

The Role of Administrators in Supporting Inclusive Practices

at a Select School District in Upper East Tennessee

by

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## ABSTRACT

The implementation of inclusive practices has increased in response to the federal mandate for students with disabilities to be educated with their typically developing peers “to the maximum extent possible.” Previous research indicates that teachers frequently cite a need for administrative support to implement inclusive practices successfully. This qualitative study examines the role of administrative support for inclusive practices by interviewing teachers and principals in a select school district in Upper East Tennessee and comparing their perspectives. Results indicated that both groups had similar viewpoints regarding the role of administrators in supporting inclusive practices. The findings suggest that scheduling, professional development, schoolwide culture, and relationships are critical to supporting inclusive practices. Implications for practice include establishing a schoolwide schedule that reflects student needs, providing regularly scheduled collaborative planning time for general and special education teachers, working collaboratively with teachers to identify professional development needs, and contributing to the culture of the school by establishing positive relationships with students and staff.

## DEDICATION

To Mom, you are my rock and my hero! Everything I am is because of you. You have taught me perseverance in the face of adversity and the importance of hard work, which has served me well thus far. Thank you for always believing in every crazy dream I have ever had. It is because of you that I have turned them into reality.

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## CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) states, “almost 30 years of research and experience has demonstrated that the education of children with disabilities can be made more effective by having high expectations for such children and ensuring their access to the general education curriculum in the regular classroom, to the maximum extent possible.”

This law has served as the legal foundation for special education since 1990 when the previously enacted Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (EHA) was reauthorized. The roles and responsibilities of public schools to serve students with disabilities continue to be further defined with each reauthorization update.

One of the pillars of IDEA that remains unchanged over time is the mandate of a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment (LRE) with typically developing peers to the fullest extent appropriate for students with disabilities. However, the definition of terms such as “least restrictive,” “fullest extent,” and “appropriate” continue to challenge educators as they attempt to interpret and apply the law (Murphy, 1996; Sumbera, Pazez, Lashley, 2014; “Summary,” n.d.).

For many students such as those with high-incidence disabilities, the interpretation of this part of the law means their needs can often be met in the general education classroom. According to recent data published by the United States Department of Education, more than half of all students with disabilities nationwide receive most of their instruction in the general education classroom (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). In Tennessee, this rate exceeds the national

average with 70% of students with disabilities spending most of their instructional day in the general education classroom (Tennessee Department of Education, 2018).

However, this was not always the case. Prior to IDEA and EHA as few as 20% of all students with disabilities were afforded the opportunity to participate in public education (U.S. Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, 2010). EHA paved a path for future legislation that continues to define best practices for students with disabilities, most recently placing a focus more on effective practices rather than compliance-based access (Sumbera, Pazey, & Lashley, 2014; “Summary,” n.d.). This paradigm shift has resulted in the development and refinement of instructional approaches to be used with students with disabilities (McLeskey & Waldron, 2002; Simmons & Magiera, 2007; Sumbera, Pazey, & Lashley, 2014).

One result of this shift is the use of more inclusive methods such as mainstreaming, inclusion, and co-teaching (Sumbera, Pazey, & Lashley, 2014). IDEA does not name or mandate any one inclusive practice. Rather, these practices have emerged as educators continue to interpret the law’s mandate of LRE to the maximum extent appropriate in practice (Kirby, 2017; Murhpy, 1996).

It is this widely varied interpretation that can result in vastly different inclusive experiences for students with disabilities as well as their teachers (Gehrke, Cocchiarella, Harris, & Puckett, 2014). Additionally, some administrators and educators feel inadequately prepared to interpret the law effectively to ensure that students with disabilities have “access to the general education curriculum in the regular classroom, to the maximum extent possible.” (Chandler & Utz, 1982; DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; Garrison-Wade, Sobel, & Fulmer, 2007; Sumbera, Pazey, & Lashley, 2014).

*Statement of the Problem*

Legislative progress made over the past four decades has provided a foundation that allows students with disabilities to be included with their typically developing peers to the “greatest extent possible.” However, the law alone is not enough to ensure that students with disabilities experience success with inclusion. The interpretation of the law by educators matters the most which has resulted in a shift toward meaningful participation in the general education classroom (Kirby, 2017; Sumbera, Pazey, & Lashley, 2014).

Some educators are still implementing compliance-based access in which students are served through a program that mirrors the pull-out or resource model within a general education setting (McLeskey & Waldron, 2002). Others have fully embraced the spirit of the law by transforming their approach toward educating students with disabilities (Lashley, 2007; Pazey & Cole, 2013; McHatton, Boyer, Shaunessy, & Terry, 2010; Sumbera, Pazey, & Lashley, 2014). These different interpretations lead to varying levels of successful inclusive experiences with many teachers citing administrative support as one of the greatest impacts on the success of inclusion (McLeskey & Waldron, 2015). However, the perceptions of administrative support so often desired by teachers can vary greatly and have an impact on the success of inclusive experiences (Kohler-Evans, 2006; McLeskey & Waldron, 2015).

*Purpose of the Study*

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to further define the role of administrators in supporting inclusive practices. Specific objectives were 1) to explore teacher and administrator perspectives of administrative support, 2) compare the perceptions of both, and 3) to identify the type of support teachers desire from administrators to support inclusive practices.

*Research Questions*

R1: What role do general and special education teachers perceive that administrators take in supporting inclusive practices?

R2: What role do administrators perceive that they take in supporting inclusive practices?

R3: Is there a difference between the perceptions of teachers and administrators regarding the role of administrators in supporting inclusive practices?

R4: What types of support do general and special education teachers desire from administrators?

*Definition of Terms*

The following terms are key to understanding the research. For the purpose of this study, the terms are defined below:

- 1) *Administrators* – a collective term to describe personnel in leadership positions in schools such as building-level principals or assistant principals
- 2) *General education teacher* – a teacher who is considered highly qualified to teach content area or grade level standards
- 3) *Educators* – a collective term to include all administrators and teachers
- 4) *Inclusive environment or setting* – a general education classroom where students with documented disabilities and their typically developing peers are learning simultaneously
- 5) *Special education teacher* – a teacher who is specifically trained to modify content or grade level standards, adapting them to meet the needs of a student with disabilities

- 6) *Students with disabilities* – a student who has been identified with a federally or state defined educational disability that is provided special education services in school under an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). By contrast, students without documented disabilities will be referred to as typically developing students.
- 7) *Universal Design for Learning (UDL)* – as defined by the Center for Applied Special Technology, UDL is a “research-based set of principles to guide the design of learning environments that are accessible and effective for all” (CAST, 2019).

#### *Limitations of the Study*

Due to the nature of a qualitative study, there were some limitations. There was a small number of participants attributed to the use of purposeful sampling. Not all participants who were invited accepted the invitation, further limiting the scope of perspectives. Therefore, findings may not be generalizable to all teachers in the district or teachers in other districts.

#### *Organization of the Study*

This study is organized into five chapters. Chapter 1 of the study presents an introduction to the research including the statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, and the research questions. Chapter 1 also includes defined terms and limitations of the study that are key to understanding the research. Chapter 2 provides a review of literature addressing the history of and laws concerning special education, the definition of inclusion including factors necessary for success and related challenges, school culture needed to support inclusion, and administrator preparation. The methodology and procedures used to gather data are discussed in Chapter 3 while Chapter 4 presents the results. Finally, Chapter 5 concludes the study with a summary, a discussion of findings, and recommendations for practice and future research.

## CHAPTER 2

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Chapter 2 includes a review of literature related to this study. The first section reviews the history of law governing special education in public schools and explores the definitions of inclusion and least restrictive environment. The second section identifies elements of successful inclusion practices, challenges related to inclusion, and the cultural context needed for inclusion. Finally, the preparation of administrators to support inclusive practices is addressed.

*History of Special Education Law*

The primary law of special education today is the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA). It has evolved through more than 40 years of legislation originating as Public Law 94-142 or the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAH) in 1975. Prior to EAH, as few as one in five children with disabilities were accommodated in public schools. Legislation during this time encouraged and supported segregation of children with disabilities, often into separate facilities with minimal accommodations (U.S. Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, 2010).

It was the landmark decision *Brown v. Board of Education* that challenged the notion of “separate but equal” for all students (McLaughlin, 2010; Obiakor, Harris, Mutua, Rotatori, & Algozzine, 2012). Discussions of equity versus equality and access in education moved to the forefront of society and politics while the Civil Rights Movement marched on in the background (McLaughlin, 2010; “Timeline”, n.d.; U.S. Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, 2010). More importantly, the concept of equal citizenship and belonging was beginning to take root (Bicehouse & Faieta, 2017).

However, the first major federal legislation to impact people with disabilities was not passed until almost twenty years after *Brown v. Board*. The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 prompted politicians to take a closer look at ethical decision making as related to students with disabilities and banned discriminatory practices in programs receiving federal funding (Bicehouse & Faieta, 2017). Although this was a progressive step toward inclusion, funding remained limited and in turn, limited the offering of services for all students with disabilities. Still, a few states move forward to establish their own laws banning discriminatory practices prior to the federal mandate to do so through Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAH) of 1975. EAH was instrumental in evolving the educational experience for students with disabilities (Bicehouse & Faieta, 2017).

This law granted access to children with disabilities to a “free and appropriate education” (FAPE) individually tailored to meet their unique needs. EAH also authorized provisions for a portion of the funding necessary to support these programs and required ongoing monitoring of the effectiveness of implementation. The law also provided protection of the rights of children with disabilities and their parents. (U.S. Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, 2010). These four principles have been maintained through all revisions of the law, including the most recent revision in 2004.

EAH also introduced the idea of the least restrictive environment which prompted decades of discussion centered on equal access to and meaningful participation in the general curriculum for students with disabilities that continues today (Frizzell, 2018; National Council on Disability, 2000; Obiakor et al., 2012; “Timeline”, n.d.; U.S. Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, 2010). In 1990, the law was revised and renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), discontinuing the use of the antiquated term “handicapped”

and emphasizing the outcomes of programs for children with disabilities. IDEA of 1990 addressed early childhood intervention and took initial steps to increase participation in post-secondary experiences. It also emphasized greater access to general education settings in the student's home school of origin (Obiakor et al., 2012; U.S. Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, 2010).

With each revision of the law came a greater focus on meaningful educational participation and benefit for students with disabilities and shifts away from merely providing access to general education settings. The debate of equity versus equality continued and brought forth the understanding that equity consisted of the opportunity to attain equal outcomes (McLaughlin, 2010). This philosophy was supported with the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2001 which increased accountability measures for students with disabilities.

NCLB placed an unprecedented responsibility on principals to provide a meaningful, appropriate educational experience for students with disabilities. The law required progress and outcomes for these students to be carefully tracked by local, state, and federal departments of education (Sumera et al., 2014). This information is included as part of the accountability measures used to identify successful or failing schools and made principals more aware of the progress of each student. The increased level of accountability for students with disabilities also prompted educators to carefully consider placement decisions in relation to the opportunity to meet these outcomes. Many schools responded by increasing access to high-quality, core instruction in the general education setting (Obiakor et al., 2012).

Swift on the heels of NCLB, the revision of IDEA into the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) in 2004 resulted in an increase of the use of universal

design for learning, a framework that uses research-based methods to optimize learning for all (CAST, 2018). The combination of both laws accelerated the implementation of inclusion to meet the needs of all students (Obiakor et al., 2012; Simmons & Magiera, 2007; Sumbera, Pazey, & Lashley, 2014).

### *Definition of Inclusion*

Rapidly evolving policy and overlapping legislation have resulted in confusion, frustration, and various interpretations of equity related to inclusion (McLaughlin, 2014). Despite the popularity of the term, there remain multiple definitions of inclusion in the field (Gehrke et al., 2014; Murphy 1996). However, a few overarching themes and common understandings emerge.

The definition of inclusion is built upon a common belief that all students belong in the general education classroom (Sapon-Shevin, 2010). Students with disabilities deserve access to the same meaningful, rigorous curriculum as their typically developing peers. They must be afforded an equal opportunity to achieve outcomes in age-appropriate classrooms in their community or home school of origin (Obiakor et al., 2012; Murphy, 1996). In other words, students with disabilities should be in the placement that they would be in if they did not have a disability and be provided opportunities to participate in the same way as those without disabilities (McLaughlin, 2010; Obiakor et al., 2012). Then, special education services and support are provided within the context of the general education classroom (Murphy, 1996).

Several core values help to further define inclusion. At the most foundational level, inclusion is a concept of social justice centered around respect, care, recognition, and empathy that directs communities toward anti-discriminatory practices (Obiakor et al., 2012; Sapon-

Shevin, 2010). Inclusion embraces individualization to provide equality of opportunity for each valued member of the school community (McLaughlin, 2010; Obiakor et al., 2012).

School communities must be flexible enough to respond to individual needs and not categorical labels (McLaughlin, 2010). This requires a fundamental shift in school culture which embraces the understanding that inclusion “is a dynamic process that implies changes in school ethos to create a community that accepts and values difference” (Bhattacharya, 2010). The influence of inclusion on school communities cannot be understated.

### *Least Restrictive Environment*

IDEA does not specifically use the term “inclusion.” Rather, it was born out of legislative mandates for students with disabilities to be placed in the least restrictive environment (LRE) “to the maximum extent possible.” The initial push for LRE and integration of students with disabilities often resulted in compliance-based placement decisions. Students with disabilities were simply present in general education classrooms without meaningful participation. This practice became known as “mainstreaming.” (Bhattacharya, 2010; Obiakor et al., 2012).

The law was revised to address this issue and shift focus from compliance-based access toward quality, meaningful, and individualized education programs (Lashley, 2007; McLaughlin, 2010; Obiakor et al., 2012; Pazey & Cole, 2013; McHatton et al., 2010; Sumbera et al., 2014). Now, LRE has evolved into an understanding that placement decisions must be made individually with a focus on what happens in the setting through the implementation of effective practices rather than where it happens (McLaughlin, 2012; Obiakor et al. 2012). Ultimately, “placement does not define practice” (Obiakor et al., 2012, p. 480) when upholding the LRE mandate.

*Elements of Successful Inclusion*

As each revision of IDEA placed a greater focus on inclusive practices, the field of education responded with research that defines elements for successful inclusion experiences. Perhaps the most significant of these is the understanding that the least restrictive environment mandate should not limit the use of effective evidence-based practices to inclusion only (Obiakor et al., 2012). In other words, students with disabilities should not be placed in general education settings solely for the purpose of experiencing effective evidence-based practices because they should be available in all settings across the continuum of services. To truly access the least restrictive environment, the focus should be placed on what happens rather than where it happens (Obiakor et al., 2012).

There are also several indicators of inclusive classrooms. First, inclusive classrooms should be heterogeneous and reflect the natural proportions of the school population. Not only does this grouping ensure there is adequate access to support, it reflects the structure of the world where a diverse group of people must learn to live and work together. Second, there is a strong sense of belonging, community, and cooperation in an inclusive classroom. Students are equipped with the social skills necessary to collaborate with one another to accomplish a common goal. Finally, inclusive classrooms engage all students in learning through differentiation with the support of special education staff (Causton & Theoharis, 2014; Sapon-Shevin, 2010).

Inclusion also demands certain characteristics of educators to be successful. The need for differentiation continues to become increasingly relevant to meet the diverse needs of learners. General and special educators must be flexible and willing to differentiate to meet individual needs. Additionally, successful inclusion also requires that teachers collaborate with one another,

which is frequently accomplished through common planning time (Berry, 2006; Obiakor et al., 2012).

However, successful inclusion does not solely rely on educators. Students should be involved in the process, too. Obiakor et al. (2012) purport that students with and without disabilities frequently state that they prefer to be educated together. Increased opportunities for socialization within inclusive environments are a commonly cited benefit of inclusion (Hammond & Ingalls, 2003; Jones, Thorn, Chow, Thompson, & Wilde, 2002).

Inclusive practices are most successful in schools that have a culture of appreciation for individual differences and diversity (Bhattacharya, 2010; Jones et al., 2002; McLeskey & Waldron, 2002). Such a culture can provide the support necessary to face the challenges related to inclusion.

### *Outcomes of Inclusion*

Research suggest that inclusive programs have a positive impact on outcomes for students with disabilities (Gilmour, 2018). Tremblay (2013) demonstrated such an effect by comparing the achievement of a co-taught inclusive classroom to that of a solo-taught special education classroom. Findings indicated that students with disabilities in the inclusive setting outperformed their peers with disabilities in the special education setting in reading and writing. Similar results were achieved in math and science through other studies (Demirdag, 2017; Fontana; 2005).

As students with disabilities access instruction taught by content area experts and supported by special education teachers who provide appropriate accommodations, they can achieve greater levels of learning compared to being taught in a special education environment

(Demirdag, 2017; Fontana, 2005; Tremblay, 2013). However, this does not mean that implementing inclusion is not without its challenges (Gilmour, 2018).

### *Challenges Related to Inclusion*

Despite the progressive legislative pathways and philosophical foundations that have brought about inclusion, there remain several challenges related to implementation. Most notably is an ambiguous definition of the term which carries a continuum of assumptions regarding the length of time students with disabilities spend in the general education setting (Gehrke et al., 2014). Some interpret it to mean a full-time, co-taught classroom with a general and special educator while others believe it to mean the use of a push-in model for services. In the latter, the student is assigned to a general education classroom under the direction of a general education teacher for the majority of the instructional day and direct special education services (e.g., academic instruction and related therapies) are provided in that setting (Gehrke et al., 2014; Kilanowski-Press et al., 2010; Obiakor et al. 2012). This lack of common understanding can make it difficult to implement inclusion with consistency (Gehrke et al., 2014; Obiakor et al., 2014).

Even in situations where there are clearly defined explanations, examples, and roles with inclusion, there are often concerns about the practicality of implementation (Obiakor et al., 2012). In pull-out or resource models, students with disabilities meet collectively from various classrooms with the special education teacher. As a result, inclusion may require more staff to serve students in several general education classrooms across the school which can create a financial hardship, especially in small districts (Downing, Eichinger, & Williams, 1997). However, Jones et al. (2002) argued conversely that other models for special education can be up to 2.3 times more costly than general education. Schools must be careful to avoid the trap of

choosing a service delivery model for a student based on practicality and resources rather than student need (Bricker, 2000).

Another challenge to inclusion is the lack of preparation of general education teachers to meet the needs of students with disabilities (Garrison-Wade et al., 2007; Hammond & Ingalls, 2003). Cook et al. (2007) examined the attitudes of general educators toward their included students and found that many teachers express the same amount or more concern for their students with disabilities compared to their typically developing peers. However, their reluctance to engage with or accommodate these students can be attributed in part due to their lack of training and preparation to meet the needs of students with disabilities in the general education classroom.

This lack of adequate preparation is echoed by special education teachers who feel unprepared to teach content area standards in inclusive environments. Initially, special educator preparation programs were established with a clinical and psychological approach, separate from universities. Special education teachers were trained to serve students in a specific category until the 1980s when preparation programs expanded with a noncategorical focus (Brownell et al., 2010). A nationwide teacher shortage coupled with increased demands for highly-qualified teachers resulted in many special education teachers pursuing alternative certification options where inclusive education and content area training is not addressed (Kohler-Evans, 2006; Nichols, Bicard, Bicard, & Casey, 2008).

### *Culture Needed to Support Inclusion*

A culture of inclusive education extends beyond students with disabilities. It is a school-wide model that reconfigures resources to benefit the maximum number of students including

those at-risk and English language learners (Obiakor et al., 2012). Inclusive education culture is grounded in the theory of Universal Design for Learning that seeks to optimize learning for all by removing barriers and improving access (Bicehouse & Faieta, 2017; CAST, 2018).

In inclusive education cultures, general education teachers accept responsibility for all students in collaboration with the special education teacher, removing antiquated stigmas of “special education students” (Obiakor et al., 2012). All teachers are flexible, data-driven problem solvers. They communicate clearly, hold high expectations for their students, and use culturally-responsive teaching methods (McLaughlin, 2010; Obiakor et al., 2012; Sapon-Shevin, 2010). Decisions are made based on individual differences and needs, not on categorical labels and biases (McLaughlin, 2010).

These decisions are supported by school leaders who also share an inclusive vision for the school. (Obiakor et al. 2012). All stakeholders must also receive district-level support for the substantial changes that are sometimes required to establish and sustain an inclusive education culture (Obiakor et al., 2012). These changes must be supported from the top (leadership) and the bottom (teachers responsible for implementation) to be successful. The process should always be a dynamic, ever-evolving picture of progress to best support the needs of the students and professionals who educate them (McLeskey & Waldron, 2002).

#### *Administrator Preparation to Support Inclusion*

The progressive expansion of access and removal of barriers for students with disabilities has placed an unprecedented responsibility on administrators. Principals are expected to take an active role in decisions that impact the outcomes of students with disabilities including curriculum, intervention, services, and placement (Sumbera et al., 2014). However, principals

report a lack of preparation to do so and when combined with confusion regarding the governing laws (NCLB and IDEA), these factors can significantly impact the outcomes of students with disabilities (Chandler & Utz, 1982; DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; Gehrke et al., 2014; McHatton et al., 2010; Sumbera et al., 2014).

### *Summary*

Special education has a long history of changing to meet the needs of students to improve opportunities and outcomes (U.S. Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, 2010). This evolution continues to refine the definition of successful inclusive practices and the challenges that inclusion brings within in the context of a culture that embraces an inclusive philosophy for all (Gehrke et al., 2014; Hammond & Ingalls, 2003; Obiakor et al. 2012; Sapon-Shevin, 2010). Inclusive practices in every school and district across the country rely on the support provided through the leadership of administrators to sustain the process (McHatton et al., 2010; Sumbera et al., 2014).

## CHAPTER 3

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

*Rationale for Study*

There is a significant amount of research available about effective inclusion practices and a common theme is a need for administrative support (Bricker, 2000; Cramer et al., 2010; Hammond & Ingalls, 2003; Jones et al., 2002; McLeskey & Waldron; 2002). Teachers often cite a lack of support as a significant source of frustration when trying to implement effective inclusion strategies (McCleskey & Waldron, 2015). However, little research has been conducted to define the role of administrators and educational leaders in supporting these practices (Kamens, Susko, & Elliott, 2013).

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of teachers and administrators who are tasked with implementing inclusive practices to support students with disabilities and further define the role of administrators in this effort. This chapter outlines the methodology used to conduct the study.

*Research Design*

A qualitative case study method was chosen due to the highly individualized information desired to answer the research questions. A qualitative case study provides an in-depth opportunity for the researcher to understand a situation through the lens of those who are experiencing it. It also helps the researcher develop and define a theory as the study is conducted (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The case study method was necessary to understand the complexity of the experiences that shaped the opinions of the participants to explore their desire or needs related to administrative support.

### *Site Selection*

The research was conducted in a school system in Upper East Tennessee which serves approximately 8,300 students. The district employs about 530 teachers and almost 40 administrators. Many of the elementary schools are established to serve kindergarten through eighth grades in one building with enrollment sizes ranging from 250 to 700. Additionally, 15.3% of students across the district are identified for special education services. All schools in the district practice inclusion to varying degrees but the elementary grades have implemented inclusive practices the longest compared to middle and secondary grades.

### *Participants*

Schools in the district were ranked based on the percentage of students identified with disabilities and the top four schools were named “target schools.” After obtaining permission from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the school district, one principal and one elementary special education teacher at each target school were invited to participate in a semi-structured individual interview (Appendix D). A total of three principals and four special education teachers participated in individual interviews.

These participants were asked to nominate up to two general educators at their schools (“target schools”) who work directly with students with disabilities to participate in a focus group interview. Potential focus group participants were contacted directly by the researcher and provided the invitation to participate (Appendix B) and informed consent (Appendix C).

In the final phase of interviews, a focus group interview was conducted with general education and special education teachers from non-target schools. Invitations were sent to principals of the non-target schools with a request for them to forward it to all general and

special educators at the schools. Interested individuals were asked to complete an online registration form through Google Forms to indicate their desire to participate.

Both focus groups were conducted as semi-structured interviews using the same questions as the individual interviews (Appendix D) except for Question 1d. (“Describe a typical day in your role.”). This question was used in individual interviews to establish a comfort level with participants and did not elicit pertinent information applicable to the research. In the focus groups, a similar level of comfort was established due to being in a larger group setting and engaging with participants and researcher informally prior to beginning the interview.

#### *Researcher’s Role*

The researcher’s primary role was to facilitate both individual and focus group interviews. A series of semi-structured interview questions were asked (Appendix D) as well as follow up questions as needed for clarification and data saturation. The researcher digitally recorded responses while also taking notes regarding responses, emotions, and other cues from the interviewee(s).

All interviews were conducted in person. Individual interviews were conducted after school in the interviewee’s office or classroom. Focus groups were conducted in the researcher’s classroom. Interview participants were invited to review the list of questions in person, just prior to beginning the interview. One interview participant was provided the interview questions the morning of the interview to facilitate the interview quickly in the interest of time at her request.

#### *Data Collection Methods*

Data were collected through a series of seven one-on-one interviews as well as two focus groups. The individual interviews took place over the course of several weeks early in the

research to allow time for data analysis that informed the focus group interviews. Participants were invited to bring artifacts that may further illustrate their experiences such as lesson plans, electronic mail correspondence, or memos. However, no artifacts were collected or viewed. Participants were informed that follow up interviews may be conducted for clarification, but no follow up interviews were necessary.

### *Strategies for Data Management*

All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed by a third party for data analysis using Microsoft Word. The transcriber had no interactions with the interviewees and no previously established relationship with the participating school system. Files were transmitted through electronic mail and file sharing platforms that were password-protected.

Attempts to maintain confidentiality were maintained during interviews such as providing anonymous codes for personal or school names (e.g., T1, T2, P1, P2, etc.). When a participant unintentionally used identifying information, it was redacted from the written transcript. Transcripts were forwarded to participants for their review and final approval.

All digital recording and transcript files were stored on a password-protected device that can only be accessed through a password-protected account. All research notes, transcripts, and files will be destroyed after three years.

### *Data Analysis*

Strauss and Corbin (1990) describe grounded theory as procedures to describe and explain a phenomenon through a set of concepts. A hypothesis emerges from the collection and analysis of data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Interview transcripts were reviewed and analyzed for emerging themes and patterns using the MAXQDA software. This software is used to analyze

and code qualitative data through color coding and labeling. Sections of the transcribed interviews were color-coded and labeled with a word or phrase to summarize the content. These labels were compared and categorized by the researcher into organizing themes. Then, organizing themes were compared and global themes emerged. Identified themes were shared with participants to ensure accuracy.

### *Credibility and Trustworthiness*

The researcher made attempts to limit potential bias as much as possible. Some of the participants had previously established relationships with the researcher therefore, the importance of confidentiality was established prior to each interview. This was accomplished by providing a letter of informed consent (Appendix C) to participants to read, review, and sign that stated they could discontinue their participation, decline to answer any questions without penalty, and emphasized confidentiality measures to be taken during the research. The researcher also discussed the informed consent with participants and answered any questions that the participants had prior to beginning.

Due to the nature of qualitative research, the sample size was purposefully small (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Therefore, efforts were made to ensure trustworthiness and credibility through participant review of interview transcripts and identified themes. Additionally, triangulation between information gained from individual interviews with teachers and administrators as well as focus groups provided further trustworthiness and credibility.

Interviews were semi-structured using the questions in Appendix D and lasted approximately 30 to 60 minutes. Follow up questions were asked for clarification and to ensure

saturation of data. When participant responses became redundant and no new information was obtained, saturation was achieved (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

### *Ethical Considerations*

Potential participants from the district received a letter providing details of the study and inviting them to participate. Participation was voluntary and each participant signed an informed consent (Appendix C) that state they could withdraw at any time without penalty. Participants were not compensated for their time.

The researcher had a previously established relationship with some participants. However, steps were taken to establish trust and maintain confidentiality throughout the study. The researcher reviewed the informed consent document with participants, emphasizing the measures for confidentiality and allowing opportunities for questions.

At times, participants would inadvertently use identifying information during the interview which was redacted during transcription. Interviews were transcribed by a third party who had no relationship with the participating school district or participants.

### *Transferability and Dependability*

Due to the nature of the qualitative case study and small sample size, the results cannot be generalized to other populations. However, the findings may be applicable to similar contexts (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Triangulation between individual interviews of administrators, individual interviews of teachers, focus group interviews with target school general educators, and focus group interviews

with non-target school general and special educators was achieved. Transcripts and emergent themes were provided to participants to ensure accuracy.

## CHAPTER 4

## DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to further define the role of administrators in supporting inclusive practices as explained by teachers and administrators. Specific objectives were 1) to explore teacher and administrator perspectives regarding the role of administrative support for inclusive practices, 2) compare the perceptions of both, and 3) to identify the type of support teachers desire from administrators to support inclusive practices.

A qualitative case study design was used as outlined in Chapter 3. The participants were purposefully sampled from schools with the highest number of students with disabilities expressed as a percent of total enrollment. This information (see Table 1) was obtained in early January 2019 from the Tennessee Department of Education State Report Card website (<https://reportcard.tnk12.gov/>). The top four schools with the highest percentage of disabilities were chosen due to the range of enrollment represented and a variety of special education programs offered.

**Table 1.***Target School Demographic Information*

<b>School (Pseudonym)</b>	<b>Total Enrollment</b>	<b>Percent of Students with Disabilities*</b>	<b>Self-Contained Special Education Programs Offered</b>
Target School 1	381	22%	Yes
Target School 2	227	20.3%	No
Target School 3	614	19.7%	Yes
Target School 4	376	18.1%	No

*\*Note: Includes all students receiving special education services regardless of placement*

*Description of Participants*

A principal and special education teacher at each target school were invited to participate in semi-structured individual interviews using open-ended questions. Seven of the eight potential participants from the target schools participated in this phase. Table 2 identifies basic demographic information of the individual interview participants using pseudonyms. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed by an unrelated third party. Transcripts were provided to participants to review for accuracy.

**Table 2.***Participant Demographic Information – Individual Interviews*

<b>Name (Pseudonym)</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>School (Pseudonym)</b>	<b>Total Years of Experience</b>	<b>Total Years in Current Role</b>
Teacher 1 – (T1)	Female	Target School 1	7	5
Principal 2 – (P2)	Male	Target School 2	21	2
Teacher 2 – (T2)	Female	Target School 2	15	2
Principal 3 – (P3)	Female	Target School 3	12	2
Teacher 3 – (T3)	Female	Target School 3	25	11
Principal 4 – (P4)	Female	Target School 4	40	8
Teacher 4 – (T4)	Female	Target School 4	6	6

The target school principal and special education teacher participants were asked to identify at least two general education teachers to participate in the target school focus group. After the target school focus group was conducted, an open invitation was sent to all general education and special education teachers at the non-target schools to participate in a second focus group. Participants from both focus groups had a range of 12 to 28 years of experience overall in

education with a range of two to nine years in their current roles. Although not a requirement for participation, all participants had experience working directly with students with disabilities in inclusive settings.

### *Analysis of Data*

Data were coded using a grounded theory approach to identify emerging themes and patterns relating to the research questions.

R1: What role do general and special education teachers perceive that administrators take in supporting inclusive practices?

R2: What role do administrators perceive that they take in supporting inclusive practices?

R3: Is there a difference between the perceptions of teachers and administrators regarding the role of administrators in supporting inclusive practices?

R4: What types of support do general and special education teachers desire from administrators?

Grounded theory is a flexible process used to understand social phenomena (Gentles, Charles, Ploeg, & McKibbin, 2015; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The purpose is to develop a set of concepts to explain and describe the phenomena (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Transcripts were uploaded to the qualitative data coding program MAXQDA and assigned a label using an open coding technique. Words or short phrases were used to categorize the data and identify themes and patterns. A constant comparative method was used during the process to compare responses of educators and further refine categories of data into global themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Gentles et al., 2015).

A report was conducted through the MAXQDA program to summarize the codes used in interviews with teachers (individual interviews with teacher participants and both focus groups). This report was exported into a Microsoft Excel table and ranked by frequency to identify recurring codes, which were then organized into larger themes. The same process was conducted to run a separate report using the codes from the transcripts of the interviews with principals.

Only codes relating to administrative support were included when categorizing and organizing data. Codes relating to classroom-level factors (e.g., lesson presentation, behavior systems) or external factors beyond an administrator's control (e.g., socioeconomic status, high-stakes testing) were excluded.

### *Teacher Perceptions of and Desire for Administrator Support*

Teacher participants in individual and focus group interviews were asked a series of open-ended questions as part of a semi-structured interview (Appendix D). Table 3 summarizes the most common recurring themes for teacher participants.

**Table 3.**

#### *Global and Organizing Themes – Teacher Responses*

<b>Global Theme</b>	<b>Number of Coded Segments in Teacher Responses</b>
<i>Organizing Themes</i>	
<b>Scheduling</b>	<b>26</b>
<i>Finding a Balance</i>	8
<i>Natural Proportions</i>	2
<i>Planning Time</i>	5
<b>Professional Development</b>	<b>12</b>
<i>Lack of Training</i>	10

**Table 3** (continued).

<b>Culture</b>	<b>10</b>
<i>Understanding &amp; Awareness</i>	13
<i>Knowing Students</i>	11
<i>Least Restrictive Environment</i>	9
<b>Relationships</b>	<b>5</b>
<i>Listening &amp; Understanding</i>	11

### *Scheduling*

Scheduling emerged as a topic discussed and reiterated by all teacher participants in all interviews. Teachers expressed the need for more time with special education staff providing direct services and support to students with disabilities in the inclusive classroom. Many of the teachers stated that students with disabilities typically receive 30 minutes each of reading and math instruction per day in the general education classroom. They noted this was largely due to the limited number of special education staff serving large numbers of students with disabilities. One non-target school focus group interview participant stated, “I never actually had the special ed [*sic*] teacher come in my room. It was always her assistant, and her assistant was not very well trained and couldn't help them with [the content].”

Similarly, teachers cited the responsibility of administrators to find a balance while placing students in classrooms. Another focus group participant from Target School 1 stated that during one school year her general education classroom consisted of 50% of students that had IEPs and received special education services. She explained they were all placed in her classroom so that the special education staff could serve them simultaneously due to scheduling constraints.

Other participants stated that the limited support in the general education classroom was due to a school-wide schedule that had overlapping instructional times. T4 noted that, “sometimes when you [the special education teacher] go in [to the general education classroom], it’s just not the best time and that’s so hard to work with.” When asked how administrators could support this concern, T4 replied that administrators should be “...aware of what we’re trying to accomplish. Like, please don’t put reading and math for 5th through 8th grade all in the afternoon.”

Finally, teacher participants discussed the need for administrators to provide common planning time between general education and special education teachers that serve students with disabilities in inclusive environments. Many teachers explained the planning time they currently have is informal, often outside of the school day and on their own time. T3 suggested that the inclusive experiences of the students with disabilities could improve with formal planning time devoted to collaboration.

Teacher participants indicated the desire for administrators to provide this planning time regularly, even if it was not feasible to do so daily. One participant explained in this past, a substitute was hired for the special educator once per grading period so that she could meet individually with the grade level teachers during their regular planning time.

T4 described another solution where she facilitated bi-weekly collaborative planning meetings between the general education teacher, the principal, and herself during the general education teacher’s regular planning time. The principal excused the special education teacher from part of her instructional duties during the day to allow the her to attend these meetings every other week.

*Professional Development*

Teacher participants also consistently stated that it was necessary for administrators to arrange for ongoing professional development to support inclusive practices. A target school focus group participant expressed frustration that administrators chose a small number of select teachers to attend professional development opportunities instead of offering the training to all teachers. Several participants also pointed out the importance of paraprofessionals attending the same training as teachers because they are often providing as much or more direct support to students with disabilities in inclusive environments as teachers do.

Another common pattern from the data was the desire of general educators and special educators to attend training together. During the non-target school focus group, a general educator and special educator compared their experiences in training and preparation. The general educator explained she felt inadequately trained in providing support to students with disabilities while the special educator felt she was inadequately trained in the content area curriculum. They both agreed that if administrators arranged for them to attend training together, it would make a positive impact on their implementation of inclusive practices.

Some teachers described the positive impact of individualized professional development opportunities arranged by their administrators such as on-the-job coaching and opportunities to observe other inclusive settings. T3 recalled when inclusive practices were first being implemented stating that, “the principal and the school system brought in a group of people that were teaching teachers how to do inclusion. It was starting to be the trend, so the principals at the other schools that I worked at were on board with that.” She felt this individualized training opportunity was particularly helpful when beginning to implement inclusive practices.

*Culture of Awareness and Understanding*

Third, teachers discussed the role of administrators in establishing a school-wide culture of awareness and understanding to support inclusive practices. They explained that to provide guidance and leadership for implementing inclusive practices, administrators must have a thorough understanding of special education and disabilities in general. They felt that this understanding leads to knowing their students well, which many teachers agreed was critical to supporting inclusive practices.

Several teachers expanded upon this concept by explaining administrators must model a desire for all students to be successful and acknowledge the progress they make toward goals. One focus group participant described the impact that this awareness can make on students in inclusive settings:

Know your students well enough to know when they have been successful with something...I've had principals who just last year came in and I had a kid who was struggling hardcore with something. I just mentioned it, 'Hey look, this student did this.' He [the principal] came in and he was in front of the whole class, [telling the student] 'I am so proud of you.' That said more to that kid than anything that I could've said.

Finally, teachers identified a need for administrators to understand and apply the concept of least restrictive environment to best meet student needs. Teachers expressed that administrators often make placement decisions based on scheduling constraints or in an attempt to expose students with disabilities to the general education curriculum in light of the pressures of accountability from high-stakes testing.

A non-target school focus group participant stated that when she inquired about other special education service and placement options she was told, "we don't do that [providing pull-out services] because that takes them from the general ed [*sic*] instruction and they need to be in

there for all instruction.” When reflecting on a similar situation, she added, “I don't want to say that she shouldn't have been in the classroom, but as far as like what was best for her, I don't feel like just sitting there and being present was the best thing for her.” Participants indicated there was a lack of understanding about meaningful participation in inclusive settings because administrators did not seem to make service and placement decisions based on individual need.

### *Relationships with Administrators*

The last theme related to teacher perceptions of and desire for administrative support that emerged from the data was the need for administrators to have positive relationships with teachers. Teacher participants cited factors such as trust and security as critical for supporting inclusive practices. One target school focus group participant compared the relationships between administrators and principals to those between teachers and students by saying, “it's kind of like with your students. When you build that rapport between your principal and your teachers, there's that trust there, there's that feeling of security, which is what you want to do in your classroom with your kids.”

T4 also discussed the importance of trust between administrators and teachers. She noted that administrators must trust that teachers know students well enough to be able to make the best decisions related to their instruction, placement, and services. She explained, “I'm going to study each kid and I'm going to know them individually enough that one scenario may be different than the other scenario. It's not just a one size fits all, that what we do is very individualized. So, I guess just backing me up in that.”

Participants further expressed that supporting inclusive practices with administrative relationships can be as simple as listening to teachers and trying to see their point of view.

Several participants cited the importance of simply acknowledging effort as explained by a target school focus group participant:

...You put so much of yourself into these kids, just that acknowledgment from the principals over time [is important]. You've put everything in your toolbox in front of these kids...So, just being able to have the principal's acknowledgment [of your effort], is a huge thing for us.

Participants noted that the role of positive relationships also extends to students and administrators. Overwhelmingly, teachers reported the need for principals to have a physical presence in their classrooms on a regular basis. A target school focus group participant stated, “over a period of time those kids actually see that principal as not somebody that just sits up in an office. There's somebody who's part of my school, who's part of my day... and over the long term, I think that makes that relationship meaningful to them.” She stressed these relationships are even more important in inclusive environments to provide teachers and students with the sense of security that she felt is needed for inclusion to be successful.

All the other target school focus group participants responded in agreement. One teacher followed up by recalling how her former principal ate his lunch in the cafeteria with a group of middle school students while also providing supervision to build rapport and nurture relationships with all students. The teacher explained that this emphasis on relationships is imperative for students with disabilities to feel a sense of belonging at school considering the commonly emphasized achievement levels that may leave them feeling excluded.

#### *Administrator Perceptions of Supporting Inclusive Practices*

Administrator participants only participated in the individual interview phase. Three of the four target school principals participated due to scheduling issues with the principal of Target School 1. Participants were asked a series of open-ended questions as part of a semi-structured

interview (Appendix D). Table 4 summarizes the global and organizing themes that emerged from administrator responses.

**Table 4.**

*Global and Organizing Themes – Administrator Responses*

<b>Global Theme</b> <i>Organizing Themes</i>	<b>Number of Coded Segments in Administrator Responses</b>
<b>Professional Development</b>	<b>14</b>
<i>Lack of Training</i>	2
<b>Scheduling</b>	<b>12</b>
<i>Planning Time</i>	9
<i>Flexible Scheduling</i>	3
<b>Personnel</b>	<b>12</b>
<i>Teacher Relationships &amp; Willingness</i>	7
<i>Collaborative Relationships</i>	9
<b>Culture</b>	<b>11</b>
<i>Sense of Belonging</i>	6
<i>Understanding &amp; Awareness</i>	4
<i>Universal Design for Learning</i>	5

*Professional Development*

Administrators overwhelmingly discussed the need for continued professional development to support inclusive practices. They felt any negative attitudes or resistance toward the concept of inclusion, especially when it was first implemented, was due to lack of training. Principals agreed that over the past several years, there have been multiple professional development opportunities for teachers to support inclusion. As a result, teachers have become more willing to work with students with disabilities in inclusive settings.

Administrators stated they often employ traditional methods for professional learning such as meetings and conferences. For example, P3 noted the faculty at Target School 3 participates in schoolwide book studies on various topics such as differentiation and building relationships with students. Both P3 and P4 stated they provide time for professional development and collaboration among teachers during regular faculty meetings. Several administrators cited the importance of disseminating information learned from conferences that the district sends them to among their teachers as another way of providing support for inclusive practices. P2 stated that he felt it is important for paraprofessionals to attend training with teachers given the amount of responsibility placed on them to serve students with disabilities in inclusive environments.

In addition, individualized opportunities for professional learning were identified by most of the principals as another way to support inclusive practices. P3 and P4 allowed their faculty members to observe teachers in other inclusive settings to further develop their understanding of inclusion. Similarly, P4 also recalled at least one opportunity where a district level leader provided on-the-job coaching for a pair of inclusion co-teachers who were struggling to be successful with inclusion. Administrators stated their role in providing professional development was to identify needs and make logistical arrangements for the learning opportunities.

### *Scheduling*

Next, administrators discussed how they use scheduling to support inclusive practices. P2 pointed out that he changes the schedule from year to year to best meet the needs of the students. He explained that while planning when to schedule intervention blocks for students with disabilities, he begins by considering the numbers and range of needs in each grade level.

5th and 6th [grade intervention times] are combined and 7th and 8th are combined because they had the lowest numbers of students who needed intervention...So next year, we already know that [2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> grade will have fewer students] and our 5th/6th are the high ones, so then next year they'll be [scheduled separately and] 2nd and 3rd will be put together.

P3 also described a similar approach to scheduling based on the needs of students. She felt she could support inclusion by...

...making the schedule a little bit more friendly, looking at the students' needs and making sure that the classes where the students have higher needs might have a little bit more time [with direct support from special education staff]. We've actually looked at data [to decide] what time of day is best maybe for [students with disabilities to go to] ELA [English/Language Arts] and what time of day is best for math.

P3 also stated she felt her role in setting up a schedule to support inclusion extended to making sure there was a balance of students and student needs. She described that involves, "being very intentional with which students are where so that we have them in a classroom where they're set up for the most success and also so that the teachers can most effectively instruct those students."

In addition to scheduling classes and assigning students to classrooms, administrator participants discussed the importance of scheduling collaborative planning time between the general and special educators that support students in inclusive settings. P3 noted that she was able to rearrange part of the schedule to allow general and special education teachers to have consistent collaborative planning time. She felt it was necessary to schedule this collaborative time because when it comes to supporting students with disabilities in inclusive settings, "I think that planning time is key."

### *Personnel*

Administrator participants stressed the importance of personnel to further support inclusive practices. Each principal acknowledged the need for more personnel however, this is

generally not a factor under their control. Therefore, the principals emphasized that the limited number of personnel means it is imperative to ensure there is a positive relationship among those that are working collaboratively to serve students in inclusive settings. P3 stated, “I think that you have to have effort and the commitment from both teachers and there has to be an open, transparent relationship between them.”

When P4 encountered resistance from a general education teacher during the initial phases of implementing inclusive practices, she responded by arranging on-the-job coaching for the teacher. Despite her attempts to equip the teacher with the training necessary to work collaboratively to support students with disabilities, the teacher remained unwilling to do so. Eventually, P4 explained, “I made up mind, ‘OK, [this relationship is] not going to work. She’s not ever going to do this.’ So, I just had to move her, find somebody else that could do it.”

All administrators emphasized the importance of the relationships between the teachers. They stated their role was to make compatible matches of teachers who express a willingness to cooperate, communicate, and display a positive attitude toward inclusion and students with disabilities.

### *Culture of Acceptance*

Finally, administrator participants cited the importance of establishing a culture of acceptance that includes a sense of belonging. P4 explained that, “...all the students belong to all of us...I think they are everyone’s kids in that classroom.” She elaborated on the impact that a sense of belonging makes on students with disabilities by adding, “going into the classroom and being part of a group... You just see kids feeling like they’re more a part of it.”

P3 expressed a similar viewpoint and pointed out that her role as an administrator is to model this culture for the faculty. She explained, “we're making a collective effort to refer to students as ‘our’ students. They're not ‘my’ students; those aren't ‘your’ students. So that's something that as a principal that I'm really trying to model and really trying to establish.”

Administrators also unanimously agreed that a culture of acceptance and sense of belonging for students with disabilities begins with understanding students with disabilities. P2 stressed the need for students with disabilities to have relationships with teachers and principals to feel a sense of belonging. He pointed out that relationships are built upon understanding and explained it in the context of supporting student behavior, “you have to make the culture such that teachers understand that ‘Jimmy’s’ going to misbehave; what can we put in place to keep ‘Jimmy’ focused?” He noted it takes communication and a team approach to build such a culture.

P3 echoed the teamwork mentality by explaining, “the special education teacher's not just in there [an inclusive classroom] for his or her students... [The special education and general education teacher are] working together to meet the needs of all the students.” She elaborated to explain how the collaborative effort of the two teachers in inclusive settings benefits all students, not just the students with disabilities, by providing opportunities for differentiation that may not be possible with the general education teacher alone.

CHAPTER 5  
SUMMARY OF FINDINGS,  
RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

Evolving legislation over the past several decades has resulted in various interpretations of inclusive practices for students with disabilities (Kirby, 2017; Sumbera, Pazey, & Lashley, 2014). Teachers frequently cite the lack of administrative support as a barrier to successful inclusive practices (Bricker, 2000; Cramer et al., 2010; Hammond & Ingalls, 2003; Jones et al., 2002; McLeskey & Waldron, 2002; McLeskey & Waldron, 2015). However, the perceptions of administrative support so often desired by teachers can vary greatly and have an impact on the success of inclusive experiences (Kohler-Evans, 2006; McLeskey & Waldron, 2015).

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of teachers and administrators who are tasked with implementing inclusive practices to support students with disabilities and further define the role of administrators in this effort. The guiding research questions were:

- R1: What role do general and special education teachers perceive that administrators take in supporting inclusive practices?
- R2: What role do administrators perceive that they take in supporting inclusive practices?
- R3: Is there a difference between the perceptions of teachers and administrators regarding the role of administrators in supporting inclusive practices?
- R4: What types of support do general and special education teachers desire from administrators?

A grounded theory approach was used to develop and refine a theory as the research was conducted (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers

and administrators. Data were analyzed for emerging themes and patterns using constant comparative analysis and reported in Chapter 4 (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Gentles et al., 2015).

### *Summary of Findings*

Several common themes related to administrator support emerged from both groups such as scheduling, professional development, and aspects of culture. However, the participant groups had different perspectives on each factor.

Regarding scheduling, both groups held a similar perspective regarding the need to have a school schedule structured to support inclusive practices. Teachers placed more emphasis on classroom-level factors such as class size and administrators discussed build level concerns such as staff assignments. However, both groups noted the need for more time for direct support in the classroom, collaborative planning, a balance of students and needs, and the responsibility of the administrator to create a balanced schedule that supports these needs.

Professional development was another theme that emerged between the two groups. Teachers and administrators both agreed the administrator's primary role is to provide the logistical arrangements for professional development. Administrators commented more on the need to be aware of what types of professional development will best support inclusive practices while teachers repeatedly noted the desire to participate in more opportunities. Only one teacher commented on the need for administrators to attend professional development, too.

While both groups mentioned aspects related to culture, their perspective varied slightly. Administrators focused on acceptance and teachers referred to the need for awareness and understanding. Administrators focused heavily on a sense of belonging and teamwork approach, reflecting a global view of culture that develops over an extended period. Teachers identified

specific details relating to culture that administrators can directly impact daily such as being present in classrooms, establishing positive relationships with teachers and students, and knowing students well.

Finally, participants noted differing views related to personnel. Teachers discussed the need for administrators to have trusting relationships with them. Administrators held a different viewpoint that involved making the best personnel placement decisions possible to support inclusive practices. While administrators felt relationships were necessary to support inclusive practices, they focused more on the teacher-to-teacher relationships between general and special educators.

### *Discussion*

#### *Scheduling*

The results indicate teachers and administrators both believe that scheduling is a critical factor in supporting inclusive practices. Administrators must establish a schoolwide schedule that allows teachers to provide the maximum amount of direct support possible to students with disabilities. However, this can be difficult to accomplish due to a lack of personnel. The evidence suggested despite the limited number of personnel, administrators can make intentional scheduling decisions that support inclusive practices such as providing a balanced course load throughout the day and placing a proportionate number of students in an inclusive classroom (Causton & Theoharis, 2014; Sapon-Shevin, 2010).

The research also supported the claim that administrators must schedule collaborative planning time to support inclusive practices (Berry, 2006; Obiakor et al., 2012). Both groups of participants expressed a desire for regular collaborative planning but stated it was often not

feasible due to lack of personnel to provide classroom supervision and instruction while teachers plan together. As a result, administrator participants described creative solutions to provide this time such as hiring substitutes or excusing teachers from a portion of their instructional duties biweekly.

However, some of these solutions can still be impractical due to other strained resources. Administrators must find methods for providing collaborative planning time which fit within their boundaries of available time, personnel, and budget.

### *Professional Development*

The study revealed the importance of professional development in supporting inclusive practices. Both groups felt that administrators have a responsibility to arrange multiple professional development opportunities for teachers. Administrators suggested these opportunities should be matched to the individual needs of teachers to support their professional growth. However, teachers can perceive this negatively when the opportunities are not open to everyone. The evidence suggests that teachers would like to work cooperatively with administrators to identify and arrange professional development opportunities.

General and special education teachers also expressed the desire to attend training together but only one principal mentioned this during the interview process. The principal explained the participating district has recently started to make efforts to provide collaborative professional development opportunities. Both groups also pointed out the importance of paraprofessionals receiving training with teachers, but this is frequently limited by budgetary constraints.

One teacher mentioned the need for administrators to receive training but did not elaborate on the topics or needs. Sumbera et al. (2014) cited the lack of administrator training as a factor in concerns with administrators implementing IDEA law, especially the mandate for a free and appropriate education in the least restrictive environment. Teacher participants echoed this perspective. They stated that some administrators attempt to implement a “one size fits all” program under the guise of least restrictive environment and are not open to other options.

### *Culture*

A third theme addressed the role of administrators in establishing a culture that supports inclusion. Teachers held a more negative perspective, expressing frustration for what was lacking from the culture (awareness of students and understanding of special education). Administrators described a positive perspective, pointing out cultural aspects that were present in their schools (a sense of belonging and teamwork). This suggests that administrators may be less aware of needs related to building a culture that supports inclusive practices.

### *Relationships*

The evidence pointed to different perspectives on relationships. Teachers focused on classroom-level relationships and stated administrators must have a positive relationship with them as well as the students. Administrators, however, only referred to the relationships between teachers in inclusive settings. This suggests that administrators believe that teacher-to-teacher interactions, which students in inclusive settings experience regularly, have a greater impact on successful inclusive practices than teacher-to-administrator experiences.

Administrators are the only group that discussed matching and placing personnel to ensure success. Both groups mentioned the need for more personnel, but administrators drew

conclusions between their frustrations related to inclusive practices and the lack of personnel. Teachers also did not discuss the importance of matching teacher personalities in collaborative relationships to support inclusion. This may be due to their lack of control over whom they work with and must find a way to make the relationship work. Conversely, administrators know they have the option of moving or changing placements and evidence suggests they place greater emphasis on the interpersonal relationships between teachers than teachers do.

### *Recommendations for Practice*

Administrators have several critical roles in supporting inclusive practices. The following are recommendations for practice:

- Administrators should establish a schoolwide schedule with teacher input that most effectively meets the needs of as many students with disabilities as possible. Although it is not possible for administrators to create a schedule that suits all teachers and students, they must be strategic about personnel assignments with consideration to interpersonal relationships and skills to meet student needs in inclusive settings.
- Administrators must also provide collaborative planning at regular, predictable intervals for teachers even if this cannot be achieved daily or weekly.
- Administrators need to involve teachers in planning for professional development. At times, it may be necessary for an administrator to identify the professional growth needs for specific teachers and provide training in response to these needs. However, there should be open communication between administrators and teachers about types of professional development desired and available.

- Administrators must be present in the culture of the school. They must have strong relationships with teachers and be involved in the growth and learning of students. Administrators must model a philosophy and vision of inclusion (Obiakor et al., 2012).

### *Limitations of the Study*

There were some limitations to the study. Due to purposeful sampling, there was a small number of participants and not all participants who were invited accepted the invitation. Six of the eight initially identified principals and special education teachers from the target schools agreed to participate. A second special education teacher from one of the target schools joined the study after the first special education teacher declined to participate. Although one of the principals agreed to participate, several scheduling conflicts arose during the interview phase that prevented her from doing so.

Additionally, the study was limited by grade levels and gender represented by participants. All the administrator participants work in schools that serve kindergarten through eighth grades and all the teacher participants work with elementary grade levels. In the selected district, inclusive practices have been implemented in the elementary grades longer than middle and secondary grades. Only one male participated in the study. A varied representation of grades and genders may have an impact on results.

During the focus group interview, several general education teachers were identified by their principal and special education teacher colleagues as potential participants. Six teachers declined to participate and two teachers who agreed to participate did not attend the focus group.

Therefore, findings may not be generalizable to all teachers in the district or teachers in other districts.

Additionally, the only method of data collection used in this study was interviews. Interview participants did not bring any artifacts to support their responses and the researcher did not observe inclusive environments at the schools. Interviewees were not provided the questions before the start of the interview with one exception (Teacher 1 at Target School 1). The use of other data collection methods and the opportunity to preview the questions ahead of time may have impacted the outcomes.

#### *Recommendations for Future Research*

This study could be expanded in the following ways:

- Duplicating the research in other districts in the region and across the country can determine if the results are representative of other populations or limited to the selected school district.
- The methodology of future studies could be modified to include:
  - time in the schools to observe administrators, teachers, and inclusive settings;
  - middle grades or secondary level administrators and participants;
  - district level administrators as participants.
- Further exploring the role of culture in implementing inclusive practices.

#### *Summary*

The purpose of this study was to further define the role of administrators in supporting inclusive practices. Specific objectives were 1) to explore teacher and administrator perspectives of administrative support, 2) compare the perceptions of both, and 3) to identify the type of

support teachers desire from administrators to support inclusive practices. The study was conducted in a single school district in Upper East Tennessee by conducting individual and focus group semi-structured interviews. Results indicated that administrators and teachers have very similar perspectives regarding the role of and teacher desire for administrator support of inclusive practices.

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## APPENDIX A: INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE (INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW)

Dear Educator,

I am conducting a research study for a dissertation to be submitted as partial fulfillment for a Doctor of Education degree at Milligan College. The purpose of the study will be to explore the role of administrators in supporting inclusive practices for students with disabilities. In your current role, you are in a position to provide a valuable perspective on this topic.

You are invited to participate in an individual interview. The interview will be informal and will take place at an agreed upon place and time. The interview will last approximately 30 minutes. Participation in this research is optional and you may withdraw consent at any time. All identifying information will be kept confidential throughout the process and will not be included in the final, published dissertation.

There is no compensation for participation in this study. There are no direct, immediate benefits nor risks associated with participation. However, your input will be a valuable contribution to the field of education in developing a deeper understanding of the role of administrators in supporting inclusive practices.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact me at (423) 444-9217 or [meblevins@my.milligan.edu](mailto:meblevins@my.milligan.edu) or the research supervisor, Dr. Lyn Howell [lhowell@milligan.edu](mailto:lhowell@milligan.edu).

Sincerely,

Melody Blevins  
Doctoral Candidate  
Milligan College

## APPENDIX B: INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE (FOCUS GROUP)

Dear Educator,

I am conducting a research study for a dissertation to be submitted as partial fulfillment for a Doctor of Education degree at Milligan College. The purpose of the study will be to explore the role of administrators in supporting inclusive practices for students with disabilities. In your current role, you are in a position to provide a valuable perspective on this topic.

You are invited to participate in a focus group interview with other educators from the district. The interview will be informal and will take place at an agreed upon place and time. The interview will last approximately 60 minutes. Participation in this research is optional and you may withdraw consent at any time. All identifying information will be kept confidential throughout the process and will not be included in the final, published dissertation.

There is no compensation for participation in this study. There are no direct, immediate benefits nor risks associated with participation. However, your input will be a valuable contribution to the field of education in developing a deeper understanding of the role of administrators in supporting inclusive practices.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact me at (423) 444-9217 or [meblevins@my.milligan.edu](mailto:meblevins@my.milligan.edu) or the research supervisor, Dr. Lyn Howell [lhowell@milligan.edu](mailto:lhowell@milligan.edu).

Sincerely,

Melody Blevins  
Doctoral Candidate  
Milligan College

## APPENDIX C: INFORMED CONSENT

**Information and Purpose:** The interview for which you are being invited to participate in is a part of a research study that is focused on examining administrative support of inclusive practices. The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of the aspects of administrative support that are necessary for successful inclusive experiences.

**Your Participation:** Your participation in this study will consist of an individual interview lasting up to 30 minutes or a focus group interview lasting up to 60 minutes. You will be asked a series of questions about your inclusion experience, especially in terms of the amount and types of administrative support you have received and desire. You are not required to answer the questions and may decline to answer any question. At any time, you may notify the researcher that you would like to stop the interview and your participation in the study. There is no penalty for discontinuing your participation.

**Benefits and Risks:** The benefit of your participation is to contribute information to your school system directly as well as the field of education about the needs of administrative support in inclusive practices. This may assist administrators and school leaders in providing more targeted support to improve the inclusion experience of teachers and students. There are no risks associated with participation in the study as all identifying information will be kept confidential.

**Confidentiality:** The interview will be digitally recorded for analysis. Your name will not be used during the interview or included in the recording. All identifying information including your name, the name of your school, and the name of the school system will also not be associated with any part of the written report. All information and interview responses will be kept confidential. The researcher will not share your individual responses with anyone other than the research supervisor.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact the researcher Melody Blevins at (423) 444-9217 or [meblevins@my.milligan.edu](mailto:meblevins@my.milligan.edu) or the research supervisor, Dr. Lyn Howell [lhowell@milligan.edu](mailto:lhowell@milligan.edu).

By signing below I, (print name) \_\_\_\_\_,  
acknowledge that I have read and understand the above information. I would like to participate in the study and am aware that I can discontinue my participation at any time without penalty.

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Signature

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Date

## APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

## Sample Interview Questions

- 1) What is your current role at this school?
  - a. How long have you served in this capacity?
  - b. (For administrators) Describe your classroom experience prior to administration?
  - c. Describe a typical day in your role.
- 2) Describe your experience with students with disabilities.
- 3) What does “inclusion” mean to you?
  - a. What benefits have you personally experienced with inclusion?
  - b. What drawbacks have you personally experienced with inclusion?
- 4) Describe the culture of your school regarding the acceptance of students with disabilities and inclusion.
- 5) (For teachers) How have principals and other leaders helped support inclusion?  
(For administrators) How have you helped support inclusion?
  - a. Can you give a specific example?
- 6) What changes, if any, would you like to see to your current inclusion program?
- 7) Have you experienced any barriers to successful inclusion? If so, what are they?
- 8) (For teachers) What would you prefer that your principal do to support inclusion?