The Perceptions of Public High School Administrators Regarding the Inclusion of Students With Disabilities in the General Education Classroom: A Phenomenological Study by Jennifer A. Thomasian

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The Perceptions of Public High School Administrators Regarding the Inclusion of Students With Disabilities in the General Education Classroom: A Phenomenological Study

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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March 2020

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The Perceptions of Public High School Administrators Regarding the Inclusion of Students
With Disabilities in the General Education Classroom: A Phenomenological Study

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To my wife, Melissa Thomasian, you are my rock. You have pushed when you
needed to push, you have comforted when you needed to comfort, and you have been by
my side through every step of this journey. There are not words enough to express how
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me. You are my village and through thick or thin we live life to the fullest.
ABSTRACT

The Perceptions of Public High School Administrators Regarding the Inclusion of Students With Disabilities in the General Education Classroom: A Phenomenological Study

by Jennifer A. Thomasian

Purpose: The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the perceptions of high school administrators in Southern California regarding how they interpret and implement specific federal and state policies concerning the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom and to identify additional factors high school administrators perceive affect implementation. It was also the purpose of this study to describe how high school administrators perceive that their prior experiences with students with disabilities impact their interpretation and implementation of policies concerning inclusion.

Methodology: A sample of participants was selected from the target population of administrators serving at the 54 comprehensive public high schools in Riverside County, California. Standardized open-ended interviews were conducted according to a protocol developed by the researcher in conjunction with an expert panel and aligned to the research questions.

Findings: High school administrators make sense of inclusion largely through formal trainings and through their own experiences with students with disabilities both in the classroom and in their personal life. Administrators implement inclusion practices through both core academic and nonacademic classes and through extracurricular experiences. Several additional factors compound how administrators implement inclusion, most notably the opinions of teachers and logistical constraints.
**Conclusions:** The findings of this study led to 3 major conclusions. First, that inclusion does not function in isolation on the school site and must be part of the larger transformative changes that the administrator is navigating with the school community. Second, administrators draw heavily from their own experiences with students with disabilities. Lastly, the individual leadership of high school administrators is a key factor for the success or failure of inclusion implementation.

**Recommendations:** It is essential that districts and schools work together to develop a system of ongoing formal training for administrators and general education teachers regarding the inclusion of students with disabilities. In addition, further research should be conducted regarding how district office personnel work with and support site administrators regarding inclusion.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

- Background ............................................................................................................. 1
- Foundations of Special Education in the United States ........................................... 2
- Changing Landscape of Least Restrictive Environment ......................................... 3
- Inclusion Paradigm Shift ....................................................................................... 5
- Role of High School Administrator in Leading Change ......................................... 8
- Theoretical Framework ......................................................................................... 8
- Impact of Inclusion ............................................................................................... 10
  - Teacher perceptions ........................................................................................... 10
  - Administrator perceptions .................................................................................. 11
- Statement of the Research Problem ...................................................................... 12
- Purpose Statement ............................................................................................... 15
- Research Questions ............................................................................................. 15
  - Central Question ............................................................................................... 15
  - Subquestions ..................................................................................................... 15
- Significance of the Problem .................................................................................. 16
- Definitions ............................................................................................................ 18
- Delimitations ........................................................................................................ 19
- Organization of the Study ..................................................................................... 19

## CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

- Foundations of Special Education in the United States ........................................... 21
  - Asylums and the Beginnings of Special Education ............................................. 22
  - Landmark Cases ............................................................................................... 24
    - Brown v. Board of Education ......................................................................... 25
    - PARC v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania ..................................................... 26
    - Mills v. Board of Education ........................................................................... 27
- Legal Mandates and Policies .................................................................................. 28
  - Education For All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 .................................... 29
  - Regular Education Initiative .............................................................................. 31
  - Individuals with Disabilities Education Act ..................................................... 32
  - Inclusion Paradigm Shift ................................................................................... 33
- The Role of School Site Leadership ....................................................................... 37
- Theoretical Framework ......................................................................................... 42
  - The Seven Properties of Sensemaking .............................................................. 44
    - Grounded in identity construction .................................................................. 44
    - Retrospective .................................................................................................. 45
    - Enactive of sensible environments .................................................................. 46
    - Social ............................................................................................................. 46
    - Ongoing .......................................................................................................... 47
    - Focused on and by extracted cues ................................................................... 47
    - Driven by plausibility rather than accuracy .................................................. 48
    - Sensemaking in Education ............................................................................. 49
- Summary ............................................................................................................... 50
- Synthesis Matrix ................................................................................................. 51
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY</th>
<th>52</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overview</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose Statement</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Questions</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central Question</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subquestions</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Design</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phenomenology</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Target Population</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sample Population</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sample</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instrumentation</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researcher as Instrument</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualitative Instruments Used</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reliability</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field Test</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Validity</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection Procedures</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protection of Rights of Human Subjects</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Analysis</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER IV: RESEARCH, DATA COLLECTION, AND FINDINGS</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overview</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose Statement</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Questions</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central Question</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subquestions</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Methods and Data Collection Procedures</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sample</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demographic Data</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presentation and Analysis of Data</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Subquestion 1</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formal trainings</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived lack of training and/or experience</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Subquestion 2</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Core academic classes</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonacademic classes</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extracurricular experiences</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focused program monitoring</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Subquestion 3</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher opinions</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Logistical constraints</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Frequency of Themes.................................................................77

Table 2. Themes Describing How Administrators Interpret Policies Concerning Inclusion.................................................................78

Table 3. Themes Describing How Administrators Implement Inclusion ..................83

Table 4. Additional Factors Related to Inclusion .................................................91

Table 5. Prior Experiences of Administrators Related to Students With Disabilities ........................................................................100
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Process used to identify the sample population of the study.......................... 60
CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Castro-Villareal and Nichols (2016) contended that “high stakes testing accountability has wreaked havoc on America’s education system” (p. 1). In this age of accountability, students, teachers, and school site administrators have felt pressure to perform on the standardized tests in the wake of the 2002 passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB; Theoharis, Causton, & Tracy-Bronson, 2016). That pressure to perform often stems from federal and state mandates to close the achievement gap between well-performing students and traditionally underperforming groups of students, who are typically students of color, economic disadvantage, those learning English, and those with disabilities (White-Smith & White, 2009).

In response to NCLB, the decades-old law related to the education of students with disabilities, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), was reauthorized and updated in 2004 (Keogh, 2007; Naraian, Ferguson, & Thomas, 2012). This spurred the movement from simply educating students with disabilities to ensuring that those individuals met the same standards of performance as their nondisabled peers. Additionally, the reauthorization of IDEA mandated that students with disabilities be educated in an inclusive manner, although the specific policies and practices needed to accomplish that were left to the discretion of individual districts and schools. The debate over feasibility and merits of inclusive education has waned but even research literature lacks a critical discussion of contemporary implementation at the school site level (Artiles & Kozleski, 2016; Theoharis et al., 2016).

Instructional leaders on each campus must make sense of and subsequently implement policies, procedures, and practices to further the inclusion of students with
disabilities (Saltrick, 2010; Sumbera, Pazey, & Lashley, 2014). The way in which school leaders make sense of complicated laws and mandates can be understood through Weick’s (1995) theoretical framework of sensemaking by focusing on how internal and external forces influence decision-making. The unique approach of each school leader as he or she interprets and implements the federal mandate for inclusion has created a litany of various inclusion techniques, each yielding a range of successes and failures (Villa & Thousand, 2016). Indeed, as Kavale and Forness (2000) pointed out, just the “word inclusion is likely to engender fervent debate” (p. 279).

**Background**

The background section outlines the historical foundations of special education in the United States, including the landmark court cases and federal laws mandating the inclusion of students with disabilities into the general education classroom. Additionally, the role of high school administrators in leading change and Weick’s (1995) sensemaking theory are explored in order to further understand the perception of administrators regarding how they interpret and implement specific federal and state policies and mandates concerning the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom.

Over the past 4 decades, the education of students with special needs has moved from the sole responsibility of the family, typically in excluded environments, to the responsibility of the public school system, currently with a trend toward inclusive practices (Goodin, 2011; Hamilton-Jones & Moore, 2013). A legislative march from the passage of P.L. 94-142—a 1975 public law referred to as the Education of All Handicapped Children Act—to the 1990 IDEA, to the reauthorization of that act in 2004
as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, indicates that American lawmakers value the education of all individuals (Farris, 2011). The passage of laws that guarantee equitable education as a right of all students illustrates the importance that Americans place upon equality and protection of rights (Artiles, Dorn, & Bal, 2016; Castro-Villarreal & Nichols, 2016). Currently, there are two dimensions to the inclusive education movement, with the first providing the rationale for inclusion and the second “concentrating on the realization of inclusion . . . concerned with what inclusive education looks like in practice” (Hannes, Von Arx, Christiaens, Heyvaert, & Petry, 2012, p. 1710).

**Foundations of Special Education in the United States**

The existence of individuals with special needs is not a new phenomenon, nor is the recognition that some individuals have inherently different developmental abilities. Just as there are those who develop stronger physically or more acutely mentally, there are also those who do not develop at the same level as their peers; in other words, in any given society there inevitably will be those who are disabled. According to Osgood (2008), throughout the course of human history, individuals with disabling conditions have been “demonized, defied, ignored, persecuted, protected, or isolated and exterminated” (p. 6).

The first organized American effort at educating the disabled came from Thomas Gallaudet in the founding of the Asylum for the Deaf in Hartford, Connecticut in 1817 (Osgood, 2008). A generation later, Gridley Howe would transform those single successes into the opening of two more asylums (Osgood, 2008). The growth of urban centers throughout the 19th century led to larger schools and the need for “increased
structure, stratification and standardization in classrooms,” thus highlighting any abnormal student performance and behavior (Osgood, 2008, p. 7). This heightened awareness of differences transformed the focus of both private and public institutions for the disabled from “treatment, education, and cure and more on isolation, custodial care, and eradication” (Osgood, 2008, p. 8). By 1900, the creation of institutions to service individuals with three essential categories of disability—deafness, blindness, or feeblemindedness—was society’s way of dealing with the differences seen in children, and each state had at least one such publicly funded institution (Osgood, 2008).

The path from exclusionary institutionalization of children with disabilities to inclusion of such children in the general classroom environment would not be a singular or a continual one. Similar to discrimination based on gender, race, or religion, discrimination based on disability demonstrates a history of segregation, dehumanization, and exploitation (Baglieri, Valle, Connor, & Gallagher, 2011). As with other civil rights violations, the battlefield for disability rights would become the courtroom, and a series of watershed cases would mark the march toward inclusion.

The most significant case to affect education practice in the past century is the 1954 U.S. Supreme Court decision of Brown v. Board of Education, a collective class action suit filed when five children in Delaware, Kansas, South Carolina, and Virginia sought to enroll in White-only schools (Burtka, 2015). The court ruled that the segregation of these children had violated their constitutional rights under the 14th Amendment and overturned the precedent set in the decades-earlier case of Plessy v. Ferguson (Farris, 2011). Chief Justice Earl Warren, in his majority opinion, wrote that separate special educational facilities were inherently unequal and had no place in public
education (Brown v. Board of Education, 1954). Following this landmark civil rights case, parents and advocates of students with disabilities seized the opportunity to point out that likewise segregating children with developmental disabilities was equally abhorrent, and thus the case for inclusion was tied to the civil rights movement (McGovern, 2015).

Over the next 3 decades, a series of court cases established the “right of every child with a disability to be educated, laying the foundation for the much-needed reform in special education” (McGovern, 2015, p. 119). Class action lawsuits affirmed the concept of a free appropriate public education, commonly referred to as FAPE, and further directed school districts to cover the cost of providing education for disabled students; in essence, the district could not use cost as an excuse to deny public education to any student (Goodin, 2011). While some school districts initially contended insurmountable costs as reason to restrict access to public school for students with disabilities, courts have repeatedly determined that the cost of educating students with disabilities falls on the shoulders of the public school system (Osgood, 2008).

**Changing Landscape of Least Restrictive Environment**

The court decisions of the mid-20th century created the concept of educating children with disabilities in the least restrictive environment (LRE), or that environment which most closely relates to the general education classroom (McGovern, 2015). Once court decisions struck down the segregation of students, federal laws followed to direct how those students would be integrated into public education.

The federal law that forever altered education for children with disabilities was the Education For All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, known as Public Law, or P.L.
94-142 (Farris, 2011; McGovern, 2015; Osgood, 2008). Passed by Congress in response to learning that “more than one million American children with disabilities were entirely excluded from the educational system,” the passage of this law put in place federal mandates that every child receive FAPE (Goodin, 2011, p. 49). The lasting impact of this law was its assurance of access to public education for all students, effectively placing the responsibility of education for all into the hands of the school system. In opposition to previous education foundations, “the effect of the 94-142 legislation was to turn it around so that schools were mandated to ‘fit’ the needs and abilities of the child” (Keogh, 2007, p. 67).

The Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 was reauthorized as IDEA in 1990, and again in 1997, to mandate increased services and broaden eligibility criteria (Daunarummo, 2010; Osgood, 2008). The latest reauthorization of IDEA came in 2004 with the intent of aligning IDEA to then President Bush’s NCLB legislation passed in 2002 (Naraian et al., 2012). The 2004 reauthorization of IDEA takes into account the NCLB requirement for highly qualified teachers and places mandatory academic gains in measurable test scores at the forefront (Nichols, Dowdy, & Nichols, 2010). By the early 2000s, students with disabilities had gone from a segregated and forgotten second-class population to the focus of legislative action.

**Inclusion Paradigm Shift**

Court decisions and federal laws are instructive in the creation of guidelines, but they do not necessarily define implementation. Out of the 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) stemmed three main methodologies to accomplish the mandate of LRE (Monsen, Ewing, & Kwoka, 2014).
Mainstreaming, the first of these approaches, is the simplest to accomplish and, in fact, has been in routine use since the President Reagan’s Regular Education Initiative of the 1980s in that it “refers to the physical placement of students within the regular classroom with their non-disabled peers” (McGovern, 2015, p. 124). The second methodological approach to implement LREs is inclusion, which refers to the “more comprehensive education practice in which students learn exclusively in the regular classroom and involves bringing the support services to the child rather than moving the child to the support services” (McGovern, 2015, p. 124). Whereas mainstreaming in most schools only focuses on the nonacademic activities of students, inclusion attempts to educate students with disabilities alongside and to the same level as their nondisabled peers (Naraian et al., 2012; Wilson, Kim, & Michaels, 2013).

The third methodology through which LRE is commonly accomplished in schools is a specific variation on inclusion known as co-teaching. Although not a federal or state mandate, co-teaching has yielded significant positive outcomes for students with disabilities (Nichols et al., 2010). Co-teaching is defined as two school professionals partnering “for the purpose of jointly delivering instruction to a diverse group of students, including those with disabilities or other special needs and in a way that flexibly and deliberately meets their learning needs” (Friend, Cook, Hurley-Chamberlain, & Shamberger, 2010, p. 11). A variety of co-teaching models have been described and chronicled for effectiveness over the past decade, and while most studies conclude that it is not a universal fix, the benefits of properly implemented co-teaching strategies are seen not only in students with disabilities but in all students (Baglieri et al., 2011; Conderman & Hedin, 2014; Hamilton-Jones & Moore, 2013; Villa & Thousand, 2016).
Role of High School Administrator in Leading Change

Researchers often recite the claim that leadership is the linchpin for success in any school change initiative (Aguilar, Goldwasser, & Tank-Crestetto, 2011; Knab, 2009; White-Smith & White, 2009). Although that leadership can be found in a variety of individuals, such as teachers, instructional coaches, school psychologists, or district-level leaders, for the school the instructional leader for all students remains the principal (Boscardin, 2005). As described by Knab (2009), educational theorist Robert Marzano was able to determine a significant positive relationship between principal leadership and student performance.

According to White-Smith and White (2009), as learning and instructional leaders, principals must maneuver through multiple sources of accountability. As Hess and Downs (2013) pointed out, reforms are most likely to fall flat when administrative leaders fall into the “culture of can’t” and fail to see themselves as able to change the system (p. 35). The success or failure of change initiatives at the school are often tied directly to the efficacy of the school administrator (Knab, 2009; White-Smith & White, 2009).

Theoretical Framework

Since the passage of NCLB, school leaders have not only had to manage their organization, but have also been left to traverse an array of high-stakes accountability systems (Saltrick, 2010). The ability of leaders to make sense of these multiple demands and then craft an appropriate organizational response is linked to the success or failure of the organization (Saltrick, 2010; Sumbera et al., 2014). Weick’s 1995 theoretical framework of sensemaking has assisted “researchers, practitioners, and policymakers in
gaining insight into the ways in which principals negotiate the complexity of their changing roles and responsibilities as mandated by NCLB and IDEA” (Sumbera et al., 2014, p. 300).

Sensemaking is not merely interpretation but the study of authorship of interpretation (Weick, 1995). Sensemaking is characterized as a “process that is grounded in identity construction” to identify and analyze internal representations (Weick, 1995, p. 17). Through the examination of existing paradigms, lenses, beliefs, and values, sensemaking helps one to understand how and why people arrive at the outcomes they do (Sumbera et al., 2014). Weick (1995) identified and explored eight key factors for sensemaking: identity, retrospect, plausibility, environment, social, ongoing, cues, and fallacy of centrality. In addition, Weick explored how the interplay of internal and external forces combine with these eight factors to influence sensemaking.

As the leaders of their schools, high school principals and assistant principals are tasked with making sense of various laws, policies, and procedures, and then implementing them. As Weick (2011) pointed out, one’s identity construction is central to sensemaking, thus it flows that each individual principal or assistant principal will draw upon his or her own experiences to make sense of laws and mandates surrounding the inclusion of students with disabilities into the general education classroom. This ongoing and individual cycle of sensemaking may lead to a variation of implementation of inclusive practices at each school. The way in which each school leader makes sense of laws and mandates may ultimately lead to a broad range of educational practices for students with disabilities.
Impact of Inclusion

The legal and moral move to inclusion does not directly correlate to an increase in student achievement, as found in a 6-year longitudinal study implemented by Goodman, Hazelkorn, Bucholz, Duffy, and Kitta (2011) in Georgia in which a 62% increase in inclusion was found to yield a 30% increase in graduation rates. Although literature is filled with best practices for educating students with disabilities, little empirical data on student responses to such practices exist (Wilson et al., 2013). In studying the impact of such practices, Wilson et al. (2013) found that significant differences existed in accommodations and services based on placement of students with disabilities, yet those differences could not be correlated to student performance as measured by course grades.

A thorough understanding of the perceptions of effective inclusive practices is needed to inform policy and educational leaders in the future. Policymakers have relied heavily on equitable access to inclusive education as a social justice and civil right issue (McGovern, 2015); however, those laws have not led to measurable success for students with disabilities (Goodman et al., 2011; Theoharis et al., 2016). To explore this disconnect, a clear understanding of how school leaders make sense of these laws and then go about implementing them is needed. Decades of legislative educational reform have not brought about real changes in the success rates of students with disabilities; therefore, future legislation should be informed by research on that disconnect as well as research on what is happening at the school level that is preventing realization of these laws and their intended results.

Teacher perceptions. The perceptions of teachers toward inclusion is important, because it is the classroom teacher’s own beliefs that often become self-fulfilling
prophesies of success or failure when implementing inclusive educational policies (Monsen et al., 2014). Grieve (2009) identified three groups of teachers when discussing perceptions toward inclusion: those willing to implement inclusion given additional and adequate support, those who thought inclusion would take away from the education of the nondisabled peers, and those who felt that some students with emotional or behavioral disturbances required “higher quality support than mainstream schools could offer” (p. 175). The perceptions and beliefs of the classroom teachers inevitably impact the effectiveness of inclusion and thus need to be thoroughly understood by administrators who are implementing policies and procedures (Monsen et al., 2014).

**Administrator perceptions.** A wide body of administrator perceptions of inclusion has been developed since the passage of IDEA (Artiles & Kozleski, 2016; Farris, 2011; Sumbera et al., 2014). However, the majority of this research is focused upon perceptions of elementary administrators, and thus a gap of understanding of secondary administrator perceptions exist (Goodin, 2011). Additionally, education has become increasingly data driven, yet there are little to no comparative data available on special education students’ academic gains and other factors based on their placement in inclusive versus noninclusive settings (Müller, 2007). Furthermore, inclusion may not yield the same results for all types of disabilities, yet studies that examine impacts upon specific types of disabilities are scarce, specifically at the secondary level (Fore, Hagan-Burke, Burke, Boon, & Smith, 2008).

According to Goodin (2011), society’s move from segregation and exclusion to understanding and inclusion largely stem from a philosophical passion for ethics and the treatment of others rather than empirical data. As school leaders go about interpreting
and implementing federal and state mandates, it is important that practices and policies be based not on moral platitudes but rather on data-driven best practices (Villa & Thousand, 2016). The sheer diversity found in schools today “requires that school professionals have a deep understanding of quality inclusion” (Hamilton-Jones & Moore, 2013, p. 161).

Although concepts of special education are vastly researched in general, research at the secondary level is fractured (De Vroey, Struyf, & Petry, 2016). More specifically, given that the interpretation and implementation of federal mandates rests on the shoulders of administrators, it is crucial to understand and act upon the perceptions of such individuals (Willis, 2009). As Sumbera et al. (2014) pointed out, future research is “needed to understand how and why school leaders make certain decisions and take certain actions related to students with disabilities” (p. 320). Literature points to the need for further study related to the specific perceptions of high school administrators regarding how they interpret and implement specific federal and state policies and mandates concerning the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom.

**Statement of the Research Problem**

Individuals with disabilities have historically been shunned, discriminated against, and vilified (Osgood, 2008). However, as public education evolved in the United States, the acknowledgement of these individuals and the necessity to address their unique needs was often a complicated endeavor (Andrews, 2000; Baglieri et al., 2011). Although for decades society’s response to disabilities was to exclude individuals with disabilities in asylums (Osgood, 2008), the landmark Supreme Court ruling of *Brown vs. Board of*
"Education" (1954) laid the foundation for equality in education for all (Burtka, 2015; Young, Dolph, & Russo, 2015).

Instigated in part by the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) decision, lawmakers in the second half of the 20th century passed a series of laws aimed at ensuring equitable education for students with disabilities (Keogh, 2007; McGovern, 2015). The passage of P.L. 94-142, known as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, addressed Congress’s concern that more than one million children went without access to public education due to their disabilities (Goodin, 2011). The law was later updated and reauthorized as IDEA in 1990, 1997, and, most recently, in 2004 (Osgood, 2008). The most recent rendition aligns with NCLB, enacted in 2002, which mandates that students with disabilities not only be educated, but also that they be educated alongside and to the same level as their nondisabled peers (Daunarummo, 2010; Naraian et al., 2012).

Research on administrative leadership in public education points to the importance of administrative leadership, particularly principals, as a key factor in implementing any change initiative (DuFour & Marzano, 2009; White-Smith & White, 2009). As a result of the interpretation and implementation of federal inclusion mandates being left to the discretion of administrative leaders, a varied array of programs, policies, and practices exist in public schools (Hannes et al., 2012; Jorgensen & Lambert, 2012; Nichols et al., 2010). Further research is needed to understand how administrators make sense of and then implement federal and state mandates for inclusion (Jamison, 2013). Of the research that exists related to the implementation of inclusion, the majority is from the perception of classroom teachers (Conderman & Hedin, 2014; Friend et al., 2010; Goodin, 2011; Monsen et al., 2014). The topic of principal leadership regarding the
interpretation and implementation of inclusion is limited and almost exclusively confined to the realm of elementary principals (De Vroey et al., 2016; Pazey, Heilig, Cole, & Sumbera, 2015; Sumbera et al., 2014).

Goodin (2011), who studied the dynamics of inclusion programs in a public high school from the perspective of the special education teacher, recommended that her study be “replicated to contribute to the breadth and depth of this topic and for comparative analysis . . . focusing on the perspective of administrators” (p. 236). Farris (2011), who conducted a quantitative study of the perceptions of Texas high school administrators toward inclusion, recommended that further research be done in other states, specifically to examine how training on inclusive practices impacted principals’ attitudes. Daunarummo (2010), who studied necessary supports for effective inclusion from the perspective of both teachers and administrators, recommended further research on principals to determine the relationship between their own perceptions of inclusion effectiveness and the supports they provide to inclusion classrooms. Jamison (2013), who studied school principals’ definitions of inclusion and their perspectives of their own involvement in implementation of inclusion but was limited by the quantitative nature of the study, recommended a “qualitative study to determine exactly what extent school leaders’ level of involvement is in the implementation of inclusion in their schools” (p. 94). Recent studies all point to the need for further study related to the specific perceptions of high school administrators regarding how they interpret and implement specific federal and state policies and mandates concerning the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom. The continued lack of information on how high school administrators implement inclusion will continue to lead to
inconsistencies in the delivery of services needed to help disabled students reach their highest possible educational outcomes.

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the perceptions of high school administrators in Southern California regarding how they interpret and implement specific federal and state policies concerning the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom and to identify additional factors high school administrators perceive affect implementation.

In addition, it was the purpose of this study to describe how high school administrators in Southern California perceive that their prior experiences with students with disabilities impact their interpretation and implementation of federal and state policies concerning the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom.

**Research Questions**

This study was guided by one central research question and four subquestions:

**Central Question**

What are the perceptions of public high school administrators in Southern California regarding the ways they interpret and implement federal and state policies concerning the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom?

**Subquestions**

1. What are the perceptions of public high school administrators in Southern California regarding how they interpret federal and state policies concerning the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom?
2. What are the perceptions of public high school administrators in Southern California regarding how they implement federal and state policies concerning the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom?

3. What additional factors do public high school administrators in Southern California perceive to influence their implementation of federal and state policies concerning the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom?

4. How do public high school administrators in Southern California perceive their prior experience with students with disabilities impacts interpretation and implementation of federal and state policies and concerning the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom?

**Significance of the Problem**

The number of students with disabilities in the U.S. public education system is at an all-time high of just over 6 million students ages 6 through 21, or 9% of all children in public education today compared to 8.4% of the same aged students in 2008 (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, Office of Special Education Programs, 2018). Although numerous federal and state laws mandate the education of these students, such education nonetheless presents challenges to those educators tasked with the interpretation and implementation of such laws (Castro-Villarreal & Nichols, 2016; Dudley-Marling & Burns, 2014; Sumbera et al., 2014).

The specific interpretation and implementation of strategies related to the education of students with disabilities is a complex relationship between school and district administrators with strong guidance from state and county policymakers.
(Theoharis et al., 2016). In addition, in California there exists special education local plan areas (SELPAs) that also guide and oversee the work of school and district leaders (California Department of Education, 2018). The percentage of students with disabilities across the United States who spend 80% or more of their day in the regular education environment has doubled over the past 2 decades, thus indicating shifting practices and policies toward inclusion (Kena et al., 2016). The increase in inclusive practices is not, however, uniform between sites and local educational agencies; a variety of site-specific factors influence the reality of inclusion from school to school (Fore et al., 2008).

Jamison (2013), however, found that one such factor, the school principal, saw his or her role as little to somewhat involved in inclusion implementation. The specific problem to be addressed is, How do those school administrators, who see their role as little or only somewhat involved in inclusion implementation, make sense of federal and state mandates for inclusion and then make decisions surrounding site-specific implementation of inclusion?

This study will add to the growing body of literature related to how school administrators make sense of and implement federal and state mandates. Research clearly indicates a positive correlation between administrative leadership and student success (DuFour & Marzano, 2009); however, this research will fill the gap that currently exists surrounding how public school leaders interpret and implement federal and state laws related to the inclusion of students with disabilities (Pazey et al., 2015; Sumbera et al., 2014). Specifically, this study sought to understand how public high school administrators make sense of laws and mandates related to the inclusion of students with disabilities, which is a little studied area related to special education (Baglieri et al.,
The complex and often fluctuating federal landscape, as noted by the recent passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015, again places school administrative leaders in a position to interpret and implement new accountability systems and policies, and the way in which they do so will have profound implications for practitioners.

If local administrative leaders are to be tasked with interpretation and implementation of special education laws, then a clear understanding of how leaders make sense of and implement such laws is needed to further the best practices of inclusion. This study sought to understand how school administrative leaders make sense of and implement laws related to the inclusion of students with disabilities. A clear picture of this sensemaking allows other principals to replicate best practices. A better understanding of how high school administrators make sense of and implement inclusion successfully will lead to replicable practices that will improve the achievement of disabled students. In addition, findings of how specific trainings influence administrators’ successes or failures in the implementation of inclusion are useful in recommendations for practitioners.

**Definitions**

**Administrator.** Assistant principal or principal of the school site.

**Inclusion.** The practice of including students with special needs into the general education classroom as the least restrictive environment.

**Students with disabilities.** Those students who have an identified disability and are identified as having an individual education program.
**FAPE.** Free and appropriate public education. This is required for public school sites to offer all students.

**LRE.** Least restrictive environment. The environment that most closely relates to the general education classroom.

**IDEA.** Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

**NCLB.** No Child Left Behind Act passed by Congress in 2002. This law mandated yearly adequate progress for all schools and students.

**ESSA.** Every Student Succeeds Act passed by Congress in 2015. This law replaces the 2002 No Child Left Behind Act and focuses on college and career readiness for all students.

**Public law (P.L.).** Laws that relate to political matters such as powers and rights of government entities.

**Sensemaking.** The study of how individuals place stimuli into a framework and also of how that framework is constructed in the first place.

**Delimitations**

This study was delimited to high school principals in Riverside County.

**Organization of the Study**

This study is organized across five chapters. Chapter I provided a brief introduction and background in addition to the purpose statement, research questions, significance of the study, definitions of terms, and delimitations. Chapter II is a comprehensive review of the literature related to the topic. Chapter III outlines the methodology used for the study, including the population, sample, data collection, analysis, and limitations of the study. Chapter IV presents the data collected through
interviews conducted. Chapter V summarizes the findings as well as presents conclusions and recommendations for action and further research.
CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Chapter II contains an overview of literature pertinent to the exploration of how high school administrators make sense of and implement special education laws. The chapter begins with an overview of special education in the United States. This section includes a synthesis of how special education arose in its current form and the various laws and court cases that have impacted the education of students with disabilities in this country over the past century.

The chapter continues with an exploration of the role of the school administrator in leading his or her school site. The section focuses specifically on how school administrators lead teachers through change initiatives. The chapter concludes with an examination of Weick’s (1995) sensemaking theoretical framework and its implications for school administrators leading special education.

Foundations of Special Education in the United States

Education in the United States has been a central theme in legislation—even prior to the drafting of the constitution—but particularly so since the progressive era, the time period from 1890-1920 marked by widespread social activism and political reform (Osgood, 2008). Massachusetts became the first state to adopt a state board of education in 1837 and later was the first state to pass compulsory education laws in 1852, and by 1900, nearly every other state had followed suit (Osgood, 2008). However, this push to mandate education for children had more to do with assimilating immigrant children into American society than with truly educating all children, as evidenced by the continued exclusion of children with disabilities (McGovern, 2015; Osgood, 2008).
The history of education in the United States is as long and varied as the country itself. The first U.S. schools were opened in the original colonies in the 17th century as a means of socialization (Osgood, 2008). Traditionally, families taught basic skills of arithmetic and literacy in the home; however, that role shifted to the public school system as more and more students were enrolled full time in school (Goodin, 2011). By the start of the 20th century, each state had compulsory attendance laws for students, and expectations were that children would attend school through the elementary level, typically age 10 at least (Osgood, 2008). In contrast to that however, most U.S. schools remained segregated both along racial lines and ability lines until legislative action was taken to integrate schools in the latter half of the 20th century (McGovern, 2015).

**Asylums and the Beginnings of Special Education**

The year 1817 marked the founding of the first American school to focus on students with disabilities when Thomas Gallaudet opened the Asylum for the Deaf in Hartford, Connecticut (Osgood, 2008). Gallaudet had spent several years traveling through Europe and learning a form of sign language from deaf Frenchman Laurent Clerc (Sayers & Gates, 2008). After returning to the United States with Clerc, the two began their school with one pupil, 7-year-old deaf girl Alice Cogswell (Sayers & Gates, 2008). The school grew in pupils and in notoriety and quickly became a model for other schools designed to serve children with disabilities.

In 1829, philanthropist Samuel Gridley Howe became the first director for the Perkins Institution for the Blind in Boston, Massachusetts, and tales of his success with a deaf and blind student, Laura Bridgman, spread throughout the world (Freeberg, 1992). Howe instructed Bridgman to communicate with a manual alphabet, far different from
previous attempts at teaching the deaf-blind to communicate via a series of gestures, and his prize pupil quickly became an object of study for Victorian elites (Freeberg, 1992). Howe repeated his success in 1848 when he opened the School for Idiotic Youth, focused on teaching what he called “feeble-minded” children (Osgood, 2008).

The large number of students found in urban centers at the turn of the 20th century highlighted the need for a systematic approach to educating those children with disabilities insomuch as the large number of students made visible a small minority that would not necessarily be visible in a smaller, one-room school house. In 1900, the National Education Association (NEA) formed the Department of Special Education to better allow educators a way to share best practices, exchange ideas, and connect with other educators who worked primarily with children with disabilities (Osgood, 2008). Urban centers of the country, such as Boston, New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Philadelphia, all had specialized classrooms for students with disabilities by the first part of the 20th century (Osgood, 2008; Rotatori, Obiakor, & Bakken, 2011). Students with disabilities living in these areas were likely to experience education in a separate classroom or in an institution that was often focused on the treatment of disabling conditions, not the education of those individuals (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015).

However, throughout rural America in the first half of the 20th century, education was far different than that found in cities. Schools in rural areas typically consisted of one-room schoolhouses where multiple ages and abilities of students were educated in unison (Rotatori et al., 2011). The pressures to stratify and group students by ability and age that began in large urban school systems simply did not exist in rural and small-town America (Artiles et al., 2016). Therefore, students with disabilities were less likely to be
identified or serviced in these areas (Rotatori et al., 2011). This, coupled with less stringent enforcement of compulsory education laws, led many children with disabilities to simply not attend school at all (McGovern, 2015). Throughout most of the country in the early part of the 1900s, children with disabilities either found a way to function in school, stopped attending altogether, or never attended at all (Osgood, 2008).

**Landmark Cases**

As a country, the United States has a long history of practicing discrimination and segregation of those individuals different from the protestant Anglo-Saxon majority (McGovern, 2015). This is particularly evident in educational structures and systems designed to stratify and segregate students. In addition, the existence of public schools at all is largely linked to the assimilation of minority youth to the predominant societal norms (Goodin, 2011). At the midpoint of the 20th century, children with disabilities in large cities were typically educated in separate schools, separate classrooms, or were institutionalized, while children with disabilities in rural and small towns were typically not educated at all or were sent to live in larger institutions (Osgood, 2008; Spaulding & Pratt, 2015). The transformation from exclusionary practices to those in which all students are included in the same classroom receiving high levels of education would be driven by the federal court system throughout the latter half of the 20th century, mirroring the civil rights movement (Rotatori et al., 2011; Spaulding & Pratt, 2015).

It is impossible to examine any reform from the second half of the 20th century apart from the impact the civil rights movement had on all things political and social during that time period (Keogh, 2007). Following the U.S. Supreme Court ruling of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), access to education and schools became a civil
rights issue, not just for students of color but also for students with disabilities (Keogh, 2007; McGovern, 2015). The political and social reforms of the 1960s and 1970s demonstrated that social activism could lead to legal and legislative changes, and that reformers had found power in progressivism and allies within each branch of government (Artiles et al., 2016). The battle for equity, though far from an end, had found a foothold in the courtroom that would lead to further legislation and policy on a national level.

**Brown v. Board of Education.** The most critical case to impact all corners of education in the United States was the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* (Burtka, 2015; McGovern, 2015; Smith & Kozleski, 2005). *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) overturned the century-old practice of “separate but equal” and sparked the start of advocacy for those with disabilities as well. The 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution provides for equal protection for U.S. citizens (Smith & Kozleski, 2005). The 14th Amendment stated that all persons born or naturalized in the United States were citizens of that state. Furthermore, it outlines that no state shall impugn the rights or liberty of such citizens, and that citizens have equal protection of the laws (U.S. Const. amend. XIV). Following the passage of the 14th Amendment, the meaning of equal access and due process was fervently contested, particularly in southern states (Smith & Kozleski, 2005). This led state lawmakers to define the scope to which the newly freed slaves were able to access the assured equal protection under the law. One prime example of this was the ruling in 1896 of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which put the Supreme Court’s seal of approval on “separate but equal” public facilities such as schools (Burtka, 2015; Smith & Kozleski, 2005).
In 1952 when the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) took on segregated public schools, 17 states had state-legalized separate schools for Black and White students based on the provision of “separate but equal” outlined in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (Smith & Kozleski, 2005). A class action lawsuit was filed on behalf of 20 students from Topeka, Kansas, and named for one of the parents of the students, Oliver Brown. That case, along with cases from four other states—Kansas, South Carolina, Virginia, and Delaware—would eventually be collectively termed *Brown v. Board of Education* (Burtka, 2015). In a 9-0 decision on May 17, 1954, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of the students and overturned the previous opinion laid out in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (McGovern, 2015). In the majority opinion, Chief Justice Earl Warren wrote “that in the field of public education, the doctrine of ‘separate but equal’ has no place” (Brown v. Board of Education, 1954, p. 483). The legal precedents of equal access under the law that *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) set forth would come to be frequently cited by courts in their decisions surrounding special education and in granting students with disabilities equal access under the law (Zirkel, 2005).

**PARC v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.** *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) gave rise to a slowly progressive push toward the embracing of students with disabilities in the educational system. Prior to 1971, the state of Pennsylvania routinely cited a statute in the state’s educational law that justified the exclusion of children with disabilities to the public school system. The state education law at the time allowed that children with a mental age of less than 5 be excluded from the public school system based upon the undue burden that would be placed on the schools in educating such children (McGovern, 2015; Osgood, 2008). In January 1971, the Pennsylvania
Association for Retarded Children (PARC) sued the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania for this practice, and the case was eventually settled in the Eastern District Court of Pennsylvania (Goodin, 2011). The plaintiffs in the case argued that all children could benefit in a variety of ways from a public school setting instead of being excluded to a separate facility.

Nearly 2 decades after *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) used the 14th Amendment as justification for the desegregation of children of color, PARC argued the same for the desegregation of children with disabilities, and U.S. District Court Judge Masterson cited the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in tasking the state of Pennsylvania to provide sufficient education for exceptional children (Farris, 2011; Zirkel, 2005). The result of this case was that public schools could no longer segregate students with disabilities to separate school facilities in the state the Pennsylvania; however, shortly after this ruling, other states would see similar due process filings across the country (Goodin, 2011).

**Mills v. Board of Education.** Shortly after the ruling in *PARC v. The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* (1971), another suit was filed in the District of Columbia challenging the school’s exclusion of seven African American children with special needs, particularly behavioral disabilities. The case was named for one child who had been expelled by the principal for behavioral problems, Peter Mills (Goodin, 2011). None of the children had received a fair hearing regarding their disability and how it impacted their unique behavioral needs (McGovern, 2015; Osgood, 2008). The defendant’s case rested on the argument that the children would be too expensive to educate in a public school setting given their unique behavioral needs (Farris, 2011).
U.S. District Judge Waddy cited both *Brown v. Board of Education* and *PARC v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* in the decision that outlined that school districts must provide accessible, free, and suitable education to all school-age children, regardless of disability, and that districts must not suspend students for more than 2 days without a hearing (Farris, 2011; Goodin, 2011; McGovern, 2015).

*PARC v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* and *Mills v. Board of Education* are often tied together for the impact they each had in the creation of the concept of free and appropriate public education (FAPE; Goodin, 2011; Osgood, 2008). The two cases mandated that students with disabilities are entitled to education, free of charge and appropriate to their ability (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015). Additionally, the *Mills v. Board of Education* case in particular affirmed that public school districts could no longer use cost as a factor in designing education services for students with disabilities (Choate, 2004; Goodin, 2011). This pair of cases also formed the basis for due process and informed consent in relation to special education laws and processes (Farris, 2011).

**Legal Mandates and Policies**

The court decisions *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, *PARC v. The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* in 1971, and *Mills v. Board of Education* in 1972 created the concept of educating children with disabilities in the least restrictive environment (LRE) and providing all children with a FAPE (Baglieri et al., 2011; Farris, 2011; Osgood, 2008). These court cases mandated states and local school boards to cease practices that denied students with disabilities access to public education (Rotatori et al., 2011). Once court decisions struck down the segregation of students, various states were left to determine how such students would be included into the public school system.
(McGovern, 2015). Just as in the case of racial integration, integration of students with disabilities was a slow and often inconsistent practice from school to school and state to state (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015). Federal laws would later follow to direct this process on a national level.

**Education For All Handicapped Children Act of 1975**

Amid the backdrop of civil rights and increased social democracy of the 1970s, Congress was presented with information that nearly one million American children were entirely excluded from access to public education, and untold others were granted only limited access due entirely to those children’s disabilities (Keogh, 2007; Osgood, 2008). The congressional response was to draft a public law (P.L.) outlining the education of children with disabilities; public laws refer to those laws that relate to political matters such as powers and rights of government entities (Gove & Webster, 2008). P.L. 94-142 would eventually become known as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (Farris, 2011; Goodin, 2011).

P.L. 94-142 outlined four key purposes. First, the law required public school systems to provide an education to all children between the ages of 5 and 21, regardless of disability (Keogh, 2007). Second, P.L. 94-142 required public school systems to create an individual education program (IEP), for each child with disabilities. The IEP was intended to ensure that each child with a disability received an education tailored to his or her unique needs (Choate, 2004). In addition to the drafting of the IEP, public school systems were also required to inform parents and children of their rights under this bill and then to uphold those rights (Goodin, 2011). The third goal of P.L. 94-142 was to guide state and local public school systems in the management of including children with
disabilities in public schools systems. The last provisions in P.L. 94-142 were to create systems to assess the quality of the educational services (Farris, 2011). The bill also included provisions that tied a school system’s ability to receive public federal funding to their continued meeting of the above goals; this ensured that schools would follow the provisions in order to continue receiving funding (Choate, 2004; Keogh, 2007; Osgood, 2008).

P.L. 94-142 federalized many corners of education, which until that point, had been the sole propriety of the state or local school systems. Although many provisions were outlined in the bill perhaps the most impactful for its lasting effects was the mandate that schools create an IEP for each student (Keogh, 2007; McGovern, 2015). The effect of P.L. 94-142 was to force educators to evaluate and identify what the LRE was for each student individually. The LRE is that environment that restricts the student’s access to the general education classroom to the least extent possible while offering the student the appropriate aids and supports (McGovern, 2015). P.L. 94-142 turned the educational system upside down, in that, for the first time, schools were forced to adjust and change the school itself in order to fit the needs of the child instead of the child being forced to change and fit the needs of the school (Keogh, 2007).

One early and still most prominent test of P.L. 94-142 came in the Supreme Court case of Board of Education v. Rowley (1982) in which the court overturned a lower court’s mandate that a district provide a sign language interpreter for a first-grade student with good lip reading skills and partial hearing through a hearing aid (Weber, 2012). In the majority opinion, Judge Rehnquist claimed that the student must receive “some educational benefit” from his or her IEP (McGovern, 2015, p. 121). He opined that
Congress’s intent was to open the schoolhouse doors to students with disabilities and not necessarily that they attain any particular level of education once inside (Weber, 2012).

Board of Education v. Rowley (1982) would be cited repeatedly for denial of services to students as long as schools could show that students were making some small measure of educational progress (McGovern, 2015).

**Regular Education Initiative**

The 1980s saw rise of one of the more controversial developments in the world of special education, the Regular Education Initiative, referred to as REI (Kavale & Forness, 2000). The REI was based on the premise that all students have commonalities and that educating a disabled student is not fundamentally different than educating any other student. Educators were pushed to include students with disabilities into the regular education environment, as opposed to segregating them in separate rooms on the school’s campus (Goodin, 2011). The REI relied heavily on citing the quality of teacher as a factor in student education. Those in support of the initiative insisted that a quality teacher could reach the disabled student using sound teaching practices that benefited all students (Andrews, 2000; Mostert, 1991). This shifted the educational responsibility for students with special needs from resting solely on the shoulders of the special education teacher to a shared responsibility between special education and regular education teachers.

The REI saw increased notoriety when tied to the “American Dream” of the Reagan administration. Support for the REI was more closely tied to a belief that anyone could pick themselves up by the bootstraps rather than in ensuring that students with disabilities are given the specialized and unique instruction they require to be successful.
(Kavale & Forness, 2000; Mostert, 1991). Several teacher’s unions also opposed the initiative as it in part placed blame for needing special education on poor quality teachers not being able to properly teach students with varying abilities (Mostert, 1991). Ultimately as the 1990s rose and education aims shifted with a shift in political parties, the REI fell out of reference in education (Goodin, 2011; Osgood, 2008). The impact on teachers and public philosophies withstood; however, the majority of individuals felt that the ideal place for all students, even those with disabilities, was in a general education classroom alongside their nondisabled peers (Andrews, 2000; Farris, 2011; Harkins, 2012; Kavale & Forness, 2000).

**Individuals with Disabilities Education Act**

One power assigned to Congress is the ability to authorize various agencies to enact programs, which become known as authorization bills. These bills, such as the case with the P.L. 94-142, often have expiration dates and must be routinely reauthorized by the government. Congress reauthorized P.L. 94-142 as IDEA in 1990 and again in 1997 (Daunarummo, 2010). During the reauthorization process, the bill often takes on changes and updates (Oleszek, 2008).

The 1990 reauthorization changed the terminology from handicapped to disability, mandated transition services, and broadened the categories of things that were considered a disability (Osgood, 2008). Significant changes came to IDEA in the 1997 reauthorization, including furthering the idea of the LRE (Nichols et al., 2010). Additionally, the 1997 reauthorization removed the ability of schools to expel students whose disabilities manifest in violent behavior, thus mandating schools to create behavior support plans for students with disabilities (Goodin, 2011; Osgood, 2008).
The most recent reauthorization of IDEA came in 2004 and focused on aligning IDEA to then President Bush’s No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation passed in 2002 (Naraian et al., 2012). The largest adjustment to the 2004 version of IDEA, renamed as IDEIA or Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, was the requirement for highly qualified teachers in certain subject and content areas to be employed in accordance with the mandates set forth in NCLB. In addition, IDEIA placed mandatory academic gains in measurable test scores to the forefront for students with disabilities (Nichols et al., 2010).

**Inclusion Paradigm Shift**

Special education philosophy and application is often met with controversy and confusion in regard to inclusion (Goodin, 2011). The 2004 reauthorization of the IDEIA clearly spells out the requirement that students with disabilities have maximum access to the general education curriculum in the regular education classroom (Goodman et al., 2011). What it does not spell out, or even attempt to clarify, is how that should be accomplished at school sites. That vacuum leaves school districts, and more to the point, school administrators and teachers, to collectively interpret and implement programs and procedures without a clear vision of what they are creating (Boscardin, 2005; Goodman et al., 2011). Alternatively, this freedom of interpretation by state and local agencies does allow for creative implementation of the federal mandates.

A variety of interpretations surround the meaning of inclusion, which is itself not a legal mandate but rather a philosophy of attaining the LRE (McGovern, 2015). Philosophies of inclusion are varied throughout the country and are often based on an individual’s own experiences with special education (Rotatori et al., 2011). Champions
of full inclusion believe all students, regardless of disabling condition, should be solely educated in the general education classroom (Jorgensen & Lambert, 2012). On the surface, proponents of this look at disability and inclusion in similar terms to race and integration (Kavale & Forness, 2000). The moral obligation to treat all humans with dignity necessitates that to segregate children with disabilities to a separate classroom or facility would be akin to segregating children of color in the pre-civil-rights era (McGovern, 2015). Research in favor of full inclusion points to studies that demonstrate that students with disabilities report higher levels of self-esteem, higher levels of academic rigor, and models for more appropriate behavior relative to their nonincluded peers (Able, Sreckovic, Schultz, Garwood, & Sherman, 2015; Goodin, 2011; Goodman et al., 2011). The majority of these studies were conducted in elementary settings, and the few studies conducted at the high school level were less conclusive and even found a greater tendency in ninth and 10th graders to fail their regular education classes, which had negative impacts on self-esteem and efficacy (De Vroey et al., 2016; Goodman et al., 2011; Sumbera et al., 2014).

The proponents of progressive inclusion, where some part of the day is included but not the entirety of the day, take into account the idea of a continuum of services (Goodin, 2011). They believe that certain needs for individual students are better met in a separate classroom facility than in the regular education classroom. A large number of students with specific medical or behavioral needs fall into this category. Champions of progressive inclusion have roots in the idea of mainstreaming in which students spend some part of their day in a separate classroom space receiving instruction from a special education teacher, but then spend other parts of their day being instructed alongside their
regular education peers (Farris, 2011; Goodin, 2011; Kavale & Forness, 2000). In practice for many students, progressive inclusion means the student receives his or her academic instruction in a pull-out setting and his or her elective or less academic instruction such as art, music, or physical education in a general education setting from a general education teacher. Research often cited for the benefits of the pull-out model include demonstrating the benefits students with disabilities receive from the specialized instruction, including additional personnel to assist with skill development, an atmosphere of greater acceptance for differences, and development of leadership skills in the smaller, separate environment that the student with disabilities may not receive in the larger general education classroom (Farris, 2011; Theoharis et al., 2016; Willis, 2009; Wilson et al., 2013).

A specific variation on the inclusion model that became popular in the early 2000s is co-teaching (Thousand, Villa, & Nevin, 2006; Villa & Thousand, 2016). Co-teaching is a collaborative engagement between a special education teacher and a regular education teacher in which both instruct in a general education classroom (Conderman & Hedin, 2014; Villa & Thousand, 2016). Within co-teaching there exists a wide range of variation of practices, but the idea that students with disabilities receive the delivery of their services alongside their regular education peers from highly trained special education teachers is foundational to this method (Conderman & Hedin, 2014). As co-teaching became popular in the late 2000s and early 2010s, proponents often cited compliance with the mandates of NCLB as a key factor in choosing to implement this approach (Friend et al., 2010; Nichols et al., 2010). Under NCLB, all students were to be taught by a highly qualified teacher; for content area courses at the secondary level that
meant that students with disabilities must be matched with teachers credentialed in their content area. When NCLB was enacted, many schools had practices that a special education teacher taught students with disabilities content area courses such as English, math, history, and science. Although these special education teachers were fully credentialed to teach students with disabilities, under NCLB, they were not considered highly qualified to teach those subjects unless they met the state requirements equivalent to those subject area teachers. Many districts looked at co-teaching as a way to bridge this gap of credentialing; pair a highly qualified content area teacher, for example a math teacher, with a special education teacher, and all students’ needs could be met while fulfilling the highly qualified mandate in NCLB (Nichols et al., 2010).

Over the past decade, an onslaught of research has cited favorable outcomes for both children with disabilities and their general education peers educated in cotaught classrooms as the holy grail of education (Conderman & Hedin, 2014; Friend et al., 2010; Nichols et al., 2010; Villa & Thousand, 2016). When implemented appropriately, students have the benefit of two highly trained and effective professionals in the classroom. However, when implemented poorly, students can experience a lack of congruency between the two teachers, or in many cases, the special education teacher is relegated to the role of an overpaid and overqualified classroom aid (Nichols et al., 2010). There is a need for practitioners and researchers to identify and replicate best practices in co-teaching, including how general education and special education teachers coplan and codeliver content lessons at the secondary level (Villa & Thousand, 2016).

Schools are a society unto themselves, and any change to society takes a shift in the paradigm of those most involved, in this case teachers (DuFour & Marzano, 2009).
Legislative mandates that are unclear on specific implementation undoubtedly lead to variation within that implementation; such is the case with inclusion. Although the 2004 IDEIA clearly states that students with disabilities should have access to the general education curriculum in the regular education classroom to the “maximum extent possible,” how to enact that mandate is less clear (De Vroey et al., 2016, p. 111). This is a philosophical shift for many special education teachers who fear that students will not receive the support they need for their disabilities in the general education environment (Able et al., 2015). This is also a philosophical shift for general education teachers who may not feel confident in their ability to meet the needs of students with disabilities while maintaining the standard for content mastery for all students (Grieve, 2009). The success or failure of schools to implement inclusion clearly is based upon their ability to make sense of the laws, implement the laws, and do so in environments that change the hearts and minds of the teachers who stand before children each and every day.

The Role of School Site Leadership

School sites are like villages; a busy level of activity hums through the halls with teachers and students, counselors and psychologists, custodians, and nutrition workers bustling to and fro from their daily tasks. School administrators are charged with overseeing all staff and activities on their campuses. The job descriptions of school administrators often include a statement that they are to maintain and implement adopted policies of the board of trustees and to interpret and apply state, county, and federal laws and regulations (Bateman & Bateman, 2014). This puts school site administrators in the place of overseeing every aspect of their school from maintenance to instruction. Often school administrators, principals, and assistant principals ascend to their role after
undertaking a number of years as a teacher. However, as school administrators, principals and assistant principals are often tasked with overseeing and managing a variety of roles of which they themselves have no direct knowledge (Sumbera et al., 2014). Research clearly shows that the role of the leader is crucial to the success of any change initiative (Ackerman Anderson & Anderson, 2010; Pazey et al., 2015; White-Smith & White, 2009). The world of special education is, at its core, a large-scale change initiative (Kavale & Forness, 2000). As new legislation is enacted and updated, school administrators must make sense of new laws and regulations and lead a change initiative among their staff (Saltrick, 2010; Sumbera et al., 2014). Leadership, then, is a critical component to the education of students with disabilities.

Anderson and Anderson-Ackerman (2010) described transformational change as fundamentally different than transitional or transactional change, which, on its own, can be managed and regulated by a manager. They claimed that transformational change must be led, not just managed, as it is a fundamental shift from one state of being to another. This upending of states requires the organization to change culture, and that cultural change is a reflection of the leadership at the top of the organization (Anderson & Anderson-Ackerman, 2010). The variety of shifts in special education, most notably a legislative push toward inclusion, is a transformational shift from a fundamentally different preexisting state. Therefore, the ability of school administrators to lead such a change is important to the success of the change.

In an exhaustive review of literature related to inclusion in secondary schools from 2001-2012, De Vroey et al. (2016) found that significant differences exist between inclusion at the secondary level and that at the primary level. In their meta-analysis of
105 research works, they found that at the secondary level significant research had been conducted on student perception of inclusion (De Vroey et al., 2016). They also found that a large number of studies had been conducted on both special education teachers and general education teachers’ attitudes toward inclusion. De Vroey et al. found that school leadership, in particular how site leadership organizes time and structure for professional development, was a significant factor in the positive view of inclusion among teachers. The finding that professional development impacts teachers’ views on inclusion indicates that more research on how school leaders organize professional development surrounding inclusion is needed.

Transformational change is different from other types of changes because it must be led and not simply managed (Ackerman Anderson & Anderson, 2010). Whereas developmental and transitional changes operate within known conditions and known outcomes, transformational change is like aiming for an unknown state through an unknown path (Anderson & Ackerman Anderson, 2010). The organization that begins the process toward transformation is fundamentally changed through the process, thus leaving an entirely new organization as the result. This complex change will not be successful with simple management but requires leadership, and the most successful transformational leaders are those who employ high levels of emotional intelligence and focus on creating a shared vision with their stakeholders (Hurwitz & Hurwitz, 2015). In a 2009 study, White-Smith and White examined how first-year principals worked within a framework of change initiatives to impact the overrepresentation of African American and Hispanic students in special education. They studied the principals’ perceptions of their work impacting the overrepresentation of African
American and Hispanic students in special education and found that a significant amount of the principals’ time was devoted to management and task orientation (White-Smith & White, 2009), while transformative change requires focus on culture and systems, not management and task (Ackerman Anderson & Anderson, 2010). White-Smith and White (2009) noted that often the leader’s vision of grand reform was mitigated by competing demands from stakeholder groups such as parents, district office personnel, teachers, and community leaders. An additional finding by White-Smith and White revealed that principals had a significant impact on the creation of cultures at their schools, and the most significant contributing factor that informed principals’ decision-making toward that culture creation was their own experiences both in their own education and in their career as an educator.

The top two influencers on student achievement are quality of classroom teachers and quality of school leadership (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). Therefore, Aguilar et al. (2011) found inspiration to study how Oakland Unified School District was supporting and coaching its school leaders and the impact it had on student performance. In their examination of Oakland schools, Aguilar et al. found positive correlations between the schools in which principals were coached as leaders and the performance of students on high-stakes state testing at those schools. They also found a reduction in teacher and administrator turnover at these schools (Aguilar et al., 2011). The retention of quality leaders who can transform their schools and themselves makes economic sense to often cash-strapped and human-resource-poor schools (Bateman & Bateman, 2014).
Upon the passage of P.L. 94-142, school districts across the country developed departments of special education to monitor and meet the legal requirements of the bill (Boscardin, 2005; Osgood, 2008). The role of the special education administrator had been to ensure legal compliance with students’ IEPs. However, with the shift in education toward inclusion, a system of special education separate from the general education school system is becoming less and less frequent (Baglieri et al., 2011; Boscardin, 2005). Now it is the school leadership, the principal, and assistant principals who are “the instructional leaders for all students, including students with disabilities” (Boscardin, 2005, p. 24). Transforming education from a dual system of special education and general education will require leadership and culture change. In a case study of administrators’ use of problem-solving strategies, Boscardin (2005) found that administrators who successfully fostered collaborative teams of teachers, counselors, psychologists, and administrators were able to effectively transform school systems from a dual approach of special and general education to a single system focused on inclusion.

Sumbera et al. (2014) found in their meta-analysis of 12 qualitative studies that school leadership was a significant factor in a schools’ ability to successfully include students with disabilities. They examined how school administrators made sense of FAPE and LRE. Sumbera et al. (2014) argued that, as the administrator in charge of implementing a student’s IEP, the school administrator has a large impact on the success of that implementation. They shared that although the hope is that school leaders will be able to promote an inclusive school culture and climate in which all students—regardless of ability, race, class, or gender—
occupy center stage and have the opportunity to fully participate as valued member of the school community, the realization of that hope takes effective leadership, first and foremost (Sumbera et al., 2014, p. 320).

**Theoretical Framework**

Sensemaking as a theoretical framework has roots in organizational psychology (Weick, 2011). The concept gained momentum on its own during the 1980s through the works of Starbuck, Milliken, Dunbar, Goleman, and Weick (as discussed by Weick, 1995). Weick (1995) made the concept explicit in stating that sensemaking “involves placing stimuli into some kind of framework” (p. 4). Sensemaking is the study of how individuals not only place stimuli into a framework, but also of how that framework is constructed in the first place, and therefore has benefits for understanding how educational leaders make sense of changing laws and regulations (Saltrick, 2010).

In the modern public education system, the administrator is not just a manager but also a leader of an organization and must therefore make sense of a variety of laws, mandates, and policies and implement them while leading the organization. Sensemaking theory can “assist researchers, practitioners, and policymakers in gaining insight into the ways in which principals negotiate the complexity of their changing roles and responsibilities as mandated by NCLB (2002) and IDEA (2004)” (Sumbera et al., 2014, p. 300). Given the broad spectrum of individual administrators’ experiences throughout life, how those individuals make sense of laws and policies is foundational to how those individuals will implement various practices.
Weick’s (1995) work on organizations such as businesses, educational institutions, and public service entities, has demonstrated how individuals, particularly leaders within the organization, are continually using the process of sensemaking. Weick (1995) began simply enough in stating that sensemaking “literally means the making of sense” (p. 4). Sensemaking is more than just the examination of stimuli through a framework; it explores how that framework is constructed to begin with. Sensemaking is most notable when predictions break down or when experiences do not fit into what we think we know to be true (Weick, 1995).

Through an examination of earlier researchers on sensemaking, Weick (1995) synthesized the work of other researchers to explore how sensemaking differs from other cognitive acts such as interpretation. For example, interpretation focuses on cues and the linking of those cues, whereas sensemaking looks more at how the cues got there in the first place or in how one picks out individual cues from the ongoing flow of experiences (Weick, 1995). Weick made a key distinction between interpretation and sensemaking. He said that sensemaking is about “the ways people generate what they interpret” (Weick, 1995, p. 13). Where interpretation can be equated to reading, sensemaking can be equated to both reading and writing (Saltrick, 2010).

This concept that sensemaking is more than just interpretation is important when examining a leader’s tasks in the organization. Leaders do not simply interpret events; they must create, or write, the story of their organization. Weick (1995) examined the work of Thayer on leadership and communication to give a frame for the need of leaders to understand and make use of sensemaking. As quoted in Weick, Thayer argued,
A leader at work is one who gives others a different sense of the meaning of that which they do by recreating it in a different form, a different “face,” in the same way that a pivotal painter or sculptor or poet gives those who follow him (or her) a different way of “seeing”—and therefore saying and doing and knowing in the world. A leader does not tell it “as it is”; he tells it as it might be, giving what “is” thereby a different “face.” . . . The leader is a sense-giver. (p. 10)

Sensemaking is about the way in which people go through a process. Interpretation can be about a process but can also be about the product created. Sensemaking examines how individuals construct, filter, frame, and create (Weick, 1995).

The Seven Properties of Sensemaking

Sensemaking includes seven distinct steps or characteristics (Weick, 1995). Weick (1995) argued that these steps can be thought of as a linear sequence, excluding any forthcoming feedback loops that arise between the steps. Each characteristic may also happen simultaneously with another, thereby shortening the time the sense-maker spends within each frame. This study sought to explore how high school administrators make sense of federal and state laws related to special education, particularly the inclusion of students with disabilities into the general education classroom, and then utilize that sensemaking to implement related practices, procedures, and programs.

Grounded in identity construction. Sensemaking can only be accomplished by the sense-maker; therefore, one’s identity construction is intrinsically tied to the process of sensemaking (Saltrick, 2010; Weick, 1995). In order to make sense of the stimuli around one’s self, the sense-maker must be aware of his or her own identity and relationship to the stimuli (Sumbera et al., 2014). However, one’s identity construction is
always in a state of flux because it is formed through interaction with others; the
definition of self changes over time, and particularly with each new interaction with other
individuals and environmental stimuli, the sense of self is readjusted (Pazey et al., 2015).
Weick (1995) pointed out that “people simultaneously try to shape and react to the
environments they face,” thus complicating the interplay between identity construction
and sensemaking (p. 23). This study explored how the high school administrator’s own
identity impacts his or her sensemaking of special education laws.

**Retrospective.** Sensemaking is retrospective in that one can only make sense of
what has happened once it has happened (Weick, 2011). Weick (1995) illustrated that
experiences are distinct events, and that the analysis of those lived events can only
happen retrospectively. The creation of meaning requires attention to some experience in
a past point in time, and therefore, whatever may have been occurring at that moment
will influence the meaning made (Weick, 2011). High school administrators have had
various experiences with special education, which may impact their retrospective
sensemaking of those experiences and also impact their future planning for
implementation of special education laws. This retrospective approach of sensemaking
implies that no experience can ever have a single interpretation but rather that every
experience is prone to hindsight bias. Weick (2011) presented three steps to avoid such
biases. First, retrospective sensemaking ought be done over the short term. Second, the
sense-maker needs to understand that retrospection can add clarity but not transparency to
events. Third, Weick (1995) warned that once “the feeling of order, clarity, and
rationality . . . is achieved, further retrospective processing stops” (p. 29).
Enactive of sensible environments. In organizations, people often craft part of, if not all of, the environment they ultimately face. In other words, they enact that of which they must also make sense. For individuals within an organization, “there is not some kind of monolithic, singular, fixed environment that exists detached” from their everyday reality (Weick, 1995, p. 31). The sense-maker is not separate from the environment but rather is part of the environment. The actions and inactions taken by each individual within the organization serve to build the meaning of events as they unfold. The environment, both physical and social, enacts “the way things are done type of mentality” (Sumbera et al., 2014, p. 301) through which individuals make sense of events, predict outcomes, and navigate daily interactions. This study explored how high school administrators are not only part of the environment related to special education but how, in practice, they also help build that environment. The study also looked at how the administrator makes sense of the environment, that is, special education laws, and then implements changes from within that environment to shape a future state of the environment.

Social. Although sensemaking conjures images of philosophers deep in introspection, “sensemaking rarely takes place in solitude” (Sumbera et al., 2014, p. 302). Humans are a social species, and the creation of frameworks to make sense of events is inherently influenced by others (Weick, 1995, 2011). Sensemaking is a collective process in that the social context of figuring things out happens via conversations and interactions with others. In fact, it is not just that conversations and interactions influence sensemaking, but rather that “sensemaking is never solitary because what a person does internally is contingent on others” (Weick, 1995, p. 40). Even one’s internal monologue
relies on frameworks made through interactions with others. This study explored how high school administrators make sense of special education, particularly through their own social interactions with other stakeholders such as district office or special education local plan area (SELP A) administrators, teachers, students, and parents.

**Ongoing.** Human beings are always in the middle of things. There is no beginning or end to sensemaking because a thing only becomes a thing when it is focused on from some point beyond the present (Weick, 2011). Within organizations, individuals are typically involved in a flow or a course of a project. Weick (1995) explored how individuals make sense of interruptions to those flows noting that interruptions typically elicit an emotional response and thus impact the framework through which the interruption is viewed. An individual who is making sense of a current interruption to his or her flow will recall and attach feelings based on previous times that feeling was present. For example, someone angry at an interruption to his or her workflow will use frameworks from when he or she previously felt angry to examine the current event, regardless of whether the circumstances of the previous event and current event match (Weick, 1995). In this way, sensemaking is ongoing and neither starts nor stops at specific points (Sumbera et al., 2014). Special education is likewise an ongoing process in that the final outcome is never final and is always in process of educating the pupil. The structures of the organization that the administrator puts in place are also always ongoing and are never a finished product.

**Focused on and by extracted cues.** Weick (1995) argued that the products of sensemaking are more likely to be seen than the process, which is why it is important to observe how individuals deal with “prolonged puzzles that defy sensemaking, puzzles
such as paradoxes, dilemmas, and inconceivable events” (p. 49). Through sensemaking, people extract cues that allow them to reconcile these puzzles. For example, when lost in a forest without a map, an individual may take cues from rocks, paths, stars, rivers, and so forth, to find his or her way to safety, thus using these cues to make sense of the puzzle at hand (Sumbera et al., 2014). Cues in organizations are familiar structures that provide a larger sense of the organization. These cues indicate the point of reference for the construction of the frame through which individuals make sense of the organization. Furthermore, it is the leader’s responsibility within the organization to chose, or place, that point of reference for subordinates (Weick, 1995). This study explored how high school administrators place those cues related to special education for their stakeholders.

**Driven by plausibility rather than accuracy.** Weick (1995) claimed that for sensemaking issues of “sufficiency and plausibility take precedence over accuracy” (p. 62). Sensemaking need not be entirely accurate due to a variety of reasons. First, making sense of a phenomenon or event is completed by humans and thus is tied to the tendency to embellish or elaborate on particular points of reference (Weick, 2011). In order to make sense, however, the individual need not have a definitive complete accurate understanding; he or she needs only have enough knowledge that what he or she is examining is plausible (Sumbera et al., 2014). Another reason sensemaking is less concerned with accuracy, particularly in organizations, is the issue of time. Weick (1995) explained that “speed often reduced the necessity for accuracy in the sense that quick responses shave events before they have become crystallized into a single meaning” (p. 57). Sensemaking may be less driven by accuracy; however, laws related to special
education are deeply related to accuracy, and high school administrators must craft their organization to be both accurate and realistic.

**Sensemaking in Education**

A litany of recent research indicates that sensemaking is a fundamental skill for effective leadership (Ancona, 2012; Saltrick, 2010; Sumbera et al., 2014; Woodward, 2015). In today’s complex and interrelated world “where unpredictable events and shifting political, economic, environmental, and social conditions challenge us at every turn, we all need to make better sense of what is going on” (Ancona, 2012, p. 15). As explained in the previous section, so much of sensemaking is dependent on the map that leaders draw for members of their organizations; the leader’s ability to frame key points of reference succinctly and clearly, and to communicate those rationally while tapping into stakeholders’ emotions is directly tied to the organization’s success or failure (Weick, 1995). At the MIT School of Management, students are taught that leadership is dependent on four capabilities, and that of those four “sensemaking is highly correlated with leadership effectiveness” (Ancona, 2012, p. 4). Sensemaking is the way in which leaders notice, frame, explain, and relate what is happening in their organizations for both those members within the organization and the world at large (Saltrick, 2010).

For the past century, changes in education, particularly in special education, have been driven by changes in policy in response to political and theoretical pressures (Saltrick, 2010; Sumbera et al., 2014). Every new initiative, policy change, or rollout of new standards and instructional practices requires school leaders to manage change. As in many organizations, change in schools is often met with resistance, and it is “critical for leaders to be able to engage in sensemaking during times of change in order to
understand who and where they are in the context” of that change (Woodward, 2015, p. 61). Half a century ago, students with disabilities were almost entirely excluded from the average American school, but hundreds of federal and state policies have been written to address this inequity (Osgood, 2008). However, policy does not simply become reality. The “meaning of a policy is the product of the interaction of the knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes of those charged with implementing it” (Saltrick, 2010, p. 62). Thus the ability of the school leader, the administrator, to engage in sensemaking of federal and state policies about special education is intrinsically tied to the success of that policy implementation.

Summary

The history of education in the United States demonstrates a long series of exclusion of groups that differ from the norm (Osgood, 2008; Spaulding & Pratt, 2015). Children of color were actively excluded and segregated from the American classroom until the 1954 Supreme Court ruling in Brown v. Board of Education (Burtka, 2015; McGovern, 2015). Likewise, until court cases like PARC v. The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and Mills v. Board of Education came to fruition, children with disabilities were similarly excluded from widespread access to public education (Kavale & Forness, 2000; Keogh, 2007). Even after Congress passed P.L. 94-142, local schools and districts were left to their own devices to determine ways to provide access to school for students with disabilities, and the results were often that students with disabilities were educated in separate classrooms without access to the general education realm of their nondisabled peers (Baglieri et al., 2011). Only over the past 2 decades have federal and state mandates dictated policies of inclusion for students with disabilities, and even then it is
largely at the discretion of the local school leaders to make sense of and implement said policies (Hardman & Dawson, 2008; Thousand et al., 2006).

Leadership matters in a variety of ways, but particularly when implementing changes in policies and procedures. The effectiveness of the leader is clearly tied to the long-term effectiveness of the policy or procedural change (Ackerman Anderson & Anderson, 2010; Anderson & Ackerman Anderson, 2010). Because of this, it is important to understand how school administrators first make sense of special education laws and mandates and then second to understand how they implement these laws and mandates at their school site (Saltrick, 2010; Sumbera et al., 2014). The work of Weick (1995, 2011) on sensemaking provides a theoretical framework through which to understand how leaders make sense of federal and state laws and mandates. Previous research on sensemaking of inclusion laws and the implementation of them has focused on perspectives of classroom teachers or elementary school administrators; little research exists in how leaders at the high school level have made sense of federal mandates regarding inclusion and implemented them (Daunarummo, 2010; Farris, 2011; Goodin, 2011; Jamison, 2013).

**Synthesis Matrix**

A synthesis matrix of supportive research was constructed (see Appendix A) and used to guide the development of this review of the literature.
CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

Overview

Chapter II served as an in-depth review of the related literature. The purpose of Chapter III is to explain the research design and the methodology employed to conduct this phenomenological study of the perceptions of high school administrators in Southern California regarding how they interpret and implement specific federal and state requirements concerning the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom. Chapter III is a formula or recipe for other researchers to follow in order to replicate this study. This chapter describes in detail the population and sample of the study, the research design of the study, and how data were collected and interpreted. Chapter III concludes with limitations of the study and a final overarching summary of the methodology. In summary, Chapter III provides detailed information that allows any researcher to replicate the study.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the perceptions of high school administrators in Southern California regarding how they interpret and implement specific federal and state policies concerning the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom, and to identify additional factors high school administrators perceive affect implementation.

In addition, it was the purpose of this study to describe how high school administrators in Southern California perceive that their prior experiences with students with disabilities impact their interpretation and implementation of federal and state
policies concerning the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom.

**Research Questions**

This study was guided by one central research question and four subquestions:

**Central Question**

What are the perceptions of public high school administrators in Southern California regarding the ways they interpret and implement federal and state policies concerning the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom?

**Subquestions**

1. What are the perceptions of public high school administrators in Southern California regarding how they interpret federal and state policies concerning the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom?

2. What are the perceptions of public high school administrators in Southern California regarding how they implement federal and state policies concerning the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom?

3. What additional factors do public high school administrators in Southern California perceive to influence their implementation of federal and state policies concerning the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom?

4. How do public high school administrators in Southern California perceive their prior experience with students with disabilities impacts interpretation and implementation of federal and state policies and concerning the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom?
Research Design

The topic of this study was to examine how public high school administrators in Southern California interpret and implement specific federal and state policies and mandates concerning the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom. Subquestions also address the prior experience administrators have had with students with disabilities and in what ways that has impacted how they make sense of and implement specific federal and state policies. The qualitative nature of the study allows for a deep understanding of how high school administrators navigate interpreting and implementing various federal and state mandates.

As noted in McMillan and Schumacher (2014), the type of research flows from the research question. In this case, the research question and related subquestions focus on describing and interpreting a specific event or phenomenon. This aligns with a phenomenological study, which captures the essence of the experience as perceived by the participants (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014). Participants, public high school administrators, were asked to describe and interpret how they make sense of various laws and mandates for students with disabilities, in addition to how they then implemented those laws and mandates into practice at their school.

This study utilized a qualitative methodology. Unlike quantitative research methods, qualitative research methods allow the researcher to examine a deep understanding of a particular event or system (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014). The nature of this study lent itself to a qualitative approach given the intent to describe and explore how high school administrators came to a perceived understanding of federal and state laws and then implemented those laws. Further, the selection of a research design is
directly connected to the nature of the research problem (Creswell, 2014). McMillan and Schumacher (2014) pointed out that individuals’ perceptions create their lived experience and thus are particularly relevant to phenomenological studies. The study described and explored how high school administrators’ perceptions of how their prior experience with students with disabilities impacted their ability to interpret and implement federal and state policies and mandates concerning the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom.

One of the guiding principles of scientific evidence-based inquiry is that the methods chosen for the study allow for direct investigation of the research questions (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014). Simply put, the method chosen must match and fit with the question and problem posed. In the case of this study, the questions centered on understanding how high school administrators interpret and implement various laws related to the education of students with disabilities. In qualitative research studies, the world has multiple realities based upon an individual’s lived experiences, whereas in quantitative research studies there exists a single reality that can be measured by a numerical instrument (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014). In qualitative research studies, the researcher seeks to answer how individuals or groups ascribe meaning to social and human situations (Creswell, 2014). Given the nature of this study in seeking meaning of an individual’s lived experience, qualitative methods were chosen for the research design, specifically methods of phenomenology.

**Phenomenology**

Phenomenology is a type of qualitative research that studies the lived experiences of individuals or groups through a particular phenomenon. This phenomenological
qualitative study explored and described the perceptions of high school administrators in Southern California regarding their interpretation and implementation of specific federal and state mandates concerning the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom. As Patton (2015) pointed out, phenomenology seeks to understand the “meaning, structure, and essence, of the lived experience” of a phenomenon for an individual or group of people (p. 288). Multiple ways of interpreting the same event exist, and thus capturing the meaning of the lived experience is reliant upon the interpretation of each participant; in phenomenology, the researcher becomes the instrument through which that meaning and interpretation is filtered (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014).

Using phenomenology, the researcher conducted in-depth interviews with those who had the direct knowledge of having lived the experience in question (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014). This study allowed the researcher to explore the lived experiences of high school administrators as they interpreted and implemented specific federal and state policies and mandates concerning the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom. Patton (2015) pointed out that phenomenology includes a focus on “exploring how human beings make sense of an experience and transform experience into consciousness” (p. 115). Phenomenology was chosen over other qualitative approaches for this focus on how individuals make sense of a shared lived experience, namely how high school administrators make sense of and implement specific federal and state policies and mandates concerning the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom.
McMillan and Schumacher (2014) pointed out that the in-depth interview allows the researcher to elicit extensive feedback from participants and leads to a rich understanding of the problem. The researcher conducted standardized open-ended interviews with research participants regarding how they make sense of and implement inclusion. The interviews were then coded for themes to determine a deeper understanding of how high school administrators in Southern California interpret and implement specific federal and state policies and mandates concerning the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom.

**Population**

McMillan and Schumacher (2014) defined population as the total group to which the results of the research can be generalized. A population for a qualitative study can be large or small and is generally considered a group of individuals who share the same characteristics (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014). McMillan and Schumacher further pointed out that population is a term that can relate to objects, persons, cases, or events. The population of this study was public high school administrators in Southern California. The term *high school administrator* refers to school principals and assistant principals serving in public high schools; therefore, the population size of high school administrators in Southern California, including Imperial, Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino, San Diego, Santa Barbara, and Ventura counties, numbers more than 2,000 (California Department of Education, 2018). Furthermore, the population was limited to administrators serving in public comprehensive high schools. Comprehensive high schools are typically large and serve a broad range of students. Comprehensive high schools are not inclusive of charter, alternative, or private schools.
that are typically small and serve specific or targeted populations of students. Since comprehensive high schools include large numbers of student enrollment, administrators serving in comprehensive high schools often assume a variety of core responsibilities inclusive of instructional leadership and management of their institutions. One such core responsibility of this population is the determination of the organization of their schools, such as schedules, course availability, teacher assignments, and budgets for the school and departments. The population for this study was the 431 high schools and high school principals in the counties included in this study.

**Target Population**

The target population is the set of individuals to which the overall study can be generalized; it is the individuals from the overall population for which the data can be used to make inferences (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014). It is important that target populations are clearly identified for the purposes of the research study (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014). It is typically not feasible, due to time or cost constraints, to study large groups; therefore, the researcher chose population samples from within a larger group (Creswell, 2014). The population for this study was high school administrators in Southern California, and the target population from that group was identified as high school administrators in Riverside County, California. Comprehensive high school administrators in Riverside County were chosen as the population based on the geographical proximity to the researcher. In addition demographically, the high school student body in Riverside County represents similar characteristics to the larger Southern California area. For the 2016-2017 school year, 54 public comprehensive high schools operated within Riverside County (Kena et al., 2016). Given an average of three assistant
principals per school, the target population included the 54 principals and 162 assistant principals serving in the 54 public comprehensive high schools in Riverside County.

Sample Population

A sample population is that group of individuals in a study selected from the target population from which data are gathered (Creswell, 2014). McMillan and Schumacher (2014) pointed out that the data from the sample can be generalized to the target population as a whole. Unlike sampling in a quantitative study, sampling for a qualitative study is done to provide information-rich cases that increase the utility of information obtained from a small sample (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014). Given the power of this sampling, few cases can often yield large amounts of data. For this study, a sample was selected from the administrators at the 54 comprehensive high schools in Riverside County.

The sample participants were identified through the following criteria:

1. Served as a principal or assistant principal in one of the 54 comprehensive public high schools in Riverside County.

2. Had at least 3 years of experience as an administrator.

3. Served at a high school within 20 miles of the researcher.

4. Had experience working with special education programs at the high school.

5. Did not serve at a school within the researcher’s own school district.
**Sample**

The sample is a group of participants in a study selected from the total population from which the researcher intends to generalize the findings. According to McMillan and Schumacher (2014), sampling is selecting a “group of individuals from whom data are collected” (p. 129). In addition, Patton (2015) and Creswell (2003) defined a sample as that subset of the target population that represents the whole population. When a researcher chooses a quantitative approach, the sample is often random; however, the sample population for this qualitative study was criteria based and considered purposeful sampling. According to McMillan and Schumacher (2014), purposeful sampling is when the researcher “selects a sample that is representative of the population or that includes subjects with needed characteristics” (p. 138). Purposeful sampling was chosen as the method of sample selection based on the criteria.

*Figure 1. Process used to identify the sample population of the study.*
For this study, a combination of purposeful and convenience sampling was used, which, according to Patton (2015), is a strength in qualitative research. In such sampling, the researcher makes a judgment about which subjects to select in order to provide the best information for the purpose of the research (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014). The researcher selected participants based on their ability to provide information-rich cases related to their experiences of interpreting and implementing federal and state laws related to the inclusion of students with disabilities.

In addition, the convenience sampling strategy allows a qualitative researcher to establish an accessible sample based on location and time (Patton 2015). In this study, the convenience sampling strategy was simultaneously applied with the purposeful sampling strategy to identify participants who met the criteria and were located in close proximity to the researcher (Patton 2015). The researcher utilized school district websites and directories to contact principals and assistant principals from the 14 public comprehensive high schools that were within 20 miles of the researcher and invited them to participate in the study if they met the above criteria (see Appendix B). Based upon 2018-2019 data available on each school’s website, there were 57 total individuals who served as principal or assistant principal at these 14 schools.

**Instrumentation**

Research is only as valid as the instrument used to measure it (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014; Patton, 2015). An instrument refers to the process through which data are gathered. For example, in quantitative research methods, the instrument often takes the form of a survey (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014). However, given the personal and in-depth nature of qualitative research, the researcher becomes part of the
process through which the data are measured (Patton, 2015), thus the researcher becomes the research instrument. The instrument used in research is inherently tied to the validity of said research, and thus particular procedures must be in place to ensure valid instrumentation (Patton, 2015).

**Researcher as Instrument**

For phenomenological studies, the researcher acts at the instrument via in-depth interviews (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014; Patton, 2015). Since the researcher acts as the instrument through which data are collected in a qualitative study, there may exist influences on the data collection due to the unique personality, characteristics, and interview techniques of the researcher (Pezalla, Pettigrew, & Miller-Day, 2012). As a result, the study may contain some biases based on the influence of the researcher during the qualitative interview sessions. For this study, the researcher was employed as a principal at a comprehensive public high school within the region where the study was conducted. As a result, the researcher brought a potential bias to the study based on personal experiences in a similar setting. Creswell (2014) articulated that the qualitative researcher is the blend of the voice of the participant with the interpretation of the researcher as well as a complex description and understanding of the problem at hand. Qualitative researchers seek out information-rich cases (Creswell, 2014). As such, the qualitative researcher must have direct and intimate access to the participants of the study (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014).

For this study, the researcher conducted in-depth interviews with study participants in which the interview protocol served as the research instrument (see Appendix C). Although qualitative interviews can take several forms, for the purposes of
this study, standardized open-ended interviews, also known as semistructured interviews, were conducted. McMillan and Schumacher (2014) pointed out that this strategy in which participants are asked the same questions in the same order reduces the interviewer’s flexibility.

**Qualitative Instruments Used**

A series of scripted interview questions were developed prior to the data collection period. These questions were intentionally linked to Weick’s (1995, 2011) research on sensemaking within organizations. The interview questions were designed and sent to the expert panel for review. The expert panel, which had extensive knowledge and experience with the research topic, was able to provide feedback on modifying, aligning, and revising the interview questions. Interview questions were aligned with the research questions in order to elicit in-depth feedback from the participants (see Appendix C for interview questions and Appendix D for alignment chart of research questions and interview questions).

The use of such protocol allowed for replication while maintaining the integrity of the interview over time and for multiple subjects (Patton, 2015). At the beginning of each interview, questions were asked to establish rapport and build trust with the interviewer (Patton, 2015). Given the open-ended nature of questions, it was important for the researcher to connect and build trust with the participant (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014). Participants were not provided a copy of the questions ahead of time, but were provided a copy of the questions to reference during the interview. The researcher did not want prescribed responses, but rather insightful and personally reflective responses; therefore, the questions were not provided in advance for
participants. However, if the participant needed to clarify or refer to a question throughout the interview, the questions were made available at the time of the interview.

**Reliability**

Patton (2015) contended that if things counted and measured are indeed valid and reliable, then those things are real and true; however, in qualitative analysis no straightforward or simple test can be applied for reliability and validity. McMillan and Schumacher (2014) described reliability as the consistency of measurement. A reliable measurement is one that can be replicated and repeated with the same result; it is a measurement free from error (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014). One way to increase reliability of qualitative research is through the agreement of the participant and researcher (Patton, 2015). In a process known as “review by inquiry participants,” interviewees in this study were provided with the opportunity to review the transcripts of their interviews prior to data analysis to ensure their responses accurately reflected their perceptions of how they make sense of and implement various federal and state policies and mandates concerning the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom (Patton, 2015, p. 659). Review by inquiry participants is an approach to analytical triangulation that strengthens credibility and confidence in the validity of the study (Patton, 2015).

McMillan and Schumacher (2014) pointed out that qualitative research depends in large part on the interpersonal skills of the inquirer. These interpersonal skills include the researcher’s ability to build trust with the participant, maintain a nonjudgmental attitude and manner, and to respect the norms of the situation. McMillan and Schumacher (2014) recommended that the researcher balance analytical and empathetic interactions in order
to obtain the best and most comprehensive data during the face-to-face interview. Given these interpersonal requirements, the researcher conducted all interviews and, whenever possible, interviews were conducted face to face. This step increased the reliability of the data, as the researcher was the instrument through which data were collected.

**Field Test**

After the standardized open-ended interview questions were created, a field test was conducted via one pilot interview that mirrored exactly the interview protocol while being observed by a fellow researcher. The observing researcher and the pilot test subject provided feedback to increase the reliability of the researcher as an interviewer (see Appendix E). The field test allowed the researcher to seek clarity of the questions and alignment to the research questions, and thus increased the overall reliability of the study. If ambiguity was found, the questions were modified based on the feedback obtained by the observing researcher prior to conducting the interviews with participants.

In addition, colleagues familiar with but not involved in the study who also had expertise and degrees in qualitative research were asked to observe the field test in order to determine any behaviors on the part of the researcher that might have influenced the participants. As noted in McMillan and Schumacher (2014), the researcher is the instrument and thus must take steps to ensure a valid study, specifically during the interview where the researcher must not exhibit behaviors that would influence the participant in any way. Patton (2015) outlined specific interviewer skills that increase the quality of the interview and responses of the participant, such as the use of head nodding, pausing, and providing nonsteering feedback. Additional feedback and the process of
debriefing with the observers provided during this observation process were incorporated into the researcher’s procedures.

Validity

Measurements that are reliable are not always valid because validity refers to the degree to which a measurement is accurate or true (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014). For qualitative research, validity is the extent to which the finding is interpreted in the correct way (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014; Patton, 2015). Qualitative inquiry depends upon the skills of the researcher to interpret, analyze, and tease out the meaning of data (Patton, 2015). The interview questions for this study were directly related to the research questions and to Weick’s (1995, 2011) research on sensemaking within organizations. This link assured that the data gathered directly answered the research questions, thereby assuring validity.

For qualitative researchers, validity is the degree to which the interpretations have mutual meanings between the participants and the researcher (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014). McMillan and Schumacher (2014) outlined several concrete strategies that are useful to increase researcher validity. Specific to this study, the researcher employed several of these strategies. First, the researcher utilized a mechanical recording device during participants’ interviews, which McMillan and Schumacher pointed out provides accurate and relatively complete records. This is preferential to relying on the researcher’s written account or memory. In addition, in what is termed participant review, each interviewee was provided a copy of the transcript from his or her interview to verify that his or her experiences were accurately captured. This strategy often leads to
increased accuracy and validity in that participants are able to clarify their meaning and responses on the topic (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014).

**Data Collection**

No data for this study were collected until the study had been approved by the Brandman University Institutional Review Board (BUIRB). As noted previously, the method of data collection was derived from the research problem and question (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014; Patton, 2015). The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the perceptions of high school administrators in Southern California regarding how they interpret and implement federal and state policies and mandates concerning the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom. As McMillan and Schumacher (2014) pointed out, the personal in-depth interview is a mainstay of phenomenological data collection. During this interview, considerable skill was needed to develop enough structure to keep the interview on track while showing enough empathy to elicit meaningful and elaborate responses from the participants (Creswell, 2014).

The data collection process followed a systemic approach to include the methods used to gather such data. First, the researcher identified participants who met the criteria for sample population. Notably, the researcher identified potential participants who were serving as administrators at comprehensive public high schools. The researcher then contacted said potential participants via e-mail with an introductory letter explaining the purpose and procedures used in the research study (see Appendix B).
Data Collection Procedures

The researcher conducted interviews directly with the participants face to face. Prior to each interview, the participant and researcher mutually agreed upon the time, date, and location of the interview. Interviews were audio-recorded using two separate and independent audio-recording devices after that was permitted by the interviewee (see Appendix F). The researcher then had an outside company transcribe the interviews. The transcripts were sent to the participants so that they could correct or clarify any statements that were not accurately captured. Upon confirmation of the participants receiving and confirming any inaccuracies, the researcher finalized the transcripts of the interview.

Protection of Rights of Human Subjects

All participants were required to read and sign the agreement prior to participation in the study. The safety of all participants was maintained and protected following BUIRB professional standards, which consist of protecting the participants’ human rights. The mission of BUIRB is to protect the rights of research participants and to ensure that research is conducted in an ethical manner (see Appendix G).

For this study, the interviewer obtained informed consent (see Appendix H) prior to any participant recruitment or data collection procedures. In addition, the researcher took steps to ensure that other aspects of the BUIRB Participants’ Bill of Rights (see Appendix G) were followed explicitly. Participants were told what the study was attempting to discover, of any potential benefits to the participant, and of any alternatives to participation. Participants were informed that the interviews would be recorded and gave consent for such prior to the start of the interview (see Appendix F). In addition,
participants were allowed to ask questions and ultimately decide not to participate without any adverse action taken.

**Data Analysis**

Upon completion of interviewing participants, the researcher analyzed the data to identify themes and patterns. Patton (2015) pointed out that, through analysis, qualitative data are transformed into findings. Inductive analysis is the process through which researchers move from specific data to more general categories and patterns within the data (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014). The researcher began the inductive analysis process by coding the transcript of each interview. McMillan and Schumacher (2014) explained that coding begins by identifying small pieces of data that stand alone. These stand-alone pieces of data, or codes, can be found in several types of data including setting, context, participant’s perspective, process, activity, event, relationship, or strategy (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014). The researcher coded each transcript digitally using NVivo Qualitative Software. Once coded, the researcher was able to classify and sort the codes in order to look for patterns and themes within the data. These patterns and themes are referred to as categories and typically encompass several codes. These categories or themes are the first layer of induction by the researcher and often will yield a few major themes with several minor themes also present (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014).

Patton (2015) recommended that to increase reliability and validity, researchers use multiple coders and establish intercoder consistency. Therefore, the researcher employed this intercoder technique by having an additional researcher with a completed doctoral degree and expertise in qualitative research separately code and analyze 10% of
the data. Any discrepancies between the coders were addressed and resolved before final themes were determined for the findings.

The data from the interviews were analyzed by the researcher and presented sequentially for each research question. The findings that emerged from the data analysis were identified and included for each research question. The analysis concluded with a table and discussion summarizing the findings in the study.

**Limitations**

This study was limited based upon the phenomenological research design. Data collected during the interview process may have been impacted by several human factors, such as personal bias, the rapport between the researcher and participant, or the emotional state of either the participant or researcher (Patton, 2015). In addition, the unintended bias of the researcher must be acknowledged. Although steps were taken to minimize the impact of researcher bias, it is possible that it impacted the analysis or interpretation of the data and must be at the least acknowledged as such.

**Summary**

This chapter outlined the research design and the methodology employed to conduct this phenomenological study of the perceptions of high school administrators in Southern California regarding how they interpret and implement specific federal and state policies and mandates concerning the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom. The researcher described the purpose statement as well as a central research question and related subquestions. The research design, population and sample, procedures for data collection and data analysis, and the limitations of the study were also described in detail for further replication of study.
The following chapter details the findings of the research and expands on the data collection process in addition to delving into the presentation and analysis of the data gathered. Chapter IV then closes with the presentation of the key findings of the study.
CHAPTER IV: RESEARCH, DATA COLLECTION, AND FINDINGS

Overview

The aim of this study was to explore how high school administrators make sense of and implement laws surrounding the inclusion of students with disabilities into the general education environment. This chapter first reviews the purpose, research questions, methodology, data collection procedures, and population and sample. Then, the data are presented according to research question and subquestion. The chapter concludes with a summary of the research findings.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the perceptions of high school administrators in Southern California regarding how they interpret and implement specific federal and state policies concerning the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom and to identify additional factors high school administrators perceive affect implementation.

In addition, it was the purpose of this study to describe how high school administrators in Southern California perceive that their prior experiences with students with disabilities impact their interpretation and implementation of federal and state policies concerning the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom.

Research Questions

This study was guided by one central research question and four subquestions:
Central Question

What are the perceptions of public high school administrators in Southern California regarding the ways they interpret and implement federal and state policies concerning the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom?

Subquestions

1. What are the perceptions of public high school administrators in Southern California regarding how they interpret federal and state policies concerning the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom?

2. What are the perceptions of public high school administrators in Southern California regarding how they implement federal and state policies concerning the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom?

3. What additional factors do public high school administrators in Southern California perceive to influence their implementation of federal and state policies concerning the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom?

4. How do public high school administrators in Southern California perceive their prior experience with students with disabilities impacts interpretation and implementation of federal and state policies and concerning the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom?

Research Methods and Data Collection Procedures

The topic of this study was to examine how public high school administrators in Southern California interpret and implement specific federal and state policies and mandates concerning the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom. Subquestions also address the prior experience administrators have had with
students with disabilities and in what ways that has impacted how they make sense of and implement specific federal and state policies. The qualitative nature of the study allows for a deep understanding of how high school administrators navigate interpreting and implementing various federal and state mandates.

First, the researcher identified participants who met the criteria for the sample population. Notably, the researcher identified potential participants who were serving as administrators at comprehensive public high schools. The researcher then contacted said potential participants via e-mail with an introductory letter explaining the purpose and procedures used in the research study (see Appendix B).

The researcher conducted interviews directly with the participants face to face. Prior to each interview, the participant and researcher mutually agreed upon the time, date, and location of the interview. Interviews were audio-recorded using two separate and independent audio-recording devices after that was permitted by the interviewee (see Appendix F). The researcher then had an outside company transcribe the interviews. The transcripts were sent to the participants so that they could correct or clarify any statements that were not accurately captured. Upon confirmation of the participants receiving and confirming any inaccuracies, the researcher finalized the transcripts of the interview.

**Population**

McMillan and Schumacher (2014) defined population as the total group to which the results of the research can be generalized. A population for a qualitative study can be large or small and is generally considered a group of individuals who share the same characteristics (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014). McMillan and Schumacher further
pointed out that population is a term that can relate to objects, persons, cases, or events. The population of this study was public high school administrators in Southern California. The term high school administrator refers to school principals and assistant principals serving in public high schools; therefore, the population size of high school administrators in Southern California, including Imperial, Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino, San Diego, Santa Barbara, and Ventura counties, numbers more than 2,000 (California Department of Education, 2018). Furthermore, the population was limited to administrators serving in public comprehensive high schools. Comprehensive high schools are typically large and serve a broad range of students. Comprehensive high schools are not inclusive of charter, alternative, or private schools that are typically small and serve specific or targeted populations of students. Since comprehensive high schools include large numbers of student enrollment, administrators serving in comprehensive high schools often assume a variety of core responsibilities inclusive of instructional leadership and management of their institutions. One such core responsibility of this population is the determination of the organization of their schools, such as schedules, course availability, teacher assignments, and budgets for the school and departments. The population for this study was the 431 high schools and high school principals in the counties included in this study.

Sample

A sample population is that group of individuals in a study selected from the target population from which data are gathered (Creswell, 2014). McMillan and Schumacher (2014) pointed out that the data from the sample can be generalized to the target population as a whole. Unlike sampling in a quantitative study, sampling for a
qualitative study is done to provide information-rich cases that increase the utility of information obtained from a small sample (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014). Given the power of this sampling, few cases can often yield large amounts of data. For this study, a sample was selected from the administrators at the 54 comprehensive high schools in Riverside County.

The sample participants were identified through the following criteria:

1. Served as a principal or assistant principal in one of the 54 comprehensive public high schools in Riverside County.
2. Had at least 3 years of experience as an administrator.
3. Served at a high school within 20 miles of the researcher.
4. Had experience working with special education programs at the high school.
5. Did not serve at a school within the researcher’s own school district.

### Demographic Data

Demographic data for the nine participants were collected to provide background information for the sample. Of the nine participants, four identified as male and five identified as female. Three of the participants were site principals while the remaining six were currently serving as assistant principals at their site. The participants had an average age of 49 although the youngest was 35 and the oldest was 60. The sample has an average number of years in administration of 10.1 years. However, the range of years in administration is from 3 to 17. The average number of years in education prior to going into administration was 12.5 and the range of that category was 4 to 20.
Presentation and Analysis of Data

The findings that emerged from this study came as a result of the transcribed interviews with the participants. In qualitative data analysis the researcher groups together words and phrases into larger themes related to each research question (Creswell, 2014). The NVivo qualitative research software program was used to organize the major findings of the study into themes. The major themes that were identified are listed in Table 1 and referenced to each research subquestion.

Table 1

Frequency of Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Interview sources</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How do you make sense of inclusion?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Through formal trainings</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Struggles to make sense of inclusion due to a perceived lack of training and/or lack of experience</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do you implement mandates of inclusion?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Through extracurricular experiences</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Through included nonacademic classes</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Through included core academic classes</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Through focused program monitoring</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What additional factors impact inclusion?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative leadership</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher opinions</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District support</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Logistical constraints</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent desires</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How have your prior experiences impacted your ability to lead inclusion?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom teaching experiences</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal experiences</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Research Subquestion 1

What are the perceptions of public high school administrators in Southern California regarding how they interpret federal and state policies concerning the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom?

Table 2 encompasses the major themes related to how high school administrators interpret federal and state policies concerning inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom.

Table 2

| Themes Describing How Administrators Interpret Policies Concerning Inclusion |
|---------------------------------|-------------------|----------------|
| Theme                           | Interview sources | Frequency |
| How do you make sense of inclusion? |                   |           |
| Through formal trainings        | 8                 | 15         |
| Struggles to make sense of inclusion due to a perceived lack of training and/or lack of experience | 7                 | 15         |

Formal trainings. All but one of the participants stated that formal trainings were a key part of their ability to interpret federal and state mandates surrounding inclusion of students with disabilities into the general education classroom. The participants felt that these trainings provided technical information regarding the laws of special education. The format of such trainings varied greatly from participant to participant, but the common theme throughout their discussion was the need to consult with perceived experts in the field. The following are examples of participant responses. Participant 1 stated,

ACSA has a fantastic program on special ed, and so I have had, I wanna say three or four meetings, and man I cannot wait till the next meeting. Because honestly,
they have attorneys coming in and giving lectures and talking about specialty clause, and people who are experts in that area—and honestly I feel like that’s the part I need the most support with, is because we need to protect these kids legally.

And we need to protect the school.

Participant 3 stated,

We’re participating in the S.I.P. grant, the Supporting Inclusive Practices grant. Our district is, and my school specifically is one of them, so there was a summer training.

Participant 5 stated,

I think through a lot of trainings, and I think in my program specialist role. I mean, that was a big part of what we would do every year, go to several different legal and law conferences, and when they updated IDEA, and you went through line by line that document, and different legal trainings.

Participant 8 stated,

Last year I went to a 3-day conference just because I sought it out myself along with another assistant principal and we went just to make sure we had that underlying base knowledge.

Although the majority of participants noted the need for formalized training related to the laws surrounding inclusion, several participants also noted that such trainings were not always helpful. Participant 2 stated,

So, the county office is doing a bunch of stuff. . . . Which honestly I found completely useless.

Participant 4 stated,
There were trainings through the district office. . . . Yeah, but I guess I thought those were lame, so trainings were lame.

Participant 7 stated,

We attend trainings at the district office. And for me, it’s very annoying, because honestly, I haven’t learned anything going to them. They seem more geared towards people who have no SPED background. Because I wanna support my team, I also go to a lot of the trainings that the teachers are sent to. But even my teachers, my strong teachers, they’re not really learning much.

The three participants who expressed the opinion that formal trainings were less than effective all had extensive backgrounds in special education themselves prior to going into administration.

**Perceived lack of training and/or experience.** Seven of the nine participants discussed feeling that they personally lacked the training or experience needed to lead the special education department and school related to matters of inclusion. Many of them spoke of the need to initiate their own training and find their own resources related to special education, particularly inclusion, in order to fill this perceived knowledge gap.

Participant 1 stated,

So, for me having no experience with special ed, that’s been the most difficult part because they put me in the position knowing that I didn’t really have any experience. . . . I’ve got my books I’ve been reading. I’ve got the classes I’ve been taking. . . . I’m just researching myself and I’m learning through experience. I’m asking questions. . . . When I found out I got the job I had about a month—and you know what it is—and so I just started pouring over everything. Like,
what do I need to know right now to get started to make sure that we are doing things legally correct?

Participant 2 stated,

I didn’t have formal trainings till probably not until after 3 years of administrative service.

Participant 8 stated,

But for the last 10 years of my teaching career I only taught AP and dual enrollment, so at that point I had very limited experience with students with disabilities other than a few students that had IEPs because of either visual or speech issues. . . . It’s been trial by fire. Coming into this and being assigned special ed with no special ed background or training. This is my second year that I worked with special ed. Last year I just made it one of my priorities and I’m clear on my credentials. So, one of my goals last year was to learn as much as I could about special education. The federal mandates, but also just best practices and organization of the district. And organization of—because I’m new to the district as well too. . . . And I spent a lot of time reading articles, talking to people, making appointments with the special ed department. Going in and doing observations with the special ed personnel that supports SPED and really those opportunities I had to seek out on my own because it didn’t really exist.

Two participants, both current principals, spoke to formal trainings they had participated in as assistant principals. Both also spoke to a sense of “being out of the loop” related to current legal mandates surrounding inclusion. Participant 9 stated,
But as far as, I rely on our special education, our massive special education department. But I have an assistant principal that was a program specialist, and if I have any questions, I go directly there, and he helps me with that. . . . Myself personally, have I gone to a training recently? No. We haven’t had those trainings. So, it’s nothing that our district has.

Participant 6 stated,

Well, it’s been less frequently lately. Or that’s not fair, maybe as principal now, I’m not going as much as when I was in AP, because the APs tend to spend more time in IEPs. I’ll go if I hear there’s going to be something that’s sticky, I trust my personality and how to deal with people to be the one that sits in there. So, I can’t really speak to that, I would say it’s been a while for me.

**Research Subquestion 2**

*What are the perceptions of public high school administrators in Southern California regarding how they implement federal and state policies concerning the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom?*

Table 3 includes the major themes related to how high school administrators implement various federal and state policies concerning inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom.

**Core academic classes.** Nearly all of the participants discussed inclusion practices at their schools that involved some level of inclusion of students with disabilities into a core academic general education class. The participants described their desires to include students with disabilities as much as possible for core academic classes of English language arts, math, science, and social science. The participants also
described that the inclusion of students into a general education classroom needed to be accompanied with support from special education services within that general education classroom. However, the way in which that special education support was delivered varied greatly among the participating schools.

Table 3

*Themes Describing How Administrators Implement Inclusion*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Interview sources</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How do you implement mandates of inclusion?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Through extracurricular experiences</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Through included nonacademic classes</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Through included core academic classes</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Through focused program monitoring</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>14</td>
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</table>

Participant 1 stated,

So, we have, first off, we really want to get the kids involved in gen ed as much as possible. So, we have a real earnest desire to make sure that’s happening. We have opened up a bunch of co-teach classes, and so we have those as places where kids can go, as well as, if we feel that they can get into the gen ed setting, and they can access a gen ed curriculum with some extra support. We put as many as we can into the co-teach classes.

Participant 2 stated,

I can honestly say we have a true co-teach model in the three core ninth-grade classes: math, English, and science, but we’re not there yet in the other grades.

Participant 4 stated,

We are all 100% inclusive for RSP, probably 50-60% for SDC. . . . Not a full co-teach model but a push-in model, so depending on the general ed teacher and the
special ed teacher, depending on their relationship, they may have just a support model or a co-teach model. In fact, I have RSP teachers who, depending on who they’re working with from period to period, may have a full co-teach, may have just support, or anything in between, but it really depends on the relationship that they’re developing in the classes that go in, and it changes every year. But with that said, we know the teachers that work really well with our SPED kids and like that co-teach model, so we try to pair them up as much as possible, but it’s not a forced marriage.

Participant 5 stated,

It kinda, I guess, depends. I think, for the most part, in all of our core academic classes, there’s usually an aide who’s helping out in the classroom. . . . We have a whole schedule on which classes we have aide support in, or there might be [a] resource teacher in there, or something like that. But there’s typically some type of special education support. We don’t do a co-teaching model necessarily here. It’s collaboration, so that aide might be in there the whole period. They may only, depending on the level of the student, they may just check in. “How’s things? Are you organized? Okay, I’ll see you next time,” kind of thing. So, that kind of varies.

Participant 6 stated,

Then we have some RSP students that will be in mostly general ed, maybe they’re in a study skills class, which that is a special education class, which just really helps with organization and really sometimes completion of work. . . . We have collaboration but it’s not necessarily co-teaching but we’ve got some people on
board that we think we’re going to start a couple in the ninth-grade level, some co-teaching.

Participant 8 stated,

So, they vary according to the classroom they teach. We have a couple of classrooms where the general education teacher and the special education teacher really truly are co-teachers with each of them taking part in the direct instruction of the students . . . and some where it’s more the resource teacher just supporting.

**Nonacademic classes.** Nearly half of the participants spoke about inclusion in terms of including students with disabilities in to a nonacademic class, particularly those students with profound disabilities. Participants also spoke to the benefits of having disabled students included with their nondisabled peers in this fashion for both the disabled student and the nondisabled peer. Similar to inclusion within an academic class, the participants spoke to various ways in which inclusion within a nonacademic class happened at their school site. Participant 1 stated,

We try to give them as much access to the gen ed setting as well. We have a couple of them who are TA’s at the front office, for instance.

Participant 3 stated,

So, it’s unified PE so it has an equal number of kids with disabilities. So, some of them are just regular SDC kids. But we have one girl she’s in our regular SDC, she’s in our mild to moderate classes, but she’s got some cerebral palsy and it’s just too hard for her to do regular PE. We have a couple kids that are RSP kids, but their anxiety level, just a class of 60 is just too much. So, we have equal number of kids on IEPs and equal number of partners. They had to apply to be in
the class and they get PE credit for it. And it’s not a special ed class. It’s unified PE. So, it has been amazing. And to watch the unified partner has been crazy because I always say it, our severe class gets more kids to be special ed teachers than anywhere, no matter where I’ve been. Because you get the TAs in there who really want to be in there.

Participant 4 stated,

They do a dash of PE, so they have one period of PE twice a week or something. I mean, they’re kind of included.

Participant 5 stated,

And then, within those classrooms, those kids are out in electives, so they have ceramics, choir, or drama, or cooking. And then, all of them are also in unified P.E., so we just started that this year, which is a general education class with general education students, and then those kids are paired up with a general education student. So, that’s part of their general ed time.

**Extracurricular experiences.** Nearly half of the participants also spoke about inclusion in terms of disabled students participating in extracurricular experiences that their schools had to offer. Several of the participants spoke not only to the need to have open access and not exclude students with disabilities but also the need to go out of their way to intentionally include students with disabilities knowing that such students may not include themselves. Participants also spoke of the need to modify some of the activities and bring the extracurricular experience to students with severe disabilities instead of bringing those students in to the larger whole school activity. Although counter to inclusion on its surface, the participants spoke to how this not only impacted students
with profound disabilities but also their nondisabled peers who participated in the experience. Participant 1 stated,

We make sure they participate in sports and all the other activities that the kids can do. We actually have a prom that we run for the SPED kids and that’s like— that’s their day to shine, so they generally get dressed up and they will attend that and look really nice. And so, we give them a sense and a taste of the gen ed setting with their own prom.

Participant 3 stated,

And then our Link Crew once a month does activities with our severe class, whether it’s just going into the class and helping out or whether it’s going in this time of year they made gingerbread houses, they painted pumpkins, we did a corn hole tournament, those sorts of things. . . . We’re getting ready to start a unified track team. So, we are actually going to have a 4 by 100 team that’s a unified team. It’s a CIF sport. We could go to state and everyone looks at me goes, “What?” I said, “Yes it’s a CIF sanctioned sport, a unified track team.” So, getting ready to start that. To me that’s definite inclusion there and the kids that are doing it are super excited.

Participant 4 stated,

We do a lot of data keeping from our ASB because we have a lot of student participation program data, also the Healthy Kids Survey data, and we want to make sure that every kid is getting the full opportunity for participation in sports, ASB activities, going to dances, and so we have a huge data system that tracks all that. They’re not excluded, so they can come to anything that they’re capable of
coming to, but it ends up being so much more difficult for them to—like I said, the rallies or events or things that we have, they can come to, but it’s more work for the teachers. It’s easier for us to come to them. So, we have ASB kids that will come and do peer buddy stuff and pumpkin patch out on the field that they can go to. We try to find things that they can take part in, but again, they’re definitely not excluded. It’s just inclusion is difficult.

Participant 6 stated,

So, here, we host the biggest student games for Special Olympics in the county, that’s what we’re about here, it’s kind of the tone of what we have. Our students love the Special Olympics day, like it’s a worthless day instructionally, but it’s so much more valuable than classroom instruction, right? They get out there, they help with the kids, they see the kids and because it’s all levels of kids, right? You have some kids that look at it and they won’t know why is this kid running and this and that. We had one disabled student, she’s passed, but she worked for months to be able to get out of her wheelchair and use a walker to do her race. It’s moments like that that matter for the whole school.

**Focused program monitoring.** The participants noted the need to monitor a variety of factors related to inclusion and the implementation of such. They spoke of monitoring both on the individual student level and on a programmatic level. All participants stated that they examine a variety of types of data when making decisions about inclusion and any needed changes to their programs. Participant 2 stated,

I have a unique background in my belief in co-teach because you don’t just throw two teachers in a room and call it co-teach. So, I came in with this perspective of
we have co-teach and then do we really have co-teach? Let me see what this looks like before I start calling it co-teach. We do, or I do, formal and informal observations just to look at instructionally what is happening in the classroom.

Participant 3 stated,

Even in the pullout classes, they do the IABs that the district has. So, if you’re in English I basic class, you’re doing the same IABs as the regular English class. If it’s math, we use TTM here, Think Through Math and the IABs, same as the regular math classes.

Participant 5 stated,

Every 6 weeks, we look at grades, determine who has failing grades, and then we actually schedule a meeting with either counselor, or admin, and then we check what interventions they’re in, and then work with teachers that way. I meet periodically with the lead teacher. And actually, we have monthly department meetings, and the PLC meetings with the special ed department. And we’re constantly looking at class sizes, and determining if a class is meeting the needs of particular students.

Participant 7 stated,

So, a lot of it is looking at numbers and how our kids are doing and are they passing? Are they not passing? What can we do to support them so that they will pass?

Participant 8 stated,

Well, we monitor student progress. So, not just their grades because grades can be subjective. But on common benchmarks, their progress and skills. So, the
English team just met ninth grade gave the IEP to all of their students. And so, they look at the data from those types of tests.

**Research Subquestion 3**

*What additional factors do public high school administrators in Southern California perceive to influence their implementation of federal and state policies concerning the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom?*

Table 4 shows the themes related to what additional factors high school administrators perceive to influence their implementation of federal and state policies concerning inclusion.

**Teacher opinions.** The theme with the highest frequency in the total study is that of teacher opinions being an additional factor contributing to how students with disabilities experience inclusion. The participants described how every aspect of inclusion depended not just on logistical implementation but also on how teacher opinions could make or break the inclusion experience for students. Participants described the need to work on getting teachers to buy into the idea of inclusion. Notably, participants repeatedly described that the success of having special education staff and general education staff work together depends on each unique staff member’s opinions related to inclusion and to one another. In relation to co-teaching relationships, Participant 1 stated,

Last year it was definitely a trial because we had some relationships that weren’t very positive, so we had teachers with a lot of conflict . . . it’s trial by fire. We tried it last year. We made some adjustments. We are gonna make some more adjustments next year.
Table 4

Additional Factors Related to Inclusion

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Interview sources</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What additional factors impact inclusion?</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Administrative leadership</td>
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<td>15</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teacher opinions</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>31</td>
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<tr>
<td>District support</td>
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<td>12</td>
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<tr>
<td>Logistical constraints</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent desires</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Also in relationship to special education staff providing support in the general education classroom, Participant 4 stated,

So, it is a full push-in with the option of an open whatever you two wanna do. So, if it’s just come in quietly, help the SPED kids, or if it’s I sub for you, you sub for me, I create a lesson and you create a lesson, and the same RSP teacher can have that experience varied from period to period depending on who they’re with.

Participant 5 described the impact teacher opinion had on his or her site’s initial building of a co-teaching model:

Just interest from one of our teachers. I mean, we’ve been talking about that co-teaching model, and that teacher had an interest, and wanted to do it. He talked with the general education teacher, they were on board, and so they’re running with it.

Several of the participants stated that teacher opinion could impact how special education students are perceived in general and how that perception then impacts any efforts they are leading related to inclusion. Participant 6 stated,

It has to be the people that are in the classroom, in the trenches, and that’s the teachers so they have to be on board.
Participant 5 stated,  
I think the biggest factor is just our teachers, and their attitude towards special ed.  

Participant 4 stated,  
If you have teachers that are in the same spot and have been in the same spot, it’s hard to move them.  

Participant 3 stated,  
I think the climate is huge, but I think getting teachers to understand too. And it helps when you get that one teacher who’s kind of always been on the fence, but now all of a sudden they’ve had a great experience with someone. And so now they’re on board and now they’ll help their team be on board.  

Participant 8 stated,  
I think that another big factor is the mindset of our staff. I know that we do grapple with teachers and their mindset with special education students in their class and even case managers. That’s a continual problem, but it’s something that we’re, again, continuing to address.  

Participant 7 stated,  
In fact, I just heard it today at lunch. For some of our medically fragile, nonverbal, low-cognitive students, the comment of they shouldn’t even be at school. I heard a teacher say that today.  

**Logistical constraints.** The second highest theme for what additional factors impact how students experience inclusion was that of logistical constraints. The participants spoke of a desire to have more students with disabilities included in the general education environment but that those decisions of how to do that were often
mitigated by logistical constraints outside of their control. Many of the logistical constraints they spoke of related to funding for additional sections and seats for students with disabilities within the general education classroom or to contract language with their teachers’ union. Participants also spoke to how their decisions related to the implementation of inclusion were often seen as a trade-off with other initiatives that the administrator was tasked with leading. Participant 3 stated,

> It’s really hard for me, because when you’re talking about an RSP kid, they’re not considered special ed anywhere when you’re doing master schedule stuff, because you get no FTEs for them. I mean, you get your special ed teachers but you don’t get to count them. And then you have your SDC kids that we want them to be A through G, but goodness gracious, our classes are so full and we’re definitely not going to give you FTEs for special day class kids to go into general ed classes at all, because you already have an FTE for the special day class teacher.

Participant 4 stated,

> We lost a teacher based on numbers that they won’t replace, and it’s ridiculous because we have teachers teaching out of their subject. They’re teaching legally where they can be teaching, but they’re not teaching where they’re good at. And when you’re talking about math and English, that’s a detriment to the students and they’re not passionate about it. So, it’s silliness.

Participant 5 stated,

> And then, there’s specific things like class sizes. So, if we have a particular class that’s five kids, I’m like, “We’re not running this class. Where else can these kids go,” type of thing. And then that impacts where and how kids can be included.
Participant 7 stated,

Because this year we lost an RSP teacher, it meant less support. We’re spread thinner. So, whereas before we used to have someone in history. Well, now they go to history maybe 2 days a week and then they go to English 3 days a week. And it’s not ideal, but that’s what we do with the numbers that we have.

Participant 2 stated,

There is contract language that you can’t make someone co-teach whether they’re gen ed or SPED. So you learn to work around that.

Several of the participants spoke about frustrations with these logistical constraints and creative approaches they had taken to combat the restraints. Particularly, they spoke about needing to advocate for their school, their staff, and their students in relationship to the district office and decisions surrounding funding.

Participant 6 stated,

Sometimes it’s very frustrating because they haven’t sat in this chair, or they haven’t even sat necessarily as a site administrator. And so, I think sometimes the expectation is that you just do it and it’s somehow exclusive of everything else that happens on the campus. And so, when you’re trying to explain it can’t be exclusive, it has to be part of what we do, so how does that look like? I’m not afraid to say, “No, no, no, no, stop. This is great in theory, but how will it really look?” My biggest concern is staffing. I like to include SDC students, but I don’t get any staffing for that, so that’s a conversation that’s been going on for a long time. I’ve made zero headway on that by the way in 7 years as a site principal. So yeah, there’s some frustration there, but it’s just the staffing formula they use
and it’s kind of held to it. I even did the formula once and gave it both to the business director and to the special education director about what this should mean in terms of FTEs. It didn’t change anything. There’s a whole lot of tails wagging the dog sometimes.

Participant 7 stated,

Because unfortunately, in a district, a lot of times money kind of plays a role. And so, trying to be the middleman in what the kid really needs and what the district is willing to do is an interesting spot to be in. Things like if a student needs a bus aide, and then there’s discussions where the kid doesn’t need a bus aide. And then, other people are saying, “Well, yeah, because they’re violent on the bus or the bus driver’s getting hurt.” And “Well, no, how many times has it happened?” And the discussions go back and forth, and then some people in my district office are saying, “Well, no, they don’t need one.” And then I’m trying to fight for getting the bus aide because the kid needs it. And trying to massage in the way to get what’s best for the kid. So, I’ve slowly been a squeaky wheel at the DO, and finally they’re like, oh, well you can start paying more aides. So, I won, but it’s always like a dance when it comes to money and funding what kids need.

**Administrative leadership.** Nearly all of the participants spoke about how they used their own administrative leadership to influence how inclusion was being implemented at their schools. They spoke about being honest and open with staff regarding their vision for the school and for inclusion in particular. The participants spoke of needing to take a stance regarding inclusion and its value. Participants also
spoke of needing to build relationships with staff while holding them accountable for implementing the vision. Participant 7 stated the following in relationship to their initial rollout of an RSP push-in model:

We’re doing this. It’s gonna happen. So just get on board. If you have questions, you can ask. But we’re doing this. It’s the end of discussion.

Participant 6 stated,

Even if it’s your idea, you know how to make it their idea? That’s what you have to do. That’s the leadership.

Participant 4 stated,

I have an AP who oversees SPED who is SPED, so she knows what it takes and how much coaching and handholding it takes for the general ed teacher and a lot of placating and moving and shaking. So, okay, fine, if you do these five things, we’ll do this for you, and then it usually works.

Participant 2 stated,

As an administrator you’re working with all of these restrictions, and that’s where I believe the relationship building comes into place because you now have all these restrictions on what people you can actually ask to co-teach. You also have to ask yourself; okay, this isn’t working and then when are we going to say okay, it’s nobody’s fault. This just isn’t working, so we’re going to try different pairings, and that actually happened. And so, for me personally as an administrator—because I oversee special ed and I actually am the one that tends to make that decision—I’m always talking to my department chair.
bringing her in when it comes to making these big decisions and then we talk
about what’s the content and who is the gen ed teacher that’s teaching it?

Participant 1 stated,

Sometimes have to have really honest conversations with the teachers involved
and let them know why this might be the best placement for the kid and have
them benefitting from being with you personally.

**District support.** Several of the participants spoke to support from district office
staff being a key factors in how students experience inclusion. In particular, the
participants described the benefits of having leadership at the district office who were
experts in special education matters that they could personally lean on for information
and resources. Participants also spoke to the benefit of having district office personnel
train special education staff, general education staff, and administrators.

Participant 1 stated,

I can talk to anybody I want there (the district office). But, of course, because I
have a lot of respect for the current specialist, I would generally go to her first
because she is very knowledgeable, and I generally don’t need to go to anybody
else. And she will do the work on my behalf if I ask her.

Participant 2 stated,

I know as a site administrator whether you have a SPED background or not you’re
really relying on your district’s program specialist and coordinators and directors
to kind of be that middle man to help with training your staff and educating your
staff, whether it’s your SPED teachers or general teachers, your site
administrators, or your principal on what does inclusion really look like and what
does it really mean and how to meet the needs of every student while trying to include them as much as possible.

Participant 3 stated,

I was very fortunate in that first school that I worked in that I had a program specialist who actually helped me with my programs. She came in and helped me set up things and helped me just get beautiful things going.

Participant 5 stated,

My mentor in the special education department, our director, she is like legalese to the n-th degree. Everything I learned from her in the 7 years of being in that department in terms of how to implement the regulations, and read the regulations, and look at those kinds of things.

Participant 8 stated,

The district office personnel that support our site have regular meetings with us here every other week for 2 hours. So, we have an opportunity at that time to sit down with the assistant director and program specialist and sometimes we invite the psychologist to address any pressing needs that we have and talk through protocols.

**Parent desires.** Some of the participants identified parent desires as a significant factor related to how students experience inclusion. In particular, the participants who identified this as a factor spoke about parent desires related keeping their child in a more restrictive environment. The participants spoke about needing to educate parents regarding how high school is a different environment than middle or elementary school and how inclusion may be different at the high school level. Participant 2 stated,
The other big factor is educating parents, and that’s one thing that I am very passionate about, is educating the parents on, as a high school administrator, what this means for their child through high school and after and beyond . . . our feeder kids are coming from, a pullout program versus a push-in and co-teach program. That plays a huge role. That’s one factor is educating parents so that they understand what high school is going to look like for their child because it is much more rigorous than middle school, what life is going to be like for them after high school with a diploma, without a diploma, and then explaining to parents that we just want to create the opportunities for them. So, the parent is a huge factor.

Participant 4 stated,

But those SDC kids that have always been told, “Oh, you’re SDC.” The parents have always been told, “Oh, they’re going to do what they can.” I think it’s our job to show parents that they can do more; they should have the opportunity to do more.

Participant 7 stated,

Parents. 100% parents. And on both ends. Some parents really want their kids excluded and want them protected, and they don’t want them to be pushed in. They don’t like the push-in model. They want them to have a separate class. And others want their kids completely pushed in when they’re not ready. So, really trying to be an effective team to where we can encourage as much inclusion as possible with keeping the student as healthy as possible in all areas—socioemotional, academic, and behavioral. Parents don’t often see what their
students are dealing with or what the rest of the school looks like when you have 2,500 kids who are at varying stages of being adults and many of them who are adults, it’s not a sixth-grade classroom. So, working with the parents and getting them to understand the level of their student’s disability, whether it be higher than they think or lower than they think, affects inclusion.

Research Subquestion 4

How do public high school administrators in Southern California perceive their prior experience with students with disabilities impacts interpretation and implementation of federal and state policies and concerning the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom?

Table 5 shows the themes related to how high school administrators perceive their own prior experience with students with disabilities impacting their interpretation and implementation of inclusion.

Table 5

Prior Experiences of Administrators Related to Students With Disabilities

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<th>Theme</th>
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<tr>
<td>How have your prior experiences impacted your ability to lead inclusion?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Classroom teaching experiences</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal experiences</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
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Classroom teaching experiences. All of the participants had some amount of experience with students with disabilities in their prior classroom teaching career. The amount of experiences with students with disabilities varied greatly among the participants and depended greatly upon whether the participant had been a general
education teacher or a special education teacher themselves prior to going into administration. The participants described how this experience, or lack of experience, impacted their ability to lead inclusion efforts on their campus. Participant 1 stated,

I don’t have a lot as far as a teacher. I know that I had students in my class, who had disabilities. I would look at the IEP at a glance and try to accommodate those kids. And what I learned, for myself at least, was there were some patterns. And what I did, was I tried to adapt my entire class to benefit all the kids with those accommodations because I found it was easier for me, and then I really felt like I wanted to meet the needs of all the kids.

Participant 6 stated,

My experience with SPED prior to admin is probably limited. I was usually teaching chemistry classes and such. So I’d have a few students with IEPs and sometimes you’d get an IEP at a glance, or you’d have a conversation with their case carrier to see what needs to be done. I didn’t have much other than that to fall back on, so I had to learn it as I started in admin.

Participant 8 stated,

My prior experience was very limited. I was a general education teacher. I did co-teach for a couple of years, RSP students so I went through a couple of years of training, kind of earlier on in my career. And I had sections with students in RSP for probably about five years. But if not for that experience I’d say I had next to none with including SPED kids.
Participant 2 stated,
Right out of college I was hired to be an instructional aide. Then, I eventually, years later got my special ed teaching credential. I got that credential because I subbed in special ed classrooms, specifically in classrooms of students with emotional disturbance, and I found that that was a passion for me. I loved those kids. It definitely impacts my leadership because I have a different lens of how I look through things, especially discipline, and also instruction, too, when it comes to having experience with students with disabilities. Whether it’s a learning disability or a behavior disability or a medical disability, whatever it is, I know I learned quickly as a teacher that there are not a lot of administrators with that experience.

Participant 3 stated,
I was on a campus where they believed that my special education kids should just stay in my room and never be seen and never be heard, and then life would go on. I had just graduated from college and had a whole different philosophy. So, I kind of shook up that school a little bit.

Participant 7 stated,
Well, I was a SPED teacher and case carrier—and I was the department chair. Well, I think it was really crucial because there’s a lot of administrators that have no SPED background. So, the fact that I know what IEP, the paperwork’s supposed to look like. And it’s changing all the time, but I’m fairly competent in what the law says. And I understand what a least restrictive environment is. And
I feel like that would be really hard to do as an administrator, if you didn’t really have special ed training.

**Personal experiences.** Several of the participants described personal experiences they had had with students with disabilities that they perceived to have impacted their work with inclusion. Many of these experiences centered on a particular individual or a key moment in which their perceptions of individuals with disabilities and education changed. Participant 8 stated,

My current principal—he has a special needs son with Down’s Syndrome. And his expectation is that his son is going to be in all general education classrooms. He speaks with such passion that you can’t help but believe that’s how it’s supposed to be.

Participant 4 stated,

On one of the visits I’ve done, I saw a school where it was total push-in, and I saw it work. And so, that kind of changed my mindset of what special ed should look like and how you can completely have a push-in model if you do it right.

Participant 3 stated,

So, I ended up with a severe girl in my mild to mod class, and I was like, “What am I going to do with a severe girl?” And so, I had to figure out how to work with the severe population and realize then too, I mean, I always say that that girl is the angel still on my shoulder and making me really look at things through just different lenses and believing that kids can do a lot more than people think they can do.
Participant 1 stated,

Well when I was a kid I could not read till third grade, and so I just could not
read. . . . And so, they were putting me in special ed. And I got so—because even
then I realized the implications. I got so scared of being special ed that I literally
went home—and my mom will tell you this—I taught myself to read. So, in 3
months, I taught myself how to read. . . . And then they did a reassessment of me
at the school and they found out that I wasn’t special ed. As far as deficits, I was
special ed gifted. And so next thing you know I went from being special ed
deficit to—they had an MGM Program (mentally gifted minors). . . . And
honestly, even as a little kid to see the difference in treatment was amazing. You
went from being kind of looked down upon to—I don’t wanna say being put on a
pedestal—but treated completely differently. And I think that really had a lot to
do with what I did as a teacher. Like, I didn’t wanna leave those kids behind
because if they made a mistake with me, who’s to say that all these kids are
labeled as special ed, you know, don’t also have abilities we just haven’t
recognized yet.

Participant 6 stated,

What impacted me the most as an administrator really wasn’t my experiences in
the classroom. It was personal experiences with family members. So, I have a
nephew, he’s a sophomore in college now, but he was so ADHD. I would even
stop going to family meetings where he was there, and I love this kid but it was
awful. And that’s when I fully realized he’s in kindergarten, and having a
struggle, and he’s not a dumb kid. He had no learning disabilities, it was just he
was struggling because of this ADHD, so severe. And that was my first true experience. You just kind of get cynical towards that, but then when you see it firsthand. These kids, it’s not in their control, they can’t control it. The other experience was with my wife after the birth of our second child, her postpartum depression got so bad it was debilitating, to the point of in the fetal position begging me not to go to work. And this is a very intelligent, educated woman and knows that her behavior is not logical, but can’t stop it. And so, both those experiences really truly gave me insight into what some of our students and families are dealing with. Probably, to be honest, I used to be “just try harder, rub some dirt on it.” That’s how I was raised, it works for me. I didn’t have any of those issues, I didn’t have any understanding of that. But through those experiences, it made me a lot better administrator.

Summary

Chapter IV presented the findings in relation to the central question and four research subquestions that guided this study on how high school administrators interpreted and implemented various federal and state mandates surrounding the inclusion of students with disabilities in to the general education setting. First the study’s purpose and methodology were reviewed followed by a synopsis of the data collection and analysis procedures. Finally, the findings were presented by research subquestion.

This researcher sought to understand how high school administrators made sense of laws related to the inclusion of students with disabilities and then to explore how said administrators led the implementation of such laws at their unique schools. Based on the nine interviews, a total of 13 themes emerged. Two of the themes related to how
administrators made sense of the various laws surrounding inclusion, four of the themes related to how the administrators implemented such laws at their unique schools, five of the themes related to other factors that contributed to how inclusion was being implemented at each of their schools, and the two final themes related to how administrators perceived their own experiences with individuals with disabilities impacting their leadership of inclusion implementation.

The next chapter discusses the conclusions, the implications for action, and recommendations for future research based on the findings from this chapter.
CHAPTER V: FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Chapter V begins with a review of the study by presenting the purpose statement, research questions, methodology, population, and sample. It then presents the major findings from the study in addition to unexpected findings. Finally, the researcher presents the conclusions and implications for action based on the research findings and the recommendations for future research in this area.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the perceptions of high school administrators in Southern California regarding how they interpret and implement specific federal and state policies concerning the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom and to identify additional factors high school administrators perceive affect implementation.

In addition, it was the purpose of this study to describe how high school administrators in Southern California perceive that their prior experiences with students with disabilities impact their interpretation and implementation of federal and state policies concerning the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom.

Research Questions

This study was guided by one central research question and four sub-questions:

Central Question

What are the perceptions of public high school administrators in Southern California regarding the ways they interpret and implement federal and state policies concerning the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom?
Subquestions

1. What are the perceptions of public high school administrators in Southern California regarding how they interpret federal and state policies concerning the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom?

2. What are the perceptions of public high school administrators in Southern California regarding how they implement federal and state policies concerning the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom?

3. What additional factors do public high school administrators in Southern California perceive to influence their implementation of federal and state policies concerning the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom?

4. How do public high school administrators in Southern California perceive their prior experience with students with disabilities impacts interpretation and implementation of federal and state policies and concerning the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom?

Methodology

The topic of this study was to examine how public high school administrators in Southern California interpret and implement specific federal and state policies and mandates concerning the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom. Subquestions also address the prior experience administrators have had with students with disabilities and in what ways that has impacted how they make sense of and implement specific federal and state policies. The qualitative nature of the study allows for a deep understanding of how high school administrators navigate interpreting and
implementing various federal and state mandates. The researcher conducted semistructured interviews directly with the nine participants face to face.

**Population**

The population of this study was public high school administrators in Southern California. The term *high school administrator* refers to school principals and assistant principals serving in public high schools; therefore, the population size of high school administrators in Southern California, including Imperial, Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino, San Diego, Santa Barbara, and Ventura counties, numbers more than 2,000 (California Department of Education, 2018). Furthermore, the population was limited to administrators serving in public comprehensive high schools. The population for this study was the 431 high schools and high school principals in the counties included in this study.

**Sample**

For this study, a sample of nine high school administrators was selected from the administrators at the 54 comprehensive high schools in Riverside County.

The sample participants were identified through the following criteria:

1. Served as a principal or assistant principal in one of the 54 comprehensive public high schools in Riverside County.
2. Had at least 3 years of experience as an administrator.
3. Served at a high school within 20 miles of the researcher.
4. Had experience working with special education programs at the high school.
5. Did not serve at a school within the researcher’s own school district.
Major Findings

The aim of this phenomenological study was to understand how high school administrators make sense of federal and state laws surrounding inclusion of students with disabilities into the general education classroom and also to understand how those individuals then lead the implementation of such laws on their comprehensive high school campuses. The study was guided by a central research question and four research subquestions. In total, 13 themes emerged related to the four different research subquestions.

Research Subquestion 1

*What are the perceptions of public high school administrators in Southern California regarding how they interpret federal and state policies concerning the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom?*

**Finding 1: Formal training.** All but one of the participants stated that formal trainings were a key part of their ability to interpret federal and state mandates surrounding inclusion of students with disabilities into the general education classroom. The participants believed that these trainings provided technical information regarding the laws of special education. School administrators are often tasked with overseeing and managing a variety of roles about which they themselves have no direct knowledge (Saltrick, 2010; Sumbera et al., 2014). Participants understood especially that as new legislation is enacted and updated regularly regarding special education laws and mandates, their ability to make sense of those new laws and regulations hinged on formal trainings not for only themselves but also for their staff and teachers.
Finding 2: Perceived lack of training and/or experience. The majority of participants discussed believing that they personally lacked the training or experience needed to lead the special education department and school related to matters of inclusion. Many of them spoke of the need to initiate their own training and find their own resources related to special education, particularly inclusion, in order to fill this perceived knowledge gap. This feeling of lack of preparation was most common among administrators who were not special education teachers prior to entering administration. However, even some of the administrators who had an extensive background in special education had a sense of being “out of the loop” regarding current laws and mandates.

Research Subquestion 2

What are the perceptions of public high school administrators in Southern California regarding how they implement federal and state policies concerning the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom?

Finding 3: Core academic classes. The 2004 reauthorization of IDEIA clearly spells out the requirement that students with disabilities have maximum access to the general education curriculum in the regular education classroom (Goodman et al., 2011). Nearly all of the participants discussed inclusion practices at their schools that involved some level of inclusion of students with disabilities into a core academic general education class. The participants described their desire to include students with disabilities as much as possible for core academic classes of English language arts, math, science, and social science. The participants also described that the inclusion of students in a general education classroom needed to be accompanied with support from special education services within that general education classroom. However, the way in which
that special education support was delivered varied greatly among the participating schools. In addition, the amount of inclusion into the general education classroom varied greatly from school to school and even within each school seemed to largely be affected not by a systematic approach but rather by constraints within each school environment and culture.

**Finding 4: Nonacademic classes.** A variety of interpretations surround the meaning of inclusion, which is itself not a legal mandate but rather a philosophy of attaining the least restrictive environment (McGovern, 2015). Philosophies of inclusion are varied and are often based on an individual’s own experiences with special education (Rotatori et al., 2011). Nearly half of the participants spoke about inclusion in terms of including students with disabilities into a nonacademic class, particularly those students with profound disabilities. Participants also spoke to the benefits of having disabled students included with their nondisabled peers in this fashion for both the disabled student and the nondisabled peer. Similarly to inclusion within an academic class, the participants spoke to various ways in which inclusion within a nonacademic class happened at their school site. In many of the sites, this inclusion into a nonacademic class was viewed as meeting the spirit of federal and state mandates regarding inclusion while not necessarily meeting the letter of those mandates, which focus on inclusion of academic core classes.

**Finding 5: Extracurricular experiences.** Nearly half of the participants also spoke about inclusion in terms of disabled students participating in extracurricular experiences that their schools had to offer. Several of the participants spoke not only to the need to have open access and not exclude students with disabilities but also to the
need to go out of their way to intentionally include students with disabilities knowing that such students may not include themselves. Participants also spoke of the need to modify some of the activities and bring the extracurricular experience to students with severe disabilities instead of bringing those students in to the larger whole school activity. Although counter to inclusion on its surface, the participants spoke to how this not only impacted students with profound disabilities but also their nondisabled peers who participated in the experience. Research in favor of full inclusion points to studies that demonstrate that students with disabilities report higher levels of self-esteem, higher levels of academic rigor, and models for more appropriate behavior relative to their nonincluded peers (Able et al., 2015; Goodin, 2011; Goodman et al., 2011). The participants who spoke of inclusion in terms of extracurricular experiences all pointed to how the impact of those experiences both for the disabled student and the nondisabled students yielded results surrounding each group’s cultural and social competencies.

**Finding 6: Focused program monitoring.** The participants noted the need to monitor a variety of factors related to inclusion and the implementation of such. They spoke of monitoring both on the individual student level and on a programmatic level. All participants stated that they examine a variety of types of data when making decisions about inclusion and any needed changes to their programs. The implementation of inclusion is at its core a large-scale transformative change for the educational system and as such is different from other types of changes because it must be led and not simply managed (Ackerman Anderson & Anderson, 2010). The administrators in this study understood that and as part of their leadership monitored closely how the changes they were making impacted student success and campus culture.
Research Subquestion 3

What additional factors do public high school administrators in Southern California perceive to influence their implementation of federal and state policies concerning the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom?

Finding 7: Teacher opinions. The finding with the highest frequency in the entire study is that of teacher opinions being an additional factor contributing to how students with disabilities experience inclusion. The participants described how every aspect of inclusion depended not just on logistical implementation but also on how teacher opinions could make or break the inclusion experience for students. Participants described the need to work on getting teachers to buy into the idea of inclusion. Notably, participants repeatedly described that the success of having special education staff and general education staff work together depends on each unique staff member’s opinions related to inclusion and to one another. The perceptions of teachers toward inclusion is important, because it is the classroom teacher’s own beliefs that often become self-fulfilling prophesies of success or failure when implementing inclusive educational policies (Monsen et al., 2014).

Finding 8: Logistical constraints. The second highest finding for what additional factors impact how students experience inclusion was that of logistical constraints. The participants spoke of a desire to have more students with disabilities included in the general education environment but that those decisions of how to do that were often mitigated by logistical constraints outside of their control. Many of the logistical constraints they spoke of related to funding for additional sections and seats for students with disabilities within the general education classroom or to contract language
with their teachers’ union. Participants also spoke to how their decisions related to the implementation of inclusion were often seen as a trade-off with other initiatives that the administrator was tasked with leading. According to White-Smith and White (2009), as learning and instructional leaders, principals must maneuver through multiple sources of accountability and it is that maneuvering that leads to several logistical constraints related to how fully students with disabilities are included within each school site.

**Finding 9: Administrative leadership.** Nearly all of the participants spoke about how they used their own administrative leadership to influence how inclusion was being implemented at their schools. They spoke about being honest and open with staff regarding their vision for the school and for inclusion in particular. The participants spoke of needing to take a stance regarding inclusion and its value. Participants also spoke of needing to build relationships with staff while holding them accountable for implementing the vision. As Hess and Downs (2013) pointed out, reforms are most likely to fall flat when administrative leaders fall into the “culture of can’t” and fail to see themselves as able to change the system (p. 35). The success or failure of change initiatives at the school is often tied directly to the efficacy of the school administrator (Knab, 2009; White-Smith & White, 2009).

**Finding 10: District support.** Several of the participants spoke to support from district office staff being a key factor in how students experience inclusion. In particular, the participants described the benefits of having leadership at the district office who were experts in special education matters that they could personally lean on for information and resources. Participants also spoke to the benefit of having district office personnel train special education staff, general education staff, and administrators. Upon the
passage of P.L. 94-142, school districts across the country developed departments of special education to monitor and meet the legal requirements of the bill (Boscardin, 2005; Osgood, 2008). The role of the special education administrator had been to ensure legal compliance with students’ IEPs. However, with the shift in education toward inclusion, a system of special education separate from the general education school system is becoming less and less frequent (Baglieri et al., 2011; Boscardin, 2005). The role of district office special education support departments was viewed as critical for the success of the site leadership implementing inclusion.

**Finding 11: Parent desires.** Some of the participants identified parent desires as a significant factor related to how students experience inclusion. In particular, the participants who identified this as a factor spoke about parent desires related to keeping their child in a more restrictive environment. The participants spoke about needing to educate parents regarding how high school is a different environment than middle or elementary school and how inclusion may be different at the high school level.

**Research Subquestion 4**

*How do public high school administrators in Southern California perceive their prior experience with students with disabilities impacts interpretation and implementation of federal and state policies and concerning the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom?*

**Finding 12: Classroom teaching experiences.** All of the participants had some amount of experience with students with disabilities in their prior classroom-teaching career. The amount of experience with students with disabilities varied greatly among the participants and depended greatly upon whether the participants had been a general
education teacher or a special education teacher themselves prior to going into administration. Each of the participants described how this experience, or lack of experience, impacted their ability to lead inclusion efforts on their campus. The most successful transformational leaders are those who employ high levels of emotional intelligence and focus on creating a shared vision with their stakeholders (Hurwitz & Hurwitz, 2015). The way in which site leaders leverage their own classroom experiences in teaching students with disabilities is an important factor to the overall success of the implementation of inclusion.

Finding 13: Personal experiences. Several of the participants described personal experiences they had had with students with disabilities that they perceived to have impacted their work with inclusion. Many of these experiences centered on a particular individual or a key moment in which their perceptions of individuals with disabilities and education changed. White-Smith and White (2009) found that principals had a significant impact on the creation of cultures at their schools, and the most significant contributing factor that informed principals’ decision-making toward that culture creation was their own experiences both in their own education and in their career as an educator. The participants in this study revealed the importance a single experience with an individual with disabilities could have upon them, particularly if that individual was a family member.

Unexpected Findings

The largest unexpected finding was how much inclusion related to the overall campus culture and climate at the school sites. Participants who championed inclusion on their campus made repeated reference to an idea that it was more than including
students with disabilities. They alluded again and again to the idea that it was simply “what we do.” They held the belief that when you do education right you look out for every type of student, and ensure that your campus has a culture and climate that supports diversity, that understands equality and equity are separate but related, and that steps need to be taken as a leader to ensure that every student feels safe and supported on campus.

**Conclusions**

The aim of this phenomenological study was to understand how high school administrators make sense of federal and state laws surrounding inclusion of students with disabilities in to the general education classroom and also to understand how those individuals then lead the implementation of such laws on their comprehensive high school campuses. Based on the findings, three conclusions emerged related to how high school administrators make sense of and implement inclusion.

**Inclusion Does Not Stand Alone**

Inclusion, like everything else a site administrator must implement, does not exist in isolation. Schools are like villages and school administrators are charged with overseeing all staff and activities on their campuses. The job descriptions of school administrators often include a statement that they are to maintain and implement adopted policies of the board of trustees and to interpret and apply state, county, and federal laws and regulations (Bateman & Bateman, 2014). This puts school site administrators in the place of overseeing every aspect of their school from maintenance to instruction. During any given school year, site administrators are tasked with implementing a variety of district-level initiatives, managing a variety of personnel matters, meeting budget
constraints, and analyzing and responding to the needs of their students, staff, families, and community. The school administrator exists at the apex of the funnel between the school and the district, and from that position he or she navigates the complexities of often competing initiatives (De Vroey et al., 2016). Inclusion is one transformative change initiative within a long list of transformative change initiatives that the school administrator must lead. The leaders who successfully navigate these complexities are those who can braid together initiatives so that their efforts yield results in several facets (DuFour & Marzano, 2009).

Experience Matters

Every educator has his or her own philosophy of inclusion based upon his or her own experiences with special education (Rotatori et al., 2011). Be it an administrator’s own experience as a student, the experience he or she had teaching students with disabilities, or the experiences he or she has had as an administrator, the experiences he or she has had matter in terms of how he or she makes sense of complex special education laws and how they lead to transformational change at their site. As White-Smith and White (2009) pointed out, the most significant factor that influenced principals in how they create a culture at their school was their own experiences. Administrators draw upon their experiences daily in conversations with staff, parents, and students. They use their previous experiences to guide their decision-making in the moment.

Leadership Matters

Researchers often recite the claim that leadership is the linchpin for success in any school change initiative (Aguilar et al., 2011; Knab, 2009; White-Smith & White, 2009). Although that leadership can be found in a variety of individuals, such as teachers,
instructional coaches, school psychologists, or district-level leaders, for the school the instructional leader for all students remains the principal (Boscardin, 2005). What the site administrator does matters; it especially matters for the success of implementing inclusion. It is important to have a leader who can build relationships with teachers, who can analyze complex data and trends, and who can clearly articulate how to transform a school site from practices of exclusion to a culture of inclusion. The top two influencers on student achievement are quality of classroom teachers and quality of school leadership (Leithwood et al., 2004).

**Implications for Action**

The implications for action are based on the findings and conclusions for this study. They are suggestions for educational leaders at all levels that will contribute to furthering inclusive practices at schools.

- School districts need to provide training related to special education laws particularly surrounding inclusion to all new site administrators within their first year of service and on an ongoing basis thereafter.

- School district special education staff and site administrative staff need to implement a system by which they meet regularly to stay informed on matters of inclusion, monitor student progress, and problem solve matters of inclusion at the school site level.

- Schools need to implement schoolwide systems for monitoring student progress both at the group level and at the individual student level.

- Schools and districts need to develop and implement professional development for both special education and general education teachers that supports their ability to include students with various disabilities in to the general education classroom.
• State and federal governments need to fully fund education including staffing needed to support students with disabilities both in and out of the general education environment.

• School districts need to fund and assign a specific special education administrator on each high school campus to work closely with and support the administrative team.

• Administrators need to hold general education teachers accountable for the inclusion of students with disabilities into the general education environment.

**Recommendations for Further Research**

Based on the findings and limitations of this study, the following recommendations for future research are presented:

1. A similar study should be conducted using a larger sample size that is not limited to a particular geographical area.

2. A similar study should be conducted that is not limited to comprehensive high schools but that looks specifically at alternative education, charter, and private schools.

3. A similar study should be conducted at the middle and elementary school level.

4. A study should be conducted that examines high school general education teachers’ perceptions of how they implement inclusion within their classroom environments.

5. A study should be conducted that examines high school special education teachers’ perceptions of how they implement inclusion for students on their caseloads.

6. A study should be conducted that examines high school students’ perceptions of how inclusion has impacted them throughout their school experiences.
7. A study should be conducted that examines perceptions of parents of high school students related to how their child has experienced inclusion throughout their school experiences.

8. A study should be conducted that examines perceptions of district office personnel as they work with the school site to implement federal and state mandates surrounding inclusion of students with disabilities into the general education environment.

9. A study should be conducted on how high school administrators develop and maintain the culture of their school site such that inclusion can flourish.

10. A study should be conducted that examines the perceptions of high school counselors regarding their role in meeting the mandates of inclusion.

11. A study should be conducted that examines the perceptions of chief business officers regarding their role in the implementation of inclusion.

12. A study should be conducted that examines the perceptions of high school administrators on how they determine which federal, state, and district mandates they choose to focus their efforts on.

13. A case study should be conducted that examines schools with high levels of inclusion and how those schools allocate resources through LCFF and LCAP toward meeting inclusion mandates.

**Concluding Remarks and Reflections**

I spent the first 5 years of my life in a special needs preschool, not because I myself was identified as having special needs, but because my mother was the director and, as a single mother, she needed day care for me. I grew up with an aunt who was severally cognitively disabled and could not function as an independent adult in the
world. These experiences have led me to understand that despite disabilities at our core we are all human, that what each of us has to offer to the world is more important than that which we are not able to do.

I took this philosophy with me to the classroom when I taught; which in hindsight is probably why I was selected as the general education half of a co-taught science /special education classroom. I continue to hold this philosophy with me at the core in my role as principal now. I believe each student has value and that it is truly simple to figure out how to include those students given their abilities, not exclude them based on their disabilities. As a leader it has confounded me that other adults, teachers in particular, do not jump on board with inclusion. I am dismayed at how difficult it seems for teachers to figure out, or even if they want to, include students in their own learning.

This study has shown me that there is no one way of doing inclusion. Even within our small geographical area, there are so many differences as to how each school site is implementing inclusion. What is most interesting to me is that there appears to be no pattern as to how each school is implementing inclusion, some use co-teach, some use push-in, some do not include a great deal, others include fully. Perhaps one participant said it best in that “what you’re doing is whatever your district was last sued for.” This frightens me for how the success of the educational system as a whole is left to the whims of a few individuals.

And yet, it is precisely at the individual level that this study showed its most power. Leadership matters. Principals and assistant principals matter. What we do at the school level matters. There is no one way of doing leadership, but it is clear in talking with administrators that who they are as leaders impacts their school for years and in
ways they may not realize. I had the unique chance in this study to interview both
principals and assistant principals at two different schools. What I gleaned from their
discussions really showed how much a principal impacts not only teachers but also his or
her assistant principals, for better or worse. This made me reflect on my own assistant
principals, and how I spend my time in mentoring them. My own leadership matters,
perhaps in ways I have yet to realize.
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APPENDICES
## APPENDIX A

### Literature Matrix

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<td>Gove, P. B., &amp; Webster, N. (2008). Webster's third new international dictionary of the English language, unabridged : utilizing all the experience</td>
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and resources of more than one hundred years of Merriam-Webster dictionaries.
Springfield, Mass.: Merriam-Webster.

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<tr>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Journal/Book</th>
<th>DOI</th>
<th>Notes</th>
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<td>Grieve, A. M. (2009)</td>
<td>Teachers' beliefs about inappropriate behaviour: challenging attitudes?</td>
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<td>Harkins, S. B. (2012)</td>
<td>Mainstreaming, the Regular Education Initiative, and Inclusion as Lived Experience, 1974-2004: A Practitioner's View.</td>
<td>i.e.: inquiry in education, 3(seq).</td>
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<td>Hess, F. M., &amp; Downs, W. (2013)</td>
<td>Combating the 'culture of can't': School leaders have more power than they think.</td>
<td>Education Next(seq), 30.</td>
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Müller, E., & National Association of State Directors of Special Education, P. F. (2007). *Involvement of Youth with*
| Reference                                                                 | | | | | |
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on their leadership role. *Urban Education, 44*(3), 259.


APPENDIX B

Invocation to Participate

**Study:** The Perceptions of Public High School Administrators Regarding the Inclusion of Students with Disabilities in the General Education Classroom: A Phenomenological Study

???, 2019

Dear Prospective Study Participant:

You are invited to participate in a phenomenological, qualitative study to describe how high school administrators make sense of special education mandates and implement those mandates at their schools. The main investigator of this study is Jennifer Thomasian, Doctoral Candidate in Brandman University’s Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership program. You were chosen to participate in this study because you are an administrator of a comprehensive public high school.

Approximately fourteen public, high schools from Southern California counties were targeted, within Riverside County. Participation should require about one hour of your time and is entirely voluntary. You may withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences.

**PURPOSE:** The purpose of this phenomenological, qualitative study is to describe how high school administrators make sense of special education mandates and implement those mandates at their schools.

**PROCEDURES:** If you decide to participate in the study, the researcher will interview you. During the interview, you will be asked a series of questions designed to allow me to determine high school administrators make sense of special education mandates and implement those mandates at their schools.

**RISKS, INCONVENIENCES, AND DISCOMFORTS:** There are minimal risks to your participation in this research study. It may be inconvenient to spend up to one hour in the interview. However, the interview session will be held at an agreed upon location, to minimize this inconvenience.

**POTENTIAL BENEFITS:** There are no major benefits to you for participation, however, your input and feedback could help determine high school administrators make sense of special education mandates and implement those mandates at their schools. The information from this study is intended to inform researchers, policymakers, and educators. Additionally, the findings and recommendations from this study will be made available to all participants.
ANONYMITY: Records of information that you provide for the research study, and any personal information you provide, will not be linked in any way. It will not be possible to identify you as the person who provided any specific information for the study.

You are encouraged to ask questions, at any time, that will help you understand how this study will be performed and/or how it will affect you. You may contact me at (909) 730-9098 or by email at jthomasi@mail.brandman.edu. You can also contact Dr. Jonathan Greenberg by email at greenber@brandman.edu. If you have any further questions or concerns about this study or your rights as a study participant, you may write or call the Office of the Executive Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs, Brandman University, 16355 Laguna Canyon Road, Irvine, CA 92618, (949) 341-7641.

Respectfully,
Jennifer A. Thomasian
Jennifer A. Thomasian
Doctoral Candidate, Brandman University
APPENDIX C

Interview Protocol

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. As part of my dissertation research for the doctorate in Organizational Leadership at Brandman University, I am interviewing high school administrators from Riverside County. The purpose of this interview is to learn about your experiences and how they have impacted the ways that you interpret and implement federal and state policies regarding the inclusion of students with disabilities.

The interview will take approximately 40 minutes and will include eight questions. I may ask some follow up questions if I need further clarification. Any information that is obtained in connection to this study will remain confidential. All of my data will be reported without reference to an individual or an institution. After I record and transcribe the data, I will send it to you so that you can check to make sure that I have captured your thoughts and ideas accurately.

I want to make this interview as comfortable as possible for you, so at any point during the interview you can ask that I skip a particular question or discontinue the entire interview.

With your permission, I would like to audio record this interview so that I ensure that I capture your thoughts accurately. Thank you.

Do you have any questions before we begin?
Demographic Questions

Please state each of the following.

Name:

Age:

Gender:

Role at school:

Number of years in administration:

Role prior to administration and for how long:

Interview Questions

1. What prior experiences do you have with students with disabilities?

2. How do you perceive your prior experiences with students with disabilities impacting your current work as a high school administrator?

3. In what ways have you come to be familiar with or made sense of federal and state mandates surrounding the inclusion of students with special needs?

4. What formal training have you had in federal and state mandates surrounding the inclusion of special needs students into the general education classroom?

5. In what ways are students with special needs educated in inclusive classrooms (the general education environment) on your school site? Describe how that may look in classrooms at your school.

6. In regards to special education programs at your school site what things do you monitor to determine if changes need to be made?
7. How do you go about implementing changes to your site’s special education structures?

8. What factors contribute to how students experience special education at your site, particularly concerning inclusion?
## Qualitative Interview Question Development Matrix

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Research Subquestions</th>
<th>Interview Questions Aligned to Subquestions</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>(Subquestion 1)</strong> What are the perceptions of public high school administrators in southern California regarding how they interpret specific federal and state policies concerning the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom?</td>
<td><strong>(Interview Question 3)</strong> In what ways have you come to be familiar with or made sense of federal and state mandates surrounding the inclusion of students with special needs?</td>
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<td><strong>(Interview Question 4)</strong> What formal training have you had in federal and state mandates surrounding the inclusion of special needs students into the general education classroom?</td>
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<td><strong>(Interview Question 5)</strong> In what ways are students with special needs educated in inclusive classrooms (the general education environment) on your school site? Describe how that may look in classrooms at your school.</td>
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<td><strong>(Interview Question 6)</strong> In regards to special education programs at your school site what things do you monitor to determine if changes need to be made?</td>
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<td><strong>(Interview Question 7)</strong> How do you go about implementing changes to your site’s special education structures?</td>
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<td><strong>(Interview Question 8)</strong> What factors contribute to how students experience special education at your site, particularly concerning inclusion?</td>
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<td><strong>(Subquestion 2)</strong> What are the perceptions of public high school administrators in southern California regarding how they implement specific federal and state policies concerning the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom?</td>
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<td><strong>(Subquestion 3)</strong> What additional factors do public high school administrators in southern California perceive to influence their implementation of federal and state policies concerning the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom?</td>
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<td><strong>(Subquestion 4)</strong> How do public high school administrators in southern California perceive their prior experience with students with disabilities impacts interpretation and implementation of specific federal and state policies concerning the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom?</td>
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<td><strong>(Interview Question 1)</strong> What prior experiences do you have with students with disabilities?</td>
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<td><strong>(Interview Question 2)</strong> How do you perceive your prior experiences with students with disabilities impacting your current work as a high school administrator?</td>
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APPENDIX I

Field Test Interviewee and Observer Feedback Questions

1. How long did the interview take? Did the time seem to be appropriate? Did the respondent have ample opportunities to respond to questions?

2. Were the questions clear or were there places where the interviewee was unclear?

3. Were there any words or terms used during the interview that were unclear or confusing to the interviewee?


5. Did you feel prepared to conduct the interview? Is there something you could have done to be better prepared? For the observer: From your observation did the interviewer appear prepared to conduct the interview?

6. What parts of the interview went the most smoothly and why do you think that was the case?

7. What parts of the interview seemed to struggle and why do you think that was the case?

8. If you were to change any part of the interview, what would that part be and how would you change it?

9. What suggestions do you have for improving the overall process?
APPENDIX F

Audio Release Form

RESEARCH STUDY TITLE: The Perceptions of Public High School Administrators Regarding the Inclusion of Students with Disabilities in the General Education Classroom: A Phenomenological Study

BRANDMAN UNIVERSITY
16355 LAGUNA CANYON ROAD
IRVINE, CA  92618

I authorize Jennifer A. Thomasian, Brandman University Doctoral Candidate, to record my voice. I give Brandman University and all persons or entities associated with this research study permission or authority to use this recording for activities associated with this research study.

I understand that the recording will be used for transcription purposes and the information obtained during the interview may be published in a journal/dissertation or presented at meetings/presentations.

I will be consulted about the use of the audio recordings for any purpose other than those listed above. Additionally, I waive any right to royalties or other compensation arising correlated to the use of information obtained from the recording.

By signing this form, I acknowledge that I have completely read and fully understand the above release and agree to the outlined terms. I hereby release all claims against any person or organization utilizing this material.

_______________________________________   __________________
Signature of Participant or Responsible Party   Date
APPENDIX G

Research Participant Bill of Rights

BRANDMAN UNIVERSITY INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

Research Participant’s Bill of Rights

Any person who is requested to consent to participate as a subject in an experiment, or who is requested to consent on behalf of another, has the following rights:

1. To be told what the study is attempting to discover.

2. To be told what will happen in the study and whether any of the procedures, drugs or devices are different from what would be used in standard practice.

3. To be told about the risks, side effects or discomforts of the things that may happen to him/her.

4. To be told if he/she can expect any benefit from participating and, if so, what the benefits might be.

5. To be told what other choices he/she has and how they may be better or worse than being in the study.

6. To be allowed to ask any questions concerning the study both before agreeing to be involved and during the study.

7. To be told what sort of medical treatment is available if any complications arise.

8. To refuse to participate at all before or after the study is started without any adverse effects.
9. To receive a copy of the signed and dated consent form.

10. To be free of pressures when considering whether he/she wishes to agree to be in the study.

If at any time you have questions regarding a research study, you should ask the researchers to answer them. You also may contact the Brandman University Institutional Review Board, which is concerned with the protection of volunteers in research projects. The Brandman University Institutional Review Board may be contacted either by telephoning the Office of Academic Affairs at (949) 341-9937 or by writing to the Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs, Brandman University, 16355 Laguna Canyon Road, Irvine, CA, 92618.

Brandman University IRB  Adopted  November 2013
APPENDIX H

Informed Consent

BRANDMAN UNIVERSITY
16355 LAGUNA CANYON ROAD
IRVINE, CA  92618

RESEARCH STUDY TITLE: The Perceptions of Public High School Administrators Regarding the Inclusion of Students with Disabilities in the General Education Classroom: A Phenomenological Study

RESPONSIBLE INVESTIGATOR: Jennifer A. Thomasian, Doctoral Candidate

TITLE OF CONSENT FORM: Consent to Participate in Research

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY: The purpose of this phenomenological, qualitative study is to describe how high school administrators make sense of special education mandates and implement those mandates at their schools.

PROCEDURES: In participating in this research study, I agree to partake in an audio-recorded, semi-structured interview. The interview will take place, in person, at a predetermined location, and will last about an hour. During the interview, I will be asked a series of questions designed to allow me to determine how high school administrators make sense of special education mandates and implement those mandates at their schools.

I understand that:

a) The possible risks or discomforts associated with this research are minimal. It may be inconvenient to spend up to one hour in the interview. However, the interview session will be held at an agreed upon location, to minimize this inconvenience.

b) I will not be compensated for my participation in this study. The possible benefit of this study is to determine how high school administrators make sense of special education mandates and implement those mandates at their schools. The findings and recommendations from this study will be made available to all participants.

c) Any questions I have concerning my participation in this study will be answered by Jennifer A. Thomasian, Brandman University Doctoral Candidate. I understand that Mrs. Thomasian may be contacted by phone at (909) 730-9098 or email at jthomasi@mail.brandman.edu. The dissertation chairperson may also answer questions: Dr. Jonathan Greenberg at greenber@brandman.edu.

d) I may refuse to participate or withdraw from this study at any time without any negative consequences. Also, the investigator may stop the study at any time.
e) The study will be audio-recorded, and the recordings will not be used beyond the scope of this project. Audio recordings will be used to transcribe the interviews. Once the interviews are transcribed, the audio and interview transcripts will be kept for a minimum of five years by the investigator in a secure location.

f) No information that identifies me will be released without my separate consent and that all identifiable information will be protected to the limits allowed by law. If the study design or the use of the data is to be changed, I will be informed and my consent re-obtained. If I have any questions, comments, or concerns about the study or the informed consent process, I may write or call the Office of the Executive Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs, Brandman University, 16355 Laguna Canyon Road, Irvine, CA 92618, (949) 341-7641. I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this form and the Research Participant’s Bill of Rights.

I have read the above and understand it and hereby voluntarily consent to the procedure(s) set forth.

________________________________________________________________________
Signature of Participant or Responsible Party Date

________________________________________________________________________
Signature of Witness (if appropriate) Date

________________________________________________________________________
Signature of Principal Investigator Date

Brandman University IRB 2018
APPENDIX I

National Institute of Health (NIH) Certificate

Certificate of Completion

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) Office of Extramural Research certifies that Jennifer Thomasion successfully completed the NIH Web-based training course "Protecting Human Research Participants".

Date of completion: 05/17/2016.

Certification Number: 2076293.