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# Exploration of How Study District-Wide Stakeholders Achieved Reading Success for Students With Disabilities

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This is to certify that the doctoral study by

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

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Walden University
2025

Abstract

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MA, Appalachian State University, 1996,

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Project Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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## Abstract

The problem that this study addressed is that students with disabilities (SWDs) demonstrated low reading achievement in U.S. public schools as shown by annual state standardized scores. The study district achieved the anomaly of more than 50% of SWDs achieving Proficient and Advanced on the state reading assessment. The gap in practice was that it was unknown how the study district stakeholders achieved such success in SWDs' reading achievement. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to investigate how archival data supports and how teachers and administrators explain the successful reading achievement of SWDs in the study school district. The five principles framework by the Center for Research on Education, Diversity and Excellence employed to guide the education of at-risk students served as the conceptual framework. Data were analyzed using a priori and open coding with the following themes emerging: teachers and administrators explain the success in SWD's reading achievement with (a) collaborative practices to support student reading and instructional services, (b) data-driven decision-making used to design instruction and interventions, (c) vision and resource allocation prioritizing learning for all students, and (d) evidence-based practices employed to engage learners and support achievement. A white paper was created to summarize the study findings as best practice guidance on how to strengthen SWDs' reading achievement, thereby creating positive social change for this population of learners.

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# Dedication

The dream of earning a doctorate began when I was just eleven years old. My father once told me that the highest level I could reach in education was a doctorate, and from that moment, I promised myself that I would achieve this milestone. This journey has not been without challenges, but through God's strength, I have persevered. First and foremost, I give all glory and thanks to God, for without Him this accomplishment would not have been possible. I dedicate this dissertation to my beloved parents, Solomon and Joann Hairston, who always encouraged me to pursue my education to its fullest extent. I especially wish my father were here to share in this moment, but I know he is smiling from Heaven with pride. I also dedicate this work to my children, Ja'ir and Indya. Thank you for your patience, understanding, and love throughout this process. Even with my demanding workload, we still found time for vacations, movie nights, and precious family moments that I will always cherish. Finally, I dedicate this achievement to my ancestors, whose sacrifices and resilience paved the way for me to experience this achievement. This moment is as much theirs as it is mine.

**Philippians 4:13:** *"I can do all things through Christ, which strengthens me."*

Acknowledgments

I want to extend my deepest gratitude to my dissertation chair, Dr. Cathryn Walker, for her unwavering guidance, expertise, and encouragement throughout this doctoral journey. I am sincerely grateful for your commitment to my success and for the countless hours you devoted to supporting and mentoring me. This accomplishment would not have been possible without your wisdom, leadership, and belief in my work.

I would like to express my sincere appreciation to my second committee chair, Dr. Frances Reed, for your invaluable support and insight. Your thoughtful guidance, constructive feedback, and encouragement were instrumental in refining my research and strengthening the quality of my dissertation. I am deeply grateful for your time, expertise, and commitment to my academic growth.

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Section 1: The Problem

## The Local Problem

The underlying problem that this study addressed is that students with disabilities (SWDs) demonstrated low reading achievement in U.S. public schools as shown by annual state standardized scores. The study district achieved the anomaly of more than 50% of SWDs achieving Proficient and Advanced on the state reading assessment. Thus, the gap in practice that this study addressed was that it is unknown how the study district stakeholders achieved such success in SWDs' reading achievement. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 2019) between the years 2015 and 2019, 66% of fourth grade SWDs scored below basic on state performance tests. Research shows that SWDs do not achieve as well as non SWDs when their scores are compared. Gilmour et al. (2019) found a 3-year reading gap between SWDs and non SWDs. Although SWDs are provided with supplemental services and instruction, reading instruction for SWDs may not include reading instructional practices that are effective for improving the reading achievement of SWDs. Research findings identified by Lindstrom and Lemons (2021) were that effective reading instructional strategies are rarely used when teaching SWDs, teachers spend more time on other classroom activities than reading instruction and reading instruction often does not address foundational reading skills. In 2021, Lindstrom and Lemons noted that additional research is needed to support SWDs to become independent readers. Lindstrom and Lemons also suggested that additional teacher and other study district personnel collaborative partnerships to

facilitate SWD reading development is needed to strengthen reading instruction. (Lindstrom & Lemons, 2021).

SWDs perform poorly on standardized state reading tests. SWDs demonstrate low reading achievement in U.S. public schools as shown by annual state standardized scores. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 2019), 69% of fourth grade SWDs score below basic on state performance tests. Studies conducted by Gilmour et al. (2019), Wankez et al. (2014), and Morgan et al. (2016) demonstrated the low reading achievement of SWDs on annual state standardized tests. These studies confirm the findings reported by NAEP and NCES. SWD's poor academic achievement scores on reading tests have been a concern for decades (Elliott, 2015). Gilmour et al. (2019) found that SWDs did not achieve as well as non SWDs with a reading achievement gap of 1.7 standard deviation (SD) or a 3.3-year gap in reading development between SWDs and non SWDs. Gilmour et al. (2019) argued that this gap raises concerns about whether SWDs have access to the general education curriculum where reading is taught.

Reading difficulties as early as kindergarten for SWDs can affect their reading performance in their later years. Morgan et al. (2016) studied whether the reading achievement gap between SWDs and non SWDs will increase, decrease, or remain stable over time. A sample of children studied was followed during their elementary school years (kindergarten - fifth grade). Data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Kindergarten Cohort (ECLS-K) were used for this study. Reading achievement scores and the students' rate of reading achievement growth over time was gathered from the

ECLS-K Reading Test during the spring of kindergarten and spring of first, third, and fifth grade. The results from the Morgan et al. (2016) study showed that SWDs displayed significantly lower levels of reading achievement between the end of 1st grade to the end of 5th grade than non SWDs. According to Morgan et al., SWDs' reading skills will continue to decrease over time without the proper targeted intervention. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to investigate how archival data supports and how teachers and administrators explain the successful reading achievement of SWDs in the study school district.

## Rationale

Between 2015 and 2019, approximately 50% of SWDs at the elementary schools in WSD have achieved Proficient and Advanced on the state mandated PSSA, which is an anomaly (see Table 2). Nationally SWDs achieve lower reading achievement scores when compared to non SWDs. There is a need for an explanation of the reading achievement success of SWDs in the study district so that other school districts can learn from the SWDs' success.

The study state released Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) State Report Card to provide education leaders and all stakeholders data about student reading achievement outcomes, including SWDs. Table 1 shows current ESSA reading score data from the 2018-19 school year from the study state. Table 1 data show that 26% of SWDs scored Proficient and Advanced in reading at the state level and that 70% of non SWDs scored Proficient and Advanced in reading at the state level during the 2018-19 school year. Table 1 shows that 27% of SWDs scored Proficient and Advanced in reading at the state

level when compared to 71% of non SWDs who scored Proficient and Advanced in reading at the state level during the 2017 to 2018 school year. According to the ESSA data from Tables 1, the percentage of the statewide SWDs performing Proficient and Advanced in reading remained below 50% when compared to non-SWDs

**Table 1**

*State Percentage of SWDs and Non-SWDs Performance in Reading*

| Year | Student group | Percentage of participants | Percentage of SWD and non-SWD students at each performance level | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | Below Basic | Basic | Proficient | Advanced |
| 2017-18 | SWD | 94% | 24% | 47% | 21% | 6% |
| 2017-18 | Non-SWD | 98% | 4% | 25% | 50% | 21% |
| 2018-19 | SWD | 94% | 28% | 44% | 21% | 5% |
| 2018-19 | Non-SWD | 98% | 5% | 25% | 49% | 21% |

The study district, a large suburban school district located in a northeastern state, has an enrollment of approximately 12,800 students. The study district consists of thirteen elementary schools, three middle schools, one high school, and one alternative education school. Each year students in the study district are administered the State School System of School Assessment (PSSA). The scores from this assessment assist school districts with curriculum and instruction improvement.

The PSSA is an annual assessment administered to students in Grades 3 through 8 in English Language Arts (reading) and Mathematics. Students can achieve a rating of Below Basic, Basic, Proficient, and Advanced on the PSSA. Students who score at the

Below Basic Level reflect inadequate performance; they demonstrate a minimal command of and ability to apply the knowledge, skills, and practices represented in the study state standards. Students who score at the Basic Level reflect marginal academic performance; they demonstrate a partial command of and ability to apply the knowledge, skills and practices represented in the study state standards. Those who perform at the Proficient Level reflect satisfactory academic performance; they demonstrate an adequate control of and ability to apply the knowledge, skills, and practices represented in the study state standards. Performing at the Advanced Level reflect superior academic performance. These students demonstrate a thorough command of and ability to apply the knowledge, skills, and practices represented in the study state standards. Table 2 shows the 2017 to 2019 reading scores for SWDs in the study district at each school.

**Table 2**

*2017-2019 Reading PSSA Scores of SWDs in the Study District*

| Year | Elementary school | Type of school (Title I or Non-Title I | Number of SWDs tested | Percentage of SWDs at each performance level | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | Below Basic | Basic | Proficient | Advanced |
| 2017 | Blue River | Title I | 148 | 4% | 28% | 47% | 22% |
| 2018 | Blue River | Title I | 156 | 10% | 33% | 36% | 21% |
| 2019 | Blue River | Title I | 152 | 11% | 37% | 49% | 12% |
| 2017 | Green Valley | Title I | 65 | 3% | 31% | 46% | 20% |
| 2018 | Green Valley | Title I | 72 | 11% | 35% | 29% | 25% |
| 2019 | Green Valley | Title I | 72 | 10% | 26% | 40% | 24% |
| 2017 | Lakewood | Title I | 180 | 8% | 37% | 42% | 14% |
| 2018 | Lakewood | Title I | 181 | 6% | 35% | 42% | 17% |
| 2019 | Lakewood | Title I | 188 | 10% | 31% | 41% | 19% |
| 2017 | Meadow | Title I | 131 | 10% | 27% | 43% | 21% |
| 2018 | Meadow | Title I | 140 | 7% | 30% | 44% | 19% |

| | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2019 | Meadow | Title I | 129 | 10% | 30% | 44% | 16% |
| 2017 | Spring Hill | Title I | 181 | 2% | 41% | 41% | 16% |
| 2018 | Spring Hill | Title I | 178 | 6% | 44% | 40% | 9% |
| 2019 | Spring Hill | Title I | 170 | 3% | 45% | 39% | 12% |
| 2017 | Sunshine | Title I | 177 | 16% | 33% | 39% | 12% |
| 2018 | Sunshine | Title I | 193 | 9% | 33% | 40% | 18% |
| 2019 | Sunshine | Title I | 168 | 12% | 34% | 35% | 20% |
| 2017 | Eastwood | Non-Title I | 95 | 15% | 23% | 35% | 27% |
| 2018 | Eastwood | Non-Title I | 90 | 9% | 36% | 37% | 19% |
| 2019 | Eastwood | Non-Title I | 84 | 4% | 38% | 45% | 13% |
| 2017 | Golden Valley | Non-Title I | 128 | 13% | 35% | 38% | 13% |
| 2018 | Golden Valley | Non-Title I | 138 | 9% | 41% | 36% | 14% |
| 2019 | Golden Valley | Non-Title I | 119 | 4% | 30% | 52% | 13% |
| 2017 | Maple Ridge | Non-Title I | 85 | 13% | 22% | 51% | 14% |
| 2018 | Maple Ridge | Non-Title I | 95 | 13% | 24% | 42% | 21% |
| 2019 | Maple Ridge | Non-Title I | 101 | 12% | 34% | 37% | 18% |
| 2017 | Northview | Non-Title I | 60 | 5% | 17% | 53% | 25% |
| 2018 | Northview | Non-Title I | 59 | 5% | 19% | 46% | 31% |
| 2019 | Northview | Non-Title I | 67 | 12% | 27% | 31% | 30% |
| 2017 | Silver Creek | Non-Title I | 118 | 7% | 25% | 43% | 25% |
| 2018 | Silver Creek | Non-Title I | 112 | 6% | 34% | 42% | 18% |
| 2019 | Silver Creek | Non-Title I | 104 | 8% | 32% | 41% | 19% |
| 2017 | Southview | Non-Title I | 114 | 10% | 33% | 45% | 13% |
| 2018 | Southview | Non-Title I | 113 | 7% | 39% | 38% | 16% |
| 2019 | Southview | Non-Title I | 105 | 7% | 31% | 51% | 11% |
| 2017 | Westwood | Non-Title I | 103 | 6% | 32% | 39% | 23% |
| 2018 | Westwood | Non-Title I | 88 | 2% | 31% | 41% | 26% |
| 2019 | Westwood | Non-Title I | 87 | 5% | 32% | 48% | 15% |

More than 50% of SWDs at WSD (see Table 2) achieved Proficient and Advanced in reading from 2017 to 2019. It is expected from the national and state

statistics that fewer than 50% of SWDs would achieve Proficient or Advanced on these tests. This is an anomaly based on the national reading scores for SWDs. The study district achieved the anomaly of more than 50% of SWDs achieving Proficient and Advanced on the state reading assessment. The gap in practice that this study addressed was that it was unknown how the study district stakeholders achieved such success in SWDs' reading achievement.

## Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this basis qualitative study the following key terms are defined:

*Inclusion*: Inclusion is defined as the educational practice when SWDs receive educational services in the general education classroom with non SWDs for the majority of the school day (LeDoux et al., 2012).

*Individualized education plan* (IEP): An IEP is developed for SWDs. It is defined as a document that describes the educational and programming needs of the students, contains measurable goals and objectives that direct the students' program, and educational placements (Drasgow et al., 2001).

*Least restrictive environment* (LRE): LRE is defined as a provision that requires SWDs to be educated with students without disabilities to the maximum extent possible in the general education classroom (McGovern, 2015).

## Significance of the Study

Historically, SWDs have not performed well on state and national reading tests. There has been little improvement in reading for SWDs (NAEP, 2019). This study explored educator perceptions and archival documents to provide insight into how

educators in the study district explained the anomaly that more than 50% of SWDs in their study district achieved Proficient and Advanced on the state reading assessment. The SWDs' performance in reading at the study district indicated a need to examine how teachers and administrators explain their success in the reading performance of SWDs. The findings of this study may provide administrators, study district stakeholders, and teachers in other school districts with information that can lead to an increase in reading achievement of their SWDs. These study findings may be used to inform stakeholders in public school systems about key recommendations to support closing the gap in the reading achievement for SWDs. Thus, contributing to social change by providing information about verified successful practices for teaching reading to SWDs.

## Research Question

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to investigate how archival data supports and how teachers and administrators explain the successful reading achievement of SWDs in the study school district. The study district schools achieved the anomaly of more than 50% of SWDs achieving Proficient and Advanced on the state reading assessment. The overall research question was: How do special education teachers, general education teachers, and administrators at the study schools explain the success in reading of SWDs at their schools between 2017 to 2019?

## Review of the Literature

### Conceptual Framework

This study was grounded by the five principles developed by the Center for Research on Education, Diversity, and Excellence (CREDE) to guide the education of at-

risk students. CREDE assists students who are at risk for educational failure to achieve academic excellence. CREDE is hosted by the University of Hawaii at Manoa. Its mission is designed to bring attention to issues of risk, diversity, and excellence to the forefront of discussions concerning educational research, policy, and practice (Tharp, 1997). According to CREDE, there are five Principles that are effective in guiding the education of at-risk students (Center for Research on Education, Diversity and Excellence, CREDE, 2018).

Principle 1 is Joint Product Activity, which is "Facilitate learning through joint productive activity among teachers and students" (Tharp, 1997, p. 12). This includes such things as designing instructional activities that require student collaboration to meet a common goal, teachers participating with the students in the collaborative activity, and organizing students in a variety of groupings, such as by friendship, mixed academic ability, language, project, or interest (Tharp, 1997).

Principle 2 is Language and Literacy Development, which is to develop competence in the language and literacy of instruction throughout all instructional activities (Tharp, 1997, p. 13). Literacy competence is necessary for school success. There should be conversation between the teacher and student instead of drills. Reading and writing should be integrated across the curriculum (Center for Research on Education, Diversity and Excellence, 2018).

Principle 3 is Contextualization, which is to contextualize teaching and curriculum in the experiences and skills of home and community (Tharp, 1997, p. 13). Learning becomes more meaningful when it is connected to the students' personal,

family, and community experiences. For example, a teacher may make instruction more meaningful by grounding her lessons on what students already know from home, community, and school (Center for Research on Education, Diversity and Excellence, 2018).

Principle 4 is Challenging Activities. Challenging Activities states students should be challenged toward cognitive complexity (Tharp, 1997, p. 14). Students who are at-risk should receive cognitively challenging instruction or instruction that requires thinking and analysis.

Principle 5 is Instructional Conversation. Instructional Conversation is engaging students through dialogue, especially the instructional conversation (Tharp, 1997, p. 15). Teaching becomes warmer, interpersonal, and collaborative. Teachers develop a clear academic goal that guides conversation with students; the teachers ensure that students talk more than the teacher, and the teacher listens carefully to assess levels of students' understanding. The five Principles are best teaching practices for students who are at risk for educational failure. The conceptual framework informed the interview protocol development and the analysis of the data, the discussion of the findings, and the resulting project.

**Review of the Broader Problem**

In this literature review, I first present a brief history of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Next, I examine the literature on teacher attitudes and beliefs regarding the inclusion of SWDs in the general education classroom. Following this, I discuss teacher self-efficacy and the role of school leaders in fostering inclusive

practices. Additionally, I review inclusive models of support, as well as the role of parents and paraprofessionals in fostering inclusive practices. Furthermore, I explore the importance of collaboration and evidence-based practices. Finally, I address the role of professional development in advancing inclusive practices.

To locate the relevant literature to inform my study, I searched Walden University's online databases using the ProQuest, ERIC, SAGE, and EBSCOHOST databases. I examined studies conducted since 2017 using the following search terms: *students with disabilities, IDEA, special education law, history and IDEA, history of IDEA, IDEA and compliance, reading achievement and students with disabilities, reading strategies and students with disabilities, state testing and students with disabilities, teacher views and students with disabilities, school study districts and Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, academic achievement and students with disabilities in the general education classroom, academic achievement, teacher attitudes toward students with disabilities, teacher collaboration and students with disabilities, and students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms, evidenced-based practices and reading, parent involvement and students with disabilities, paraprofessional and students with disabilities, professional development, administrators, leadership and students with disabilities, special and general education teacher collaboration and students with disabilities, teacher beliefs and attitudes and students with disabilities and factors influencing teacher beliefs,* and *self-efficacy reading achievement and students with disabilities*. I conducted a citation search for each study in the literature review, and I am

confident that the literature was saturated because recurring searches and citation searches failed to return new articles.

### *Historical Context of Special Education Policy in the United States*

Historically in U.S. public schools, SWDs were provided only minimal services, many of which were granted at the discretion of local school districts. Prior to Public Law 95-142, school districts could refuse to enroll students who were considered "uneducable." School districts that did enroll SWDs placed them in general education classrooms without the appropriate services. Many parents had to venture outside of the public education system to find educational services that meet the needs of their SWDs (May, 2009).

In 1975, Congress enacted the Education for All Handicapped Children Act to ensure that public schools received the resources necessary to educate SWDs. The law was amended in 1990 and renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). IDEA guarantees SWDs access to a "free, appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE) with accommodating supports and services" (May, 2009). According to IDEA, students identified as having a disability should be educated in the general education classroom whenever appropriate and schools must modify the general education classroom to meet the needs of SWDs placed there. IDEA emphasized the student rather than the disability, replacing the use of disabled with the term student with a disability (Yell et al., 1998). The law also extended the list of disabilities to include autism and traumatic brain injury and expanded transition services designed to help high school graduates transition into the adult world.

IDEA was amended in 1997 to hold schools accountable for the achievement of SWDs. The SWD population was required to participate in state and district assessments (Yell et al., 1998), with the results made publicly available as a way to hold states accountable for student performance. This has brought the educational performance of SWDs the same attention that general education students have historically received for their state assessments (Yell & Shriner, 1997).

IDEA established the requirement that each student who receives special education and/or related services must have a current IEP to receive services. The IEP is a document developed by a team to help determine the services and supports needed to enable SWDs to be successful in the classroom. The IEP team includes the student's parent or guardian, a general education teacher, a special education teacher, evaluation team members, school administrators, and related service personnel, such as a speech therapist (Phillips, 2018). The general education teacher is required to participate in the team development of the IEP because he/she plays a major role in the SWD's educational progress. Together, team members decide what the student's needs are, what services will be provided, and what the anticipated outcomes may be. The IEP includes a student's present level of performance, goals and short-term objectives, student progress and reporting requirements, services offered, general education involvement, accommodations on state and district assessments, dates and times of services, and transition planning (Gartin & Murdick, 2005). The student's progress toward annual IEP goals must be reported and measured (Yell & Shriner, 1997).

IDEA was reauthorized in 2004 to align with the No Child Left Behind Act, (NCLB), (May, 2009). This reauthorization encouraged parents to participate in the education of their child with disabilities by requiring them to play a role in developing their child's IEP (Bradley et al., 2011). The goal of the 2004 reauthorization of IDEA and the NCLB was to increase both the academic performance of SWDs and their access to the general education curriculum. This led to increased participation in state and district accountability for SWDs (La Salle et al., 2013).

### *Teacher Attitudes and Beliefs Related to Inclusion*

Teacher attitudes toward including SWDs in the general education classroom can significantly influence the successful implementation of such classroom inclusion (Choi et al., 2017). For this reason, several studies have been conducted to determine the attitudes of general education teachers toward inclusion of SWDs in their classrooms and identify the factors that contribute to positive or negative teacher attitudes.

A major factor influencing teacher attitudes toward inclusion of SWDs in the general education classroom is adequate administrative and teaching support. W. W. Fuchs (2010) conducted a qualitative study that examined general education teachers' perceptions about the current barriers to successfully including SWDs in general education classrooms. Kim et al. (2020) and W. W. Fuchs (2010) identified three barriers that affected the inclusion of SWDs in general education classrooms: lack of administrative support, perceived lack of support from special education teachers and support staff, and lack of preparation in general teacher education programs. The general education teachers expressed feeling a lack of support from the administration to

implement SWD inclusion in their classrooms, including a lack of in-service education and training, inappropriate class size, insufficient collaboration and planning time, and inequalities in shared duties with the special education staff. General education teachers also felt that special education staff did not provide quality support, instead spending too much time on unrelated tasks, such as grading papers. Finally, general education teachers reported that their teacher education programs contained only one required course in special education, which consisted mostly of terminology. Therefore, they did not know how to teach diverse learners, differentiate instruction, provide accommodations, or work with special education teachers. Many teachers in general education inclusion settings feel-ill prepared to teach SWDs in their classrooms due to the lack of exposure of inclusive practices in their teacher preparation programs (Alharbi & Iqtadar, 2024; Kirby, 2017; Sokal & Sharma, 2017; Zagona et al., 2017). This lack of preparation can create frustration for general education teachers (Gray et al., 2017). Although W. W. Fuchs (2010) found that teachers in this study agreed that SWD inclusion was a positive educational placement, many of them felt unprepared to meet the demands and responsibilities of SWD inclusion due to these barriers. Teacher attitudes did improve once they received sufficient support from administration and special education staff (Fuchs, 2010).

Alfaro et al. (2015) further supported the aforementioned findings when they found significant correlations between teacher preparedness and teacher attitudes toward SWD inclusion in the general education classroom. The researchers administered quantitative surveys of general education teachers from five rural school districts in South

Texas. The survey assessed teachers' knowledge of the policies and procedures in special education law (i.e., least restrictive environment, referral procedures, and parental rights), teacher knowledge of instructional strategies, and teacher knowledge of different student attitudes (i.e., motor, sensory, cognitive, emotional, and total attitude). The researchers found significant correlations between teacher knowledge of special education policies and procedures and all of the different attitudes. Alfaro et al. (2015) interpreted this to mean that teachers with a solid knowledge of policy and procedures also have positive attitudes toward SWDs in all domains. There was also a significant correlation between knowledge of instructional strategies and each of the attitude subsections, suggesting that teachers with a solid understanding of different instructional strategies will also have positive attitudes toward SWDs. Overall, teachers felt knowledgeable about instructional strategies, but less knowledgeable about disabling conditions. Alfaro et al. concluded that when general education teachers understand appropriate special education policies, procedures, and instruction, this ensures that all decisions and actions are performed legally and in the interest of SWDs succeeding in the general education classroom.

Because teacher attitudes can directly affect the success of SWDs' inclusion in the classroom, it is important to understand what influences teacher attitudes toward inclusion. Supporting the successful inclusion of SWDs in a general education classroom requires sufficient, ongoing professional development opportunities and assistance from school staff at all levels to support teachers in inclusive classrooms.

### *Teacher Self-Efficacy and Role in Inclusion*

A teacher's level of self-efficacy plays a role in the educational outcomes for students. Bandura (1997) defined self-efficacy as an individual's belief in their ability to successfully perform tasks and achieve goals. The following studies demonstrate the importance of self-efficacy and the role it plays in teacher confidence and student outcomes.

Teacher self-efficacy or their sense of self-confidence is a factor in their attitudes towards instructing SWDs. According to Francois (2020), high levels of teachers' self-efficacy correlate with student achievement. Based on Francois's study findings, when general and special education teachers exhibit strong self-efficacy, a positive relationship emerged between their confidence in teaching SWDs and student academic outcomes. Francois (2020) proffered that professional development is effective in building a positive sense of self-efficacy in special education teachers. Building upon research connecting individual and collective teacher efficacy to student achievement, Horan and Merrigan (2021) employed a mixed methods approach to investigate the effect of professional development targeted at educators of SWDs. Their study findings demonstrated that teachers who received specialized training exhibited slightly higher levels of teaching efficacy and preparedness compared to those with minimal or no professional development. Accordingly, Daugherty (2023) explored the differences in self-efficacy, collective efficacy, and professional development among middle school general education teachers teaching reading comprehension and fluency to middle school learners. In this quantitative study, surveys were administered to the participants. The

initial survey, the Teachers' Sense of Self Efficacy Scale (TES), examined individual teachers' perceptions of their capacity to enhance academic outcomes for students participating in RTI for reading. The second survey, Collective Teacher Beliefs (CTB), assessed teachers' views regarding their school's overall effectiveness and the RTI program, including the number of professional development hours obtained towards improving student achievement. The results were mixed. There was a negative correlation between increased professional development hours and general education teachers and perceived efficacy while there was a positive correlation for special education teachers with greater professional development hours and this distribution of professional development hours showed no significant statistical significance.

Similarly, researchers explored which practices were identified to reflect high quality inclusion services. Finkelstein et al. (2021) conducted a meta-analysis of 15 studies to determine which teacher practices are related to high-quality inclusion while conducting classroom observations. The researchers found five themes related to inclusive practices that underscored high-quality services in inclusive settings that included collaboration and teamwork, determining the progress of students, instructional support, organizational practices, and social/emotional / behavior support. Collaboration and teamwork are not only related to working with professionals but also working with families of students, other professionals, and connecting with community agencies and other institutions (Finkelstein et al., 2021). Determining progress relates to how the teachers assess and monitor the students' individualized outcomes. These practices associated with this theme include the development and execution of the IEP, use of

formal and informal assessment, evaluation of student progress, test administration with appropriate accommodations, and checking for retention of previous content through frequent questioning to assess concept mastery.

Practices associated with instructional support include the use of small groups to facilitate peer learning, constructing and implementing the Universal Design for Learning (UDL), and differentiating instruction. According to Nelson (2021), UDL is an evidence-based instructional framework that guides the development of goals, materials, teaching strategies, and assessments to accommodate diverse learners. Organizational practices include how teachers establish predictable routines, usage of resources and technology to meet the diverse needs in the classroom and ensuring a smooth transition between activities. The social/emotional/behavior theme relates to how teachers cultivated a supportive classroom environment that prioritized and addressed student social/emotional/behavioral needs. Each of these themes represents a holistic view of what is important to support inclusive practices in general education classrooms.

Teachers' sense of self-efficacy is related to their use of effective inclusive practices. Alharbi and Iqtadar (2024) investigated teachers' self-efficacy, educational practices challenges, and support for SWDs in the inclusive classroom. The results showed that overall, the teachers demonstrated positive beliefs and capabilities regarding teaching SWDs in inclusive settings. The data did show a need for professional development in instructional strategies and technology integration. In addition, general education teachers expressed the need for collaboration. To help SWDs feel a sense of connection in the inclusive classroom, educators should embrace adaptable teaching

methods that offer diverse opportunities for SWDs to participate both academically and socially (Connor et al., 2025).

Self-efficacy plays a role in shaping student outcomes and teacher confidence. Teacher collaboration and professional development play a role in increasing self-efficacy. Positive self-efficacy allows teachers to gain new knowledge and apply this knowledge in a supportive environment. When teachers feel a positive sense of self-efficacy, they are more likely to implement effective strategies to support SWDs' instruction, thereby leading to improved instructional quality and student outcomes (Alharbi & Iqtada, 2024; Connor et al., 2025). School leaders play a role in the design and delivery of inclusive practices in school systems.

### *The Role of School Leaders in Fostering Inclusive Practices*

The recognized leaders in schools are the principals and assistant principals. Principals are known as change agents because they play a pivotal role in shaping school culture, driving instruction improvement, and fostering innovation regarding implementing inclusive practices (Acton, 2021). Principals lead the way in reshaping school culture, policies, and instructional strategies to ensure that students feel valued and supported. Systems to support inclusionary programming are complex and require an understanding of innovation and change. Additionally, principals need to feel equipped to implement such changes. They need to have the knowledge and skills to effectively lead change. In a study by Acton (2021), principal participants' experiences were explored to determine whether experienced principals felt prepared as change agents to navigate the implementation of inclusionary systems of support for SWDs. The five principals that

participated in this study reported they had little professional development and guidance on how to be a leader of change. However, they conveyed that their development as change agents to guide the implementation of inclusionary systems of support emerged through collaboration with their colleagues, which facilitated closing their gaps in their understanding how to build capacity and lead change (Acton, 2021). Background knowledge of special education is important for all leaders who are charged with leading change for SWDs in schools or districts. Knowledge of special education is also important for leading changes related to supporting SWDs and their achievement.

To lead inclusive schools, principals need to have background knowledge in special education. However, many principals are not adequately prepared to lead inclusive schools (Melloy et al., 2022). Melloy et al. (2022) examined the knowledge and perception of special education of graduate students enrolled in educational leadership programs which will prepare them to lead inclusive school environments. The study's findings indicated a lack of attention to instruction regarding special education and leadership preparation programs. However, students with background knowledge in special education and who were pursuing an administrative license in special education reported being more prepared to lead inclusive schools.

School district leaders that invest funding and resources to provide administrators with training to advance inclusive learning environments is crucial to the support systems needed for inclusive programming. A study conducted by Novak and Paroff (2024) exemplified an initiative aimed at investing funds to support inclusive capacity building. The schools in Washington state were awarded funding to assist district leadership teams

in developing and implementing plans for more inclusive learning environments for SWDs. Forty-two districts in Washington participated in the state Inclusionary Practices Project, which began in 2020. Over 4 years, the participating districts achieved a 12% increase in inclusion in the least restrictive environment (Novak & Paroff, 2024). Throughout the study, researchers learned what strategies, when successfully implemented, strengthened inclusive systems for SWDs. In a synthesis of the literature on inclusive schools and the role of the principal, the researchers identified key findings that included: (a) disability identity is often overlooked, and (b) physical influence of school culture shapes students' identity such as pulling students out for services rather than pushing services into the general education setting. The implications for leadership are that leaders should cultivate awareness of disabilities and ensure mentorship and representation. Additionally, marginalization of SWDs should be addressed through disability identification, professional development, and inclusive access of all students to the fabric of the school community (DeMatthews et al., 2023).

The role of the superintendent is crucial in the implementation of systems to support SWDs in inclusive settings. Novak and Paroff (2024) identified that the superintendent is crucial in supporting inclusive practices. The superintendent's participation serves as a demonstration of a visible commitment to inclusive practices and establishes a positive tone throughout the study district. In a qualitative study by Decman et al. (2023) regarding how superintendents navigated the complex intersection of educational accountability and equity, offering insights into leadership practices that promote more inclusive and context-responsive school systems was explored. Decman et

al. (2023) conducted open-ended interviews with 13 public school superintendents exploring their perceptions and experiences related to the intersection of educational accountability and equity. The researchers aimed to understand the superintendents' experiences, beliefs, and leadership philosophies in an era dominated by both high-stakes accountability systems and increasing demands for educational equity. Decman et al. (2023) identified five key themes that included: (a) overemphasis on standardized testing at the expense of broader educational goals; (b) accountability systems often operate under the false assumption of equal conditions, overlooking the impact of poverty, language barriers, and systemic inequities; (c) tension between individual student needs and uniform accountability measures; (d) testing was viewed as only one aspect of student assessment, with superintendents advocating for more holistic approaches that include social-emotional and developmental metrics; and (e) anxiety tied to single-test outcomes—was seen as undermining deeper, long-term learning initiatives. The study findings by Decman et al. (2023) highlighted the pivotal role of superintendents as equity-focused leaders who must balance the demands of accountability with the need to provide equitable opportunities for all students, especially those from marginalized backgrounds. Leadership practices, beliefs, and philosophies play a role in the implementation of inclusive initiative, such as supporting all students and implementing inclusive models of support.

Moreover, the implications related to instructing SWDs suggest that effective leadership also requires capacity building through targeted professional development that emphasizes equity in data interpretation. Additionally, superintendents are urged to

engage in policy advocacy to promote accountability systems that reflect the diverse realities of their student populations. Ultimately, the study findings support an equity-centered approach to accountability, positioning school leaders as central figures to create inclusive and just educational systems Similarly, leadership that promotes equity was identified by other researchers as critical to support SWDs.

Administrators must not only receive the appropriate training in special education but also demonstrate a commitment to fostering inclusive environments through their attitudes or beliefs. White et al. (2021) examined the attitudes of principals toward the inclusion of SWDs in the general education setting. The researchers' study findings were that although principals' training and experience were limited, they did support inclusive placements.

In a qualitative study examining principal preparation for inclusive education, Jones et al. (2023) analyzed action plans, reflections, and monitoring data from six principal interns participating in a 15-month, job-embedded residency program. Using content analysis, the researchers identified how aspiring leaders developed practices to support SWDs. Findings revealed a key mindset shift from focusing on student deficits to emphasizing teacher responsibility in implementing inclusive strategies. Interns increasingly used data-driven monitoring and supported teachers in delivering accommodations and differentiated instruction with fidelity. The study's implications highlight the importance of preparing school leaders to promote inclusive practices through collaboration, ongoing assessment, and servant leadership. The researchers' recommended leadership preparation programs embedded with opportunities for

reflection, IEP fidelity, and instructional leadership that centers equity for SWDs. While administrators are designated change agents, their capacity to lead is dependent upon targeted training, collaborative support, and understanding of special education. Many do not feel prepared in their role as change agents. The implications of these study findings are that policymakers and district leaders must prioritize collaborative planning**,** emotional well-being, and trust to effectively implement inclusive education reforms.

### *Inclusive Models of Support Require Collaboration*

Inclusive models of support call for collaboration. Co-teaching is an instructional model used in general education to support SWDs. To determine the benefits and barriers to coteaching, in their seminal work, Scruggs and Mastropieri (2017) found that general education teachers lead most of the instruction in an inclusive classroom while the special education teacher played the role of the classroom assistant. The practice of having one teacher teach and the other assist was observed frequently, with the general education teacher likely to take the lead duties in the classroom because they were held accountable for student performance. All teachers agreed on the benefits of coteaching, which increased support for both students and teachers and allowed teachers to differentiate instruction more effectively. Special and general education teachers had different perceptions of the barriers to coteaching, however, with the special education teachers citing a very long list of barriers compared with general education teachers. These barriers included difficulty balancing the responsibility of coteaching in an inclusive classroom, lack of training and planning time, and the difficulty of coteaching with several teachers. Teachers acknowledge the benefits of coteaching to support SWDs.

Professional development, communication and support of educators implementing inclusive models of support is critical to the successful implementation of inclusive instructional models. According to Brendle et al. (2017) and Chitiyo and Brinda (2018), teachers recognized the benefits of coteaching, but they may not receive the proper training and development to fully prepare them to use collaborative teaching models in the classroom. In a qualitative study, Brendle et al. conducted surveys, interviews, and classroom observations with elementary general and special education teachers to determine how co-teachers implemented research-based coteaching models and collaborative strategies, how they perceived the co-teacher roles, and to discern the effect of administrative support on co-teachers. The teachers used coteaching models to present the lessons and collaborated to modify lessons for SWDs, but they were unable to identify the specific coteaching models used in their instruction. They never discussed specific coteaching models or strategy before class and frequently gave common assessments to all students. They reported planning together but rarely collaborated to determine co-instruction and assessment needed. Teachers stressed the importance of communication and collaboration when coteaching and reported a positive relationship with each other. In one co-teacher pair, the teachers provided co-instruction, but in the other pair, the general education teacher acted as the lead teacher and the special education teacher worked only with the special education students. The general education teachers identified their role as the lead teacher, while the special education teachers identified their role as assisting the SWDs, modifying assignments and tests, and providing accommodations. Teachers reported that the administrators provided

coteaching training and time for collaboration, but they did not receive any guidance in planning or how to execute the coteaching models. According to Brendle et al., study findings illustrated that teachers recognize the benefits of coteaching and there was a need for ongoing co-teacher training and support to help co-teachers implement proper models and strategies.

Together, these study findings demonstrate that collaboration between general and special education teachers plays a significant role in teacher attitudes toward coteaching and in the academic performance of SWDs in inclusive classrooms. More collaboration between co-teachers leads to improved student performance (King-Sears et al., 2021; van Garderen et al., 2012) as each educator contributes unique knowledge and skills that benefit both SWDs and general education students. Special education teachers are skilled at individualizing instruction and modifying the curriculum based on a student's needs, while general education teachers have more knowledge of the curriculum and standards, which can help SWDs in the classroom. Coteaching leverages the skills of both special and general education teachers to the benefit of SWDs when the appropriate training and support is provided.

Teachers must be provided with professional development that provides the basis for the various models of co-teaching. Cook and McDuffie-Landrum (2020) defined co-teaching as when the general and special education teachers work together. Co-teaching is the most common approach to support SWDs in general education or inclusive settings. Cook and McDuffie-Landrum discussed a 5-step process to help co-teachers integrate specialized instruction to increase the general education outcomes of SWDs. Cook and

McDuffie-Landrum and McKee and Gomez (2020) recommended a 5-step process to help co-teachers integrate specialized instruction into the general education classroom. The 5-Step process is described:

Step 1: Teachers learning goals. This involves examining grade-level standards and reviewing IEP goals to identify student needs.

Step 2: Co-teachers select an effective practice for targeted interventions. Co-teachers select evidence-based practices – those backed by rigorous research – that align with the unique learning needs of their students.

Step 3: Select a co-teaching model for targeted instruction. Co-teachers must choose the most appropriate co-teaching model.

Step 4: Determine roles. After choosing the model, co-teachers need to define their roles and implement them.

Step 5: Implement the practice. They may need to refer to reliable resources such as the previous steps.

This 5-step process encourages teachers to be deliberate in their planning to ensure they are providing both access to the general curriculum and the specialized curriculum (McKee & Gomez, 2020).

A study conducted by Kirkpatrick et al. (2020) investigated how classroom teachers and resource special education teachers experience a coaching partnership model to support inclusive education. Both worked in the general education classroom to support SWDs. Ther teachers met an average of 45-60 minutes weekly outside of class, in addition to co-teaching during instructional time. Special education teachers moved from

a pull-out model (supporting students outside the general education classroom) to an inclusive model. The teachers used station-teaching and team-teaching co-teaching models in the general education classroom. Special education teachers and general educational teachers reported that the co-teaching partnership was very valuable and contributed to the co-teaching model success. There are various formats used in co-teaching. The formats include:

1. One-teach, one-assist- In this format, one teacher leads instruction while the other provides support.
2. Station teaching-In this model, students rotate through different stations, each led by a teacher, designed for independent work.
3. Parallel teaching- This model is used when the class is split into two heterogeneous groups, and each teacher teaches the same content simultaneously.
4. Alternate teaching- In this model, one teacher works with a small group of students, and the other teaches the majority of the class.
5. Team teaching-In this model, both teachers present content and engage the whole class equally.

Hence, the role of teachers is crucial in the proper implementation of co-teach models in inclusive settings. Professional development, support and the identification of the appropriate model of support and strategies aligned to students' IEPs are key considerations for implementation of inclusive systems. Parent involvement is also important in designing and implementing inclusive support systems.

### *The Role of Parents in Fostering Inclusive Practices*

Parental engagement is important for SWDs. They play a critical role in making sure their child's educational needs are being met and in the development of the IEP. Parents who are involved in their student's education make meaningful contributions and support strengthened partnerships between school and home. Guo and Keles (2024) reviewed 15 empirical studies on parent-involved interventions for children with specific learning disabilities, with a focus on elementary students with reading impairments. Parents provided intervention in a structured in-home setting or school-linked strategies where parents were guided to support reading, writing, and math skill development. Guo and Keles' (2024) study findings reflected improvement in academic achievement and positive social-emotional outcomes for students whose parents employed the in-home strategies. There were also sustained benefits, such as generalized actions (from home to school). According to Guo and Keles, schools should involve parents as active partners by considering structuring systematic parent-led components for literacy and mathematical skill programs by focusing on SWDs. To participate, parents need training, feedback, and ongoing support to implement the program with fidelity.

Parent involvement supports student achievement. Musendo et al., (2023) synthesized literature on studies related to interventions that promoted parent involvement of SWDs by focusing on studies published between 2020 and 2021. The interventions provided were communication between home and school, home learning support (helping parents work with children at home),peer support groups and school community groups. These interventions led to greater parent involvement and parent self-

confidence, knowledge and motivation, and their child's academic outcomes (Musendo et al., 2023). Parents of SWDs are essential advocates, yet they often face barriers such as gaps in knowledge and understanding special education procedures and documentation that interfere with their full participation. Strengthening parent engagement is critical to promoting both educational equity and meaningful inclusion. Just as parental involvement is crucial for the successful implementation of inclusive practices, moreover, is the role of the paraprofessional.

### *The Role of Paraprofessionals in Fostering Inclusive Practices*

In the inclusive classroom, the role of the paraprofessional is to conduct one-on-one or small group support to SWDs. As the number of SWDs receiving instruction in inclusive settings increases, there has been a rise in the number of professionals providing support in these environments (Sharma & Salend, 2016). Sobeck et al. (2020) found that when paraprofessionals receive proper training and support, they can consistently implement practices with fidelity that improve social, academic, and behavioral outcomes for SWDs in inclusive classrooms. According to Massafra et al. (2020), paraprofessionals receive limited preparation and training in inclusive practices.

There is often a lack of training opportunities to prepare paraprofessionals. In a study conducted by Lichte and Scheef (2022), they sought to determine if formal training had been offered or would be offered to support the paraprofessional's knowledge of special education and best practices. Thirty-two participants completed a survey that focused primarily on professional knowledge of working with SWDs, additional training opportunities provided, and willingness to complete additional training. The results

showed that the participants had knowledge of working with SWDs. However, over 50% of them had not received individualized training from their supervisor. Paraprofessionals are an integral part of the success of inclusive practices. Therefore, they should have the resources and support to effectively work with SWDs.

The collaborative relationship between the paraprofessional and general and special education teacher underscores the need for professional development. Gilson and Biggs (2024) conducted a study examining the collaborative relationship between special education teachers and paraprofessionals. The sample included 64 special education teachers and paraprofessionals. The purpose of the study was to explore the collaborative relationship between the teachers and paraprofessionals. The study findings identified barriers that arose between the special education teacher and paraprofessional providing support to SWDs in the general education classroom. Gilson and Biggs (2024) identified four themes that included (a) the importance of sharing ownership of all students in the general education classroom; (b) sharing an understanding of the appropriate supports needed for SWDs; (c) defining the roles and responsibilities to help contribute to effective inclusive practices; and (d) communicating frequently and effectively among all the special education teachers and general education teachers and the respective paraprofessionals. These findings indicate the need for clarity on roles and responsibility protocols for communication and collaboration and the shared vision for student success.

### *The Role of Collaboration in Inclusive School Settings*

Collaborative partnerships between educators are the cornerstone for supporting all students, and especially SWDs. Shand and Goddard (2024) investigated how teacher

collaboration, both at its initial level and as it develops over time, predicts changes in educational practice. The participants were provided with a questionnaire that asked a series of questions about school climate, teacher practice, attitudes, and beliefs. At baseline, or initial data collection period, reported collaboration was shown to predict positive growth, the use of differentiated instruction, a focus on student learning, a reported sense of collective responsibility, and a perception of trust among teachers, students, and parents. Two years later, more growth was reported in differentiated instruction, focused student learning, collective responsibility, and trust among teachers. According to Shand and Goddard (2024) teacher collaboration initially and over time leads to improvements in instructional quality, climate, and trust. School administrators should support ongoing collaboration by scheduling team meetings, peer observation, and professional learning communities (PLCs). Sustained support and professional development aimed at collaboration leads to growth in teacher understanding, collaborative partnerships and student outcomes. Professional development and coaching will foster these collaborative relationships

Corcelles-Seuba et al. (2024) investigated the effectiveness of reciprocal peer observation (RPO) as a collaborative professional development strategy for improving teachers' perceptions of collaboration in schools. RPO is defined as a pair or group of teachers acting as equal partners, observing specific pedagogical aspects of each other's practice. This process typically follows three main phases – pre-observation, observation and feedback- during which teachers gather evidence of their practices to provide material, constructive feedback aimed at improving their teaching. A sample of 400

teachers were administered a Teacher Collaborative Perceptions Questionnaire (TCPQ). This questionnaire was used to measure three dimensions: perceptions of collaborative school culture, collective agency among educators, and attitudes toward collaboration versus individual practice. After receiving RPO, the teachers reported significant improvement on all three dimensions. According to Corcelles-Seuba et al. (2024), RPO can result in a stronger sense of collaboration by reshaping teacher beliefs and attitudes toward collaboration.

Tallman (2021) explored how teachers described collaborative experiences. The researcher documented the experiences of a group of teachers collaborating to construct an eighth-grade curriculum. They found that teachers prefer collaboration; they initiated collaboration themselves instead of mandating collaboration. When the collaboration was teacher-initiated, it was deemed as “fun” rather than “forced.” Collaboration led to enhanced professional knowledge and reduced teacher isolation. Feedback, compliments, advice, and mutual support from colleagues led to professional growth. They also experienced personal growth which led to a sense of worth and enjoying the collaborative process. Teachers reported a shared sense of accountability for student learning. However, challenges were reported, such as a lack of time for planning and formal curriculum meetings focused on subject areas rather than grade-level curriculum. Tallman (2021) suggested that school leaders should continue to foster the teacher-initiated approach, which leads to greater satisfaction. There should be dedicated time for teachers to collaborate during the school day. The use of evidence-based practices in the inclusive setting is central to the academic progress of SWDs.

### *Evidence-Based Practices to Support Student Achievement*

Due to the increasing number of students with substantial reading needs, particularly SWDs, there is a need for evidence-based practices that improve literacy development for all students, especially SWDs (Arias-Gundín, & García Llamazares, 2021; Mauer & Swanson, 2025). Evidence-based practices, EBPs, are essential for enhancing student learning. According to the IRIS Center (n.d.) “an EBP is one whose effectiveness is supported by rigorous research. In other words, research shows that the practice or program works” (IRIS Center, n.d.).

A study conducted by Casale-Giannola et al. (2023) found that EBPs used in reading/literacy were the use of visuals and discussion while reading, the use of graphic organizers, balanced literacy, direct instruction, and increased drill/repetition. Since reading programs are often closely linked to literacy instruction for SWDs, participants shared the programs they found most beneficial for this population. Orton-Gillingham (OG) and similar approaches such as Wilson or Fundations, were most frequently mentioned (Sayeski et al., 2018;. These programs help SWDs improve in reading because they use explicit systematic phonics instruction combined with multisensory techniques to develop reading skills. Additional resources noted by participants included reader’s / writer’s workshop and online audio texts.

Casale-Giannola et al. (2023) also suggested that these EBPs used in reading / literacy are also useful in other content areas. EBPs such as direct instruction, graphic organizers, visual aids, and group discussions can enhance learning in these subjects. Additionally, audio texts and dictation tools can support writing and improve

comprehension across other subject areas. EBPs can lead to positive student outcomes when implemented with fidelity in the inclusive setting.

### *The Role of Professional Development in Advancing Inclusive Practices*

Professional development is central to supporting the stakeholders instructing SWDs. Ongoing, collaborative professional development works in terms of supporting sustained practice changes and improvements in teacher skills and knowledge and student outcomes (Saunders et al., 2024; Swanson et al., 2021). Effective PD is not a singular event but a sustained, iterative process involving practice, reflection, and feedback in a collaborative context. Professional learning communities, on-site coaching, and teacher study-teams support sustained practice changes and outcome improvements (Saunders et al., 2024; Swanson et al., 2021). Fidelity of the PD content taught is essential to fidelity.

PD that is characterized with ongoing support and technical assistance provides critical scaffolded support to the stakeholders. Researchers have emphasized extremely high fidelity to the content introduced in PD is made possible by explicit training, rehearsal, feedback, and ongoing coaching which are necessary conditions for improving reading achievement among SWDs (Swanson et al., 2021).

Researchers have established that there are key supporting factors related to PD and the achievement of SWDs. When both teachers and paraprofessionals receive high-quality PD accompanied training and coaching, SWDs benefit. Additionally, when PD is focused on EBPs, rather than practices that are less evidence-based students have been found to make greater gains (Theobald et al., 2022). While teacher knowledge and skills are crucial, organizational factors such as leadership support, district curricular policies,

in terms of the reading approach, and PD structures have been identified to substantially influence outcomes for students (Saunders et al., 2024; Swanson et al., 2021).

Professional development provides support to teachers in inclusive settings where SWDs are served. In a synthesis of the literature conducted using 25 studies from 2007 to 2020, Chow et al. (2024) analyzed research findings pertaining to inclusive education and teachers' perceived support needs. Their findings revealed that teachers perceive they need professional development, resources and teaching assistants, planning time, collaboration time with other teachers and authority to modify and accommodate the curriculum (Chow et al., 2024). Accordingly, leaders need to ensure that professional development is relevant, that classrooms are adequately staffed with assistants, and that teachers are given the time and resources needed for effective collaboration and curriculum adaptation. This synthesis of the literature underscores the transformative role of leaders in shifting from a traditional special education model to a systemic, inclusive approach. Similarly, Anderson et al. (2022) identified administrative support is a crucial factor for the success of inclusive practices. They identified principals as a defining factor for successful school improvement initiatives such as inclusion. In a synthesis of the literature, they concluded that leaders must provide professional development and training and use strategies like modeling and feedback to help educators develop capacity related to the implementation of evidence-based practices. In addition, they also must foster ongoing collaboration among educators and other professionals and create a shared vision for inclusion (Anderson et al., 2022).

## Implications

The focus of this basic qualitative study was to address the lack of explanation for the successful reading achievement of SWDs at the study schools in the study district. The knowledge gained from this study has implications for providing stakeholders in the study district and other districts, with information that could lead to an increase in reading achievement of their SWDs. The results of this study pertaining to best practice recommendations for achieving higher than average reading scores for SWDs in urban public school settings were compiled into a white paper to serve other district stakeholders who desire reading gains for SWDs. The goals of the white paper are to provide clear guidance for leaders of public-school systems on the critical factors that support the reading achievement of SWDs.

## Summary

The problem addressed in this study was that SWDs demonstrate low reading achievement in U.S. public schools as shown by annual state standardized scores. Nationally SWDs achieve lower reading achievement scores when compared to non SWDs. Between 2015 and 2019 approximately 50% of SWDs at the elementary schools in WSD have achieved Proficient and Advanced on the state mandated PSSA which is an anomaly. The study district achieved the anomaly of more than 50% of SWDs achieving Proficient and Advanced on the state reading assessment. The gap in practice that this study addressed was that it is unknown how the study district stakeholders achieved such success in SWDs' reading achievement. In Section 1, I reviewed the rationale of the problem, evidence of the problem at the local context, and at the broader, national level

and the significance of the problem. I described in detail the conceptual framework, CREDE. I discussed the five Principles developed by CREDE that were used to ground this study. In Section 1, I also reviewed the literature that pertains to (a) history of Special Education Policy in the U. S., (b) teacher attitudes and beliefs related to inclusion, (c) teacher self-efficacy, (d) role of leaders in fostering inclusive practices, (e)the role of parents in fostering inclusive practices, (f) the role of paraprofessionals in fostering inclusive practices, (g) the role of collaboration in inclusive school settings, (h) collaborative instructional models of support for inclusive practices, (i) evidence-based practices to support student achievement, and (j) the role of professional development and inclusive practices. In Section 2, I describe the research methodology, the participants, data collection, data analysis methods, study findings and the selected project genre, a white paper that emerged as the most appropriate project based on the study findings in this exemplary school study district.

## Section 2: Methodology

The underlying problem that this study addressed is that SWDs demonstrated low reading achievement in U.S. public schools, as shown by annual state standardized scores. The study district achieved the anomaly of more than 50% of SWDs achieving Proficient and Advanced on the state reading assessment. Thus, the gap in practice that this study addressed was that it is unknown how the study district stakeholders achieved such success in SWDs' reading achievement. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to investigate how archival data supports and how teachers and administrators explain the successful reading achievement of SWDs in the study school district. The research question used to guide this study was: How do special education teachers, general education teachers and administrators at the study schools explain the success in reading of SWDs at their schools between 2017 to 2019?

In the next section, I describe the chosen research design for this study and approach, rationale, participants, data collection and data analysis methods.

### Research Design and Approach

I used a basic qualitative study to explore how special education and general education teachers and administrators explain the reading achievement success of SWDs in the study school district. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), qualitative research is contextual, flexible, and interpretive, aiming to gain a deep understanding of participants' experiences. In addition, Ravitch and Carl (2021) emphasized that qualitative research is a systematic and intentional process aimed at understanding how people make meaning of their experiences within a specific context. Thus, given the

focus on my study, I selected basic qualitative design as it was best aligned to the study's purpose.

**Description of Qualitative Design Used**

The research design that I employed for this study was a basic qualitative study design (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A basic qualitative study design was appropriate for this study, as I was seeking to learn how educators and archival documents could provide insight into the anomaly of the reading achievement success of SWDs in the study district. According to Merriam and Tisdell, in a basic qualitative design, data is collected from one source, either from interviews, observations, or document analysis. In qualitative research, the researcher is interested in how meaning is constructed, how people make sense of their lives, and their worlds. The goal of basic qualitative study was to uncover and interpret meaning from educators and from the study district website related to the anomaly of the better than national average reading achievement scores for SWDs (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), basic qualitative research is the most common form of research found in education. The researcher collects data from interviews, observations, or document analysis. The analysis of the data involves identifying recurring patterns that characterize the data. Findings are these recurring patterns or themes supported by the data from which they were derived. This type of research is interested in how meaning is constructed, how people make sense of their lives and worlds. For my study, I used a basic qualitative research design because it is the most appropriate design for a study to address the lack of explanation for the successful

reading achievement of SWDs in the study district. This research design and data collected generated a deeper understanding of how the study district schools achieved the anomaly that more than 50% of SWDs achieved Proficient and Advanced on the state reading assessment. In the next section, I justify the selection of the research design by describing other designs and the reasons for not selecting that design.

## Justification of Research Design

In this basic qualitative study, I considered other possible designs. In the following section, I describe the other designs and provide a rationale for why the chosen design was the preferred design. Qualitative research involves the exploration of perceptions, experiences and thoughts towards a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). Accordingly, I considered several qualitative designs. Because I wanted to collect rich, thick data, and because qualitative research would not allow me to achieve that goal, I chose to conduct a qualitative study. Phenomenology, grounded theory, narrative analysis, ethnography, case study, and basic qualitative design are the different types of qualitative design to choose from when designing a study.

### *Phenomenology*

According to Lodico et al. (2010), phenomenology is defined as “an attempt to understand the meaning of an experience from the perspective of the participant “(p. 270). Researchers who adopt this design are interested in the “lived experiences” of the participants and the focus of the research is on the experience and how the experience transformed the participants (Merriam, 2009). I rejected the phenomenological design because I did not plan on learning about the participants' “lived experiences”.

### *Grounded Theory*

Creswell (2013) defined grounded theory design as a design in which the researcher attempts to derive a general, abstract theory of a process, action, or interaction grounded in the views of participants in a study. The purpose of my study was not to derive a theory but to address the lack of explanation for the successful reading achievement of SWDs at the study district. Therefore, I rejected the grounded theory as a research design.

### *Narrative Research*

According to Creswell (2003), narrative research is a form of inquiry in which the researcher studies the lives of individuals and asks one or more individuals to provide stories about their lives. I rejected this type of research because I did not intend to analyze the stories of the participants' lives.

### *Ethnography*

Ethnographic studies are studies in which the researcher studies the unique complexities of cultures and groups within cultures (Creswell, 2003). I did not select this design because my study was not designed to investigate the culture of the teachers in the study district. Instead, my focus was on the lack of understanding of the reading achievement success of SWDs in the elementary schools in the study district.

### *Case Study*

According to Creswell, "a case study is when a researcher explores a bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed in-depth collection involving multiple sources of information and reports a case description and

case-based themes" (p. 40). A case study was not appropriate for my study, because I was not collecting data from multiple study sites or two participant populations. Instead, I collected data from educators of one school study district and did not plan to compare and contrast these data with other study districts.

## Participants

According to Patton (2020), qualitative researchers deliberately choose participants who have direct experience, knowledge, or perspectives relevant to the research question. I interviewed three participants who worked with SWDs in the study school district. The study district is located in the northeast United States, with an enrollment of 12,998, of which 19.1% are categorized as Special Education, according to the study district's 2023-2024 annual report. There are 17 schools within the study school district, including one credit recovery school. The following sections outline the criteria for choosing participants, the rationale for determining the sample size, the approach for gaining access to the participants, and the safeguards in place to ensure their ethical protection.

### Setting

I conducted this study in a suburban K-12 study school district located in the Northeastern region of the United States. The mission of the study district is stated on their website "to empower every student to become an independent, adaptable, life-long learner who uses knowledge to create new understandings; exhibit creative collaborative, and critical thinking; achieve at one's highest potential; live as a positive, responsible, and contributing citizen of the global society; and develop a respect for diversity and

appreciation of human differences" (study district website, n.d.) One of the goals of the study district was to develop study district practices that support an inclusive, culturally responsive environment that guarantees equity and access to all students and their families. Two of the ways the study district achieved these goals in reference to SWDs as stated on their website is to "reduce the number of students who are disproportionately represented in special education programs and suspended from school and increase inclusive opportunities for special education students at the secondary level."

The study district employed approximately 2,000 teachers and staff at the time the study was conducted. The study district was comprised of 17 schools, of which 13 were elementary schools. Six elementary schools were Title I schools, and 7 elementary schools were non-Title I schools. The K-12 study district had an enrollment of approximately 12,800 students, with whom 20% were Asian, 8% were Black, 8% were Hispanic and 58% were White at the time the data were collected. Also, during this time, approximately 32.6% of the students were economically disadvantaged, and 16.3% of the students received special education services.

In the study district there were 13 elementary schools of which six were Title I schools and seven are non-Title I schools. More than 50% of SWDs at the WSD at both Title I and non-Title I schools achieved Proficient and Advanced in reading on the state assessments. The national and state statistics predicted that fewer than 50% of SWDs would achieve Proficient or Advanced on these tests. However, SWDs were performing well in the study district.

## Criteria for Participant Selection

The participant criteria included educators who were study district employees and had experience working on reading with SWDs in inclusive settings. I interviewed two reading specialists and one special education teacher who have had experience working with SWDs in their classrooms. Thus, I interviewed a total of three participants in the study district. Table 3 reflects the demographics of the three participants who self-selected into the study.

**Table 3**

*Participant Demographics*

| Participant | Role | Years in education |
|---|---|---|
| P 1 | Special educator | 8 years |
| P 2 | Reading specialist | 5 years |
| P 3 | Reading specialist | 10 years |

## Sampling Procedure and Size

Participants were selected by using a convenience sampling approach. According to Courage et al. (2015), convenience sampling is a sample of individuals of the population who are available at a moment in time. Participants in my study were current special education teachers, and general education teachers who were also reading specialists.

**Accessing Participants**

To conduct my study, I obtained permission from Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). After I received permission from the IRB, I provided the study district designee a brief description of my study proposal and the Walden IRB approval number (12-23-21-0064543). After receiving approval from the study designee, I obtained an email from the designee that I could proceed with my data collection. I shared the letter of invitation to the designee and a consent form to the designee. The designee sent the letter of invitation to the principals of the study schools. The principals sent the letter of invitation to the potential campus participants. I continued recruitment for 3 months. During that time, I added an incentive to the letter of invitation to attempt to recruit more participants. Since I did not have a sample of eight or more participants after 10 days, I asked the study district designee to send a reminder email to the potential participants twice over a period of 2 weeks due to the low number of participants who self-selected into the study. Once the potential participants self-selected into the study I sent a consent form. The consent form included the purpose of the study, rights to ask questions, and the study's benefits. It also informed the potential volunteers that participation is voluntary, and they had the option to stop participating at any time. Three participants responded that they consented to the study. I emailed a thank you letter to each person who volunteered to participate in the study. I then contacted those who volunteered to begin to build the researcher-participant relationship.

### Participants' Rights and Protections

The researcher should never put the participants at risk. I will follow Walden University IRB guidelines to ensure the ethical protection of the participants in my study. The interview was conducted at a mutually agreed location, so the participant's identity was protected. Participants were reassured before and during the interview that their information would be kept in strict confidence. They were informed that their names would not be used in the study, and all data would be de-identified and that they would be given a pseudonym. Details of the interview, audio recordings, and transcripts will be kept confidential per Walden IRB policy for a period of 5 years. I will further protect the participants' names by assigning a pseudonym to each participant. Transcripts and other data collected will be stored in a secured filing cabinet in my home. All the computer files will be locked with an encrypted or password-protected code that only I can access. The data will be stored and destroyed after 5 years.

## Data Collection

I used two instruments to collect data for this study. I used a semi structured interview protocol and a protocol to support the review of archival documents from the study district website. First, I used semi structured interviews for my study. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), semi structured interviews provide a balance between openness, where the goal is to understand the participant's experiences in depth. I used this approach to capture the participants' experiences and perceptions of working with SWDs in the inclusive setting. I wanted to gain a deeper understanding of how they explained the reading achievement success of SWDs in the study school district.

The second data collection tool I also used was archival data from the study district website. Archival data is data that already exists at the study site. Archival data is either publicly available or private. Archival data is any sort of information, previously collected by others, amenable to systemic study (Jones, 2010). The data I used was publicly available; it did not require special permission to access. I examined various documents on the study district's website, which contributed to my study. I reviewed the Study District's Special Education Plan, the Study District's Plan, the Study District's Annual Report, the School Board minutes, the Vision Statement, and the Study District's Comprehensive Plan. Examining the study district's archival data allowed me to understand the policies and discussions that shaped the study schools' approach to improving SWDs' reading outcomes.

**Interview Instrument and Process**

In this study, data was collected through individual interviews of a sample of special education teachers, general education teachers, and principals currently employed at the study schools. The interviews were conducted by Zoom and by phone. I communicated with the participants via email to schedule a mutually agreeable time and place for the interview. Once the interview was scheduled, I sent out a confirmation email confirming the time of the interview. The participant was reassured of confidentiality before and after the interview. I created an interview protocol for the type of participant, which included a special education teacher and two general education teachers.
The interview protocol was developed using the five Principles developed by CREDE. These five principles have been shown to be effective in helping educators guide the

education of at-risk students. Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed into a Microsoft Word document within 36 hours of each interview. I thanked each participant for their participation in the study.

I asked open ended questions to gain an explanation of the reading achievement success of SWDs at the study school district. Open ended questions allowed the participants to provide responses in their own words, which provided more diversity in the data (see Allen, 2017). The interview questions aligned with the conceptual framework and engaged the participants in discussions about how they implemented the five principles when teaching reading to SWDs.

**Archival Document Instrument and Process**

I received Walden IRB approval to collect archival documents from the study district website. Due to the low response rate of participants self-selecting into the study, I conferred with my committee and program leadership regarding additional data that could be used to address the research question and purpose of the study. Based on the exemplary status of the study district and the anomaly of the SWDs' performance in reading being above the national average, we determined that archival study district data available through open public records would be appropriate to combine with the participant interview data obtained from study district educators. I obtained permission from the IRB and proceeded to collect the additional data that allowed me to reach saturation and address the research question that guided the study (see Tight, 2023).

**Sufficiency of Data Collection Instrument**

I used two data collection protocols, one for interviews, and one for a review of publicly available study district archival documents retrieved and reviewed from the study district website. The combination of using these two types of data collection tools supported me in reaching saturation (Tight, 2023). I developed an interview protocol, using the conceptual framework supported by CREDE (Tharp, 1997), five principles that are effective in guiding the education of students at-risk of educational failure. The interview questions were specifically designed to allow participants to share what contributed to the reading success of SWDs. Instead of creating yes or no questions, participants were provided with open-ended questions along with probes to allow the participants to express themselves freely. I also developed a protocol for analyzing archival documents from the study district website. I conducted an analysis of archival data sources. Below is a table of the archival data sources from the study school district's website. Table 4 reflects the publicly available archival documents reviewed from the study district website.

**Table 4**

*Publicly Available Archival Documents Used in Data Collection and Analysis*

| Archival data source |
|---|
| Annual Report 2016-17 |
| Annual Report 2017-18 |
| Annual Report 2018-19 |
| Department of Special Education and Student Services Core Values |
| Study District Comprehensive Plan 2019 - 2022 |
| Study District Educational Foundation report 10/19/2017 |
| Study District Overview |
| Study District Plan 2015-18 |
| Study District Plan 2015-28 |
| Study district website: School and Community Engagement |
| Job Description: Reading Specialist |
| Job Description: Special Education teacher |
| Language Arts Philosophy |
| School Board document April 2018 |
| School Board minutes 5/18/2017 |
| School Board minutes 3/15/2018 |
| School Board minutes 8/28/2018 |
| Special Education Data 2018-2019 |
| Special Education Data Report 2017-2018 |
| Special Education Data Report 2018-2019 |
| Special Education Plan 07/2018 - 6/2021 |
| Study District Special Education Alliance |

I created a self-designed interview protocol based on the conceptual framework. My committee reviewed the interview questions for alignment and cohesion to confirm that they were congruent with the elements of the conceptual framework.

**Table 5**

*Interview Protocol for Educators*

| Interview protocol questions for special education teacher | Interview protocol questions for general education teacher (Reading specialists) |
|---|---|
| *1.* How did you encourage collaborative activities involving grouping of SWDs and non SWDs between the years 2017 to 2019? | 1. How did you encourage collaborative activities involving grouping of SWDs and non SWDs between the years 2017 to 2019? |
| *2.* How did you integrate literacy throughout your classroom curriculum for SWDs between the years 2017 to 2019? | *2.* How did you integrate literacy throughout your classroom curriculum for SWDs between the years 2017 to 2019? |
| *3.* Considering the needs of SWDs how did you develop lessons / activities that are challenging without causing frustration between the years 2017 to 2019? | 3. Considering the needs of SWDs how did you develop lessons / activities that are challenging without causing frustration between the years 2017 to 2019? |
| *4.* How did you encourage SWDs to participate in classroom discussions considering their ability levels between the years 2017 to 2019? | 4. How did you encourage SWDs to participate in classroom discussions considering their ability level between the years 2017 to 2019? |
| 5. How did you develop lessons for SWDs that encouraged a connection to what they already know from home, community, and school between the years 2017 to 2019? | 5. How did you develop lessons for SWDs that encouraged a connection to what they already know from home, community, and school between the years 2017 to 2019? |
| 6. What other instructional practices did you use during the years 2017 to 2019 to achieve reading proficiency of SWDs? | 6. What other instructional practices did you use during the |

| | |
|---|---|
| | years 2017 to 2019 to achieve reading proficiency of SWDs? |
| 7. How do you explain the fact that SWDs in your study district achieved in reading at unexpected higher levels during the years 2017 to 2019? | 7. How do you explain the fact that SWDs in your study district achieve in reading at unexpected levels during the years 2017 to 2019? |

**Systems for Keeping Track of Data**

To track data and maintain transparency, field notes were used to record my progress. "Fieldnotes are accounts of describing experiences and observations that a researcher has made while participating in an intense and involved manner" (Emerson et al., 2011, p. 2). Field notes should include analytical memos and questions that support deeper meaning-making (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The field book was used when I began the data collection process. Use of the field book helped me make sense of the data as I used it to write down thoughts that developed during the interview process. Saldaña (2021) stated that field notes are raw data that can be analyzed alongside interview transcripts. My field notes were used in the process of theme development.

**Procedure for Gaining Access to Participants**

After I received permission from the IRB, I provided the study district designee a brief description of my study proposal and the Walden IRB (12-23-21-0064543). After receiving approval from the study designee, I obtained an email from the designee that I could proceed with my data collection. I shared the letter of invitation to the designee and a consent form to the designee. The designee sent the letter of invitation to the principals

of the study schools. The principals sent the letter of invitation to the potential campus participants. I continued recruitment for 3 months. During that time, I added an incentive to the letter of invitation to attempt to recruit more participants and obtained permission from the Walden IRB to add this to the recruitment flyer. Since I did not have a sample of eight or more participants after 10 days, I asked the study district designee to send a reminder email to the potential participants twice over a period of 2 weeks due to the low number of participants who self-selected into the study. Once the potential participants self-selected into the study I sent a consent form. Three participants responded that they consented to the study. I then contacted those who volunteered to begin to build the researcher-participant relationship.

## Role of the Researcher

I am a special education teacher with 20 years of experience in the classroom. I lived in the study school district where my research took place. My educational experience has allowed me the opportunity to work with SWDs in grades K-12. I have had the opportunity to collaborate with general education teachers to help meet the needs of SWDs in the general education classroom. I have no extended contact with the participants in this study. I am not currently employed in the study school district.

### *Researcher Bias*

According to Creswell (2003), it is important to identify researcher biases and monitor them to see how these biases may shape the collection and interpretation of data. I interpreted and analyzed my data objectively because I was aware that my personal biases and experiences could influence my interpretation of the data collected (Ravitch &

Carl, 2021). I continually monitored my personal views and opinions as they could affect how I analyzed and interpreted the data (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

Another way of monitoring researcher bias is the method of bracketing. According to Tufford and Newman (2012), "bracketing is a method used in qualitative research to mitigate the potentially deleterious effect of preconceptions that may taint the research process" (p. 2). I self-monitored and controlled my biases by developing a reflexive journal to identify any personal and professional biases throughout the research process.

My experiences as a special education teacher could influence my perceptions and interpretation of the data collected. Specifically, I believe that SWDs can achieve just as well as non-SWDs on standardized reading tests when given the appropriate academic strategies. I believe that general and special education teachers should receive ongoing training and support when working with SWDs.

The biases I brought to the analysis of the data were related to my role as a substitute special education teacher with the study district during the 2009-2010 school year and prior experiences as a special educator. In addition, I have 20 years of experience working with SWDs in public education settings, and thus, these experiences could influence my perceptions of the information collected. As such, I attempted to minimize these biases through the techniques described, such as keeping a researcher's journal, an audit trail, practicing reflexivity, and bracketing (Ravitch & Carl, 2021; Tufford & Newman, 2012).

### Researcher – Participant Relationship

It is important to develop a researcher-participant relationship with the participant by communicating with them about the study through phone calls and emails prior to conducting the interviews. I established and maintained a researcher-participant working relationship by maintaining a professional rapport that consisted of respect, trust, and confidentiality. Professional rapport was maintained when communicating with the participants by email, telephone conversations, and any face-to-face meetings.

## Data Analysis Methods

I used qualitative content analysis to analyze the participant interviews and archival data collected through publicly available information. Qualitative content analysis is a practical data analysis approach for analyzing large quantities of information (Bengtsson, 2016). After the data were collected, the next step was to make sense of the data. According to Creswell (2012), data analysis consists of drawing conclusions about the data, summarizing the data by representing it in tables, figures, and pictures, and explaining the findings, which provide answers to the study's research questions.

According to Saldaña (2021), putting codes into patterns or categories is seen as a method that enables the researcher to organize or group similarly coded data into categories that show common characteristics. According to Rossman and Rallis (2017), coding is the process of organizing the material into "chunks" before bringing meaning to those "chunks" (p. 171). All codes were compared and contrasted in each cycle or round of coding. I used qualitative content analysis employing a priori coding, a form of deductive coding, and open descriptive coding, a form of inductive coding. I identified

codes and then moved on to identify categories and finally examined the data for the themes pertaining to the research question.

### Data Generated, Gathered, Recorded

Potential participants were sent an email invitation containing instructions to reply with 'I consent' if they agreed to participate in the study. There was a lack of responses for a 2-week period. A follow-up email, which included a $25 gift card incentive, was then sent, and after another 2 weeks, a third email was sent offering the option to respond via a Google form link. Participants who agreed confirmed by replying "I consent." Three responses were received after the third attempt. Interviews were conducted using an audio recorder, and the recordings were transcribed using Otter.ai. I reviewed each audio file alongside its transcript, making necessary corrections to ensure the transcript accurately represented the content of the participant's recording.

Upon receiving IRB approval to collect data using open public records from the study district website, I proceeded to review data from the exemplary study district website and placed the appropriate contents from the secondary documents into a spreadsheet to analyze using the qualitative content analysis method described in this section. Together with the participant data and the review of publicly available appropriate archival data, I addressed the research question for this study.

## Data Analysis Results

After data collection, the researcher must make sense of the information supplied by the participants in the study (Creswell, 2012). My written discussion of the findings will include a summary with supporting details that will contain information the reader

will need to fully understand the findings. In my discussion, I will present the data, discuss the themes and their meaning, with reference and support from the data. I will accomplish this by discussing the themes and categories that emerge from the data using the coded data from the transcribed interviews.

In this basic qualitative study, I asked one broad research question regarding how special education teachers and general education teachers at schools that were successful teaching SWDs accounted for their student's reading success during the period 2017 to 2019. The problem that was addressed was that during those years more than 50% of SWDs at the WSD achieved Proficient and Advanced in reading on the state test. Based on national and state statistics, it was expected that fewer than 50% of SWDs would achieve Proficient or Advanced on these tests. The SWDs' reading success is an anomaly that needed to be explored. To answer the research question, I analyzed the three semi structured interviews with special and general education teachers and analyzed textual evidence of documents from the study school district's website. The order for data analysis included compiling, disassembling, reassembling, interpreting, and concluding. In the next section, I discuss data analysis.

**Compiling**

Data was collected via three semi structured interviews and textual evidence of documents from the study school district's website, which met the inclusion criteria for this study. According to Yin's (2018) five-phase data analysis process, the first step in the data analysis process is compiling the collected information. After conducting the interview, I uploaded the audio into Otter.ai. Each interview was transcribed within 24 to

48 hours. I checked the audio recording with the transcriptions to ensure they accurately matched each other and to remove any identifiable information. I cleaned the transcripts of repeated words or words in the transcript that did not align with the audio file. I read and reread the transcripts to familiarize myself with the data.

Textual evidence was derived from the study school district's website. I explored the study district's website to locate relevant sections such as "About Us," "Departments," "Board of Education," and "Plans and Reports." I analyzed specific documents from these sections, such as *strategic plans, special education plans, comprehensive improvement plans, board meeting minutes,* and *annual performance reports.* I read through the documents extracting key phrases that related to the research question, which were organized into a spreadsheet. Thus, I compiled the transcripts of the semi structured interviews and all documents extracted from the study district website pertaining to the phenomenon being studied. Table 6 reflects the sources of data compiled. After compiling all the documents, I proceeded to the second phase in the data analysis process, which is the disassembling phase.

**Table 6**

*Archival Data Sources Analyzed*

| Source of data |
| --- |
| Annual Report 2016-17 |
| Annual Report 2017-18 |
| Annual Report 2018-19 |
| Department of Special Education and Student Services Core Values |
| Study District Comprehensive Plan 2019 - 2022 |
| Study District Educational Foundation report 10/19/2017 |
| Study District Overview |
| Study District Plan 2015-18 |
| Study District Plan 2015-28 |
| Study district website: School and Community Engagement |
| Job Description: Reading Specialist |
| Job Description: Special Education Teacher |
| Language Arts Philosophy |
| P1 |
| P2 |
| P3 |
| School Board document April 2018 |
| School Board meeting minutes 5/18/2017 |

## Disassembling

According to Yin (2018), the next step after compiling the information is to disassemble the data. Researchers should become familiar with the data by reading

through the transcribed data to open coding (Bengtsson, 2016). Open coding is the process of identifying any segment of data that might be useful (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I conducted my first round of coding using open descriptive coding while reviewing the participants' transcripts and textual evidence. I assigned codes to phrases that represented how specific special education teachers, general education teachers, and administrators explain the success of reading achievement of SWDs. In the first round of open coding, I identified 318 textual excerpts and identified 32 Round 1 open descriptive codes. I used an excel spreadsheet to compile text excerpts I coded from my interviews, transcripts, and documents from the study district's website. The coded text was entered into the spreadsheet, and I used a pivot table after each coding round to examine the frequency count of the codes identified. Table 7 reflects the Round 1 open descriptive codes and frequency of each code compiled from the archival documents and from the participants.

**Table 7**

*Round 1 Open Descriptive Coding and Count of Text Excerpts by Code*

| Round 1 open descriptive code | Count of raw data text excerpt |
|---|---|
| Employ: family engagement | 1 |
| Employ: co-teaching / elementary schools | 1 |
| Employ: collaboration | 39 |
| Employ: collaboration/families | 1 |
| Employ: data-driven | 21 |
| Employ: differentiation | 10 |
| Employ: improved instruction | 47 |
| Employ: improved literacy | 4 |
| Employ: inclusion | 23 |
| Employ: inclusion conferences | 2 |
| Employ: intervention | 1 |
| Employ: meeting students' needs | 1 |
| Employ: modify instruction | 2 |
| Employ: monitor progress | 2 |
| Employ: PD | 21 |
| Employ: provide information | 1 |
| Employ: provide support | 1 |
| Employ: research-based interventions | 2 |
| Employ: resources | 9 |
| Employ: strategies | 2 |
| Employ: understanding needs | 2 |
| Employ: PD | 2 |
| Explain: collaboration | 35 |
| Explain: data-driven | 20 |
| Explain: differentiated instruction | 17 |
| Explain: study district support/confidence | 3 |
| Explain: inclusion | 18 |
| Explain: instruction | 12 |
| Explain: PD | 4 |
| Explain: reading instruction | 5 |
| Explain: resources | 8 |
| Explain: small group instruction | 1 |
| **Grand Total** | **318** |

In compiling the open descriptive codes, I examined the textual excerpts from the interviews and content from the websites to facilitate consistency in the assignment of

open codes. I collapsed the Round 1 open descriptive codes into fewer Round 2 open descriptive codes. Table 8 and Table 9 reflect a sampling of the Round 2 open descriptive codes identified and corresponding text excerpts from open coding from the archival data extracted from the study district's website (see Table 8) and from the three participants (see Table 9).

**Table 8**

*Sampling of Round 2 Open Descriptive Codes and Text From Archival Documents*

| Source | Round 2 open descriptive code | Text excerpt representing descriptive code |
|---|---|---|
| Annual Report 2016-17 | Differentiation/EBPs/Interventions | The grant helped the study district make great strides in literacy achievement, family literacy, and over the life of the grant received…over $5 million for literacy improvement, birth to grade 12 |
| Annual Report 2016-17<br>Annual Report 2017-18 | Employ Inclusive Practices | Study district was recognized at the state level for inclusion facilitators with the K-5 Literacy Innovation Award |
| Annual Report 2016-17<br>Annual Report 2017-18 | Explain PD | 3,167 hours of PD in 893 different workshops |
| Annual Report 2017-18 | Employ Inclusive Practices | Final year of the study district's 3-year plan to expand inclusive practices |
| Annual Report 2018-19 | Data-Driven Instruction/Student needs | Roadmap…improve student achievement, growth & mastery by implementing evidence-based practices that address student needs |
| Study District Comprehensive Plan 2019-2022 | Employ Inclusive Practices | Board of Directors approved the 2019-2022 comprehensive plan…2nd goal is to develop study district practices that support inclusive, culturally responsive environment that guarantees equity & access for all students and families |
| Job Description of Reading Specialist | Employ differentiation | Plans lessons that are differentiated in order to meet the needs of students and demonstrates alignment to the Core Curriculum |
| Special Education Plan 7/2018-6/2021 | Explain: Collaborative Practices | Teachers meet in professional learning communities to discuss and strategize action plans to address the achievement needs of students who require intervention. |
| Study district Special Education Alliance | Employ: Collaborative Practices | The mission of the Study District Parents Special Education Alliance is to provide educational and networking opportunities to professionals of children with disabilities within the study district and surrounding communities. |
| Special Education Plan 7/2018-6/2021 | Employ: resources | Beginning in the 2015-2016 school year, inclusion facilitators were assigned to various elementary buildings in the study district. |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Special Education Plan 7/2018-6/2021 | Employ: resources | An "Inclusion Toolkit" database has also been developed by the inclusion facilitators. |
| Vision document | Explain: Study district support/Vision | • Families demonstrate the confidence to meet the needs of every child<br>• Community members demonstrate the confidence to meet the needs of every child<br>• Staff demonstrate the confidence to meet the needs of every child |
| Study District Comprehensive Plan 2019-2022 | Data-Driven Instruction/Student needs | • Teachers monitor curriculum-based informal assessment data to monitor student achievement in terms of growth<br>• In the special education settings, instructional practices are modified in order to best support individual students.<br>• Throughout the year, there is an ongoing analysis of student data where learning gaps are identified. |
| Special Education Student Services Core Values | Data-Driven Instruction/Student needs | Presume Competence: Recognizing each student's strengths and assets, not just their differences. |

**Table 9**

*Sampling of Round 2 Open Descriptive Codes and Text Excerpts From Participants*

| Participant | Round 2 open descriptive code | Text excerpt representing descriptive code |
|---|---|---|
| P1 | Employ Inclusive Practices | Sometimes put higher kids with the kids with that had some reading difficulties. |
| P1 | Data-Driven Instruction/Student needs | Prepare them or pre-teach them what was going on in the classroom. |
| P1 | Differentiation | I used instructional and when students came to [specific reading challenges]Wilson was implemented |
| P1 | Explain: Collaborative Practices | …making sure that the special ed teacher and I were on the same page; …educating the teachers a little bit more about SWDs |
| P2 | Explain Collaborative Practices | We grouped our students; I'm usually at all the IEPs for the students; the special ed teacher and I will sit and talk about what we think the goal should be. |
| P2 | Data-Driven Instruction/Student needs | I used a lot of Fountas and Pinnell material; did phonemic awareness based on Haggerty; I reviewed the skills that they had seen in the classroom, and I did inventories; I used parts of intervention programs; we would prepare specific questions for certain students; I think that's the biggest key is to develop a relationship with them |
| P3 | Explain: Collaborative Practices | Tried to have a collaborative relationship with our speech therapists, special education teachers, planning time, as well as the general education teachers, planning, aligned; special education teachers were included in the same professional development activities; We did have regular PLC meetings, both for general education teams, as well as the Special Education Team |
| P3 | Employ Data-Driven DM/ Instruction | Guided reading; getting adequate time in materials at their instructional level throughout the week; doing reading fluency passages |

I used the pivot table to examine the Round 1 codes and to discern possible similarities between the codes. In Round 2 of open coding, I identified emerging patterns and relationships (see Yin, 2018). I collapsed the Round 1 codes by looking for comparisons and similarities. I identified words and phrases that led to developing a smaller grouping of Round 2 open descriptive codes. Thus, in Round 2 of open coding, I collapsed the 32 Round 1 codes to seven Round 2 open descriptive codes. Table 10

reflects the process of moving from Round 1 to Round 2 open codes and count of text excerpts by code.

**Table 10**

*Round 1 Open Descriptive Codes to Round 2 Open Descriptive Codes*

| Round 1 or round 2 open descriptive code | Round 1 to Round 2 open descriptive codes | Count of raw data text excerpt |
|---|---|---|
| **Round 2 Code** | **Data-Driven Instruction/Student Needs** | **100** |
| Round 1 Code | Employ: data-driven | 21 |
| Round 1 Code | Employ: improved instruction | 40 |
| Round 1 Code | Employ: meeting students' needs | 1 |
| Round 1 Code | Employ: modify instruction | 2 |
| Round 1 Code | Employ: monitor progress | 2 |
| Round 1 Code | Employ: understanding needs | 2 |
| Round 1 Code | Explain: data-driven | 20 |
| Round 1 Code | Explain: instruction | 12 |
| **Round 2 Code** | **Differentiation/EBPs/Interventions** | **49** |
| Round 1 Code | Employ: differentiation | 10 |
| Round 1 Code | Employ: improved instruction | 7 |
| Round 1 Code | Employ: improved literacy | 4 |
| Round 1 Code | Employ: intervention | 1 |
| Round 1 Code | Employ: research-based interventions | 2 |
| Round 1 Code | Employ: strategies | 2 |
| Round 1 Code | Explain: differentiated instruction | 17 |
| Round 1 Code | Explain: reading instruction | 5 |
| Round 1 Code | Explain: small group instruction | 1 |
| | **Employ: Inclusive Practices** | **44** |
| Round 1 Code | Employ: co-teaching/elementary schools | 1 |
| Round 1 Code | Employ: inclusion | 23 |
| Round 1 Code | Employ: inclusion conferences | 2 |
| Round 1 Code | Explain: inclusion | 18 |
| Round 1 Code | **Employ: Resources** | **17** |
| Round 1 Code | Employ: resources | 9 |
| Round 1 Code | Explain: resources | 8 |
| **Round 2 Code** | **Explain: Collaborative Practices** | **78** |
| Round 1 Code | Employ: family engagement | 1 |
| Round 1 Code | Employ: collaboration | 39 |
| Round 1 Code | Employ: collaboration/families | 1 |
| Round 1 Code | Employ: provide information | 1 |
| Round 1 Code | Employ: provide support | 1 |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Round 1 Code | Explain: collaboration | 35 |
| **Round 2 Code** | **Explain: Study District Support/Vision** | **3** |
| Round 1 Code | Explain: study district support/confidence | 3 |
| **Round 2 Code** | **Explain: PD** | **27** |
| Round 1 Code | Employ: PD | 21 |
| Round 1 Code | Employ: PD | 2 |
| Round 1 Code | Explain: PD | 4 |
| **Grand Total** | | **318** |

**Reassembling**

The next step is to reassemble the data. When the researcher reassembles the data, the researcher reorganizes and clusters the coded information to identify patterns, relationships, and themes (Yin, 2018). Following open coding of Rounds 1 and 2, I continued to look for patterns to identify categories. I utilized a pivot table within the excel spread sheet to explore relationships between codes and emerging categories. I repeatedly read through transcripts and textual evidence to remain immersed in the data. I reassembled the codes from Rounds 1 and 2 and identified broader categories that represented the meanings of Round 2 codes. Table 11 represents Round 2 open descriptive codes to categories. Table 12 reflects the Round 2 open descriptive code and count of textual evidence coded to each Round 2 code.

**Table 11**

*Round 2 Open Descriptive Codes to Categories*

| Round 2 open descriptive code or category | Name of round 2 open descriptive code or category | Count of coded text |
|---|---|---|
| **Category** | **Employ: Data-Driven DM/Instruction** | **100** |
| Round 2 Open Descriptive Code | Data-driven instruction/student needs | 100 |
| **Category** | **Employ: Inclusive Practices** | **44** |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Round 2 Open Descriptive Code | Employ: inclusive practices | 44 |
| Round 2 Open Descriptive Code | **PD** | **25** |
| Round 2 Open Descriptive Code | Explain: PD | 25 |
| **Category** | **Resources** | **13** |
| Round 2 Open Descriptive Code | Employ: resources | 13 |
| **Category** | **Resources for Inclusive Practices** | **4** |
| Round 2 Open Descriptive Code | Employ: resources | 4 |
| **Category** | **Use EBPs/Differentiation and Implement Interventions** | **49** |
| Round 2 Open Descriptive Code | Differentiation/EBPs/interventions | 49 |
| **Category** | **Vision** | **3** |
| Round 2 Open Descriptive Code | Explain: study district support/vision | 3 |
| **Category** | **Explain: Collaborative Practices** | **80** |
| Round 2 Open Descriptive Code | Explain: collaborative practices | 78 |
| Round 2 Open Descriptive Code | Explain: PD | 2 |
| **Grand Total** | | **318** |

**Table 12**

*Round 2 Open Descriptive Codes and Count of Codes*

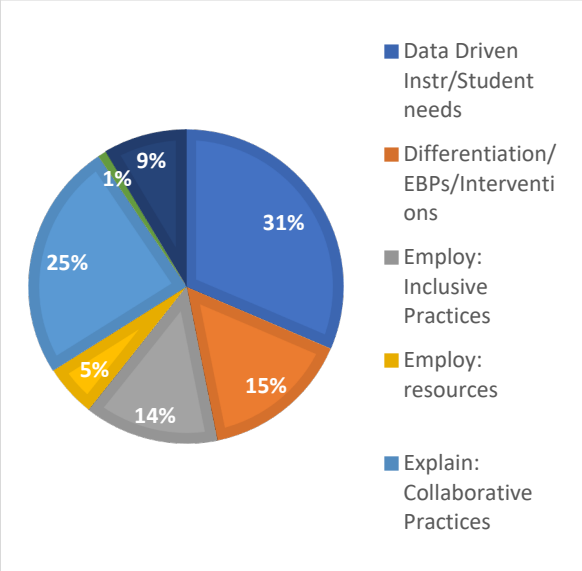
| Round 2 open codes | Count of raw data text excerpt |
|---|---|
| Data-driven instruction/student needs | 100 |
| Differentiation/EBPs/interventions | 49 |
| Employ: inclusive practices | 44 |
| Employ: resources | 17 |
| Explain: collaborative practices | 78 |
| Explain: study district support/vision | 3 |
| Explain: PD | 27 |
| **Grand Total** | **318** |

I considered the magnitude and frequency of the coded data. I used the pivot table to analyze the coded text. I also examined the source of the coded text and considered the

implications. The two Round 2 codes with the highest percentage of coded textual evidence were data-driven instruction/student needs and collaborative practices. Figure 1 reflects the percentage of textual evidence coded to each Round 2 Code.

**Figure 1**

*Round 2 Codes and Percentages*




Following Round 2 coding, I again used the spreadsheet and pivot tables to identify the categories. Table 13 reflects the Round 2 Codes to Categories process. Table 13 represents the Categories and count of coded text by Category.

**Table 13**

*Round 2 Codes to Categories and Count of Text*

| Round 2 Open descriptive code or category | Name of Round 2 open descriptive code or categories | Count of raw data text excerpt |
|---|---|---|
| **Category** | **Employ Data-Driven DM/Instruction** | **100** |
| Round 2 Open Descriptive Code | Data-driven instruction/student needs | 100 |
| **Category** | **Employ: Inclusive Practices** | **44** |
| Round 2 Open Descriptive Code | Employ: inclusive practices | 44 |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Round 2 Open Descriptive Code** | **PD** | **25** |
| Round 2 Open Descriptive Code | Explain: PD | 25 |
| **Category** | **Resources for Inclusive Practices** | **17** |
| Round 2 Open Descriptive Code | Employ: resources | 17 |
| **Category** | **Use EBPs/Differentiation and Implement Interventions** | **49** |
| Round 2 Open Descriptive Code | Differentiation/EBPs/interventions | 49 |
| Round 2 Open Descriptive Code | **Vision** | **3** |
| Round 2 Open Descriptive Code | Explain: study district support/vision | 3 |
| **Category** | **Explain: Collaborative Practices** | **80** |
| Round 2 Open Descriptive Code | Explain: collaborative practices | 78 |
| Round 2 Open Descriptive Code | Explain: PD | 2 |
| **Grand Total** | | **318** |

**Table 14**

*Categories and Count of Text Excerpts Coded by Category*

| Categories | Count of raw data text excerpt |
|---|---|
| Employ: Data-driven DM/instruction | 100 |
| Employ: inclusive practices | 44 |
| PD | 25 |
| Resources for inclusive practices | 17 |
| Use EBPs/differentiation and implement interventions | 49 |
| Vision | 3 |
| Explain: collaborative practices | 80 |
| **Grand Total** | **318** |

Figure 2 reflects the Categories and percentage of text by Category. I clumped the data when I conducted Round 1 and Round 2 coding, thus making the alignment between the Round 2 Open descriptive codes and categories tightly aligned. Thus, there was coherence between the identified Round 2 open codes and the seven categories that were identified.

**Figure 2**

*Categories and Percentage of Text by Category*


I examined the seven Categories that emerged from the data. I considered the similarities and alignment of the Categories to possible Themes. The seven Categories collapsed into four Themes. Table 15 reflects the four Themes and count of coded text excerpts by Theme.

**Table 15**

*Categories to Theme and Count of Text Excerpts*

| Category or theme | Categories to themes | Count of raw data text excerpt |
|---|---|---|
| **Theme** | **Special education teachers, general education teachers and administrators explain their success in reading of SWDs is due to the collaborative** | **80** |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | **practices embedded in the study district beliefs and culture.** | |
| Category | Explain: Collaborative Practices | 80 |
| **Theme** | **Special education teachers, general education teachers and administrators explain their success in reading of SWDs is due to the Data-driven instruction and decision-making.** | **100** |
| Category | Employ Data-Driven DM/Instruction | 100 |
| **Theme** | **Special education teachers, general education teachers and administrators explain their success in reading of SWDs is due to the Study district guiding principles, inclusive practices, vision, professional development and resource allocation.** | **89** |
| Category | Employ: Inclusive Practices | 44 |
| Category | PD | 25 |
| Category | Resources | 13 |
| Category | Resources for Inclusive practices | 4 |
| Category | Vision | 3 |
| **Theme** | **Special education teachers, general education teachers and administrators explain their success in reading of SWDs is due to the use the evidence-based practices, differentiation, and interventions to support SWDs in inclusive settings.** | **49** |
| Category | Use EBPs/Differentiation and implement interventions | 49 |
| **Grand Total** | | **318** |

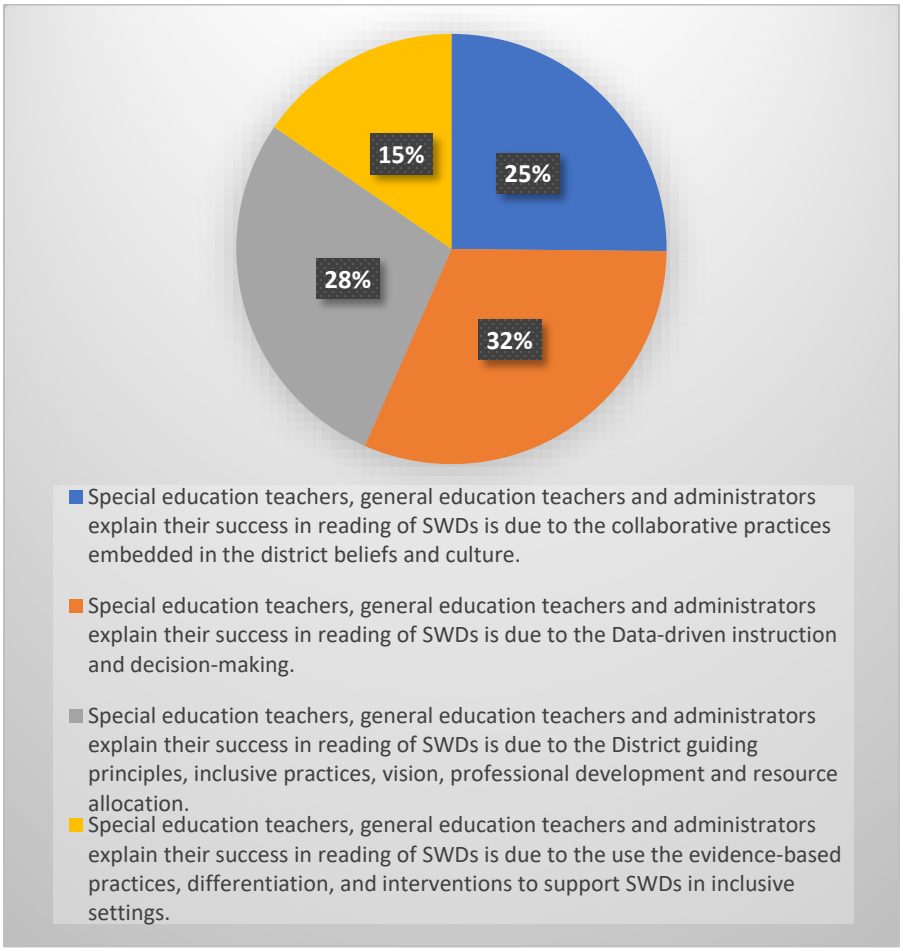
**Interpreting**

The next step is to interpret the data. During data interpretation, the researcher draws meaning from the reassembled data connecting findings through the original research question and theoretical framework (Yin, 2018). Creswell and Poth (2018) noted that the data interpretation involves layering the data to reveal a deeper meaning including looking for unexpected findings and discussing the significance of the themes

within the study's context. Once I identified categories, I then collapsed the categories into four themes. Figure 3 reflects the four themes and percentage of text coded by Theme.

**Figure 3**

*Themes and Percentage of Text by Theme*



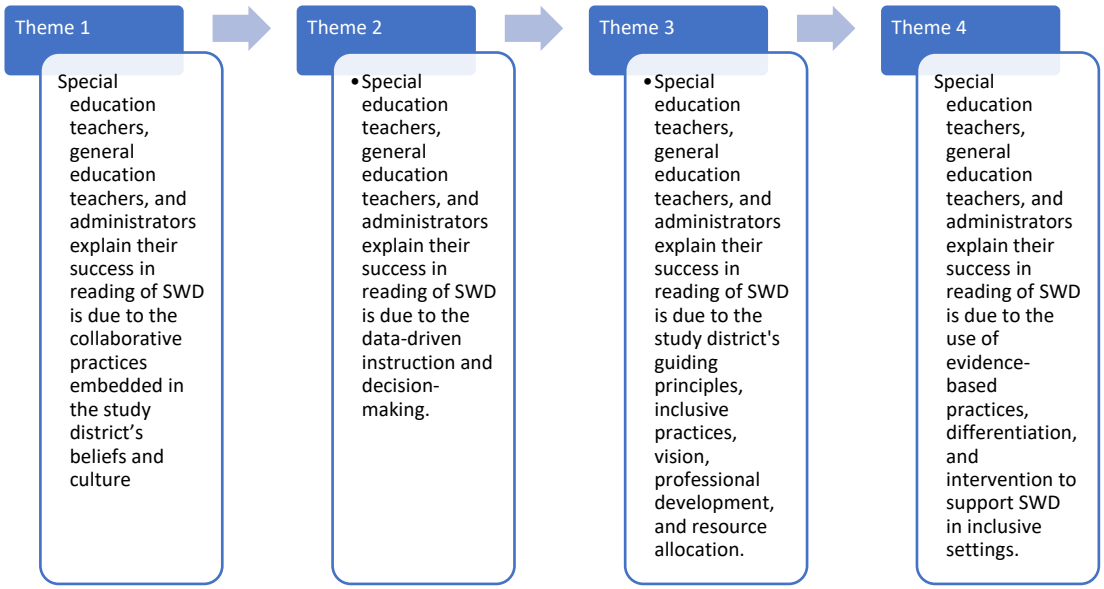

**Concluding**

I used open descriptive coding to analyze the information from 3 participants and textual evidence for this basic qualitative study. I utilized a spreadsheet and pivot tables to examine the data collected from the participants and textual evidence. The pivot table

supported the content analysis process and helped me to examine the magnitude and frequency of coding while conducting Round 1, Round 2 coding and then identifying the Categories and finally the emerging Themes. Figure 4 reflects the Themes for the research question that guided this study.

**Figure 4**

*Themes for Research Question*
*How do special education teachers, general education teachers, and administrators at the study schools explain the success in reading for SWDs?*




## Findings Aligned With Research Question

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to investigate how archival data supports and how teachers and administrators explain the successful reading achievement of SWDs in the study school district. The problem that was addressed in this basic qualitative study was that more than 50% of SWD's achieved Proficient and Advanced in

reading on the state tests in the study district, while national and state statistics reflected that fewer than 50% of SWD's achieved Proficient or Advanced on these tests. The overall research question explored how special education teachers, general education teachers, and administrators explained the success in reading of SWD's at the study district. In this basic qualitative study, individual interviews and archival documents were collected to address the research question. This success in reading achievement is an anomaly for SWDs that needed to be more deeply understood. Through the data analysis process of reviewing the interview transcripts of three participants and reviewing the archival documents of the study district, four themes emerged. In the next section, I review each theme for the research question that guided this study providing textual evidence in the form of quotes from participants, and content from archival documents from the study district website that address the research question and purpose of this basic qualitative study. The qualitative content analysis resulted in four themes that related to (a) collaborative practices, (b) data-driven decision-making, (c) vision and resource allocation, and (d) evidence-based practices.

## Thematic Results for Research Question

### *Theme 1: Special education teachers, general education teachers, and administrators explain their success in reading of SWDs is due to the collaborative practices embedded in the study district beliefs and culture*

Textual evidence was identified in all the documents reviewed from the study district's website, which included the Study District's Vision, Study District Plan from 2015 to 2018, Special Education Plan from June 2018 to June 2023, and Special

Education Parent Alliance's mission. In order to demonstrate support for this theme, I describe the textual evidence and support identified in each archival document and in the semi structured interviews from the participants. In examining participant transcripts and the study district's archival documents, evidence of Theme 1 emerged from the Study District's Vision, the Study District's Plan from 2015 to 2018, the Special Education Plan from June 2018 to June 2023, the Special Education Parent Alliance mission, and participant interviews.

### *Study District Vision*

Collaborative practices are part of the study district's vision and culture. The study district stakeholders embrace collaborative practices by recognizing the power of respecting collaboration with colleagues, and in respecting, understanding, and celebrating human differences to enrich the organization, build community, and inspire ideas and develop shared differences. This is evidenced by the Study District's Vision statement on the study district's website. The Study District Plan also reflects collaborative practice that emerges in study district practices to support SWDs' reading.

### *Study District Plan 2015 to 2018*

The Study District Plan from 2015 to 2018 reflected a consistent commitment to supporting collaborative practices and inclusive practices for all students. The Study District Plan demonstrated a commitment to collaborative practices through monthly team meetings to review student progress and plan intervention support. Team members included parents, school personnel, outside consultants, and therapists, thus reflecting the spirit of a collaborative culture. The Study District Plan from 2015 to 2018 included

flexible instructional time to meet the needs of SWDs. Collaboration with colleagues and community members was evidenced in the study district documents and was reported to occur regularly. Classroom teachers and individuals who were charged with providing interventions collaborated on an ongoing basis for a minimum of once a week to discuss students' needs, academic progress and to plan for future intervention support. According to the semi structured interview data, the SWDs were placed in small groups to practice focused reading skills. Collaboration was evidenced by how the staff made decisions to work with students on specific skills needing strengthening. Participant 2, (P2), and the general education teacher collaborated to determine how to configure the small student groups, that focused on reading skills development within the general education classroom. P2 stated that "the collaboration with the general education teacher involved both when determining the small group structure, and the areas needed for [reading skill development] growth for each student." The Study District Plan from 2015 to 2018 contained time built in for "teacher collaboration during the morning, professional learning committees, during the school year, and during designated data analysis days." During the interview, P1 and P3 stated that they "had common planning time," P2 had a common planning time with the special education teacher first in the morning before the students arrived in class. P1 explained that they had common planning time "from 8:25 to 9:00 am." The administration at P3's school provided common planning time for the special education teachers and the general education teachers. Scheduling a common planning time for the special education teacher and general education teacher is important because this requires that the administrators commit the resources to the Master schedule

in order to allow for teachers from different departments to share a common planning time. Thus, this dedication of resources is a show of commitment to supporting the skill development of students and recognizing that collaboration serves as a significant factor in that process. P3 stated, “They always made sure that…the special education teachers’ planning time, as well as the general education teachers’ planning time aligned and were at the same time, so we did co-plan, all of the lessons together.” Another aspect of collaboration was evidenced in the professional learning community meetings in which teachers discussed and strategized action plans to address the specific learning needs and achievement needs of the students who require intervention. According to the Study District Plan, the collaboration among educators has been paramount to the success of all students and their unique learning needs, according to the study district website. The study district leaders are committed to developing strong partnerships with all stakeholders, including families, community members, and business leaders to improve and enhance student achievement. The collaborative nature of the study district beliefs and behaviors was also evidenced in the Special Education Plan.

***Special Education Plan June 2018 to June 2021***

The Special Education Plan outlined a plan for the IEP team to properly address the needs of SWDs. In this plan, the IEP team collaborated to discuss and review appropriate pre-referral strategies as well as academic and behavioral interventions for students in need. The IEP team reviewed and discussed all components of SWDs’ education by making informed decisions regarding placement by first considering general education with supplementary aids and services. In addition to the IEP collaboration,

there was evidence of collaboration with the middle/intermediate school stakeholders, and special education staff on behalf of students.

According to the Special Education Plan, there was a collaborative effort among the intermediate unit principals and special education supervisors to provide staff training or professional development on inclusive practices in order to support the capacity building of staff so they could deliver the evidenced-based practices in inclusive settings. Collaborative practices were used to implement supplemental aids and services to support SWDs in the general education classroom. These supplemental aids and services included special scheduled time for co-planning and team meetings, and instructional arrangements that support collaboration such as co- teaching and paraprofessional support. Inserting special scheduled time into a Master schedule requires administrator leadership, endorsement and the allocation of resources. Accordingly, P1 confirmed, “just making sure that the special ed teacher and I were on the same page, using the same language, the same instructional strategies… that's how I collaborated with the special education teacher. I also went to IEP meetings with the parents to … to give updates and … what I was doing along with the special education teacher(s).”

The Special Education Plan reflected co-teaching as a collaborative practice. Co-teaching pairs, pairs denoted by a special education and a general education teacher, were trained together to deliver best practice inclusive instruction in English language arts, social studies, science, and math. The Special Education Plan detailed how principals and special education supervisors participated in collaborative practices. Principals and special education supervisors collaborated to develop and refine schedules for staff that

supported the delivery of effective instructional practices, and they worked collaboratively to develop and refine schedules for students to take advantage of the co-teach teacher teams and evidence-based practices.

Collaboration permeated the Special Education Plan and offered a number of learning opportunities for both staff and parents to engage together. The Special Education Parent Alliance also offered opportunities for networking among parents.

***Special Education Parent Alliance***

The mission of the study district Parents Special Education Alliance is to provide educational and networking opportunities to parents and caregivers of children with disabilities within the study district and surrounding communities. In addition, the Special Education Parent Alliance developed good working relationships with caregivers, community members, professionals, and administrators who support individuals with disabilities within the study district. The stakeholders' commitment to working with one another on behalf of SWDs extended to community and family members, thus broadening the support network for SWDs.

Theme 1 focused on the collaborative nature of the study district and how the prioritization of collaboration permeated the study district's vision, beliefs, guiding principles, and behaviors. Theme 2 is related to the problem statement, as the significant emphasis on the study district's focus on data-driven decision-making based on the use of data-driven instruction.

### *Theme 2: Special education teachers, general education teachers, and administrators explain their success in reading of SWDs is due to data-driven instruction and decision-making*

Textual evidence was identified in all of the documents reviewed from the study district's website which included the Study District's Vision, Study District's Plan for 2015 to 2018, School Board Meeting Notes from April 2018, the Study District's Department of Special Education and Student Services Core Values, the Study District's Comprehensive Plan for 2019 to 2022, Special Education Plan for July 2018 to June 2021, the Study District Data Report from 2017 to 2019, and the Job Description of the Reading Specialist and Special Education Teacher. In order to demonstrate support for this theme, I describe the textual evidence and support identified in each archival document and in the semi structured interviews from the participants. In examining participant transcripts and the study district archival documents, evidence of Theme 2 emerged from the Study District's Vision, Study District Plan for 2015 to 2018, School Board Meeting Notes from April 2018, the Study District's Department of Special Education and Student Services Core Values, the Study District's Comprehensive Plan for 2019 to 2022, Special Education Plan for July 2018 to June 2021, the Study District Data Report from 2017 to 2019, and the Job Description of the Reading Specialist and Special Education Teacher. The Study District Plan also supported data-driven decision-making.

***Study District Plan 2015 to 2018***

The study district participants and archival documents reflect that the stakeholders used data-driven instruction to support student learning. The study district's values and practices reflected a data-driven instruction approach to identify extra support needed to monitor and adjust the instruction of SWDs. The Study District Plan detailed a priority on using data to monitor student progress and to inform and modify instruction. According to the Study District's Plan, the special education and general education teachers tracked student progress using curriculum-based formal and informal assessments to measure the SWDs' proficiency or skill development and growth. Each of the participants used running records to inform the reading instruction of the SWDs by determining which reading program or support the SWDs needed. According to Shea (2012), a running record is a method for establishing a student's "competence at a given moment in time with a specific level and type of book" (p. 10). Running records provide data for instruction because they are based on texts used in the classroom. They provide data on the student's reading fluency of decoding and depth of comprehension. While the student reads aloud, the reading specialist codes what the student reads and evaluates comprehension from the student's retelling. After an analysis of the results, the teacher plans the next instructional steps. (Shea, 2012). P 1 reported, "We did running records to find out where they were. …. we looked at their miscues and… their errors, to find out where they needed support, and then we would work from there. …we used books that met their needs, programs that met their needs". P 2 reported that running records were used to assess SWDs and to help them perform better on formalized assessments. The

study district documents and staff reported that they retaught concepts for students who were challenged with mastery in the initial phases of instruction. The reading specialist also prepared students by pre-teaching concepts. According to P1, “We prepare them or pre-teach them what was going on in the classroom.’ In the general education and the special education setting, academic progress and instructional practices were modified in order to best support students’ learning.

P1 reported using instructional routines to teach SWDs what to do when they encountered an unknown word while reading. P1 stated, “It was more instructional routines that I taught, like what to do when you come to a word you don’t know.” P1 taught these instructional routines so that SWDs would use them in the general education classroom. P1 explained, “So it was more like instructional routines that I would teach them, hoping that they, you know, they would go back into the classroom and use their instructional routines.” The general education teachers reported to the reading specialist that the SWDs were using these instructional routines in the general education classroom. P1 said, “Hearing from the teachers, the students were carrying over what I was teaching them.”

P1 pre-taught the SWDs vocabulary, so they were prepared to participate and understand what was being taught in the general education classroom. P1 said, “I would like prepare them or pre-teach them what was going on in the classroom …I would pre-teach them the vocabulary, so that when the teacher went over the vocabulary…they could participate and understand it.” This strategy was identified as effective as they reported that use of the strategy resulted in building background knowledge for SWDs so

they would better understand the concepts before they were taught in class and as such provided the SWDs confidence to participate in the classroom. P1 stated, “They had that background knowledge and understanding of it [the concept to be learned] before everyone else, so it [pre-teaching] gave them that confidence to participate in the classroom.”

The reading specialist and special education teachers implemented reading programs to help SWDs score at the proficiency level on the state reading assessment. *Equity, Wilson*, and the *Read Naturally* reading programs were implemented by P1 to help SWDs master specific skills and meet the reading proficiency standard. P 1 stated, “If they needed phonemic awareness, we did a program called Equity in 2019. It’s all phonemic awareness.” Equity was a phonics reading program. The Wilson Reading program is a research-based program that is used to help students understand the total word structure of words in the English language, to help students improve in reading and spelling. Word structure is known as morphology and is taught to students to help students consider the root word, prefix, and suffix of a word (https://www.wilsonlanguage.com). P1 reported that the Wilson Reading program helped students achieve reading proficiency due to the program’s focus on encoding, decoding, fluency and comprehension. P1 reported that they also used leveled books and books that contained phonics rules to help improve SWDs reading proficiency. P1 stated, “We did have some level books and also books that had phonics rules in them. like you know, if the child was having trouble with just basic short vowels and CVC words, then I would pull a book that had [basic short vowels and CVC words]. I would review the vowels.”

Participants described using other individualized reading materials to support the development of reading skills and knowledge. P1 reported using a reading program called Read Naturally. P1 shared SWDs' progress with the special education teacher, describing how this program worked to support their reading fluency. "Read Naturally is a reading program designed to improve reading fluency by combining reading a passage, repeated readings, and progress monitoring." The first step in Read Naturally is an unpracticed "cold read" where the student will read a passage for one minute. During the second step, the student practices reading the same passage three to four times. The last step involves having the teacher time the student's reading of the practiced passage for 1- minute. The teacher subtracts the total number of errors from the total number of words read. The number of errors will determine if the student repeats the same passage or moves to another passage at the same level (Hasbrouck et al., 1999).

P2 used a variety of reading programs based on the needs of the SWDs, such as Fountas and Pinnell (Fountas & Pinnell, 2022). Fountas and Pinnell is a comprehension reading program that includes assessment and leveled books. Heggerty is a reading program designed to improve phonemic awareness. P2 stated, "And I really did like some of the leveled intervention material that Fountas and Pinnell put out. And I also believe in phonics and phonemic awareness based on Heggerty." Sonday is a guided reading intervention program that provided structured phonics lesson. The goal of the Sonday program is to build fluency and speed (Sonday, 2009). Rasinski is a reading program developed by Timothy Rasinski to help build fluency (www.nwea.org). P2 reported, "For decoding or phonics needs I used Sonday. For fluency I used Rasinski." Thus,

participants shared using a multitude of highly individualized reading programs to support SWDs' reading needs.

P3 said that the study school district enforced a balanced literacy model to improve the reading proficiency of SWDs. According to O'Day (2009), balanced literacy is a literacy approach that emphasizes teachers' differentiated instruction to meet individual learning needs by using various instructions, including modeling, grouping strategies, and self-directed learning. Balanced literacy includes five components: guided reading, shared reading, independent learning, and word study (Fountas & Pinnell, 2022). P3 stated, "Our study district was pretty strong on using a balanced literacy model. So read-alouds and independent reading was a big piece of language arts programming."

Specific reading practices were used to support SWDs' reading skill development. A teaching practice that P3 used to improve the reading proficiency of SWDs was to prepare specific questions for SWDs for classroom reading activities to support their reading comprehension. P3 said, "So one of the strategies I used a lot … if we were doing… read[ing] a lab for the whole class, we would prepare specific questions for specific students."

The study district's Response to Intervention (RTI) was fully developed and represented how the study district embraced data-driven instruction and decision-making. The Study District Plan included RTI protocols to place students into fully developed tiered instruction. There was clear evidence of RTI protocols for tiered instruction. Study schools participated in RTI daily. According to D. Fuchs and L. S. Fuchs (2017) RTI is an intervention approach that provides tiered support for improving students' academic

learning. RTI consists of two approaches: the problem-solving protocol approach (PS) and the standard protocol approach (SP). The PS approach is where a school-based team works together to identify students' learning needs, discuss and implement the intervention, and evaluate the instruction. The SP approach uses pre-planned intervention for all identified students to address various needs. RTI delivers tiered support to students based on their academic needs through both approaches (IRIS Center, 2006). P2 explained, "We used the RTI model, so that everyone had a time during their day, whether they be IEP students, or typical students, everyone at one particular time during the day for a half hour that was geared to intervention or what they needed at that time. So even though students with IEPs had other interventions and other things that were happening, at that time, we grouped our students .... So, if they were having trouble with phonemic awareness…it didn't matter if they had an IEP or not, if they had trouble with phonemic awareness, they would be in a small group with a targeted instruction in phonemic awareness". The School Board document from April 2018 reflected the implementation of an elementary summer reading intervention program that served students completing kindergarten, first, and second grades. The students who participated in this program were recommended based on the RTI data analysis process. The summer intervention program represents how the study district embraced data-driven instruction to support students' reading and math development. Resources, materials, transportation, and curriculum planning accompanied this robust summer intervention program.

### *Study District Comprehensive Plan 2019 to 2022*

The study district developed a Study District Comprehensive Plan to ensure the ongoing analysis of student data where learning gaps were identified. Once their learning gaps were identified, targeted intervention was provided to students who needed support. The schools used this information to create building goals to design professional development related to areas of student need. In addition, this analysis of student data determined which skills teachers should possess to provide better instruction to students. The study district showed a commitment to reviewing all relevant data to develop instructional practices to ensure that SWDs continued to make progress. This commitment was further demonstrated by including the Special Education Plan for July 2018 to June 2021.

### *The Special Education Plan July 2018 to June 2021*

The Special Education Plan was developed to show the study district's commitment to reviewing all relevant data and instructional practices to ensure that SWDs made growth. This plan outlined supplementary aids and services used to support SWDs in the least restrictive environment (LRE). These supplemental aids and services included alternative assessments and or grading which matched the educational needs and cognitive abilities of the SWDs. The study district implemented a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) which ensured SWDs received academic and behavior support to be successful in the general education classroom. The study district used the data from MTSS to make informed decisions about instruction and interventions for SWDs in the general education classroom.

### *Study District Overview*

The study district was committed to using data to improve the achievement of SWDs. These efforts have increased the academic achievement of SWDs. The study district reading achievement scores continue to improve by closing the achievement gap. In addition, RTI efforts led the study district on the path toward even higher achievement. The special education teacher job description was tailored to support SWDs in inclusive settings.

### *Special Education Teacher Job Description*

In reviewing the study district documents, I also reviewed the job descriptions as they were tailored to support the overall mission of serving SWDs in inclusive settings. The job description of the special education teacher emphasizes the use of data-driven instruction to meet the individualized needs of SWDs. This approach ensures that IPE goals, assessments, teaching strategies, interventions, and support services are guided by student data. By using data-driven instruction, the special education teacher should:

1. Prepare to meet and instruct for assigned classes at designated times and locations. This preparation includes showing written evidence of class preparation upon request. Special education teachers also prepare and develop instructional materials and lessons that meet the diverse needs of the SWDs on their caseload and that target the SWD's IEP goals and objectives.
2. Strive to implement the study district's philosophy of education and instructional goals and objectives.

3. Use strategies and techniques to improve the development of language skills, cognition skills, memory skills, and sensory and perceptual motor skills as indicated in the student's IEP.
4. Develop and prepare IEPs and other special education reports in accordance with special education timelines to ensure the study district is in compliance.
5. Maintain accurate and complete student records as required by special education laws, regulations, and study district policies.
6. Monitor that IEPs / SDIs are being implemented properly across all school environments.
7. Teach socially acceptable behavior employing techniques such as behavior modification and positive reinforcement.
8. Teach personal development/functional skills such as goal setting, independence, and self-advocacy. Participant 3 stressed the importance of building the students' self-confidence to encourage them to participate in the general education classroom. P 3 stated, "Just build confidence in those students to, you know, to speak up and participate."
9. Monitor special education assistants to ensure that they are fulfilling their job responsibilities.
10. Facilitate the use of assistive devices, support technology, and aids with daily living.
11. Prepare and administer tests and assignments to evaluate the students' progress.

12. Ensure that students' goals are monitored during the duration of the IEP with progress monitoring.
13. Supports the use of all necessary supplementary aids and services to provide meaningful access.
14. Takes all necessary and reasonable precautions to protect students' equipment, materials, and facilities.
15. Schedules and hosts special education meetings within designated timelines, making sure that it's in accordance with state special education laws and regulations.
16. Serves on staff committees as required.

The reading specialist job description was also tailored to support inclusive programming for SWDs and all students in need prior to being considered for special education services. Note how the highlighted job description areas support inclusive programming and student success.

***Reading Specialist Job Description***

The job description of the reading specialist emphasizes the use of data-driven instruction to meet the individual learning needs of SWDs. This approach assures that the IPE, assessments, teaching strategies, interventions, and support services are guided by student data. The reading specialist has a similar job description as the special education teacher, with a few differences:

1. Assesses the accomplishments of students regularly.
2. Provides progress reports as required.

3. Makes provisions for being available to parents and students for education-related purposes outside the instructional day when required or requested to do so under reasonable terms.
4. Displays a comprehensive understanding of technology and 21st-century skills and their incorporation into instructional practice and methodology
5. Assumes responsibility for continued professional growth and development to include conference attendance.

***Theme 3: Special education teachers, general education teachers and administrators explain their success in reading of SWDs is due to the study district's guiding principles.***

Textual evidence was identified in all of the documents reviewed from the study district's website which included the Study District's Vision, the Study District Plan for 2015 to 2018, School Board Meeting Notes from April 2018, the Study District's Department of Special Education and Student Services Core Values, the Study District's Comprehensive Plan for 2019-2022, Special Education Plan for July 2018 to June 2021, the Study District Data Report from 2017 to 2019, and the Job Description of the Reading Specialist and Special Education Teacher. In order to demonstrate support for this theme, I describe the textual evidence and support identified in each archival document and in the semi structured interviews from the participants. In examining participant transcripts and the study district archival documents, evidence of Theme 3 emerged from the Study District's Vision, Study District Plan for 2015 to 2018, Study District Annual Report from 2016-2018, Study District Comprehensive Plan for 2019-2022, Study District

website, Special Education Plan for July 2018 to June 2021 and the Job Description of the Reading Specialist and Special Education Teacher. The Study District Plan also supported data-driven decision-making.

### *Study District Vision*

The study district's vision shows a commitment to meeting the needs of every student. The school study district values inclusive education and ensures that support systems will be in place to support SWDs in the general education classroom. Families, community members, and staff demonstrate the confidence to meet the needs of every child. The study district provides opportunities for collaboration to train these individuals to support diverse learners in the LRE. This is commitment to inclusive practices and training development is further demonstrated in the Study District Plan.

### *Study District Plan 2015 to 2018*

The Study District Plan for 2015 to 2018 demonstrated a strong commitment to inclusive practices and targeted professional development aimed at supporting the needs of SWDs. Throughout the school year 2015 to 2018, educators and staff engaged in ongoing professional development sessions focused on evidence-based strategies for inclusive instruction, differentiated teaching, and co-teaching models. These sessions equipped teachers with the skills necessary to effectively support SWDs within the general education setting. Additionally, the study district completed a three-year membership in the Membership Participation and Learning (MPL) program, which was modeled after the statewide “Include Me from the Start” initiative. This initiative emphasized the importance of full participation of students with complex support needs

in general education environments. As a result of the MPL model and the increased collaboration among general and special education teachers during team meetings, the study district successfully restructured and reallocated resources—such as support staff, co-teaching assignments, and adaptive technologies—to foster inclusive environments. Consequently, a growing number of students with significant disabilities were included in general education classrooms to the maximum extent appropriate, as mandated by IDEA (IDEA; Zirkel, 2020).

The hiring of an inclusion specialist helped support the study district's plan for resource allocation, which played a key role in advancing inclusive practices. This strategic resource allocation was fundamental in creating an inclusive environment where SWDs could thrive academically, socially, and emotionally. The inclusion specialist primarily supported SWDs receiving science and social studies instruction in the general education classroom. As a result, SWDs were able to spend more time alongside their non-disabled peers and access grade-level curriculum in a meaningful way.

The study district consistently demonstrated a commitment to inclusive practices by promoting the reading success of SWDs in the general education classroom. There was a notable increase each year in the number of SWDs educated in the general education classroom to the maximum extent possible, which is in alignment with the IDEA. For example, during the 2013 to 2014 school year, the study district provided special education services to over 64% of SWDs in general education settings for more than 80% of the school day. Furthermore, three of the study district’s 13 elementary

schools showed marked improvements in inclusive practices during that same year. The commitment of inclusive practices continues in the Study District's Annual Report.

***Annual Report 2016 and 2017, and 2018***

The annual report continued to show the study district's focus on inclusive practices. In November 2018, the study district's Board of School Directors approved the 2019 to 2022 Comprehensive Plan and Strategies. This was a road map for the upcoming years and was organized into six goals. The second goal, *Cultural Responsiveness*, specifically focused on inclusive practices, stating that the study district would "develop practices that support an inclusive, culturally responsive environment that guarantees equity and access to all students and their families—across core instruction, enrichment, and intervention."

For two consecutive years, the study district was recognized at the state level for the use of inclusive facilitators with the K to 5 Literacy Innovative Award. Additionally, the Special Education Department received dedicated funding to support inclusive practices. This included a grant from the Merck Foundation for special education materials and school board approval to apply for a U.S. Department of Education grant titled *Technical Assistance and Dissemination to Improve Services and Results for Children with Disabilities*. This grant provided up to $2,000 to help implement and sustain inclusive practices for students with significant cognitive disabilities through targeted technical assistance and resources. Professional development is critical to the sustainability of inclusive practices as outlined in the Study District Comprehensive Plan.

### *Study District Comprehensive Plan 2019 to 2022*

The Study District Comprehensive Plan emphasized the importance of professional development in improving student outcomes. It identified key areas to improve student outcomes and plans, stated the importance of shared responsibility, and ownership of professional development among all stakeholders. The plan also called for a system of accountability to ensure that professional development was aligned with efforts to increase student achievement. In addition to the emphasis on professional development, the study district extended its focus on the broader community.

### *Study District Website*

The study district promoted advocacy and awareness through community awareness. During October in recognition of Disability Awareness Month, the study district provided information and resources highlighting various disability categories to increase knowledge and understanding of the SWDs. The study district website provided resources about possibilities for teachers and families and the celebration of Disability Awareness Month.

### *Special Education Plan July 2018 to June 2021*

The Special Education Plan was a plan designed to detail the inclusive practices and professional development needed to support SWDs in the general education setting. Each year, the study district has consistently increased the number of special education students educated in the general education environment. The study district provided special education services to over 85.8% of SWDs in the general education classroom for more than 80% of the school day. This showed that the study district was committed to

integrating SWDs in the general education classroom. The study district has made a concerted effort to provide SWDs meaningful educational benefits through a highly rigorous curriculum and the LRE.

The study district implemented a variety of methods to ensure that SWDs were educated in the LRE, which follows federal guidelines. These guidelines include the provision of supplementary aids and services with a strong emphasis on professional development related to collaboration and instructional arrangements. The role of inclusion facilitator was instrumental in supporting inclusive practices. This included training in creating accommodations and modifications, particularly for students with complex needs, and ongoing support. Additionally, the inclusion facilitator developed and maintained an inclusion toolkit, which enabled teachers to access and share curricular resource materials, research, and videos across the study district to support inclusive practices. However, there were situations where there were not enough resources to meet the SWDs needs, according P1. P1 had to borrow materials from the special education teachers. P1 states, “So just not having the resources to meet the needs of the students, I think, you know, I was borrowing from them and, but sometimes I wasn't trained in what they were doing.” To ensure consistency and effectiveness in support, the study district also provided continuous professional development for paraprofessionals. These sessions emphasized best practices in supporting SWDs and aligned with the study district’s inclusive education goals. The study district took additional steps to provide support for inclusive practices by establishing an inclusive task force in 2014. The inclusive task force was established to provide meaningful inclusion for SWDs. The task force was

comprised of various stakeholders including study district staff and parents and was a catalyst to adopt more inclusive practices. As a result of the task force, SWDs in both the elementary and secondary level were supported in general education classes to a much greater extent than previous years. In response to previously unmet state targets related to general education participation, the study district prioritized training for staff focused on co-teaching models, differentiated instruction, accommodations and mod0ifications, and behavior intervention strategies. These professional learning initiatives significantly enhanced the study district's capacity to support SWDs in inclusive environments and demonstrated a long-term commitment to educational equity and access for all learners. In addition, this support led to an increase in SWDs' participation in the general education classroom. P1 states," The kids with disabilities felt they felt a little more confident to participate in the classroom."

***Special Education Job Description***

The job description of the special education teacher emphasizes the importance of the study district's guiding principles, inclusive practices, vision, professional development, and resource allocation when addressing the needs of SWDs in inclusive settings. In the following section, I have provided a sample of the descriptors that support this theme. The special education teacher should:

1. Provide opportunities for students to be included in the least restrictive environment with non-disabled peers
2. Attend professional meetings to maintain and improve professional competence

3. Attend educational conferences to maintain and improve professional competence
4. Attend teacher training workshops to maintain and improve professional competence
5. Attend staff meetings.

***Reading Specialist Job Description***

The job description of the reading specialist emphasizes the importance of the study district's guiding principles, inclusive practices, vision, professional development, and resource allocation when addressing the needs of SWDs in inclusive settings. In the following section, I have provided a sample of the reading specialist job descriptors that support this theme. The reading specialist should:

1. Attend staff meetings as required
2. Assume responsibility for continued professional growth development to include coursework.
3. Assume responsibility for continued professional growth development to include participation in PLCs, etc.

***Theme 4: Special education teachers, general education teachers, and administrators explain their success in reading of SWD's is due to the use of evidence-based practices, differentiation, and interventions to support SWDs in inclusive settings.***

Textual evidence was identified in all of the documents reviewed from the study district's website which included the Study District's Vision, Study District Plan for 2015 to 2018, Annual Report from 2016 to 2017, School Board Meeting Notes from April

2018, the Study District's Department of Special Education and Student Services core values, the Study District's Comprehensive Plan for 2019 to 2022, Special Education Plan for July 2018 to June 2021, the Study District Data Report from 2017 to 2019, and the Job Description of the Reading Specialist and Special Education Teacher. In order to demonstrate support for this theme, I describe the textual evidence and support identified in each archival document and in the semi structured interviews from the participants. In examining participant transcripts and the study district archival documents, evidence of Theme 4 emerged from the Study District's Vision, Study District Plan for 2015 to 2018, Study District Annual Report for 2016 to 2018, the Study District's Special Education Department, Special Education Plan for July 2018 to June 2021 and the Job Description of the Reading Specialist and the Special Education Teacher. The Study District's Vision also supported data-driven decision-making.

***Study District Vision***

The study district's vision focuses on strategies being used to address students' learning differences and strategies used to ensure high levels of achievement. These strategies include utilizing data-driven instruction, implementing differentiated instruction, and fostering an inclusive learning environment. Building on the study district's vision, a plan was developed to guide the implementation of inclusive practices. The plan to support inclusive practices is reflected in the Study District Plan for 2015 to 2018.

### *Study District Plan 2015 to 2018*

The Study District Plan documents how to support SWDs in inclusive settings through the use of interventions, data, teacher collaboration, and differentiated instruction. Interventions and differentiated instruction, and structured grouping in the inclusive setting are matched to address the SWD's needs where they feel supported and valued. Data is used to inform SWD's placement in the LRE. The study district outlines teacher collaboration occurring throughout the year, such as morning planning time to plan the instruction for SWDs in inclusive settings. During the interview, P1 and P3 stated that they had common planning time. P2 had common planning time with the special education teacher first in the morning, before the students arrived in class. P1 explained that they did have common planning time "from 8:25 to 9:00." The administration at P3's school provided common planning time for the special education teachers and the general education teachers. P3 stated, "They always made sure that the special education teachers' planning time, as well as the general education teachers ' planning time aligned, and were at the same time, so we did co-plan, all of the lessons together."

### *Annual Report 2016 to 2017*

According to the Annual Report, the study district was awarded a 5-year grant. This grant helped the study district make great strides in literacy achievement and family literacy over the life of the grant. The study district received $5,106,000 to provide instruction and support to students for literacy development, ages birth through 12th grade. Funds were earmarked for the improvement of literacy from birth to 12$^{th}$ grade. In

November 2018, the study district Board of Directors approved the 2019 to 2022 Comprehensive Plan. This plan was organized around six goals. One of the goals was academic excellence. Accordingly, the goal included, “The study district will improve student achievement both in growth and mastery by implementing evidence-based instructional practices that address student needs.” The Department of Special Education also included specific verbiage on their website page that supported the overall goal of improving student reading for SWDs.

### *Department of Special Education*

To support SWD's in inclusive settings, the Department of Special Education at the study district developed core values to ensure student success. Special education values included maintaining “high expectations for all students by having access to a rigorous curriculum with specially designed instruction accessible for student success.” Secondly, “Each student's learning path will be individualized with services and varied supports available across all settings as discussed with their individual team.” The Department of Special Education’s website included the importance of “celebrating diversity and belonging” by advocating for and educating others on disability and diversity as part of the human condition and the fundamental right of belonging as valued members of the global community.” The Special Education Plan detailed support in terms of personnel and resources to support reading instruction and achievement.

### *Special Education Plan July 2018 to June 2021*

This plan outlines the role of supplementary aids and services and supporting SWDs in the LRE. Flexible grouping, such as appropriate small group instruction,

individualized instruction, and resource periods, were supplementary aids and services used to support SWDs in the inclusive classroom. Instructional adaptations used to support SWDs in the inclusive classroom include the method of presentation, reduction of the pace of instruction, additional time for instruction, and pre-teaching or reteaching. Instructional arrangements such as cooperative learning strategies and flexible grouping support SWDs in the LRE. Supplementary aids and services to support SWDs in the LRE include modified curricular goals and assessments, such as appropriately matching the educational needs and cognitive abilities of SWDs.

During the interviews, the two reading specialists explained that the success of reading among SWDs was the result of small group instruction, thus allowing them to implement the evidence-based individualized reading interventions to support the development of reading skills. Small group instruction involves the teaching of three to four students together in a small group. Small group instruction occurred both in the general education classroom and outside the general education classroom and was conducted by the reading specialist. During small group instruction, the reading specialist reinforced previously learned skills or emphasized new skill development.

These small groups were formed through collaborations between the reading specialist and the general education teacher. The small groups sometimes contained higher-level reading students and lower level reading students. P1 stated, “We would sometimes put higher kids with the kids that had some reading difficulties to try and just help them.” The higher-level reading students helped the lower level reading students read unknown or unfamiliar words.

Reading specialists encountered challenges when providing small group instruction to SWDs in the general education classroom and outside the regular classroom. A challenge that the reading specialists experienced in a small group consisting of SWDs and non SWDs was having the non SWDs dominate the conversation. When non SWDs dominated the conversation, this led to SWDs not actively participating in small group discussions or activities. P1 said, "So it would be hard to get the kids like my kids, the lower 5% or 7% of kids that I work with, to participate." P 1 solved this challenge of SWDs not actively participating in small group discussions or activities by implementing fluid grouping. Fluid grouping, also known as flexible grouping, is defined by Radencich and McKay (1995) as "grouping that is not static, where members of the reading group change frequently" (p.11). Radencich and McKay (1995) emphasized the importance of teachers carefully considering various grouping methods, advantages and disadvantages while planning for flexible or fluid grouping. P1 stated, "…there were fluid groups because I didn't want one group, one set of kids …. overtaking the conversation."

Another challenge expressed by P1 was motivating SWDs to participate in small group instruction in the general education classroom. P1 explained,

> I know I had students that expressed to me that they just, they weren't confident in themselves, and they knew they struggled. And so rather than kind of opening their mouths and showing everybody that they didn't know what to do they would just sit and stay quiet and let others do the work.

The study district implemented numerous research-based interventions, included but not limited to: Wilson Reading, Just Words, Read 180, Leveled Literacy Instruction, and more. In addition, the study district implemented Response to Intervention (RTI) at the elementary level. The research-based interventions helped the students develop their skills in language arts.

### *Language Arts Philosophy*

The language arts philosophy developed by the study district states that students develop thinking skills through language arts such as reading, writing, listening, viewing, and speaking. Students grow personally, socially, and intellectually while learning language arts. Students experience the process of learning to read.

### *Job Description of the Special Education Teacher*

The special education teacher must have the ability to employ inclusive practices to support SWD's in the general education classroom. The special education teacher provides opportunities for students to be included in the LRE with non-disabled peers; attends professional meetings, educational conferences, and teacher training workshops to maintain and improve professional competence; and attends staff meetings.

### *Job Description of the Reading Specialist*

The reading specialist attends staff meetings as requested; assumes responsibility for continued professional development to include coursework and participation in PLCs, etc.

**Discrepant Cases**

Researchers should actively seek out and report cases that do not fit the emerging pattern or themes in their data (Creswell, 2013). In my study, there was no discrepant data. However, I would have included discrepant cases, which would have increased the credibility of my analysis. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), incorporating discrepant cases in qualitative analysis strengthens the credibility of the analysis.

**Evidence of Quality**

Ensuring quality qualitative research is crucial, as it strengthens the validity and credibility of this project study. Data was collected through semi structured interviews. I interviewed two reading specialists and one special education teacher. I also analyzed archival documents from the study district's website. The emergent themes reflect the participants' responses and the analysis of archival documents.

Interviews were conducted either by Zoom or phone at an agreeable time and day. Saldaña (2021) stated that member checking validates whether the interpretations and coding accurately reflect the participant's views and invites feedback from participants to confirm or refine emerging findings. The participants were emailed a summary of findings to check for accuracy of their data.

To guarantee credibility and validity, a member checking process was implemented throughout the transcription and data analysis process. Participants were required to inform me via email whether the results reflected their data. Participants were asked to review the findings and correct any inaccuracies. If the findings did not

accurately reflect their data, they were instructed to indicate the necessary modifications. I requested that they return the reviewed transcript within 7 business days.

**Systematic Process**

To protect participant privacy and comply with IRB policies, all data was anonymized. Each participant was assigned a numerical pseudonym after their interview, and all identifying information was removed. Following the transcription of the interview, data were analyzed using Yin's (2018) five-step process: compiling, disseminating, interpreting, reassembling, and concluding.

**Member Checking**

Member checking is a process in which the researcher solicits participants' views of the credibility of the findings and interpretations" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p.261). Participants were allowed to review the researcher's findings and to provide corrections if they were dissatisfied with the findings from the study. Each participant was emailed my findings from the interview along with the original transcripts. Seven business days were allotted for each participant to provide feedback on the findings and transcripts. None of the participants requested any modifications or revisions to their answers.

**Reflective Journal / Bracketing**

I developed a reflective journal to self-monitor and control any biases throughout the research process. I recorded notes and any observations I noticed during the interview and developed probing questions. Interviews were transcribed using Otter.ai and compared with the audio recording. Every interview was transcribed within one week after the scheduled interview.

## Summary of Findings

The study findings addressed one RQ that guided this study: How teachers and administrators explain the successful reading achievement of SWDs in the study school district. Four themes emerged from this RQ based on archival data and based on the seven questions and probes I asked the participants during their interviews. Theme 1 is special education teachers, general education teachers, and administrators explain the successful reading achievement of SWDs is due to the collaborative practices embedded in the study district's beliefs and culture. Theme 2 is special education teachers, general education teachers, and administrators explain the successful reading achievement of SWDs is due to data-driven instruction and decision making. Theme 3 is special education teachers, general education teachers, and administrators explain the successful reading achievement of SWDs is due to the study district's guiding principles, inclusive practices, vision, professional development, and resource allocation. Theme 4 is special education teachers, general education teachers, and administrators explain the successful reading achievement of SWDs is due to the use of evidence-based practices, differentiation, and intervention to support SWDs in inclusive settings.

Theme 1 is special education teachers, general education teachers, and administrators explain the successful reading achievement of SWDs is due to collaborative practices embedded in the study district's belief and culture. Teacher collaboration helps special education and general education teachers develop a group strategy for teaching, assisting one another, and making decisions when they work together (Surender, 2023). This study district's plan reflects this collaborative practice by

establishing regular team meetings, which included educators, parents, and service providers to monitor SWDs' progress and develop interventions. Co-planning between general education and special education teachers reinforced inclusive instruction using evidence-based strategies. Collaboration is the catalyst for maximizing higher leverage and evidence-based practices to help SWDs in the general education classroom (Jenkins & Murawski, 2023). These practices reflect the conceptual framework of joint product activity and contextualization of the CREDE model, emphasizing collaboration among educators and alignment of instruction to each student's background and learning needs (Tharp, 1997). Consistent collaboration builds capacity by improving the general educators' skills, knowledge, and confidence. They learn how to implement accommodations, understand IEPs, and adapt lessons effectively. When general educators build capacity, they support SWDs by improving their academic and social outcomes and provide better access to the general education curriculum.

The Special Education Plan supported collaborative practices through the IEP team participation, co-teaching, and professional development initiatives. IDEA prioritizes placement in the LRE and collaborative IEP processes. A study conducted by Gourvennec et al. (2024) suggested that when school leaders facilitate shared planning and co-teaching, such as aligning schedules and providing common planning time, there is a positive correlation with student academic success. There are two levels of co-teaching. Level 1 includes the one teach, one support model. In this model, one teacher leads the instruction while the other teacher provides support to the students by circling the room, providing one-on-one small group support, monitoring behavior, and checking

for understanding. Level 2 co-teaching includes parallel teaching, alternative teaching, station teaching, and team teaching. In parallel teaching, both teachers instruct half the class. This provides a good teacher-to-student ratio. In the alternative teaching model, one teacher works with a large group while the other teacher works with a smaller group. The station teaching model occurs when students are divided into groups and go to stations or learning centers in the classroom. The teachers may rotate with the student or may lead the station or learning center. Team teaching occurs when both teachers share the entire instructional process (King-Sears et al., 2021).

The Special Education Parent Alliance provided networking and training opportunities that facilitated family engagement and interagency collaboration, thus contributing to positive outcomes for SWDs. Schools are held accountable for their facilitation of parent involvement under the Parent Involvement Part B of IDEA. This not only includes the parents being part of the IEP team but also engagement in outreach, which supports school and family collaboration (Elbaum, 2025). The study district consistently demonstrated a commitment to a shared responsibility to educate all students through a collaborative approach across several contexts in the study district.

Theme 2 is special education teachers, general education teachers, and administrators explain their success in the reading achievement of SWDs is due to data-driven instruction and decision making. The study district's use of data-driven instruction and decision making improved the SWD's reading proficiency and narrowed the reading achievement gap between the SWDs and non SWDs. Vembye et al. (2023) provided suggestions on how teachers can use data to inform instruction. This includes collecting

and preparing data from a variety of sources such as annual, interim, and classroom assessment data. The participants used formal and informal assessments to help evaluate the SWD's proficiency and guide instruction. Through the use of multiple research-based instruction, SWDs improved their reading achievement. The Participants implemented several teacher strategies to help achieve reading proficiency of SWDs. These teacher practices encompassed the instruction of routines, the adoption of reading programs, and strategies for equipping SWDs for reading instruction in general education settings. The instructional strategies provided SWDs with the confidence to participate in classroom activities. The study district staff used data to develop annual goals and to create needs-driven professional development. RTI data and MTSS data were used to make informed instructional decisions and determine academic and behavioral support for students. The overall study district data-driven inclusive approach led to improved reading proficiency narrowing of the achievement gap for SWDs.

Theme 2 reflects the conceptual framework principles of contextualization, instructional conversation, and joint product activity. Contextualization refers to connecting teaching and learning to the students' lives and needs. The study district demonstrated contextualization by using ongoing assessment to inform instruction. Instructional conversation is the idea that learning is enhanced through the sharing of data when educators share data and instructional strategies. Joint product activity refers to the collaborative efforts of the educators and administrators analyzing data and developing lesson plans to meet the students' needs. Data-driven instruction supported inclusive

practices and professional development to help increase SWDs' reading achievement success.

Theme 3 is special education teachers, general education teachers, and administrators explain the success of reading achievement of SWD is due to the study district's guiding principles, inclusive practices, vision, professional development, and resource allocation. Textual evidence and interview transcripts revealed consistent support for inclusive education and professional development was consistently offered for staff and was aimed at supporting SWDs in the general education classroom. The study district showed a firm commitment to inclusive practices, evidenced in their vision. There was an emphasis on collaboration among families, staff, and community members to ensure SWDs' needs were met in the LRE in the Study District Special Education Plan. Participation in the MPL model program and the hiring of an inclusive specialist led to increased co-teaching, differentiated instruction, and an increased number of SWDs educated in inclusive settings (Study District Special Education Comprehensive Plan 2018 to 2021; Study District Plan 2019 to 2021).

The Study District's Annual and Comprehensive Plans included specific actions that leaders and study district staff engaged in to promote inclusion and provide professional development to increase SWDs' achievement. The study district's website also contributed by raising awareness during Disability Awareness month and offering resources to families. The Special Education Plans showed a growth in the number of SWDs included in the general education classroom and professional development focused on co-teaching and accommodations. According to Sims and Fletcher-Wood

(2021), continuous professional development is important for inclusive practices to be implemented and collaborative relationships to be maintained. The participants' interviews support the study district's efforts and inclusive practices. The study district created an inclusion task force and increased training for paraprofessionals and teachers, which were critical in implementing inclusive practices. The textual evidence and participant interviews show an effort to foster inclusive practices through the use of data-targeted professional development and collaboration. Joint product activity and instructional conversation are the CREDE principles (Tharp, 1997) reflected in Theme 3. Joint product activity and instructional conversation were demonstrated by teachers' co-teaching and planning efforts.

Theme 4 is special education teachers, general education teachers, and administrators explain the success of reading achievement of SWDs is due to the use of evidence-based practices, differentiation, and intervention to support SWDs in inclusive settings. A review of documents from the study district and participant interviews demonstrates a strong commitment to collaborative practices and the academic success of SWDs. The study district emphasized data-driven instruction, differentiated strategies, and inclusive practices to address the SWDs' academic needs. The Study District Plan outlined the use of targeted interventions, data-informed placement decisions, and collaboration between general and special education teachers. Consistently, collecting formative assessment data and reviewing the data is needed to adjust instruction or groupings (Cook & McDuffie-Landrum, 2020). The participants' interviews confirmed common planning time. The 2016 to 2017 Annual Report of the study district highlighted

a grant that supported literacy advancement and evidence-based instructional practices. High expectations for SWDs were promoted in the Special Education Department. The Special Education Plan (2018 to 2021) reinforced supporting SWDs in the LRE through the use of flexible grouping, cooperative learning, and supplementary aids. The partnership between the general education teachers and special education teachers allowed them to plan how to personalize lessons, adapt curricula, and provide supplementary aids and services (Surender, 2023). These instructional supports aligned with inclusive practices, which were designed to ensure all students with and without disabilities were able to participate and benefit from the general education experience (Surender, 2023). Reading specialists worked with SWDs in small groups and these small groups were formed collaboratively with general education teachers and special education teachers. Research-based interventions and RTI were used to strengthen instruction. RTI is a more effective model in the identification and intervention of reading difficulties. It is a more personalized method for those students who need more individualized instruction (Arias-Gundín & García Llamazares, 2021). Theme 4 reflects the principles of contextualization, joint productive activity, and instructional conversation from the CREDE model (Tharp, 1997). Instruction was contextualized to meet each student's needs. Joint productive activities and instructional conversations occurred using collaboration and co-teaching. In the next section, I describe the project deliverable, a white paper with recommendations for the study district stakeholders to address the findings of the study.

## Project Deliverable

In Section 3, I present a deliverable project that is aligned with the study's objectives, research question, conceptual framework, and literature review. The deliverable, a white paper, is designed to inform and inspire stakeholders to consider implementing the recommendation derived from my research.

To help other school districts improve the reading achievement of SWDs, the white paper will be presented to school stakeholders. The report includes the following recommendations:

1. Establish a culture of collaboration in which educators are provided with common planning time, professional development on co-teaching, accommodations, and modifications to ensure practices are embedded in instruction to promote a network of support for SWDs in inclusive settings.
2. Promote inclusive models of practice to ensure SWDs are included in the general education classrooms with access to the general education curriculum and appropriate grade-level reading content with supports.
3. Provide targeted and systemic professional development that includes evidence-based literacy practices, inclusive strategies, high-impact practices, and data-driven instruction and decision-making.

## Conclusion

In Section 2, I reviewed the basic qualitative design, participants, textual evidence, data collection, data analysis, summary of findings, and project deliverable.

The four themes were linked to participant responses, textual evidence, literature review, and the conceptual framework based on CREDE.

Analysis of themes from the study suggested that the successful reading achievement of SWDs is due to collaborative practices, data-driven instruction, and inclusive practices. Teachers need to implement these practices to properly meet the needs of SWDs in inclusive settings. In Section 3, I discuss the creation of a white paper that offers recommendations to stakeholders to improve the reading achievement of the SWDs.

# Section 3: The Project

The issue explored in this basic qualitative study was how archival data supported and how teachers and administrators explained the successful reading achievement of SWDs in the study school district. The gap in practice that this study addressed is that it was unknown how the study district achieved such success in SWDs' reading achievement. I reviewed archival data from the study school district and interviewed three participants to determine how SWDs achieved successful reading achievement scores on the state accountability assessments. I initiated data analysis by employing open coding, where I identified open descriptive codes in two rounds of coding and then collapsed the codes into categories and themes by examining patterns in the data. Based on my analysis of the data, I determined that a white paper would be appropriately aligned to inform and persuade stakeholders of the study findings and to compose recommendations for study district stakeholders in other school districts regarding best practices for increasing the reading achievement of SWDs.

Based on the analysis of the data from the archival data and participant interviews four themes were identified. The four themes that emerged from this study are: (a) special education teachers general education teachers and administrators explain the successful reading achievement of SWDs is due to the collaborative practices embedded in the study districts beliefs and culture, (b) special education teachers general education teachers and administrators explain their success in reading achievement due to the data-driven instruction and decision making, (c) special education teachers general education teachers and administrators explain their success in reading achievement of SWDs is due to the

study district's guiding principles, vision, professional development and resource allocation, and (d) special education teachers, general education teachers, and administrators explain their success in reading the achievement of SWDs is due to the use of evidence-based practices differentiation and intervention.

In Section 3, I outline the goals of the white paper and demonstrate how the deliverable project will be used to inform stakeholders in other public-school districts about how to increase the reading success of SWDs in general education classrooms in inclusionary settings. I also share the rationale for selecting the white paper format, followed by a review of current scholarly literature that supports the relevance and design of the project. Then, I summarize the study's findings and outline the recommendations included in the white paper. Additionally, I examine how the topic, purpose, conceptual framework, and study findings align with the goals of the white paper. The section concludes with a detailed description of the white paper, an evaluation plan, and a discussion of its potential impact on social change.

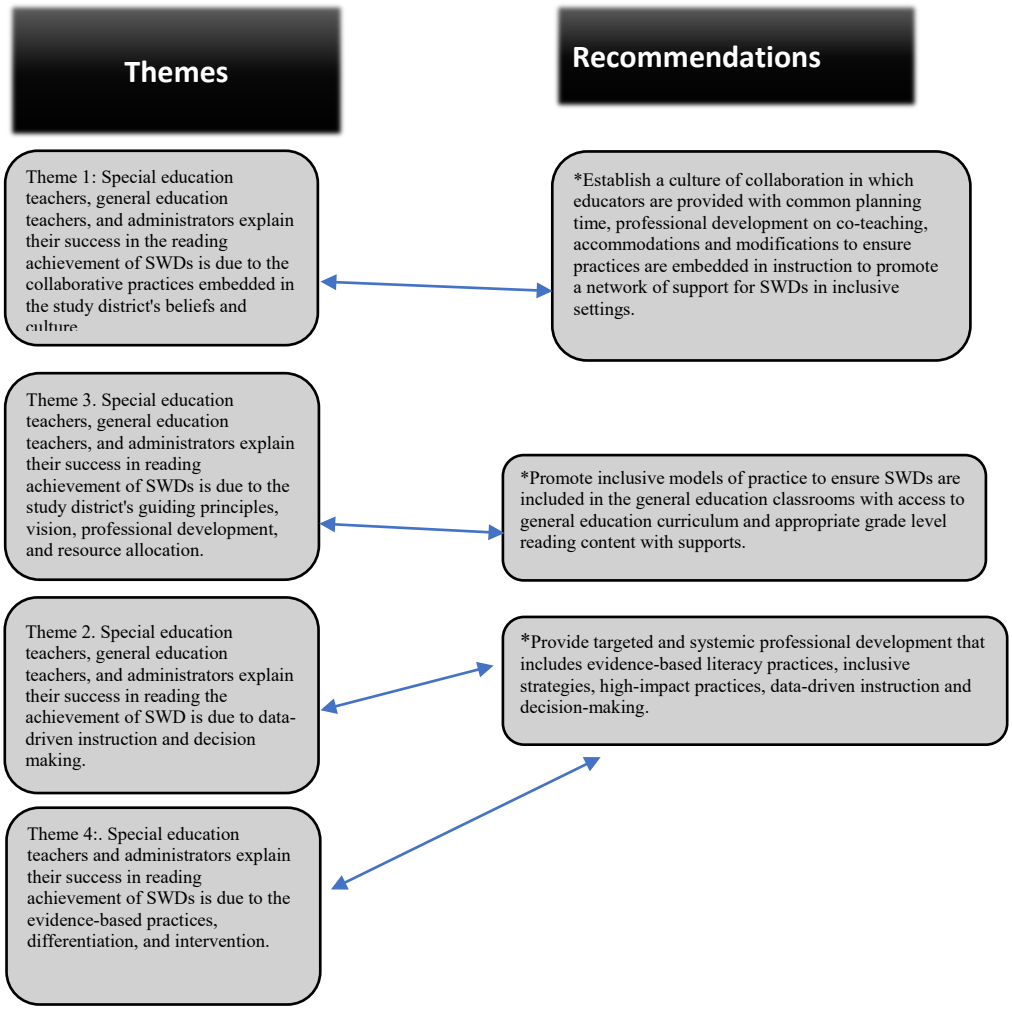
## Description and Goals of a White Paper

Based on the data analysis results, I created a white paper including specific recommendations emerging from the data analysis results. The white paper is aligned with the Appreciative Inquiry Model (Moore, 2021). Instead of centering on the lack of reading success of SWDs, the white paper will highlight successful practices, effective inclusive practices, and professional development models that have already yielded positive outcomes. The white paper emphasizes strengths and building upon those strengths to create positive change.

The three recommendations outlined in the white paper are included in Figure 5 and aligned to the study findings.

**Figure 5**

*White Paper Recommendations Derived by Theme*




## Conceptual Framework

Based on the Appreciative Inquiry Model and its four-step process, the conceptual framework was established. Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is “a way to engage groups of

people in self-determined change. It focuses on what's working rather than what's not working and leads people to co-design their future" (Moore, 2021).

The AI model consists of 4 steps: Discover, Dream, Design, and Destiny. The white paper will follow the 4 steps in improving the reading achievement of SWDs. Figure 6 reflects an example of the AI model:

**Figure 6**

*Appreciative Inquiry Model*

Note: Moore, C. (2021). *What Is Appreciative Inquiry? A Brief History and Real-Life Examples*. PositivePsychology.com

During the Discovery phase, stakeholders will use current data and research to identify what's working in inclusive reading instructions. During this phase, special and general education teachers can participate in discussions on what strategies they have used to work with SWDs. Study districts can also collect data on where SWDs have made reading gains to determine what is working.

During the Dream phase, study districts can establish a future goal where SWDs show gains in reading achievement by having access to grade-level content. Study districts should create a vision statement that demonstrates equity and access for SWDs.

The Design phase is the development of systems, structures, and strategies that support the study district's vision. Recommendations include ongoing professional development, scheduling collaborative planning time, and using data-driven instruction.

The goal of the Destiny phase is to put the plan into action. The Destiny phase consists of regularly reviewing reading data specific to SWDs, peer coaching, and leadership teams to guide and support the plan's implementation. When school districts apply the AI Model, they will develop a strategic roadmap for improvement based on what is already working. In the following section, I explain the rationale behind selecting a white paper genre to propose recommendations for increasing the reading achievement of SWDs.

## Rationale

For my research, I completed a basic qualitative study to explore how archival data and how teachers and administrators explain the successful reading achievement of SWDs in the study school district. My study was guided by one research question that focused on how special education teachers, general education teachers, and administrators at the study schools explained the success in reading for SWDs in general education classroom settings.

The study's findings revealed four themes in response to the research question that were: (a) special education teachers, general education teachers, and administrators explain their success in the reading achievement of SWDs is due to the collaborative practices embedded in the study district's beliefs and culture, (b) special education teachers, general education teachers, and administrators explain their success in the

reading achievement of SWDs is due to data-driven instruction and decision making, (c) special education teachers, general education teachers, and administrators explain their success in reading achievement of SWDs is due to the study district's guiding principles, vision, professional development, and resource allocation and (d) special education teachers general education teachers administrators explain their success in reading achievement of SWDs is due to the evidence-based practices, differentiation, and intervention.

The white paper was an appropriate choice for the project genre based on the themes identified from the data analysis in Section 2. The white paper will serve the purpose of providing recommendations on how to improve the reading success of SWDs in the general education classrooms and the white paper will offer evidence-based solutions to possibly influence decision makers in other school districts who may be interested in addressing the reading needs of SWDs (Purdue Online Writing Lab, n.d.).

The decision to choose a white paper for my study stemmed from the data analysis results, which revealed a pressing need to address the reading success of SWDs in general education classrooms. The study findings of this basic qualitative study stressed the importance of greater stakeholder involvement as a pressing need to address the reading needs of SWDs. White papers should be used to inform or persuade stakeholders by clearly stating the problem, articulating the purpose of the study and sharing key findings. The primary goal of this white paper is to inform and engage stakeholders in public school districts, encouraging them to consider and implement the study’s recommendations to promote the reading achievement of SWDs in inclusionary

settings. The ideas presented within this white paper hold the potential to drive meaningful social change by increasing the reading success of SWDs in the general education classrooms.

## Review of Literature

In this literature review, I present current research and explain the white paper project to support the study findings described in Section 2 and also to support the recommendations that flow from the study findings. In this literature review, I explain how the white paper is the appropriate project genre aligned to the study findings, the nature of the white paper, and I describe the best practice recommendations aligned to the study findings and to the literature. The issue being addressed is how teachers and administrators explain the reading success of SWDs in the general education classroom. I will use the white paper genre to provide recommendations to inform other stakeholders about actions and strategies to consider that were identified by this basic qualitative study as instrumental in aiding the reading success of SWDs in the general education classroom. The literature review centers on white papers in education that address establishing a collaborative culture, promoting inclusive practices, and providing targeted professional development.

In the literature review, I will also highlight relevant peer-reviewed research that supports the recommendations in the white paper. It will specifically address the most effective method for establishing a culture of collaboration, promoting inclusive practices, and providing targeted professional development. I searched Walden University's online databases using Eric, Sage, Google Scholar, and EBSCOhost

databases. I conducted literature search using the following phrases: *white papers*, *teacher collaboration, inclusive practices,* and *professional development*. I am confident that the literature review reached saturation, as repeated searches and citation tracking consistently yielded no new or relevant articles.

**White Paper**

In the white paper, I aim to inform a specific audience and support their decision-making with well-researched insights. The white paper is designed to direct the reader to a specific decision using facts and logic to promote a particular viewpoint. An effective white paper positions the author as a knowledgeable authority and lends credibility to the recommendations presented (Publishing State, 2023). The goal of this research was to determine how teachers and administrators achieved the reading achievement success of SWDs in the general education classroom in the study district. This white paper explores the essential components of inclusive education and presents best practices, supported by recent research, to guide educational leaders in strengthening inclusive policies and classroom practices.

**Teacher Collaboration**

Teacher collaboration is essential to support SWDs in inclusive settings. Bennett et al. (2021) reported a lack of collaboration between general and special education teachers. Collaboration allows teachers to better understand SWDs'needs and to better prepare and execute instruction and services more effectively (Robiyanech, 2020). Co-teaching, professional learning communities, and interdisciplinary teams are types of teacher collaboration. Co-teaching is defined as two or more professionals delivering

substantive instruction to a diverse and blended group of students in a single physical space (Vembye et al., 2023). Co-teaching is a collaborative partnership between professional peers with complementary expertise, aimed at upholding the rigor of the general education curriculum while incorporating Specially Designed Instruction (SDI) to meet the needs of SWDs (King-Scales et al., 2021). SWDs receive meaningful educational experiences when there is collaboration between special and general education teachers and school administrators (IRIS Center, n.d.). Vembye et al. (2023) identify teacher assistants/aides as a collaborative model. The assistant teacher/aide is seen as playing a secondary role relative to the general teacher. Team teaching is another form of team collaboration. Team teaching is defined as two or more general education teachers sharing instructional and/or behavioral responsibilities in the classroom (Vembye et al., 2023).

Teacher collaboration leads to improved instructional quality and enhanced problem-solving and shared accountability. According to Shand and Goddard (2024) teacher collaboration leads to a change in teacher practice, instructional climate, and trust relations. Their study found that schools with higher initial levels of collaboration reported greater improvements over 2 years in differentiated instruction, student-centered focus, shared responsibility, and trust among colleagues and stakeholders. Additionally, increases in collaborative practices over that period were linked to even greater gains in teacher quality, school climate, and trust. Accordingly, Vembye et al. (2023) conducted a systematic review and meta-analysis of 280 quantitative research studies on the effectiveness of collaborative models. The researchers found that collaborative models of

instruction significantly increased student achievement compared to either single-taught or special education models.

Over the past three decades, there has been a steady rise in the number of SWDs who receive most of their education in the general education classrooms. As this shift occurred, it brought about notable challenges, making teacher collaboration essential for effective problem-solving and support (Friend & Barron, 2025). A study conducted by King-Sears et al. (2021) found that SWDs who received instruction in a co-taught setting performed better academically than SWDs in a special education setting. In this study, a special education setting consisted of resource, self-contained, or a combination of resource and self-contained.

Collaboration takes time. A study conducted by Tallman (2021) emphasized the importance of fostering a collaborative culture by allocating dedicated time for teachers to work together and create an environment free from pressure. When school leaders foster such a culture, they promote trust among staff members. As a result, professional learning communities are more likely to develop, bringing together educators with shared goals in a supportive setting focused on continuous improvement and instructional growth. A study conducted by Ma and Marion (2024) found that distributed leadership is directly associated with teacher collaboration. The study findings revealed that school leaders can influence teacher collaboration by cultivating a culture of shared responsibilities, shared information, and open communication. Similarly, Shand and Goddard (2024) confirmed the importance of teacher collaboration as their study findings indicated that teacher collaboration is a positive indicator of growth in teacher practice,

instructional, climate, and trust. Inclusive practices are critical for SWDs' academic achievement and access to the general education curriculum in inclusionary settings.

There are barriers to delivering co-teaching services to SWDs. Alnasser (2020) explained the barriers to the successful implementation of co-teaching in inclusive classrooms. The researcher found that general and special education teachers expressed: a lack of shared vision of coaching; a lack of co-teaching planning time; a lack of effective instructional supervision and establishment of clear expectations; and insufficient opportunities for professional development. Collaboration time, shared vision, and administrative support are central to the implementation of effective co-teaching models in inclusionary settings.

Teacher collaboration is essential in improving the reading achievement of SWDs. When special education and general education teachers work together, they can co-plan lessons, align instructional strategies, and ensure that accommodations and modifications are used to support SWDs, in the general education classroom. Inclusive practices are designed to support collaborative practices by providing meaningful participation.

**Inclusive Practice**

Inclusive practices and strategies promote the inclusion of SWDs in general education. Inclusive education is a philosophy that ensures all students, regardless of ability, background, or learning need to have access to quality education in general education settings (Deroncele-Acosta & Ellis, 2024). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was designed to promote a free and appropriate public education

(FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE) for SWDs (Steward, 2024). According to research, SWDs achieve greater academic results and social outcomes when included in the general education classroom and experience improved postsecondary outcomes such as graduating from high school (IRIS Center, n.d.).

Delivering instruction to SWDs in the LRE is a cornerstone of IDEA and to exemplary inclusionary practices. However, LRE not only involves placing SWDs in general education but also requires continuous evaluation and adjustments based on SWDs' needs, according to Stewart (2024). Effective inclusive practices require school staff to be prepared with planning and instructional strategies to provide accessible and equitable instruction to SWDs. In addition, providing time for co-planning is essential for general and special education teachers to work together and develop common goals and to discuss their roles and responsibilities. Administrators' support is needed to provide the proper support in funding and staffing inclusive co-teaching models to support SWDs in general education (Chiappe et al., 2025). Administrators need to understand and arrange support between the SWDs' current abilities and environmental demands. For example, a student who decodes text slowly may need targeted supports to participate in a reading comprehension activity. Administrators can analyze the classroom expectations (e.g., complete assignments on time); routines (e.g., partner reading); learning activities (e.g., identify the main idea); academic content (e.g., grade level reading standards); and physical layout (e.g., access to reading materials). Based on this information, supports such as text-to-speech software, audio versions of texts, extended time, or graphic organizers may be. provided to help students access the material and demonstrate

comprehension effectively (Thompson, 2022). When adjustments to the environment are made, this allows SWDs to fully participate in the general education classroom. Providing effective instructional support to SWDs in inclusionary settings involves strategic processes and teamwork.

Systems and collaborative partnerships must be used to support SWDs in inclusionary settings so that effective instructional practices can be implemented. According to Walker et al. (2023), there are three key considerations for effectively supporting inclusion in general education classrooms, which are: recognizing students based on their strengths, abilities, and specific support needs; using a structured approach to plan and organize these supports; and fostering strong collaborative team-based efforts. According to Thompson (2022), before designing and implementing individualized supports in general education classrooms, educational teams benefit from gaining an understanding of the classroom environment as well as the strengths and needs of SWDs. Strategically gathering assessment information to drive data decision-making is an important practice for SWDs.

Using data to make decisions is a strategy that supports the timely selection of appropriate strategies to support the progress of SWDs. Gathering a wide range of assessment information plays a role in understanding SWD's strengths, abilities, and support needs. Melloy et al. (2022) and Pennington et al. (2023) identified the use of data-driven decision-making as a high-leverage practice for inclusive classrooms. High-level practices (HLPs) are evidence-based instructional strategies that K-12 educators can use to effectively teach a wide range of learners and academic content (Brownell et al.,

2020). The use of HLPs leads to more productive support planning (Wehmeyer & Kurth, 2020). Data or assessment information that is current provides educators with the information to tailor the strategies used in inclusive settings based on student-identified functioning levels. Assessment information can be gathered through observations, interviews, questionnaires, rating scales, work samples, and record reviews, which develop a profile of students' preferences, abilities, and support needs in the general education classroom (Thompson, 2022). Thus, teachers should proactively plan to gather data to reflect the functioning level of SWDs while concurrently monitoring the progress of students. Once the current data is gathered, educators plan the instructional supports needed to help the student continue their progress in whatever area of support is needed. In summary, recognizing students based on their strengths and abilities allows educators to determine the best course of action for organizing the identified support of the SWDs in inclusionary settings.

The next step is the process for planning or organizing support. Once there is an understanding between environmental demands and student abilities, teachers and administrators need to consider how to adapt classroom instruction and assessment practices for SWDs in the general education classroom. This can be achieved by incorporating the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and all Tier 1 academic and social behavior instruction within a Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) (CAST, 2024). The use of UDL encourages teachers to intentionally design lessons and classroom environments that provide multiple means of representation (e.g., presenting content in different formats); multiple means of engagement (e.g., connecting

learning to students interests and experiences to boost motivation), and multiple means of action and expression (e.g., allows students to demonstrate their understanding through various methods (CAST, 2024). Instructional supports expand the access for SWDs to master the general education curriculum.

Accessing the general education curriculum in inclusionary settings is the goal for SWDs. Instructional supports, such as adaptations to teaching practices and materials, need to be discussed by teachers and administrators to ensure that SWDs can meaningfully participate in all instructional activities (Thompson, 2022). Similarly, teachers and administrators need to consider participation support, such as peer support arrangements, communication supports, and behavioral supports (Rowe et al., 2022). Proper selection and implementation of instructional, behavioral, and technological supports expand the opportunities for SWDs in inclusionary settings and support their achievement. Thompson (2022) identified that using the appropriate supports allows SWDs to fully and meaningfully participate in all academic and non-academic activities and in the general education classroom by promoting a sense of belonging (Thompson, 2022). Therefore, it is imperative to develop comprehensive training programs that equip teachers with differentiating strategies, classroom management, and the use of assistive technology (Deroncele-Acosta & Ellis, 2024). Fostering strong collaborative team-based efforts is the foundation upon which the strategies and models of support and high-impact practices are implemented.

The final step to effectively support inclusion of SWDs in general education classrooms is collaborative teaming. Walker et al. (2023) proffered that the relationship

between the educators serving SWDs in inclusionary settings needed to portray a united collaborative team. Collaboration takes time. Administrators are responsible for the master schedule, and as such, they should build in time for teachers to collaborate during the school day. School administrators need to establish dedicated time, so teachers can develop and discuss the effectiveness of supports during their planning times. Dedicated time can be set aside by administrators assisting with scheduling logistics (e.g., schedule and arrange meetings, provide classroom coverage) (Kittelman et al., 2021). According to the DeMathews et al. (2023), school administrator leaders' support is crucial in helping provide the necessary resources to the educators to collaborate, staff the inclusive models of support that facilitate SWDs inclusion in the general education classroom, and to attend the critical professional development central to models of support, high impact practices, data-driven instruction, and collaborative teaming that underscore high quality inclusively designed systems. Thompson, (2022) recommended that school administrators consider key behaviors to support the successful implementation of inclusive practices:

1. Develop and articulate a clear vision for inclusive education.
2. Strengthen professional expertise and foster collaborative partnerships that promote shared responsibility between general education staff
3. Design the master schedule that facilitates the effective implementation of inclusive practices.
4. Utilize data to drive ongoing improvement efforts and
5. Emphasize consistent collaborative communication with families of SWDs

Administrators who support inclusive practices for SWDs have systemic process and a clear vision for the success of SWDs. Promoting inclusive practices is a collaborative and ongoing process where SWDs' strengths, abilities, support, and environmental needs will need to be continually revised to improve effectiveness and appropriateness (Thompson, 2022). According to research findings, there is a positive impact on student achievement, attendance, behavior, social-emotional skills, and graduation rates when there is a strong partnership between schools and families (IRIS Center, n.d.). Professional development that is systemic and targeted on key skills is associated with positive outcomes for SWDs in inclusionary settings.

**Professional Development**

Professional development must be a priority for public education systems that are focused on the educational outcomes of SWDs. Research findings have reflected poor or inadequate training about inclusive education environments to support SWDs' needs in general education classrooms is associated with poor outcomes for SWDs (Tristani & Bassett-Gunter, 2020). Many educators lack the necessary skills and knowledge to address the diverse needs of SWDs. In addition, there is a lack of training and preparedness among general education teachers to teach SWDs in the general education classroom (Ginja & Chen, 2023). Donath et al. (2023) investigated the effects of professional development for teachers in preparation for inclusive education by conducting a meta-analysis. The results showed an improvement in the teacher's knowledge of inclusive education. Intensive professional development results in a positive effect on teachers' skills, beliefs, and student behavior. Conversely, in a study

conducted by Alhaby and Iqtadar (2022), teachers felt that a lack of professional development, limited collaboration, and a lack of regular IEP meetings were barriers and challenges faced when supporting SWDs in the general education classroom. The study findings indicated professional development was essential to ensure the teachers are equipped with the necessary skills to meet SWDs' needs in the general education classroom (Alhaby & Iqtadar, 2022). Appropriately designed professional development safeguards special education teachers and general education teachers by equipping them to better address the needs of SWDs (IRIS Center, 2010).

Professional development hubs have been considered to support the ongoing need for professional development for educators who serve SWDs in inclusionary settings. A study conducted by Deroncele-Acosta and Ellis (2024) suggested initiatives to address the need for professional development. One initiative is to establish “Professional Development Hubs” where educators are provided continuous access to workshops, training sessions, and instructional resources centered on inclusive teaching practices. These hubs may include interactive elements such as simulations and role-playing exercises to help teachers deepen their understanding of and responsiveness. Another valuable initiative involves the creation of “Inclusive Teaching Fellowship,” which offers educators immersive experiences alongside experts in inclusive education. Through these fellowships, educators can receive mentorship, engage in hands-on learning, and develop and apply inclusive strategies directly within their classrooms.

## Project Description

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to investigate how archival data support and how teachers and administrators explain the successful reading achievement of SWDs in the study school district. The study district achieved the anomaly of more than 50% of SWDs achieving Proficient or Advanced on the state reading assessment. It was unknown how the study school district achieved this success in SWDs' reading achievement. Analysis of the data from this project study indicated that: (a) special education teachers, general education teachers, and administrators explain their success in reading achievement of SWDs is due to the collaborative practices embedded in the study district's beliefs and culture; (b) special education teachers. general education teachers, and administrators explained their success in reading achievement of SWDs is due to the data-driven instruction and decision-making and; (c) special education teachers, general education teachers, and administrators explain their success in reading achievement of SWDs is due to the study district's guiding principles and; (d) special education teachers, general education teachers, and administrators explain their success in reading achievement of SWDs is due to the use of evidence-based practices, differentiation, and interventions to support SWDs in inclusive settings. According to the data, I concluded that a white paper would be the most suitable genre for formulating recommendations for the stakeholders of the study district. In the white paper, three suggestions are put forth to increase the reading achievement of SWDs. The three recommendations of the white paper address the study findings.

1. Establish a culture of collaboration in which educators are provided with common planning time, professional development on co-teaching, accommodations and modifications to ensure practices are embedded in instruction to promote a network of support for SWDs in inclusive settings.
2. Promote inclusive models of practice to ensure SWDs are included in the general education classrooms with access to general education curriculum and appropriate grade level reading content with supports.
3. Provide targeted and systemic professional development that includes evidence-based literacy practices, inclusive strategies, high-impact practices, and data-driven instruction and decision-making.

**Needed Resources and Supports**

Resources and supports needed to support the success of the project are the time needed to meet with the key stakeholders, such as study district administrators, principals, teachers, and community members. I will facilitate a meeting among all stakeholders by sending an invitation by e-mail to discuss the research findings and present the white paper. This e-mail will include a proposed date and time to present the study's results and white paper. The e-mail will also include an overview of the research findings and suggestions on improving the reading achievement of SWDs. During the presentation, I will share a PowerPoint of the white paper's main points. Copies of the PowerPoint will be made available to all stakeholders who are present at the meeting. If a printed version of the white paper is requested, there will be an additional fee for preparing the document.

## Potential Barriers and Solutions

A potential barrier may be the challenge of scheduling an in-person meeting. Ideally, the meeting could be held before the start of the academic school year. A potential solution to this barrier would be to hold the meeting in an online setting. Another potential barrier is the hesitation of administrators to implement a new project geared towards improving student achievement. There may be other initiatives across the other potential school districts that could consider the white paper recommendations aimed at improving student achievement, so gaining support may be a challenge. To gain administrative support, I would emphasize how the project could positively impact SWDs' reading outcomes and enhance the working relationships among teachers, families, and community stakeholders.

## Implementation Proposal

After creating the white paper, I will submit it to Walden University for editorial review. Upon obtaining approval to share the findings and recommendations with school study district stakeholders, I will meet with the study district administrators, family, and community stakeholders to present the study findings and recommendations for increasing the reading achievement success of SWDs. I would share how collaborative practices, inclusive practices, and targeted professional development improve the reading success of SWDs in inclusive classrooms. This will improve the reading outcomes of SWDs.

### Proposal for Implementation and Timeline

Upon the completion of the doctoral study, I will submit a copy of the white paper to the district Superintendent or designee. After the document has been reviewed, I will discuss a plan for disseminating the white paper with the Superintendent or the designee and answer any questions. Preferably at the beginning of the school year, I will arrange a meeting with the stakeholders and at the end of the school year, I will schedule another meeting with the stakeholders to follow up on the project implementation.

### Roles and Responsibilities

The researcher will share the white paper with the Superintendent or designee, discuss a plan to disseminate the white paper, arrange a meeting with the stakeholders, and follow up at the end of the year. The role and responsibility of the administration and stakeholders is to participate in the PowerPoint presentation and follow recommendations presented in the white paper

## Project Evaluation Plan

The study results were used to inform and convince school administrators to take action through the use of a white paper. In addition to a framework and academic literature, the white paper included recommendations based on the findings. The project will be evaluated using a Google form with a Likert scale (from 1 to 5). The survey would include questions about the project's effectiveness in collaborative practices, types of professional development needed moving forward, and opinions on how the project improved teaching practices. The purpose of the white paper is to summarize the study's

findings and offer three recommendations to increase the reading achievement of SWDS based on the study's findings.

The recommendations offered in the white paper include:

1. Establish a culture of collaboration in which educators are provided with common planning time, professional development on co-teaching, accommodations, and modifications to ensure practices are embedded in instruction to promote a network of support for SWDs in inclusive settings.
2. Promote inclusive models of practice to ensure SWDs are included in the general education classrooms with access to the general education curriculum and appropriate grade-level reading content with supports.
3. Provide targeted and systemic professional development that includes evidence-based literacy practices, inclusive strategies, high-impact practices, and data-driven instruction and decision-making.

The white paper recommendations must be approved by the Superintendent or designee of the school district. The school district Superintendent or designee will communicate the recommendations to the principals. Aligning with the conceptual framework of the project, administrators and educators will envision and build upon existing strengths within their school district. This creates a shared vision for inclusive education to help improve the reading achievement of SWDs.

## Key Stakeholders

The main stakeholders for this project are elementary general and special education teachers, study district administrators, and school leaders at the elementary

schools. These stakeholders informed the recommendations outlined in the white paper. The recommendations in the white paper, if adopted, could support other public school district leaders and educators to employ district-wide best practices to support the reading for SWDs and to close the gap in practice related to the best practices to use to address SWDs' reading challenges and low achievement levels. The white paper's recommendations may result in productive conversations among the stakeholders that focus on what is working well and also may encourage a culture of continuous improvement and a vision for inclusion.

## Project Implications

### Implications for Social Change

To address the issue of the reading success of SWDs in the general education classroom, I decided to compose my research study around a white paper. The development of the white paper was used to address the problem of the four themes that emerged from the outcomes of the study. The goal of the white paper is to achieve possible social change by addressing the gap in practice, that it is unknown how the study district achieved the success in SWD reading achievement. The consequence of this white paper will improve collaborative practices and inclusive practices through professional development, which will improve the reading outcomes for SWDs.

### The Importance of the Project in a Larger Context

In a broader sense, this white paper can have social change implications on a national scale and encourage stakeholders to develop more professional development opportunities to increase the teachers' knowledge with supporting SWDs in inclusive

classrooms. The implications also could be that this project could be repeated at other school districts with a similar problem.

## Conclusion

In Section 3, I discussed the goals for the white paper to inform and persuade stakeholders in the school district about supporting the reading success of SWDs in inclusive classrooms. I provided details regarding plans for disseminating and presenting the information via a white paper. I provided scholarly literature that supports the recommendations in the white paper. I also provided a description of the project, stakeholders involved, and the project evaluation plan, along with project implications.

In Section 4, I outline the advantages and limitations of my study project. I also reflect on my personal growth and the insights gained throughout this research journey as a researcher. I conclude this section with a discussion of the study's significance, practical implications, potential applications, and recommendations for future research.

## Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

In this section, I discuss the strengths and limitations of the project and the recommendations for alternative approaches of this project study. The problem that was addressed in this basic qualitative study was that it is unknown how the study school district achieved this anomaly that more than 50% of SWDs achieved Proficient and Advanced on the state reading tests. Guided by the five principles developed by CREDE, this study investigated how archival data and special and general education teachers and administrators from the study school district explain the successful reading achievement of SWDs. A gap in practice was described in Section 2. The gap in practice displays a need to understand how the study district achieved successful reading achievement among SWDs. A white paper was created to provide recommendations on how other school districts could improve the reading achievement of SWDs in the general education classroom, and it offered evidence-based solutions to possibly influence decision makers in different school districts who may be interested in addressing the reading needs of SWDs (Purdue Online Writing Lab, n.d.). Archival data and the participants in the study explain that the successful reading achievement of SWDs at the study school study district is due to collaborative practices, data-driven instruction and decision making, guiding principles and inclusive practices, professional development, resource allocation, and evidence-based practices.

In this section, I discuss the study's strengths and limitations, alternative approaches, and project development and evaluation. I also discuss reflections about the importance of work, implications, and directions for future research. Overall, this section

provides a further conclusion of the study and how school districts can improve the reading achievement of SWDs

## Project Strengths and Limitations

This project has strengths and limitations. One strength of this project was the opportunity to showcase a study school district that is closing the reading achievement gap through the use of inclusive practices, collaboration, and professional development. Many studies share ways to close the achievement gap between SWDs and those without, but schools often don't use these strategies in a way that brings the same results as the study district. Another strength is the participants' discussion of how they implemented inclusive practices, the role of how teacher collaboration, and professional development played in their teaching practice. Their insight offered a view of how committed the study district was to be focusing not just improving the reading achievement of SWDs but to all students. The final strength is the purpose of the white paper. The white paper was developed from the themes that emerged from the data. The themes that emerged from the study were: (a) establish a culture of collaboration in which educators are provided with common planning time, professional development on co-teaching, accommodations and modifications to ensure practices are embedded in instruction to promote a network of support for SWDs in inclusive settings, (b) promote inclusive models of practice to ensure SWDs are included in the general education classrooms with access to general education curriculum and appropriate grade level reading content with supports, and (c) provide targeted and systemic professional development that includes evidence-based literacy practices, inclusive strategies, high-impact practices, and data-driven instruction

and decision-making  The white paper provided suggestions on how school districts can increase the reading achievement of SWDs.

One limitation of this project could involve a school district's willingness to implement the recommendation outlined in the white paper. Lack of valuable resources and funding could inhibit or cause a delay in the project's implementation. Another limitation of this project includes the possibility of this study to gain perspectives from the parents of SWDs to provide their experiences with reading supports in the school district and any increase in reading ability in the home.

## Recommendations for Alternative Approaches

The problem of the study focuses on how the special and general education teachers and administrators at the study schools explain the reading achievement of SWDs. Possible alternative approaches to the project include (a) developing professional development for general education teachers on how to support SWDs in reading; (b) conducting a study of a school district implementing the recommendations in the white paper; and (c) tracking a cohort of SWDs from Grades 1 to 5, monitoring reading scores and supports received. These alternative approaches to the project study could provide school districts with more information on how to increase the reading achievement of SWDs.

## Scholarship, Project Development and Evaluation, and Leadership and Change

The process of this research study took time, effort, and patience. My journey was full of challenges, but it also increased my knowledge of the steps involved when conducting research. The major challenge was in securing an appropriate number of

participants. The COVID-19 pandemic had a major effect with this process. With the help of my chair, I was able to obtain IRB approval to use archival data to help support the participants' interview data. Once I reviewed the archival data, I was able to conduct the data analysis. Through the data analysis, I gained valuable insight into how the study district supported SWDs, and the participant interviews reinforced the effectiveness of this inclusive initiative.

The findings of this study can promote social change for SWDs and school districts. SWDs can experience social change through the use of inclusive practices designed to increase their reading achievement. SWDs can also experience an increase in self-confidence. The school district can experience positive social change from the reading achievement of SWDs and by providing teachers with the tools they need to improve student reading outcomes.

## Reflection on Importance of Work

Other school districts can use the results for this qualitative study to improve the reading achievement of their SWDs. This study is an important contribution to the field of special education by highlighting how study district-led initiatives, when implemented with fidelity, can lead to meaningful academic achievement for SWDs. The study district ensured that every student regardless of ability has access to high-quality instruction. As a former special education teacher, I often encountered the prevailing narrative that SWDs consistently fall behind their peers, with much focus centered on how to raise their test scores. This study shifted the conversation toward the diverse ways SWSs can succeed when given the right support.

## Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to investigate how archival data supports and how teachers and administrators explain the successful reading achievement of SWDs in the study school district. The white paper created from the findings of the study provides a framework for increasing the reading achievement of SWDs. The white paper was designed to address the local problem. The white paper included in Appendix A was created based on the data and archival evidence from the study school study district. The recommendations outlined in the white paper have the potential to equip stakeholders with the knowledge of how to increase the reading achievement of SWDs.

Findings from this study can be used as a model for other school districts to address the reading achievement gap of SWDs and non SWDs. This white paper has the potential to create social change by improving teacher practices, which will lead to an improvement in SWDs reading outcomes. Further research could investigate the effect of these recommendations at the middle school and high school levels.

## Conclusion

The problem addressed in the study is that it is unknown how special education and general education teachers, and administrators at the study schools, explain the success of reading achievement of SWDs. The research study examined archival data which supported how teachers and administrators explain this success. An analysis of the data from the project study suggested that special education teachers and general education teachers explain the successful reading achievement of SWDs id due to the collaborative practices, data-driven instruction, the study district's guiding principles and

evidence-based practices. The white paper provided recommendations to the study district's stakeholders. The recommendations proposed in the white paper include the following:

1. Establish a culture of collaboration in which educators are provided with common planning time, professional development on co-teaching, accommodations, and modifications to ensure practices are embedded in instruction to promote a network of support for SWDs in inclusive settings.
. 2. Promote inclusive models of practice to ensure SWDs are included in the general education classrooms with access to the general education curriculum and appropriate grade-level reading content with support. Provide targeted and systemic professional development that includes evidence-based literacy practices, inclusive strategies, high-impact practices, and data-driven instruction and decision-making.

As a result of this study, school districts could use this as a model to improve the reading achievement of the SWDs at their schools. In addition, they will be able to provide teachers with the tools they need in order to improve student outcomes.

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Appendix: The Project

**Teacher and Administrator Explanations of the Successful Reading Achievement of Students with Disabilities**

**A White Paper**

By Kisha Hairston

# Teacher and Administrator Explanations of the Successful Reading Achievement of Students with Disabilities

**A White Paper**

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**Kisha Hairston**

## Introduction

Historically, SWDs have not performed well on state assessments. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 2024), reading scores for SWDs have continued to decline since 2019. The 2024 reading scores revealed that 72% of 4th graders with disabilities scored below basic, which is the lowest achievement score. When a student scores Below Basic they demonstrate an inability to identify relevant information within texts, draw inferences, extract textual evidence to support comprehension, and interpret word meaning from context clues (Vaughan and Barnes, 2023). However, the study school study district is experiencing successful reading achievement among SWDs in contrast to the national statistics that show SWDs achieve low reading achievement results in comparison to non SWDs. The study district implemented collaborative practices, data-driven instruction and decision making, inclusive practices, and professional development to explain the success in reading of SWDs. It is imperative to learn how the study school district achieved the anomaly of more than 50% of SWDs achieved Proficient and Advanced on the state reading tests. These key reasons include: (a) replicating the study school district's effective practices, (b) dispelling stereotypes and assumptions that SWDs are low performing, (c)

improving equitable access to grade-level content, (d) guiding targeted professional development which may lead to more instructional resources, and (e) empowering educators and families of SWDs.

The reading levels of SWDs are on average 3 years behind non SWDs (Gilmour, et al., 2019). According to Reed and Gates (2020) and Dietrichson et al. (2020) a student's limited reading skills could impede their living status, which can be a major disadvantage in finding professional opportunities. In addition, reading difficulties could lead to dropping out of school, incarceration, unemployment, lack of civic awareness, poor health outcomes, and poverty (Eloranta, 2019). The performance of SWDs on reading achievement tests can affect student's motivation. Research from Toste et al. (2020) has shown evidence of a connection between motivation and reading achievement. Despite an emphasis on inclusion and standards-based instruction, it is possible that the gap in reading achievement between SWDs and non SWDs is due to SWDs not adequately accessing grade-level reading content (Gilmour et al.,

2019). According to Daniel (2024) SWDs do show some reading growth over time but their rate of progress is not sufficient to close the achievement gap. Another factor is a lack of school resources and teacher preparedness and lack of training in inclusive practices (Daniel, 2024). Wanzek, et al. (2021) found that although evidence-based practices demonstrate significant gains in reading among SWDs, these evidence-based practices are underutilized. This underuse of evidence-based practices may be due to a lack of professional development (Daniel, 2024). Neurocognitive factors such as working memory, processing speed deficits, phonological processing impairment, and executive functioning challenges have an impact on reading fluency and comprehension (Miller and Thomas, 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic had an impact on the reading achievement gap between SWDs and non SWDs. According to Kaufman (2022) SWDs experienced significant loss in reading and math due to the pandemic.

This white paper is the result of a basic qualitative study conducted with the teachers and the examination of archival documents. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to investigate how archival data support and how teachers and administrators explain the successful reading achievement of SWDs in the study school district. The study district achieved the anomaly of more than 50% of SWDs achieved Proficient and Advanced on the state reading assessment. Based on the finding three recommendations are suggested to increase the reading achievement of SWDs: (a) Establish a culture of collaboration in which educators are provided with common planning time, professional development on co-teaching, accommodations and modifications to ensure practices are embedded in instruction to promote a network of support for SWDs in inclusive settings, (b) promote inclusive models of practice to ensure SWDs are included in the general education classrooms with access to general education curriculum and appropriate grade level reading content with supports, and (c) provide targeted and systemic professional development that includes evidence-based literacy practices, inclusive strategies, high-impact practices, and data-driven instruction and decision-making The targeted professional development will foster collective ownership of SWDs' reading outcomes and promote consistent school-wide supports for SWDs rather than temporary solutions.

**Problem Defined**

The problem addressed in the study is that it is unknown how special education and general education teachers, and administrators at the study schools explain the success. When I analyzed the findings, four themes emerged from the individual interviews and analyzed archival data. These themes are: (a) special education teachers, general education teachers, and administrators explain the successful reading achievement of SWDs is due to

collaborative practices embedded in the study district's belief and culture, (b) special education teachers general education teachers and administrators explain their success in the reading achievement of SWDs is due to data-driven instruction and decision making, (c) special education teachers, general education teachers and administrators explain the success of reading achievement of SWDs is due to the study district's guiding principles, inclusive practices, vision, professional development, and resource allocation, and (d) special education teachers, general education teachers, and administrators explain the success of reading achievement of SWDs is due to the use of evidence-based practices, differentiation, and intervention to support SWDs in inclusive settings. The analysis of the findings in alignment with the white paper development includes recommendations to increase the reading achievement of SWDs. The first recommendation is to establish a culture of collaboration.

**Recommendation #1: Establish a culture of collaboration**.

Collaboration leads to better reading outcomes for SWDs. The goal is to create an environment where working together is the norm. Teachers, specialists, and administrators regularly communicate, share ideas, and support each other to help all students succeed. Collaboration allows teachers to better understand SWDs' needs and to prepare better and execute instruction and services more effectively (Robiyanech, 2020). Based on the findings of the study and current scholarly research, teacher collaboration fosters a unified approach to differentiation, promotes an inclusive classroom culture, and enhances student academic and social outcomes (Pozas & Letzel-Alt, 2023).

**Recommendation #1: Establish a culture of collaboration in which educators are provided with common planning time, professional development on co-teaching, accommodations and modifications to ensure practices are embedded in instruction to promote a network of support for SWDs in inclusive settings.**

Co-teaching is a model of collaboration which emphasizes communication among all members of a team that meets the needs of all students (IRIS Center, n.d.). According to the IRIS Center (n.d.) co-teaching teams should address 3 critical issues before starting the process: planning, disposition, and evaluation.

**Planning**

Co-teaching teams not only need time to plan but also a commitment to the planning process. The recommended amount of time needed to plan is a minimum of 10 minutes per lesson. However, additional time may be needed for first year teams. Team should focus on planning for the entire class. Any issues that are student specific (e.g. behavioral concerns) should be

discussed during the planning process or after the lesson is completed. The next critical issue is disposition.

**Disposition**

Co-teaching teams need to discuss perspectives on issues such as fairness, grading, behavior management, and philosophy of teaching. Any differences in these perspectives can hinder the co-teaching process. Any disagreements in these areas can make it challenging to work effectively. Evaluation is the last critical area.

**Evaluation**

There should be a systematic method to evaluate teacher satisfaction and student learning. An evaluation should take place approximately every 4 weeks to discuss two critical questions: Are the needs of both teachers being met (i.e., is the special education teacher meeting the needs of SWDs and is the general education teacher meeting the local and state standards), and is this process good for all students? Both teachers need to ensure that all students are learning and effectively address any disruptions. Modifications and accommodations are an expected part of the process. Once the critical issues are addressed by the co-teachers, they should also address any possible barriers. There are barriers to effective co-teaching that can hinder its effectiveness. This includes time, grading, student readiness, teacher readiness, and high-stakes testing.

**Time**

Dedicated time must be set aside for co-teaching teams. A lack of sufficient time can jeopardize the success of the co-teaching model. Study districts should consider creating the schedules of SWDs and co-taught teams first and then other activities second.

**Grading**

Before school starts, co-teaching teams need to discuss how they will grade SWDs in their classroom. This will prevent any disagreements and misunderstandings about how to evaluate SWDs. It is best to have a discussion early in the semester instead of at the end of the grading period.

**Student Readiness**

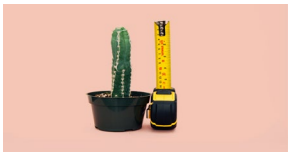
SWDs in inclusive classrooms may have academic and behavioral gaps compared to non SWDs. Many SWDs were not included in the general education classroom so many may have a knowledge gap. Teachers in the co-teaching relationship will need time to prepare to assist SWDs with these challenges.

**Teacher Readiness**

Even in great schools with strong teachers, there can still be pushbacks against co-teaching because teachers are used to working independently. A good way to introduce schoolwide co-teaching is to let teachers know ahead of time

(using a supportive team-like approach) that they will be co-teaching next year. Then, give them the freedom to help design co-teaching models that fit their needs, while also holding them accountable for using this model to support all students in their classroom and help the students succeed.

## High-Stakes Testing



Study districts need to consider the impact co-teaching will have on standard assessments. First, co-teaching needs to be implemented to ensure the success of all students. Second, the co-teaching model should not be considered as a cost-saving method or a dumping model. SWDs need to have sufficient support, or the co-teaching relationship will fail. Third, there should be ongoing evaluation that reflects the intent of the co-taught setting.

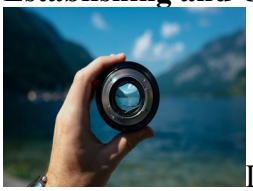
When a school embraces this philosophy of inclusion, co-teaching can be successful. Teachers need time to plan, and administrators and teachers should conduct ongoing evaluations to make any necessary changes to the co-teaching model.

## Recommendation #2: Promote inclusive models of practice to ensure SWDs included in the general education classrooms with access to the general education curriculum and appropriate grade-level reading content with supports.

**Recommendation #2: Promote inclusive models of practice to ensure SWDs are included in the general education classrooms with access to the general education curriculum and appropriate grade-level reading content with supports.**

Inclusive education is a philosophy that ensures all students, regardless of ability, background, or learning need to have access to quality education in general education settings (Deroncele-Acosta & Ellis, 2024). Principals play a major role in establishing inclusive practices. The goal is to make sure SWDs are fully included in general education settings. According to DeMatthews et al. (2023), there are five domains a principal will need to implement to demonstrate effective inclusive practices. These domains are establishing and conveying the vision, facilitating a high-quality experience for students; building professional capacity; creating a supportive organization for learning; and connecting with external partners.

## Establishing and Conveying Vision



Developing an inclusive vision is a collaborative effort between the principal and staff. The

vision should motivate staff to work toward organizational goals. As principals work towards developing an inclusive vision they need to consider and collaborate with staff to develop a vision that contains a clear rational for inclusion by identifying drawbacks and potential benefits; engaging stakeholders in discussion about the purpose and practical implementation, addressing concerns, and maintaining momentum to commitment to the vision (DeMatthews et al., 20203).

**Facilitating a High-Quality Learning Experience for Students**

The goal of this domain is to create a collaborative culture. Teachers need to accept responsibility for all students in the classroom. SWDs are taught the same content as non SWDs by using varied instructional approaches such as differentiated instruction and small group instruction (DeMatthews et al., 2023).

**Building Professional Capacity**

Principals need to provide professional development to better prepare teachers to meet the needs of SWDs. Many teachers feel they are not equipped to work with SWDs. High-quality professional development should be supported by activities such as grade-level / content area teams, study groups, and coaching (DeMatthews et al., 2020).

**Creating a Supportive Organization for Learning**

Principals play an important role in building a school environment that supports both teachers and students in their learning. Principals should focus on finding resources, involving others in decision-making, encouraging shared leadership, valuing diversity, setting high expectations, and building a strong school culture. (DeMatthews et al., 2023). Principals are known as change agents because they play a pivotal role in shaping school culture, driving instruction improvement, and fostering innovation regarding implementing inclusive practices (Acton, 2021).

**Connecting with External Partners**

In effective inclusive schools, the principal builds productive relationships with families and the community and engages families and the community through collaborative processes to strengthen student learning. They should encourage parents of SWDs to play an active role in developing and reviewing IEPs (DeMatthews et al., 2023).

Each domain shows the critical role principals play in developing inclusive schools. They can create and support inclusive schools by: establishing and conveying the vision, facilitating a high-quality experience for students, building professional capacity, creating a supportive organization for learning, and connecting with external partners

**Recommendation #3: Provide targeted and systemic professional development that includes evidence-based literacy practices, inclusive strategies, high-impact practices, and data-driven instruction and decision-making.** This recommendation emphasizes the need for intentional and well-organized training for educators to improve teaching and support for all students, especially SWDs. The goal is to provide teachers with proven literary methods, inclusive approaches, and high-impact strategies, while also teaching them how to use student data to guide their instruction and decisions. Educators are provided with common planning time, professional development on co-teaching, accommodations, and modifications to ensure practices are embedded in instruction to promote a network of support for SWDs in inclusive settings.

**Recommendation #3: Provide targeted and systemic professional development that includes evidence-based literacy practices, inclusive strategies, high-impact practices, and data-driven instruction and decision-making. .**

A study conducted by Alhaby and Iqtadar (2022) reported that teachers felt a lack of professional development, limited collaboration, and a lack of regular IEP meetings are barriers and challenges faced when supporting SWDs in the general education classroom. The researchers' data showed a need for professional development to ensure the teachers are equipped with the necessary skills to meet SWDs' needs in the general education classroom. Professional development ensures special education teachers and general education teachers are equipped to address the needs of SWDs (IRIS Center, n.d.).

Professional development is effective if it contains six characteristics. First, professional development is effective if it is sustained over time (Sims & Fletcher-Wood, 2021). Ongoing, collaborative professional development works in terms of supporting sustained practice changes and improvements in teacher skills and knowledge and student outcomes (Saunders et al., 2024; Swanson et al.2021). Providing teachers collaboration time facilitates the assimilation of new knowledge (Sims & Fletcher-Wood, 2021). Second, when a teacher attends a professional development as a group, it is more effective (Sims & Fletcher-Wood, 2021). When teachers attend a professional development as a group, it provides the opportunity to challenge each other and clarify misunderstandings (Sims & Fletcher-Wood, 2021). Third, teachers must see the value of taking part in professional development. The purpose and the benefit of professional development need to be clearly outlined. If teachers identify with professional development, the outcome will be more effective (Sims & Fletcher-Wood, 2021). Fourth, professional development is considered more impactful when it incorporates training in subject-specific content knowledge (Sims & Fletcher-Wood, 2021). Fifth, professional development is more effective when facilitated by individuals with external

expertise (Sims & Fletcher-Wood, 2021). Individuals outside the school provide fresh input or perspective (Sims & Fletcher-Wood, 2021). Sixth, professional development is more effective when teachers are allowed to practice and apply what they have learned (Sims & Fletcher-Wood, 2021). Researchers have emphasized extremely high fidelity to the content introduced in PD is made possible by explicit training, rehearsal, feedback, and ongoing coaching which are necessary conditions for improving reading achievement among SWDs (Swanson et al., 2021). This helps teachers apply what they have learned in their classrooms (Sims & Fletcher-Wood, 2021).

**Summary**

The recommendations from this white paper are based on research findings from a qualitative study. The recommendations are: (a) Establish a culture of collaboration in which educators are provided with common planning time, professional development on co-teaching, accommodations and modifications to ensure practices are embedded in instruction to promote a network of support for SWDs in inclusive settings, (b) promote inclusive models of practice to ensure SWDs are included in the general education classrooms with access to general education curriculum and appropriate grade level reading content with supports, and (c) provide targeted and systemic professional development that includes evidence-based literacy practices, inclusive strategies, high-impact practices, and data-driven instruction and decision-making.

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