move from making decisions to developing the leadership capacity of others to make decision to improve achievement for special education students." P3 shared, "distributed leadership looks different from my first year to what it looks like now, as I have learned how to relinquish decision making power to my teacher leaders." Furthermore, P6 stated, "principals are not provided formal training for distributed leadership; therefore, I didn't understand how to shift my role from exclusive leadership to a form of leadership of collaboration." Finally, P7 shared, "it has taken time for me to understand and learn how to broker, facilitate and support others in leading in my building." Several participants (P3, P5, P6) shared that school districts should provide formal training to principals on distributed leadership as a practice that will improve student academic outcomes. Middle school principals believed they wasted 2-3 years trying to learn how to effectively

distribute leadership, which could have been taught in principal preparation programs. Middle school principals believe they should walk into a principalship with the knowledge of how to distribute leadership, leading them to develop structures and routines to improve academic achievement.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Credibility

When designing my research, establishing credibility relied on sound methodology that ensured alignment with my research questions and contexts. To gather middle school principals' perspectives on distributed leadership practices used by their ILTs, I interviewed middle school principals who had direct responsibility for implementing distributed leadership in their buildings. Qualitative researchers attempt to establish credibility by implementing the validity strategies of triangulation, member checking, using peer review, and putting all the pieces together (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Credibility was established by drawing significant inferences from data collection. By allowing the participants to review their interview transcripts, I ensured that my interpretation of the data through coding themes aligned with their responses. A reflexivity journal was maintained during the interviewing process and data analysis and was used to record my predispositions, emotions, and reactions when data were collected and analyzed to notice, reduce, and avoid biases and creativity. For example, as a middle school principal, I used the reflexivity journal to reflect on the distributed leadership practices I used in my building to ensure that I did not incidentally affect the research by adding my personal ideas about distributed leadership.

Transferability

Transferability is how qualitative studies can be applied or transferable to broader contexts, still maintaining their context-specific richness (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Transferability was achieved through detailed descriptions of my data, including thick descriptions, for other researchers to compare my research to other studies based on the provided information (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Participants in this study were selected because they demonstrated academic growth for students with disabilities in reading and math on statewide assessments for 3 years. The distributed leadership practices (collaboration, co-planning, formal and informal leadership roles, and the use of the master schedule as a tool to improve academic achievement) used by the eight middle school principals in this study may be effective for other principals by illustrating what leadership practices are needed to narrow the achievement gap of students with disabilities and their nondisabled peers.

Dependability

Dependability is the structure for how data is collected and aligned to a research problem and purpose (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The data collected were used to answer the research question and explain my method of coding as my process for achieving dependability. The steps I used during the research process were explained, which justified my use of interviews, explaining why I selected the data collection method and how it aligned with my research question. When collecting the data, each participant was recorded, and each participant who was interviewed was provided the opportunity to review the transcript of their interviews to confirm the data's accuracy.

Confirmability

Qualitative researchers do not claim to be objective; however, qualitative researchers seek to have confirmable data and reasonable freedom from unacknowledged research biases (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Researchers must recognize and examine their biases and preconceptions by analyzing data through reflexivity to establish confirmability. Confirmability was established through consistent reflexive practice, memo writing, and recognition of my personal bias', beliefs, and assumptions related to the topic of distributed leadership at the middle school level (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Before each interview, I reflected on my notes and memos from previous interviews to ensure consistency in questions asked and my initial coding of responses from participants. This process supported me in identifying any potential personal biases and checking my beliefs and assumptions prior to each interview.

Summary

In Chapter 4, I explained the setting where the research was conducted and the characteristics of the participants as they pertained to this study. This study explored the beliefs of middle school principals on distributed leadership practices, and the research question explored the perspectives on the distributed leadership practices used by their ILTs that contributed to increased academic achievement of students with disabilities. The data collection and analysis summary supported the study's findings, providing evidence of the researcher's trustworthiness.

The qualitative study was performed to investigate middle school principal perspectives on the distributed leadership practices within their ILTs that improved the

academic achievement of students with disabilities. The participants included 8 middle

school principals whose schools' demonstrated growth in academic achievement for

students with disabilities on statewide assessments for 3 years were interviewed for the

study. The three themes included: leadership practices used by instructional leadership

teams to support special education achievement, structures, tools, or routines used to

distribute leadership within instructional leadership teams to improve special education

achievement, and barriers and challenges principals face when implementing distributed

leadership to improve academic achievement for special education.

Special education achievement is complex and requires principals to use different

approaches to meet students with disabilities. The eight middle school principals in this

study distributed leadership within their ILTs to improve special education achievement.

The study revealed that these eight middle school principals used collaboration, co-

planning, formal and informal leadership roles, schoolwide tools and routines, and the

master schedule to distribute leadership within their ILTs to increase students' academic

performance with disabilities. Participants expressed strong beliefs about using shared

planning between general and special educators as one leadership practice that has helped

improve academic achievement for students with disabilities. Consequently, the

participants stated that being collaborative is one of the most important leadership

practices that members of their instructional leadership team can exhibit. The participants

shared a common message that the formal and informal roles of ILT members play a

critical factor in distributing leadership. When leadership is distributed, the work of all

individuals who contribute to the leadership practice is recognized, whether they are formal or informal roles.

In Chapter 5, I describe the interpretation of these data and the implications of these results. Limitations of the study and recommendations for further research are described based on the data collected. Finally, this study's social influence and positive social change are discussed.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore eight middle school principals' perspectives on the distributed leadership practices within their ILTs that improved academic achievement for students with disabilities. The middle school principals provided their perspectives about how distributed leadership practices used by their ILTs contributed to increased academic achievement of students with disabilities. The study revealed that these eight middle school principals used collaboration, co-planning, formal and informal leadership roles, schoolwide tools and routines, and the use of the master schedule to distribute leadership within their ILTs to increase the academic performance of students with disabilities.

The methodology used was a qualitative design. Through the research, I developed a deeper understanding of beliefs, attitudes, perspectives, and meanings about a particular problem or phenomenon (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). By using semistructured interviews, I understood the individual perspectives of middle school principals who used distributed leadership among their ILTs to improve the academic achievement of students with disabilities. Middle school principals shared their emotions, experiences, best practices, and opinions on a specific phenomenon that aligns with best practices for a qualitative study where interviews were the source of data collection (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Each interview allowed respective middle school principals to respond to the interview questions about their personal experiences with distributed leadership practices, how they distributed leadership, and barriers they faced in distributed leadership among their ILT members to improve academic achievement for students with disabilities.

The responses from the interviews connected to the research question, and the middle school principals provided their perspectives related to distributing leadership in their school site to improve academic achievement for special education. The themes from this study were: (a) leadership practices used by instructional leadership teams to support special education achievement, (b) structures, tools, or routines used to distribute leadership within instructional leadership teams, and (c) barriers/challenges principals face when implementing distributed leadership to improve academic achievement for special education students. Chapter 5 includes an interpretation of findings, limitations of the study, recommendations, implications of the findings, positive social change, and conclusions.

Interpretation of the Findings

Based on the data, conclusions were drawn through note-taking, coding, categorizing, theme identification, and writing. Findings in this study added to my holistic understanding regarding distributed leadership practices used by principals that lead to improved student academic achievement. A key finding was developing organizational structures to foster distributed leadership. The participants shared how important structures are in distributing leadership to their ILTs to promote increased academic achievement for all students, with an emphasis on students with disabilities. Another key finding was developing a master schedule that supports special education achievement. The master schedule must be designed to meet the needs of the special education subgroup to move achievement forward. A third key finding was co-planning between general and special educators. The difficult nature of special education requires

collaboration with all staff to improve academic outcomes. Last, a challenging finding was the lack of principal training around distributed leadership. Principals have not been trained on distributed leadership, which led to principals spending years trying to understand the concept of distributed leadership to effectively implement it in their buildings.

Key Finding 1: Developing Organizational Structures to Foster Distributed Leadership

One critical leadership practice for distributing leadership in all the middle schools was developing an organizational structure to support distributed leadership. While the literature did not specifically address organizational structures, the distributed leadership framework discussed that situations involve tools, organizational routines, structures, and other aspects of the organization. When analyzing school leadership from a distributed leadership lens, leadership practices are an outcome of the interactions of formal and informal leaders, situational context, use of tools in facilitating interactions, and organizational structures that influence the interactions (see Bagwell, 2019). Organizational structures must be developed to include staff members in multiple groups to create collaborative structures that result in dialogue about issues such as decision making, specific school issues, professional development, and teaching and learning. To successfully utilize a school's staff for leadership, organizational structures must be developed that facilitate schools' staff to be engaged in multiple groups, consequently promoting tasks to be distributed.

Effective principals do not just put together a series of individual actions but systemically distribute leadership by building it into the fabric of the school (Spillane et al., 2004). How school leaders use structures, routines, and tools varies based on the situation. For example, middle school principals can and did design their own structures, routines, and tools, based on the unique needs of their school, which supports distributed leadership. Allowing principals to have independence to develop these structures for their schools supports the process of being able to engage their teacher leaders in leading the structures, routines, and tools for the school. According to Nappi (2019), one method to evolve the practice of including stakeholders in leadership is to form teams that will provide authentic input designed to improve the education process. At the middle school level, department chairs, which are teacher leaders, belong to ILT, content groups, grade level teams, and smaller professional learning communities based on committees developed to meet the unique needs of the school. Schools require structures that encourage the development of learning communities that value differences, support critical reflection, and encourage members to question, challenge, and debate teaching and learning issues (Silins & Mulford, 2002). All middle schools in this study used a collaborative model, which facilitated the fundamental middle school principles and distributed leadership. As such, distributed leadership is a collaborative practice when stakeholders cultivate capacities by collaborating and synergizing the combined capabilities within an organization (Harris, 2004). The analysis of data validated that distributed leadership is a collaborative process. For example, P6 stated, "collaborating with teachers and making decisions based on their feedback is the type of collaboration

we use daily to support our students." P3 shared, "almost every important decision I make as a principal, as it relates to academic achievement and instruction, is a collaborative one discussed with many people before the decision was actually made." By engaging teachers in various groups, teachers had multiple opportunities to problem solve and discover solutions to the many school-based issues that were present at the time, specifically student achievement. Although distributing leadership without engaging staff in collaborative decision making may be possible, the principals in this study used the collaborative nature of middle schools to engage their staff members in the decision-making process at the school. Consequently, creating an organizational structure that utilizes teachers as leaders empowers these leaders to carry out tasks in support of the schools' vision and to improve achievement for students with disabilities.

Providing staff with multiple opportunities to participate in the school organization provides opportunities for teachers to become more engaged. ILTs create an environment where teachers work collaboratively to perfect their craft and impact student achievement, which leads to a supportive environment where teachers learn from one another to build upon their core skills (Nappi, 2019). By distributing leadership to ILT members, principals entrust building leaders with analyzing achievement data and developing plans for improvement, which allow principals to oversee the organization and provide support to groups as they perform their specific tasks. When principals use teacher teams, such as ILTs, these teams can provide coaching (both formal and informal), determine professional development needs, design professional development, problem solve, assist with communication and be a resource to both teachers and

administrators (Nappi, 2019). Teacher leadership empowers teachers to understand

organizational processes that teachers might not typically understand or conceptualize.

Distributed leadership encourages others in the school to increase their school's

capacities for improving educational outcomes for students (Klar et al., 2016).

Key Finding 2: Creating a Master Schedule That Supports Special Education Achievement

When you build a master schedule around student needs, the schedule becomes a

learning tool, providing students with the opportunity for success and helping them better

prepare for high school and beyond (Casillas, 2018). In this study, middle school

principals used the master schedule as a response to what data revealed about the needs

of students with disabilities. Dynamic master schedules can ensure that the most

experienced teachers are matched with the highest-need students and can allow more time

for planning and collaboration. For example, P2 shared, "it's not just putting special

education students in any class. It really is prescriptive of who we are going to have to

teach our special education students and who we think can best meet their needs." P1

added, "we look at our staffing for special education. Who is providing the service to

students? Is it the strongest content teacher?" Middle school principals must ask

themselves, do students with disabilities have access to the same advanced courses, with

the proper staffing and instructional support, as their non-disabled peers. Providing ILT

members and teachers from all content areas to provide input on the master schedule by

reviewing student data, creates a master schedule that is student-centered and grounded in

equity and access (Casillas, 2018).

The analysis of data validated that to improve achievement of students with disabilities, the master schedule must be developed around this subgroup. For example, P7 suggested that "our master schedule starts with our special education students. We create a schedule for self-contained students that serves as the basis, and then from there we build parallels to ensure student can have access to general education classes." When students with disabilities are at the center of the master schedule, they are placed in a learning environment where they can grow and thrive. Moving an entire school toward increased academic achievement for students with disabilities requires that all adults be focused on the same goal, which requires a common vision to maintain a consistent focus on the common goal of academic achievement. The master schedule should be seen as a template for a school's values and priorities. The master schedule is the frame that aligns with a school's vision with the human and fiscal resources you prioritize to make learning opportunities more equitable for students (Casillas, 2018).

Key Finding 3: Co-Planning Between General and Special Education Teachers

Educational organizations focus on people and are dependent on human relations; therefore, the relationship among stakeholders is paramount in school effectiveness (Atik & Celik, 2020). There has been legislative pressure for over 20 years on both special and general education sides to partner to increase equity in learning, improve the quality of teaching, and increase learning outcomes for students with disabilities (Alsarawi, 2019). The research from this study validates the need for special and general education teachers to partner to increase academic achievement for students with disabilities. For example, P3 shared that "incorporating shared planning between special educators and general

educators so that there is a shared responsibility for improving student achievement for special education students." In addition, P1 shared that "co-planning provides a structure for general education and special education teachers to collaboratively work to modify grade level curriculum to meet the needs of special education students." Co-Planning with general and special educators was a structural approach that all participants in this study found to be critical to their work of increasing academic achievement for students with disabilities.

Using the master schedule to build in co-planning time during the school day is a creative way to ensure collaboration among educators. Alsarawi (2019), suggest "the school administration must provide both special and general education teachers with sufficient time to plan lesson and discuss ways to improve instruction" (p. 8). When general and special educators co-plan they should create a vision to work as equal partners to maximize the learning opportunities for students with disabilities. By having and embracing a clear vision, both teachers have a common understanding of their roles in the co-planning and a shared purpose for their work. Ensuring that general education and special education teachers had the same expectation, (grading, modifying assignments, communication with families, etc), was a key paradigm that all participants shared in improving academic achievement for special education students.

Co-planning must reflect the commitment of all educators to collaborate and have mutual and shared accountability for planning delivering instruction, and assessing the student's needs (Alsarawi, 2019), when this happens, student achievement improves. For example, P3 shared, "collaborative planning meetings have been the key to improving

academic achievement for special education students." When special and general educators co-plan, they work as partners to design instruction for students to engage them in active learning opportunities that are relevant and provide scaffolding as needed. P5 shared, "you must communicate using a common language, so everyone knows the direction you are moving." Co-planning can create learning spaces for students with disabilities and build a community for all students (Davis et al., 2012).

Key Finding 4: Lack of Principal Training Around Distributed Leadership

The literature on distributed leadership did not address principal training to ensure that distributed leadership is implemented effectively to move schools forward, consequently, another barrier to distributed leadership is principal training concerning distributed leadership. According to Klar et al. (2016), middle school principals must identify potential leaders, create leadership opportunities, facilitate role transition, and provide continuous support to new leaders. However, many the participants in this study discussed how they have not been formally trained in distributed leadership, causing them to spend years trying to develop the skillset to effectively distribute leadership. Knowing that principals have not been formally trained in distributed leadership, principals can themselves become a barrier to teacher leadership as they may be reluctant to entrust their formal authority and decision-making powers to teacher leaders, without the proper training. The data collected in this study validated principal resistance that can be present in distributed leadership; for example, P7 shared, "the distributed leadership process has been difficult to move from making decisions to developing the leadership capacity of others, without having formal training in distributed leadership."

Furthermore, P6 stated, "principals are not provided formal training for distributed leadership; therefore, I didn't understand how to shift my role from exclusive leadership to a form of leadership of collaboration." Distributed leadership requires that middle school principals relinquish some authority and power, thus adapting a form of leadership that focuses on brokering, facilitating, and supporting others in leading innovation and change (Harris, 2012). P7 shared, "it has taken time for me to understand and learn how to broker, facilitate and support others in leading in my building."

Limitations of the Study

The limitations of this study included generalizability, which is limited due to purposive sampling of only eight middle school principals who met the selection criteria of improving academic achievement for students with disabilities. The subjects included in this purposive sample may not have been representative of the entire population and may have introduced unknown bias into their responses. Therefore, the findings may not be generalized to the entire population of middle schools meeting the criteria for inclusion in this qualitative study. Furthermore, school systems did not have statewide assessments in the spring of 2020 and 2021 due to COVID-19; therefore, the data used in this study did not include the most current school year, which is another limitation of this study. This basic qualitative study was based on a single means of investigating distributed leadership in middle schools. These findings may not reflect the current situation in all public middle schools. The limitations presented are potential perspectives for future study, development, and generalizability.

Recommendations

Recommendations for Further Research

The limitation of this study warrants the need for further research, such as investigating the relationship that collaboration and co-planning have on the improvement of student achievement for students with disabilities. Due to the complex nature of special education, staff must all work collaboratively to improve academic achievement. Special education teachers have expertise in matching specific instructional strategies to students' areas of need, while general education teachers have more expertise in their content areas. Both areas of expertise are needed to improve the achievement of students with disabilities. Further research is needed on the relationship collaboration through co-planning can have on achievement for students with disabilities.

Secondly, additional research should be conducted on the influence of the middle school concept on distributed leadership practices. The middle school model is focused on teaming and advising, flexible grouping opportunities, community service learning, supporting character development, and multiple and alternative assessments (Alley, 2018). The middle school structures that were present in all the middle schools of principals who were interviewed demonstrated an important function in the distribution of leadership: collaboration with multiple teams. The collaborative nature of middle schools, as well as the trust and relationships necessary to engage in effective teaming, contributed to the success of the schools' distributed leadership practices. The middle school movement recognizes that the organizational structure is one of the most critical aspects of middle school. Consequently, further research should also be conducted to

consider if distributed leadership practices are built into the collaborative structure of middle schools. The research should consider what is commonly discussed in these collaborative groups and how topics are used to make collaborative decisions.

Finally, this study should be replicated to include larger and more diverse populations since this study was limited to a small number of middle school principals in a Mid-Atlantic state who demonstrated positive trends of academic growth for students with disabilities. Middle school principals seek new models that require collaboration, networking, and multi-agency work, which requires more responsive leadership approaches (Harris & Spillane, 2008). Replicating this study with a larger sample size and selecting more diverse locations would increase the current research on distributed leadership at the middle school level.

Recommendations for Practice

This study centered around middle school principals' perspectives on distributed leadership practices within their instructional leadership team that may improve the academic achievement of students with disabilities. First, middle school principals must develop structures that allow collaboration for staff to have a real voice in the decision-making process involving teaching and learning, which creates a commitment to the school's vision and mission to the staff. An effective framework for distributed leadership should include structures for school-wide decision-making. Principals can strengthen a distributed leadership framework by using small, teacher-led groups to discuss and debate issues and concerns, offering a channel directly to school leadership with structures in place that facilitate two-way communication. Schools that use a

distributed leadership framework do not operate with a top-down style but frequently engage in collaborative dialogue with the entire staff around issues that directly impact their work. Using a distributed leadership framework, principals must use the feedback from this dialogue to actively guide their decision-making process.

Secondly, middle school principals should focus on the functions of each collaborative team to ensure that the teams are functioning to meet the academic needs of students with disabilities. For example, grade level teams provide an interdisciplinary approach that supports students' needs at that specific grade level. Grade-level teams provide academic and social-emotional support for students at a given grade level. Principals must consistently ensure that teams are functioning to serve the purpose for which they are intended to provide. In addition, principals should ensure that special education teachers are on multiple teams to provide their expertise so that the teaching and learning process meets the needs of students with disabilities.

Next, middle school principals should focus on the tasks that are needed to be distributed based on the needs of special education vs. general education students. For example, are special educators providing modifications to the curriculum to ensure that students with disabilities can access the curriculum to mastery the objectives. Students with disabilities need effective instructional leadership, as they continually fail to meet proficiency standards on standardized assessments, at the middle school level, the content knowledge that students must exhibit to be proficient becomes increasingly hard for middle school students with disabilities (Lynch, 2016). Middle school principals should draw on the expertise of special educators to provide professional development to the

entire staff on how to meet the academic needs of students with disabilities, ensuring professional development is adequate and ongoing to meet the academic needs of students with disabilities.

Another recommendation would be for middle school principals to ensure that the master schedule is created to meet the needs of students with disabilities, which includes co-planning as part of the schedule. Providing ILT members and teachers from all content areas to provide input on the master schedule by reviewing student data creates a master schedule that is student-centered and grounded in equity and access (Casillas, 2018). The master schedule becomes a learning tool, providing students with the opportunity for success, and helping them better prepare for high school and beyond. The master schedule process should organize and coordinate resources to enhance learning and increase academic achievement for students with disabilities.

My final suggestion would be for middle school principals to develop a cadre of teachers that they will coach and train to become teacher leaders. The foundation of distributed leadership is to have teacher leaders to distributed leadership to support the vision of the school. While distributed leadership is a more expansive concept, teacher leadership is a subset of distributed leadership, represents a valuable resource to principals, and is a viable option for any school improvement efforts and a part of school cultures (Nappi, 2019). Principals must ensure that they always have teacher leaders ready to step up and become part of the decision-making process.

Implications

The data from this study may help to inform and provide guidance and insights on how middle school principals can leverage the collaborative structure of middle schools to support a distributed leadership framework to improve academic achievement for students with disabilities. Middle school principals who engage in distributed leadership depend on others in their organization to carry out leadership functions. The eight middle school principals in this study trusted the expertise of their staff to lead their content departments in the analysis of data, professional development, and any other task that the principals deemed necessary.

Positive Social Change at the Organizational Level

The data from this study indicated that middle school principals used collaboration, co-planning, formal and informal leadership roles, schoolwide tools and routines, and the master schedule to distribute leadership within their ILTs to increase the academic performance of special education students. This study could support the potential organizational change in the need for a clear and consistent distributed leadership model at the middle school level. If all middle schools used the same distributed leadership model, it could be a positive social change at the organizational level. It would provide a common vehicle that middle schools could use to improve the academic achievement of students with disabilities. Using a consistent distributed leadership model could provide the framework at the organizational level for positive social change of increasing academic achievement for students with disabilities at the middle school level.

Academic and social performance gaps for students with disabilities significantly limit this population's educational success and overall life opportunities (Hock et al., 2017). The findings from this study have the potential for positive social change for students with disabilities because it provides strategies for middle school principals to improve academic achievement for students with disabilities, which can lead to more student engagement. When students with disabilities achieve academically, they are more engaged and less likely to drop out of school (Hock et al., 2017). When students are more engaged, they stay in school, which can lead to higher levels of education, an increased sense of community, and expanded job sustainability promoting additional opportunities for students with disabilities to thrive in their local community.

Positive Social Change at the Policy Level

Participants in this study shared that they were not formally trained on distributed leadership practices, which caused them to spend years trying to learn distributed leadership practices and effective ways to distribute leadership to teacher leaders. To create a system policy to ensure that aspiring principals are trained in distributed leadership at the district or state level, principals would receive adequate training on distributed leadership. Administrative training programs should review their curriculum to ensure that aspiring leaders are exposed to a framework for distributed leadership. Including distributed leadership in educational leadership preparation programs will ensure that today's leaders are being trained in the evolution of leadership styles and techniques, which will lead to positive social change within their respective school districts. School leadership has become increasingly complex during the 21st century

requiring principals to collaborate with people demonstrating various levels of expertise to meet the challenge of the teaching and learning process (Harris & Spillane, 2008).

Conclusion

Eight middle school principals in a Mid-Atlantic state were interviewed to explore their perspectives on distributed leadership practices within their ILTs that may improve the academic achievement of students with disabilities. The data themes indicated that: (a) leadership practices used by instructional leadership teams to support special education achievement, (b) structures, tools, or routines used to distribute leadership within instructional leadership teams, and (c) barriers/challenges principals face when implementing distributed leadership contributed to principal's perspectives on the distributed leadership practices used by their ILTs that may contribute to increased academic achievement of students with disabilities. All the participants reported that being collaborative is an essential leadership practice that members of their instructional leadership team can exhibit. The participants reported a common message that the formal and informal roles of ILT members play a critical factor in distributing leadership.

Special education achievement is complex and requires principals to use different approaches to meet the needs of students with disabilities. This study's eight middle school principals distributed leadership within their ILTs to improve academic achievement for students with disabilities. The study revealed that these eight middle school principals used collaboration, co-planning, formal and informal leadership roles, schoolwide tools and routines, and the use of the master schedule to distribute leadership within their ILTs to increase the academic performance of students with disabilities. This

research revealed that principals must develop organizational structures to foster distributed leadership, develop a master schedule to support special education, and co-planning between general and special educators. In addition, the research showed that principals must be aware of some of the challenges to distributed leadership, such as teacher special education staffing and the lack of principal training around distributed leadership. While these are challenges, the principals in this study shared how they overcame these challenges to implement distributed leadership in their schools successfully.

Based on the results of this study and previous research, positive social change can be implemented by contributing to positive academic achievement for students with disabilities. When students with disabilities have higher academic achievement, they are more engaged in the learning process, decreasing the drop-out rate and positively affecting their overall lives (Hock et al., 2017). The positive social change may include higher levels of education, an increased sense of community, and expanded job sustainability which could promote additional opportunities for students with disabilities to thrive in their local community. The findings in this research may provide findings to school district senior administrators to determine if using collaboration, co-planning, formal and informal leadership roles, schoolwide tools and routines, and the use of the master schedule to distribute leadership within their ILTs can continuously increase the academic performance of students with disabilities.

Education in the 21st century has shifted from being teacher-centered to one in which the teacher is the facilitator of the teaching and learning process. Through this

process, students are more engaged in their learning, providing input on how and what they are learning, creating a student-centered classroom. The distributed leadership practices discussed by each middle school principal in this study can emulate the student-centered classroom. The ability to successfully lead middle schools has become increasingly complex during the 21st century, requiring middle school principals to collaborate with a wider assortment of stakeholders who may demonstrate various levels of expertise to meet the challenge of the teaching and learning process effectively. Using distributed leadership, middle school principals have become leadership facilitators in their building by being highly collaborative and using teams, such as ILTs, to provide leadership throughout the building. Middle school principals face a unique challenge as they work to ensure their schools are developmentally responsive to adolescent learners. Adolescent students biologically experience significant emotional, physical, and intellectual changes in their developmental and academic trajectories during their late childhood and early adolescent years (Alley, 2018). School practitioners must continue to examine the practices of middle school principals who have distributed leadership practices throughout their building and who are showing growth in academic achievement for students with disabilities to gain insights from their experiences to support distributed leadership at the middle school level.

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Appendix A: Instructional Management Framework
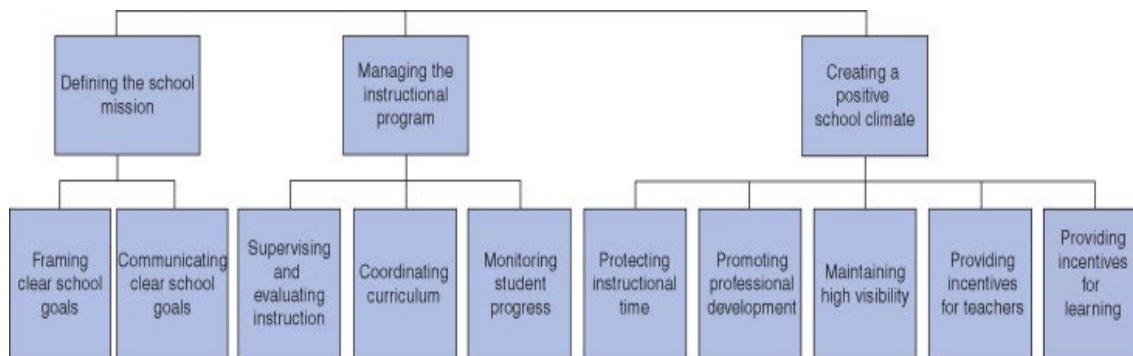
Note. Reprinted from "Instructional leadership and the school principal: A passing fancy that refuses to fade away." *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, *4*(3), 221–239.

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Appendix B: Semistructured Interview Question Guide

Date:

Time:

Interviewee Code #

Location of Interview:

Parts of the Interview	Interview Question
Introduction The research questions were designed to explore and describe principals' perspectives on how they implement distributed leadership in middle schools where students with disabilities have demonstrated academic growth.	Thank you for taking the time to participate in my qualitative study. The purpose of this interview is to gather your perspectives on how you distributed leadership within your instructional leadership teams to improve academic outcomes for students with disabilities. This interview should last about one (1) hour. After the interview, I will send you a transcript of our discussion so you can review it for accuracy before I examine your response for data analysis purposes. However, I will not identify you in my documents and no one will be able to identify you based on your response. You have the right to end this interview at any time. I need to let you know

	that I will be recording this interview for efficient transcribing. Do you have any questions before we begin?
Question 1 (Background)	Please give a brief background of your professional experience, including the number of years you have served as principal. How many years have you been a middle school principal? Do you have a background in Special Education?
Question 2 (Distributed Leadership)	Who do you consider part of your instructional leadership team (ILT)? Follow up prompts: Tell me more about….
Question 3 (Distributed Leadership)	What are the roles you have on your team? How are they decided and developed? Follow up prompts: Informal vs. Formal? Tell me more about…. You mentioned_____. Can you explain the function vs the role?

Question 4 (Distributed Leadership)	What actions do you take as principal? What actions do others take to facilitate distributed leadership practices? Follow up prompts: What tools and structures do you have in place to facilitate these actions?
Question 5 (Special Education Achievement)	How does distributing leadership among your ILT support the academic achievement of students with disabilities? Who does what in this support? Follow up prompts: How did you do that? Can you give a specific example of how you do this? Tell me more about…. You mentioned_____. Can you explain how you did that?

Question 6 (Distributed Leadership Practices)	What kinds of leadership practices do you think people on your ILT need to assist you? How do you distribute those practices? Follow up prompts: How did you do that? Can you give a specific example of how you do this? Tell me more about…. You mentioned_____. Can you explain how you did that?
Question 7 (Distributed Leadership Practices)	What kinds of leadership practices do you think people on your ILT use in assisting you to improve academic achievement? How do you distribute those practices? Follow up prompts: How did you do that? Can you give a specific example of how you do this? Tell me more about….

	You mentioned_____. Can you explain how you did that?
Question 8 (Organizational Routines)	What kinds of routines do you have in your building with leadership practices (Formal vs. Informal)? How do interactions with teachers shape these routines? Follow up prompts: How did you do that? Can you give a specific example of how you do this? Tell me more about…. You mentioned_____. Can you explain how you did that?

Question 9 (Structures, tools, and routines)	Identify structures, tools, or routines that you or others created related to special education that has been sustained under your leadership. Follow up prompts: How did you do that? Can you give a specific example of how you do this? Tell me more about…. You mentioned_____. Can you explain how you did that?
Question 10 (Barriers or Challenges)	What barriers or challenges have you faced when attempting to implement distributed leadership practices, and what strategies or practices have been put into place to overcome them? Follow up prompts: How did you do that? Can you give a specific example of how you do this?

	Tell me more about….
	You mentioned_____. Can you explain how you did that?
Question 11 (Distributed Leadership)	Is there anything else that you would like to share about your distributed leadership practices? Follow up prompts: How did you do that? Can you give a specific example of how you do this? Tell me more about…. You mentioned_____. Can you explain how you did that?