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Inclusive Schools for Students Served by Special Education: How Central Office Supports Principals

Abstract

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District leaders have a responsibility to develop and support principals to provide equitable and high-quality learning experiences for students who have been identified with disabilities. The purpose of this study was to analyze the Mountain Meadow School District's role in supporting the development of leaders for social justice for students identified with a disability. This qualitative case study examined current practices and structures through interviews, document reviews and observations to discover how central office leaders support principals. A synthesis of school leadership for social justice frameworks (Capper, Theoharis, and Sebastian, 2006 & Theoharis, 2009) and The Five Dimensions of Central Office Transformation (Honig, Copland, Rainey, Lorton, and Newton, 2010) framework led to the development of the District Level Leadership for Social Justice Framework that was used to analyze the current practices and systems in the Mountain Meadow School District.

The findings indicated that while MMSD supported a vision for equity for all students through their vision and strategic plan there were little to no explicit connections to the needs of students identified with a disability in principal professional learning. The examination of current practices and structures revealed four areas of focus for the district's role in supporting the development of principals: development of the instructional leadership capacity of principals, system-wide focus on instructional practices, beliefs supporting equity, and leadership for special education. Three themes emerged from the analysis through the District Level Leadership for Social Justice Framework: assumptions that structures and practices would serve all students; coaching and data use were vehicles to provide support; and special education was a siloed area of work. Recommendations for improvement were made from an analysis of current practices and systems and informed by the District Level Leadership for Social Justice Framework. The synthesis of the findings related to current practices and systems and the District Level Leadership for Social Justice Framework provide the basis for recommendations for improvement and action as the Mountain Meadow School District strives to create socially just inclusive schools that consider the needs of each student identified with disabilities.

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How Central Office Supports Principals

A Doctoral Research Project

Presented to

To the Faculty of the Morgridge College of Education

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in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

by

Lynn Reynolds Saltzgaver

May 2020

Advisor: Susan Korach, Ed.D.

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Title: INCLUSIVE SCHOOLS FOR STUDENTS SERVED BY SPECIAL
EDUCATION: HOW CENTRAL OFFICE SUPPORTS PRINCIPALS

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Keywords: principal, central office leadership, inclusive, disability, social justice leadership, special education, professional development

DEDICATION

My sweet girl Allison. You inspire me to bring my best to each day, I love you.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The scope of the work of the school principal in the United States is vast, and the role has a significant impact on student outcomes, second only to the teacher (Branch, Hanushek & Rivkin, 2013; Darling-Hammond, Meyerson, LaPointe, & Orr, 2010; Leithwood, Patten, & Jantzi, 2010). The role of a principal has become synonymous with being an instructional leader. A principal must guide a school to be a supportive system within its community, achieve accountability measures for students, grow, shape and support teacher practice, and develop students into learners and leaders (Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson & Wahlstrom, 2004; Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom & Anderson, 2010). A principal must also have the awareness of and desire to support an increasingly diverse population of students as well as the skills and ability to do so effectively. Thus, a leader needs to create a school culture that is representative of who the students are, while also providing an environment that supports achieving social justice for all students (Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis, 2016).

Principal as Instructional Leader

Well established in literature is the value of effective instructional leadership (Leithwood et al., 2004; Murphy & Hallinger, 1992; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008). However, the definitions of effective instructional leadership vary. Hallinger and Heck (2002) suggest that principals have a positive impact on instruction with the development of a mission, vision, and goal setting. Some researchers have conceptualized instructional leadership as the behaviors of leaders that aim to improve

instruction by supporting the teachers' ability to implement high-quality instruction while also organizing and managing a school effectively and efficiently (Hallinger, 2011; Leithwood et al., 2004; Wahlstrom, Louis, Leithwood, & Anderson, 2010). Other scholars have built upon this idea and define instructional leadership as efforts to improve teaching and learning for students, teachers, and the organization using distributive leadership practices (Marks & Printy, 2003; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001). The definition of instructional leadership has developed over time to include principals and other school leaders, yet foundationally it advances practices that support improved learning outcomes for students. The research within instructional leadership is vast and social justice leadership is a growing body of research within instructional leadership.

Principal as Leader for Social Justice

A new type of instructional leadership has emerged within the last two decades called social justice leadership. Social justice leaders focus on social justice with an emphasis on recognizing the inequities related to race, class, gender, disability, language, and sexual orientation, seeking to identify and change the inequities that exist in both opportunity and outcomes (DeMatthews & Izquierdo, 2016; Furman, 2012; Theoharis, 2007). Dantley and Tillman (2010) call out social justice leadership as creating solutions to systematic inequities and oppression. Leaders who have a social justice approach are action-oriented, committed, and persistent (Scheurich & Sklra, 2003; Theoharis, 2007); believe in inclusive practices (Theoharis & Causton-Theoharis, 2008); and are transformative in what they do. Transformative leadership not only

acknowledges inequity but also makes changes in assumptions, beliefs, and practices that will create just and equitable learning communities (Shields, 2018). For this study, social justice leadership is defined as the recognition of unequal circumstances for marginalized groups and the subsequent action to replace the oppressive practices and policies with those that are more equitable (Furman, 2012).

McKenzie et al. (2008) suggest that leaders need to “raise the academic achievement of all the students in their school” and “structure schools to ensure that students learn in heterogeneous inclusive classrooms” (p. 116). With this notion of social justice, principals need to also understand the inequities that students who are identified with disabilities encounter. Research links social justice and special education, often in the context of the overrepresentation of students of color or emerging bilinguals (Pazey & Cole, 2013). This is an essential area of study, yet the need to study the leadership required to dismantle the inequities that exist for students in special education is equally important. Disability is a social construct, where the individual is blamed and excluded for their difference (Skrtic, 2005). This deficit mindset is a long-standing belief in our educational system that is evident in policy, structures, and instruction and will continue to keep students from successful experiences and equitable opportunities. Students identified with disabilities are viewed as a problem to be solved rather than as a part of an inclusive community (Frattura & Topinka, 2006; LaNear & Frattura, 2009). It is an issue of social justice that students with disabilities have limited opportunities to be a part of an authentic inclusive community. In their efforts to build inclusive school

communities and to address inequities, principals must collaborate with many educational specialists.

Special Education

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is a federal policy established to provide students who are identified with disability a free appropriate public education (FAPE) to include special education and related services, in the least restrictive environment (LRE). IDEA (2004) states:

Disability is a natural part of the human experience and in no way diminishes the right of individuals to participate in or contribute to society. Improving educational results for children with disabilities is an essential element of our national policy of ensuring equality of opportunity, full participation, independent living, and economic self-sufficiency for individuals with disabilities. (33 C.F.R. § 1400 [c] [1])

IDEA was established in 1975 with the most current reauthorization completed by Congress in 2004. Most recently, IDEA (2004) was amended in 2015 through Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).

Under IDEA (2004) there are thirteen different disability categories for which students can receive special education services. Students who were identified with a disability and required special education services represented 14% of all public-school students in the United States in 2017-2018. The category of learning disability represented the disability with the highest incidence, with 34% of all students being identified with this disability in 2017-2018 (National Center for Education Statistics,

2019). IDEA (2004) also categorizes a student’s preferred educational environment, referred to as Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). LRE is defined by the school setting and time spent with general education peers. When comparing the LRE of students over the last twenty years (1990-2012), there has been an increase in the amount of time students with disabilities are included in the regular classroom. Specifically, in 2012, 60% of students with disabilities were included in the general classroom 80% or more of the time, an increase of 33% from 1990 to 2012 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Figure 1 displays the percentage distribution of students 6 to 21 years old from 1989 to 2012.

Table 204.60. Percentage distribution of students 6 to 21 years old served under Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Part B, by educational environment and type of disability: Selected years, fall 1989 through fall 2015

Type of disability 1	All environments 2	Regular school, time inside general class			Separate school for students with disabilities 6	Separate residential facility 7	Parentally placed in regular private schools ¹ 8	Homebound/hospital placement 9	Correctional facility 10
		Less than 40 percent 3	40-79 percent 4	80 percent or more 5					
All students with disabilities									
1989	100.0	24.9	37.5	31.7	4.5	1.0	—	0.6	—
1990	100.0	25.0	36.4	33.1	4.2	0.9	—	0.5	—
1994	100.0	22.4	28.5	44.8	3.0	0.7	—	0.6	—
1995	100.0	21.5	28.5	45.7	3.1	0.7	—	0.5	—
1996	100.0	21.4	28.3	46.1	3.0	0.7	—	0.5	—
1997	100.0	20.4	28.8	46.8	2.9	0.7	—	0.5	—
1998	100.0	20.0	29.9	46.0	2.9	0.7	—	0.5	—
1999	100.0	20.3	29.8	45.9	2.9	0.7	—	0.5	—
2000	100.0	19.5	29.8	46.5	3.0	0.7	—	0.5	—
2001	100.0	19.2	28.5	48.2	2.9	0.7	—	0.4	—
2002	100.0	19.0	28.7	48.2	2.9	0.7	—	0.5	—
2003	100.0	18.5	27.7	49.9	2.8	0.7	—	0.5	—
2004	100.0	17.9	26.5	51.5	3.0	0.6	—	0.4	—
2005	100.0	16.7	25.1	54.2	2.9	0.6	—	0.4	—
2006	100.0	16.4	23.8	54.8	2.9	0.4	1.0	0.4	0.4
2007	100.0	15.4	22.4	56.8	3.0	0.4	1.1	0.4	0.4
2008	100.0	14.9	21.4	58.5	2.9	0.4	1.1	0.4	0.4
2009	100.0	14.6	20.7	59.4	3.0	0.4	1.2	0.4	0.4
2010	100.0	14.2	20.0	60.5	3.0	0.4	1.2	0.4	0.3
2011	100.0	14.0	19.8	61.1	3.0	0.3	1.1	0.4	0.3
2012	100.0	13.9	19.7	61.2	3.0	0.3	1.2	0.4	0.3

Figure 1. Distribution of students served under IDEA, 1989-2012

When considering the category of learning disability, the category with the highest incidence, only 69.5% of students were included in the general classroom 80% of the school day in 2015-16 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019).

The inclusion of students with disabilities has increased, yet many students are still excluded from critical educational experiences and opportunities in the general classroom. Additionally, students with disabilities are performing below grade level. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) aims to measure the trends in academic achievement in the United States and it is administered to students in the 4th and 8th grades. According to NAEP data from 2017, 31% of 8th grade students with disabilities performed at the basic level in mathematics compared to 75% of students who are not identified with a disability. Similarly, 39% of 8th grade students with disabilities performed at the basic level in reading compared to 81% of students who are not identified with a disability. The percentages in 4th grade have a similar disparity in achievement outcomes for students with disabilities (The Nations Report Card, 2019). The outcomes for students served in special education are lacking compared to general education peers. Given the data on the national data on LRE, it can be argued that students with disabilities do not spend enough time learning in the general education classroom with their peers, which is limiting their opportunity to access grade-level content and instruction and impacting their achievement on academic assessments. School practices and structures that are more inclusive may help improve outcomes for these students.

Definitions of inclusion for special education students vary greatly. Inclusion can be defined as a mindset or framework for thinking about meeting the needs of all students, with peers of the same age (Capper, Frattura, & Keyes, 2000; Frattura & Capper, 2007). Definitions of inclusion also include access to the general classroom

with appropriate services (Theoharis, Causton, & Tracy-Bronson, 2016) and integrated comprehensive services, meaning all students have access to environments throughout the school day while receiving differentiated services that are necessary to experience success (Causton-Theoharis & Theoharis, 2008; Frattura & Capper, 2006; McLeskey & Waldron, 2015). Building upon and combining these definitions, other scholars define inclusion as the beliefs and practices where the general education classroom, with services, is the first consideration for all students (Artiles & Kozleski, 2007; Villa & Thousand, 2005). This study will use this definition to define inclusion and inclusive practices.

Leadership and Special Education

It is critical that leaders understand the core requirements within special education. DeMatthews and Mawhinney (2014) suggest that “school leaders not only recognize inequality, but also must have the necessary competencies to take actions in ways that replace pre-existing structures of inequality with more equitable structures” (p.847). Social justice leadership for students with disabilities requires the constant reflection and refinement of the skills, as well as the knowledge and actions on behalf of the leader (Furman, 2012). When leaders grasp the nuances associated with leadership in special education, their ability to develop an inclusive community and lead effectively is impacted positively (Sumera, Pazey, & Lashley, 2014). Furthermore, students benefit from the alignment of effective instructional leadership and a culture that embodies social justice.

Given the impact that leaders can have on a school, it is important to consider their growth and development. Although the experiences that a principal has in their preparation program are important, it is ongoing professional learning that can shape the development of leaders. Today's leaders need regular access to learning that can support their ability to lead schools.

Principal Professional Development

Recent research indicates that principal development has had an increasing focus on providing learning opportunities that are job embedded and that this approach has a greater ability to build the capacity of school leaders (Croft, Coggshall, Dolan, & Powers, 2010). Croft et al. (2010) also suggest that district leaders can enhance the instructional leadership of principals by providing job embedded training related to identifying and supporting effective instruction as well as in leading professional development to strengthen teacher practice. Some current trends in leadership professional development include support for principals to work with teachers to examine instructional practices with student evidence analysis and teacher observation and feedback. (Darling-Hammond et al., 2010; Honig, 2012; Leithwood et al., 2010). Similarly, these areas of focus are emphasized within the instructional rounds process (City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Tietel, 2009) aimed at developing school leaders.

Additionally, the relationship with central office and school principals is important in the development of a leader. Central office staff are critical partners in the development of job embedded learning for principals on their journey to being strong instructional leaders (Honig, 2012). Principals face many adaptive challenges as they

aim to lead a successful, socially just school and they need support to do this effectively. With adequate support and development, principals can be more successful in developing strong learning communities that are both collaborative and supportive of teacher growth (Drago-Severson, 2012a) and have a positive impact on student outcomes (Cohen et al., 2009; DuFour et al., 2008). Drago-Severson (2012b) also suggests that principals need support and development to engage in reflective learning practices with colleagues, which can build continuous improvement across the organization.

Statement of the Problem

Principals create a school culture and shape the teaching practices that students experience and engage with every day. As research has previously found, leadership is important to the success of students (Leithwood et al., 2010). Yet, principals do not begin their roles fully developed to lead schools; professional development and reflection are necessary components of their continued development (Capper, Theoharis, and Sebastian, 2006; Furman, 2012; McKenzie et al., 2008). Job embedded professional learning and support from a central office can provide a continuous impact on principal learning and improve their capacity to provide an equitable and inclusive learning environment for these students.

For the central office to adequately support principals in their development related to special education, district leadership needs to be proactive and engaged with a focus on social justice leadership. The need to develop socially just principals is critical for our students, especially those who have disabilities. However, there is limited

information on the practices that are occurring in districts that support leaders in creating a socially just environment for each student, including students identified with disabilities. This study contends that there is a need to explicitly understand the development of and support for in-service leaders for students who are identified with disabilities (Capper, et al. 2006; Furman, 2012; Pazey & Cole, 2013). Additional research is needed to understand how central office teams promote the attainment of social justice leadership and support principals to establish equitable systems and practices for students with disabilities.

Conceptual Framework

Capper et al., (2006) and Theoharis (2009) developed descriptive frameworks from their research related to school leadership for social justice. Honig, Copland, Rainey, Lorton, and Newton (2010) developed a descriptive framework from their research on the role of central offices to improve the quality of teaching and learning in schools. An integration of these frameworks is used as the conceptual framework for this study to inform the leadership and central office supports needed to lead for social justice for students with disabilities.

Capper et al. (2006) proposed a framework to support the development of principal preparation programs for social justice. Capper et al.'s (2006) framework outlined three essential elements for leaders: critical consciousness, knowledge, and practical skills developed through the curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment. Although this framework is intended to support universities in developing future school leaders, this framework can provide insight into how school districts contribute to the

development of principals for social justice. Specifically, the elements included in the framework, critical consciousness, knowledge, and practical skills, identify the leadership attributes that need to be developed for principals to lead schools that are socially just.

Within the framework, Capper et al. (2006) defined each element. Capper et al. (2006) defined critical consciousness as a leader's dispositions, beliefs, and values. They stated that social justice needs to be represented in the beliefs and values of a leader through an awareness and understanding of power, privilege, and other socially constructed issues that perpetuate inequitable schools. Capper et al. (2006) defined knowledge as what school leaders need to know to create a socially just and equitable schools, some examples include knowledge of evidence-based practices in literacy, language acquisition or special education. Additionally, the term knowledge requires the leader to consider the impact of inequitable structures and practices embedded in a school system. Lastly, Capper et al. (2006) defined practical skills as the skills that are required by a leader to act. For example, a leader must use practical skills to create a school culture with an emphasis on equity or use data to inform decisions (Capper et al., 2006). The connection of these three elements serves as a foundation for school districts to develop and support school leadership for social justice.

Capper et al. (2006) identified the elements needed to develop leaders to create schools that are socially just, that framework alone does not address how to create an inclusive school for students who are identified with a disability. Theoharis (2009) suggested a framework that identifies components of social justice leadership for

students who are identified with a disability. The components he proposed included (a) advancing inclusion, access, and opportunity; (b) creating a climate of belonging and; (c) improving core teaching and curriculum. These components describe the elements that a principal develops and supports within a school to create an inclusive environment that can raise achievement for all students.

Within the framework, Theoharis (2009) defined each component. The first component of Theoharis' (2009) framework is advancing inclusion. Advancing inclusion is defined as providing students identified with a disability with authentic opportunities where they can access academic and social experiences as their same aged peers would do. It suggests identifying practices and structures that perpetuate inequities, such as self-contained classrooms, and dismantling them by beginning with creating a vision that connects social justice and inclusive practices (Theoharis, 2009).

The second component of Theoharis' (2009) framework is creating a climate of belonging. Creating a climate of belonging is an integral component in the development of a more equitable school. To create an authentically inclusive climate, all stakeholders need to believe in the value of all students and they need to participate in actively creating a sense of belonging through purposeful school-wide community building (Theoharis & Causton, 2014). In this framework, a leader's focus on creating this climate with the school community is essential to provide a more equitable school for students.

The third component of Theoharis' (2009) framework is improving core teaching and curriculum. Teaching and learning comprise some of the core work of schools.

Improving this component is a critical element of instructional leadership and one that must be addressed when considering the needs of students identified with disabilities. Theoharis (2009) offers this as a third critical component for leaders; it is essential to understand the unique and specialized learning needs of students to support teachers and staff with the implementation of instructional strategies and curricula that are supportive and will advance achievement.

These three components: advancing inclusion, access, and opportunity; creating a climate of belonging and improving teaching and curriculum, intersect with the knowledge and skills components identified by Capper et al. (2006) and provide a level of depth and specificity for students served by special education. The overarching support of this intersection of ideas is the critical consciousness for social justice described by Capper et al. (2006) See Figure 2.

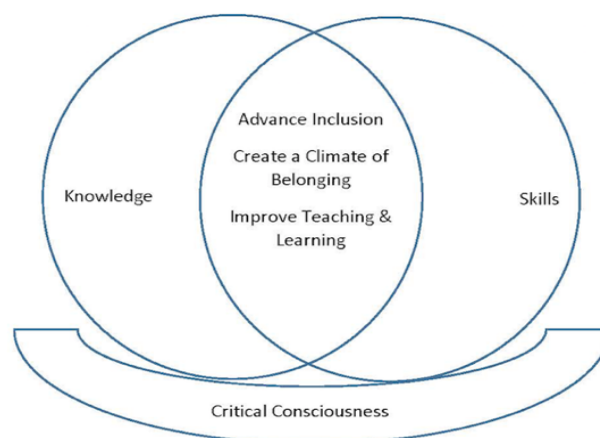


Figure 2. Integration of frameworks of Capper et al. (2006) and Theoharis (2009).

The integration of these two frameworks identifies the leadership needed to lead for social justice including the nuanced understanding of the components required to lead for students with disabilities. The critical consciousness of the leader serves as both the foundation and lens for leadership actions for equitable and inclusive learning environments. This integration of leadership frameworks for social justice serves as the base of the conceptual framework for this study. These elements support the argument that students with disabilities require a leader who understands their needs and can lead for social justice.

Professional learning for principals exists within a context that has historical and structural organizational components that impact the delivery of support services. Principals are nestled within the bureaucracy and systems of a school district with central office support. As noted earlier, the central office is responsible for job embedded learning to promote instructional leadership (Honig, 2012). Research has identified limitations regarding the ability of the central office to support teaching and learning. Scholarly research has sought to understand how leaders can influence and impact improvement in teaching and learning across a district. The research efforts of Honig, Copland, Rainey, Lorton, and Newton (2010) established a conceptual framework that addressed the role of central offices to improve the quality of teaching and learning. The Five Dimensions of Central Office Transformation framework (Honig et al., 2010) was developed from this research to support the transformation of central

offices to support principals as instructional leaders. Dimensions 1 and 5 are directly linked to the development of the instructional leadership of the principal.

Dimension 1 is Learning-focused Partnership with School Principals to Deepen Principals' Instructional Leadership Practice. This dimension specifically addresses building the capacity of the principal for instructional improvement through the ongoing support of central office leadership (Honig et al., 2010). Dimension 5 is Use of Evidence throughout the Central Office to Support Continual Improvement of Work Practices and Relationship with Schools. This dimension supports the other dimensions within the framework as it includes all areas of the central office looking at student level data to support schools. Another essential element of this dimension is the specific use of data as evidence to analyze the effectiveness of the districts own practices and relationships. Embedded within this framework is the belief that improving schools is the core work of everyone at the central office and through a mindset of continuous improvement, central office can serve to improve schools by impacting teaching and learning (Honig et al., 2010). The framework Honig et al. (2010) developed did not specifically address leadership for social justice or the needs of students served in special education; it is built on the extant literature surrounding practices that are targeted to identify and transform practices within the central office that will shape and inform a principal's leadership. Dimensions 1 and 5 (Honig et al., 2010) were used to examine the central office structures and relationships and inform the recommendations.

As outlined in Figure 3, elements from each of the three frameworks, in conjunction serve as the conceptual framework and guide for this study.

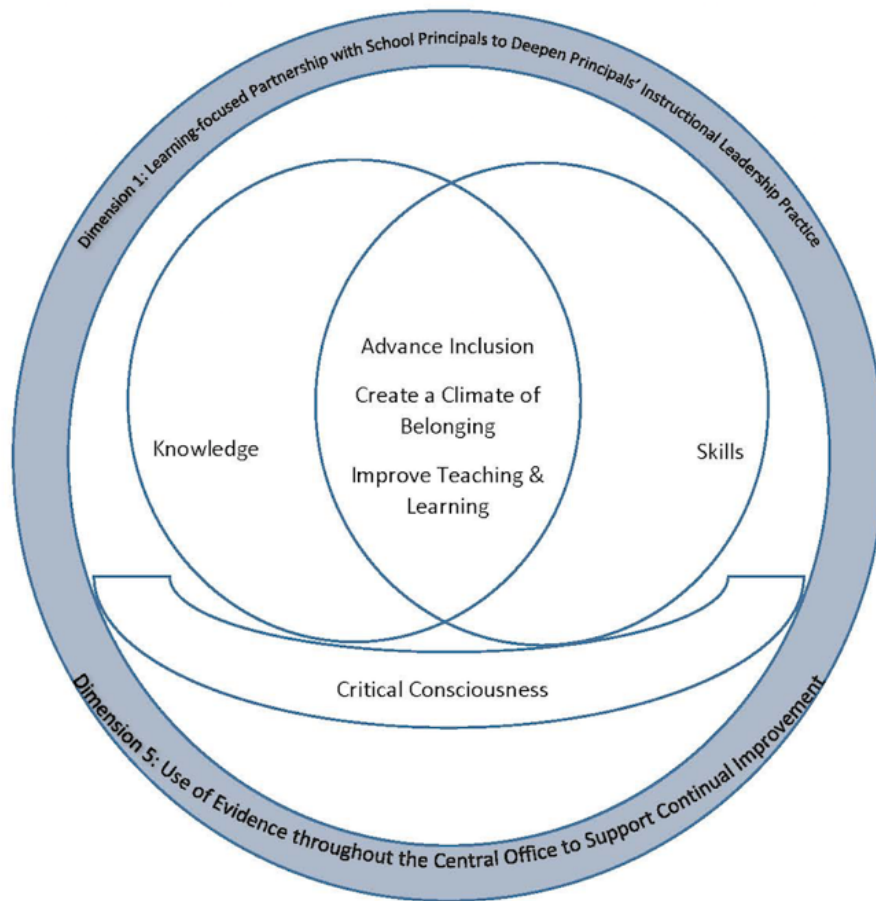


Figure 3. District Level Leadership for Social Justice Framework

This synthesis of Capper et al., (2006), Theoharis (2009), and Honig et al., (2010) frameworks provide the research base for the conceptual framework for this study. The three components of Theoharis' (2009) framework integrate with the Capper et al.'s (2006) three essential elements to provide a level of depth and specificity for students with disabilities. The framework of Honig et al., (2010) specifically Dimensions 1 and 5, examines the structures and actions of the district that are directly linked to the development of the instructional leadership of the principal. The District Level

Leadership for Social Justice (DLLSJ) framework is the analytical lens used to explore and describe the structures and relationships within the central office of a school district specifically as they relate to the foundational elements of a principal's leadership for social justice for students with disabilities.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore how the central office in a school district in the Rocky Mountain West approaches and supports the professional development of principals in their efforts to provide students identified with disabilities an inclusive experience that can lead to social justice. Through the examination of current practices and structures within the central office, this study aimed to describe and highlight practices that can be elevated as well as identify areas of development. Critical elements that support leading for social justice for students identified with disabilities were analyzed through the research-based lens of the framework, DLLSJ (Figure 3). The question guiding this research is: In what ways, if any, do central office teams in a school district in the Rocky Mountain West develop principals to lead schools that support an inclusive environment for students identified with a disability? The results of this study will be used to provide recommendations to the district to guide improvement and action for their development and support of social justice leaders for students served by special education.

Significance of Study

This study is important as it serves as an opportunity to better understand the role of the central office in providing support to principals. District leaders need to be

proactive, supportive, and engaging to develop principals' knowledge and capacity in special education. The study may serve as an anchor for districts to measure their professional development and support for leaders. It may also provide implications for practitioners and researchers as considerations for leader development and of social justice leadership for students with disabilities. Pazez and Cole (2013) state that:

At a time when the latest trend in educational leadership is a social justice orientation, the scarcity or absence of general training about a historically underserved population is particularly troubling. Even within the social justice-oriented leadership discourse, issues related to children with disabilities are rarely touched upon, relegated to the purview of specialized teachers and administrators who are designated as the “experts” (p.245).

The need to develop socially just principals is critical for our students, especially those who have disabilities.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study. This study was constrained by time as data collection occurred over a period of several weeks. This time limits the depth of discovery of what takes place within a school district. Also, because of the small size of the district, there were fewer participants available to include in the study. The qualitative nature of this study supports answering the research question, but it also limits the study's ability to be generalized. The study is only representative of the people and the organization involved.

Delimitations

The purpose and the research question in this study define its boundaries. One of the delimitations within this is participant selection. The study focused on only central office leaders and principals. While there is interest and value in looking at other stakeholders, that was outside of the scope of this study. My assumptions and bias had an impact on the study. This influenced not only the research question but also the conceptual framework utilized.

Organization of the Study

The introduction of this study has established the background of the problem, its purpose, and research question. The second chapter consists of a review of the literature relevant to the problem and established a conceptual framework that grounded the research. Chapter three includes details related to the method and methodology of the study. Chapter four presents the findings that were discovered through data collection and analysis with the conceptual framework defined in chapter two. Finally, the doctoral research project concludes with a discussion and recommendations and implications for practice.

Definitions of Key Terminology

The following terms are used throughout this study.

Disability. IDEA defines thirteen different disability categories that make a student eligible to receive services under the law. The disability categories are Autism Spectrum Disorder, Deaf-Blindness, Developmental Delay, Hearing Impairment Including Deafness, Infant/Toddler with a Disability, Multiple Disabilities, Orthopedic

Impairment, Other Health Impairment, Serious Emotional Disability, Specific Learning Disability, Speech or Language Impairment, Traumatic Brain Injury, Visual Impairment Including Blindness (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019).

Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE). This is the foundational provision within IDEA emphasizing special education and related services to meet the unique needs related to education, employment, and independent living for students identified with a disability (IDEA, 2019).

Inclusion. The beliefs and practices where the general education classroom, with services, is the first consideration for all students (Artiles & Kozleski, 2007; Villa & Thousand, 2005).

Individualized Education Program (IEP). An IEP is a plan developed based on the individual needs of a student, including present levels of academic achievement and functional performance and the impact of the disability on access and progress toward the general education curriculum. It is the primary tool for providing FAPE and is governed under IDEA (IDEA, 2019).

Individual with Disabilities Education Act 2004 (IDEA). A federal law that provides eligible children with disabilities access to a free appropriate public education. This law ensures special education and related services and governs how states provide these services along with early intervention (IDEA, 2019).

Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). The extent that students with disabilities are educated with children who are not disabled. The exclusion from the

regular education environment only when the nature or severity of the disability is such that access to education in the regular environment cannot be achieved with appropriate aids and services (IDEA, 2019).

Social Justice Leadership. The recognition of unequal circumstances for marginalized groups and the subsequent action to replace the oppressive practices and policies with those that are more equitable. (Furman, 2012).

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The ability of a principal to lead a school that provides students with disabilities a more inclusive school environment will positively impact students' futures. The role of the principal is complex, often riddled with challenges, some of which leaders are prepared for and some of which require ongoing development and support. A central office needs to be a source of development for principals contributing to the success of schools, students, and principals. This literature review compiles and explores extant literature related to the role of the central office as a learning organization with a commitment to equity and leadership for social justice. Additionally, the literature review delves into the work of central office leadership to support the development of principals as instructional leaders. Also, within this chapter an overview of special education in the United States is provided along with an examination of principal leadership in special education, highlighting both knowledge of special education and leadership behaviors and actions that are supportive of inclusive practices. Further analysis examines the literature surrounding inclusive practices in schools, specifically identifying inclusion as a belief and a practice related to providing access to general education for all students. This review of the literature supports the construction of the conceptual framework, DLLSJ, that guides answering the research question. Finally, the review of the literature offers a critique, addressing the strengths, weaknesses, and gaps in the extant literature.

This literature review was developed from an extensive search using specific educational databases as well as specific inclusion and exclusion criteria. The following questions guided the search as well as the development of this chapter: (a) How does the support provided by the central office of a school district develop its principals? (b) What does research suggest about social justice leadership for students identified with disabilities? (c) How does the role of the principal as instructional leader shape the education for students identified with a disability? (d) What are the key tenets of leading for inclusive schools for students in special education? A variety of strategies were implemented to search for studies included in this review. Specifically, the University of Denver Library search engine, Compass; Google Scholar; ERIC; and Psych Info were all resources used in the search. Specific keywords were also used to identify and gather available studies: instructional leadership; social justice leadership; equity; principals; professional development; disabilities; inclusion; special education; central office; and school district. Given the large body of research available back-searching strategies, defined as using an articles' references to search for additional relevant studies, were employed. Back-searching served as an additional tool that supported gathering all relevant literature to include both seminal and recent research.

The criteria identified for the studies in this review included both exclusion and inclusion criteria. Inclusion criteria comprised studies that: (a) are written in English; (b) have been published by a peer-reviewed journal within the last twelve years, except for seminal work; (c) books that are written by researchers focused on social justice leadership or instructional leadership with an emphasis on scholarly research to support

their assertions; and (d) address central office supporting principals as instructional leaders, school leadership for social justice, leadership in special education, and inclusive and equitable practices for students with disabilities. This study has an emphasis on public schools in the United States and its specific context, so studies that took place in other countries were not included. Other exclusion criteria included using non-peer reviewed publications or scholarly text.

Central Office as a Learning Organization with a Commitment to Equity

Much of the current accountability that schools and districts have toward student learning began with the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and is further extended in ESSA. Specifically, ESSA includes accountability measures to support graduation and readiness for college and career for all students, explicitly disaggregating measures for students identified with disabilities, and other historically underserved populations (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2019). This legislation makes it essential for a school district to function as a learning organization. A learning organization is one that “involves everyone in the system in expressing their aspirations, building their awareness and developing their capabilities together” (Senge, 2000, p. 5). Research surrounding school districts as learning organizations indicate that the role of a school district has shifted and the emphasis is now on student learning and instructional leadership. The responsibility of professional development focused on teaching and learning is becoming fundamental to the role of central office leaders (Honig & Copland, 2008). It is with this commitment to instructional leadership that district leaders

recognize the need to shifting their practices to develop their leaders to meet the expectations of improved teaching and learning.

There is consensus among scholars that an investment in instructional leadership through increasing the depth of skill and capacity of principals can influence teaching and learning (Bryk et al., 2010; Darling-Hammond, 2010; King & Bouchard, 2011). As teachers and leaders improve so does the organization. The cornerstone to building capacity in a school is the principal and other school leaders, whose leadership requires the creation of a learning organization. King & Bouchard (2011) studied the efforts of a school district to enhance instruction. With the use of executive coaches, in a partnership with a university, principals and leadership teams were provided real-time, job embedded coaching to improve curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment. Additionally, a network of principals was provided with additional coaching as well as formal opportunities to connect and reflect with one another. Outcomes of this study reinforce the idea that this is complex and requires effort and commitment from an entire organization to support schools engaged in this work.

Related to the idea of investing in instructional leadership, there is a large body of literature focused on studying institutional change within the central office of a school district. Honig et al. (2010) launched an ambitious study, conceptualizing the transformation of the role of the central office to heed the call to improve student learning and become a learning organization. This work resulted in several different scholarly articles related to the role of the central office in the development of principals as instructional leaders. A common thread throughout this body of research is the

concept that the central office has an important role to play in the improvement of teaching and learning.

An important element in the development of a district functioning as a learning organization is the analysis of student achievement outcomes, especially how districts are closing gaps in achievement between different groups of students. In an analysis of 31 studies, Leithwood (2010) identified ten characteristics of school districts that are successful in closing achievement gaps. Many of the districts in the study served students from marginalized backgrounds. Of the ten characteristics identified, three of them are directly connected to the framework in this study. The characteristic that Leithwood (2010) identified most often within the 31 studies is employing job embedded professional development. Specifically, districts who used this approach across the learning organization allocated resources, aligned the focus of professional learning with district goals, and used a differentiated approach to deliver instruction that directly impacts instructional leadership practice. Job embedded professional development is growing as a research-based process for the effective development of teachers and leaders. Specifically, job embedded professional learning occurs in the day-to-day practice of an educator, with a specific and intentional focus on the practices directly connected to improving student learning. Job embedded development can occur individually, with support, or in teams, and is directly connected to instruction. Structures that serve as examples of job embedded professional learning include coaching, data teams, mentorship, lesson study, or professional learning communities (Croft, Coggshall, Dolan, Powers & Killion, 2010). Although job embedded

professional learning is often thought of in the context of teachers; as a process, job embedded professional learning practices can be used to support developing principals as instructional leaders.

The second characteristic in Leithwood's (2010) research connected to this study's conceptual framework is the "use of evidence for planning, organizational learning and accountability" (p.249). School districts in this study that used evidence to support their work not only provided data to schools, but also provided schools with professional learning opportunities around the use of data as well as time to collaboratively understand the data and make decisions. In addition to using data from student achievement outcomes to align areas of focus for school leaders, the three districts in this study also used data, such as principal feedback and principal growth, to inform the work that central office leaders engaged in with principals. Central office leadership also used data to evaluate their performance as coaches of principals and to determine areas of professional growth for central office leaders. This intentional use of data is also highlighted in the work of Honig et al. (2010); Dimension 5 emphasizes using data to inform and continually improve the work of central office and schools. The explicit use of data to inform and develop the central office as a learning organization includes the analysis of data and feedback to adjust the operations within central office, ensuring a commitment to a focus on teaching and learning (Honig et al, 2010).

The third characteristic in Leithwood's (2010) research aligned to this study's conceptual framework is school districts that invest in instructional leadership are

effectively closing achievement gaps. Leithwood (2010) determined that an investment in instructional leadership from districts not only includes school-based staff, but also includes central office staff. In the identified districts, there was an organizational commitment across the entire district to improving instruction and outcomes for students. These findings are consistent with the research of Honig et al. (2010), where the investment in instructional leadership is crucial to supporting principals. This investment is outlined in Honig et al.'s (2010) Dimension 1: create learning-focused partnerships to deepen a principal's instructional leadership. In Honig et al.'s (2010) study, three large urban districts engaged in a central office transformation used central office leaders to provide differentiated support to individual principals. Central office leaders identified specific areas of focus related to the core work of teaching and learning and engaged in observations, dialogue and feedback related to student work, best practices, increasing rigor, and providing feedback with principals. Honig et al. (2010) discovered that principals who perceived the partnership to have a positive influence on their leadership believed so because their central office leader was not only focused on teaching and learning, but also was engaged and prioritized their time together.

Developing educators and impacting student learning and outcomes are critical to the development of a school district as a learning organization. Yet a reality within our schools is that the pathway to these outcomes have roadblocks and challenges perpetuated by inequities that plague marginalized student groups. School districts and leaders have both the responsibility and the potential to transform their systems and

“effect deep and equitable change” (Shields, 2018, p. 20) with an unwavering commitment to be transformative leaders. A school district and its leadership need to function as learning organizations that are committed to equity to improve outcomes for all students.

Commitment to equity. A commitment to equity is foundational in leaders who pursue social justice within education. Critical consciousness (Capper et al., 2006), an element within the conceptual framework of this study is an important element in a district’s commitment to equity. Principals who embody a critical consciousness with an emphasis on equity and social justice believe that all members in the organization have a responsibility to understand the rights of all students and to serve all students as well as safeguard student rights (Pazey & Cole, 2013). School districts have the responsibility to create practices and policies that demonstrate this equity consciousness (Scheurich, McKenzie, & Sklra, 2011; Sklra, McKenzie, & Scheurich, 2009) and to lead for inclusivity (Shields, 2018).

In addition to this responsibility, there is also evidence that districts have the potential to dismantle their structures to create equitable schools for students (Rorrer, Sklra, & Scheurich, 2008). It is through a call to action and a commitment to equity that districts can disrupt the system and lead their organizations’ reform efforts. The central office in a school district plays an essential role in the successful outcomes of equity-based reform efforts. Rorrer et al. (2008) conducted a narrative analysis of more than 80 studies involving central office leaders focused on equity and achievement. The most notable findings were the elements identified that need to be included to support

successful change in a district: reorganization of district structures, policy coherence, a focus on equity, and instructional leadership. These elements cannot occur in isolation but rather are interconnected (Rorrer et al., 2008). Additionally, other studies found that efforts around equity must be understood and practiced across the system; it is a belief that needs to permeate the organization to dismantle existing inequities and create sustainable change (Capper & Young, 2014; Maxwell, Locke, & Scheurich, 2013).

Denith, Frattura, and Kaylor's (2013) study provided an example of a school district's central office leadership committed to equity for students with disabilities. The central office team led a district-wide reform effort to redesign special education services to be more inclusive. Central office staff believed that students identified with a disability would be served better with special education functioning as a service rather than as a place. Central office staff were committed to removing exclusionary practices inherent in the structure of their special education services and they wanted to identify the challenges the school staff perceived in transitioning to a more inclusive and integrated approach as well as understand what supports were needed. In this case study, classroom observations as well as individual and focus group interviews were conducted with school-based staff to include principals, teachers, and psychologists, comprising 50 people in all. The study found that one barrier to this reform was the misconceptions and misunderstandings of school staff regarding inclusion. School staff consistently thought that inclusion was a place to be taught rather than a mindset and a belief.

Another barrier identified in Denith et al.'s (2010) study was that many of the school staff believed that students had to earn the opportunity to be educated with their general education peers, thus lacking the fundamental and ethical understanding of the least restrictive environment and inclusive practices (Denith et al., 2010). The reluctance on the part of the staff to consider different ideas and philosophies impacted the success of the reform effort. These findings led the researchers to the assertion that despite the district efforts at reorganizing central office and establishing new policy, the reform effort lacked a district-wide belief and vision for equity and lacked any focus or development of instructional leadership (Rorrer, et al., 2008), and ultimately the practice in this district did not change. This study highlights the complexity of implementing successful district reform and the necessity to understand the barriers to providing equity for students identified with disabilities.

Principal professional learning. Given the scope of a principal's role as an instructional leader and the increasing accountability for student performance outcomes, continuous learning and development can benefit a principal. Through their support and development of teachers, principals are expected to improve achievement (Grissom, Kalogrides & Loeb, 2014; Robinson et al., 2008). While this area is well documented in the literature, there is less research addressing the development of practicing leaders. Specifically, leaders need knowledge of effective pedagogy that will support learning (Steele, Johnson, Otten, Herbel-Eisenmann & Carver, 2015). Through the job embedded implementation of effective adult learning practices, the capacity of principals can

flourish (Drago-Severson, 2016). Central office staff can support the professional learning of leaders with systems and practices that focus on their development.

Boston, Henrick, Gibbons, Berebitsky, and Colby (2017) analyzed response data in a recent study after principals engaged in professional development sessions utilizing a classroom observation tool designed to identify rigorous mathematical instruction. Pre- and post-survey data indicated that the professional learning opportunity provided leaders with an improved understanding of the level of rigor within tasks, supported their observation, and had the potential to support their feedback. This study reinforces the argument that intentional professional learning with an emphasis on classroom practice has the potential to be an effective tool to develop principals as instructional leaders.

The comprehensive study of Honig et al. (2010) highlights the importance of intentionally developing principals. Researchers developed a framework detailing five different dimensions critical to transforming central office leadership, *The Five Dimensions of Central Office Transformation*. The research conducted in three large, urban school districts provided data that emphasizes the value in developing instructional leaders as detailed in Dimension 1. The study found that modeling effective leadership practices led to improvements in the effective instructional leadership of several principals. Examples of modeling effective leadership practices in the study included modeling how to lead a professional learning opportunity for staff to increase relevance and modeling how to have a challenging conversation with a teacher. Honig et al. (2010) also identified the use of tools as an effective way to develop a principal's instructional leadership capacity. The tools that were found to be

most effective were related to a framework for teaching and learning, protocols for classroom observations, cycles of inquiry, and data-based dialogue. The use of tools such as these can provide a common experience, support a common vision, or goal, and enhance a leader's ability to engage with teachers constructively (Honig et al., 2010). The learning-focused partnership called out in Dimension 1 of this study offers examples of effective leadership development.

Building from the same original data collection in the 2010 study, Honig (2012) identified how district-level instructional leaders made changes in their day-to-day work and provided principals with job-embedded professional learning opportunities to strengthen their instructional leadership practice. The districts in this study held the development of leadership in high regard and shifted the role of the executive leadership to serve as facilitators, supporters, coaches, and teachers of principals. The elements that grounded this study were: joint work, modeling, use of tools, create, and sustain social engagement and brokering (Honig, 2012). The analysis of professional learning communities for principals contributed to the understanding of the role central office staff plays in this process of fostering principal leadership. The findings of this study imply that school districts may see benefit in allocating resources for the explicit development of their principals to support actionable change in their leadership for teaching and learning.

Professional learning communities of principals or networks are intended to provide support and development to increase the capacity of the principal to serve as an instructional leader (Honig & Rainey, 2014; Leithwood, 2010). In a quantitative study,

Grissom and Harrington (2010), analyzed principal networks and mentoring to determine the association between professional development opportunities and the effectiveness of the principal. These researchers surmised through their study using data from the Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), a national representative random survey of schools, that mentoring had a more positive outcome on principal effectiveness compared to that of principal networking (Grissom & Harrington, 2010).

In another study, Honig and Rainey (2014) collected data from a mid-sized urban district where professional learning communities for central office staff included the elements of joint work, modeling, use of tools, social engagement, and brokering. Most notably, Honig and Rainey (2014) found that the principals and central office leaders whose levels of engagement were high found the most value and success with the strategy of joint work. This level of engagement on the part of the principals and the district leader highlights the value of engaging together in common work and the importance of the idea that supporting teaching and learning through instructional leadership is the work of everyone within the organization. Another finding from this study was the influence of modeling on principal perception of the value of the professional learning community. In the study central office leaders used modeling to demonstrate how to use a classroom observation protocol. Modeling makes the thinking visible for principals to understand the intention and the vision of instructional leadership (Honig & Rainey, 2014). Honig and Rainey (2014) found that the job embedded approach of modeling how to do something has an impact greater than telling a principal how to do it. This type of professional development for leaders supports their

growth (City et al., 2009; Darling-Hammond et al., 2010). In addition to modeling, consistent use of tools also grounded leaders in strong instructional practices. Honig and Rainey (2014) found that professional learning communities who employed tools consistently had conversations more focused on instruction and more reflective in nature.

School staff look to leadership for vision, guidance, and development, whether through a partnership with an outside agency or collectively within the organization. This connection to schools and leadership was evident in a study of an elementary school engaged in inclusive reform (Causton-Theoharis, Theoharis, Bull, Cosier, & Dempf-Aldrich, 2011). The school in this district experienced some early success due to the efforts in professional learning and support provided by administrators at the building and district level (Causton-Theoharis et al., 2011). While this study focused on a university-school partnership, the inclusion of efforts by staff at the central office was apparent.

Professional development and support are key components of the work of the central office. Schools and districts that experience success as a learning organization focused on equity have not only the structures to provide support but also do so in a way that creates a culture of learning felt by teachers and leaders.

Special Education

The foundation for special education as it is today was the Education for All Handicapped Children Act in 1975, later renamed Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) in 2004, which mandated the education of all

students with disabilities. IDEA heightened the principal's responsibility to ensure that students identified with a disability are educated in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). This shift in the law has led to the inclusion of more students identified with disabilities in the general education classroom (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). In addition to this, IDEA addresses the highly qualified status of teachers as well as the inclusion of a universal design for learning, delineating that curriculum needs to be both accessible and appropriate for individuals (Bicehouse & Faieta, 2017), creating the potential for greater opportunities for students identified with a disability to be included and experience success.

In a review of national data from 1990-1991 to 2007-2008, McLeskey, Landers, Williamson, and Hoppey (2012) sought to examine the changes that have taken place with the inclusion of students in the general education classroom through analysis of the changes in LRE placement as reported to the U.S. Department of Education. McLeskey et al. (2012) also looked at the changes in LRE placement made for students who represent the high incidence disability categories, such as a learning disability. They found that significant changes have taken place in these 17 years with more students with disabilities being included in the general education environment across all disability categories. Students identified with a learning disability had the greatest increase in being included in the general education environment by 160%. McLeskey et al. (2012) determined that the requirement of all teachers being "highly qualified" to teach in their content area, a mandate set forth by NCLB, influenced the increase of students in the general classroom. Because of the implementation of highly qualified status, "82% to

99% of secondary level special education teachers were not highly qualified in the content area they taught” (McLeskey & Billingsley, 2008); thus, potentially influencing an increase in participation in general education to meet the requirements of NCLB. Over time, public education has had an increasing trend toward inclusion.

This trend toward inclusion is aligned to the civil rights movement for individuals identified with disabilities. Yet despite this increasing trend in inclusion over the last few decades, disparities still exist within special education for students from different racial, ethnic, and language backgrounds for both identification and placement (Dunn, 1968; Sullivan, 2011; Waitoller, Artiles, & Cheney, 2010). Data from the United States Department of Education (2008) highlights the disparities that exist for African American students in special education. DeMatthews and Mawhinney (2014) found that:

African American students are 2.75 times more likely to be classified as having an intellectual disability, and 2.28 times more likely to be classified as having an emotional/behavioral disability than students in all other racial and ethnic groups combined (p.846).

The decisions that determine student identification and placement stem from not only quantitative data about a student, but the decisions are also influenced by school context, school culture, and the personal experiences of the educators making decisions.

In addition to identification and placement disparities, there are also academic disparities for students with disabilities. As previously noted, the academic achievement of students identified with disabilities lags that of their general education peers.

Furthermore, in 2012, the dropout rate of students identified with a disability was 10%, compared to 3.2% of students not identified with a disability. Similarly, less than equivalent outcomes exist for high school completion, which includes alternative diplomas such as GED, with a rate of 81.5% for students identified with a disability compared to 91.7% for students not identified with a disability (Stark & Noel, 2015). Students with disabilities are falling behind their peers without a disability, and principals can play an important role in changing outcomes for these students through social justice leadership.

Principal Leadership for Social Justice in Special Education

The depth of a leader's knowledge and understanding of students with disabilities is connected to their ability to lead a school for successful outcomes for these students. Leadership preparation and development contribute to a principal's ability to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills to support their leadership. Scholars have highlighted the challenges that principals encounter in this domain of leadership, as many educators have limited knowledge of special education. (Angelle & Bilton, 2009; Bays & Crockett, 2007; Billingsley, DeMatthews, Connally, & McLeskey, 2018; Pazey & Cole, 2013). Principals need to have a solid understanding of the characteristics of students with disabilities, issues related to legislation and funding, and instructional practices that provide positive outcomes and support for students (McHatton, Boyer, Shaunessy, Terry, & Farmer, 2010).

In a pilot study, McHatton et al. (2010) investigated principal perception of their preparation and professional development related to special education. The study

identified 61 principals in a large urban district with questions related to both pre-service and in-service professional development related to special education law, special education funding, characteristics of students with disabilities, discipline, and modifications for students with disabilities. The study found that principals felt preparation programs spent some time addressing legal and funding issues, while their in-service development focused on instruction. Leaders were also asked to respond to questions about the frequency of their engagement in special education tasks in their building connected to their perception of their level of understanding. Respondents felt least prepared to support initial IEP meetings and most prepared for teacher observation. These findings led McHatton et al. (2010) to recommend that principal preparation and development need to align with what is expected in the current role, translating the theory to practice. In a similar study, Roberts and Guerra (2017) surveyed 84 principals about their perception of their knowledge (legal, foundational, and contextual) in special education. The principals in this survey indicated that they were most prepared for legal issues related to IDEA, while the area where principals felt the least knowledgeable was in the curriculum for students with disabilities. These two studies highlight the need to provide principals with more background and knowledge in special education.

The depth of knowledge a principal has about the role of a special education teacher along with best practices in instruction is important if a principal is to lead a school towards equity for all students. Previous literature indicates that principals have limited knowledge with these two elements, often likening the role of a special education teacher to that of a general education teacher and consigning their professional

development to the central office administrators within special education (Angelle & Bilton, 2009; Bays & Crockett, 2007; Steinbrecher et al., 2015). Yet, providing all teachers with professional learning to support students with disabilities is a responsibility of a principal. Additionally, if principals have limited knowledge in the understanding of the role of the special education teacher, their skill in providing effective feedback to special education teachers is likely limited (Billingsley, McLeskey & Crockett, 2017). The more a principal knows about special education the more powerful their influence on the teachers' attitudes toward students identified with a disability (Lynch, 2012).

To address this gap in knowledge, leaders that are unprepared to effectively lead for students with disabilities may benefit from ongoing professional learning to support their leadership. As described within the District Level Leadership for Social Justice Framework (DLSJ), it is the pairing of the critical consciousness and equity orientation of a leader with skills and knowledge of special education and students identified with disabilities that enable a principal to lead for social justice.

Knowledge and skills for social justice leadership. Scholarly literature has identified social justice leadership as a pathway to change outcomes for marginalized groups of students. As described, social justice leadership research often has a focus on race, poverty, and English language acquisition. However, the need for social justice leadership for students with disabilities is equally as important and often intersects with the other identified groups. Capper et al. (2006) identified in their framework for developing leaders for social justice that knowledge, skills, and critical consciousness that are required. Principals need to understand the inequities that exist in schools and

the current systems and structures perpetuate them. Leaders also need to be reflective, understanding issues of oppression, power, and privilege along with the acceptance of their actions and their subsequent impact (Trujillo & Cooper, 2014). Principals need to be skilled at navigating these elements and adept in leading a school community as these issues are examined, as evidenced-based practices are implemented, and as decisions are made that replace inequitable systems (Capper et al., 2006).

Studies focused on principal preparation at the university level highlight both the need for social justice leadership development as well as the changes occurring in the field. Trujillo and Cooper (2014) analyzed the syllabi of two university leadership preparation programs looking at curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment. The findings revealed varied definitions of social justice leadership, yet evidence of a curriculum aligned with the principles espoused in the differing definitions. Seemingly, principal candidates can engage with resources that support their development as social justice leaders. Yet what was espoused about instructional delivery in a syllabus, may or may not be what occurs in practice in the classroom. Additionally, although the preparation programs were found to assess the learning of the content the students acquired, neither program measured the changes in a candidate's skills or knowledge of social justice (Trujillo & Cooper, 2014). This study demonstrated that although a program may have an emerging equity focus, additional strides need to be made to provide leaders with skills to create socially just schools.

Scholars have also sought to understand the qualities that need to be developed in leaders to create socially just schools. Building upon the framework of Capper et al.

(2006), Theoharis and Causton-Theoharis (2008) interviewed three experts in the fields of inclusive and social justice leadership to identify specific characteristics of leaders and the use of curriculum and instruction capable of fostering these attributes. They found that the key dispositions were a leader's global perspective, a strong vision, and agency. Specifically, these three scholars emphasized that the concept of inclusion exists as equity for all students despite an initiation in the field of special education. Leaders need to make sense of the global context, understand the past and present conditions and structures that marginalize students, and then act to dismantle them. The global perspective is the connection between inclusion and social justice (Theoharis & Causton-Theoharis, 2008). This global perspective needs to be the foundation of leaders' abilities to create a strong vision for inclusion that addresses all systems within a school. Equally important is the belief of the principal that it is within their ability and control to lead a school towards being more equitable for all students. This sense of agency serves as another quality of leaders identified in the study (Theoharis & Causton-Theoharis, 2008). Their analysis also found that teaching these attributes is both challenging and complex, yet it is critical to develop inclusive leaders for our schools. These dispositions represent a similar thought process outlined in a conceptual framework offered by Furman (2012). This framework looks at leadership for social justice as three distinct concepts. Furman (2012) suggested that leadership "is a praxis involving reflection and action...with leadership that spans several dimensions" (p.202) and requires specific skills and knowledge for the leader to act. Each of these studies

highlights critical skills principals need to possess to create transformative change in our schools.

Principals who lead with a mindset and vision for socially just schools often struggle given the contextual challenges of schools and the institutionalized barriers that exist within the organization. DeMatthews (2018) argues that research often represents social justice leadership as something that can be accomplished by a leader with commitment and vision given available resources. Yet principals each day are faced with what DeMatthews called “justice dilemmas” (p.548), the actions of a leader who while intending to address an injustice, creates or ignores another in the process. In a recent study, DeMatthews (2018) reexamined his data from three previous studies focused on social justice leadership. This new inquiry examined the multiple facets of social justice leadership with an emphasis on the justice dilemmas that the leaders encountered. The principals in each of the studies were committed to their values, they had a critical consciousness that is supportive of social justice leadership, and they took specific courses of action to address areas of injustice within their respective schools. A common theme that emerged was leaders often faced challenges outside of their control. One of the principals in the study believed in creating an inclusive school for students with disabilities, yet despite the school district voicing support for this effort, site-based segregated special education programs were maintained by district leadership. Another finding was the inability of a leader to address all areas of inequity concurrently. A principal in the study led the school in making great gains in closing achievement gaps for emerging bilingual students, yet this laser focus lacked acknowledgment of the

cultural backgrounds and experiences of the community, and provided little opportunity to engage the parent community (DeMatthews, 2018). The tensions that exist for social justice leadership are contextual and leaders need skills and knowledge along with critical consciousness to create more equitable schools for every one of their students.

Considering the qualities of leaders for social justice and the challenges that leaders face to create and sustain inclusive schools for students with disabilities, it is imperative to support principals in their efforts. Social justice leadership for students with disabilities requires a leader who is equity-minded and has skills and knowledge related to leading social justice to understand the importance of learning about the needs of students identified with disabilities. School districts and central office leadership need to capitalize on opportunities to build the capacity of their leaders.

Leadership for Inclusive Schools

Inclusive practices are foundational to enacting social justice for all students. An often-cited idea behind the value of inclusion as social justice comes from Sapon-Shevin (2003) who stated, “Inclusion is not about disability... Inclusion is about social justice... By embracing inclusion as a model of social justice, we can create a world fit for all of us” (as cited in Theoharis, 2007, p.223). Inclusion is not specifically called out in IDEA, yet the intention is that inclusion, should be a first consideration. Scholars who study the influences of inclusive practices on students and schools have consistently found that leaders have a critical role in creating safe and inclusive learning environments for students while also supporting teachers and other providers to meet the specialized needs of students.

The framework developed by Theoharis (2009) came from multiple studies from different vantage points of inclusive practices. Theoharis (2009) suggests a framework that identifies components of social justice leadership for students with disabilities. Each element of the framework is evident in the scholarly literature surrounding inclusive practices. The components as proposed include (a) advancing inclusion, access, and opportunity; (b) creating a climate of belonging and; (c) improving core teaching and curriculum.

Advancing inclusion in schools begins with the principal establishing and communicating a vision that “inclusion is building services, collaborative teams, climate and instructional practices that give all students access, success and a sense of belonging in general education” (Theoharis, 2009, p. 29). The structures within a school are outward signals to the level of inclusivity that exist in a school. The use of tracked academic classes that are ability grouped or segregated special classes are structures that leaders can change. Changing these systems can eliminate barriers to increased access for students (Theoharis, 2009). Advancing inclusion also includes increasing rigor, instructional time, and internal accountability measures for the school.

This framework also includes the intentional focus on behalf of the principal to create a climate that truly values all in the community by creating a welcoming environment. This can be accomplished by building strong classroom communities, reaching out to all families, including those from marginalized communities, incorporating social responsibility into the curriculum, and addressing discipline practices (Theoharis, 2009). The third component focuses on improving teaching and

learning. Theoharis (2009) identifies specific strategies that a principal can engage in to support this component. Some of these strategies include addressing issues of race and equity with staff, hiring, and evaluating staff with a belief in inclusive practices, and using research-based curriculum and instructional approaches that enhance the quality and level of rigor in classrooms.

Advancing inclusion by increasing access. Increasing access to the general education classroom is a key component of inclusive practices. Leaders need to identify the disparities that exist in their school and address them. At the same time, simply increasing time in the classroom does not fully advance inclusion. Creating a more inclusive school requires a social justice orientation, strong leadership, and support from within the school and district alike. DeMatthews (2015) highlighted the challenges in a case study analysis that a principal at an urban elementary school experienced using a sensemaking theory. During the 2010-11 and 2011-12 school years DeMatthews collected data from observations, interviews, and document analysis to understand the principal's sensemaking of inclusion while leading the school to shift to more inclusive practices. The principal faced many challenges and limitations including teacher resistance, limited experience, and a lack of support and development for both teachers and the leader. During the principal's tenure, the leader increased the amount of time students spent in the general education classroom, yet the barriers that existed in the school proved too great to maintain this inclusive approach. This study adds to the questions regarding how principals who lead with a social justice orientation can best be supported to be successful in this endeavor for students with disabilities.

In a cross-case study analysis, DeMatthews and Mawhinney (2014) studied two principals leading for social justice with an inclusive approach for students with disabilities. They identified two qualities necessary to support this effort: a commitment to social justice and a belief in inclusion. These values must exist in a leader who is seeking to create a more inclusive school. Additionally, leaders need to align the focus of their school to include inclusive reform. In this study, one of the principals emphasized ongoing professional learning for leaders and teachers to support instructional practices required for inclusion to be successful. This focus on professional learning is a cornerstone of strong instructional leadership and inclusive education and it provided this principal with the opportunity to increase student access to the general education curriculum while improving instructional practices. The researchers found that inclusive leaders can be supported in their understanding of “special education areas including (a) assessment, evaluation, and placement, (b) policies, law and court decisions, (c) best practices at the classroom and school level, (d) understanding the IEP” (2014, p.876). The principals in this study also experienced challenges related to leading with a social justice approach, including an allocation of resources and cooperation from parents for increased inclusion.

Strong leadership experience in reform efforts can be an attribute that supports a principal in leading a school to become more inclusive. Hoppey and McLeskey (2013) engaged in a study with a veteran educator and leader with a strong belief in inclusive practices. This case study provided the scholars with an opportunity to understand how a principal provides support for school improvement in an inclusive environment.

Through interviews and observation over the course of the 2008-2009 school year, the analysis provided three themes that supported the development of an inclusive school: caring and investing in teachers, buffering teachers from outside accountability pressures, and developing teachers. The leadership strategies that this principal employed align with best practices in instructional leadership such as job embedded professional learning and distributive leadership. Additionally, the study highlighted the principal's strengths of effective leadership for inclusive schools, primarily a commitment to success and increased outcomes for all students, a climate of belonging, and emphasis on improving teaching and learning (Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013). These qualities align with Theoharis' (2009) framework for inclusive education.

Theoharis and Causton (2014) have contributed to scholarly research through multiple studies of inclusion as social justice. Their study related to inclusive school reform addressed the essential steps a principal should engage in to develop an inclusive school that is supportive of students with disabilities. The authors delineated a seven-step process that principals can use as a model when engaged in this reform effort through collaboration with the school community and representative stakeholder groups. Theoharis and Causton (2014) advocated that successful leaders of inclusive reform do so by establishing a vision for inclusion, identifying how the school staff and structures can be aligned to support inclusivity, and provide opportunities for delivery of services for students identified with disabilities to be developed collaboratively, reviewed regularly, and adjusted as needed. Another key step identified was the need to provide ongoing development for staff that addresses student and staff needs. This work was

done in tandem with creating a climate where staff and students feel as they belong (Theoharis & Causton, 2014). This process of identifying supports and increasing access and opportunity is in alignment with the framework of Theoharis (2009) for advancing inclusion.

Creating a climate of belonging. School culture and climate influence teacher and leader retention (Billingsley, McLeskey, & Crocket, 2017; Honig & Copland, 2008), develop teacher effectiveness (Louis et al., 2010), shape expectations for students (Lynch, 2012; McLeskey et al., 2014), and build relationships with parents (Shogren, McCart, Lyon, & Sailor, 2015). The climate of belonging described by Theoharis (2009) is integral to the success of an inclusive school community for students identified with a disability. This climate of belonging was based on the work of scholars such as Bowlby (1969) and Maslow (1943) who studied belonging as a “fundamental psychological need...and when the need for belonging is satisfied, positive social, behavioral, and psychological outcomes can be achieved” (Prince & Hadwin, 2013, p. 241). This scholarship grounds what other scholars have studied the influence of the climate and culture of a school as a measure of equity and inclusive practices.

When leaders and teachers value all students and create environments that are welcoming, a climate of belonging is created, influencing the effectiveness of an inclusive school (Shogren et al., 2015). This sense of belonging is maintained through the development of positive relationships between students and staff (Billingsley et al., 2017; Hattie, 2012). It is also supported through the development of teachers. When teachers feel prepared to meet the needs of all students, often obtained through

intentional professional learning, their sense of efficacy increases and this supports an inclusive classroom environment (Billingsley et al., 2017).

The study of highly effective inclusive schools may produce recommendations for how principals can create more inclusive school communities. Distinct characteristics of both schools and leaders are evidenced in the literature. McLeskey, Waldron, and Redd (2014) suggested that schools that believe and maintain high expectations for all students, provide high-quality instruction paired with high levels of student support, and job embedded teacher professional development are key characteristics of an effective inclusive school. A strong emphasis on the belief that it is the responsibility of everyone to support high expectations for students with disabilities was a recurring theme in this study. This level of expectation enhanced the climate of belonging, allowing all students to engage with high-quality instruction and requisite supports. With an inclusive school climate and a focus on implementing high-quality instruction, the professional learning of the teachers was targeted to improve instructional practice. Researchers also noted through interviews that the climate of belonging was evident within the staff and allowed leaders to establish effective organizational structures, including shared decision making and data-informed decision making which supported the development of a highly effective inclusive school. The culture of high expectations of every student fueled this school, creating an environment where everyone's needs were natural and supported and infusing a culture where everyone belonged (McLeskey, et al., 2014). The climate of belonging, with a shared sense of responsibility is essential to an inclusive school.

Improving teaching and learning. The academic success of all students is directly influenced by the teaching and learning that takes place in the classroom. As Theoharis (2009) suggested, focusing on the instructional practices and curriculum is one factor required in improving teaching and learning in inclusive classrooms. The development of teachers who use research-based curriculum and instructional approaches is paramount to ensure the quality and level of instruction for students. The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and The Collaboration for Effective Educator Development, Accountability and Reform Center (The CEEDAR Center) worked in partnership to support inclusive leadership practices through the development of guidance documents that align with the Professional Standards for Education Leadership (PSEL). The guidance document addressed all standards, including the standard related to curriculum, instruction, and assessment, and called out specific leadership behaviors that support students identified with disabilities (Billingsley, DeMatthews, Connally & McLeskey, 2018). In addition to providing access to high-quality classrooms with rigorous curriculum and instruction, leaders need to work alongside teachers to support their growth and development with effective pedagogy. Also critical is the principal's ability to ensure that teachers provide students with instruction and assessment that is evidenced based (Billingsley et al., 2018). Researchers have identified instructional practices that are effective in the classroom for improving outcomes for students identified with disabilities.

Effective strategies that work to engage students and impact learning are applicable across contents. Some of these strategies include whole and small group

instruction (McLeskey & Brownell, 2015), explicit and intensive small group instruction (McLeskey & Brownell, 2015; McLeskey & Waldron, 2011; McLeskey, Billingsley, & Ziegler, 2018), cooperative learning, inquiry approaches, response prompts and use of assistive technology (Alquraini & Gut, 2012), and universal design learning (Alquraini & Gut, 2012; Toson, Burrello, & Knollman, 2013). The understanding and ability of a teacher differentiate the curriculum (Causton-Theoharis et al., 2011; Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013; Shogrene et al., 2015;), engage in co-teaching (McLeskey et al., 2014; Waldron, McLeskey, & Redd, 2011), and provide accommodations and modifications, based student need (Alquraini & Gut, 2012) are also critical practices. All teachers can be taught and use high-leverage, researched-based practices such as these, providing increased access and the attainment of learning goals for every student.

Additionally, there are strategies and practices of principals that support teachers in creating learning environments that employ these strategies. The quality of a school's instructional program is in direct alignment with its leader's ability to focus on instruction, build community, and establish a vision and goal (Supovitz, Sirinides, & May, 2010). In a study, Supovitz et al. (2010) found that the principal can influence and shape a teacher's instructional practice. A principal's influence on the capacity of a teacher to provide effective instruction can be supported through the implementation of professional development. Additionally, in a three-year quasi-experimental study, Choi, Meisenheimer, McCart, and Sailor, (2017) looked at the use of professional development as one of the interventions used to bring about inclusive reform efforts in a school. With the use of trainers to provide professional learning in topics such as content instruction,

formative practices, and flexible grouping, the school saw positive outcomes for reading and math achievement. A leader can improve the core of teaching and learning with teachers through this focus on instruction.

Theoharis' (2009) framework also identified the need to address issues of race and equity within a school to improve teaching and learning. The principals in his study spoke about the impact of discussing race and equity in their schools. These efforts did not directly affect instruction, but the principals perceived that the regular discussion of these topics did influence the attitudes of their staff (Theoharis, 2009). These leaders also believed that with this consistent vision and focus on race and equitable practices for all learners that their supervision of teachers was improved as was their ability to hire and retain teachers with an equity mindset, thus influencing student learning. Socially just leaders can supervise teachers and influence outcomes for students from marginalized groups. Theoharis' (2009) findings indicated that both professional development and the supervision of teachers are critical skills for leading for social justice and may have a profound impact on improving the teaching and learning for students identified with a disability.

Outcomes for students. The literature also addressed the accountability that comes from federal and state policies regarding the academic achievement of all students, including those students identified with disabilities. While national data indicate that students who are identified with a disability lag their peers, scholars believe that inclusive practices can support in improving student outcomes. Cosier, Theoharis, and Causton-Theoharis (2013) found that time in the general education classroom

improved academic outcomes for students identified with disabilities. They found in their study of 180 school districts that included 1,300 elementary-aged students that time spent in general education was statistically significant ($p < .001$), and this time resulted in improved reading and mathematics performance for students with disabilities.

Additional studies were reported in TASH Congressional Briefing on Inclusive Education (Almazan, 2009) which studied the academic achievement and growth of students who are identified with a disability. The studies compared the academic outcomes of students with disabilities who were included in the general classroom and those who were not included in the general education classroom. Students who were included in the general classroom had academic growth in the 80th percentile, while students who were not included had academic growth in the 50th percentile.

Additionally, Theoharis, Causton & Bronston (2016) studied two schools that engaged in a multi-year effort to implement school-wide inclusive reform. As measured by their state assessment for three years, the two schools saw an increase of passing rates for students identified with a disability by 15% in the first year, 18% in the second year, and 20% in the third year. Scholars and practitioners should heed the positive implications that stem from the increased inclusion of students with disabilities.

Critique of Research

The research included in this review related to the leadership in the central office intersects with research related to instructional leadership. Central office practices are shifting, with leadership at this level needing to better support and develop the instructional leadership of school principals (Honig & Copland, 2008). The research

documented in this review highlights practices that are effective in shaping the leadership of principals and other instructional leaders. Yet this research maintains a broad, balcony view of leadership with minimal attention focused on “how-to” serve the diverse students served in a school district. There is also limited research looking specifically at the role of the central office in the development of principals. Further study in this area could enhance the type and quality of support that the central office provides to principals.

The analysis of social justice leadership is an area that is far reaching, with topics addressing qualities of leaders for social justice (Furman, 2012; Theoharis & Causton-Theoharis, 2008), barriers leaders face when leading for social justice (DeMatthews, 2018), and the preparation of leaders for social justice (Trujillo & Cooper, 2014). Research investigating the role of a principal as a leader for social justice is a predominant area of study in the literature. This literature review delved into trends in special education while also documenting the inadequacies in preparation of the principal to lead for students with disabilities. Many scholars would agree that leadership for social justice is a critical need in education and further study can continue to support efforts to create equitable schools. More empirical evidence is needed to address and identify how leaders successfully practice social justice leadership for students with disabilities. Research on the role the central office plays in relationship to social justice is also limited. There is a more singular focus on instructional leadership in these studies concerning central office leadership with little emphasis on equity. These are specific

areas where scholarly pursuits can provide practitioners with research and evidenced based guidance.

Conclusion

This review explored the extant literature related to the central office as a learning organization designed to develop principals as instructional leaders and leaders for social justice. This review further investigated the dimensions Honig et al. (2010) created, which included developing a partnership with principals to enhance their instructional leadership and using data to inform decision and practice. This chapter also provided an overview of special education in the United States, highlighting shifts in practices stemming from the statute as well as the disparities that exist for students with disabilities.

This review also explored the literature surrounding the critical consciousness, skills, and knowledge required of principals as well as a review of inclusive practices in schools that align with best practices. Building on the foundation of knowledge and insight within this literature review, the following chapter describes the methodology used to analyze the practices in a school district.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to explore how the central office of a school district in the Rocky Mountain West approaches and supports the professional development of principals in their efforts to provide students identified with disabilities an inclusive and socially just experience. The use of case study research design is described and justified. The selection of the site and its participants, a detailed description of the data collection, and data analysis processes are included. Additionally, grounds for the credibility and trustworthiness of this study are identified along with researcher positionality, ethical considerations, and limitations.

Research Question

The question guiding this research is:

- 1) In what ways, if any, do central office teams in a school district in the Rocky Mountain West develop and support principals to lead schools that support an inclusive environment for students identified with a disability?

Rationale for Case Study Design

Qualitative research delves into the human experience, engaging in an inquiry process that aims to surface beliefs, assumptions, attitudes, and experiences surrounding individuals to better understand a phenomenon (Creswell, 2014; Yin, 2018). Qualitative research is designed to understand the meaning that participants have constructed for themselves within their context (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2018). The qualitative research process of seeking to describe, explain, and understand a

complex scenario or problem, brings honor and value to both the context and the experiences of the participants. Patton (2002) describes the understanding that comes from qualitative research as “the end in itself, so that it is not attempting to predict what may happen in the future but to understand the nature of that setting” (p.1). As a qualitative researcher, one is perched as an observer situated within a context, sharing the lived experience of the participants as it relates to the problem or question. It is in this process rather than the outcome that meaning is constructed.

Qualitative case study is not only investigating people, but also setting, events, and processes (Maxwell, 2013). It is the tradition of case study that provides an authentic exploration of the meaning that the participants have constructed through their lived experience and their shared context. A case study approach in this investigation offers the opportunity to have an in-depth view of a school district and its leaders. A case study can get at the heart of the experiences between different leaders and contexts juxtaposed against the influence their work has for students with disabilities. A case study approach is justifiable in this study as it will support the goal of the study through “developing an adequate description, interpretation and explanation of the phenomenon within the case” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 79) as well as the ability to answer the research question.

Research Design

Studies that relate to inclusive education and social justice leadership often occur predominately in urban areas, as these locations tend to have a greater population of students of color. As previously stated, the marginalization of students based on race is

an area of emphasis in social justice research; however, marginalization for students with disabilities is not limited to race and urban areas. In this Rocky Mountain West state, only 5% of school districts are in located in an urban area. Nearly half of all the students in this state are served in locations other than urban (NCES, 2013). These statistics support the need to explore leadership for students with special needs in districts outside of urban areas.

Site Selection

Site selection for this study began with a focus on locations that are classified by the designations of suburban, town, and rural. Small rural school districts serving less than 1,000 students were excluded from site selection as the number of participants would be too small for the scope of this study. An initial scan of districts in the state identified school districts whose population of students was greater than the state average when considering these areas: race and ethnicity, free and reduced lunch, and emergent bilinguals. Research links these demographics to a need for leadership for social justice. Using state enrollment data from the 2016-2017 school year, seven school districts met this criterion.

Another critical component within site selection was to identify a school district whose public efforts displayed a commitment to equity. Espoused values regarding equity and inclusion are an indicator of readiness for leadership for social justice. A review of school district web sites was conducted to identify which districts' vision and mission for equity may closely align with the purpose of this study. This review narrowed the selection to three districts. A secondary review of these school districts

was conducted to identify the percentage of students served in special education. Each of these districts had within one percent of the state average of 10.45% of students served in special education. The special education programming in these districts also included a full continuum of services with some inclusive practices.

Mountain Meadow School District (MMSD) was selected because it met the above criteria, and it was also accessible, willing to engage in a research study and wanting to improve how it supports students with disabilities. This district served nearly 6,000 students and had multiple schools at each level. The district office had organizational structures and central office staff that supported principals and special education programming. A requirement of IDEA (2004) is that states must have a State Performance Plan (SPP) to plan to make improvements to special education programming. The SPP is reported by districts or collaborative systems, such as Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES). MMSD's SPP is reported as part of a BOCES rather than as an individual district. The SPP includes an Indicator Profile used to compare the BOCES to the state targets using the indicators identified within IDEA. Of the indicators reviewed, the BOCES which included MMSD, met the state targets for students identified with a disability in graduation rate, dropout rate, achievement in literacy or math, and the percentage of students included in general education, as measured by an LRE greater than 80%. In addition to the SPP Indicator Profile, each school district or BOCES receives a rating for compliance and results based on student performance served by special education as it compares to the state targets. The BOCES which included MMSD received a rating "needing assistance" at the time of this study.

The 6,000 PK-12 students in MMSD reside in three different towns spanning portions of three different counties. Each town has a feeder system serving students PK-12. In total, the district has four elementary schools, two K-8 schools, three middle schools, three high schools, and one alternative high school. One of the elementary schools and one of the K-8 schools in the district offer dual-language, English and Spanish programming. At the time of this study, 59% of students represented races and ethnicities other than White and 31% of students were identified as emerging bilinguals; these numbers are greater than the state average. Additionally, 43% of its students were eligible free or reduced lunch, which is slightly higher than the state average, and 10% of the students were identified with a disability, which was slightly lower than the state average of 11%.

Data Collection

Three distinct types of data were collected to gather a comprehensive picture of the experiences of the leaders within MMSD: relevant documents, observations of professional development and coaching, and interviews with central office leaders and principals. Each of these three types of data supported making meaning related to the research question and provided a perspective that was meaningful and valuable to the study.

The use of document analysis provided evidence of espoused values and supported understanding the written record of past, current, and future of the school district. In this study, four different documents were reviewed. Each of these documents

was selected because they could be analyzed against the conceptual framework. The following documents were reviewed and analyzed: the district's instructional model, the district's strategic plan to include the mission and vision, the special education strategic plan, and a school budget development guide. These documents presented the structure and practices of support that MMSD provided to principals and their stated beliefs about equity, achievement, and learning. Each of these documents served as a more espoused view of the intention and practices of the organization.

Observational data were also collected during site visits. Site visits occurred over six days from December through January of the 2019-2020 school year. Observation site visits included professional development sessions held at the district's main office and an elementary school and a coaching session held at a middle school. Observations ranged from a one-hour coaching session with a central office leader and principal, to a two-hour professional learning session with central office leaders and elementary principals and a four-hour professional learning session that included leaders from the central office and all the schools. Each observation setting was observed once.

Observations of principals and central office leaders provided data about the partnership relationship between the different leaders. The central office leader had regular visits with each principal at their school, which provided a unique opportunity for observational data. These meetings focused on instructional leadership and the intentional use of data to inform their work as aligned with Dimension 1 and Dimension 5 (Honig et al., 2010) of the conceptual framework for the study, DLLSJ. Professional learning opportunities were also selected to look at both dimensions of the framework.

The central office leadership provided a structured time for principals to collaborate and focus on their learning. An observation protocol was used during observations, ensuring that the data collected were aligned to the research question (see Appendix A for observation tool). Descriptive field notes were collected during the observations and following each observation a reflexive memo was written to record my observations and reflections.

Individual interviews were the third type of data collected in this study. Seven principals representing elementary, middle, and high schools, across all three communities, were interviewed as well as three central office leaders, including the Superintendent, Chief Academic Officer (CAO), and Director of Special Education. The following table describes the participants in the interviews.

Table 1

Interview Participants

<i>Role</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Years as Leader</i>	<i>Years Leading in MMSD</i>
Director of Special Education	Male	5-10 years	< 5years
Superintendent	Male	>20 years	5-10 years
Chief Academic Officer	Male	>20 years	>10 years
High School Principal	Male	> 10 years	5-10 years
High School Principal	Male	>20 years	>10 years
High School Principal	Female	>10 years	>10 years
Middle School Principal	Female	5-10 years	5-10 years

Elementary School Principal	Female	>20 years	>20 years
Elementary School Principal	Male	5-10 years	<5 years
Elementary School Principal	Male	<5 years	<5 years

Overall, the participants of the study were experienced leaders with one principal having less than five years of experience and only three leaders having less than three years of service in the district. In the findings section, the interviewees are identified as central office leader and principal due to the small number of participants and the lack of variability of responses across central office leaders and elementary, middle, and high school principals. It was important to designate the differences between school and district level leadership and important to note that there was coherence within these levels of leadership.

In this study, semi-structured interview questions were used to achieve a greater understanding of the case and answer the research question (see Appendices B for complete interview protocol). Semi-structured interviews provided an opportunity for all participants to respond to a specific set of questions, yet it also provided opportunities for fluid discussion and probes for clarification. Each participant was interviewed once for a 60-minute session. All interviews were audio recorded with permission from the participants (see Appendices C for consent form). The general scope of the questions sought to gain participant perspective on the systems and structures that are in place to support (a) professional learning specific to students with disabilities, (b) the level of inclusivity experienced by students who are served in special education, (c) the

professional learning opportunities and support provided, (d) the intentional use of data and evidence in decision making about practice, and (e) the relationships between the principal and central office. The interviews were transcribed and sent to the participants for member checking. I also wrote a reflexive memo following the interview to document reflections and check for researcher bias.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is the process of making meaning, it is the space where a researcher makes sense of the data through “consolidating, reducing and interpreting” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 202). A constant comparative analysis approach, comparing each interpretation and finding with existing findings and the DLLSJ framework, was used to analyze the data gathered. This process is widely used within qualitative research as an inductive method to identify findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Matrices were created to align the framework, data collection, and data analysis. These matrices documented both the types of data collected and indicators that guided my analysis of how the data and evidence related to the framework (see Appendices D and E for complete matrices).

The initial data analysis began first with reviewing all the different documents to build a strong understanding of the districts’ processes and espoused values. Interviews were recorded then transcribed using a transcription service, rev.com. I reviewed each transcription along with the recording to support accuracy. Data from observational field notes included a description, interactions between participants, and analytic notes. A reflexive memo was written that captured my thoughts and insight about the process following each observation and interview. The memos also captured elements that stood

out as interesting, challenging, or significant. The regular use of this tool helped to acknowledge and maintain an awareness of self. Interview transcriptions, field notes from observations, and reflective memos were loaded into a data analysis software system, Dedoose, which supports qualitative data analysis. Dedoose supported analyzing both the frequency of codes as well as the co-occurrence of codes. Dedoose was the platform used to support all rounds of coding and analysis of these data.

I coded the data throughout the collection process. Data analysis was used as an iterative process that led to greater understanding and meaning. Observations and interviews were coded first to check alignment with the DLLSJ framework. This deductive coding allowed me to answer the research question. One of the aims of this study was to examine current practices and structures of MMSD to describe and highlight practices that can be elevated as well as identify areas of development. Open-coding was used to examine current practice and break it into discrete parts. This open coding process allowed me to be open to the direction that the data revealed (Saldaña, 2016). These open codes supported identifying similarities and differences in the data. Following the first round of coding of the interviews and observations, these codes were analyzed and compared with the data from the documents.

Multiple cycles of coding are needed to reach a point of saturation (Saldaña, 2016). A second round of coding was conducted using pattern coding to group codes into like categories or concepts that helped to make meaning of the data. After the second round of coding was completed, concepts and categories were developed that began to shape areas of focus related to how central office leaders supported principals.

After review and analysis of the second round of coding, I engaged in theming the data which Saldaña (2016) described as developing an “extended phrase that helps to identify what the data means” (p. 297). The following table provides an example illustrating how the data were analyzed.

Table 2

Analysis Example

<i>1st Cycle: Open Code</i>	<i>2nd Cycle: Pattern Code</i>	<i>3rd Cycle: Theme the Data</i>
Coaching leaders	Coaching	Central office leader’s beliefs and actions to develop principals as instructional leaders.
Building capacity		
Analyzing data		
Creating conditions	Trust and Efficacy	
Autonomy		
Learning		

This analysis and identification of concepts and categories led to the development of assertions or areas of focus of the central office’s work to support principals. Themes emerged from an analysis of the areas of focus of the central office’s work to support leaders and the leadership needed to support an inclusive environment for students identified with a disability as defined by the DLLSJ Framework.

Credibility and Trustworthiness

A goal of qualitative research is to understand the experience of individuals, building a bridge, and making connections to understand a phenomenon. Understanding

how all leaders support one another to serve students with disabilities by creating inclusive environments is a problem of practice that exists in many school districts. While not generalizable, this case study brings a depth of understanding to a specific context about a specific phenomenon that has a broad meaning. The research base of the DLLSJ Framework brings credibility to this study. Connecting the findings of this study to a research-based framework has the potential to guide future endeavors, influence the discipline, and shape leadership practices. To support credibility, I employed different tools such as the use of protocols, member checking, and triangulation.

To support the semi-structured interview process, an interview protocol was used. The protocol used supported delving into areas supported within the framework while still allowing for the depth of discovery of information from the participant. After interviews were transcribed, the transcriptions were sent to the participants for member checking. Participants offered confirmation of what they shared.

Additionally, triangulation was used with the three different types of data to ensure a more complete picture of the case and increase the credibility of this case study. Following each round of coding, I revisited each of the documents to identify areas that either contradicted or confirmed what was discovered within the new codes.

Triangulation provided the ability to utilize all the methods of data collection to support the findings (Yin, 2018) while it also contributed to the understanding of the experiences of the participants and the case. Using multiple data sources and analytical techniques

increased the outcome of the most thorough and complete elucidation of the case, thus giving credence to the analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Stake, 1995).

Ethical Considerations

The research process requires certain ethical considerations. In this case study, I obtained the school district's approval to engage in research. Additionally, each of the participants provided informed consent to participate in research with the assurance of confidentiality, including data storage, as well as the inclusion of pseudonyms for increased anonymity. Other considerations were the understanding that a case study takes a deep look into a participant's context, probing with questions about their beliefs, work, and personal experiences. While the technical aspects of ethical considerations are essential, I also recognized that this experience may feel intrusive and responded with care and concern throughout the process.

Researcher Positionality

My position as a researcher in this study is grounded in my beliefs that I have constructed from my experiences as both a principal and as a leader within a central office in a school district. Through study and reflection of my leadership journey, I have witnessed that people of color, those who are under-resourced, people who are differently abled, and those whose native language is not English often attend schools that struggle to create environments that are truly equitable and inclusive. I believe that too often schools have difficulty recognizing and building upon the unique and creative strengths, talents, and capital of these diverse groups. Instead, I believe they often focusing on their faults or challenges. Yet, while I have these beliefs, I am also poised

to be a part of the process to create conditions that can support changing this current reality.

I believe that effective leadership can lift the assets of those who are not truly seen. My own leadership experiences have provided me with great learning, beautiful opportunities, and perspective. These experiences and my beliefs certainly influence who I am as the researcher. I have a belief in leadership development and I am driven by a desire to see socially just environments created for students with disabilities. Each of these foundational beliefs is evidenced using conceptual frameworks that are grounded in these principles in my study. Additionally, the use of a case study allowed me to deeply explore and better understand the experiences unique to a school district.

Operating under the constructivist epistemology, my goal was to understand the realities that are constructed by the perceptions and experiences of those active in the research process. As the researcher I needed to acknowledge my beliefs, biases, and assumptions. I believe that my experiences as both a school and central office leader, who is committed to social justice, were advantageous in the process, specifically in question design, data collection, and analysis. Yet, maintaining neutrality was necessary. As noted above, I strictly adhered to my observation and interview protocols and used reflexive memos and reviewed them as I analyzed the data to check my bias. I also triangulated data and used a process of member checking.

Limitations

A limitation of this case study was that the study was bound by time and the number of participants. And although I aimed to catalog my assumptions and biases

throughout the study and maintained the integrity of the data collection and analysis, the researcher as the instrument provided some limitations. Additionally, leaders within both central office and schools have varied experiences with students identified with a disability, perceptions related to professional learning and values and beliefs connected to social justice. All these imposed limitations on the study.

Conclusion

This chapter detailed the rationale for the use of case study as a qualitative approach to research in this investigation. Also included in this chapter was the research design including site selection and data collection, analysis procedures, and issues with credibility and trustworthiness. The chapter also provided the role and positionality of my role as the researcher as well as limitations and ethical considerations. The analysis and findings will be included in the subsequent chapter.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to analyze a district's role in supporting the development of leaders for social justice for students identified with a disability through the examination of current practices and structures. The first three chapters provided the background, purpose, and significance of the study, a review of relevant literature, along with a methodological design to answer the research question. This chapter presents the background of the case and then the findings that are intended to answer the research question: "In what ways, if any, do central office teams in a school district in the Rocky Mountain West develop and support principals to lead schools that support an inclusive environment for students identified with a disability?"

District Vision

The review of district documents included the district's strategic plan which contained the mission and vision, the special education strategic plan, a school budget development guide, and the instructional model. These documents revealed the espoused vision, beliefs, and values of the district. The district mission has language about every student and the knowledge, skills, and character needed in a changing world. MMSD developed a strategic plan to achieve their mission. This strategic plan included five specific drivers that guided their work: belonging, engagement, equity, mastery, and wellness. Connected to these drivers were specific strategies outlined to meet the district goals and outcomes; five of the ten strategies identified were centered around instruction. The following phrases indicate instructional priorities: "Hold high

expectations for all”, “...grade-level assignments, curriculum and assessments”, and “...engage students...authentic learning experiences”. Statements from the strategic plan that addressed instruction included language that espoused a belief that equity exists through “high expectations for all”, “Guarantee equitable access...”, and “...high quality instruction...so that every student”. There was no distinct or specific strategy related to equity.

The strategies outlined in the strategic plan were directly linked to the district developed tool, MMSD Instructional Model. The purpose of the instructional model was evident in the following phrases: “high-quality instruction, improve instructional design, leverage teacher instructional expertise”. The instructional model included a list of practices connected to three components: classroom culture, design elements, and engaging instruction. Also included in the model were a scope and sequence document that listed specific practices and techniques of effective teachers related to each component and a lesson plan structure. Classroom culture was comprised of teacher actions related to “tone and presence, safe and inclusive management, and character development”. Only one statement within the section connected to the espoused value of equity, “A climate of respect for diversity and bilingualism is maintained”. This statement was not supported by any specific strategies or actions that guided a teacher in creating a climate such as this. Similarly, the component of design elements included teacher actions that supported, “intentional lesson structure, classroom procedures and routines, physical environment, purposeful differentiation, and academic growth and results”. Three statements within this component referenced culturally and linguistically

relevant materials and assessments. The review of the scope and sequence document revealed that there were not any explicit strategies that supported developing culturally or linguistically relevant materials and assessments. Engaging instruction was the third component, it included teacher actions related to, “student voice and relevancy, pacing, high expectations and rigor, and check and adjust”. Again, this component identified teacher moves and contained one statement referencing culturally responsive instruction. General instructional strategies predominated the scope and sequence, there were no specific strategies identified for teachers that supported or developed their efforts to create a culturally responsive environment. Additionally, there was no explicit mention of any strategies to support students identified with disabilities within the three components or the scope and sequence document. The instructional model identified common language related to effective instructional practices that included, general strategies to improve instructional design, practice, and student outcomes for a typical learner.

Special education programming. Special education programming in MMSD was varied across the district. The district used a formula to determine the full-time equivalent for special education teachers and paraprofessionals to support each school based upon the numbers and needs of the students served by special education. The services for special education were provided in core academic areas with the support or specialized instruction occurring in different classroom settings. The range of settings included collaborative teaching, push-in targeted support with a special education teacher or paraprofessional in the general classroom, and replacement core academic or

supplementary instruction with the specialized instruction provided by a special education teacher outside of the general classroom. Additionally, the K-8 school and the three high schools had an affective needs program that served students with emotional disabilities. One school at each level, in each town, had specialized programming for students who were identified with significant cognitive disabilities. Related services such as physical or speech therapy were provided at schools based on student needs. Within the central office, there was one Director of Special Education who supported the entire school district. Some of the responsibilities of the Director of Special Education included strategic planning for special education services across the district, the evaluation and supervision of related service providers, fostering family and community relationships, and special education support and problem solving with teachers and principals. Overall, the structures and systems to provide special education services and support the needs of special education students were centralized and targeted to specific needs. MMSD had a department, central office leader, and structures to support special education as a discipline.

The review of district documents revealed three categories: instructional leadership, inclusive environment for students with a special disability, and social justice leadership. The first category appeared from the open coding of the data and the last two categories were tied to the research question. Instructional leadership emerged as a priority of the district. The documentation of an inclusive environment for students with a disability appeared in the descriptions of special education programming and the structures and systems to support special education services. Although the mission

mentioned every student and the strategic plan included language ensuring equitable access and an equity driver, there was no specific language that embodied social justice leadership. There were no direct references to equitable and evidenced-based instructional practices, the need to identify and dismantle inequitable structures, beliefs about race and ethnicity, or practices to support students from specialized populations.

District Role in Developing Principals to Build Inclusive Environments for Students Identified with Disabilities

The structures and systems discovered in the document review revealed the MMSD approach to delivery of services, but there were no explicit descriptions about how they supported principals to promote inclusive environments in their schools for students identified with a disability.

The observations and interviews revealed more about the research question: In what ways, if any, do central office teams in a school district in the Rocky Mountain West develop and support principals to lead schools that support an inclusive environment for students identified with a disability? During interviews, principals stated that central office leadership was available to them when they sought out support for problems or areas of concern. Three principals identified that they sought support for scheduling issues and another principal shared asking for support for student behavior issues. One leader expressed that principals have not been provided with data or a vision to guide their leadership for students served by special education. They stated:

We don't start the year with like, "Hey here we are." "We got 10% of our students have some sort of mild, moderate risk, significant learning disability."

This is huge. This is where we started from this is where we're going. This is why it is important. We haven't had that big picture piece. I think that would be helpful (Principal Interview, January 2020).

The principals expressed that they felt the central office supported them, yet the examples from the interviews did not reflect actions that develop leadership for creating inclusive schools. There was no affirmation from principals that the central office supported them in this way. Additionally, observations of coaching and professional development did not reveal any specific or explicit training or support related to building an inclusive school culture for students with disabilities.

These data indicate that while MMSD supported a vision for equity for all students through their vision and strategic plan there were little to no explicit connections to professional learning or practices that supported principals to address the needs of students with a disability. The examination of current practices and structures in MMSD did reveal a commitment to and coherent practices for the role of central office support for principals. These practices and structures illuminate how MMSD central office leaders align to the Honig et al. (2010) The Five Dimensions of Central Office Transformation framework by providing learning-focused partnerships with principals and use evidence to support continual improvement. These two dimensions highlighted in the outer ring of the DLLSJ framework provide the foundation for central office leaders to support principals. An examination of their current practices illuminated strengths and areas of growth to help MMSD provide explicit support for principals to

build inclusive school environments for students with disabilities. The following sections describe the current practice of how the MMSD central office supported its principals.

There was strong evidence across all data that the district focused discrete activities and events to support the instructional capacity of principals. These events and activities provided evidence of instructional practices that were common across the district and there was an articulated value and belief regarding equitable practices and learning opportunities. There was a gap in specificity regarding special education and an articulated need for increased leadership for special education. The following figure presents these four areas of focus that define the district’s role in supporting the development of principals: development of the instructional leadership capacity of principals, system-wide focus on instructional practices, beliefs supporting equity, and leadership for special education.

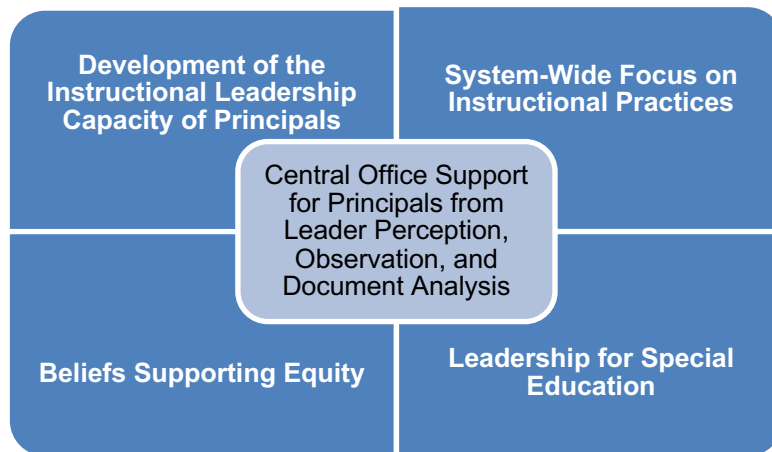


Figure 4. Areas of focus that support central office support for principals.

Each area of focus along with supporting data are described in the following sections.

Development of the Instructional Leadership Capacity of Principals

The district was strongly focused on developing the instructional capacity of principals. All participants articulated this emphasis and it was evident in all observations. District level support consisted of coaching, providing expert support, and offering professional learning. Figure 5 shows the process the district used to develop the instructional capacity of the principal.



Figure 5. Development of the Instructional Leadership Capacity of Principals

Coaching leaders was how the district provided most of the development for the instructional capacity of principals. Principals interviewed said the coaching predominately consisted of sessions with the central office leader focused on collaborating on feedback for instructional visits and monitoring of the strategic plan.

Within these coaching sessions, principals identified that data supported these conversations and that an environment of trust and leader efficacy existed.

Coaching process and structures. Coaching was a tool consistently used to develop educators in this district - principals coaching teachers and central office leaders coaching principals. In MMSD, coaching cycles for principals occurred every two weeks. The Superintendent and the Chief Academic Officer, who also serve as each principal's direct supervisor, led these coaching sessions. Each participant highlighted these coaching sessions as the primary way that principals receive support from the central office. The focus of the coaching session alternated with supporting the school's strategic plan and supporting the principal's coaching of teachers. One central office leader described coaching sessions this way,

We review the strategic plan. We asked for updates, we asked for challenges.

Then on the other visit, we spent a lot of that time working with principals on doing coaching rounds, how do you get actionable feedback? How do you follow up, how do you monitor if that is making progress that you want? (Central Office Leader Interview, January 2020).

During an observation of the principal coaching session, the central office leader observed asked for bright spots and challenges, which led to a discussion of the principal's current focus. During the discussion, the two leaders viewed and discussed survey data. The discussion centered on how the overall student data trended over time. The practice of asking principals questions and having them respond with examples from their current practice was a trend in the coaching process.

Each school had a strategic plan, and the emphasis on the school's strategic plan supported each principal in an individualized way. Principals commented positively on their coaching sessions. One principal shared, "We come around the table in here and just deal with our strategic planning and where are we at with their goals, and how are we moving, and how are we getting staff involved" (Principal Interview, January 2020). Another principal stated "Our strategic goals are informed by data" (Principal Interview, January 2020). Central office leadership viewed the connections back to the strategic plan as a time to "help them stay focused on strategic goals, action planning, follow through, monitoring impact" (Central Office Leader Interview, January 2020). Observation of a principal coaching session confirmed the review of a strategic plan type of session.

Coaching teachers was an identified skill that principals need to develop. The principals in MMSD valued the time they have in their coaching session to improve on their coaching of teachers. One principal highlighted an example of the supervisor coming to the school, observing several classrooms, and returning to the office to role-play how to provide the teachers feedback based on that observation. Another principal stated, "Hey, we're all going to work on coaching, that's a piece of our instructional support package for teachers, and we have to get good at that so we're in the practice of that, and think about it, and we reflect on it" (Principal Interview, January 2020). Two principals mentioned the use of school level data as a focus of conversation within coaching sessions to support them with providing teacher feedback. Principals would bring their observational data from classroom observations and the central office leader

would use these data to coach the principal to provide actionable feedback to teachers. Coaching sessions related to classroom observations were not observed, yet every principal and central office leader stated that the use of data was a part of the coaching process.

Using data to support leadership. The use of data was a significant component of coaching principals. When positioned with a question about examples of using data, five principals indicated that they used aggregate and disaggregated achievement data when monitoring their school's growth and performance. The use of survey data, whether it was from students, families, or teachers was also a metric that three principals and a central office leader identified to monitor their efforts and next steps. Three different principals also mentioned that they used their school assessments to support conversation with teachers and building leadership dialogue. Central office supported leaders in looking at their site-specific data to define actions connected to their site-based strategic plans. A central office leader stated,

If you use more strategies effectively, you had a higher growth rate. And so, we shared that data and then principals are like, "Okay, well I guess I should make a choice to add some of these things." And it wasn't a, "Shame on you for not doing it," it's like, "You have this opportunity, you could add these strategies, we're here to support you" (Central Office Leader Interview, January 2020).

The strategic plan was used as a guide and articulation of the desired outcomes during these discussions. "We have strategic plans and there is, with our progress monitoring tools, what are we going to be looking at (Central Office Leader Interview, January

2020). Throughout the interviews and observations, there was continual reference and anchoring feedback to data and data to the strategic plan.

While data were used, there was also a sentiment that intentionality and effectively using data was an area of improvement. One principal said, “We need to work as a whole district to learn together and to plan together and to gather our data and see how this is working” (Principal Interview, January 2020). A central office leader also shared, “Pockets of schools and school leadership that use different datasets more frequently or better than others” (Central Office Leader Interview, January 2020). Using data can extend beyond looking at outcomes and trends in student performance by analyzing the data to identify questions about current practices and current reality to identify what is working well and levers for change. “I think what I find is that my mind works more that way so usually I'm the one who's asking the questions that I wish they were asking themselves more routinely” (Central Office Leader Interview, January 2020). The practice of data analysis was more aligned with identifying trends rather than asking questions to lead change.

Leadership efficacy and trust. Leaders reported that they felt efficacious in their work and that there was a trusting relationship and partnership between principals and their supervisors. This sentiment served as evidence that the central office was supportive and built leadership capacity. Principals felt empowered and supported to lead their school. As two principals noted, “We really are charged with creating that priority, creating that focus” (Principal Interview, January 2020) and “So, there's a lot of freedom as a building leader under guidelines from central office. But that central office

is there to go back and get help because that is their wheel house” (Principal Interview, January 2020). Central office leadership also saw the potential in principals by affirming the belief that their principals have the ability, support, and authority to lead their school. A central office leader stated that “One of the ways that we try to get there though is through building consensus on my end...Because consensus is slower than edict. It's just more rooted once you get there” (Central Office Interview, January 2020). The trust between central office and principals was established in many ways, which one central office leader highlighted, “Where we see those gaps in those strategic plans, then we design the professional development for support and give the principals space to work on those things” (Central Office Interview, January 2020).

Providing expert support. Although mentioned less often than the use of coaching, another element to building the capacity of instructional leaders identified was the support provided by the central office through the connection of specific expert level support, intended to guide the principals in their leadership. Different departments within the central office were available to principals, as they need support with anything in their building. Principals identified times of seeking out support from the Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Education (CLDE), Special Education, and Data departments as they planned professional learning for teachers, observed classrooms, or reviewed data. A principal noted, “Well at the district level, there's someone for CLDE. There is someone for Special Ed. There is someone for Elementary Ed, and I guess for new teachers. There is some data support. There is some tech support” (Principal Interview, January 2020). Each principal respondent felt that the central office was available to

provide some level of support to address their need or question. Four of the principals also expressed a desire for additional support and insight from their central office experts. One principal responded,

I want research on models that work. I want somebody to come in and say here's what the data shows and here's how you can track your own data so you know if it's working or not. And here's the barriers that they have found through this research that were challenges and how they worked through them” (Principal Interview, January 2020).

These four principals also voiced recognition that the district level experts had more time and specific experience in an area that would benefit their schools.

Professional learning opportunities. Support for developing principals also came in the form of formalized professional learning for both principals and other members of the central office instructional team. The central office structured two different types of professional learning opportunities each of which I observed during the data collection phase.

One of these structures was the level-based meetings. The principals drove the focus and agenda of these meetings. Principals identified a problem of practice that they wanted support with solving. Colleagues shared insight and resources and central office leaders connected to the needs of their leaders as well as offer support on the same problems of practice. The session was described as “We might do some PD in there, problem solve, typically a problem of practice where one of the schools will bring. And we might do a consultancy protocol to just give a chance to unpack it and get some

feedback” (Central Office Leader Interview, January 2020). One principal also commented that they value this collaborative time together, “and that’s another time where I feel like we get into some deeper conversation about what we really need” (Principal Interview, January 2020). Principals felt supported by one another as they addressed issues and problems they faced. This meeting structure served to address the current issues principals faced yet demonstrated a reactive rather than proactive approach.

This meeting also served as an opportunity for principals to connect with district level instructional team members. During the observation of a level meeting, a district level content expert came and met with principals. The presentation consisted of the content leader sharing a vision, providing district level data, and posing a question to the principals. This prompted discussion centered on what leaders were seeing in their classrooms. Principals were focused on the current state rather than the desired state or alternative scenarios. Focused on the current state alone, principals were limited to analyze the status quo, rather than to consider alternatives or inequities created through proposed solutions. The discussion touched on the potential of future math content learning with teachers. At the end of the presentation a principal in the room asked, “What are you hoping to accomplish?” which prompted the content leader to articulate that the team of content experts was seeking principal feedback about what the next steps should be. Overall, this presentation in the level meeting provided principals with some learning focused on equity in mathematics while it also served to gather feedback from principals about what they are seeing in their schools related to mathematics

instruction. This level meeting observation supported the participant response that central office leaders were available to provide support and professional learning in their different areas of expertise.

Another of these professional learning structures included learning planned by the central office leadership, typically by the CAO and Superintendent. Principals reported different sentiments about these experiences, “it’s very powerful, it’s giving us some useful schema and a common vocabulary” (Principal Interview, January 2020).

Another principal said,

The PD that we get monthly when we all come together, I think it's usually pretty good, often focused on some aspect of coaching and some aspect of student work protocol... It is just not enough time to really go super deep I think into some of those topics. But I think sometimes it's just the good kind of re-hit of some information or reminders of things, but it's not often super deep learning I would say (Principal Interview, January 2020).

Other principals reported that “Half is logistical and the other half is instructional...the instructional piece is centered on coaching and good instruction” (Principal Interview, January 2020); “The focus is all on coaching” (Principal Interview, January 2020); “It really depends on what they are seeing as coaches. It’s more universal so it benefits all of us” (Principal Interview, January 2020).

I observed this learning opportunity and found that the primary focus of the session was on coaching and providing feedback to teachers. During the observation of this session, there were several examples of the emphasis on both coaching teachers and

the instructional model to support teacher development. All the leaders engaged in a “5 Whys” activity answering the question, why has our organization invested significant time and energy into implementing instructional coaching? The leaders engaged in discussion at table groups and shared out. This activity connected to the next segment where table teams identified components of effective coaching and the highest leverage practices that they needed to coach in their building based on their reflection. The leaders wrote action steps on a post-it or piece of paper that identified what they could do differently when coaching their teachers. The session concluded by reminding principals about and providing different coaching tools and links to the instructional model to support their coaching efforts. The emphasis on providing leaders with professional learning to support their coaching of teachers is evident in the documents reviewed, observation, and participant interviews.

Another segment of the principal professional learning day also focused on a specific time for more technical learning. An example occurred when representatives of different departments such as CLDE or Special Education facilitated a portion of the meeting. During this observation, a department level leader shared specific data along with components of high-quality instruction for language learners while highlighting the issues they see within the data. Principals brainstormed suggestions around the issues presented. Another department level leader also shared challenges and changes related to budgetary issues with a brief opportunity for questions or clarifications.

Summary. Overall, the perception of leaders in MMSD was the central office was supportive of developing the capacity of principals as instructional leaders using a

few different tools and strategies. None of the tools and strategies to support principals were targeted at inclusivity or the needs of students with disabilities. The consistent use of a coaching model provided an opportunity to build relationships and trust through the process and focus on the instructional model. The intentional focus on instruction, the presence of a common language, and a collaborative approach was highly evident across all interviews and observations. Principals named and examined their school and district level data as part of their processes. The connection of all the members of central office leadership was evident in the structures the district used to provide professional learning and expert support.

System-Wide Focus on Instructional Practices

A consistent instructional model with an emphasis on teacher development was evident throughout all interviews and observations. Central office leaders and principals used specific language that communicated the value felt for the district instructional model along with the expectation and desire to impact classroom instruction through the development of the teachers. Eight of the ten participants identified their role in developing teachers as critical to the success of their schools.

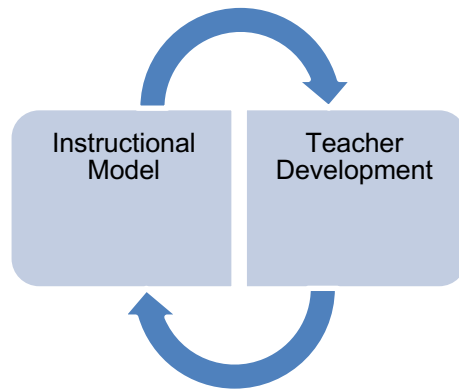


Figure 6. System-wide focus on an instructional model.

Figure 6 reflects the symbiotic relationship between the instructional model and teacher development that was a part of central office practice to support principals. The following section provides detail about how this system-wide focus was characterized by the participants, documents, and actions.

Instructional model. Principals supported teacher development through school-based professional development that was aligned to the district’s instructional model. This district-wide instructional model was built to identify common language related to effective instruction, improve instructional design, practice, and student outcomes as well as to guide observations of and feedback for teachers. The instructional model included a list of practices connected to three areas: classroom culture, design elements, and engaging instruction. Also included in the model were a scope and sequence document that listed the specific practices and techniques for each area and a lesson plan structure. One principal shared, “We’re focusing on formative assessment and we’ve

narrowed down our observation tracker to the specific things that we've identified from the district instructional model” (Principal Interview, January 2020). When discussing teacher development and coaching another principal shared, “It all goes around our instructional model, which handles clear instructional move pieces as well as classroom environment and relationships” (Principal Interview, January 2020). Only one principal highlighted students when discussing the instructional model. The model is “focused on engaging every kiddo” and “getting every student’s voice into the classroom immediately” (Principal Interview, January 2020). Although principals and central office leaders spoke to engaging every student, there was no mention of how the instructional model supported students served in special education. In addition to the data from interviews, the focused use of an instructional model was evident in a document review as well as in observations of professional learning for principals. The instructional model was also evident and visible on the walls in hallways and offices in seven of the nine district buildings visited. The use of the district-wide instructional model indicates that it is believe to address the needs of all the students in MMSD.

Teacher development. The use of coaching as a tool to develop teachers was a hallmark of what was heard across all interview participants, “consistent coaching cycles” (Central Office Leader Interview, January 2020) and “observation and coaching cycles every two weeks” (Principal Interview, January 2020). Principals defined coaching cycles as regular and routine observations of individual teacher’s classroom instruction by either the principal or assistant principal, followed up by a feedback conversation with specific action steps. The intentional focus of coaching cycles guided

and supported teachers with improving their instructional practice. One principal commented on this intentional focus to improve classroom instruction, “This district quite some time ago came around to the view that the focus needs to be on the instruction” (Principal Interview, January 2020). The district instructional model drives instructional practices and teacher professional learning and support. Eight of the ten participants identified the connection between coaching cycles and the instructional model as the way to influence teacher practice. “We believe that coaching is the most effective and highly differentiated kind of professional development teachers could get” (Central Office Leader Interview, January 2020). Four of the principals also spoke to the challenging craft and skill involved in teaching, one principal explained,

Teaching is extremely complex work, and we are never going to go in with a checklist of you did not have your objective on the board. That is bad. That kind of superficial analysis of what is going on in the classroom is not going to serve anybody. So, with great humility, we try to work at the level of the individual teacher through the coaching mechanism” (Principal Interview, January 2020).

Principals utilized the structure of coaching related to the instructional model and teacher moves to develop their teachers and align language for expectations and practices. There was little to no mention of student needs or support for inclusive practices.

While the consistent messaging from participants held that coaching was essential to teacher growth, principals also expressed challenges. Three principals indicated that there were areas of coaching teachers where they felt stronger in providing

support and feedback. One principal cited the high-quality practices provided by the Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Education (CLDE) department as a useful tool when coaching. Another leader pointed to the resources provided by the district, which connects the instructional model and Relay tools. A principal did specifically note the difficulty in coaching special education teachers. One principal shared,

I was just coaching a special education teacher this week and it was just some basic intentional lesson structure. We do that kind of coaching and that is in my wheelhouse for sure. When I'm trying to coach my SSN teacher, I haven't done a single coaching cycle, we've had conversations, I've given feedback on parent communication, but I don't feel that would be very effective use of my or the teacher's time" (Principal Interview, January 2020).

This principal's interview was the only time a school level leader identified that the coaching practices used may not support all teachers and raised an area of need to support special education teachers. Central office leadership indicated that coaching occurs for related service providers, such as occupational or speech therapists, from the central office and that it was the responsibility of the principal to coach special education teachers. It was clear that the responsibility of coaching and supporting all teachers and special service providers was the responsibility of the principal; however, central office leaders did not provide any specific tools or support for the range of teachers and support staff within a school. Three of the participants highlighted challenges faced to meet the expectations set by the central office around conducting frequent and consistent coaching cycles with teachers. Principals articulated that they consistently relied on the

instructional model to support teachers, yet their ability to meet every teachers' needs was identified as a concern.

Summary. Overall, the district had an intentional focus on developing their teachers using both a district-wide instructional model and protocol driven coaching and feedback cycles. Each of these two strategies is dependent on the other. The instructional model provided leaders and teachers with an anchor in the coaching process. The coaching cycles were a process to give teachers feedback on their implementation of the model. The perceptions shared identified these as effective tools and processes that support their work with teachers. The district-wide instructional model and coaching cycles provided common language and processes, but there was no evidence that the model and coaching supported leaders in building inclusive environments for students identified with disabilities. The principals also noted challenges with implementing the coaching cycles with all teachers and ensuring that the coaching was helping them improve their practice.

Beliefs Supporting Equity

A recurring pattern within the data from both principal and central office interviews was a shared articulated belief that leaders need to create schools that embody equity.

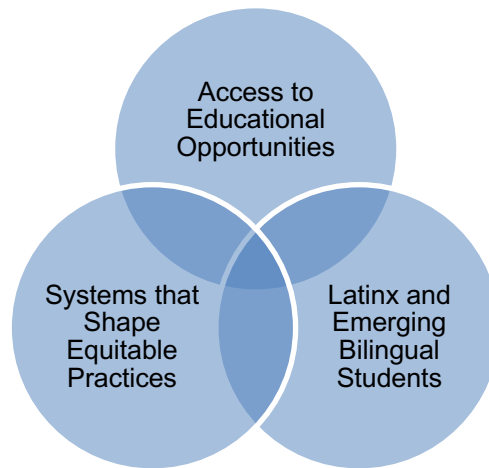


Figure 7. Beliefs supporting equity.

This area of focus was seen through language and practices related to equitable access to educational opportunities, systems that shape equitable practices and the needs of Latinx and emerging bilingual students.

Access to educational opportunities. Most central office leaders and principals defined equity as providing equal access to all students, with eight leaders identifying the need to provide students with access to instructional opportunities. A central office leader stated, “We’ve defined an outcome that we’re working for is students will have access to grade level standards as an equity proposition” (Central Office Interview, January 2020). A principal responded, “When you present them (students) with rigorous grade level material absolutely no harm is done. When you don’t hold those high expectations and don’t believe your kids can achieve that grade level then you are kind of dumbing down” (Principal Interview, January 2020). Four of the principals interviewed also considered access to all the opportunities that school offered, not

related solely to the academic program. Plans for efforts to increase access were also noted,

We are going to devise a plan that will take us to a point where National Honors Society exactly reflects our ethnic breakdown. And then we want the same in the musical. We want the same on the playing fields. So that's part of the way in which we are living the idea that we are about student's real-life challenges (Principal Interview, January 2020).

Another common sentiment among principals was the need to increase access to support for students to help them navigate life outside of school. One principal shared, “I worry about equal access to social emotional support” (Principal Interview, January 2020).

Bringing about equity through access to different opportunities was also evident in district strategies that were included in the strategic plan. Examples include, “to engage and invest in early learning and to partner with families and the community in the education of the whole child” as identified in the document review of the strategic plan.

Systems that shape equitable practices. The overarching systems that support and influence schools play a role in bringing about equitable experiences for students. One of the systems that can have an impact on schools is through the allocation of resources. A central office leader specifically spoke to this idea of how decisions about resources are made, “Disproportionately resourcing, disproportionately investing, proportionally meaning not just slicing the pie evenly in kids who need it more” (Central Office Interview, January 2020). Principal interviews echoed this sentiment as well, “Structurally there is, they in the calculus of your budget we are based on our emerging

bilingual population, we are given an FTE number for English language learner instructors” (Principal Interview, January 2020). This example was also evident in the document review. A central office instructional leader led a discussion at a principal professional learning session that addressed the changes in special education staffing allocations for schools whose student needs had changed over the course of the school year. These discussions indicate that central office leaders are considering the needs of different groups of learners as they make resource and budget decisions.

Programs and instructional expectations also reveal issues of equity. The district’s instructional model states that they hold: “high academic expectations and grade level standards regardless of language proficiency, giftedness or disability”. This statement indicates a desire for equality in instructional expectations for all students. This stated expectation for all learners is like other standardized expectations in the district-wide instructional model and coaching practices. Central office leaders and principals shared that along with high expectations for all, considerations for varying systems and supports are needed for equity. “That our systems are set up so that people's needs are met. That you're challenged at the right level” (Principal Interview, January 2020), was an explicit statement of a principal when discussing equity. Another leader shared a similar statement, “And then of course making sure that programmatically we're differentiating programs enough to meet individual needs, and not differentiating more for those who need it more, differentiating for all” (Central Office Leader Interview, January 2020). The language of differentiation and equity frequently appeared, but the approaches and practices were more generalized than directed to specific needs.

Latinx and emerging bilingual students. When considering the concept of equity, there was an often-stated assumption that the target population for creating equitable schools was Latinx and emerging bilingual students. One principal clearly expressed what all other leaders spoke to, “Generally speaking our district, we feel a lot more value or priority given to English language learners and equity” (Principal Interview, January 2020). Another leader stated, “The majority of our population are Latinos and the minority are Anglos. But the dominant culture remains white and English...but then how do we cultivate and promote more opportunity for emerging bilinguals and Latino students, period” (Principal Interview, January 2020). Only two leaders described equity for students in addition to this majority in number (Latinx, emerging bilingual) group. “All students of course, regardless of race, sexual orientation, or any other factor” (Principal Interview, January 2020). Just as the instructional model included a statement of the need to focus on instructional practices that support all learners, within that document were specific strategies identified for use with students who are emerging bilingual students. In general, serving the needs of Latinx students was how many participants described the district’s equity focus. There were no specific mentions of addressing the needs of other populations of students including those identified with a disability.

Summary. Overall, leaders within the school district expressed value for the idea of creating equitable schools. Leaders consistently expressed that access for instructional opportunities with a focus on emerging bilingual students and Latinx students was a priority.

Leadership for Special Education

The data across documents, observations, and interviews revealed that leadership for special education was defined by leaders' knowledge of special education; serving students with a sense of belonging and school structures; and central office support for principals.

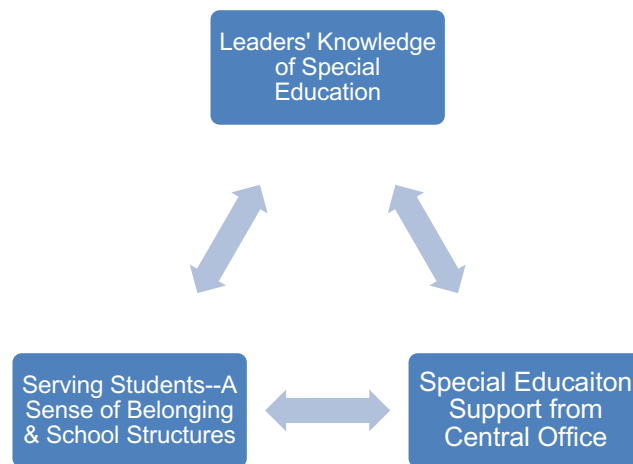


Figure 8. Leadership for special education.

This model shows how the three components influenced one another when considering leading for special education.

Leaders' knowledge of special education. An element gleaned from the participant interviews was their perception of their understanding of special education. A primary example of this was the acknowledgment from seven participants that there was a lack of knowledge and strategy when considering their leadership for students served by special education. Principals contended that they lacked knowledge related to instructional practice, structures for services, and knowing the needs and outcomes for students with special needs. One principal indicated difficulty with the data,

One of the challenges that I've had has been the data itself. Because I think they ended up in special education because we did not see growth. And so how much growth should I be expecting? I've been frustrated by that when I'm supporting teachers... We've got to do something that changes these kid's lives (Principal Interview, January 2020).

This acknowledgment is supported by research. Roberts and Guerra (2017) found that principals indicated they lacked knowledge and skills that supported curriculum for students with disabilities. While other scholars identified that principals reported they lacked knowledge related to IEP support and development (McHatton et al., 2010). The research literature corroborates this need that principals should acquire more background and knowledge in special education.

This lack of knowledge about what to do when students are in the general education classroom impacts students, “Just thinking that throw them into the classroom and they'll learn without very targeted support. I think there's been a lot of that going on” (Central Office Leader, January 2020). Another principal also spoke about gaps in their understanding, “I actually don't know. I don't understand the terminology very well” (Principal Interview, January 2020). Four of the principals explicitly stated that special education teachers drive what happens for students identified with disabilities.

I definitely rely on my Special Ed teachers and the director to know special education law to know, I'm a little more hands-off with them. I kind of trust them to do what they need to do and I obviously insert myself with challenges or

issues, but I definitely don't feel it's an area of expertise for me (Principal Interview, January 2020).

Most participants articulated this trust in teachers and a hands-off approach. This open and honest acknowledgment connected to a stated desire that they want to know, understand, and better serve their students with disabilities.

Although all participants expressed a desire to improve outcomes for special education students, only three principals were able to identify their data outcomes for this group of students. Several principals indicated that they were not familiar with data for students with disabilities or they had not looked at the data recently “students with disabilities, it's one that I've tried to get back into to be honest with you. I haven't really looked tightly at that data” (Principal Interview, January 2020). Similarly, “I'm embarrassed that I can't just like, I feel like I know my data outcomes pretty well. I don't know specifically my academic outcomes for my kids (in special education)” (Principal Interview, January 2020). These answers were starkly different when responding about another population of students; all seven principal participants could articulate outcomes for emerging bilingual and Latinx student groups.

This acknowledged lack of understanding about students with disabilities also connected to the strategies and structures within the school to support special education programming. Again, principals and central office leaders honestly acknowledged the challenges they faced with this identified gap in their leadership. One principal expressed, “I don't really know what best practice is” (Principal Interview, January 2020). While another shared,

I don't feel like we have a set expectation around levels of service for individuals that go anything beyond what the state has already laid out. And then it's up to the interpretation of the teachers that are implementing that. And I don't feel like our principals have a lot of support and depth of understanding of that or that we have a solid program in place (Central Office Leader Interview, January 2020).

When considering the concept of inclusion as a belief that is put into practice central office leadership stated,

If you are included in the classroom, then what's the role of the Special Ed teacher in co-planning, providing resources to teachers and consulting teachers, pushing into classrooms, and providing direct support to kids? We have no clarity around that. If you asked our mild moderate teachers what their job description is, this can be very different (Central Office Leader, January 2020).

They also noted the need to have a detailed guide for how to work with special education teachers and talked about legal and procedural aspects of special education.

We didn't have a playbook to go off to. I mean the Special Ed teachers, they know the law, they understand the IEPs, they know how to do that, that's not a problem. I want to imagine that is not a problem and maybe it is, but I think what we are lacking is efficiencies and we're just not getting the growth that we should (Central Office Leader Interview, January 2020).

These articulated wonderings about the lack of knowledge and the role of special educators as primary decision makers highlights gaps related to special education data, practices, and outcomes for students.

Serving students – A sense of belonging and school structures. A primary function of special education is to provide students with services and specialized instruction, in the least restrictive environment. Districts and schools must design and offer a continuum of services that meet this objective. Special education service delivery models and supporting structures must align with law and include the beliefs, and values of a school district. In MMSD, central office and principal perception indicated that services for students in special education aligned with the law and came from both beliefs and structures.

A belief that all students should feel a sense of belonging while at school was foundational in the response from participants. Each leader articulated that they believed that it was within their responsibility to lead a school where all people had a feeling that they were a part of the community, there was a deep sense of belonging to the school, and that the school understood and recognized who they are. When discussing the needs of students in the district, central office leader articulated it as,

Belonging. That's number one. They (students) have to feel they belong. What does that mean? That means that they are comfortable, they are safe, they feel there are people who know them, who care about them. They have people they can reach out to or talk to. They have help when they need it. They are included (Central Office Leader Interview, January 2020).

A principal shared a similar sentiment, “They should feel welcomed. They should feel that what they do matters and that teachers are there to support them” (Principal Interview, January 2020).

This core value of belonging was extended to the consideration of students with disabilities. “They need to feel seen and they need to feel like the person understands them and recognizes what their needs are” (Principal Interview, January 2020). Considering the strengths and value that students bring to school each day contributes to this sense of belonging. One principal connected belonging to instructional expectations by stating, “Make heavy demands on these students, because they can do it. They can do so much more than we think” (Principal Interview, January 2020). The sense of belonging that many leaders voiced connected to their definition of inclusion. Inclusion was described by most participants as connected to a sense of belonging and that students are valued for who they are. “Inclusion means no matter who you are, where you come from, what language you speak, do you have a disability of some kind that you come into this school, and you are valued and included no matter what” (Principal Interview, January 2020). All leaders articulated the importance of a sense of belonging, while only three principals shared how this sense of belonging may look for students identified with disabilities.

There were some inconsistencies across participants about what inclusion means. Two principals articulated inclusion as “the least restrictive environment” (Principal Interview, January 2020) and another definition was “socialization” (Principal Interview, January 2020). Inclusion was also defined as a process “identify the needs and target instruction” (Principal Interview, January 2020), and “it’s based on students’ needs, preferences, and abilities... Inclusion is not a thing, or it is not a place. It's really a decision, and we want it available to all” (Central Office Leader Interview, January

2020). The inconsistencies present in the different definitions of and beliefs regarding inclusion demonstrated a lack of knowledge amongst leaders and coherence across the district.

Principals also connected this sense of belonging to the systems and structures within their schools to support students identified with disabilities.

Design something that meets those needs in a system that should be heterogeneous, in order to get to the sense of belonging. I think we need to have high rigor, like expectations, that we know that you can learn and you will succeed and we just have to find a way for you to get there (Principal Interview, January 2020).

The structures that schools develop are a visual and applied representation of their beliefs, stated and unstated. Central office leaders and principals expressed a desire to have systems and structures that focus on this group of students to best meet their needs. Yet, they also acknowledged how their perception of what happens does not always align to this belief. “I don’t think they get the same attention” (Central Office Leader Interview, January 2020). Another contended,

There is huge bias. I think we set unduly low expectations on a lot of subgroups of kids. Certainly, students with disabilities...I think that we probably do a lot of that to our special-needs students, we isolate them and don't give them access to rigor that would, even if they struggled with it, would benefit them more (Central Office Leader Interview, January 2020).

More than half of the principals articulated that their special education teachers made the structural decisions of the delivery of instruction based on IEPs. As noted in the section on instructional leadership capacity, principals are responsible for the support of all instructional staff; however, they rely on special education teachers to make structural decisions.

Trends in participants’ statements found consistent beliefs in the need for specialized instruction but there were inconsistent practices, and structures across the district to support this type of instruction. Interviews with each stakeholder provided examples of multiple and varying beliefs about the structures implemented to best meet the needs of students served by special education. There were different programming structures and service delivery models in every school and limited consistency at each level and within feeder systems. The following table synthesizes the description of service delivery models collected from all the interviews.

Table 3

Examples of Service Delivery Structures for Students Served by Special Education

Mild to Moderate Disabilities – Grade Level Standards and Expectations	
Specialized Instruction (IEP Goals and Grade Level Standards)	
1. Supplanted	Content Replacement - Outside of the general classroom; Not grade level standards
2. Supplemental	Pull Out Groups - Outside of the general classroom during instruction of grade level standards in the general classroom; Partial participation in general classroom

	Intervention Blocks – Outside of the general classroom as a second round of instruction paired with grade level standards in the general classroom
3. Collaborative Teaching	General Education and Special Education Teachers in the same classroom delivering grade level standards
4. General Classroom	Supported – Inside of the general classroom; Grade level standards; Supported by a paraprofessional
Significant Support Needs – Extended Evidence Outcomes / Alternate Standards	
Specialized Instruction in Reading (IEP Goals and Extended Evidence Outcomes)	
1. Supplanted	Content Replacement - Outside of the general classroom; Not grade level standards
2. General Classroom	Supported – Inside of the general classroom; Not grade level standards; Supported by a para professional

As discovered in participant interviews, service delivery models for special education students varied across the system. In many of the schools, principals at each level articulated that for core literacy and math instruction, student instruction is supplanted. Supplanted instruction is when students are taught outside of the general classroom either for all or most of their instructional class period, working on different standards and outcomes or in a small group setting, missing a portion of these instructional blocks in the general classroom within the class. Supplanted instruction occurred at every level for students with mild/moderate needs. Mild and moderate needs

most often included students identified with a learning disability or a speech and language disability. This same approach of supplanting the regular standards in literacy and math occurred for students with significant support needs (SSN) at every level. SSN is used to describe students who are identified with a significant cognitive disability. These students worked on extended evidence outcomes or a different set of standards as identified in their IEP. Students with affective needs (AN) whose emotions and behavior may separate them from core instruction for various periods also received supplanted instruction. Often these students may not have modified standards within their IEP. Supplanted instruction was used in the district as a common structure for students whose instructional level was below the grade level expectation, yet not all students who were serviced in this way had modified grade level standards within their IEP.

Supplanted instruction was used, yet two principals were also adamant about not removing any students with mild to moderate disabilities from the general classroom for core content areas. Rather they provided specialized instruction as a double dose or second round of instruction and replace another part of their school day instead of removing them from the general classroom during core content. This was evidence that the beliefs of principals shaped the structure of the programs. Three principals described that school-based intervention and enrichment structures were opportunities to pull students into literacy instruction with a special educator. These students may also participate in a pullout service as described above or have no additional service during the school day and receive instruction solely in the general classroom. Two principals

also spoke of using collaborative teaching models, where the special education and general education teachers taught together. Principals that served students with more emotional needs talked about flexing time within their day to receive support from a special service provider, while students in the Affective Needs (AN) program function more on a level system, fluidly moving within the special and general education classrooms.

Special education support from the central office. The specific special education support that principals received from the central office varied based on how they expressed their needs. Principals often sought support when they reached a point that their need feels urgent, typically connected to issues with student behavior. “They know when they reach the threshold, or maybe well across the threshold of their expertise and experience, and I think then come ask for help” (Central Office Leader Interview, January 2020). Three principals also indicated that they have sought out some support with caseloads and scheduling.

We met at the end of July...and we looked at the caseload and we broke out the caseload and we worked on the scheduling, the interventions, their schedule of when they're going to offer resource classes and what those look like. I think that is an important thing to keep doing (Principal Interview, January 2020).

The sentiment from the central office was that principals seek this type of support infrequently. Paired with the principals' acknowledgment that they lack a level of expertise for special education, four school and district leaders cited a need to expand the level of support provided to principals.

Additional foundational background in special education successes, of what it looks like, are often missing from the equation... how can leaders know what that looks like and feels like so that they can work towards it more instinctively, not just programmatically? We don't start the year with like, "Hey here we are." "We got 10% of our students have some sort of mild, moderate risk, significant learning disability." This is a huge. This is where we started from this is where we're going. This is why it is important. We haven't had that big picture piece. I think that would be helpful (Principal Interview, January 2020).

The range of responses regarding special education support from central office indicates that principals not only do not know the big picture and range of services, but they may not know the questions to ask.

Summary. All participants identified a general belief in creating cultures where all students feel as though they belong. There were varying levels of knowledge and understanding of best practices in special education, awareness of data and outcomes for students served by special education and structures to deliver a continuum of services for students within each school. It is significant to note the high degree of variability in leadership for special education in contrast to the consistency and coherence regarding instructional leadership. Leaders articulated a desire and a need to expand their understanding and level of expertise to support students with disabilities as well as receiving specific support from the central office.

Themes

The examination of current practices and structures revealed the following areas of focus of the central office in supporting the development of principals: development of the instructional leadership capacity of principals, system-wide focus on instructional practices, beliefs supporting equity, and leadership for special education. These findings regarding current practice inform how the district has built learning-focused partnerships with principals and used evidence to support continual improvement. Three themes emerged from an analysis of the current practices to support principals and the leadership needed to support an inclusive environment for students identified with a disability as defined by the DLLSJ framework. These three themes cut across all four areas of focus for supporting the development of leaders and relate to persistent beliefs, practices, and systems in the district: (a) assumptions that structures and practices would serve all students, (b) consultative coaching and data analysis were vehicles to provide support, and (c) special education was a siloed area of work. The following sections discuss these themes and how they emerged.

Structures and practices serve all students. The evidenced-based practices used by central office leaders to support principals had a one-size-fits all approach. They used a district-wide instructional model to guide teaching and a standardized approach to coaching cycles for teachers. The district-wide instructional model provided a common language and consistent expectations of levels of learning and high-leverage instructional strategies. All principal participants referenced the instructional model as a guide for teacher development. Nearly every participant stated that one of the critical

roles of the principal was the development of a teacher. The instructional model influenced principals when they were coaching teachers as well as when they were setting school goals for classroom observations. The consistent use of this model provided the district with coherence to improve overall instructional design and practice.

The document review identified that the district's instructional model included a scope and sequence of practices and techniques to be used in classroom culture, engaging students, and lesson design. The practices and techniques identified in the model do not address the needs of students identified with disabilities. Rather, the language used within the model was: "collect data from all students to adjust next steps, plan instruction backward based on knowledge, skills and understanding required in assessment, and elicit responses with a variety of techniques, demonstrated the general approach to instructional practices". To provide focus across a complex system, the instructional model provided direction through generalized approaches for all students. Common instructional strategies, rather than a range of approaches, provided focus but did not emphasize the consideration of special education student needs along with decisions regarding instructional strategies.

This global approach to all learners was also evident when participants described their focus on coaching principals and teachers. The described coaching process was connected to the instructional model which lacked practices specific to learning for students with disabilities. A principal shared when discussing coaching, "It all goes around our instructional model, which handles clear instructional move pieces as well as classroom environment and relationships" (Principal Interview, January 2020). The

coaching model also is generalized when considering the different types of teachers. Principals described a lack of understanding of how to coach a special education teacher or how to know what their special education students needed to be successful. As noted in the findings, one principal stated,

I was just coaching a special education teacher this week and it was just some basic intentional lesson structure. We do that kind of coaching and that is in my wheelhouse for sure. When I'm trying to coach my SSN teacher, I haven't done a single coaching cycle, we've had conversations, I've given feedback on parent communication, but I don't feel that would be very effective use of my or the teacher's time" (Principal Interview, January 2020).

Without knowledge and tools to support a special education teacher and students with disabilities, a principal cannot create an inclusive school that meets the needs of each student. These structures and practices to support all students provide a common language, coherence, and alignment for instructional leadership but universal implementation does not promote equity.

Consultative coaching and data analysis. There was a high level of consistency regarding the approaches that were used to support principals. Both central office leaders and principals described giving and receiving support through coaching and the analysis of school, teacher, and student data. These were the primary means of how leaders engaged and supported one another. These processes existed with regularity and routinized protocols, yet little evidence of reflection, adjustment to practice, or impact on leadership was described by principals. When analyzed further, the coaching sessions for

principals had more elements of consultation and mentoring than coaching. An example of the consultative approach is from a session where the principal shared bright spots and challenges. The conversation was anecdotal and the principal shared a few examples. The response from the central office leader consisted of general clarifying questions and suggestions. This “coaching” session was conversational, and did not contain elements of coaching such as probing questions, modeling, practice with tools, goal setting, or planning for next steps. Principals described the coaching process as context-specific and reactionary, “We come around the table in here and just deal with our strategic planning and where are we at with their goals, and how are we moving, and how are we getting staff involved” (Principal Interview, January 2020). This more contextualized reactionary process was also reflected in thoughts shared by a central office leader, “I’m the one who’s asking the questions that I wish they were asking themselves more routinely” (Central Office Leader Interview, January 2020). Principals described the “coaching” process and included the topics discussed; yet they did not articulate any reflective learning or applications of their learning to their work.

Similarly, the use of any school-based data was reflective of current data and procedural using defined protocols. Principals described that they regularly examined data, but the analysis of data did not lead to any substantive changes in approach, identification of more data to gather, or questions of the variables that might impact the data. When describing the data of special education students, one principal expressed not knowing what to look for in the data. The process of simply looking at data did not support this principal to plan or act to create an impact for their school. Another

principal articulated, “We need to work as a whole district to learn together and to plan together and to gather our data and see how this is working” (Principal Interview, January 2020). Those who indicated some action steps were developed based on school level data analysis highlighted that the process started well, but then lagged and lacked monitoring, adjustment of practice or reflection.

While the use of coaching and data analysis were processes consistently used by both principals and central office leaders, evidence suggested there was a limited impact on leadership actions. Coaching and data analysis had an emphasis on identifying the strengths and challenges within the data and identifying what happened. There was less of a focus on how to make sense of the data and how to use the data to adjust leadership practices. Additionally, given the consultative style of coaching sessions rather than coaching in action during leadership practice, principal perception shaped the events and information shared. It is important to note that all participants felt that the consultative coaching and data analysis supported principal leadership. Yet, without multiple data points and additional perspectives, the coaching sessions were influenced by principal perception and lacked opportunity for reflection or adjustments to practice. The data analysis provided an understanding of the current context for improvement, but it did not yield a challenge to the status quo and a means to generate solutions and address issues of equity.

The silo of special education. A final theme that emerged across the findings was somewhat surprising given that the known scope of the study was related to leading for students with disabilities. Except for the Director of Special Education, participants

did not mention special education students or teachers unless directly asked. When participants were asked direct questions about students with disabilities, the answers reflected universal feelings of care and concern, yet the responses lacked specificity and references to learning. As one principal shared, “They (students) should feel welcomed. They should feel that what they do matters and that teachers are there to support them” (Principal Interview, January 2020). The responses from participants related to inclusivity and students with disabilities were limited in detail or included the admission that they had not really thought about this group of students. One principal indicated a distant approach to special education, “I definitely rely on my Special Ed teachers and the director to know special education law, I'm a little more hands-off with them. I kind of trust them to do what they need to do” (Principal Interview, January 2020). Participants’ answers, supporting observations, and documents demonstrated a lack of knowledge of special education students and their needs, limited understanding of best practices within special education, and an overall emphasis on the general population of students with little focus on this specialized group of students. Special education was not a consideration when leaders spoke about their practice; it was an isolated topic.

Conclusion

This chapter described MMSD’s central office supports for the development of principals that emerged from the analysis of all three data sources. The data revealed that central office leaders do not provide specific supports for the development of principals to create inclusive environments for students identified with a disability.

The data revealed four areas of focus for the ways central office leaders in MMSD support principals: (a) development of the instructional leadership capacity of principals, (b) system-wide focus on instructional practices, (c) beliefs supporting equity, and (d) leadership for special education. These four areas of focus utilized by MMSD are aligned with the dimensions within the outer ring of the DLLSJ framework. MMSD's practices to promote learning-focused partnerships with principals and the use of evidence to support continual improvement are evident throughout each of these four areas of focus. The district has embraced the role of a learning organization and has developed an instructional framework and practices to support principal learning.

Three themes emerged from the analysis of how central office leaders support principals and the leadership needed to support an inclusive environment for students identified with a disability as defined by the DLLSJ framework: (a) assumptions that structures and practices would serve all students, (b) consultative coaching and data analysis were vehicles to provide support, and (c) special education was a siloed area of work. The interconnected nature of these three themes is significant and informs areas to improve the capacity of the MMSD to support principals to amplify teacher practice to support the needs of students with disabilities. The DLLSJ provides both an organizational framework to identify strengths and growth opportunities as well as a structure through which these themes are addressed in the recommendations to MMSD.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study was to understand how leaders within the central office of a school district support principals to lead inclusive schools and embody social justice for students identified with disabilities. As detailed within the literature review, a school principal must act as an instructional leader, amplifying teacher practice to support the needs of all learners (Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson & Wahlstrom, 2004; Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom & Anderson, 2010). The needs of special education students are included as a part of principals' responsibility to meet the needs of all learners. This qualitative case study sought to answer the research question: In what ways, if any, do central office teams in a school district in the Rocky Mountain West develop and support principals to lead schools that support an inclusive environment for students identified with a disability?

This chapter presents a critical analysis of the themes derived from the findings through the research-based lens of the conceptual framework, DLLSJ. These themes impact and provide anchors for the recommendations for improvement. The congruence and gaps of the findings and framework inform opportunities for growth and recommendations for action. This discussion includes an identification of biases and limitations. The chapter concludes with recommendations for MMSD as they work to create inclusive schools that consider the needs of each student identified with disabilities. Central office leaders play a significant role in developing socially just principals with knowledge and capacity in special education. Attention to this need for

socially just leadership practices defined by the DLSJ is critical for our students who have been identified with disabilities.

Toward Leading Inclusive Schools for Students Identified with Disabilities

The conceptual framework, DLSJ, was developed from a review of relevant literature and anchored the exploration of the structures and approaches used by MMSD central office leaders to provide support to principals. It also provided a lens to critically analyze these structures and approaches and to support principals to create schools that embody social justice for students identified with a disability. Figure 9 shows the District Level Leadership for Social Justice Framework.

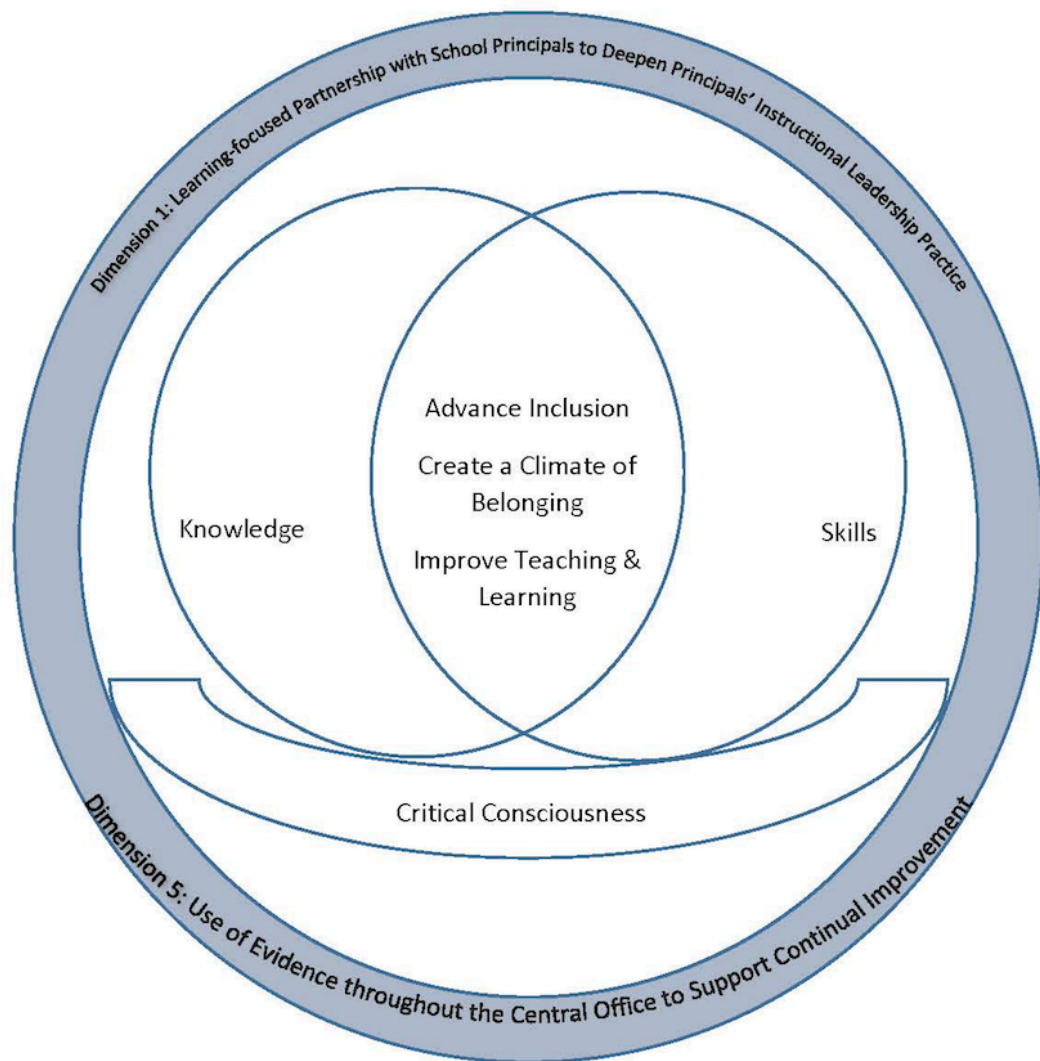


Figure 9. District Level Leadership for Social Justice Framework.

This framework was a synthesis of three frameworks of Capper et al., (2006), Theoharis (2009), and Honig et al., (2010), and served as a model to support the analysis of the intersecting themes identified in MMSD.

The outer ring of the framework includes two dimensions of support from The Five Dimensions of Central Office Transformation framework (Honig et al, 2019): a learning-focused partnership intended to deepen a principal's instructional leadership and the use of evidence and data to support continuous improvement. As seen in the four areas of focus that described how central office leaders in MMSD support principals, several areas of strength emerged and provided evidence of their utilization of the dimensions of support within the DLLSJ framework. There was a district-wide emphasis on improving teaching and learning by building the knowledge and skills of the teacher and leader. There were systems in place to support leadership development through coaching and data analysis. Participants also stated beliefs and values that all students should have a sense of belonging in their schools. The pairing of these strengths built a strong foundation in the district to create systems of teaching and learning with a general focus on all learners.

Within these dimensions of support the adaptability and differentiation required to lead for inclusive schools for each student was lacking. The instructional model and coaching structures were strengths of the system, yet the generalized approach used to serve all students created limitations. The assumption that this general approach was also the best approach for every student potentially expanded inequity for students from typically marginalized populations, including those who are identified with disabilities. With a common approach across a system, how were students who are outside of the typical curve served differently? Subsequently, how were the teachers supported to serve these students differently? Additionally, the isolation of special education within

the district was a barrier. This silo effect created gaps with the knowledge, skills, and critical consciousness of the educators in the system.

To improve its practice, the district could leverage its strengths of learning-focused partnerships and the use of evidence and data supports to elevate the identified limitations and gaps. The use of coaching and data analysis can support continuous improvement and can alter that status quo with the introduction of more diverse data and multiple perspectives. The district structures in place that are aligned with these dimensions can support each student in the district, with a new focus on increasing skills and knowledge of special education with its leaders. Increasing the skills and knowledge of principals addresses the internal elements of the framework that include creating a climate of belonging, advancing inclusion, and teaching and learning. This increase in skills and knowledge also supports raising the critical consciousness of principals from a more passive approach to actively supporting equity for each student.

Grounded in critical consciousness, knowledge, and skill. Capper et al. (2006) used the term critical consciousness to describe leaders' dispositions, beliefs, and values. Principals need to be equity minded and have the skills and knowledge related to leading for social justice, to include specific understanding about the needs of students identified with disabilities. Principals need to understand the inequities that exist in schools and the current systems and structures that perpetuate them. Although it is important to have a common language and coherent approach it is also imperative for systems seeking equity to bring attention to the needs that are not being met by district-wide models and

practices. Critical consciousness is needed to navigate the decision making to create more equitable schools for every student.

Literature identified that to create socially just and equitable schools, principals require a deep understanding and knowledge surrounding evidence-based practices in literacy, language acquisition, and special education along with using data to inform and lead discussions and decisions (Capper et al., 2006). Research also indicated that principals need to have a deep understanding of the characteristics of students identified with disabilities (McHatton, Boyer, Shaunessy, Terry, Farmer, 2010). This instructional work has begun in MMSD with general education students, yet the knowledge required to consider each student, including students identified with disabilities lags. The generalized, global approach, used within coaching cycles of teachers and leaders and the instructional model, has not provided teachers and principals with the knowledge and skills to support students identified with disabilities.

One of the most significant findings from the study was that special education was only referenced by principals and central office leaders when it was directed through a question. The lack of attention to this group of learners highlighted the influence that a generalized approach has had on the focus of principals and on their limited knowledge base related to special education. Principals articulated a need to develop a greater understanding of special education and that they have limited knowledge and understanding. The expansion of principals' knowledge is needed to be inclusive and equity minded for students identified with disabilities. Some areas of development could include best practices at the classroom and school level, assessment, evaluation, and

placement, and policies, and legal issues that support programming and the IEP.

Professional development that addressed knowledge of special education can provide principals with an increased capacity to serve this group of learners.

The literature base of the framework suggested that advancing inclusion is providing access to academic and social experiences as their same aged peers and more (Capper, Frattura, & Keyes, 2000; Frattura & Capper, 2007; Theoharis, 2009). It included creating a vision of an inclusive school and inclusive practices along with dismantling the structures or practices that perpetuated the inequities that students experience (Theoharis, 2009). MMSD's instructional model stated the expectation that educators hold students with disabilities to high academic and grade level standards, but there were varying levels of understanding about how to make adaptations to support these learners. Individual leaders had varying definitions of inclusion and inclusive practices. Inclusion is more than setting equal outcomes. Additionally, some principals identified specific beliefs and actions taken to remove structures that were inequitable while others felt that more restricted, self-contained classrooms were the best decisions for students of all disability categories. This indicates that there was not a common belief, definition, or expectation across all district leaders about how to promote equity for students with disabilities while holding high academic expectations and grade level standards. An established definition of inclusion and a vision for creating an inclusive school are needed to support principals.

While special education students need to be supported based on their individual needs, structures that begin with an inequitable approach do not support creating an

inclusive school setting. The structures within a school are outward signals to the level of inclusivity that exist in a school. With a gap in understanding, principals are not prepared to lead effectively, impacting their influence on a teacher's attitudes toward students and on positive student outcomes (Lynch, 2012). This incongruence of practices with the framework stemmed not from a lack of desire to serve students well, but rather from a lack of knowledge of special education or alternative approaches. When teachers and leaders feel prepared to adapt to meet the needs of their students, their efficacy increases (Billingsley et al., 2017). Principals must have an awareness of power and privilege within the school and act to disrupt the status quo that perpetuates inequities for students. An infusion of knowledge and skill regarding special education focused on principals would enhance their ability to lead for social justice for every student and change the current narrative.

The central core of the DLLSJ framework included the practices that principals must engage in to create an inclusive school for students with disabilities. The critical consciousness required to lead for social justice includes a commitment to success and increased outcomes for all students, a climate of belonging, and emphasis on improving teaching and learning. (Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013). Leaders in MMSD articulated an espoused value that all students should have a sense of belonging. The principals within MMSD all spoke to the importance of a sense of belonging that students need to feel at school. Specifically, they identified the importance of a feeling of being welcomed and included and developing relationships with students. The participants also spoke to the value of creating a school with a sense of equity for all students. Each identified this

value, but their language was very generalized. Three participants included students served by special education in their description, but none of the leaders described what this looked like or sounded like in action in their schools. These espoused beliefs were strengths and foundational pieces that can be leveraged as the district continues to build a climate of belonging.

The beliefs articulated by participants that students served by special education needed to be included was limited to feeling welcome and having a sense of belonging. The inclusion of students identified with disabilities was not evident in participants' communication about the instructional model. The district's instructional model offered consistency, yet the omission of practices and strategies that supported different learners limited the ability of principals and teachers to meet the needs of every student. The instructional model represented a structure that could perpetuate the inequities in instruction and access for students served by special education. Research has identified a wide range of instructional practices that are effective in the classroom for improving outcomes for students identified with disabilities. The incorporation of these practices can serve as an entry point to make the instructional model more inclusive and support principals as they coach and support their teachers.

Students served by special education were also not included in dialogue related to coaching or the use of data. As the primary avenues of support and development for principals, students served by special education need to be evident in these structures. While leaders stated that they valued a sense of belonging for all students, the value lacked action, evidence, or outcomes for students while special education remained

isolated from the system. The tensions that exist for social justice leadership are contextual and principals need skills and knowledge to uncover and address systemic issues; commitment is not enough. The beliefs and values of principals that make their commitment to equity for every student tangible need to be visible and supported in the district's structures and systems.

Relevant research literature identified additional focus areas that support principals in creating inclusive schools. These areas of focus include reaching out to all families, including those from marginalized communities; incorporating social responsibility into the curriculum; and addressing discipline practices (Theoharis, 2009). These strategies support creating a climate of belonging that includes every learner. Additionally, principals who addressed issues of race and equity with staff, hiring and evaluating staff with a belief in inclusive practices, and using research-based curriculum and instructional approaches that enhance the quality and level of rigor in classrooms improve teaching and learning for every student (Theoharis, 2009). Although these practices were not evident in the findings, MMSD may be engaged in some of these practices that are strengths to be leveraged. The district may also find value in incorporating these tools into their current structures to increase their climate of belonging and improve instructional practices for students identified with disabilities.

Incorporation of inclusive and equitable practices in learning-focused partnerships. The responsibility of professional development focused on teaching and learning has become fundamental to the role of central office leaders (Honig & Copland, 2008). As documented in the findings of this study, MMSD established a learning-

focused partnership between the central office and principals through the implementation of coaching cycles and professional learning structures for principals. These established relationships and structures provide a platform that can be adjusted to incorporate instructional leadership practices to support students identified with disabilities.

The coaching cycle process contributed to the trusting relationships and leader efficacy between central office leaders and principals. This was a strength within the process that MMSD established. Honig et al. (2010) identified that when central office leaders are invested in the process, principals perceived the learning partnership to have a positive influence on their leadership. The interviews and observations also indicated that the coaching received and their analysis of student data was more consultative and reactive rather than reflective or adaptive. It was responsive to the current context rather than future focused and lacked a critical analysis that would challenge the status quo to promote greater access and inclusion for diverse student populations. Additionally, this focus on the current context offered limited opportunities to consider counter narratives to include what was not happening, and what challenges existed in the solutions that were offered. Coaching cycles with principals need to offer support and learning to help them dismantle systemic barriers and create the conditions for inclusive practices. A retrospective, status quo approach will not turn a vision for equity for every student into a reality.

The established coaching process offers an opportune time to address “justice dilemmas” (DeMatthews, 2018, p.548), the actions of a leader who while intending to

solve an issue or address an injustice, created, or ignored another, which leaders may face when addressing issues related to special education. The use of scenarios and protocols can help to identify and problem solve the dilemmas as well as contend with intended and unintended consequences of structures or decisions, and consider alternative perspectives to successes and challenges. With committed leaders who are invested in coaching, there is a possibility for a shift from a consultative tool to one that engages leaders to be more critical and reflective, equity minded, and aligned to a research-based model.

Leadership of MMSD was engaged in regular and routine dialogue about school goals and instructional feedback to teachers based on classroom observation. Literature indicated that principals often liken the role of a special education teacher to that of a general education teacher and consign their professional development to the central office administrators within special education (Angelle & Bilton, 2009; Bays & Crockett, 2007; Steinbrecher et al, 2015). Findings in MMSD aligned with this research as principals indicated their coaching and feedback for special education teachers were limited to basic instructional practice and not directly connected to instructional strategies that support the learners they served. The inclusion of specific and research-based strategies for central office leaders to support principals can be incorporated in the existing coaching and data analysis practices. Examples of these strategies are modeling, use of practical tools, and brokering or bridging. Modeling supports making thinking visible, through engaging not only in the dialogue of what, but also of how, and why.

Meta-cognitive strategies are essential when modeling practices for teachers and leaders (Honig, 2008). The use of conceptual tools, such as the instructional model of the district is important. Practical tools, those that bring the model to life in the classroom for students with disabilities, also need to be included to support principal development and to offer a more constructive engagement with teachers. Tools, found in literature, that were most effective for central office leaders providing support for principals were related to a framework for teaching and learning, protocols for classroom observations, cycles of inquiry, and data-based dialogue (Honig et al., 2010). MMSD's instructional model was a tool that was more focused on instructional practices and teaching moves rather than on student learning or needs. When a focus on instruction expands to learning for each student, the dialogue in a coaching session with leaders is more focused on learner needs and allows for reflection. The inclusion of professional learning for principals focused on how principals can support instructional practices for students identified with disabilities is necessary. The consultative nature of the coaching process can be enhanced by providing brokering and bridging support for principals. The inclusion of these strategies supports shifting from consulting on the instructional moves made by the teacher to understanding the contextual factors of instruction which include the learner. This shift offers the opportunity to be more reflective about learning and leading. Additionally, the central office instructional leadership team can participate not only in professional learning opportunities but also be invited into coaching sessions between principals and central office leaders. Embedding an outside perspective or local expert into these sessions can offer real-time support, adjustments to practice, and a

focus on learner needs. These ideas paired with continued job embedded professional learning that uses a differentiated approach to deliver instruction, directly impacts instructional leadership practice.

MMSD principals spoke about using data, but interpretation of the findings revealed that they examined data and could name it, but they were unable to articulate why it was important or how it changed their practice. Support for principals to use data to serve as a catalyst for change and create an impact for every student, especially those with disabilities, is a responsibility of the central office. The use of specific data and evidence related to instruction and outcomes for students would support principals' abilities to improve teaching and learning as well as to lead for a more inclusive school. Research findings support that districts that used evidence to support their work not only provided data to schools, but also provided schools with professional learning opportunities around the use of data as well as time to collaboratively understand the data and make decisions (Leithwood, 2010). Central office leaders can support principals with a focus on the critical analysis of data.

In addition to the anecdotal dialogue of bright spots and challenges during coaching sessions, leaders can engage in a collaborative inquiry approach to the data analysis: identifying specific learning problems and causes based on the disaggregation of data and generate solutions with action steps and a monitoring plan (Love, 2009). The data used can come from multiple sources, highlighting not only the principal perspective but also other qualitative or quantitative metrics. The trust that currently exists in this partnership between the central office leader and principal will allow for

the questioning of bias, which can enhance both the reflective opportunities as well as allow the data and researched-based solutions to support solving challenges. The more data are used, the more perceptions can shift, action can be taken, and leadership can adjust to support each learner. Data can serve as a third point of reference for principals providing the opportunity to question the current narrative and create changes for every learner.

Central office leaders can also use data and evidence to evaluate their performance as coaches of principals and leaders of professional learning to guide their professional growth. The explicit use of data to inform and develop central office as a learning organization includes the analysis of data and feedback to adjust the operations within the central office, ensuring a commitment to a focus on teaching and learning (Honig et al, 2010). These practices may or may not exist in practice as it was not discovered within the findings. The use of data supports the ongoing learning of every leader within the system. Central office leaders can build from the current strengths of coaching and the use of student level data in their leadership with principals, to bring about more critical consciousness and begin to shift from the status quo to a more inclusive experience for every student.

Recommendations

Several foundational elements and processes are in place at MMSD to support principals in their development as instructional leaders. This study indicated that the current structures are not developing and supporting principals to lead schools that support an inclusive environment for students identified with a disability. The following

recommendations support the district to break the silo of special education, provide differentiated support for principals to meet the needs of special education students, and provide central office structures and systems to support principals and students identified with disabilities.

Coherence for special education. The first recommendation is to focus attention on this unique population of students to break down the silo. There is a need to define and develop a vision of inclusive schools and focus on each student, including learners identified with disabilities. This vision can support the district's theory of action and guide professional learning for principals with a specific focus on identified areas of special education, district-level and school-based decision making, and the central office support structures.

Given the stated need to increase the knowledge and skills of special education in its principals, central office leadership may need to begin with a needs assessment to understand the specific needs of each of its principals and then define a plan that aligns with the vision. The needs assessment can support the development of a revised vision for coaching, as a learning-focused partnership and data analysis, leveraging its current strengths while addressing the gaps. Outcomes of a needs assessment may also drive the pathway to build the knowledge and capacity of its principals related to special education through job embedded professional learning. A needs assessment may align with the findings of this study and identify areas of focus for professional learning such as best instructional practices at the classroom and school level, assessment, and placement, along with a review of the law, policies, and understanding the IEP. This

professional learning needs to align with the district vision for inclusive schools. The inclusion of this professional learning can occur within existing structures such as coaching and principal professional learning sessions. In addition to professional learning for principals, it is recommended that this learning also includes instructional staff from the central office as it relates to their role.

When there is a level set of skills and knowledge in special education that aligns with the district vision of inclusive schools, the focus can shift to for supporting principals with school-based structures. These school-based structures include those that align with the literature, advancing inclusion, creating a climate of belonging, and improving teaching and learning. This is work that needs to occur at the school level, aligning the district vision with school beliefs and practices. Schools and principals need to be supported by the central office in their implementation of a continuum of services that meet students' needs while advancing inclusion. This work can be as overarching as establishing school wide belief statements and as granular as the development of instructional master schedules and the collaborative planning structures between general and special education teachers. The district needs to identify opportunities in each school to increase the access to general education, physically, socially, and with instruction, for students identified with disabilities to increase expectations and opportunities for all students. Additionally, work to establish a climate of belonging, from using person-first language to actively engaging families in the district, school, and classroom opportunities are needed to promote equal value and membership in the community of every student and their family.

Teacher development that addresses the instructional practices that support the unique needs of this student population needs to be emphasized. Approaches to instruction for students identified with disabilities need to include the development of learning opportunities that are accessible to all learners and include different ways of acquiring, processing, and demonstrating learning. Adjustments to the instructional model to include a focus on learning and a range of strategies to support diverse learners can be made with the support of district content experts. Principals can use the coaching structures and the analysis of data and evidence to support this work. Additionally, all leaders need to understand how to support educators in addressing these needs during instructional design and planning rather than solely through an accommodation or a modification approach after planning is completed. This development for teachers needs to occur for general and special education teachers together. The support for principals to implement these structures can be implemented through methods such as including supervisors and the district experts of best practices in special education to participate in the principal coaching sessions. This structure along with professional learning grounded in a district vision and a guide for leadership can support ensuring inclusive educational experiences for students.

Leadership development to promote critical consciousness. It is the pairing of the critical consciousness and equity orientation of a leader with skills and knowledge of special education and students identified with disabilities that enable a principal to lead for social justice. The district could build from their existing strategies and adapt and apply tools, modeling, and brokering that build critical consciousness to question the

status quo and incorporate practices that support special education. The use of scenarios and protocols that address the dilemmas principals encounter in leading for social justice offer another structure of support, reflection, and learning. Modeling is an essential component of effective coaching and builds instructional practice. Modeling is an element that can shift sessions between principal and central office leaders from primarily consulting to include real time coaching. Modeling how to effectively support special education teachers can help principals develop both knowledge and skill. In a small district such as MMSD, bridging the knowledge of other district leaders and partnering with the supervisor during coaching sessions would leverage the expertise and directly support both the principal and the supervisor. These adjustments to coaching sessions would complement the concurrent shifts in professional learning opportunities.

Interrogation of data through an equity lens. A system wide effort to engage with data with an identified purpose of changing outcomes for students in special education begins with identifying specific data, selecting goals and outcomes, and determining methods for progress monitoring that can be supported in the coaching process. Principals need to know and understand how to use tools to support their teachers making meaning of special education data to generate an impact for learners. An initial step is for principals to engage in coaching and data analysis using a collaborative inquiry approach based on the evidence of a challenge at their school. Incorporating strategies to interrogate practice through multiple perspectives like justice dilemmas or counter narratives will foster reflective and creative thinking. Additionally, principals, and district instructional leaders can engage in learning walks or learning

observations across schools to gather data that will help to understand the district's instructional delivery and programming in special education. This could serve to provide all central office leadership a connection and analysis point for their work to support schools. Central office leadership can also reflect on how all principals are prioritizing their efforts to improve teaching and learning as well as their ability to observe, analyze, and provide feedback to teachers. This type of evidence can support differentiating support and professional learning for leaders.

Limitations

Qualitative research aims to identify beliefs, attitudes, and experiences of participants within their context (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2018). I served as the instrument in this exploration of MMSD as a research for this case study. A qualitative approach was best served in this study, yet some limitations need to be acknowledged. First, this study was conducted in a short amount of time with a small sample size. The data collection was completed within two months. Additionally, of the thirteen schools in the district, only seven of the principals were interviewed. Half of the schools were not represented and assistant principals did not participate. Both factors could have influenced the comprehensiveness of the results. A final limitation was specific to my role as a researcher. My participation and potential bias can be considered a limitation; however, it needs to be noted that I took care to maintain the integrity of the data collection procedures and to use processes that checked for validity.

Conclusion

There is evidence in the literature that school districts can create equitable schools for students by shifting practices and dismantling their inequitable structures (Rorrer, Sklra, & Scheurich, 2008). Support for increasing the capacity of principals in regards to their knowledge and skills of a special education is important if a principal is to lead a school for equity for every student. Central office leadership can support principals in this effort through the development of leaders and educators, thus impacting student learning and outcomes.

MMSD has established strong learning-focused partnerships with principals and intentional practices for patterns of behavior to use data and evidence to support continuous improvement. From the findings of this study, these efforts were not focused on leading inclusive schools for students identified with disabilities. MMSD has an opportunity to ground professional learning in critical consciousness, knowledge, and skill about inclusion and the needs of students identified with disabilities and adjust their learning-focused partnerships with principals to incorporate inclusive and equitable practices. Students identified with disabilities need leaders who will advocate for and lead inclusive school communities to attain social justice. Social justice leadership is essential to dismantle inequitable structures and practices that tolerate rather than celebrate and value students with disabilities. Leaders who recognize inequities and act to transform the attitudes, principles, assumptions, and practices of the entire school community can transform the educational experience of students identified with disabilities. These students deserve leaders who will create equitable environments that

value their potential as successful and contributing members of every community.

Specific recommendations to improve the coherence for special education, leadership development that promotes critical consciousness, and the interrogation of data through an equity lens are provided. These opportunities and recommendations will help central office leaders develop and support principals to create inclusive schools for students identified with disabilities.

The structures that the central office uses to develop and support principals can be enhanced with the inclusion of key components identified in the DLLSJ framework. This framework might also support MMSD as they employ a lens of critical consciousness to how they develop and support principals and calibrate the instructional model to intentionally focus on student needs particularly those identified with a disability. Revisioning how the central office can leverage its strengths and use dimensions of support that include a focus on students identified with disabilities can create a change in leadership and lead towards a unified district with authentically inclusive opportunities for every student.

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APPENDIX A

Observation Tool

Inclusive Schools for Students Served by Special Education:

Central Office Support for Principals

Event	Date	Time
Location District Central Office	Roles of People Present:	

Descriptive Observation:	AN:
Interactions and Other Relevant Information	

APPENDIX B

Interview Protocol

Inclusive Schools for Students Served by Special Education:

Central Office Support for Principals

Research Question

In what ways, if any, do central office teams in a school district in the Rocky Mountain West develop and support principals to lead schools that support an inclusive environment for students identified with a disability?

Opening Protocol:

1. Provide the Informed Consent Form to the participant and have participant read the form.
2. After the participant has read the form, ask the participant if he/she has any questions about his/her consent, the research, or the process.
3. Ask the participant if he/she is willing to participate in the study and to sign the two copies of the Informed Consent Form.
4. If willing to participate, give the participant one copy of the informed consent form and retain a signed copy for yourself.

Preamble:

My name is Lynn. Thanks so much for agreeing to this interview! Today is and we are at _____ talking with _____. I appreciate your participation in this study. The purpose of this research study is to understand how central office supports school leaders. Specifically looking at how school leaders can create inclusive schools for students identified with a disability. The reason why you were asked to participate in this interview is to learn about your experience and perspective related to the partnership with central office and the principal in alignment with this purpose. Your opinions, experiences, ideas, and participation are very important in this study and shape understanding of how central office and school leaders connect to create equitable schools for all learners. Please know that I am not here to promote a particular way of thinking about the relationships between these sets of leaders, I purely want to understand your context. I want you to feel comfortable to share things that are either positive or constructive. There are no right or wrong answers.

I received consent to audio record our discussion today so that I can ensure the best accuracy in note taking for this study. Other than a transcription service company, no one but my chair, Dr. Susan Korach and I will have access to hear the tape or read the transcript of this interview. Additionally, I will destroy the audio recording after transcription and the research project is completed. Because of these efforts to provide protections, the informed consent form signed by you today meets the requirements for human subject research for this dissertation research project. The form explains that: 1) All information shared during our conversation is confidential; 2) Your participation is voluntary, and you

may stop at any time without penalty if you feel uncomfortable or embarrassed; and 3) there is no harm intended through this study.

I intend to present the findings in conferences and potentially in publications. My hope is that the findings will add to the conversation about instructional and social justice leadership. I will not put your name or any other identifiable information on the final report. Before we continue, do you have any questions? Great! Let us begin.

Closing:

Thank you for your time. Before we wrap things up, are there any last comments you have regarding this area of research? Thanks again, I will see you at our scheduled follow-up interview time. I will also follow up with you regarding the findings of this interview. You have the right to check them and agree or disagree with what I found. I may also request additional comments and feedback during the writing of the report to ensure that they accurately reflect your opinion, experiences, and ideas.

Follow Up Interview:

Thank you for meeting with me again. This follow up interview will help to make sure I interpreted your previous answers in the way you intended to say them. I want to understand your experiences related to the topics we talked about previously.

- Are any areas from the last interview that they would like to add? (Participant lead)
- Categories and questions requiring clarification. (Explanation and examples)
- Discuss themes and sub-themes that I noticed emerging. (Build in member checking)

Interview Questions:

Leadership

- Tell me about your background in education.
- What are you most committed to as a leader?

Practices

- Tell me about the mission statement of the district or schools?
- How do you see the district vision in action?
- What are some ways that support occurs between district leaders and principals?
 - Improving Instruction
 - Using data
 - Commitment to equity
 - Special education
- What does professional development for leaders look like?
 - Improving instruction/teaching/learning
 - Inclusion and educational equity
 - Special education
- What does professional development for teachers look like?

- What can you tell me about achievement of students in your district?
 - For marginalized groups of students.
 - For students served in special education.
- In your role, how do you influence the climate and culture in schools?
- Tell me about the special education services in your district.
 - What does a typical day look like for a specific student with a learning disability, with a more severe cognitive disability?
- What is your background and knowledge of special education?

Philosophy & Beliefs

- What are the most important things children experience when they are in school?
- Talk about equity in education, what does that mean to you?
 - Tell me about the background of the district's efforts to implement equity and inclusive education.
- What do you believe the phrase inclusive education means?
 - What does inclusive education look like in your district
 - Tell me about barriers to inclusion (school and district level)
 - What patterns of exclusion existed that you have you tried to dismantle?
- What are your greatest challenges in leading for students identified with disabilities?

Closing

- What systems, structures or training would you like to see that are not currently in place?
- What might you choose to do if you could do things differently?
- Is there anything else you would like to add?

Possible Probes:

- You mentioned.... Tell me more about that.
- Can you describe that for me?
- Please give me an example of...
- What about that interested you?
- What were you thinking at the time?
- What was...like for you?
- I am not sure that I am following you. Would you explain that?
- I would now like to move on to a different topic.

APPENDIX C

Consent Form for Participation in Research

Inclusive Schools for Students Served by Special Education:

Central Office Support for Principals

Researcher

Lynn R Saltzgaver, EdD Candidate, University of Denver.

Chair of Dissertation Committee: Dr. Susan Korach, EdD, Associate Professor,
University of Denver.

Study Site

The study will take place at various sites within the selected school district.

Purpose

The purpose of this research is to understand the role of central office in support of school leaders, specifically looking at leadership practices that support socially just and inclusive schools for students identified with a disability. Your district agreed to participate in this study and you are being asked to participate based on your role as a school or district leader.

Procedures

If you participate in this research study, you will be invited to participate in an interview that will last for approximately sixty minutes, with a potential follow up interview. The study also includes observation of different district meetings or trainings related to the purpose of this study where you may be a participant.

Voluntary Participation

Participating in this research study is completely voluntary. Even if you decide to participate now, you may change your mind and stop at any time. You may choose not to continue for any reason without penalty or other benefits to which you are entitled.

Risks or Discomforts

You may feel uncomfortable while being interviewed. However, I will do all we can to make you feel comfortable. Even so, as a participant, you might still experience some

feelings that may be evoked from questions being asked in the interview. The study may include other risks that are unknown at this time. If, however, you feel embarrassed, stressed, upset, or uncomfortable at any time to answer a question, you may decline to answer the question or end the interview. You may also choose to withdraw from the study. There will be no penalty, no negative consequences, and no removal of other benefits to which you are entitled if you decline to answer any question, end the interview, or withdraw from the study. This study does not have direct benefits for the participants. Moreover, your privacy will be maintained throughout the project. Please see the “confidentiality” section below for detailed information on how privacy will be maintained.

Incentives to participate

You will not receive any incentives. You will not be paid for participating in this research project.

Study Costs

You will not be expected to pay any costs associated with the study.

Confidentiality

The researcher will make all efforts to keep your information private. No identifiers linking you to this study will be included in any sort or report that might be published. The name of the school district will also be kept confidential. You may choose your own pseudonym; a pseudonym has been selected for your school district. The researcher will destroy the original data once it has been transcribed and the study is completed. Voices or images that will be recorded, only with prior consent, will be accessed by the researcher for education purposes only. The results from this research may be published or presented to inform learning and practices. Information about you will be kept confidential to the extent permitted or required by law. Research records will be stored securely on a password-protected software, and only I, the researcher will have access to the records. Further, should any information contained in this study be subject of a court order or lawful subpoena, the University of Denver might not be able to avoid

compliance with the order or subpoena. Your individual identity will be kept private when information is presented or published about this study.

Questions

If you have any questions about this project or your participation, please feel free to ask questions now or contact Lynn R Saltzgaver at 720.988.3938, email: lrsaltzgaver@gmail.com or Dr. Susan Korach at 303.871.2122, email: susan.korach@du.edu

Options for Participation

Please initial your choice for the options below:

_____ The researcher may audio/video record or photograph me during this study.

_____ The researcher may NOT audio/video record or photograph me during this study.

Please take all the time you need to read through this document and decide whether you would like to participate in this research study.

If you agree to participate in this research study, please sign below. You will be given a copy of this form for your records.

Participant Signature

Date

APPENDIX D

Data Matrix for Analyzing Dimension 1 District Level Leadership for Social Justice Framework.

Research Question	Dimensions of Central Office	Social Justice Leadership and Inclusive Practices	Indicators	Data Collection
In what ways, if any, do central office teams in a school district in the Rocky Mountain West develop and support principals to lead schools that support an inclusive environment for students identified with a disability?	Dimension 1: Learning-focused partnerships with school principals to deepen principals’ instructional leadership practice. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partnership • Professional Development • Instructional Leadership 	Critical Consciousness	Interactions are focused on equity, inclusion, examination of exclusionary policies and practices; reform efforts and student outcomes	I O D
			Interactions provide time for collaboration and reflection and indicate support for a joint commitment to priorities surrounding social justice and instructional leadership.	I O
			Interactions include job embedded approaches to increasing leadership capacity to achieve equitable outcomes.	I O
				Knowledge
Interactions foster the capacity building of school leaders for social justice through job embedded learning emphasizing effective instructional practices and the considerations of existing systems and structures.	I O			

		Skills	Interactions foster the capacity building of school leaders for social justice through collaboration, feedback and reflection with an emphasis on creating opportunities that support equity (school culture, decision making, etc.)	I O
		Advancing Inclusion	<p>Interactions identify practices that are exclusionary and plan to dismantle them aligned with a vision for equity, supported by district leadership.</p> <p>Interactions include the planning for and development of more equitable structures within schools, to include special education services, supported by district leadership.</p>	<p>I O D</p> <p>I O</p>
		Creating a Climate of Belonging	Interactions include evidence of stakeholder participation to enhance school climate supporting inclusive beliefs and practices.	I D
		Improving Teaching and Learning	<p>Interactions are intentionally focused on curriculum, pedagogy and assessment.</p> <p>Interactions are designed and implemented to support purposeful professional development for teachers, instructional observation and feedback surrounding the implementation of instructional practices that will advance achievement.</p>	<p>I O</p> <p>I O D</p>

APPENDIX E

Data Matrix for Analyzing Dimension 5 District Level Leadership for Social Justice Framework

Research Question	Dimensions of Central Office	Social Justice Leadership and Inclusive Practices	Indicators	Data Collection
In what ways, if any, do central office teams in a school district in the Rocky Mountain West develop and support principals to lead schools that support an inclusive environment for students identified with a disability?	Dimension 5: Use of evidence throughout the central office to support continual improvement <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evidence & Data • Continuous Improvement 	Critical Consciousness	Interactions align beliefs surrounding equity with analysis of student outcomes and organizational structures.	I D
		Knowledge	Interactions emphasize job embedded professional learning and coaching to support leadership development and opportunities to increase equity based on school and district evidence.	I O D
		Skills	Interactions utilize effective tools and modeling based on explicit need of the principal as determined by school data.	I O
		Advancing Inclusion	Interactions examine data and outcomes to identify systems and structures in need of redesign or realignment.	I O
		Creating a Climate of Belonging	Interactions include review of goals and outcomes that support a school climate that is inclusive.	I D
		Improving Teaching and Learning	Interactions focus on instructional leadership capacity through analysis of knowledge of students and effective instructional practices.	I O
		*Data Collection: Interviews (I); Observations (O); Document Analysis (D)		