

Summer 6-22-2019

## Perceptions of Educators Regarding Specialized Instruction for Students With Learning Disabilities: A Case Study

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Kimberly S. Baker

*Concordia University - Portland*

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Concordia University–Portland

College of Education

Doctorate of Education Program

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Perceptions of Educators Regarding Specialized Instruction for Students With Learning  
Disabilities: A Case Study

Kimberly Sue Baker  
Concordia University–Portland  
College of Education

Dissertation submitted to the Teachers of the College of Education  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Education in  
Higher Education Leadership

Brandy Kamm, Ph.D., Faculty Chair Dissertation Committee

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Concordia University–Portland

2019

## **Abstract**

Learning is a challenge for any child, especially a child with a learning disability. With a focus on best practices and teaching techniques, this qualitative case study will examine the perceptions of individuals at a public charter school dedicated to students with learning disabilities. The study takes place at a public charter school located in Florida. I will gather data by conducting seven interviews of the participants within this study. Participants included four teachers, two support staff, and one administrator at the specific school. I found four themes during the coding process and analysis. These themes include collaborative partnerships, professional development, support, and challenges. The majority of those interviewed feel strongly about collaborative partnerships and professional development. These two themes warrant future collaborative partnerships and professional development opportunities for teachers and support staff at the school. Teachers requested support in teaching techniques and best practices. The constant change of federal and state laws requires support staff and teachers to stay on top of things when educating students in this diverse population. This challenge and having enough time to educate students will always be evident with this population.

*Keywords:* educational laws, charter schools, disabilities, best practices, graduation rates, teaching techniques.

## **Dedication**

I dedicate this dissertation to my husband, Phil, and our daughter, Leighan, who stood by me throughout this process with the late nights of homework and time away from family. Although this was a long journey, I feel it was worth it. I am thankful to my sister, Denise, who kept encouraging me to hang in there because the finish line is near. I am truly blessed to have an understanding family. I want to say a special thank you to each of you as you assisted during my journey within education.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **Introduction of Problem**

Educators have struggled for decades to find the best ways to teach students with learning disabilities. Teaching techniques vary across the United States when educating these students. This has led to varied graduation rates of students with learning disabilities. The National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD, 2016) strives to eliminate the gap between knowledge and action to help educators, parents, and policymakers who are ready to design personalized learning systems that meet the needs of students with learning disabilities.

The most recent educational reform is the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015 and it goes hand and hand with Section 504 of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Both require schools to provide accommodations that allow students with disabilities to be educated in the least restrictive environment. There is always room for improvement in the instructional quality while educating students with learning disabilities. According to the Florida Department of Education Bureau of Exceptional Education and Student Services (2017), many teachers in the Florida education system are not aware of proper instructional methods when teaching students with learning disabilities.

Cortiella and Horowitz (2014) noted teachers who did not believe in their abilities to teach students through interventions criticized students who made errors and continued to refer students to special education due to the lack of knowledge in this special education population. The lack of knowledge on federal laws, state laws, and individual instructions' guidelines are a problem that many individuals face in special education. According to Cortiella and Horowitz (2014), despite the fact that millions of individuals face various learning disabilities, confusion

and misinformation about learning disabilities remains. Charter schools provide opportunities for parents to meet the needs of their children with learning disabilities.

The public charter school used in this study is located in Florida and strives to create a high intensity, low threat therapeutic learning community to help students celebrate their special gifts. The school's approach is about the whole child—mind, body, and soul. This school is focused on students with learning disabilities, dedicated teachers and support staff, and committed parents (Ackerman, 2013). The community works together with the school to provide students with what they need regardless of the special challenges each child faces. This includes raising funds to support the nonprofit school to purchase supplies and other needs to educate a diverse population of students. This case study is an investigation on the perceptions of teachers, support staff, and administrators on educational services used in a specialized setting in relation to a regular classroom.

### **Background, Content, and History**

There are many organizations and offices available in the United States to assist states and institutions in doing what is best for individuals with learning disabilities. West Ed's National Center for Systemic Improvements (NSCI) assists states in improving systems that work with children with disabilities. The U. S. Department of Education (2014) launched a Result-Driven Accountability (RDA) initiative for special education. The Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) along with NCSI continue working together to better serve students in need. According to OSERS, there are three components in the RDA: state performance plan, which measures results and compliance; determinations, which reflect state performance on results as well as compliance; and differentiated monitoring and support for all states, especially those that are considered low performing states.

With federal and state laws for an individual with disabilities, it may seem difficult for many to understand these laws and how they differ from each other. With the right instruction, guidance and support, individuals with learning disabilities can achieve many things. “Learning disabilities can take many forms, and the labels have multiplied as our knowledge and understanding of learning and attention issues have increased” (Flink, 2014, p. 39). Learning disabilities come in various forms and within each of these forms comes different challenges.

A review of literature lays the groundwork for researching the constant changes in educational policies and best practices utilized in teaching students with learning disabilities, as it remains a challenge for educational institutions. In 1997, the United States Department of Education defined a learning disability as “a severe discrepancy between intellectual and achievement abilities” based on Section 300.8 of the Individual with Disabilities Act (IDEA, 2018). These discrepancies could take several years before signs appear in a student’s performance.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is derived from the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (1975) and provides special education and related services for students with disabilities up to 21 years old. This law guarantees a free appropriate public education tailored to an individual’s needs. Some states allow students to receive services until they are older, such as California, which allows students up to the age of 26 years old. According to IDEA, state and federal legislation guarantees students with disabilities to be placed in the least restrictive environment possible. In many states, special education continues to advance and thrive in providing services to individual with disabilities.

This advancement comes alongside the 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) in the United States. IDEIA provides ways in



addressing school and parent concerns regarding the education of children. This is done by concentrating on students' strengths and building the proper curriculum of teaching techniques to help students succeed. Getting research-based instructional practices into the hands of educators is one of the challenges faced by many educators (ERIC Clearinghouse, 2005). According to Ackerman (2013), the National Center for Special Education in Charter Schools plans to identify barriers that special education student's face and create a coalition to help protect students' rights.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Educators and others have struggled for decades to find the best strategies to teach students with learning disabilities. According to the Florida Department of Education, in the 2016–2017 school year, Florida had a graduation rate of 66% for students in the ESE program. Many educators believe varying teaching techniques cause a variation in graduation percentages of students with learning disabilities.

In Florida, over 350,000 students are served under IDEA. That is over 13% of the United States total students served under IDEA according to NCES (2016). Among these students, 34% had a specific learning disability. Students with learning disabilities can receive either a regular diploma or a specialized diploma in many schools. In 2015–2016, the high school graduation rate in Florida rose to 65% over the previous year of 64%. Schifter (2016) made note that students with disabilities are permitted to remain in high school through age 21 and, therefore, may need additional years to graduate.

NCLD (2014) noted learning disabilities is one of many disabilities caused from neurological differences in the brain function and structure. These differences can cause a person to have problems when receiving, storing, retrieving, and communicating information. Warning

signs include poor behavior, not starting or completing assignments, falling behind in class, and missing too much school. Schools need to develop programs to serve students in the most effective ways possible by examining and using federal and state laws as they develop personalized learning plans to help individuals with learning disabilities.

The Bureau of Education and Student Services (BESS) in the Florida Education System works to ensure all students in the ESE programs are included in all state initiatives to improve learning for students with a disability. “Students with learning disabilities experience pervasive academic deficits and require extensive academic interventions; however, they may also engage in problem behaviors that adversely affect teaching and learning which lessens the impact of specialized instruction and support” (McKenna, Flower, Kim, Ciullo & Haring, 2015, p. 15). Interventions used by educators include proactive strategies that incorporate skill building, accommodations, and/or modifications for students with learning disabilities.

“Most people see learning disabilities as a growing issue in the United States” (NCLD, 2014, p. 7). Learning disabilities is considered one of the largest categories of students who receive special education services of some sort. Psychiatric disorders like depression, anxiety, and others can be cured or managed. Learning disabilities cannot be cured, though with early diagnosis and proper support services, people can become successful in society.

The NCLD (2012) collected data randomly from a sampling of almost 2,000 adults in the United States via an online survey about learning disabilities. “The results clearly demonstrated that there is a greater need for understanding learning disabilities throughout society” (NCLD, 2014, p. 7). Knowledge of best practices for special education gives teachers an advantage in the classroom, where children face a broad range of difficulties in learning each day. The charter school in the study uses a personalized learning system as in an individual education plan (IEP)

that assists in educating this population. With personalized learning plans expanding across the United States, many educators understand what personalized learning is and how it works (NCLD, 2016).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this case study is to evaluate best practices based on the perceptions of teachers, support staff, and administrators at a public charter school in Florida and their insight on teaching techniques specifically designed for students with learning disabilities. All students that attend the school have an individualized education plan (IEP) and, depending on the severity, some of the students acquire a specialized diploma because they do not meet the requirements for a regular diploma. The state and federal education departments do not count special diplomas in the graduation rate. The regular school system in this particular county only had a graduation of 64% based on information retrieved from the Florida Department of Education (FLDOE, 2017).

The charter school used for this study serves approximately 1,000 students. According to the school principal, the school started with one location located in Florida and opened a second location several years later. Soon after opening the south campus, the school ventured into a neighboring county because the demand had increased for the specialized education institutions for students with learning disabilities. The institution is considered an ESE center because it specializes in teaching students with learning disabilities.

Students at the school graduate with a regular diploma and go on to college or graduate with a special diploma and the institution helps students transition into the workforce. In 2016–2017, there were over 1,100 students who graduated in the ESE system based on the 2017 Fact

book for the State of Florida. This total was based on all public schools and public charter schools within Florida during a specific time frame.

The charter school follows the Next Generation Sunshine State Standards and Florida Standards. The standards, benchmarks, and expectations are met through the use of multisensory teaching, techniques using visual aids, kinesthetic, and auditory learning modes. The school received almost 200 applicants requesting admission forcing the school to create a wait list in the 2015–2016 academic year. In the 2016–2017 academic year, over 250 applicants applied and some applicants had to be placed on a waiting list. To get into this particular charter school, there is no testing as each applicant is different based on their specific needs

Each prospect is interviewed with his or her parents and if a spot is open, they are informed that day whether their child can attend the school or if they will be put on a waiting list. Some students may not likely to get the same amount of time on an individual basis or in a small group setting in a regular school system. With a specialized school, students can be taken out of class for specialized learning. In public schools, this proves to be harder due to limited resources.

This school offers all services students need to complete their educational experiences. These services include speech therapy and language therapy, mental health counseling, skills labs, occupational therapy, and a registered nurse. All of these services are provided at no cost to the student. The school is accredited by Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) and is known throughout the state as an institution that is dedicated to making a difference. The school in this study strives to make a difference in a student's life and their impact on society as citizens.

## **Research Questions**

**RQ1.** What are the perceptions of teachers, support staff, and administrators' regarding services offered to students with special needs at a specialized public charter school?

**RQ2.** What are the perceptions of teachers, support staff, and administrators on teaching techniques needed to meet the unique learning needs of students with learning disabilities?

## **Rationale, Relevance, and Significance of the Study**

The objective of this research study is to evaluate the best practices and teaching techniques at a public charter school in Florida that specializes in students with learning disabilities. The objectives manifested into key curriculum updates, improved policies, and overall best practices for those with learning disabilities. "Learning disabilities are not a prescription for failure. With the right kind of instruction, guidance and support, there are no limits to what an individual with learning disabilities can achieve" (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014, p. 3).

The significance of this study is to collect data on perceptions of teachers, support staff, and administrators in a public charter school for individuals with learning disabilities and how best practices can help other institutions. The teaching techniques used by this specific public charter school could help other educators make decisions when educating students with learning disabilities. The school adjusted their teaching techniques over previous years to make the school a success in helping those students in need. Educational institutions continue to evolve as the education criteria and guidelines change.

The charter school strives to meet the needs of students with learning disabilities in assisting in their educational goals. The school is a K–12 charter school in Florida for students with learning disabilities that offers a regular or a special diploma. The first graduating class of

only 13 students and has since grown to over 100 graduates with regular or specialized diplomas. Institutional leaders see the need for specialized learning and strive to meet the growing need. The school originally had only one campus but has grown into three campuses to meet requests. Ackerman (2013) also noted that national enrollment rates among special education students show a gap between charter and public schools. “Because charter schools have more freedom, they can focus on those needs in ways traditional public schools can’t” (Ackerman, 2013, n.p.).

### **Definition of Terms**

Learning disabilities are real and a permanent diagnosis that individuals deal with. For the purpose of this study, the following definitions are used to describe background information on learning disabilities and the challenges that affect how an individual receives, processes, retrieves, and communicates information. The school in this case study works specifically with students who have learning disabilities.

**Accommodations.** Changes in schools that are used to assist students in working around their disabilities (National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities, 2010) are known as accommodations. Accommodations can be additional time to get assignments done, one-on-one instruction, or adjusted outcomes to mention a few. There are a number of accommodations, and each accommodation can be unique to the individual student based on their needs.

**Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).** ADA was signed into law on 1990, by President George H.W. Bush. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2002), the ADA is one of America's most comprehensive pieces of civil rights legislation that prohibits discrimination and guarantees that people with disabilities have the same opportunities as everyone else. This law, modeled from the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibits

discrimination on basis of gender, race, religion or national origin. If a person has a physical or mental disability, they are protected under this law.

**Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA).** Individuals who live in low-income homes have children who need additional educational resources. This law laid the groundwork for all states to provide education to all individuals who have a disability (U.S. Department of Education, 2002).

**Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).** According to NCLD (2016), this law requires states to establish standards in the K–12 system. The law also requires states to establish assessments that are aligned with the standards and evaluate the assessments to meet goals of these standards. During the Obama administration, discussion of the unworkable requirements of NCLB were brought to the forefront. The Every Student Succeeds ACT (ESSA) signed into law on December 15, 2015, focused on educational equity no matter what the students learning style may be. States are encouraged to use the universal design of learning, a multitier system of support, and develop personalized learning to meet the needs of individuals in this population. The new law builds on key areas of progress made possible by the help of educators, parents, students and communities across the United States.

**Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).** IDEA law passed in 1990 and updated in 1997 and 2004. IDEA also provides federal funding to state institutions to help support students with disabilities, whether they have physical disabilities or mental disabilities. These funds help the institutions to offset the cost of the additional services needed (Public Law 108-446 (20 U.S.C 1400 et seq.)). As stated by IDEA, the purpose of the law is:

1. To ensure that all children with a disability have available access to a free, appropriate education which focuses on meeting the needs of the students; ensure the

rights of children; and assist State and Federal agencies in providing the best education possible.

2. Assist States with the implementation of a comprehensive statewide system to develop interventions for students with learning disabilities.
3. Ensure that educators and parents have the necessary tools to improve educational results of students with disabilities.
4. Assess and ensure effectiveness of and all efforts to educate children with disabilities.

“The very term ‘disability’ suggests a deficit mode of thinking about labeled students” (Gold & Richards, 2012, p. 144). As students with learning disabilities graduate high school, they transition from Individuals with Disabilities Act to the American with Disabilities Act.

**Individualized Education Plan (IEP).** This term is a written statement, created by a committee of teachers, parent, counselors and sometimes the student to develop, review and revised the plan of action needed when educating a student with disabilities (IDEA, 2004. n.d., para 1).

**Modification.** This term is a change in what is being taught or expected from a student with disabilities (National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities, 2010).

**No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB).** In 2001, NCLB passed overwhelmingly with support from all government parties. “This was a pledge to ensure educational quality for all children so that indeed, no child is left behind” (U.S. Department of Education, 2002, para 3). Educational institutions are under pressure from politicians, community, and other stakeholders to convert to a learning community that centers on the subject and produces standard-based reform, resulting in increased test scores for all students including ones with a disability (Green, 2008). To increase accountability and begin to close the achievement gap, NCLB requires



education institutions to divide into subgroups for accountability. These subgroups are (a) economically disadvantaged students, (b) students from major racial and ethnic groups, (c) students with disabilities under IDEA, and (d) students with limited English proficiency (Greatschools, 2015).

**Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act.** Section 504, enacted into statute and affected the federal assistance that individuals could get to help financially. Under Section 504, the statute states that an “otherwise qualified” student with a disability who is granted admission and meets eligibility criteria for completing a program may request educational support services (Simon, 2001, p. 4). These support services, commonly called “reasonable accommodations” usually consist of but are not limited to: additional time on tests, oral test-taking, provided note takers, and offering computerized testing, among others.

### **Assumptions, Delimitations, and Limitations**

It is assumed that the practices used by this school are considered effective based on their success in graduating a higher percentage of students with a regular diploma and assisting them to further their education goals and becoming productive individuals in society. Results may not accurately reflect opinions from all members included in the population. “Learning disabilities can take many forms, and the labels have multiplied as our knowledge and understanding of learning and attention issues have increased” (Flink, 2014, p. 39).

This study took place at a public charter school. Boundaries or delimitations became apparent with the research in preparation of the case study. Due to the number of participants in the study population, the population involved in the current study focused only on members located within a certain county in Florida. Another delimitation is the number and type of questions asked during the conducted interviews.

In this study, only one school location was studied. Due to the small size of schools that specialize in serving students with learning disabilities, the population of the study was limited to only teachers and support staff within one school located in the Florida. Limitations associated with this research included the teachers' experience in providing services in a special education environment and the certification of support staff and teachers serving students in this population. Limitations pertaining to the timeframe are apparent in conducting interviews so not to intervene with the education process.

### **Summary**

The best practices currently used at the public charter school in Florida could lead to assisting other education professionals on teaching techniques that enables them the opportunity to assist or expand the disability programs at their institutions. A limited number of public charter schools serve this specialized population when compared to private charter schools. Private schools charge tuition, and many families cannot afford to pay, so they are faced with the dilemma of keeping their children in regular schools and hoping they do not fall behind due to their disabilities. The personalized learning systems that evolve from this will assist in meeting the needs of students with learning disabilities. Many states have started designing personalized learning systems as the Common Core Standards (Shaw, 2012).

The exploration of best practices and teaching strategies used when educating students with learning disabilities at the school assisted in uncovering new obstacles others may encounter when educating this population and trying to implement best practices. Chapter 1 included an introduction to the problem and background of history of education laws. Also listed are the assumptions, delimitations, and limitations of the study. Chapter 2 represents a literature review on learning disabilities laws and types, teaching techniques used in charter schools.

Chapter 3 provides a review of methodological review. Chapter 4 will share the findings and Chapter 5 wraps up the study with discussion and conclusion in addressing the research question.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### Introduction to Literature Review

This literature review provides a synthesis of research on policies and best practices in the United States K–12 public charter school system for students with learning disabilities. While schools may find it a challenge to accommodate and educate this population of students, for parents the concern is greater. “Educating students with disabilities in public schools is shaped by an amalgam of federal, state, local statutes, regulations, negotiated agreements, and established—if not always best—practices” (Rhim & O’Neill, 2013, p. 4). More students with disabilities are in the education pipeline than ever before (McGuire & Scott, 2006).

Federal laws, specifically the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) passed by the Congress in 1990, guarantees protection for students with learning disabilities. Educational reforms over the past several years have improved the outcomes for students with disabilities. These reforms changed who was educated, where they are educated, and how they are educated. Constant change to reforms is a challenge for educators.

The literature review includes peer-viewed articles from professional journals using online databases, including: ERIC, EBSCO, SAGE Research Methods online, as well as government websites of current laws and practices in the United States today. The search included such keywords as *IDEA*, *learning disabilities*, *federal education policies*, *and students with learning disabilities*, *teacher’s perception*, *special education*, *disability services*, and *Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act*. The review of best practices in teaching techniques within the literature identified what currently works, as well as areas that may need improvement.

One of the primary roles in education is supporting teachers, support staff, and administration through the change process via strategic planning and advocacy (Anderson,

2009). Cherry (2017) noted that even though existing research found matching learning styles and teaching techniques, it had no influence on education, and still remains a popular topic. An education prepares students to live successfully in a diverse society. Teaching those with learning disabilities is harder due to the extra time needed on an individual basis and assisting in the development of an individual education plan (IEP) for each student.

How individuals learn depends on what their learning style is. Every individual is unique so their learning style or styles may vary. “Learning styles are a popular concept in psychology and education that are intended to identify how people learn best” (Cherry, 2017, p. 1). There are fewer self-contained classrooms because students with disabilities are to be educated in a least restrictive environment. Interventions used in instruction should be based on assessment results and research-based instruction.

The classroom environment can have an effect on the amount of learning that occurs. The room can be too busy for some learners but inviting for other learners. Schools that lower the expectations or standards can make it harder for a student with learning disabilities to graduate with skills needed to succeed in college or in the workplace. A major consideration for school-based intervention is meeting the needs of students with special requirements. Predetermined or negative biases against students with learning disabilities may directly impact student learning. Understanding the teachers’ and others’ perceptions of learning disabilities is important in giving the significance of their authority and influence over students (Al-Azidiyenn, Mei, & Fook, 2010).

The three most popular learning models used today are Kolb’s model, Jungian learning style, and Neil Fleming’s VARK model. Kolb’s theory works on two levels: a four-stage cycle of learning and four stage learning styles. Kolb believes effective learning progresses through (a)

concrete experiences, (b) observations and reflections, (c) formation of abstract concepts, and (d) hypothesis testing. Jungian learning using introvert and extrovert learning styles. This leaning style is based on Jungian personality theory. Jung combined two types of attitudes and four functions of personality (thinking, feeling, sensation, & intuition). Neil Fleming's VARK model is the most used model. In this model, learners are identified as visual learners, auditory learners, reading and writing learners, or kinesthetic learners. Each of these models are used daily in various education settings and are not limited to students with learning disabilities. Cherry (2017) noted that the validity of all learning models are still questionable and criticized extensively.

The school in this study uses the Marzano model of teaching effectiveness. This model lets teachers set goals and check for understanding in order for the students to be effective (Marzano, Pickering, & Heflebower, 2010). Under this model, teachers are able to reinforce effort and provide recognition to students, leading them to be successful in their education. Marzano's research data showed effective teachers need to set goals, provide feedback, interact with students, engage students, establish and maintain classroom rules, and communicate high expectations. Engagement of students is a central aspect of effective teaching (Marzano et al., 2010). Student engagement comes from the effective planning of teachers to incorporate engagement into their classrooms.

The visual learning style allows learners to remember what they see in diagrams, pictures, charts, and other visual aids (Cherry, 2017). Visual learners benefit from the use of a variety of colors. This helps with ocular stimulation in understanding what is being taught. Students with this style of learning would rather see the information rather than having it in written format. Cherry (2017) noted auditory learners, also known as verbal learners, understand

better by listening to words and the repetition of the words as a technique in learning. Students may be sensitive to outside distractions as they listen to the lecture. Learners that prefer to read or write about a subject matter are known as reading/writing learners. These learners prefer reading, taking notes, and are able to translate the information in a way they understand.

Kinesthetic learners are also known as active learners or hands on learners (Cherry, 2017). Active learners retain and understand better when they are able to do something physical while learning. Active learners like to try things and see if they work before coming to a conclusion. These learners also need continuous movement as in tapping their fingers or using a stress ball or other devices. Cherry (2017) also noted that effective special education is an important issue with the Department of Education and would benefit from more research. Understanding the various learning styles could benefit teachers and students.

Teachers are the biggest influence on student achievement; they have to be flexible in meeting the needs of students with learning disabilities. Rafferty, Boettcher, and Griffin (2001) noted that parents expect teachers to have the necessary skills to teach all students but are concerned that the students with special needs may not get the proper attention. Knowledge of evidence-based interventions can help when implemented to meet the diverse needs of the students (Dudley-Marling, 2011). Educators continue to work through issues that have emerged with the implementation of the Common Core. In order to comply with state and federal legislature, teachers and an individualized education plan (IEP) team have critical roles in developing interventions that meet the needs of each unique student. The team is made up of ESE specialist, teachers, support staff, parents, and sometimes the student.

An IEP is the primary module in communicating the school district's commitment in addressing the unique educational needs of students with a disability. The process of developing

an IEP was derived from the 1975 federal and state laws and local policies (NCLD, 2016). An IEP team is charged with developing the educational plan for each individual student. The student's educational plan should include the areas that impact the student's disabilities and strengths. The IEP should focus on the student's strengths and build around those strengths when developing support services.

According to FLDOE (2017), there is a four-step problem-solving process in Florida to develop an IEP. The first two steps define and analyze the problem. Defining the current levels of the students and establishing goals to achieve. The third step involves the planning of the interventions and what need to be done to support the interventions. Finally, the IEP team must measure and evaluate the progress and determine if goals have been met. IEP teams can provide valuable input to a school-based leadership team as it relates to problem solving and future goals of the school and the students.

According to Rhim and O'Neill (2013), approximately 6.4 million students receive special education services; that is 13% of the population of students aged 6–21. The Council of Chief State School Officers and National Governors' Association explicitly stated that all students, regardless of disability, are to be given the opportunity to achieve high standards (2011). As this population grows, we must consider new ways to face the challenge of education for these students today and in the future. Despite the requirements to enter a higher education institution, an estimated 1.2 million students did not receive a high school diploma (Walberg, 2013). Students with learning disabilities require the same opportunities as other students in achieving high standards as those expressed in the Common Core State Standards Initiative (Council of Chief State School Officers and National Governors' Association, 2011).



The use of direct instruction approach is emphasizing academic engagement (Landrum, Tankersley, & Kauffman, 2003). Incorporating this type of intervention helps to improve attention in direct instruction. Direct instruction and other interventions at an early age in school becomes an essential part of a student's success in their education. The direct instruction approach is considered the richest form of instruction in enhancing a student's ability to not struggle with academic achievement. Interventions that could affect learning are reading comprehension, word recognition strategies, direct instruction, and computer-based instruction (Forness, 2001).

“For far too long, issues involving students with learning disabilities have been overlooked in law, absent from public debates, and neglected by schools” (Gregg, 2007, p. 1). Three classification frameworks in defining and identifying specific learning disabilities (SLD) are neurological, cognitive discrepancy, and instructional (Fletcher, 2012). The National Council on Teacher Quality defined best practices as requiring all teachers to be observed and given feedback on their teaching practices (National Council on Teacher Quality, 2014).

According to Fletcher et al. (2007), the neurological framework has fallen as the number one choice, leaving the other two frameworks of cognitive discrepancy and instructional to compete for the top slot in frameworks. A problem occurs when institutions are not ready for the population of students who need specialized learning. According to Stevens (2012), the six best practices for mainstreaming students with disabilities are using teacher resources, valuing students with disabilities, training teachers for this population, having teachers work together, assigning special needs students to experienced teachers, and not segregating students in prior grades.

Having the correct resources available for teachers to use will help to improve the instructional program for all children. Valuing the students gives them a sense of collaboration: It is difficult for any initiative to be effective if the participants are not on board. Mainstreaming students with disabilities is not going to be beneficial if the principals and teachers don't see the value of creating inclusion classrooms for these students. This will only create a negative environment for these students. (Stevens, 2012, para. 2)

Teachers need professional development in order to deal with issues that would challenge even experienced psychiatrists and other specialists. Collaboration with others can assist in solving problems. This also allows teachers to share what has worked or not worked for them. This supports Campbell, Milbourne, and Silverman's (2001) findings of when teachers are allowed to collaborate on the difficulties they share and the need for more professional training. Teachers rarely receive formal training when working with students with special needs.

Many schools assign students to experienced teachers to avoid causing issues in regular classes. Segregating students is not the answer. Students with learning disabilities who attend mainstream schools need to be included in all grades. Stevens (2012) noted that not only do these best practices and mainstreaming of students in this population benefit special needs students, but they benefit every student. There are positive outcomes in the classroom, and this leads to a greater understanding of working with children with learning disabilities.

### **Conceptual Framework**

In social cognitive theory, learning by observing others is the focus of the study. McLeod (2016) noted this type of theory involves social experience and environmental influences. The social experience is how individuals act within a certain situation. The environmental influences are the state and federal laws that protect certain individuals. Teachers, support staff, and

administrators provided their expert opinions on educating students with learning disabilities and the various learning styles that come along with it (see Figure 1).

“Social constructivists hold assumptions of the world they live in and develop subjective meanings of their experiences—meanings directed towards certain objects or things” (Creswell, 2012, p. 8). Current theories are based on knowledge scaffolding, focusing on critical thinking and retention (Almala, 2005). Constructivist theory indicates the starting point for instruction is not new knowledge, but prior knowledge and experience in dealing with the best interests of learners (Robertson, 2011). The focus of this case study is to review perceptions of teachers, support staff, and administrators regarding services offered to students with learning disabilities.



*Figure 1.* Conceptual framework for the study.

### **Review of Research Literature and Methodological Literature**

To inform the current study, seven areas of literature are reviewed: (a) history of laws, (b) charter schools, (c) accommodations, (d) teaching strategies, (e) universal design learning, (f) accountability, and (g) graduation. Specific focus on each area was reviewed as it relates to best

practices in education. Educators and others have struggled for decades to find the best ways to teach students with learning disabilities. According to Horowitz, Rawe, and Whittaker (2017), lack of effective instruction can limit a student's opportunities and lead to poor outcomes.

Daane, Smith, and Latham (2000) noted that most general education teachers are not prepared to accommodate students with disabilities. Brown, Welsh, Hill, and Cipko (2008) examined the effectiveness of general education teachers and how apprehensive they are about modifying their curriculum. Researchers (West & Schaefer-Whitby, 2008) noted creating a strong awareness among students helped support the push toward inclusion in the classroom and access to the general education curriculum.

**History of special education laws.** A special education law was signed in 1975 by President Ford and renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Educational Act (IDEA) in 1997. The definition of learning disabilities by Federal Law 34 CFR 300.8 is as follows: Federal legislation, as well as the United States Department of Education, enforce Section 504 and stated that institutions are required to provide disabled individuals the opportunity for equal access to all programs and services that are sponsored by an institution. Multiple presidents over the last few decades have made revisions to education acts.

For example, President Clinton revamped and set Goals 2000, which demanded immediate improvement standards and goals for American students (Caples, 2005). President Obama concentrated on the Common Core initiative. Understanding the history of special education provided awareness on what to expect and what is still needed to improve graduation rates of students with learning disabilities (Caples, 2005). Individuals with or without a disability should be made aware of these laws.

The changes to the IDEA followed reports from the President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education (2002) and the Donovan and Cross (2002) report, both of which emphasized the importance of a contextualized assessment process that considers a child's opportunity to learn. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act focused on the success of all children including children with learning disabilities. The law funded a number of federal programs that directed advancement in the success of United States schools by increasing the standards for accountability. The intent of NCLB is for all children to meet state academic achievement standards, reaching their full potential through improved programs.

NCLB required all states to develop standards for reading and math. In addition, schools had to achieve adequate yearly progress that demonstrated growth and ensured quality instruction for all students. By 2015, there was so much criticism that Congress stripped the national features from this law, and it was replaced by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). Today, schools are required to adhere to the Every Student Succeeds Act per Congress.

ESSA provides three opportunities that support a shift to personalized learning: redesigned system assessments, accountability, and education preparation. ESSA includes accountability requirements that disaggregate outcome data by subgroups including disability status and provides funding to increase the use of evidence-based interventions at schools with learning gaps (NCLD 2017). The law also focuses on struggling readers, including a comprehensive literacy center to help educators and parents recognize the early signs of dyslexia. This act took full effect during the 2017–2018 academic year. ESSA required education institutions to provide assessment data for specific categories of students (Klein, 2016). This new law built on key areas of progress that schools have made over recent years.

**Charter schools.** According to data from the U.S. Department of Education, from the 1999–2000 school year to the 2007–2008 school year, the number of students enrolled in charter schools in the United States tripled. This is an increase from 340,000 to 1.3 million students. Critics have argued that charter schools enroll fewer students with learning disabilities than public schools do. Charter schools, introduced in the late 1980s, are an effort to improve the educational outcomes of students and increase productivity using the traditional business model, which incorporates accountability of federal and state laws, choice, competition, and autonomy.

“Charter schools are schools of choice located within a school district boundaries and operated have expanded rapidly across the nation over the past two decades” (Winters, 2015, p. 228). Forty-one states have charter schools. “Only Alabama, American Samoa, Guam, Kentucky, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, Northern Marian Islands, Puerto Rico, South Dakota, Vermont, Washing, and West Virginia do not have charter schools” (Mulligan, 2011, para 9).

Garda (2012) identified that charter schools are responsible for providing a free appropriate public education that is in a least restrictive environment and ensuring that students with disabilities are provided programs, services, support, and academic instruction to meet their special needs. Because charter schools are generally small, accurate data on the achievement of students with learning disabilities are limited. Even with this, parents still choose to send their children to charter schools. Students are more likely to get individualized attention in the charter school due to small class sizes and flexible curricula. Lake (2008) noted that charter schools generally focus their educational design on a specific mission. Lake concluded the schools adapt the programs that are needed for students with disabilities to succeed.

According to Rhim and O’Neill (2013), charter schools that are designed primarily or entirely for students with identified disabilities are a small niche of the charter school sector. A

charter school is a public or private school that operates under a contract, or charter, that has been agreed upon by the founders and the governing state and local education agency that sponsors the charter (Glascock, Robertson, & Coleman, 1997). Over the last several years, charter schools have arguably become an educational force to reckon with. “Parents choose to send their children with a disability to a charter school and few studies have been completed to find out the reason why parents choose this type of school” (Finn, Caldwell, & Raub, 2006, p. 92). Gross and Lake (2014) noted that successful charter schools have partnerships with other networks to provide professional development to teachers and support staff. Research has shown that many schools are successful in educating students with special needs in their programs (Fierros & Bloomberg, 2005; Gross & Lake, 2014; Lake & Gross, 2011; Lange and Lehr, 2000).

The United States has an increasingly diverse population that continues to drive the choice to attend a charter school over a public school. Lake and Gross (2012) noted since the initiation of special education and the variation of students in charter schools throughout the United States, educators are at a disadvantage for accessing training and support staff development opportunities that could provide resources and tools required to effectively work with students with disabilities. The difference in special education rates between public schools and charter schools has gained the attention of policy makers (Winters, 2015). Florida charter schools have played a key role in increasing options in public education for students (FLDOE, 2017).

At the charter school in Florida, approximately 75% of the students graduate with a regular diploma and go to college, and the remaining 25% of the graduates get a specialized diploma that allows them to enter directly into the work field. With such diversity, parents and community members continue to collaborate over charter schools in order to accommodate the



variety of student needs in society. In 2016–2017, over 283,000 students were enrolled in 654 charter schools in Florida (FLDOE, 2017).

Charter schools are required to set students up for achievement within their charter. Public charter schools cannot turn away any individual who applies, including students with special needs (Lubiensky, 2003). “A study conducted by the U.S. Department of Education in 2000 identified several reasons why parents of students with learning disabilities are choosing charter schools” (NCLD, 2010). Special curriculum, eliminating the stigma associated with special education, and using the inclusion model are some of the reasons identified.

Charter schools have a responsibility to parents, students, teachers, and other stakeholders. “Many kids with learning and attention issues are at charter schools. That includes a quarter of a million kids who get services, according to the national Center for Special Education in Charter Schools (NCSECS)” (Morin, 2018, para 2). These stakeholders may attempt to resolve issues directly with the sponsor if they feel they are not being addressed at the school level (Zavislak, 2002). Research is still needed to determine how well students with learning disabilities fare overall in charter schools.

**Accommodations.** According to the National Center for Learning Disabilities (2006), accommodations are alterations to ways a task is conveyed to students that allows them to complete a task as other students. “The presence of accommodations and modifications may be evidence of the need for teachers to better differentiate instructions for some students with learning disabilities” (McKenna, Flower, Kim, Cuillo, & Haring, 2015, p. 24). Accommodations provide equal access to the task presented in order to understand a concept, but do not provide an undue advantage over other students. According to Scalon and Baker (2012), when accommodations are included in classroom instruction, teachers may not feel comfortable with

the knowledge and skills that may be required based on a student's IEP. Modifications should not be confused with accommodations. Modifications change the curriculum, whereas accommodations assist in various ways to expand learning.

Accommodations in education can assist anyone, especially those individuals with learning disabilities. These accommodations could be extra time for assignments, using visual aids, or one-on-one instruction. Accommodations are generally grouped into four categories. These categories are presentation, response, time/scheduling, and setting. Presentation examples include repeating directions or reading aloud. Response examples are using reference aids, marking answers in book and even using a computer. The third category of timing/scheduling allows for extended time on assignments or frequent breaks. Finally, the setting is crucial in helping students succeed. Setting includes special lighting, visual aids, or a separate space or room to allow the student the opportunity to learn.

The state of Florida adopted rigorous educational standards between 2007 and 2010. These standards are known as the Next Generation Sunshine State Standards. These standards provide a benchmark to guide students and prepare them for college and life readiness. In Florida, modifications are defined as changes in what a student is expected to learn (Rule 6A-6.03411[1] [z], F.A.C.). Accommodations, however, are defined as changes that are made in how the student accesses information and demonstrates their performance (Rule 6A-6.03411[1] [a], F.A.C.).

The standards are considered a broad statement that describes the knowledge and the ability a student should achieve in each grade level. Benchmarks are used at each grade level and adjusted accordingly to ensure best practices are used in teaching young learners. Benchmarks need to be set at the beginning of the school year and used to determine overall outcomes at the

end of the school year. With the use of a state test, known as FCAT, teachers are able to adjust the lessons to ensure each student is able to achieve the knowledge whether a disability is present or not.

**Teaching strategies.** Understood (2018) noted there are five strategies that teachers use when teaching those with learning disabilities. These are wait time, multisensory instruction, modeling, graphic organizers, and one-on-one instruction. Each of these strategies has been proven helpful in educating students with learning disabilities. Further detail on each strategy is listed below to give a better understanding of how each can benefit a student's education.

Wait time is generally the three-to seven-second pause after teachers ask a question to give students time to process (Understood, 2018). Wait time gives the students' time to think about the question before they try to answer. Wait time improves the length, diversity, and quality of answers. This is key in getting the correct answer from students, especially students who have learning disabilities. According to Teacher Vision, wait time has significantly changed the classroom to include:

- The length of the responses increases
- Failure to respond decreases
- A student's confidence increases
- Achievement levels increase significantly

Wait time will dramatically increase student participation and success in educating this diverse population.

Multisensory instruction is a way of teaching that engages more than one sense at a time (Understood, 2018). Multisensory instruction involves using two or more of a student's senses at a time. Through the use of visual aids or tools students can physically touch are just a couple of

examples of a multisensory instruction method. A teacher can use this teaching strategy to assist students to better understand the main concept being taught. Teachers may need to use this strategy when teaching students in the particular way students learn. This allows students to learn more easily because they understand the concept better. This strategy is proven useful, especially in teaching reading and math to students.

Modeling, according to Understood (2018), is when the I Do, We Do, and You Do method is used. First, teachers will do a problem, then ask the student to help, and finally the student will do the problem on his or her own. Modeling strategy is used to provide a clear example of the desired skill or strategy of the outcome. Modeling should be used at all grade levels no matter if the student has a disability or not. The following steps are important when using this strategy, based on the Intel Corporation (2012):

1. Make sure students have background to perform task
2. Break the skill down into smaller learning segments
3. Content should be grade appropriate
4. Provide various learning aids
5. Think aloud as you show the steps
6. Make connections between steps
7. Be aware of student understanding and repeat skills if needed
8. Adjust timing as needed
9. Model multiple times to allow the student to understand before completing the skill themselves
10. Allow for questions and clarification

Graphic organizers and the use of visual aides are beneficial to students who are visual learners. Graphic organizers can be any type of visual aid. This strategy is grouped with the multisensory strategy, as students need cues besides only verbal cues. Organizers can be books, pictures, planners, or other useful items that enhance the learning process. Students have different learning style or styles so they may need more than one type of aid as they learn. Graphic organizers allow teachers to reach students better so they understand the overall concept that is being conveyed.

Finally, the one-on-one instruction gives a personal touch and small group instruction, allowing students to understand better than in larger groups. Green (2013) noted that no learning could be more personalized than one-on-one instruction. For the instruction to be truly personal, teachers need to give feedback or assistance in a timely manner. It is impossible to conduct the whole class one-on-one, but teachers can break the class up into smaller groups for a sense of individual learning. Even having an assistant in class is beneficial. Those learners who need one-on-one learning tend to be pulled from the class by others who have the time to dedicate to them. A drawback of that is it may make students feel they are different and affect them socially.

**Universal design of learning.** Personalized learning builds on the universal design for learning (UDL) to allow students to understand what they are learning at their own pace. UDL provides an opportunity for all students to access, participate in, and progress in the general education curriculum by reducing barriers to instruction (Ralabate, 2011, August 30). Designing and implementing universally-designed lessons can provide students with the abilities to meet learning targets. As the use of personalized learning plans grows, the understanding and knowledge of them continues to be refined. Learning aligns interests, skills needs, and an engaging environment where students can gain a better understanding of their strengths.

As the personalized learning movement grows, the knowledge base supporting it continues to expand and become more defined. There is no single definition of personalized learning. NCLD (2016) chose this definition of personalized learning:

Students' learning experience – what they learn, and how, when, and where they learn it – are tailored to their individual needs, skills, and interests, and enable them to take ownership of their learning. Although where, when, and how they learn might vary according to their needs, students also develop deep connections to each other, their teachers and other adults. (p. 3)

These five strategies of wait time, multisensory instruction, modeling, graphic organizers, and one-on-one instruction have proven to improve a student's success in class. These strategies are effective in a regular classroom, but extremely effective when teaching students with learning disabilities. This type of teaching and learning assists in the accountability of teachers and the school. These strategies lead to the use of universal design among institutions.

Universal design for learning (UDL) is essential to the education of students with disabilities and is considered a core component of a personalized learning system. UDL is a blueprint for accessibility in curriculum and instruction (Edyburn, 2010). UDL allows for curricula to be proactive in meeting needs of individuals instead of retrofitting strategies afterward. Institutions may use learning modules to assist individuals with learning disabilities. The framework is based on three principles: supporting students' multiple means of representation (*what* of learning), supporting the student's expression (*how* of learning), and the means of engagement (*why* of learning) based on research by CAST (Rose & Meyer, 2002).

A personalized learning system assists educators in providing the skills needed for students to learn. Courey, Tappe, Siker, and LePage (2013) studied how to improve lesson plans

and to account for barriers in instructions using UDL. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (2014), notes that the process to help educators, families and policymakers needs to be addressed. NCLD initiated this process in understanding, explaining, and addressing how school districts need to implement personalized learning systems. The multitier system of supports (MTSS) is an evidence-based and system-wide practice that uses data-driven progress monitoring to make decisions and respond to students' academic and behavioral needs (NCLD, 2016). This along with Universal Design for Learning Principles for curriculum is what assist educators and students be successful. The following example depicts how a multitier system of supports would look.

**Accountability.** The strict accountability measure is what schools agree to do in exchange for flexibility and freedom in programming (Weil, 2000).

The Department of Education has published a regulation implementing Section 504 (34 C.F.R. Part 104) and maintains an Office for Civil Rights (OCR), with 12 enforcement offices and a headquarters office in Washington, D. C., to enforce Section 504 and other civil rights laws pertaining to the use of federal funds. (U.S. Department of Education, Free Appropriate Public Education for Students with Disabilities, 2010). “State and federal regulations regarding the rights and responsibilities of students with learning disabilities are complex and constantly changing—and, to the consternation of students and practitioners in the learning disabilities community, they often conflict with each other” (Gregg, 2007, p. 4).

The reauthorization of the Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) allowed for expansion of the act to include children three to nine years old. This reauthorization had major changes to the Individual Education Plan (IEP) including:

1. New focus on general curriculum

2. Inclusion of benchmarks in place of objectives
3. Explained the displacement of students with disabilities in the regular education environment
4. Established progress reports on completion of IEP goals
5. Addition of a behavior assessment for students with behavioral issues

Due process requires safeguards to ensure that the rights of children with disabilities and their parents are protected and they are provided the correct information they need to make a rational decision about the education of their children. Parental involvement in collaboration with teachers, should design and implement the special services needed to meet the educational outcomes.

Considerable attention has been given to parental involvement in education over the last decade, and the movement has empowered parents, giving them moral and legal rights to be involved with the schools and community agencies in the education of their children (Heward, 2006). This is done through meetings to develop a student's Individual Education Plan (IEP), which is a best practice process to ensure that the student is getting all the help needed to achieve their educational goals. Certain methodological issues appear when conducting research. Bias is inevitable, it is a value of channels which interest and passion will show.

**Graduation.** Graduation percentages for students with disabilities has improved slightly over the past several years. Many believe this is due to schools being more accountable for the outcomes of students in this population. States need to make this a top priority as they develop plans to implement the recently passed Every Student Succeeds Act (ESEA). ESEA ensures the education system must prepare every student to graduate from high school and be ready for college and careers. Grindal (2016) noted that the steps within education would likely not be



sufficient to close the graduation gap. Grindal also believes that we need to continue and expand investments in proven strategies as the Universal Design for Learning. Teachers are tasked to ensure that students are prepared for independent practice and understanding to complete the tasks give (Farr, 2016). Rosenshine (2012) noted, the challenge many teachers had was to ensure students remembered what they previously learned before introducing new material to the students.

Amid the changing environment, students with learning disabilities feel overwhelmed which could result in low graduation rates. “Graduation rates are now determined by counting how many ninth graders in a state leave school with a standard diploma four years later, with some wiggle room for students who transfer in and out of their ninth grade cohort” (Samuels, 2015, para 3). This calculation is known as the “adjusted cohort graduation rate” (para 6). Samuel also stated that in 2010-11 school year, states reported allowing students with learning disabilities to take easier courses that count for credit, letting students skip final exams and letting them receive a passing grade. While the graduation rate for students with specific learning disabilities across all states is an average 68%, half of all students with specific learning disabilities are estimated to have a graduation rates lower than the nationwide rate.

Every school has its own story and the context in which teaching and learning take place. The processes and procedures by which decisions are made around curriculum, instruction and assessment are unique. According to Tyler (2018), Florida’s overall graduation rate increased 3.8 points; this increase gave Florida a new high of 86.1% and is the eighth largest school district in the United States, with an ESE graduation rate of 76% within the state. Federal regulations require each state to calculate graduation rates based on a 4-year cohort adjustment. This included standard diplomas but not GED’s, both regular and adult, and special diplomas.

The statewide graduation rate for a student with disabilities increased 22% in 2017–2018, giving Florida a new graduation rate of 77% over previous years (Tyler, 2018). Florida uses the graduation rate to hold schools accountable. Graduation from high school with a regular diploma is the cornerstone of our advocacy programs. Too many children with learning disabilities are at risk because a regular diploma is not planned as their first option. According to McFarland et al. (2017) in the school year 2014–2015, a higher percentage of children and youth ages 3–21 received special education services under IDEA for specific learning disabilities than for any other type of disability. Students with learning disabilities are dropping out of school or getting a special certificate instead of a regular diploma. Society deems a regular diploma a necessity, so policymakers, schools and parents should work together to transform schools while allowing students with learning disabilities to graduate with a regular diploma.

Based on data retrieved from NCES (2017), in fall of 2014, 95% of students served under IDEA are enrolled in regular schools. Three percent of students are enrolled in a public or private schools for students with disabilities. In McFarland et al. (2017), data pertaining to those served under IDEA, noted that the percentage of students exiting high school was students who had visual impairments and/or language impairments at 78% who received a regular diploma. Thirty-five percent of students graduated with a specialized diploma. As with any other process there are also challenges.

According to the National Center for Learning Disabilities (2017) the top five challenges are:

1. Students with a disability have various needs and if these needs are not met, the student can fall behind.

2. Assessment and accountability systems must align with personalized learning and equitable for students with disabilities so they produce valid and reliable data on performance and progress.
3. Students with disabilities must have access to appropriate technology.
4. Parents and students must be included, informed and empowered.
5. Educators must be aware of the demand that personalized learning systems place on students' executive functioning skills and should be ready to support students in this environment.

Investing time, money, and resources to improve graduation rates for this diverse population increases the chances for students to be successful. Teachers often feel they are not prepared or have lack of knowledge to modify individual assignments for students with disabilities without changing their teaching strategy used for the rest of the class (Kurth & Keegan, 2014; Scalon & Baker, 2012).

### **Review of Methodological Issues**

Through examination of the research available on teacher perceptions and practices, it is evident that most research is conducted using qualitative research methodologies. Four federal laws help protect the rights of individuals with learning disabilities. Also, some states have statutes to assist individuals in addition to these federal laws. The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA), Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and the 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) require education institution to be more responsive in assisting disabled students.

“Independent research conducted in 2013 with the support and involvement of NCLD and others identified a broad spectrum of attitudes, beliefs, values, and challenges among parents

of children with learning and attention issues” (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014, p. 9). Researchers collected data from over 2,000 parents who identified their child as having a learning disability or attention issue (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014). The data collected from parents fell into three categories: individuals struggling with the challenges (35%), those who are optimistic at (34%), while 31% are conflicted about dealing with the learning challenges of individuals with disabilities. The limited number of studies done on this topic proved challenging.

Although offices of disability services primarily provide supports for students with learning disabilities, data on the educational supports made available by other sources can also help students compensate for their academic needs (Canto, Proctor & Prevatt, 2005). Students with learning disabilities face challenges in the learning process, social skills, and self-esteem. Association on Higher Education and Disability (2012) guidance on documentation policies, focuses broadly on the philosophy behind the process rather than on rigid documentation criteria and data that requires extensive medical and scientific evidence perpetuates a deviance model of disability. Educators, parents, and politicians demand high quality educations for students. This refers to all students, not just those with learning disabilities.

One curriculum currently used in teaching students with learning disabilities, is the Common Core Standards, which is part of an intricate process in educating students with or without a disability. Common Core Standards are guidelines developed as part of an educational accountability reform designed to hold schools accountable for students and their educational goals (Florida Department of Education, 2017). One objective to these standards is for educators to provide curriculum that gave students the necessary skills to graduate. Based on data from the Florida Department of Education (2018) the implementation of a Common Core Standard was

one approach to support the increased academic rigor, as well as establish the requirements to graduate high school.

Research on teaching strategies for young children with learning disabilities should inform consumers and policy makers. Best practices that produce positive outcomes for children and their families is critical. Research should demonstrate the relationship between the educational interventions and the long term changes that can occur in development, behavior, relationships, and in life. Individuals in this unique population are heterogeneous. This has become a problem with scientists who use standard research methods to address educational treatments (NCLD, 2016). A goal of early intervention is to list types of practice that proved beneficial and effective in individuals with specific learning disabilities characteristics.

Data collection of previously published findings helps to build a case for a specific argument. Survey and interviews can be a highly reliable and credible resource used in collecting information on opinions and viewpoints. The use of standard methods proved to be inefficient when addressing educational needs of students with learning disabilities (National Research Council, 2001). There are no two individuals who are identical when considering their characteristics and learning abilities. Through surveys and interviews, I can discover real problems, suggest resolutions as when the topic is as controversial as educating students. Previous research by McLesky and Walsrom, (2011) made note that the use of specific teaching techniques are required in educating students with disabilities. These specific teaching techniques proved to be beneficial in their study.

In a qualitative study by Blanton, Pugach, and Boveda (2014), suggested that revisions are needed in general education programs. They recommended teacher education programs be general and special education should be a collaborative partnership. “A study conducted by the

U.S. Department of Education in 2000 identified several reasons why parents of students with learning disabilities are choosing charter schools” (NCLD, 2010, p. 3). Special curriculum and eliminating the stigma associated with special education are some of the reasons identified.

In the study by Smith and Smith (2000), teachers completed surveys on inclusion of students with learning disabilities in the general classroom. Mohamed (2104) used interviews and observation of teachers in his study. Morgan (2016) utilized interviews and surveys to collect information for his study on the role educators take to create collaborative learning environments for students. Schools and teachers need to prioritize the learning needs of those students that have learning disabilities.

Laws have been put into place mandating the ability to deliver instruction that meets the needs of all students. A comparative study by Daniels (2018) focused on the inclusion of students with special needs in the general classroom. Using observation and surveys, Daniels (2018) was able to identify the need for collaboration between general classroom teachers and those in specialized classrooms for students with learning disabilities. Daniels (2018) also discussed the self-efficiency of teachers in the general classroom as well as the specialized classroom for students with disabilities.

Previous research by Ricketts (2014) found that teachers identified lack of time, lack of support, lack of professional development opportunities and inadequate resources as barriers they face when educating students with learning disabilities Teachers who attend professional development opportunities improve the effectiveness of collaboration within the school. Professional development could lead to having efficient time to educate students as priorities are may be identified.

Sokal and Sharma (2014) uncovered that teachers need to reflect upon their attitudes towards educating students with learning disabilities when confronted with the possibility of teaching in an inclusive setting. West, Novak, and Mueller (2016) evaluated survey responses to determine teacher attitudes towards inclusive education and environmental barriers. They identified educators' lack of understanding the legal definition of disabilities and federal compliance when teaching based on the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act mainly with their lack of culpability when teaching students with disabilities. Crevecoeur, Sorenson, Mayorga, and Gonzales (2014) reviewed literature over a 10-year time span using comparative analysis in hopes to better understand the complexity of using the Universal Design principles in teaching. Data collected over an extended period gives the researcher better credibility on the effectiveness of interventions, inclusion, universal design and educational inclusion.

A qualitative study by Maccini and Gagnon (2006) discussed several approaches that could assist teachers in educating students with disabilities. One approach included using organized approaches to help students retain what they are learning today and in the future. Parents and teachers realize that it is hard for any student to retain all they have learned during the school year, but for students with learning disabilities it proves to be more of a challenge. Quantitative research by Aron and Loprest (2012) in the field of education revealed an increasing number of students with learning disabilities are entering into the education arena.

To meet the student's needs, teachers must collaborate with each other on best teaching methods that have proven to be beneficial to all involved. Although qualitative research is best suited to a specific topic of interest as in this study, it can also provide in-depth information from participants but there is always some limitations in qualitative research. In this study, the case

study approach allowed for the acquisition of data that is unique and practical to a specific school.

### **Synthesis of Research Findings**

Due to the vast interpretation of federal laws and development and/or integration of policies and procedures to assist students with learning disabilities, the findings varied. According to IDEA (2017), special education has continued to advance and thrive in providing services to individuals with learning disabilities. In 2016, the federal government only covered 16% of the extra cost for special education leading to below 40% of the funding that Congress promised (NCLD, 2016). This leaves states and institutions struggling to deal with the shortfall. Schools vary in the instructional method they use in teaching students with learning disabilities. As the personalized movement is growing, the knowledge base supporting it continues to expand as more and more individuals refine it. NCLD chose this definition of personalized learning:

Students' learning experiences—what they learn, and how, when, and where they learn it—are tailored to their individual needs, skills, and interests, and enable them to take ownership of their learning. Although where, when, and how they learn might vary according to their needs, students also develop deep connections to each other, their teachers and other adults. (2016, p. 3)

In recent decades, students with disabilities have not been included in the design of IEPs. This omission led to the often ineffective practice of retrofitting policies to match the student's unique needs. It is imperative that educators balance the scale by providing students the best education available. The school in this study follows an instrumental model of education which makes them unique.



This model includes comprehensive IEPs, the philosophy of the school, full-time speech and language pathologists, a full-time mental health counselor, a full-time nurse, learning labs, skills lab, sensory environment, social skills, and preparation for adult living, intensive reading classes, and a transition program. Students with disabilities require intense, high quality instruction provided through the use of direct instruction, modeling, small groups, and time (McLeskey & Walsrom, 2011). Each individual learns in various ways and timeframe, leading to the need for an IEP that details the accommodations needed for success.

When choosing a school, parents should consider best practices and how they are managed on an individual basis because each student with a learning disability will learn in different ways from others. Parents should explore certain criteria when looking for a charter school. Examining the school's philosophy, teaching models, classroom size, and services is critical when choosing the right school (Morin, 2014). According to Thiessen (2006), teachers' perceptions have increasingly been solicited. Browell, Smith, Crockett, and Griffin (2012) noted that effective teaching strategies vary based on the severity of the student's disability. Browell et al. (2012) discovered that interventions used for students with disabilities help meet their needs, and the student is more likely to become engaged in learning.

Summers, White, Zhang, and Gordon (n.d.) noted that providing reasonable accommodations such as testing accommodations, interpreters, assistive listening, audio recording, large print materials, and priority registration are among the mandated accommodations and services. Lovett, Nelson, and Lindstorm (2015) argued that the changes within education institutions' best practices help them to succeed. In reality, a competition for resources factors into the complexity of the educational system. This is evident in the fact that

funding is the largest barrier in assisting students with learning disabilities (Kemp, Hourcade, & Parette, 2000; Walker, Walker, & Bean-Kampwerth, 2012).

According to Horowitz, Rawe, and Whittaker (2017), when schools fail to provide enough support for students, the social, emotional, and behavioral challenges that come with learning could lead to serious issues. These issues include social isolation, increased risks of skipping school, and even dropping out. Horowitz et al. (2017) noted that policy change is needed in several areas to create a more open, supportive, and inclusive society where the potential of individuals is recognized. Table 1 depicts proposed policy changes that would benefit students, especially those in this diverse population. The target policies are for any type of school (See table 1). For the purpose of this study, the changes pertain to students with learning disabilities.

Table 1

*Target Policy Changes*

Major Policy Area	Key Aspects
Expanded Early Screening	Invest in early screening.  Build expertise of educators.
Empower Student and Families	Prepare Successful Transition.  Invest in research on outcomes after adulthood.
Cultivate Creative, Informed Educators	Create supportive classrooms by rethinking educator preparation and professional development.  Partner to erase discipline disparities.
Drive Innovation for Effective Teaching & Learning	Transform technology. Promote personalized learning. Use UDL and a multitier system of support (MTSS).
Strengthen and Enforce Civil Rights Laws	Invest in public schools and reject private school voucher proposals.

*Note.* Adapted from *The State of Learning Disabilities: Understanding the 1 in 5*.

The American Association on Intellectual and Development Disabilities (2010) noted that with the appropriate supports over time, a person’s life functioning will improve.

**Critique of Previous Research**

The following section is a discussion of issues that may become apparent during the research. Gregg (2007) indicated that the institution’s role is to educate the student, individualize assessments, lessen the burden of accessing technology, and help students establish their disabilities and meet the legal definitions. Van Getson and Thurlow (2007) showed that when students with disabilities meet the standards, the achievement gaps can be shortened.

Many parents and educators believe institutions need to educate the students, perform individualized assessments, and participate in assisting with the special accommodations that meets the student's need. Morrissey, Bohanon, and Fenning (2010) noted general education teachers without special education training are teaching more and more students with special needs. The National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (NJCLD) identified a lack of uniformity in determining whether an individual is eligible as a person with a disability and identifying needed supplemental services and accommodations.

Winters (2015) stated that charter school critics have focused on the failure to enroll an appropriate number of students with disabilities. Educators need to understand the difference in student learning styles in order to implement best teaching techniques. Despite how common learning and attention issues are in the United States today, there is still widespread confusion among the public about it. Smith and Smith (2000) study indicated that teachers need additional time for planning to provide quality instruction in inclusive settings where students with disabilities are part of the general classroom. According to NCLD (2017), 48% of parents believe children can grow out of a learning disability, 78% believe any child can do well if they try hard enough, and 18% believe that children with learning disabilities are less intelligent than others.

Private institutions do not receive federal funding or have to go by the laws of Section 504 or Title II; however, they are subject to Title III of the Americans with Disabilities Act, which is enforced by the United States Department of Justice. Uncritical trust of self-reported disabilities is also questionable because of the possibility of malingering (Lovett et al., 2015). The NJCLD's comprehensive assessment and evaluation based on the belief that professionals with expertise in learning disabilities, is necessary to conduct a comprehensive assessment and evaluation system for students suspected of having learning disabilities. These professionals

from various disciplines must make up a multidisciplinary team along with the family of the students to make identifications and eligibility decisions; this team must possess the range of competencies necessary for evaluation and identification (NJCLD, 2010).

The K–12 education system is overwhelmed with the need for specialized learning within the United States today. Institutions are doing what they can, but with limited funding and a growing need, they struggle to better serve the students in need (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2016). The learning style of an individual is the way in which a person absorbs, processes and comprehends, and retains information they are given. According to an article on teach.com, an individual’s learning style or styles depends on cognitive, emotional and environmental factors (para. 1). “Mostly important, we need an unflinching commitment—from the president to school administrators to classroom teachers—to do everything necessary to help students with learning disabilities to thrive and graduate from high school” (Grindal, 2016, para. 8).

With the knowledge about the human brain and ongoing research on instructing students with disabilities, educators still do not have all the answers for the best approaches for teaching students with learning disabilities. Personalized learning holds the promise of customizing education to meeting the needs of individuals with learning disabilities. This plans requires thoughtful implementation to ensure that all students, including students with disabilities, are truly engaged, supported, and successful. Benefits of personalized learning include increasing student engagement and achievement, encouraging a growth mindset, building decision-making and self-advocacy skills, reducing the stigma of special education, and giving students who think differently multiple ways to show what they have learned.

As states and schools redesign systems of assessment, they need to consider the needs of all learners including those with disabilities. Effective evidence-based teaching can improve academic achievement. These include using conceptualizations, cooperative learning, student centered learning, peer tutoring, and self-regulation skills (Perin, 2011). To determine the best teaching practices, educators must first consider how individual students learn. Effective teaching strategies support student engagement and achievement.

### **Summary**

Despite a concerted effort on finding documents on this subject matter that appear relevant to the theme, the review was far from exhaustive. “It will take more than federal and state mandates to end the achievement gap that the United States is seeing” (Contreras, 2011, p. 4). Further investigation on best practices and teaching techniques when educating students with special needs is recommended from the perspectives of teachers, support staff, and administrators. Institutions must consider students’ disabilities, histories, and experiences, as well as the unique characteristics of the program when determining if reasonable accommodations can be made.

I gathered participants (teachers, support staff, and administration) perceptions, performed validity and reliability measures for this study are provided. Currently, the new guidelines from AHEAD may leave educational institutions confused about what best practices are needed for students with learning disabilities to offer the best educational experience possible for students. In addition, it may be unclear as to which teaching techniques and best practices offered benefited the student by providing the best educational experience possible. As states implement rigorous standards and increase graduation requirements, attention must be given to

evidence-based instruction practices and other efforts to improve the rate at which students with specific learning disabilities earn a regular diploma” (*Teachme*, 2011).

This literature review presented discussion topics pertinent not only to teachers, support staff, and administrators that work with students with learning disabilities, but also the disability laws that govern the education of students with a disability, history of disability laws in education, current teaching techniques used, charter schools, and accountability. Taymans, West, and Sullivan (2000) stated “researchers’ report the 5–10% of Americans have learning disabilities, and while no two people with learning disabilities are exactly the same, many do share certain characteristics” (p. 2). With so many students being diagnosed with learning disabilities, teachers and others in the education area need to be prepared to assist the students in achieving their education goals.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **Introduction to Methodology**

This chapter provides an explanation of the methodological design chosen, including data collection and analysis, to analyze responses for the research questions. A case study methodology is a qualitative approach to research involving gathering specific types of data (Yin, 2003). A study design allows for interpretation of the participants' perspectives and describes their experiences. This case study contains information addressing best practices for teaching and leadership styles based on the perceptions of teachers, support staff, and administrators on education in schools specifically for students with learning disabilities. According to Yin (2003), interviews are one of the most important sources of information regarding a case study.

According to Yin (2003), "the distinctive need for case studies arises out of the desire to understand complex social phenomena for the reason that the case study method allows investigators to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events" (p. 26). I gathered data using an open-ended question interviews with teachers, support staff, and administrators about their perceptions of the success of the institution. Qualitative research can simultaneously become part of the investigation process when analyzing the data collected. (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). The research I used involved conducting interviews pertaining to best practices in education according to teachers, support staff, and administrators for students with learning disabilities at a public charter school.

The scholarly community mainly refers to qualitative research as a soft science that lacks rigor when compared with quantitative research (Greenhalgh et al., 2016). Qualitative research is the appropriate method for conducting a study that focuses on the meaning of events and actions



expressed by the participants on special education. Qualitative research is necessary when making efforts to investigate individual experiences, to develop understanding of human actions, and allows for the how, what or why questions (Cope, 2014). Case studies may take an extended length of time as the researcher collects information over. Understanding the lived perceptions of individuals who work and teach students with disabilities is the cornerstone of this study.

### **Research Questions**

The case study is designed to investigate the following question:

**RQ1.** What are the perceptions of teachers, support staff, and administrators' regarding services they offer students with special needs at a specialized public charter school?

**RQ2.** What are the perceptions of teachers, support staff, and administrators about teaching techniques needed to meet the unique learning needs of students with learning disabilities?

The analysis and conclusion of the researcher may guide others on present or future practices, specifically for students with learning disabilities.

### **Purpose and Design of Study**

Using a case study design allowed researcher the ability to collect perceptions of individuals who worked in the specific population. This design was chosen in order to better understand the personal experiences of specific individuals. The knowledge gained while working with students with a learning disability could prove beneficial in all educational settings. The purpose of the interviews is to collect perceptions of teachers, support staff, and administrators at a public charter school that is specifically for students with learning disabilities. The goal is to understand how effective the current teaching techniques are and how they could

lead to future analysis. I collected practices and specific strategies used by teachers as part of this study. The administrators and support staff detailed daily encounters with students, and how they are prepared for these interactions, and ideas they shared with others.

According to Stake (1995), the experience of a researcher is a critical role in understanding and analysis of the interpretation of the data collected. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2016) noted, the percentage of children with a disability has increased from 8% to 13% in the years from 2004–2005, thus increasing the need for special education in schools. According to Creswell (2012), qualitative research is used when a study is done to gain a better understanding beyond the problem. “A case study protocol has only one thing in common with an interview: both are directed at a single data point—either a single case or a single respondent” (Yin, 2014, p. 84). Striving to eliminate the gap between knowledge and action will help educators, parents, and policy makers design personalized learning systems that meet the needs of special education.

### **Research Population and Sampling Method**

Prior to performing the interviews, approval to conduct the research was obtained from the Institutional Research Board (IRB) of Concordia University and the public charter school in this study, which serves over 1,000 students with learning disabilities across three campuses. I administered the research interviews at the North Campus. The sample for the study, made up of seven participants: four teachers, two support staff, and one administrator, all of whom work at a public charter school during the academic year. The teachers, support staff, and administrators at the public charter school are all ESE certified to teach and work with children with learning disabilities. The well-designed educational program, dedicated and innovative teachers,

committed parents, and the community all work together to provide for the individual needs of a child, regardless of the challenges they face.

A public charter school specifically for students with learning disabilities is rare. According to the FLDOE 2017 data book, over 70 private charter schools are dedicated to these students, but with the tuition cost, many students cannot afford to attend. With the limited number of public charter schools dedicated to this population, parents are forced to work with schools near to them or relocate to be near a school specifically for this unique population of students.

The goal of this case study is to include information that may have a positive impact on the education system in the United States. I acquired perceptions of teachers, support staff, and administrators regarding teaching techniques currently used at the public charter school. This data could prove to be beneficial to other institutions in developing or revising their processes for educating students with learning disabilities.

### **Instrumentation**

Semistructured one-on-one interviews will be used for data collection. This method was chosen over the multiple-choice survey format in order to gain personal perspectives from others regarding public charter schools for students with learning disabilities. Seidman (2013) stated semistructured interviews allow researchers to understand the data collected and incorporate findings into teaching strategies. “Interviews are a mode of data collection involving verbal information from a case study participant” (Yin, 2014, p. 239).

The interviews gave participants the opportunity to explain the best practices they have observed and suggest what is needed to be put in place to improve overall teaching techniques and leadership styles in a specific environment. Experts in the field reviewed interview questions

to assure they would provide dependable data to assist in answering the research questions. Member checking was used to validate accuracy of interviews. “Findings based on evidence attained from interviews, observation, and documents are more convincing than those based on evidence from only one or two of these information sources” (Hancock & Algozzine, 2011, p. 71). The interviews used in this study resembled guided conversations, rather than a structured process. Rubin and Rubin (2001) stated that even though the researcher pursued a consistent line of inquiry, the actual flow of the questions appears more fluid than rigid in nature.

According to Seidman (2006), the interviewer should follow three steps. The first few questions should be background information that will help the interviewer the opportunity to better understand previous experience of the interviewee. The second section should allow the participants to reconstruct the details of their experience. The third section should encourage the participants to reflect on their experience as educators and what might help in future research and teaching students with learning disabilities.

### **Data Collection**

Approval was obtained from Institutional Review Board (IRB) as well as from the school in this study. I sent twelve letters to employees of the charter school requesting their participation in the study. Seven individuals responded and I scheduled the interviews. Seven employees interviewed at the North Campus of the charter school, made up of four teachers, two support staff, and one administrator. The interviews are scheduled to be conducted during a one-month period within the academic year. Creswell (2012) suggested asking five to 10 open-ended questions. The use of open-ended questions allows participants to voice their experiences and concerns. This leaves the door open, providing the interviewees time to not feel stressed over time limits in answering the questions.

Interviews took place in a private conference room at the North Campus. Each interview was 30–45 minutes in length. The same questions were asked to each participant. Structured open-ended questions were used during the interviews. I used probing with some of the questions to gain clarification of participants' responses. Probing consists of asking the individuals to elaborate further in their answers. I assumed that the participants' perspectives would be meaningful and would lead to the success of the study. Creswell (2013) noted that qualitative research focuses on learning and the researcher's interpretation of participants.

### **Identification of Attributes**

The interview questions allowed understanding from the perception of teachers, support staff, and administrators at a public charter school that specializes in dealing with students with learning disabilities. There are many private schools for students with learning disabilities, but very few public charter schools that do not charge a fee as the private schools do. Public and private charter schools have waiting lists because the students' needs are not being met in the regular school system.

Charter schools were introduced as an effort to improve the educational outcomes of students and increase productivity using the traditional business model which incorporates accountability of federal and state laws, choice, competition, and autonomy. Charter schools are considered a school of choice for parents. The charter school in this study is unique as it specifically educates students with learning disabilities. Some learning disabilities may stem from individuals who have trouble sending and receiving information (IDEA, 2017). These individuals may encounter trouble reading, writing, and understanding directions.

Each individual is unique with a disorder as no two individuals are alike even when they share the same diagnosis. According to an article by [Idamerica.org](http://Idamerica.org) on eligibility of special

education services, a child with a disability means a child evaluated based on IDEA and has an intellectual disability, hearing impairment, speech impairment, visual impairment, autism, brain injury, or multiple disabilities that requires them to need special education and related services. IDEA (2018) includes the following procedures when evaluating and determining eligibility for special education assistance:

1. If a child has a severe discrepancy between ability and achievement
2. Observation of child
3. A written report suspected of having a learning disability

This data is obtained from parents, teachers, healthcare provider, psychologist, and speech pathologist. Based on IDEA (2018), the data collected is used to determine eligibility for education assistance.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

“Data analysis is the process of making sense out of the information which involves consolidating, reducing, and interpreting what people have said and what the researcher has seen and read—it is the process of making meaning” (Merriam, 2014, p. 176). Once the interviews are complete and transcribed, printed transcriptions will be dropped off at school for participants to member-check for accuracy. “Member checking is a way of validating the findings within an interview” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 36). This assisted in the qualitative process of categorizing the perceptions of the participants on teaching and working around students with learning disabilities. Transcripts will be reviewed for descriptive categories known as open coding (Rudestam & Newton, 2015). According to Creswell (2013), the first step in the analysis is to reduce the data into themes.

A code in qualitative inquiry is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and or evocative attribute for a portion of language (Saldaña, 2014). This is based on visual data obtained during observation. Merriam (2014) stated that each section of the coding process is a unit of data which is a potential answer or part of an answer to questions that are being investigated, which the answers are themes. Themes are derived data as it is reviewed after interviews.

Using the Atlas.ti software, analyzation of data occurred to easily construct notes and assign themes from the transcriptions. Atlas.ti consolidated large volumes of transcripts and was able to keep track of notes and codes. The program provided ease in discovering, organizing, and analyzing the transcripts from interviews. Coding all transcripts instead of allowing the software to calculate repetitive words proved efficient. Allowing the connection with participants and kept the true meaning that the participants portrayed. I coded the data through themes (Creswell, 2012). Qualitative research experts used different techniques in analyzing data: These consist of (a) compiling, (b) disassembling, (c) reassembling, (d) interpreting, and (e) concluding (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2010).

Themes will be condensed from over 150 words into smaller categories. Key words as in academic instruction, academic success, and tools to increase student achievement are identified. Subcategories identified are effective instruction, collaboration, accountability, and motivation. The third process is to condense the data further through selective coding. Four themes emerged: collaborative partnerships, professional development, support and challenges. Creswell (2005) suggested six steps to use in the data analysis process. These steps include organize and prepare data for analysis, read through data thoroughly, begin the detailed analysis using the coding process, using coding to generate a description of setting analysis, discuss how the description of

themes represented in narrative, and to interpret the meaning of the data. Interviews will be recorded using a tape recorder and transcribed. The transcribed text became data to be analyzed. Emerging themes will be identified. An analysis by Court (2005) allowed the researcher insight on how to carefully conduct research and uncover the cultural meaning, build a theory and open new directions for future studies. The analysis tells a story from the interviewees and allows the interviewer the ability to interpret the results.

### **Limitations of Research Design**

Limitations and delimitations are conditions that may restrict this study, which could, in turn, influence credibility. Since the interviews will be administered as a single case study at a public charter school specifically for students with learning disabilities, data will be limited, as there are few public charter schools similar to this one in the United States. The data collection to be used for this study is narrow in scope and limited to teachers, support staff, and administrators at one public charter school. Limitations could occur depending on the number of responses collected during the study.

Delimitations, sometimes referred to as boundaries, of this study are based on the teachers, support staff, and administrators' experience in providing special education services to students with learning disabilities. A relevant researcher's position, which may include gender, age, race, immigration status, personal experiences, and political and professional beliefs (Berger, 2015) was important factors in considering qualitative research limitations. The role of collecting and analyzing data proved challenging due to the fact of limited data on proposed subject. Another limitation is the amount of information the interviewee is willing to share and the interpretation of that information. Conducting the study on only one public charter school is also a delimitation.



## **Validation**

The ability to generalize findings affected this limited sample size, and the focus on such a specified population. Triangulation of sources was utilized by collecting and comparing data from participants in three different jobs and roles within the school. An email was sent to 12 possible employees requesting participation in the study. Seven responded and took time to participate in the study. The study I conducted was at one of the three charter school campuses. I collected data in strict confidence and stored it in a locked file cabinet until time to dispose.

**Credibility.** Credibility is based on the honesty of the participants. Trust with participants keeps the study dependable and participants honest with their answers in order to conduct a good case study on public charter schools specifically for students with learning disabilities. For the purpose of this study, interview questions will be reviewed by experts in the field. Member checking was conducted to review the transcripts' accuracy. By using this method, it prevented misunderstanding on the interviewer's side.

**Dependability.** Dependability ensures that the research findings are consistent and could be repeated. Consistent replication of the same case study demonstrates its dependability (Yin, 2014). The dependability and trustworthiness of this study will be established through external audits. Dependability of the interview and focus questions produced necessary data to answer the research questions occurred when experts in the field reviewed and approved the interview and focus group protocol prior to use in the study. Dependability of the analysis and findings occurred when the research is reviewed by a person holding a Doctor of Philosophy degree (PhD) who are not affiliated with this study.

## **Expected Findings**

The expected findings of the research included: teachers satisfaction with support services at the school; a high level of commitment from teachers, support staff, and administrators for the well-being of the students; and a need for additional instructional space to meet the needs that challenge students in special education. Some students may require more one on one time with the instructor or therapist to achieve the desired outcomes. The goal of this case study is to identify the best practices in special education currently used and what can be done to improve the practices. The interviews gave a better perception of teachers, support staff, and administrators of the success they have seen at the public charter school dedicated to students in this study population.

Students with learning disabilities are heterogeneous, which means that there are no two students identical in their profile of strengths and weaknesses. Parents, educators, and professionals in the field of learning disabilities associate several characteristics that are associated with learning disabilities. These characteristics are reading difficulties, mathematical disorders, poor motor disabilities, and social skill deficits to mention a few. These characteristics of individuals are expected in this study and other issues may arise. The quantity and duration of these behaviors is what led to problems in school. It is assumed that boys are more likely to have a learning disability than girls do; the reason for this has not been determined by researchers at the time of this study.

## **Ethical Issues**

The case study reviewed perceptions on best practices and teaching techniques needed in educating students with learning disabilities. According to Creswell (2012), full disclosure regarding the nature, purpose, and requirements of the study will be provided in order to

maintain ethical standards per the university guidelines. All data collected for the survey was kept confidential and not shared with others outside of the dissertation committee members. Simons (2011) notes that ethics is a situated practice connected to factors that consider the communal interactions, individual's beliefs and political understandings.

When considering ethics in qualitative research, considerations of explicit procedural process in conducting the investigation, intrapersonal relationships, and understanding the background information that may affect the study need to be considered. Common classroom conditions can and do affect many students to some degree. These students are already vulnerable to classroom hazards as poverty, nonnative speaking, and attention issues. Teachers and staff need to constantly reassure students that they are there to help them succeed.

**Conflict of interest assessment.** The researcher has affiliation with one of the campuses, but interviews will be conducted at another campus of the school where I had no affiliation. No financial gain or privileges will be gained from this study by the researcher or participants. Participants will be given the specific information regarding all aspects of the study. Prior to the study a letter was distributed to participants disclosing the purpose of the investigation, the interview process, and timeline, as well as the proposed outcome of the data collected from the interviews. Each participant completed an informed consent form before the interviews and made aware of their rights as part of the study. Aliases will be used in the interviews to keep data confidential. Hard copies of data transcribed will be collected and stored in locked cabinet until the study was complete and then destroyed. The findings are shared, but are not traceable to participants.

**Researcher's position.** I took an unbiased approach to data collection while reviewing the literature. I collected data on teaching techniques and best practices at a charter school that

specializes in serving students with learning disabilities. Alignment with the literature review findings became apparent and identified key characteristics in best practices and teaching techniques when working in the specialized environment. I am responsible for ensuring confidentiality of the school and research participants. These allowed the participants to feel more open and willing to share without others knowing what they shared.

Throughout the study, I made every effort to be conscious of participant's responses and made an effort to communicate research findings without bias. Due to having a child who attended one of the campuses and to avoid bias, I conducted research at one of the school's campuses where I had no affiliation. I maintained an awareness of my position throughout the study to refrain from interactions that may occur with coding the transcribed interviews so not to introduce his or her ideas into the results provided by participants.

**Ethical assurance.** Prior to conducting the research, consent was requested, signed, and returned prior to the interviews being conducted. Permission was granted from the IRB and the public charter school as part of this study. Informed consent forms are to be requested from all participants who wished to participate in the interviews. All the data from the consent form and the interviews will be kept confidential. All data collected will be aligned with the guidelines established by the IRB rules and regulations.

For this study, the areas of professional, scientific, and scholarly responsibilities will be addressed by using appropriate resources as evidence. Professional integrity and respect are crucial when conducting research. The IRB granted permission, and the study adhered to expectations of federal regulations. Federal regulations protect human subjects and assure the requirements of Institutional Review Board will be followed. Equitable subject selection

## **Summary**

This chapter contained an explanation of the overall research plan for this case study. According to Hancock and Algozzine (2011), when considering a student's poor academic performance, it may not be a result of his or her laziness, but to the fact that the school system failed to realize that the student has a learning disability. "Learning disabilities can take many forms, and the labels have multiplied as our knowledge and understanding of learning and attention issues have increased" (Flink, 2014, p. 39).

The purpose of this study is to describe the best practices in methods in teaching techniques used at a public charter school located in Florida. The school in this study provides individualized instruction to each student. The continuous assessment process helps the teachers, support staff, and students follow the best educational practices possible. Open-ended interviews will be conducted with various teachers, support staff, and an administrator at the public charter school to determine the teaching techniques they believe to be most beneficial to the school in educating students with learning disabilities.

## **Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Results**

### **Introduction**

This chapter describes data analysis and findings of the study. This case study investigated the perceptions of teachers, support staff, and administrations regarding best practices and the unique teaching techniques used to educate students with learning disabilities. Analysis of the data will be in line with the research approach, which is a qualitative single-case study design (Yin, 2009). Seven interviews will be conducted, transcribed, and coded by using the software Atlas.ti. Before collecting the data, permission from the principal at a public charter school to conduct the study was given (see Appendix C).

This chapter details the results from data collected during the interviews and used as an analysis of the research process. This study used a semistructured interview format of teachers and support staff in order to gain a perspective of their experience in working with learning disabled students. The data revealed four themes: collaborative partnerships, professional development, support, and challenges. With some of the participants, I used probing for clarification of their answers. After the interviews I conducted, I will transcribed data and transcriptions will sent back to participants to confirm accuracy of their responses.

According to Florida Department of Education (2017), the charter offers a regular diploma or a specialized diploma for those students that did not pass state standards. There are many private charter schools for individuals with learning disabilities, but only one public charter school for this population in Florida. The student population is made up of 50% White, 25% Black/African American, 18% Hispanic, 7% Asian, Indian, or multiracial. Sixty-seven percent of the students were male and 33% were female. The charter school had a waiting list of

students wanting to attend, as many students currently in the public school system have difficulty succeeding.

Due to the interpretation of federal laws, development, and integrating policies and procedures to assist students with learning disabilities, the findings varied. A possible cause of this problem is that teachers in the regular school system may not have the needed education or understanding of disability laws when educating students within this population. During the study, an inquisitive approach was used to gain understanding of the perceptions of teachers and support staff who deal with students with learning disabilities. Teachers' perceptions play a pivotal role in a student's academic process.

Every effort was made to learn from the teachers, support staff, and administrators who participated in the interviews and how each responded differently to teaching and working with this population. Participants will be asked to participate in an interview as part of this study. From these interviews, I expect to collect data that can be used to determine current best practices and future research possibilities. I have allotted one hour for each of the interviews to allow participants enough time to thoroughly answer the designated questions.

The interview questions will be in sequential order, audio recorded, and transcribed for member checking. Interviews lasted 30 to 45 minutes, depending on comfort level and time constraints of individuals. Participants are encouraged to respond honestly and openly to the interview questions. The participants will be given ample time to respond to questions and elaborate, ensuring that data collected is valid and participants are not harmed by the study. After approval was granted, the data collection process began.

## **Description of the Sample**

As a research method, a single case study is conducted to gain insight in understanding the perceptions of the group based on the unique standards and policies used at the public charter school. Discovering what made this charter school different from other charters or public schools when it comes to educating students with learning disabilities is the goal of the study. Data was collected and analyzed to identify themes, barriers, and support in educating students in this population. All teachers and support staff will be invited to participate in the study. Seven employees made up of four teachers and three support staff members will be interviewed. Each participant was given a copy of the interview questions and permission form prior to interviews being conducted.

The setting for this study is at a school located in Florida. The school has since grown to three locations serving over 1,000 students since its establishment. Each employee was listed with a corresponding number and identified as a participant based on order of interviews. I conducted interviews at the end of school year. Purposeful sampling was utilized for this study. One administrator, two support staff, and four teachers participated. The teachers consisted of two elementary and two middle school grade levels. The teacher participants were two male and two females. The administrator and support staff in the study are all female.

Each participant noted a special feeling of accomplishment when working with students who had disabilities and each agreed that their school provided special education students a supportive and flexible education. Participants acknowledged that their school is equipped with qualified special education support staff that develop and implement IEPs. All seven participants noted that time and resources are among the top challenges they encounter on a daily basis. Having enough time to work with the students with or without a disability is something all



teachers face each day. Training on how to better serve students in this unique school would be beneficial to special education students as well as the teachers and support staff.

### **Research Methodology and Analysis**

This study used the software Atlas.ti to analyze the data. Four themes emerged based on responses from interviews. The participants are experienced in the subject matter of best practices and teaching techniques used in a public charter school that specializes in students with learning disabilities. A qualitative design using a single case study approach is the best choice for this study.

I used the qualitative design chosen due to data being descriptively rich, it helps establish multiple aspects of an interconnected process that could lead to components of the problem (Pugach, Mukhopedhyay, & Gomed-Najarro, 2014). Yin (2010) explained that a researcher must use several different approaches to analyze data for a qualitative study. Creswell (2012) stated that data should be reworked to build an expected conclusion in response to research questions. Instead of testing a hypothesis, I used a semistructured interview process.

Once the charter school, Concordia University, and Concordia's Institutional Review Board approved the research proposal, an email (see Appendix B) was sent to the principal of the North Campus requesting to set up times to conduct the interviews. Each participant received a letter of consent (see Appendix D) and a scheduled interview time and date. An interview protocol (see Appendix A) was used to plan the interviews with various individuals. The protocol aligned research questions with semistructured interview questions. Prior to interviews, the participants will be given the opportunity to ask questions about the study and/or express any concerns about confidentiality. According to Patton (2002), the interpretation of data and analysis involves making sense of data by identifying patterns.

A specific list of questions guided each interview. When the interviews were conducted, the participants signed a letter of consent and asked if they had any questions before the interview started. I informed each participant that the interviews would be recorded for transcription purposes and granted permission. No identifying information will be disclosed. After the transcription, the recordings will be destroyed. The participants are able to stop the interview at any time if he or she became uncomfortable with the questions. These four themes: collaborative partnerships, professional development, support, and challenges will be discussed in the next chapter.

### **Summary of Findings**

As the number of students with learning disabilities increases, it is necessary for teachers to have access to proper teaching techniques for teaching in this diverse population. Some private charter schools specialize in students with learning disabilities but only one public charter school specializing in education of students with learning disabilities was found. The first research question in the study, “What are the perceptions of teachers, support staff, and administrators’ regarding services they offer students with special needs in a specialized public charter school?”

The services offered at this specific school included on site tutoring, therapy, multisensory lab, and speech pathologist. School leaders believe the specialized services they offer is what helps students with learning disabilities to succeed in their education goals. Having these services on site improves the daily functions of the teachers and support staff and also improves the relationships with the students. Every school offers some services, but the school in this study goes further to address students’ disabilities and concerns.

The second research question in this study, “What are the perceptions of teachers, support staff, and administrators on teaching techniques needed to meet the unique learning needs of students with learning disabilities?” Using the Marzano Causal Teaching Evaluation Model separates this school from others, as the practices they use are directly related to student performance. Assessment prior to instruction helps to differentiate how information is presented to students. Using progress monitoring and problem solving, teachers can contribute to this instructional method. Teaching techniques such as one-on-one time, additional time to complete assignments, and small class sizes helps when instructing students with learning disabilities. A cause-and-effect relationship to student achievement is the basis of this model. Two of the four teachers interviewed commented on using the Marzano model, focusing on specific competencies:

- Emphasize a competency-based approach to observation and scoring.
- Increase fairness, accuracy of scores and reliability.
- Focus evaluations on standards-based instruction and teacher growth.
- Yield desired effects that are centered upon evidence of student learning.
- Empower educators with procedures for implementation and scoring.

### **Presentation of Data and Results**

The goal of this research is to identify best practices in educating students with learning disabilities at a public charter school. Analysis of the collected data focused on teacher and support staff perceptions of best practices at their institution. The codes used to identify the participants in the study are Participants 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7. I used this system to ensure the confidentiality of the participants.

Participant 6 noted that each student has different learning styles and the instruction may need to be adapted accordingly for each student. The different learning styles include but are not limited to, auditory, visual, or sensory styles. These learning styles help students understand tasks and continue to be successful learners. This was evident through the thoughts and responses of the participants as they replied to questions. Table 2 depicts the four themes that were derived from the data collections during the interviews.

Table 2

*Description of Themes*

Theme	Description of the Theme
Collaborative Partnerships	Collaboration between community partners, teachers, support staff, parents & students.
Professional Development	Professional development opportunities for teachers and support staff will assist in better serving the diverse population.
Support	Support is need from all involved in educating students.
Challenges	Lack of time and resources needed to educate students in this population.

I gathered data from seven participants to assist in answering two research questions:

**RQ1.** What are the perceptions of teachers, support staff, and administrators’ regarding services offered to students with special needs at a specialized public charter school?

**RQ2.** What are the perceptions of teachers, support staff, and administrators on teaching techniques needed to meet the unique learning needs of students with learning disabilities?

The conducted interviews resulted in the development of four themes. The interviews were analyzed and grouped across the themes. These themes, as depicted in Table 2, included collaborative partnerships, professional development, support, and challenges. The themes are

discussed in length below along with participant's responses used to try and get more data related to each question.

**Research question 1.** What are the perceptions of teachers, support staff, and administrators' regarding services offered to students with special needs at a specialized public charter school? The following themes of collaboration and professional development assist in answering this question.

*Collaborative partnerships.* The most prominent theme discovered within the analysis was collaborative partnerships. All participants acknowledged that collaborative partnerships with administration, parents, and the community helps in educating students with learning disabilities. Having everyone involved and on the same page when it came to educating their children helped students to be successful. With all parties working together to develop the student's IEP, along with knowing how much assistance is needed, educating became a smoother process.

Participant 3 acknowledged that the close relationship between teachers, parents, and the student allowed them to have a better understanding of the student's needs and plan accordingly. Participant 5 added, "Most students with learning disabilities get distracted easily and being able to make changes on the spot helps teachers to keep the students interested in the lesson," thus leading to a best practice in educating students in this diverse population.

Collaborative partnerships generally rely on participation by at least two different parties that have mutual interest. These partnerships can be with the community to raise funds for school or a partnership with the parents. Working with the community allows nonprofit institutions to meet the needs of the school while educating students. All schools can strive to raise funds to enhance the learning experience. A lack of administration support could lead to budget

constraints and implementation of newly learned practices acquired from professional development is less likely. Private schools, public charters, and public schools all strive to give the best experience possible to students. Administrators need to be there for teachers and their moral support even if they are not available to support strategies used. When parents know about their child's education needs teachers and students can feel secure and be successful.

All interviewees referred to communication being a key point for the collaborative partnerships between support staff, teachers, parents, and federal and state lawmakers. This helps all parties to be successful in educating students and their success. Participant 3 stated, "Communication is the key in education. Everyone must communicate best practices and/or failures as they are essential in order to help the school succeed." Participant 2 noted,

In order to be collaborative partners with students, parents, community, and others, we need to practice better communication as we are all concentrating on one single goal.

That is getting our students to graduate.

"We are always willing to try new things as long as everyone is on the same page," Participant 4 noted.

Four of the seven participants believed if a child knows that parents and teachers are communicating, they tend to excel in class. Participant 6 noted that students with learning disabilities are considered heterogeneous as each has different strengths and weaknesses. Parents, educators, and other professionals have worked together to identify key characteristics. These characteristics included: academic problems, attention disorder, lack of motor skills, and lack of cognitive strategies, language difficulties, reading difficulties, writing difficulties, and even social deficits.

These characteristics can be found in anyone, and an individual can have one or more of these characteristics. When educating this population, parents, teachers, and other professionals need to collaborate on what the best practice is needed for this population and the overall education process. The use of certain teaching models is helpful in determining such goals. Participants 5 and 6 spoke about the instrumental model they use at the schools, the Marzano casual teaching evaluation model, and how it makes them unique.

Participant 4 responded, “This is achieved through the comprehensive IEPs, skills lab, multisensory lab, full-time nurse, mental health counselor, and speech pathologist all residing at the school. All work together to assist students with their educational success.” Whereas, Participant 7 believed, “The model we use at the school has proven itself over and over as we have helped the students achieve daily goals and graduate.” The teachers–student partnership can affect the student’s achievement. Participant 1 responded that there is always a special bond between the students and personnel. She went on to say, “We are an extended family in helping dreams come true.” When there is a bond between the teachers and the student, students tend to achieve more because they feel comfortable.

***Professional development.*** Professional development is identified as another theme. Professional development opportunities in instructional strategies would help strengthen instruction that supports student overall performance. All teachers interviewed believed professional development to be necessary in order to stay on top of policies and laws in teaching and dealing with students with learning disabilities. Professional development is an ongoing process that everyone in education needs to stay aware of.

Professional development varies by school, teachers, administrator, and support staff based on policies and procedures they have in place. Based on best practices and services offered

through professional development, a person can explore new experiences, which is a powerful aspect of change. Teachers noted that if they have the appropriate professional development opportunities, they are able to stay abreast of changes needed in educating students with specialized needs. Participant 4 noted that professional development includes having a mentor or coach and attending educational workshops or conferences.

Participant 1 added, “I do not think there is professional development opportunities for me as I am just an administrative assistant. It seems like we are overlooked when it comes to professional development.” Participants 2, 3, and 4 believed the professional development to be considered outstanding. Participant 6 stated, “I think the opportunities for professional development is ample at the present time, but I feel this should be a recurring opportunity to make sure we keep up with standards and best practices.” Participant 4 stood strong about his opinion on professional development. “Professional development is what you make it. You need to take advantage of opportunities when they become available.” Participant 5 shared, “Professional development is critical if you want to stay on top of new laws and procedures. This allows us to better serve our students in this specialized environment.”

Participant 7 was positive about professional development and made the following statement:

We are given numerous opportunities for professional development and this allows us to develop and improve the services we offer the students. We try and provide the best services possible from speech, counseling and the multisensory room that will help students succeed.



Participant 1 stressed, “Allowing teachers and support staff to further their education in a specialized subject matter will assist in understanding the various learning styles of our students.” Educators can use job shadowing and new technology to understand best practices.

**Research question 2.** What are the perceptions of teachers, support staff, and administrators on teaching techniques needed to meet the unique learning needs of students with learning disabilities? The following themes of support and challenges assist in answering this question.

*Support.* Theme 3, Support, became apparent as teachers and support staff noted that support from administration, parents, and the community are key factors in helping them succeed in educating students. All teachers interviewed stated administrators support assistance with educating students with learning disabilities. Participant 2 noted that as a counselor, she was involved in IEP development and the welfare of the students. When teachers know the administration and the community support them, they are more likely to be successful. Support could be as simple as standing behind their teaching style.

Teachers want to be sure that administrators have the best interests of the teachers and students in mind. Building a foundation of trust can go a long way toward accomplishing set goals based on my observation. Participant 5 stated, “The administration supports teachers in teaching techniques that are proven beneficial to the students.” Support from all parties involved in the education of students helps the academic process be successful. Teaching techniques need to be adjusted based on students’ needs. Participant 4 noted, “We do the yearly assessments for the IEPs. We also do weekly assessments to make sure the students are retaining what we teach.”

Participant 5 noted, “Teaching techniques are modified per class of students and even on the individual basis as our student’s needs are unique.” Participant 3 stated, “Our students are

different in special ways, but that doesn't mean they cannot learn. At the school, we treat every child as if they are the only one and this helps to build the relationships needed to teach them skills." Each student learns in various ways. "This is what makes them special and teachers as well as support staff makes sure the student has the support they need" (Participant 2). Teachers need to have the support of administration and parents.

Participant 1 noted that "Every student is unique no matter if they have a disability or not." Participant 4 stated that "Each student's unique characteristic brings life to the classroom." Participant 7 stated, "Teaching is my passion and knowing there is support from administration and the School Board make everything worthwhile." This uniqueness makes each student special no matter what their level of disability is. Participant 6 stated, "Keeping students engaged is a key to conducting a meaningful learning environment." Support needs to come not only from the school, but also the family members because everyone who interacts with a child is a coach in a sense.

**Challenges.** The fourth theme in the study, challenges was noted due to the fact of needing more time and resource available to better serve the students in a diverse population. These challenges are common across the United States as many educators are facing the shortage of time in educating students, especially those with disabilities. Based on these perceptions, administrators noted the need for more time, resources, and training to meet these needs. Participant 4 noted that there is never enough time to plan so decisions are made on the spot. Having flexibility in planning allows for teachers to assist with the individual needs of each student. The challenges are known to anyone who works in the education arena.

For teachers, having enough time in the day to teach set lesson plans is the most frequent challenge. Having the correct number of resources to teach students also helps teachers be

successful in educating students with or without disabilities. Each participant encounters challenges daily; how they choose to deal with these challenges sets them apart from others. Participant 7 noted that each challenge is unique to the individual and they react to the challenge in various ways. Some teachers dismiss a challenge and continue to do their best. Others may feel stuck and discouraged due to lack of support and in teaching techniques used.

Challenges such as time and resources are on the mind of any educator. All educators should strive to make the time to educate students. All participants spoke about the challenge of teaching and working with such a diverse population. This diverse population is what makes teaching students with disabilities a blessing. Participant 6 stated, “After we have worked for a while with the students, the challenges seemed to lessons.” Even though there may be limited time and resources available to teach this population, everyone makes the best attempt to help them succeed.

Participant 5 mentioned, “Since each student will bring in various challenges and experiences, the challenges will still continue but we adapt as needed.” Participant 5 stressed, “Even though there are sometimes challenges, teaching is what life is about.” Life gives teachers challenges every day. How they choose to address these challenges is what helps individuals to learn. Participant 4 added, “Teaching in such a diverse population make me feel as though we are making a difference in the world.”

Even though there are time constraints and sometimes limited resources, the school never gives up on the student’s needs. Participant 1 commented, “I worked at the front desk but it gives me joy every day to see the smiles on the student’s faces. I may not be their teacher, but showing them I care can go a long way.” This indicates that no matter how hard things get for those in this population, there is hope. Each teacher and support staff member interviewed stated they are

glad to be a part of a school and education system that allows them to assist in making a difference in a student's life.

## **Summary**

In Chapter 4, findings are presented and an analysis of the study conducted. These findings are based on the analysis of the interview transcripts. Findings are derived from four themes that emerged based on the data collected. These themes are collaborative partnerships, professional development, support, and challenges. Kaufman and Ring (2011) examined the reasons for low retention rates among special education educators in general purpose classrooms. Their research suggested that professional development should focus on the challenges that are faced by educators on a daily basis.

Overall, the findings highlighted areas of concern from support staff and teachers that warrant further research. The perceptions of best practices in teaching are apparent, but there is still need for deeper investigation as challenges will be identified among the participants. The responses appeared mainly positive, but it is important to take into account that responses are only from seven employees and not the entire school. The findings of this study are representative of the participants' perceptions. In Chapter 5, results will be discussed in relation to literature, limitations, implications, and recommendations for future practice and research.

## Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

### Introduction

This completed study provided a baseline for schools in Florida regarding perceptions of teachers, support staff, and an administrator about the best practices and teaching techniques for educating students with learning disabilities. Chapter 1 introduced the problem, background and history, purpose of the study, research questions of the study, and delimitations and limitations. Chapter 2 provided a review of literature and Chapter 3 discussed methodology of the research study. Chapter 4 reported on the results of the study and the data analysis process. Chapter 5 gives a summary of the results followed by the interpretation and discussion of the findings in relation to the literature. The final sections of this chapter will discuss the limitations of the study, implications for policy and practice, and recommendations for future research.

Best practices are important when educating this unique population. The research questions guided the qualitative methodology process of data collection and analysis. This approach allowed for opportunity to collect comprehensive and detailed data. Information included personal interpretation of results, how data was informed by the literature, and how the data was able to provide confirmation or lead to new knowledge for the scholarly community.

This study intended to investigate the following research questions:

**Research Question 1.** What are the perceptions of teachers, support staff, and administrators regarding services offered to students with special needs in a specialized public charter school?

**Research Question 2.** What are the perceptions of teachers, support staff, and administrators on teaching techniques needed to meet the unique needs of students with learning disabilities?

I conducted using interviews with teachers and support staff to understand their perceptions of best practices within this specialized population.

IDEA applies to students with disabilities from Kindergarten through high school. This means the school is responsible for providing interventions and accommodations to students during these years. At the school in this study, students who are 14 years old or older participate in the development of their IEP. This practice helps prepare the students by understanding their education needs and can better serve them in the future if they choose to attend a higher education institution. One part of IDEA (2018) is to assist in the development of transition plans that focus on postsecondary outcomes. These outcomes need to be aligned with student needs, interest, and life goals.

### **Summary of the Results**

The purpose of the research study explored and identify best practices of educators at a specialized school for students with learning disabilities. Interviews will be conducted with special education teachers, support staff, and administrators at a school that specializes in teaching students with learning disabilities. I collected data and performed an analysis, uncovering four key themes. These themes included professional development, collaboration, support, and challenges.

The majority of participants stated there is a need for collaboration and professional development when working students with learning disabilities. They also believed that the collaboration between teachers and administration is a vital part in student success. Dretske (2012) noted that perception is significant due to the personal views that come from it. Each participant indicated that they loved working with students with disabilities and enjoyed helping

them. Forming close relationships with students allowed the educators to concentrate on areas of need to help them further their education goals.

Seven educators participated in this study, including four teachers, two support staff, and one administrator. Each participated in one-on-one interviews. Interviews results are based on the employees' perceptions of educating students with learning disabilities. The semistructured interviews provided the opportunity to elaborate on the participants perceptions of educating students with learning disabilities. In Chapter 4, the data depicted four themes that emerged from interviews. The relationship between teachers' perceptions and years of service was strong as the dedication to making a difference showed evident with experience.

According to Ross (2015), perception affects expectations and student achievement. Perceptions of teachers and support staff can affect their relationships with students, especially those with learning disabilities. Teachers are believed to have the most impact on student achievement (Hattie, 2009). Teaching techniques have long been debated and controversial, especially when pertaining to best practices. Dretske (2012) described perception as a personal view found in one's mind. How the individual chooses to interpret perceptions will vary.

A goal of the study is to provide other schools and policymakers with a foundation of best practices when it comes to teaching students in this population. According to IDEA (2017), special education has continued to advance and thrive in providing services to individual with learning disabilities. In 2016, the federal government only covered 16% of the extra cost for special education leading to below 40% of funding that Congress promised (NCLD, 2016). Recognition of individual experiences and knowledge of each participant contributed to the learning experience in the classroom.

Many of the participants shared positive experiences they had while working with students with learning disabilities at the school. All participants expressed the emotional connections they have formed in working with the unique group of students. These connections encourage a person stay in the special education area. They explained that most of the students left traditional schools because they are mistreated or poorly served when it came to their education. The teachers attributed the success of the students to the close connections and personal support they received at the school. The administrator shared a sense of pride as they watch the teachers and support staff make a difference in a student's life by supporting them beyond the academic classroom.

The school in this study uses the Marzano model of teaching effectiveness. This model lets teachers set goals and check for understanding in order for the students to be effective (Marzano et al, 2010). This model allows teachers to reinforce effort and provide recognition to students, leading them to be successful in their education. Engagement of students is a central aspect of effective teaching (Marzano et al., 2010). Student engagement comes from the effective planning of teachers to incorporate engagement into their classrooms.

Educators and others have struggled for decades to find the best ways to teach students with learning disabilities. According to Horowitz, Rawe, and Whittaker (2017), lack of effective instruction can limit a student's opportunities and lead to poor outcomes. Teachers' perceptions also affect the relationships between students and teachers. Closing the achievement gap is on the minds of many school administrators. Further in-depth analysis on best practices is needed based on teachers' perceptions. The interviews focused on best practices at a public charter school specializing in teaching students with learning disabilities. Four themes were found: collaborative partnerships, professional development, support, and challenges.



**Research Question 1.** What are the perceptions of teachers, support staff, and administrators' regarding services they offer students with special needs at a specialized public charter school?

*Theme 1: Collaborative partnerships.* Collaborative partnerships described the collaborations between teachers, students, parents, and administrators to understand and use the federal and state laws governing students with disabilities. Collaborative partnerships are critical to the school's purpose because it includes everyone in the students' education. Educators, parents, students, and the community need to contribute to best practices in educating this diverse population. Parents and educators work together to understand education laws and the needs of the students.

Students need to be involved in developing their education plans, and community partnerships assist in meeting the needs of the school, physically and financially. As indicated in Chapter 2, having students, parents, and educators involved in the development of a student's IEP is critical to their success. An IEP is the primary means of communicating the school district's commitment to address the unique educational needs of students with disabilities. According to NCLD (2016), the process of developing an IEP was derived from federal and state lawmakers in 1975. Using an individual student's IEP to provide a framework, teachers are able to collaborate with each other to make sure the student's needs are being met.

Sharing instructional methods, as in the universal design for learning, could lead to building partnerships with everyone involved in the education process. These partnerships are a common goal of everyone involved in educating students. Collaborative partnerships between educators and federal and state legislatures could lead to opportunities for advancement and student success. Valuing students shows them that collaborative partnerships between the school

and parents will assist them in their education goals. As Stevens (2012) argued, it is difficult for any initiative to be effective if all participants are not involved in the decision making process.

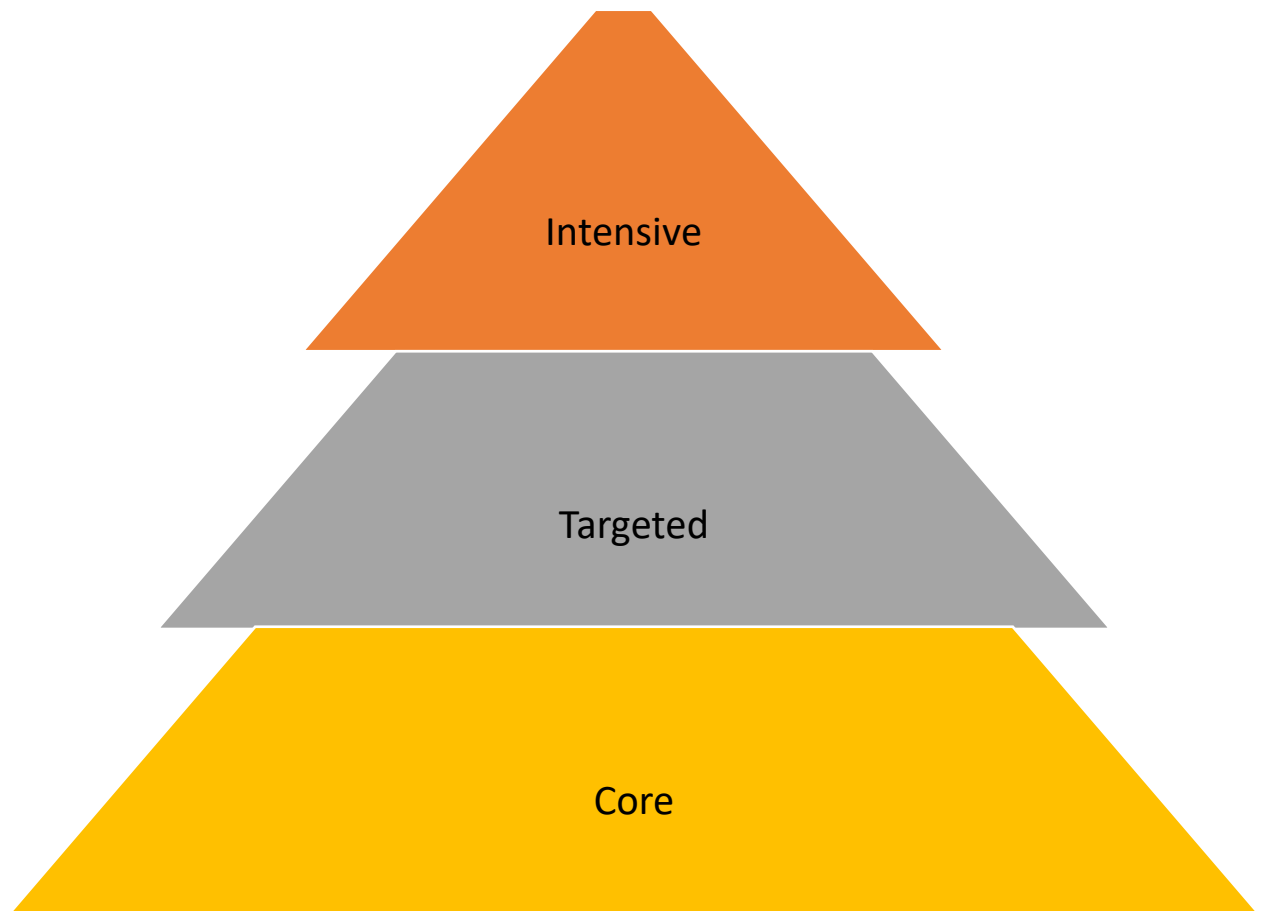
***Theme 2: Professional development.*** Professional development addressed the continuous need for professional development of current teachers and support staff, but also future educators. Professional development is needed for teachers and support staff to stay abreast of changes in education laws and meet the needs of the students. Time for professional development allows teachers and support staff to communicate with others in their field to better serve students.

Brown et al. (2008) examined the knowledge of educators. The study indicated a need for professional development to stay aware of the changing education laws and better teaching techniques in education. Professional development on the Marzano model has proven beneficial to the school in this study. The Marzano model is used by many schools and they have benefitted from it; in a school that specializes in learning disabilities, this model has improved the outcomes of the students' education in a positive way.

Using this model on a day-to-day basis allows students to become more involved in their learning. The school is able to provide evidence that this approach creates learning environments driven by the needs of the students. This method leads to flourishing learners who have been successful in their education endeavors. Every school may use a different learning model, but for the school in this study, they use the Marzano model and it has been proven beneficial.

**Research Question 2.** What are the perceptions of teachers, support staff, and administrators on teaching techniques needed to meet the unique learning needs of students with learning disabilities?

**Theme 3: Support.** Support included areas where the participants acknowledged support or recommended more support for future needs. Support from senior management is important to teachers and support staff, especially those who work with learning disabled students. Teaching students is always a challenge, but those who teach learning disabled students have to be especially proficient, as they deal with multiple learning styles. The multitier system of supports (MTSS) is an evidence-based and system-wide practice that uses data-driven progress monitoring to make decisions and respond to students' academic and behavioral needs (NCLD, 2016). Using this support system proved beneficial to the participants in this study.



*Figure 2.* Multitier system of support. Adapted from National Center Learning Disabilities (2016).

Learning styles are unique to each individual, and having support from administration on teaching methods and best practices is crucial to many educators. Anderson (2009) noted educators need to support each other through changes in teaching techniques. These techniques need to be shared with others in order to better serve students with learning disabilities. Teaching students with learning disabilities was identified as being harder due to the extra time needed in educating each student as their learning styles are different. “Learning styles are a popular concept in psychology and education that are intended how individuals learn best” (Cherry, 2017, para 2). Each learner has a different learning style; however, the school in this study used the Marzano model of education which is designed to educate the various learning styles.

***Theme 4: Challenges.*** Challenges encompassed areas that continue to be a challenge for educator such as time and resources. According to NJCLD, the gap in educating students with learning disabilities continues to grow. This gap leads to challenges faced in the education of all students. Life is full of challenges. In educating students, this is an everyday challenge. When individuals with learning disabilities are involved, the challenges increase; unique with every individual interprets things differently. With support and partnerships, challenges can always be addressed. The themes represented the thoughts and responses from the participants at the specialized school.

The intent of this study is to identify teacher and staff perceptions on best practices and teaching techniques used in educating students with learning disabilities. Teachers reported successful engagement between teachers and students. The successful strategies on for improving student achievement by the participants in the study are: accommodations, shortened assignments, and modified curriculum (Marzano, et al., 2010). Participants discussed obstacles

including not having enough hours in day to teach students according to federal and state standards.

Shah (2012) noted instructional methods are gaining attention due to the common core state standards. Lack of funding at the school is apparent. The school conducts fundraisers and other events to raise money for supplies and equipment because the state allocates limited funding to the school. A common challenge that teachers want addressed is being trusted by administrators, parents, and community officials to educate students with learning disabilities. With knowledge of trust, teachers are able to use best practices for individualized instruction, which each student needs.

### **Discussion of Results**

The findings from interviews led to the understanding that professional development and collaborative partnership are very important to the participants regardless of their role at the school. The teachers who were interviewed seemed happy with the school and felt they are making a difference. Support staff, on the other hand, felt support and communication needed to be addressed for others in similar positions. Notable findings included the frequency of communication reflecting how educators have difficulty with time management and meeting the needs of the students. One of the findings from the study is that employees interviewed all felt strongly about the school and the outcomes of the students, as they are making a difference in the students' lives and educational goals.

Special education students often require greater attention and extra time; many educators and parents may fear that the students do not get the proper education. The study results indicated there is a need for further research and understanding of best practices and teaching techniques used in an environment of students with learning disabilities. Working with a unique

environment of students with learning disabilities, educators will always have challenges and experience a need for change. To foster student engagement, teachers need to base instruction on four questions based on the Marzano model (2008). These questions are:

1. How do I feel?
2. Am I interested?
3. Is this important?
4. Can I do this?

The first two questions focus on students' attention, while the second two questions gauge students' interest in a specific topic. The teachers have classroom rules, consequences, and rewards posted throughout the school year. Participants reported creating an exciting and engaging classroom helped to promote student engagement. Marzano et al. (2001) compiled nine high-yield instructional strategies that have proven success. These include

1. identifying similarities and differences
2. summarizing and note taking
3. reinforcing effort and providing recognition
4. homework and practice
5. nonlinguistic representation
6. cooperative learning
7. setting objectives and providing feedback
8. generating and testing hypothesis
9. questions, cues, and advance organizers

Using these nine strategies has set the school in this study apart from other schools. Building the collaborative partnerships between teacher and students assists in the success of their education.

When students feel trusted in the classroom they are more prepared to learn. Having an understanding of what is expected from teachers, staff and students will go a long way in their educational success.

### **Discussion of the Results in Relation to Literature**

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) mandates that all students be educated in the least restrictive environment possible, especially those with disabilities. The themes from this case study provided insight into the perceptions of best practices and teaching techniques among individuals at a public charter school. The data provided evidence that this work may be effective in other K–12 settings in terms of allowing individuals to freely express their perceptions of working with or teaching individuals with learning disabilities. Cherry (2016) noted that children with learning disabilities receive communication from society regarding their academic ability.

The methodology provided an opportunity for dialogue and assessment. During the study, participants welcomed the opportunity to discuss issues and concerns as it related to teaching students in this population. Buysse and Hollingsworth (2009) advocated professional development for educators, especially those teaching students with disabilities. Principals are often too overwhelmed with managing the day-to-day operations at the school rather than the professional development of teachers and support staff. This takes away from the time necessary to become experts on special education regulations and best practices in educating students with learning disabilities. Logsdon (2016) listed strategies for educating students with learning disabilities.

These strategies are: letting students know why the material is important, using specific words when describing an assignment, having students repeat instructions back to teacher,

graphic organizers, and clearly defined classroom rules and procedures. The classroom rules and procedures need to be addressed at the beginning of the school year and enforced as the year goes on. Doing this assist both the teacher and the students in understanding what is expected during the school year. Understanding what is expected from them will allow students to be successful in gaining knowledge needed for graduation.

As noted previously by Daane et al. (2007), most general education teachers are not prepared to accommodate students with disabilities. Brown et al. (2008) examined the effectiveness of general education teachers and how apprehensive they are about modifying their curriculum. As previously noted in Chapter 2, Rafferty et al. (2001) acknowledged that parents expect teachers to be able to teach the students, but many may not have the necessary skills when educating students with learning disabilities. There is still concern that students with learning disabilities are not getting the needed attention. This is where professional development opportunities need to be made available to teachers.

Professional development is necessary in order to stay aware of new or updated laws and best practices when serving a diverse population. Educators continue to work through issues that have emerged with the Common Core Standards that many states have implemented. This has a tremendous effect on students with learning disabilities as understanding the basics is a major challenge for them. Many students with or without a disability find the State Common Core Standards to be a challenge mainly due to the set time limits to complete the tests.

All of these factors can be tied to the need for efficient professional development of teachers and their willingness to adapt their teaching techniques. When teachers can relate to professional development, they are more willing to implement new best practices. “In education, the term professional development may be used in referencing a wide variety of specialized



training, formal educators, or advanced learning intended to help administrators, teachers, and other educators improve their professional knowledge, competence, skill and effectiveness” (Edglossary, 2013, para 1).

Professional development for educators encompasses a broad range of topics and is considered to be the primary mechanism for teachers to continually improve and expand skills over time. Best practices that are effective should be continued, and less effective ones should be eliminated (Ermeling, Hiebert, & Gallimore, 2015). Employees at the charter school in this study noted that they continue to adjust best practices and teaching strategies daily as the needs of the students change. During this study, teachers at the school agreed with past research data from Marzano et al. (2010) to be effective in assisting teachers to set goals, interact with students while keeping them engaged, and provide feedback not only to the students, but their parents and administration.

Professional development involves a change in practice and beliefs. Fogart and Pete, (2007) proposed that real change takes a sound professional development plan that is well documented and training designed to support. Mellard and Johnson (2006) noted that administrators must provide the infrastructure needed to support professional development for teachers and support staff. Administrators have a unique and powerful opportunity to implement change with professional development. These changes need to be put in place without labeling a student that may need education assistance. Participant 1 felt there was little professional development based on her perceptions of best practices and services.

As noted in Chapter 2, Cherry (2017) discussed even though existing research was found to match learning styles and teaching techniques, it still has no influence on education. This still remains a hot topic among educators. Teachers’ teaching strategies has changed over the past

several years as research suggests. Strategies are focused on teaching the necessary skills needed to meet state proficiency standards instead of the basic areas student need of reading, writing and mathematics (Cherry, 2017).

When using the theoretical framework, it is important to make connections to teaching techniques and best practices. The framework served as a guide for the development of research questions used in this case study. The framework illustrated the need for professional development and support for teachers in assisting them to better serve students with disabilities. Brown, Welsh, Hill, and Cipko (2008) examined the effectiveness of general education teachers and how apprehensive they were about modifying their curriculum. Services as collaboration with parents, administration and others along with needed support are challenges they face. Support on instructional methods used is needed at all schools especially those schools that teach students with learning disabilities.

### **Limitations**

There is no perfect research study according to Patton (2005). I conducted the study at a small public charter school that had unique characteristics as ADHD and high-functioning autism. Limitations are circumstances beyond the researcher's control (Simon, 2011). The sample size of seven participants was relatively small due to only one campus being selected and the small response to participate in the study. Participants in the study are familiar with the education laws and extra needs in teaching students with learning disabilities. Five of the participants knew the laws in depth while the other two only noted awareness of the minimum laws.

Because of these unique characteristics, the findings are not generalized. The scope of the investigation is narrow and the majority of data gathered from interviews related specifically to

research questions. This study is important due to the lack of research on public charter schools dedicated to students with learning disabilities. A second limitation of the study is the lack of control over the responses of the participants. Participants may or may not have responded honestly to the interview questions. The lack of hard data on educating students with learning disabilities made the analysis more difficult and is considered a limiting factor.

Frequently encountered limitations include: (a) the uniqueness of the sample available, which could lead to results not being generalized, (b) length of the study, and (c) responses to interview questions were not answered with candor. I gathered data at the end of the school year, leading to the limited teachers and support staff still in session at the school. Researchers should consider choosing a better time of the year for future research because certain times of the school year are busier and may prevent opportunities for interviews and research. Wide-range data were not collected as the intent is to instruct the investigation around research questions. Given the personal and professional experiences, researcher bias was acknowledged as a limitation of this study. I addressed this by conducting the interviews at the North Campus, where I had no affiliation.

### **Implications of the Results for Practice, Policy, and Theory**

**Practices.** There are implications from this study for current practices, including adding resources within the special education classroom and adjusting the instructional practices of teachers. Per federal and state laws, teachers are now held accountable for increasing student academic achievement. The results of this study identified that the perceptions of the individuals interviewed varied based on the years they have worked in education and in an environment as this. The participants that had worked at the school dealing with special needs appeared to be aware of the changes needed on a daily basis with this unique student population. The

participants with fewer years in special education needed better communication, support, and professional development.

Teachers and support staff have to keep abreast of these laws and changes as they occur and could direct or indirectly affect them. According to Caples (2005), having an understanding of laws helps teachers to provide support in instruction and improves graduation rates. The changing roles of teachers poses a unique challenge because their previous training did not encompass their duties and the need for training programs on interventions to assist in the deficit areas and less on curriculum-specific training. School administrators need to develop a master schedule to accommodate the amount of additional time required in educating students with learning disabilities.

**Policy.** Policies and procedures are in place to help ensure learning-disabled students' right to receive a proper education in the least restrictive environment. All seven participants understood that policies and procedures may change on a daily basis pending the needs of the students and assisting them to graduate. Qualitative data collected shows an increased need for training and professional development among teachers and support staff. This would ensure that students are able to move higher in the tiered system as previously discussed. Federal policies continue to change in the best interest of the students, enabling students with learning disabilities to develop the necessary self-determination skills to be successful in school and working adults, thus becoming productive citizens within the community no matter what disability they have.

**Theory.** The results of this study suggest teachers, support staff and administrators find value in educating students with learning disabilities and continue to grow in teaching techniques and best practices. During this study, I used the Bandura (1977) social cognitive theory along with environmental influence of federal and state laws that protect individuals with disabilities.

Social constructivists hold assumptions based on the way they live (Creswell, 2018). These assumptions develop subjective meaning of their experience in the subject matter.

Each participant valued their opinions in educating such a unique group of students and feel they are making a difference in students' lives. Brown et al. (2008) examined the effectiveness of general education teachers and how apprehensive they were about modifying their curriculum. According to Scalon and Baker (2012), curriculum in the classroom needs to be adjusted as the need arises. I became aware of the adjustments that need to be made on a daily basis as the need changes.

In relation to the conceptual framework of this case study based on constructivist theory, all participants appeared interested in becoming more knowledgeable with regards to finding best practices and opportunities to accommodate the various learning styles of the students, personal experiences, and knowledge of education laws while connecting previous knowledge with new knowledge. Through professional development, the participants are able to keep abreast of changes in education laws and best practices needed in educating students with learning disabilities (Campbell et al., 2001). Stevens 2012 made note that teachers can manage their classroom not only as an educator, but as a secure facilitator and mentor to students. This security and confidence can only be experienced through professional development of teachers and staff. According to participants, professional development and support are the top things that educators are missing at the school.

In addition to the lack of support teachers have when working with a diverse student population, they also feel the need for additional resources and moral support. The constructivist theory does not only apply to the appropriateness of the instructional methodology in this study, but as the way educators are preferring to be treated as professionals. Participants, especially

teachers, have a thirst for knowledge, professional development, resources and mainly support in educating students (Daniels, 2018). Not only are the students learning, the teachers and staff are learning alongside of them as knowledge is power no matter who you are. This power can be applied in the classroom on a daily basis.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

Several recommendations for possible future studies emerged. The findings of this study contributed only a small portion of qualitative research related to perceptions of best practices and teaching techniques. One recommendation would be to expand the sample size of the study because only one campus was evaluated and the number of interviews was limited. The study did not address the issue of technology and other aids that could assist students with learning disabilities. Further studies on specialized schools that educate students with learning disabilities, expectations in academic accomplishment, accountability, and school improvement initiatives are warranted. Another recommendation would be to study a geographic area outside of Florida.

Another recommendation is teachers should be experienced, knowledgeable, and have the skills necessary to teach students in this specialized area. When teachers have knowledge of the best teaching techniques available, they can better serve their students, especially those with learning disabilities. This could be done through professional development allowing teachers the opportunity to better serve students. One could argue that many educational institutions focus on passing state standardized testing instead of teaching the basic needs a student requires.

The school in this study focused on students' success. Even though these students had learning disabilities, their success in education is important to everyone involved, ensuring that the students are listened to with their suggestions about their education. Further research may

look at the culture of specialized schools and the impact of best practices in assisting students with learning disabilities.

Often, students with learning disabilities require specialized instruction focusing on their preferred learning styles. Implementing a student life skills class to be taken in a student's senior year would allow them to be better prepared for higher education and be successful in life.

Federal mandates, such as IDEA and ESSA, require students with disabilities to be taught in the least restrictive environment possible while meeting the accountability standards (Pisha & Stahl, 2005). Teachers realized the need to personalize and differentiate instruction based on the needs of the student.

Many teachers find it challenging to accommodate or modify their lesson plans to meet the unique needs of the students with disabilities. Teachers are better prepared if they have a better understanding in teaching students with learning disabilities (McCray & McHatton, 2011). Researching perceptions from a more global population is also recommended. Exploring private schools that specifically serve students with learning disabilities is another option for future research.

## **Conclusion**

The results of this study are encouraging, and the insight gained became valuable to the researcher. After several decades of educating students with learning disabilities in public schools, many educators continue to struggle. There is a gap between the research on effective instruction and actual practice. It is apparent from the results of the study that teachers need to be better prepared when working with this diverse population. Additional professional development on various special education exceptionalities is also needed. This would allow teachers to be better equipped with ideas and strategies in the classroom.

Clear and concise communication is an important factor in the classroom. According to Marzano et al. (2008), relationships teachers have with the students have a profound effect on their perceptions of being welcomed, accepted, and supported, which helps establish relationships between the teachers and students. Students may not feel comfortable in school or feel positive about their education. But for students with learning disabilities, the tension, and feelings they experience is heightened.

The success of the school is revealed through improved reading abilities, increased vocabulary skills, use of higher level thinking skills, and spoken and written abilities that are reflected in improvement on test scores. It is up to teachers, staff, and parents to work together to help students succeed in their education with or without a disability. With the changing laws, increasing state standards, and diverse student disabilities in the classroom, teachers and administrators need to continue to be updated of changes in these areas when educating all students.

The school administrators and teachers in this study focuses not only on the academic but also the mental state of students. This focus includes students' behaviors, motivations, and confidence levels. This is done by looking at students as whole persons and not grouping them based on aspects of their life pertaining to their educational goals. Everyone who is part of a child's education is an influence on that child and their future goals. This includes teachers, counselors, parents, administrators, and others involved in developing a students' education plan within the K-12 system and beyond.

The daily instructional decisions and the experiences of teachers and support staff at the public charter school for students with learning disabilities affect the success of the students and overall graduation rates. The learning process is continual and is a vital part of growth. A scholar



must be able to acknowledge the beliefs and ideas that they may encounter. Lastly, it is vital that scholars share new thoughts and ideas with others in a larger context. In the end, the themes that emerged may be important for the current practices and procedures for educating students with learning disabilities.

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## **Appendix A: Interview Protocol**

The following guided questions will be used during the on-on-one interviews.

### Introduction and Demographic Information:

1. What is your teaching background?
2. What is your background in special education?

### Interview Questions:

1. How long have you been associated with the school?
2. Have you always taught at this school? If not, what type of school were you at? Why did you choose to relocate to this school?
3. In your opinion, what are some pros and cons of the public charter school?
4. What is your perception of the current practices in teaching techniques at the school?
5. Is there a specific teaching style you use? Is this style the same throughout the school?
6. What is your opinion on special education in the United States as it relates to students with learning disabilities?
7. In your opinion, what do you believe is the difference between a public or private institution for special education students?
8. Do you see public charter schools or private schools being in more demand in the United States when it comes to education students with special needs?
9. Where do you see the education system for learning disabled students in the United States in the next ten years?
10. What teaching techniques have you used at the school that prove to be beneficial? Why?
11. What are your expectations of students with learning disabilities?
12. How often do you meet with parents and others to discuss the child's progress?

## **Appendix B: Recruitment Letter**

Dear Educators,

My name is Kimberly Baker and I am a doctoral student at Concordia University–Portland. My dissertation case study is designed to examine teachers, support staff, and administrators’ perceptions on teaching techniques used at the school.

Q1. What are the perceptions of teachers, support staff, and administrators’ regarding services they offer students with special needs at a specialized public charter school?

Q2. What are the perceptions of teachers, support staff, and administrators on teaching techniques needed to meet the unique learning needs of students with learning disabilities?

The target participants will include teachers, support staff, and administrators at the campus. Participants will be asked to participate in an interview. Participating in this case study will be a minimal amount of your time and each interview will last at least 60 minutes. Your anonymity and responses to interview questions will be kept strictly confidential. If you are willing to participate, please respond to this letter and I will contact you to schedule the interview.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Respectfully,  
Kimberly Baker  
Doctoral Student, Concordia University–Portland  
[redacted]

### **Appendix C: Email to Principal of Participating Campus**

Dear Principal,

I am excited that approval has been granted for the collection of data regarding teachers, support staff, and administrators' perceptions regarding the services offered to students with learning disabilities at the school. I am eager to have the opportunity to conduct interviews at the school. Please feel free to contact me if you need further information. Please give me some time frames to conduct the interviews that would not interfere with the learning of the students. I thank you in advance for your support on my dissertation research topic.

Sincerely,

Kimberly Baker  
Doctoral Student, Concordia University–Portland

## Appendix D: Consent Form

**Research Study Title:** Case Study: Public charter school specializing in students with learning disabilities.  
**Principal Investigator:** Kimberly Baker  
**Research Institution:** Concordia University–Portland  
**Teachers Advisor:** Dr. Brandy Kamm

### **Purpose and what you will be doing:**

The purpose of the research study is on the perspectives of teachers, support staff, and administrators on best practices in special education and the effectiveness of their public charter school that specializes in children with learning disabilities. No one will be paid to be in the study. I will begin interviews on 6/1/18 and end 6/1/18. To be in the study, you will participate in an open-ended interview with questions pertaining to your perspective of the best practices within special education and what makes your institution different. Doing this should take less than 30 minutes of your time.

### **Risks:**

There are no risks to participating in this study other than providing your information. However, I will protect your information. Any personal information you provide will be coded so it cannot be linked to you. When I or my teachers advisor look at the data, none of the data will have your name or identifying information. I will assign a code for each data point so I do not know what information is linked to them by name. This way, your identifiable information will not be stored with the data. I will not identify you in any publication or report. Your information will be kept private at all times and then all study documents will be destroyed 3 years after we conclude this study.

### **Benefits:**

Data collected will assist in identifying best practices at a public charter school for students with learning disabilities and how these practices can be utilized to assist other schools in dealing with special education students.

### **Confidentiality:**

This information will not be distributed to any other agency and will be kept private and confidential. The only exception to this is if you tell me about abuse or neglect that makes me seriously concerned for your immediate health and safety.

### **Right to Withdraw:**

Your participation is greatly appreciated, but I acknowledge that the questions I am asking are personal in nature. You are free at any point to choose not to engage with or stop the study. You may skip any questions you do not wish to answer. This study is not required and there is no penalty for not participating.

**Contact Information:**

You will receive a copy of this consent form. If you have questions you can talk to or write the principal investigator, Kimberly Baker at email [redacted]. If you want to talk with a participant advocate other than the investigator, you can write or call the director of our institutional review board, Dr. OraLee Branch (email [obrand@cu-portland.edu](mailto:obrand@cu-portland.edu) or call 503-493-6390).

**Your Statement of Consent:**

I have read the above information. I asked questions if I had them, and my questions were answered. I volunteer my consent for this study.

_____	_____
Participant Name	Date
_____	_____
Participant Signature	Date
<u>Kimberly Baker</u>	<u>6/1/18</u>
Investigator Name	Date
_____	_____
Investigator Signature	Date



Investigator: Kimberly Baker; email: [redacted]  
c/o: Professor Dr. Brandy Kamm  
Concordia University–Portland  
2811 NE Holman Street  
Portland, Oregon 97221



## **Appendix E: Statement of Original Work**

The Concordia University Doctorate of Education Program is a collaborative community of scholar-practitioners, who seek to transform society by pursuing ethically-informed, rigorously- researched, inquiry-based projects that benefit professional, institutional, and local educational contexts. Each member of the community affirms throughout their program of study, adherence to the principles and standards outlined in the Concordia University Academic Integrity Policy. This policy states the following:

### **Statement of academic integrity.**

As a member of the Concordia University community, I will neither engage in fraudulent or unauthorized behaviors in the presentation and completion of my work, nor will I provide unauthorized assistance to others.

### **Explanations:**

#### **What does “fraudulent” mean?**

“Fraudulent” work is any material submitted for evaluation that is falsely or improperly presented as one’s own. This includes, but is not limited to texts, graphics and other multi-media files appropriated from any source, including another individual, that are intentionally presented as all or part of a candidate’s final work without full and complete documentation.

#### **What is “unauthorized” assistance?**

“Unauthorized assistance” refers to any support candidates solicit in the completion of their work, that has not been either explicitly specified as appropriate by the instructor, or any assistance that is understood in the class context as inappropriate. This can include, but is not limited to:

- Use of unauthorized notes or another’s work during an online test
- Use of unauthorized notes or personal assistance in an online exam setting
- Inappropriate collaboration in preparation and/or completion of a project
- Unauthorized solicitation of professional resources for the completion of the work.

**Statement of Original Work (continued)**

I attest that:

1. I have read, understood, and complied with all aspects of the Concordia University–Portland Academic Integrity Policy during the development and writing of this dissertation.
2. Where information and/or materials from outside sources has been used in the production of this dissertation, all information and/or materials from outside sources has been properly referenced and all permissions required for use of the information and/or materials have been obtained, in accordance with research standards outlined in the *Publication Manual of The American Psychological Association*.

Kimberly S. Baker

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Digital Signature

Kimberly S. Baker

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Name (Typed)

July 1, 2019

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Date