

Original Paper

Educational Leaders and Inclusive Special Education: Perceptions, Roles, and Responsibilities

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Received: September 5, 2018 Accepted: September 18, 2018 Online Published: September 25, 2018

doi:10.22158/jecs.v2n4p248

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/jecs.v2n4p248>

Abstract

Educational leaders, including principals and district leaders, are the primary special education leaders in public schools today. They are ultimately responsible for the successful implementation of inclusive special education programs, as outlined by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004). Yet, educational leaders continually report they lack the knowledge and skills to effectively oversee inclusive education programs. The research that examines the perceptions, roles, and responsibilities of educational leaders related to inclusive education programs is extremely limited. Therefore, guided by transformational leadership theory, this qualitative case study explores the perceptions, roles, responsibilities of school and district leaders who oversee successful inclusive education programs. The findings suggested that educational leaders value the philosophy of inclusion. The predominant themes that arose were culture, collaboration, limited staff, purposeful inclusion, consideration of individual needs, acceptance, relationships, appreciation of diversity, and student learning. Educational leaders described their role in inclusive education programs as collaborators, problem solvers, professional developers, and facilitators. The findings from this study can serve as a basis for discussion regarding the strengths and needs of current practices for inclusive education. These discussions can be utilized to analyze current strengths, and potential needs for refinement of practices, policies, and procedures.

Keywords

educational leaders, administrators, special education, inclusion, inclusive education

1. Introduction

People with disabilities have been inadequately served for too long. For decades, people with disabilities have faced discrimination. They and their advocates have fought tirelessly to be provided with rights commensurate to those of people without disabilities. This trend of discrimination and inequality has permeated all aspects of society, including America's public schools.

As early as the 1950s, when they were typically institutionalized, students with disabilities and their families have fought for equal protection rights and for access to a free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) (Barlett, Etscheidt, & Weisenstein, 2007; Osgood, 2005). Over time, a variety of pivotal court cases, federal laws, and educational reform efforts have prompted districts to move toward an inclusive model of special education that is effective, just, and constitutional (Bublitz, 2016). However, the American public school system remains inconsistent and often ineffective in delivering inclusive special education services to students with disabilities in a manner that truly provides them with access to FAPE.

1.1 What Does the Research Say?

Inclusive education refers to students with disabilities being educated in their neighborhood schools along-side their same-aged peers in general education settings to the maximum extent appropriate. Research indicates that inclusive special education provides a myriad of benefits for both students with and without disabilities (Carrington et al., 2016; Dills, 2005; Freeman & Alkin, 2000; Garrick Duhaney & Salent, 2000; Hatch, 2013; Hanushek, Kain, Markman, & Rivkin, 2003; Henry & Rickman, 2005; Litvack, Ritche, & Shore, 2011). Some of these benefits include a heightened acceptance of human diversity by peers without disabilities; social, emotional, and academic development for students with and without disabilities; resilience; enhancement of self-image; access to appropriate role models and friendships; and becoming prepared for the "real world" (Garrick Duhaney & Spencer, 2000; Ko & Boswell, 2013; Yssel, Engelbrecht, Oswald, Eloff, & Swart, 2007). Not only has inclusive special education programming been shown to be more effective than traditional separated education programming, but it is required by federal law (IDEA, 2004). Yet, there is still a disparity in the United States in terms of the implementation and belief in inclusive special education programming (Salisbury, 2006).

For inclusion to be successful, multiple stakeholders have to be involved in the process. Students, parents, the community, teachers, specialists, and educational leaders must fully embrace and implement the philosophy of inclusion (Bublitz, 2016; Hatch, 2013). Stakeholders must work together to most appropriately support students with disabilities, who have fought for too long to be provided with an equal access to education as their peers without disabilities.

Even now, thirteen years after the reauthorization of IDEA (2004), teachers and educational leaders continually report they lack the knowledge and skills to provide quality inclusive special education services (Abernathy, 2012; Ball & Green, 2014; Praisner, 2003; Williams, 2015). In an attempt to address the lack of knowledge and skills required to provide quality special education services in

inclusive settings, a plethora of research has been conducted with parents and teachers. Undeniably, these two stakeholder groups provide useful insight into the challenges, benefits, strategies, and struggles associated with providing inclusive education services. While the research that explores parents' and teachers' perceptions toward inclusion is insightful, research that examines educational leaders' perceptions has yet to be explored.

1.2 An Urgent Need to Hear from Educational Leaders

Since the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004, school districts have been prompted to provide inclusive special education services to students with disabilities. Prior to the reauthorization of IDEA (2004), special education was typically the responsibility of district administrators and special education teachers. However, after the reauthorization of IDEA (2004), with an increased focus on inclusive education for students with disabilities, principals, together with district leaders, have become largely responsible for overseeing and implementing inclusive education programs in their districts (Cobb, 2015; Lashley, 2007).

Educational leaders are the primary special education leaders in our schools today (Cobb, 2015; Lashley, 2007). Yet, research examining the perceptions of educational leaders toward inclusive education has been almost entirely neglected up until this point. There are very few studies that examine the roles, responsibilities, and perceptions of educational leaders related to inclusion and even fewer studies that are remotely current (Chandler, 2015). Furthermore, despite the critical role district leaders play in the special education decision-making process, the available research examines leaders' perceptions toward inclusion from solely school principals' perspectives.

District leaders and principals work closely to ensure inclusive special education programs are effectively implemented and sustained. District leaders are responsible for providing funding, allocating resources, and delivering professional development pertinent to inclusive education to principals. In turn, principals oversee the inclusive education programs in their schools and provide professional development pertinent to inclusive education to their staff. Inclusion is a district-wide effort, and educational leaders are at the forefront of these efforts. Therefore, it is imperative to have an understanding of all educational leaders' perceptions toward inclusive education to ensure a well-rounded understanding of what it takes to create and sustain a successful inclusive special education program.

Collectively, educational leaders are responsible for establishing a vision, culture, and a community of inclusion within the district (McKinney, Labat, & Labat, 2015; Urton, Wilbert, & Hennemann, 2014). All educational leaders hold the primary responsibilities of providing quality instructional leadership and professional development, collaborating with other stakeholders, determining student placement, and monitoring instruction and student achievement outcomes (Cobb, 2015; Glanz, 2014; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005; Satterwhite, 2015).

In addition to the myriad of important roles that educational leaders play in inclusive education, educational leaders' positive attitudes toward inclusion is one of the strongest indicators of a district

being successfully inclusive (Stith, 2013). Evidently, educational leaders play highly important roles in special education programming. The lack of educational leaders' voices and their critical input into the dialogue about inclusive special education creates an urgency and a gap in the research that needs to be filled.

Educational leaders must have an understanding of their roles and responsibilities related to inclusive education in order for inclusion to be successful in their districts. The limited research that is available suggests that there is still a great deal of confusion and mixed perceptions toward inclusive education from the perspective of educational leaders. Even more concerning is the inconsistent implementation of inclusive special education programs from district to district and state to state, despite requirements dictated by federal legislation (Salisbury, 2006).

If educational leaders, arguably the most instrumental stakeholder group involved in inclusive special education programming, do not understand their roles and responsibilities pertinent to inclusion, then America's public schools will not stand a chance at providing students with disabilities with the education to which they are entitled. If educational leaders do not hold positive perceptions toward inclusive education, then their schools cannot flourish and serve all students equally, which is required by the Constitution (Stith, 2012). Educational leaders are ultimately responsible for ensuring that students with disabilities get the education for which they have fought for decades.

1.3 A Time for Change

Students with disabilities have been repressed for long enough. They have fought assiduously to have equitable rights to those of students without disabilities. The law, educational reform efforts, and local districts have taken strides to provide students with disabilities access to FAPE. However, public schools have a long way to go before all students with disabilities are truly provided with the education to which they are legally entitled.

The research available from the perspective of parents and teachers is incredibly useful. However, it is just a small piece of the puzzle. After all, educational leaders are the primary special education leaders in schools, and they have the largest impact on the efficacy and implementation of inclusive special education programs (Carrington et al., 2016; Hack, 2014). For inclusive education and education reform efforts to be truly successful, it is imperative that the roles, responsibilities, and perceptions of educational leaders are understood. Thus, there is an urgent need to explore the perceptions toward inclusion from perspective of educational leaders.

1.4 Purpose of Study

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to understand the perceptions, roles, and responsibilities of district leaders involved in the special education decision-making process and principals who oversee successfully inclusive schools in a successfully inclusive district in a Midwestern state. This article was adapted from dissertation research that was also conducted by Romanuck Murphy (2018). Structured e-mail interviews and a document review are used to gain a better understanding of how educational leaders articulate their perceptions toward inclusive education. The findings from this study can be used

to address a gap in the literature, which fails to examine the roles, responsibilities, and perceptions of educational leaders toward inclusive education. Inclusion is a holistic philosophy and a culture, not just an isolated practice. Since all educational leaders in this study are employed by a successfully inclusive district, they provide invaluable insight to districts who have areas in which they need to improve.

At this time, the level of implementation of inclusive special education programs varies from district to district and from state to state (Salisbury, 2006). Understanding educational leaders' roles, responsibilities, and perceptions toward inclusive education may aid in creating more consistent and appropriate programs for students with disabilities. The findings from this study may be utilized to discuss the strengths and needs of current practices for inclusive education.

Being aware of how other educational leaders perceive inclusion may serve as a powerful source of reflection and growth for all school- and district-level administrators across the nation. These discussions can be utilized to analyze current strengths and potential needs for refinement of practices, policies, and procedures. Ultimately, educational leaders may use the findings from this study to consider whether their students with disabilities are being provided with their constitutional rights and FAPE.

1.5 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework driving this study is transformational leadership theory. The theory of transformational leadership suggests a leader's attitude, strength, and vision affect other members' attitudes (Balyer, 2012). According to Moman Basham (2012), transformational leaders effectively communicate their visions, overcome obstacles, and encourage others to do the same. Transformational leaders lead with enthusiasm and passion, and others tend to follow these types of inspiring individuals ("Leadership theories" n.d.). The attitudes and values of transformational leaders motivate their followers to create common goals, which ultimately leads to successful outcomes (Tucker & Russell, 2014).

1.5.1 Traits of Transformational Leaders

According to Bass (1985), there are four components of transformational leadership: 1) individualized consideration; 2) inspirational motivation; 3) idealized influence; and 4) intellectual stimulation (Tucker & Russel, 2004). Individualized consideration refers to one's ability to provide individualized, one-on-one support to followers as needed (Tucker & Russel, 2004). Inspirational motivation is the ability for a leader to provide followers with shared motivation by establishing a vision and values that coincide with the organization's mission (Bass & Riggio, 2008). The leader's enthusiasm and integrity to follow her vision, values, and the mission, inspires others to do the same.

A third trait of transformational leaders is idealized influence. This refers to transformational leaders being respected and trusted within their organizations (Tucker & Russel, 2004). Followers who trust and respect their leader will emulate the vision and actions of their leader (Chandler, 2015). Lastly, transformational leaders provide their followers with intellectual stimulation, continually motivating others to explore new and creative ways of learning and instructing (Bass & Riggio, 2008). This skill is

a necessary trait for leaders to foster positive change and to inspire others to produce creative and effective solutions in their organizations.

1.5.2 Transformational Leadership and Inclusive Education

Inclusive education has been an area of focus and debate over the past few decades. With an increased focus on inclusion for students with disabilities, educational leaders must be creative and supportive of inclusion in order to best meet the needs of all students (Bublitz, 2016). In many circumstances, this requires educational leaders to demonstrate transformational leadership traits. Meeting the unique needs of diverse learners is not an easy task, and meeting the needs of all students in an inclusive environment often requires leaders to challenge the status quo by asking questions, creating new solutions, and problem-solving often-difficult practical solutions (Marzano et al., 2005). Additionally, transformational leaders effectively collaborate with multiple stakeholders to establish a vision, goals, and strategies that support increased student learning for all students in inclusive settings (Hack, 2014). Educational leaders must possess the fundamental transformational leadership traits of inspiring others, creating a shared vision and mission for the district, and the ability to foster change when warranted (Marzano et al., 2005). For these reasons, it is imperative to have an understanding of educational leaders' perceptions regarding inclusive education practices. Moreover, it is important to understand how transformational leadership traits are related to the perceptions of educational leaders toward inclusion.

1.6 Research Questions

The research questions guiding this study are:

1. How do educational leaders articulate their perceptions toward inclusive education?
2. How do educational leaders articulate their perceptions of the impact of inclusive education on students and the school community?
3. How do educational leaders articulate their role as leaders in inclusive education programs?

2. Methodology

This study used a qualitative case study design in order to understand educational leaders' beliefs and perceptions toward inclusive education (Clark & Creswell, 2015; Harwell, 2011). Structured e-mail interviews and a document review were used to collect data. The e-mail interviews allowed participants to express their perceptions, beliefs, and experiences related to inclusive special education. A document review was conducted to triangulate the data obtained from the e-mail interviews and to determine if there was a need for supplementary resources or additional training to address educational leaders' needs pertinent to inclusive education, as determined by the findings in this study.

The setting for this study was a successfully inclusive district located in a Midwestern state. In the case of this study, district leaders involved in the special education decision-making process, and principals who oversaw successfully inclusive schools were included in the sample. For a school to be considered successfully inclusive, they were required to have a high rate of inclusion of students with disabilities

and strong academic assessment data (Bublitz, 2016). Successful inclusion refers to a district that educates the majority of students with disabilities in a general education setting for more than 80% of the school day (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016, May). The students with disabilities were to be provided with appropriate supports and accommodations to ensure academic progress was being made in the general education setting (IDEA, 2004). Strong academic assessment data refers to state assessment scores for each school meeting or exceeding the state average in all academic domains.

Prior to recruiting participants, consent to conduct research with the target district was obtained. Solicitations to participate in the research were sent from the appropriate district administrator to all district leaders involved in the special education decision-making process and to principals who oversaw successfully inclusive schools. This yielded a total pool of 34 educational leaders who were eligible to participate in the study. Seven educational leaders agreed to participate in the study. Four participants were principals and three participants were district leaders.

2.1 Data Analysis

The e-mail interview responses from educational leaders served as transcripts. Themes were identified through the process of coding. For this study, a computer data analysis program called NVivo was used to assist in analyzing the data. The themes were checked and confirmed by the researcher. Narrative data and quotes from the e-mail interviews were used to support identified themes.

While analyzing the data and coding the transcripts into themes, data saturation was considered. Data collection and analysis halted when no new themes or relevant information arose from the e-mail interview protocols. Additionally, the document review was used to triangulate the data obtained from the e-mail interviews and to determine if there was a need for supplementary resources or a practical training to address educational leaders' needs pertinent to inclusive education, as determined by the findings in this study.

The use of e-mail interviews allowed participants to formulate their own reflections and answer direct, structured interview questions. The ability for participants to carefully consider and formulate their unique opinions and beliefs accounted for member checking, as participants formulated answers to concrete questions. Rich, thick descriptions of every stage of the study were provided so future researchers will have a solid framework for comparison and transferability.

3. Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions, roles, and responsibilities related to inclusive education from the perspective of educational leaders in a successfully inclusive district. Since there was very little research available on this topic, e-mail interviews and a document review were used to explore the perspectives of educational leaders. Seven educational leaders, including four principals and three district leaders, completed the e-mail interviews. The findings section first explores the overarching themes that arose as a result of the data analysis. In the discussion section, a summary of

how these themes directly related to the research questions is presented. The following questions guided the study:

- 1) How do educational leaders articulate their perceptions toward inclusive education?
- 2) How do educational leaders articulate their perceptions of the impact of inclusive education on students and the school community?
- 3) How do educational leaders articulate their role as leaders in inclusive education programs?

3.1 Demographics

A total of seven educational leaders participated in the study. Of the seven educational leaders who participated in the study, four were principals and three were district leaders. All seven participants were female. Four educational leaders served in their current role for less than two years, one educational leader served in her position between two and four years, and two educational leaders served in their current roles between 5-10 years.

All participants were asked how many years in total they served as an educational leader in some capacity. This included the number of years in any school leader or district leader role in any district. One of the participants was an educational leader for less than two years. One educational leader served in a leadership capacity between two and four years. Two of the educational leaders served in their roles between 5-10 years. Three participants indicated they served in a leadership capacity for 10 or more years.

Six of the seven educational leaders had teaching experience prior to accepting a leadership role. Of the seven participants, one indicated she served in a specialist role for five years prior to accepting her current role. Four participants indicated they had between 5-10 years of teaching experience. Two of the participants had over ten years of teaching experience. Participants were asked to identify with which race or ethnicity they identified. All seven educational leaders indicated they were Caucasian.

Lastly, educational leaders were asked to state their highest educational degrees earned. Two educational leaders held master's degrees. Three educational leaders held education specialist degrees. Two educational leaders held doctorate degrees. The educational leaders held degrees in a variety of major fields of study including: English, philosophy, school psychology, secondary business, special education, educational leadership, specialist, elementary education, learning disabilities, curriculum and instruction, reading, and directorship of special education. Of the seven participants, five participants had prior education in special education.

Table 1. Demographics

Demographics	Frequency (N)	Percentage
Gender		
Female	7	100%
Role		
School Leader	4	57.1%
District Leader	3	42.9%
# of Years in Current Role		
<2 years	4	57.1%
2-4 years	1	14.3%
5-10 years	2	28.6%
Total # of Years as an Educational Leader*		
<2 years	1	14.3%
2-4 years	1	14.3%
5-10 years	2	28.6%
10+ years	3	42.9%
Prior Teaching Experience*		
<2 years	1	14.3%
2-4 years	0	0%
5-10 years	4	57.1%
10+ years	2	28.6%
Race/Ethnicity		
Caucasian	7	100%
Highest Degree of Education*		
Bachelor's	0	0%
Master's	2	28.6%
Education Specialist	3	42.9%
Doctorate	2	28.6%
Special Education Degree		
Yes	5	71.4%
No	2	28.6%

3.2 Overarching Themes

E-mail interviews and a document review were used as data collection methods. The interview data that was collected, analyzed, and organized into themes. Several documents were reviewed, including an inclusive education observation checklists, a sample IEP meeting agenda, strategies for co-teaching, and a new special education teacher training packet. The data was coded and organized into themes. Themes were organized according to the prevalence of themes by number of references and by

prevalence of themes by the number of leaders who mentioned each theme. An analysis of the data revealed the following primary common themes:

- Culture
- Collaboration
- Limited Staff
- Purposeful Inclusion
- Consideration of Individual Needs
- Acceptance
- Relationships
- Appreciation of Diversity
- Student Learning

All themes were supported from the educational leaders' responses which were aligned with the research questions. Rich, descriptive data from the e-mail interview transcripts, combined with a document review, allowed for a thorough analysis of the data. The theory of transformational leadership was also considered when analyzing the data. The most common themes that arose from how educational leaders articulated their perceptions toward inclusion were: culture, collaboration, limited staff, purposeful inclusion, consideration of individual needs, acceptance, relationships, appreciation of diversity, and student learning.

3.2.1 Culture

McKinney et al. (2015) suggested that educational leaders are instrumental in transforming and promoting a positive culture and climate within their school districts, thereby improving student learning, including learning for students with disabilities. Moreover, educational leaders' perceptions toward inclusive education have a large impact on how other stakeholders view inclusion (Urton et al., 2014). Therefore, it is crucial educational leaders have positive perceptions toward inclusive education so they can support a positive culture of inclusion in the schools and districts they oversee.

It was evident that all educational leaders in this study believed in and supported a culture of inclusion in their district. All leaders indicated they believed inclusive education had a positive effect on students and the school community. When asked about how inclusion affected the school community, many educational leaders outlined a myriad of benefits for the culture of the district. One principal expressed these benefits by stating, "Oh my, no words can describe the benefits... Our students without disabilities don't know any other way at this point. I don't think they would be ok if we did not include their classmates with disabilities. Our students without disabilities know that the world we live in includes ALL and that is how most of them make decisions when forming teams and planning get together".

All educational leaders described the effects of a strong culture of inclusion on students and the school community. Some of these benefits included fostering acceptance, an appreciation of diversity, and increased confidence in students with and without disabilities. For most leaders, inclusive education

was a part of their vision and mission for learning.

One district leader explained, “We are very fortunate that our district is based upon the inclusive principles for all students. It is the norm that we are inclusive”. Three principals explained that their schools had a culture of “all of our students”. According to one principal, “...we have an inclusive, loving school climate and culture. Our students and families all value inclusion of students with special needs”. A district leader suggested that inclusion creates a community that reflects the real world, and as a result, students celebrate each other for who they are.

According to the educational leaders in this study, the factors that contributed to a strong culture of inclusion were a caring community atmosphere, parental and community support, and excellent teachers. According to one principal, “Our teachers and students create school families that are encouraging, supportive, and loving... Inclusion helps create this family-like atmosphere of teaching and learning”.

3.2.2 Collaboration

Collaboration is necessary in order to maintain a culture of inclusion (Haager & Klinger, 2005). Educational leaders collaborate with multiple stakeholders to create and sustain effective inclusive education models (Satterwhite, 2015). The educational leaders in this study indicated collaboration was vital for the success of inclusive education programs. The theme of collaboration arose in a variety of ways including collaboration between teachers, collaboration between students, and collaboration between educational leaders and teachers. The interview data and document review suggested teachers worked collaboratively to support students with disabilities in inclusive settings. One principal suggested that students with disabilities must also have opportunities for collaborative learning experiences with their peers without disabilities.

To effectively collaborate with others, and to foster staff collaboration, transformational educational leaders provide their followers with a shared motivation to collaborate for inclusive education matters (Bass & Riggio, 2008). Ensuring teachers are provided with the time and resources to collaborate is imperative to ensure best practices in inclusive education instruction. One principal described her role by explaining, “As the principal, I am a member of the collaborative teams that serves a variety of services. I work with my leadership and special education teams to ensure our schedule is structured as such to support inclusive practices including collaboration and co-teaching opportunities”.

It is imperative that multiple stakeholders collaborate to ensure the success of inclusive special education programs (Hack, 2014). Transformational educational leaders use idealized influence, or their ability to be respected and trusted, to engage in healthy working relationships with other staff members, parents, and the community (Bass & Riggio, 2008). They do their best to provide time and resources to staff to collaborate, and they communicate effectively with staff, students, and the community in order to foster a collaborative culture that supports inclusive education. In turn, the school community collaborates to best meet the needs of students with disabilities.

3.2.3 Limited Staff

When asked to describe challenges associated with providing inclusive special education services, six of the seven educational leaders expressed limited staff as a barrier. Educational leaders stated that the lack of budget and limited staff made collaboration to meet student needs difficult. According to a district leader, “providing adequate staffing to support student needs” is a challenge to inclusion. As noted by one principal, “Providing teachers with the resources and training necessary to meet every student’s needs [is a challenge]. Effective instruction takes effective planning. Effective planning takes time and we never have enough of it. My teachers are stretched pretty thin and that can be very challenging”. Similarly, one district leader explained, “Funds are limiting the ability to provide services to the degree that we want. It is harder to be inclusive when staff are limited... the finances do not provide for the supports necessary to be successful”.

One school leader expressed her concerns by stating, “I am not a believer that 1:1 support is necessary or needed, but to have the ability to co-teach more often helps establish routines and processes that keep ALL our students in the general education classroom”. Another principal suggested that “additional staffing is needed to be able to take [inclusion] to the next level and be even more intentional about supporting students”. Similarly, a district leader suggested that finances do not provide the supports necessary for purposeful inclusion to be successful. Another principal expressed that due to tight budgets, “it can be challenging to provide adequate staff to truly implement best practices, especially in regards to inclusive teaching and learning models”.

3.2.4 Purposeful Inclusion

Purposeful inclusion was a theme that arose from the e-mail interviews. This was a theme that had not yet arisen in any of the previous literature examining educational leaders and inclusive education. One principal stated the importance of purposeful inclusion by suggesting, “Putting a learner in a room is not true inclusion, [and] students with unique needs are not purposefully separated from their peers, but rather provided with accommodations and modifications to ensure they are able to participate and succeed within the general education learning and social environment”.

Another principal built on the concept of purposeful inclusion by stating, “We believe that we must have purposeful inclusion and purposeful pull-out. This means that students sitting in the back of the classroom working on their own curriculum with a para is not purposeful inclusion. In fact, we believe that is still pull out. So inclusion is not about being physically in the classroom, it’s more than that”.

All seven educational leaders believed that students with disabilities should only be pulled out of a general education setting for strategic purposes and should be educated in their LRE. The majority of educational leaders suggested that students with disabilities should be educated along-side their same age peers in a general education setting to the maximum extent appropriate. One principal explained that students with disabilities are “only being pulled out of [the general education] environment for a strategic purpose”. The accommodation of providing students with disabilities with a distraction-free testing environment was provided as an example of a strategic purpose for pulling a student out of the

general education setting.

Although all educational leaders expressed the importance of providing students with disabilities with an education in the general education setting to the maximum extent appropriate, one principal suggested that, if not purposefully planned, students with disabilities can take an inordinate amount of time from a general education lesson. As noted by another principal, “It is not inclusion at all costs. It is not inclusion at the cost of true learning. It is not inclusion at the cost of learning for others. We will not risk the safety or the academic fragility of others just to hang our hat on inclusion. It must be inclusion with creative proactive planning and responsive solutions when necessary”.

Five of the seven educational leaders described their role in inclusive special education as being problem solvers and facilitators. One principal explained, “If our inclusive education program needs additional support, it is my job to find ways to make that support possible. If it’s not possible, it’s my job to work with my team to help them think creatively and find ways to make it better”. A district leader stated, “I help support teams in providing programming solutions for students with disabilities [and] support IEP team decision making as it relates to LRE and student programs”. Specific to the concept of purposeful inclusion, one principal stated, “I think most of my discussions are centered around purposeful inclusion of our students with significant handicaps”. Another principal described one of her roles as helping “new staff quickly learn our culture of inclusion and ensuring we have purposeful inclusion and purposeful pullout”.

3.2.5 Consideration of Individual Needs

The majority of educational leaders expressed the importance of understanding and supporting students’ individual needs. According to one principal, “there is a philosophy of meeting the individual needs of every student in our school and doing that in their least restrictive environment”.

Another principal described inclusion as “a model in which students with unique education, physical, behavioral, and emotional needs are included within the general education population as much as possible to meet their needs”. The same principal went on to say, “An inclusive model rejects a one-size-fits-all learning model and strives to meet the unique needs of a student regardless of his or her disability, race, ethnicity, religion, gender, etc.”.

While the majority of educational leaders expressed an importance for educating students in a general education setting to the maximum extent appropriate, they also indicated consideration of students’ individual needs when determining the LRE. A district leader explained, “We always start with the LRE being the natural environment for that student as if they were a student without a disability—the regular education classroom. From there, we determine the more appropriate setting to meet their unique needs”.

It was apparent from the interview responses that the educational leaders respected the value of considering the individual needs of students with disabilities. However, considering students’ individual needs did not come without challenges. One principal suggested, “Each student has unique needs. The biggest challenges are finding what combination of support, teaching and learning strategies,

accommodations, and modifications will best meet his or her unique needs. Sometime results take time to come to full fruition”.

Another principal explained, “if not done well, students may not be getting their individual needs met in the classroom setting”. Additionally, a lack of budget was once again listed as a barrier to support students’ individual needs. As described by one district leader, “The greatest challenge is meeting the needs of each individual student in [inclusive] settings—it costs more to educate kids inclusively and funds keep getting cut”. Finally, a district leader suggested that students with disabilities in inclusive settings “may miss out on opportunities to establish very individualized programming alongside other students with similar disabilities”.

Lastly, educational leaders expressed a need for training and resources pertinent to supporting students with mental health and behavioral issues. While all educational leaders emphasized the importance of meeting students’ individual needs, the majority of leaders felt they lacked the resources to meet the individual needs of students with mental health and behavioral needs.

One principal suggested that “additional social/emotional/and behavioral health supports and interventions for kids” would be beneficial. Another principal stated, “I have seen an increase in students with behavior concerns, and believe all educators, myself included, would benefit from on-going training in how to meet the social-emotional needs of our kiddos”. Similarly, a district leader suggested that “the growing need of mental health services in schools does not allow students’ needs to be met”. Another district leader suggested that teachers need training at the college level to work with students with significant disabilities and mental health needs. However, she noted that “funding barriers stall continuous improvement”. Additionally, the district leader noted “... school boards that don’t understand the need for support in the area of mental health can stall support for kids”.

All educational leaders expressed concerns with limited staff, lack of budget, and lack of time. However, five of seven educational leaders suggested that a part of their role as an educational leader is to help educators problem-solve solutions in order to provide the best individualized services with what they have available. As noted by one principal, “I need to support and guide best practices when it comes to serving students with special needs. I need to lead or provide professional development as it relates to providing enriching inclusive educational opportunities within a school”.

3.2.6 Acceptance

According to Carrington et al. (2016), teachers believed acceptance to be a benefit of inclusive education. Similarly, six of the seven educational leaders in this study suggested that inclusion of students with disabilities fostered acceptance in the school community. One principal described a benefit of inclusion as “the mindset it instills in kids to be accepting and grateful to everyone for their unique differences”. A district leader shared a similar view, suggesting “the acceptance of all ability children and adults” as a benefit of inclusion.

Another principal described a benefit of inclusion as “developing appreciation, acceptance, and respect for all”, and went on to state that inclusive education fosters a “sense of community and belonging for

all”. The same principal shared a story about a boy with a disability being educated in the school she oversaw:

In one of our first grade classes, we had a new student start in January. This student has very unique needs and requires quite a bit of adult support throughout the school day. I will call him Dan. Fast forward to May. The students in the same class were asked to share their favorite memory from first grade. Several of the students wrote about how their favorite memory was when Dan joined their class. They went on and on about how much they loved having Dan in their class! It was quite heartwarming to see that even our six year olds understand the power of and embrace inclusive learning environments. Relationships. Similar to the findings from Garrick Duhaney and Spencer (2000) and Yssel et al.’s (2007) studies, all educational leaders in this study expressed relationships to be a benefit of inclusive education. Leaders referred primarily to relationships between students. However, they also indicated a bond between teachers and teachers, teachers and students, and students and students.

In response to a question about the benefits of inclusive education for students with and without disabilities, one principal wrote, “[Students are] building strong and positive relationships with same-age peers”. Another principal commented on relationships between students by stating, “Building relationships with their peers is the most amazing and heart-warming journey”.

While educational leaders wrote primarily about the relationships between students, relationships between students and teachers, and between teachers and teachers, were also addressed. One principal described a benefit of inclusion as, “developing relationships—general education students build relationships with special education students and visa versa. Classroom teachers building relationships with special education students and visa versa. Special education teachers building relationships with general education students and visa versa. Special education and general education teachers building relationships with one another”.

Of the seven educational leaders, six leaders described relationships to be a benefit of inclusion. One principal described the most rewarding part of her job as “moments when you see [inclusion] working well and intentionally”. She provided a specific example of how inclusion aided in the development of relationships between peers by writing, “One example [of successful inclusion was] last year with a student with autism who is non-verbal... I [was] watching him in P.E. It was one of the few times he didn’t need a para professional next to him and he was truly interacting with his peers”.

While relationships were mentioned repeatedly in the interview responses, one principal noted that relationships between general education and special education teachers can be fragile at times. The principal expressed that “sometimes it can be challenging to support the somewhat fragile relationships between special education and regular education. At times, there can be a lack of understanding on both sides of the other’s role and professional responsibilities. Neither is wrong or right”. The principal explained her role as a problem solver by suggesting, “Part of my job is to build stronger understanding for both my special education and regular education staff, so they can better support one another to do what is best for all students”.

3.2.7 Appreciation of Diversity

Similar to findings in Carrington et al.'s (2016) study, all educational leaders in this study described appreciation of diversity as a benefit to inclusive education. From the interview responses, it appeared that a positive culture of inclusion resulted in an appreciation of diversity. However, an appreciation of diversity may have also contributed to the ongoing positive culture of inclusion.

When asked to describe the benefits of inclusion, one principal replied, "My number one [benefit] would have to be the mindset [inclusion] instills in all kids to be accepting and grateful to everyone for their unique differences". The same principal went on to say, "[Inclusion] impacts the entire community in many of the same ways. We all learn to better appreciate and benefit from each other's individual differences".

Other educational leaders shared similar sentiments. Another principal suggested, "Our culture includes ALL [students] and our students are curious and not afraid to seek understanding. We can teach to differences of all kids and students respond in a positive way". Similarly, a district leader stated that "students learn to be accepting of others, understand the challenges of others, and learn about the strengths and qualities of disabled peers".

The majority of educational leaders felt that the culture of inclusion resulted in an acceptance of others and a tolerance for diversity. One district leader explained that inclusion is beneficial because it "develops an inclusive climate for the school and the opportunities to talk about diversity and differences". As described by another district leader, "students get a firsthand lesson on not everyone being the same. Students [with and without disabilities] have the same challenges of being a self-advocate and assisting in their own learning due to a varying degree of needs in the same classroom. They learn empathy as well". The district leader went on to describe how inclusion fosters an appreciation of diversity by stating, "It creates a community that reflects the real world and students celebrate each other for who they are".

3.2.8 Student Learning

Educational leaders are responsible for student placement and monitoring and adjusting educational programs (Chandler, 2015; Marzano et al., 2005). Principals and district leaders are ultimately responsible for student learning and school improvement. From the interviews, educational leaders consistently referred to student learning and having high expectations for all students.

Five of seven educational leaders expressed student learning to be a benefit of inclusive education. One principal described "seeing the daily progress that all of our students make on a consistent basis" as a rewarding experience. The same principal believed that "in an effective inclusive program, you see students enjoy learning and they have a desire to want to improve".

The majority of educational leaders expressed enhanced student learning for students with and without disabilities as a benefit of inclusion. One district leader suggested shared learning as a benefit by stating "all students have an opportunity to work with their same age peers and learn from one another". Similarly, another district leader stated a rewarding part of the job was "continuing to see students

succeed academically and socially”. However, the district leader also noted that there are “struggles we face every day with a shortage of supports”.

4. Discussion

This purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions, roles, and responsibilities of educational leaders related to inclusive education. The research questions and theoretical framework guided the data analysis. The questions asked: 1) How do educational leaders articulate their perceptions toward inclusive education?; 2) How do educational leaders articulate their perceptions of the impact of inclusive education on students and the school community?; and 3) How do educational leaders articulate their role as leaders in inclusive education programs?

4.1 Research Question One: How do Educational Leaders Articulate Their Perceptions toward Inclusive Education?

The findings suggested the educational leaders included in this study valued the philosophy of inclusion and held positive perceptions toward inclusive education. It was evident that all educational leaders in this study believed in and supported a culture of inclusion in their district. The educational leaders described many benefits of inclusive special education, including a welcoming culture, collaboration, acceptance, and enhanced student learning. While all educational leaders held positive perceptions toward inclusive education, challenges toward providing high quality inclusive education services for all students were also noted.

4.2 Research Question Two: How do Educational Leaders Articulate Their Perceptions of the Impact of Inclusive Education on Students and the School Community?

Overall, the educational leaders in this study felt inclusive special education impacted students and the school community very positively. Similar to previous research conducted with parents, teachers, and educational leaders, the educational leaders in this study described the benefits of inclusion, including enhanced student learning, high expectations for all students, appreciation of diversity, and relationships. While there were many benefits to inclusive education, educational leaders also described the barriers to providing quality inclusive services including lack of budget, lack of time, limited staff, and a need for additional training to support students with behavioral and mental health needs. Lastly, educational leaders noted a need to continually consider how to implement purposeful inclusive education programs and to provide individualized support for students with and without disabilities.

4.3 Research Question Three: How do Educational Leaders Articulate their Role as Leaders in Inclusive Education Programs?

Educational leaders described their role in inclusive education programs. Primarily, educational leaders defined their roles as collaborators, problem solvers, and facilitators. Moreover, all educational leaders defined a primary role as providing appropriate professional development to staff.

Haager and Klinger (2005) suggested collaboration is necessary in order to maintain a culture of inclusion. The educational leaders in this study expressed the importance of collaboration between

students, teachers, parents, and leaders. They also outlined their roles as problem solvers and facilitators, explaining their responsibilities in aiding teachers to deliver the best possible instruction with available resources.

Lastly, as suggested by Earley and Bubb (2004), a primary responsibilities of educational leaders is to provide quality instructional leadership and professional development pertinent to inclusive education. All educational leaders indicated they played a role in providing professional development to others in some way, whether formal or informal. Educational leaders explained their role in professional development primarily as providing appropriate training and staff development that enriches staff members' ability to deliver quality inclusive educational opportunities within schools.

4.4 Theoretical Framework Application: Transformational Leadership and Educational Leaders

As defined by transformational leadership theory, a transformational leader's attitude, strengths, and vision affect other members' attitudes (Balyer, 2012). Transformational leaders effectively communicate their vision, overcome obstacles, and encourage others to do the same (Moman Basham, 2012). Transformational leaders establish a vision for learning, promote a positive culture and climate for learning, provide professional development opportunities to staff, collaborate with stakeholders, and ultimately support student learning (Cobb, 2015; Marzano et al., 2005; Nicolas, 2015).

The findings from this study revealed a variety of transformational leadership traits in the educational leaders who participated. All educational leaders who participated in this study held positive perceptions toward inclusive education. The common themes in this study suggested the educational leaders used transformational leadership to support inclusion. Notably, all educational leaders created a vision for learning that encompassed the philosophy of inclusion, with an emphasis on supporting all students. All educational leaders expressed a positive culture and climate of inclusivity. All leaders suggested their role included providing professional development to staff. The majority of educational leaders expressed the importance of collaboration between stakeholders. Lastly, there was an underlying focus on student learning throughout all e-mail interview responses.

4.5 Limitations and Implications

One limitation of this study was the potential for researcher and participant bias. The researcher may have held a bias when deriving meaning from the educational leaders' statements, as the researcher had direct experience with inclusive special education (Anderson, 2010, October). To control for researcher bias, interpretations of the data were cross-checked by a professional colleague with research experience.

The perceptions of educational leaders are strongly influenced by their past experiences with people with disabilities (Praisner, 2003). Five of the seven participants in this study held degrees in special education. As a result, educational leaders may have held biases about inclusive education, depending on their education and experience with people with disabilities. Therefore, there may have been a sample bias (Ogden, 2012).

Another limitation of this study was a small sample size and a lack of diversity. A total of seven

educational leaders participated in this study. All of the participants were female and all of the participants were Caucasian. It would be beneficial to conduct exploratory research with a larger pool of participants, and to include a more representative pool of educational leaders. In addition, all of the principals who participated in this study oversaw elementary schools and no assistant principals participated in this research. Therefore, it would be beneficial to include principals and assistant principals who oversee elementary, middle, and high schools in future research.

All educational leaders included in this study were employed by a successfully inclusive district. It would be insightful to explore the perceptions of educational leaders in districts with less effective inclusive education programs. Conducting research with struggling districts may offer more insight to the barriers districts face in implementing inclusive special education programs.

Lastly, although the educational leaders in this study were employed by a successfully inclusive district and held positive perceptions toward inclusive education, the participants expressed a variety of barriers to providing successful inclusive education services. The barriers included: lack of budget, lack of time, limited staff, and a lack of training to support students with mental health and behavioral needs. Educational leaders across the nation face similar challenges. Yet, there is a lack of training for educational leaders pertinent to issues that revolve around inclusive special education programs.

Therefore, there is a need for direct, purposeful, relevant, and applicable training pertinent to inclusive education for educational leaders. It would be beneficial for future research to focus on training and practical strategies for educational leaders who oversee inclusive schools. Training topics pertinent to educational leadership and inclusive special education may include: roles and responsibilities of educational leaders, transformational leadership and leading inclusive education programs, review of important laws and special education concepts, reform efforts, strategies to address mental and behavioral health issues, best practices in inclusive education, and practical strategies to sustain or improve effective inclusive education programs.

Lastly, a variety of core issues in special education were not reviewed or considered in this research, as they are beyond the scope of this study. However, future researchers should consider the impact of disproportionate representation in special education. According to the National Education Association (2007), students from minority groups and students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds are over identified as having learning disabilities across the nation. Additionally, students who exhibit behaviors, including students with attention deficit and students from culturally diverse backgrounds, are over identified as having disabilities. Historically, these students have been placed in more restrictive placements than their peers (Skiba, Poloni-Staudinger, Gallini, Simmons, & Feggins-Azziz, 2006). While consideration of these core special education issues were not included in this study, schools are becoming increasingly more diverse, and educational leaders should consider the impact of disproportionate representation in their inclusive special education programs.

5. Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to address a gap in the literature that failed to examine the roles, responsibilities, and perceptions of educational leaders toward inclusive education. Educational leaders are arguably the most important stakeholder group for ensuring the success of inclusive education programs. Therefore, educational leaders must have an in depth understanding of the strengths and needs of the inclusive practices within their districts. Moreover, it is of the utmost importance that educational leaders have an understanding of their roles, responsibilities, and perceptions toward inclusive education, so they can ensure that students with disabilities are being afforded their constitutional rights and access to FAPE.

Understanding the way in which educational leaders in inclusive districts perceive inclusion is important because it can help to identify and address their needs (Cobb, 2015). In order for districts to provide quality inclusion programs, understanding the perceptions of educational leaders as special education leaders is necessary. The findings from this study contribute to the available research that explores the perceptions, roles, and responsibilities of educational leaders related to inclusive education.

All administrators may benefit from the findings of this study, as the findings can serve as a basis for discussion regarding the strengths and needs of current practices for inclusive education. Being aware of how other educational leaders perceive inclusion may serve as a powerful source of reflection and growth for all school- and district-level administrators. These discussions can be utilized to analyze current strengths, and potential needs for refinement of practices, policies, and procedures. Moreover, the findings from this study contribute to the limited pool of current research that is focused on educational leaders and inclusion.

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