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THE IMPACT OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT ON SPECIALLY DESIGNED  
INSTRUCTION FOR STUDENTS WITH A SPECIFIC LEARNING DISABILITY

By  
Stacy H. Huffman

A Dissertation Submitted to the  
Gardner-Webb University College of Education  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Doctor of Education

Gardner-Webb University  
2023

## Approval Page

This dissertation was submitted by Stacy H. Huffman under the direction of the persons listed below. It was submitted to the Gardner-Webb University College of Education and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education at Gardner-Webb University.

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## Abstract

### THE IMPACT OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT ON SPECIALLY DESIGNED INSTRUCTION FOR STUDENTS WITH A SPECIFIC LEARNING DISABILITY.

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This research study, rooted in the theoretical framework of phenomenology, examined the impact of professional development related to specially designed instruction for students with a learning disability in reading. Teachers of students who had mastered at least 50% of their IEP goals in reading or had exited from special education services were the participants in this study. In addition to the teachers, administrators and district staff who worked with these teachers and students were included. Through a mixed methods research design, 47 participants were surveyed using Qualtrics, and 14 participants were interviewed. Findings demonstrated that professional development related to specially designed instruction proved beneficial to teachers, administrators, and district staff in helping students receive direct and intensive support in overcoming deficits and mastering goals. However, roadblocks such as lack of coaching, few incentives for professional development, scheduling conflicts, and vacancies negatively impacted the effectiveness of the professional development implementation. This research will provide the district with recommendations on how to increase the effectiveness of professional development for teachers related to specially designed instruction for students with a learning disability in reading to facilitate student progress.

*Keywords:* specially designed instruction, professional development, learning disabilities, mixed-methods, student progress, phenomenology

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

One of the liberties Americans enjoy is access to an education that is both free and appropriate. One of the misconceptions regarding public education is that it is guaranteed by the federal constitution when it is within the control of the states. The U.S. Constitution supports the belief that individual states are more aware of the needs of their citizens (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). In the 1800s, many states began passing compulsory attendance laws. While these laws aimed to ensure education for all, many laws excluded students with disabilities (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2016b). Despite parents and advocates involving the courts in many cases, the courts upheld the exclusion of these students. Even as recently as the late 1960s, courts upheld legislation that excluded students deemed "feeble-minded," believing that public schools could not educate these individuals (Brophy & Troutman, 2016).

As a result of numerous civil rights movements, by the early 1970s, courts began to rule in favor of creating equity within the education system. Many states passed laws requiring that schools educate students who have disabilities (Kober & Rentner, 2020). The efforts across the states were far from equitable; however, as some states worked to provide a fair and equitable education, others provided nothing more than access to the school building. Students with disabilities, students of color, and those of low socioeconomic status were often segregated. Researchers point out that this segregation is in part due to the disproportionate identification of learning disabilities within minority groups in order to exclude these individuals from mainstream society (Pak & Parsons, n.d.). Lack of funding also played a factor in these inequities as states were not fiscally prepared to support the diverse needs of students with disabilities such as specialized

materials and structural modifications to provide accessibility (Kober & Rentner, 2020).

With the passage of PL 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (EACHA), now known as IDEA, the phrase "special education" was first used (Yell et al., 1998). For eligible students, ages 3 to 21, this law requires the provision of a free and suitable public school education. A group of experts determines which students qualify as having a disability that has a negative impact on their academic performance (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). Since PL 94-142, legislation has been passed with the goal of strengthening and clarifying EAHCA rules (Yell & Katsiyannis, 2019).

Since the passing of PL 94-142, schools have aimed at improving outcomes for students with disabilities. Students can exit special education if and when the achievement gap has been closed to the degree they can succeed in the general education program and no longer require specially designed instruction (SDI), which is the ultimate goal of special education services. School districts have explored a variety of settings to provide special education services, from mainstreaming into the regular education classroom to self-contained, to closing achievement gaps for students with disabilities. Despite these efforts, data show that these students still lack instructional gains sufficient to exit from special education services.

## **Data**

Many students who qualify for special education have specific learning disabilities. The National Center for Education Statistics (2022) reported that 14% of all public school students receive special education services. Thirty-three percent of these are eligible under the category of a specific learning disability (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). Students with learning disabilities may qualify due to deficits

in basic reading, reading comprehension, math reasoning, math calculation, and/or written expression; however, students identified as having a learning disability usually respond in a positive manner to effective and appropriate instruction. Nonetheless, research suggests that this subgroup of exceptional children is the least proficient. Wei et al. (2013) found that growth for this subgroup of Exceptional Children students, when compared to other subgroups, was not higher, although they should be the easiest to remediate. Research further indicates that these students rarely make gains sufficient to no longer require SDI under an Individualized Education Program (IEP; Wei et al., 2013). Table 1 shows the students identified with disabilities have made no lasting gains in reading over the past 21 years, as demonstrated by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). According to the NAPE data (NAEP; Table1), students identified with disabilities have made no lasting gains in reading over the past 21 years (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019).

**Table 1***NC NAEP Data 2019*

Year	1998	2000	2002	2003	2005	2007	2009	2011	2013	2015	2017
Identified as a student with a disability scale score	176	167*	187	184	190*	190*	189*	186	184	186	186
Gap identified between scale scores	40	48	33*	35*	31*	33*	34*	38*	42	40	40
Not identified as a student with a disability scale score	216*	215*	220*	220*	220*	223*	223*	224*	226	227	226

\*Significant difference ( $p < .05$ ) from 2017

*Note.* NAEP levels include Advanced, Proficient, Below Basic with scale scores as follows: Advanced Scale Score-270, Proficient Scale Score-238, Below Basic Scale Score-210.

A review of data for the state of North Carolina of students proficient at a Level 3 or above on end-of-grade testing showed that proficiency within the students with disabilities subgroup was significantly below that of students without disabilities. Table 2 shows the end-of-grade reading score for Grades 3-8 for both of these subgroups.

**Table 2***2018-2019 and 2020–2021 End-of-Grade Reading Grades 3-8 Level 3 and Above*

	Student subgroup	All students	Students with disabilities	Not students with disabilities
Reading Grade 3	2018-2019	56.8	23	61.8
Reading Grade 3	2020-2021	45.1	18.2	49
Reading Grade 4	2018-2019	57.3	22.1	62.7
Reading Grade 4	2020-2021	45.1	15.2	49.5
Reading Grade 5	2018-2019	54.6	19.3	59.9
Reading Grade 5	2020-2021	42.4	12.5	46.9
Reading Grade 6	2018-2019	60	19.5	66.
Reading Grade 6	2020-2021	45.3	12.5	50.1
Reading Grade 7	2018-2019	58.8	18.5	64.8
Reading Grade 7	2020-2021	46.7	12.3	51.5
Reading Grade 8	2018-2019	55.6	16.5	61
Reading Grade 8	2020-2021	48.2	13.4	53

**Problem Statement**

Historically, students with learning disabilities have had significant academic underachievement, despite the passage of laws such as Free Appropriate Public Education, the implementation of PL-94-142, and attempts to integrate students with disabilities into regular school settings. NAEP data from over 20 years show minimal gains for this subgroup of students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Students with disabilities posted stagnant scores on the NAPE in 2017 and “failed to close the gap with students who were not identified as having disabilities” (Samuels, 2020, para. 2). In fact, Exceptional Children published an article in 2018 that revealed that students with disabilities performed more than three 3 behind their nondisabled peers (Gilmour et al., 2018).

Adequately supporting students with disabilities can be quite a challenge. This is typically attributed to a lack of sufficient professional development or a shortage of

qualified staff (Cohen, 2022). The lack of collaborative planning between special education and general education teachers is a challenge that affects how curriculum and instruction are planned for students who have various disabilities (Woodcock & Woolfson, 2019). In addition to these challenges, demands of paperwork and compliance requirements for special educators are taking the focus away from instruction. The complexities of individualizing instruction appropriate to a student's needs while still holding them to grade-level standards and requirements further contribute to these demands (Billingsley, 2017).

Students must have access to evidence-based curriculum and high-quality instruction, as well as be held to high expectations based on their grade level or independent learning capabilities, in order to reach high levels of achievement. Students with disabilities are entitled to a free appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment possible, and they require assurance that the environment is of high quality (Vanderbilt Peabody College, 2022). Simply including students with nondisabled peers in a general education classroom does little to close the achievement gap and creates additional challenges for teachers (Setren & Gordon, 2017).

Many states have adopted a variety of approaches to providing SDI in order to ensure adequate progress for students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment. Current delivery methods for SDI range from full inclusion in the general education classroom to full-time placement in the special education classroom. These settings exist on a continuum from least restrictive to most restrictive (Vanderbilt Peabody College, 2022).

***Inclusion***

This setting allows students with disabilities to spend over 80% of their day with peers who are considered nondisabled and are provided support, including accommodations and modifications to grade-level content appropriate to their needs (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2021).

***Resource***

The resource setting involves the student spending 40% to 79% of their day in the special education classroom away from nondisabled peers (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2021).

***Separate***

This setting consists of students spending less than 39% of their day with nondisabled peers (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2021).

***Separate Public School***

For students with intensive needs that cannot be met in a community-based school setting, the IEP team may decide that a separate public school is the best option. All students in this setting have an IEP and spend the majority of their day separated from their nondisabled peers (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2021).

To be able to provide adequate support and instruction appropriate for student needs, special education teachers require access to appropriate resources, quality professional development, and adequate support (Gilmour et al., 2018). “The goal of access to the general education curriculum for [students with disabilities] is commendable, but this access can only be achieved when special education is actually special, that is, individualized and intensive for the many who require it” (Setren &



Gordon, 2017, para. 4). Through the collaborative efforts of general education and special education teachers, students with disabilities will make gains sufficient to close the achievement gap (Mora-Ruano et al., 2019).

When provided with appropriate SDI, students who are identified as specific learning disabled in reading should be able to make adequate progress to close the achievement gap (Wei et al., 2013). Despite these findings, data indicate that these students are not making sufficient gains to exit special education services. School districts across the nation have employed various methods to meet the needs of the students with disabilities population, from changes in setting and increased services to a continuous change in instructional resources, teaching methods, and ongoing professional development. These efforts continue to equate to unsubstantial gains for these students (Wei et al., 2013).

Furthermore, professional development is critical for continued teacher growth, yet growing research supports that most professional development opportunities teachers are provided are workshop-based and ineffective for teachers and do little to improve student achievement (Kelley, 2021). When teachers are unsure of how to deliver SDI or how to monitor student progress, students are not able to make adequate growth, master their IEP goals, or exit the program (Wei et al., 2013).

States are also reporting a shortage of highly qualified special education teachers. According to reports, 44 states reported a shortage of special education teachers to the federal government in 2019. By 2022, that figure had risen to 48 (Cohen, 2022).

Regardless of the various methods used by school districts to ensure instructional gains for students with a specific learning disability in reading, these methods alone are

not closing the achievement gap. According to NAEP data, students in the students with disabilities subgroup have made little progress over the last 21 years (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Despite significant investment by lawmakers in early reading instruction through programs such as Early Reading First and Title I over the last few decades, students with disabilities continue to underperform (U.S. Department of Education, 2019).

The push to educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment has blurred lines between special education and general education, including roles, locations, and funding. Researchers argue that special education should immerse itself into the multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) and work as a collaborative partner with general education teachers to problem solve for struggling learners to ensure adequate gains for all students regardless of classification (Fuchs et al., 2010).

The research from this study examined the current implementation of SDI, teacher practices, and methodologies used to support students with an IEP. This information provides guidance for improving the integration of SDI to make adequate gains for students who have a learning disability in reading. Recommendations are provided on effective types of resources, methodologies, and professional development opportunities related to SDI for exceptional learners who have a disability in reading.

### **Purpose**

Research shows that students with a specific learning disability in reading respond favorably to SDI targeted at their specific learning deficit (Wei et al., 2013). SDI involves practices designed to address the unique needs of a particular student. This instruction focuses on IEP goals considering their specific disability. It provides modifications and

adaptations needed for them to access the general curriculum (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2018). Many misconceptions exist surrounding SDI known as SDI. It is important for special educators to have a clear understanding of what it is and what it is not in order to achieve maximum growth for students who receive special education services (Setren & Gordon, 2017).

The purpose of this study was to discover, from teacher and other stakeholder perspectives, the implementation and understanding of SDI through a review of effective professional development, an examination of appropriate SDI tools and strategies, and an analysis of the exit rate of students with a learning disability in reading from special education for a North Carolina public school system. The participants of the study were teachers in the district of study who have exited students from special education in the past 2 years or who have progress monitoring data supporting mastery of IEP goals for over 50% of the students they serve with a learning disability in reading. Additional participants included stakeholders who supported the teachers working with these exceptional learners.

A closer examination of teacher training, development, and practices provided a better understanding of SDI for students with learning disabilities and how to properly implement SDI in order to increase student achievement.

### **Research Questions**

This research study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do teachers of students identified as specific learning disabled perceive the way SDI is being delivered?
2. What elements of the professional development processes do administrators

feel are impactful in improving teacher practice?

3. What elements of the professional development processes do district staff feel are impactful in improving teacher practice?

### **Significance**

According to the district of study's online Every Child Accountability and Tracking System (ECATS), there are currently 4,522 students with IEPs; of those, 1,837 are classified as learning disabled with 1,763 having reading goals. Ensuring that teachers have a clear understanding of how to provide appropriate SDI would assist students in making adequate progress toward their goals.

In addition, data collected through the district's ECATS system portrays that on average, approximately 711 students with various disabilities exit special education through various avenues such as testing out of the program, moving out of the district, graduating, or transitioning to another setting or disability area. Of the 711 students who had an exit code, 264 were students with a learning disability and 153 were students identified with a specific learning disability in reading. The percentage of students who exit the program as a student with an identified specific learning disability in the area of reading who have shown mastery of their IEP goals and no longer qualify for special education services is approximately 6%, which correlates to approximately nine students per year.

This research study is significant because students with learning disabilities in the area of reading are not making adequate growth or closing their achievement gap. Students are not mastering the goals set forth by their IEPs and therefore are remaining in the Exceptional Children's program indefinitely. When students with disabilities have

mastered their goals and have closed their learning deficits, they exit the program and are no longer identified as exceptional students. Unfortunately, due to a lack of appropriate SDI, students with learning disabilities in reading are not mastering IEP goals or making adequate growth.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework used to support the research questions and methodology provided during this study is phenomenology theory. This theory focuses on a philosophy of experience. This theory is grounded on the idea that all meaning and value related to an experience or situation are based on how an experience is lived through human beings (Williams, 2021). Phenomenology is defined as the study of “phenomena,” how things appear in relation to our experiences or how individuals experience things, therefore providing meaning to individualize experiences (Ho & Limpaecher, 2022). Phenomenology is a research design that is descriptive in nature. The aim of this particular type of research is to discover what a certain experience means to an individual or a group of people and how they experienced it (Ho & Limpaecher, 2022). To truly understand and utilize this theory with integrity and validity, researchers must set aside any prejudice or bias that may be had and focus on the immediate experience (Williams, 2021). The researcher must describe the experience that was lived objectively and then reflect on the experience and how it impacted them, other people, or another situation (Ho & Limpaecher, 2022).

There are different methods included in the phenomenological design. The most common methods include participant observation, interviews, conversations with participants, analysis of personal text, action research, and focus meetings (Neubauer et

al., 2019). One key component of this research is to ensure that the focus is on the given issue while avoiding influencing the participants. During the conversations and interviews, it is imperative that the researcher shows empathy and establishes a positive relationship and rapport to help truly understand the participants' thoughts and feelings about the experiences (Neubauer et al., 2019).

Phenomenology is not clear-cut and is considered an inquiry. To truly understand and implement the theory in a valid way, there are certain patterns to follow. First, researchers need to identify the phenomenon, develop a detailed description of the phenomenon or experience, and ensure that there are no personal prejudices or any prior assumptions (Ho & Limpaecher, 2022). Next, data need to be collected and analyzed by establishing themes and accurately describing the situation and experience. Lastly, the researcher can make recommendations that will help the individuals understand their experience as well as how it may impact future situations (Williams, 2021).

Research has shown the theory of phenomenology is often used in the educational field to explain how educators view various situations and experiences. Phenomenology in education includes educational experiences, processes, and the meaning of teaching and learning (Ho & Limpaecher, 2022). This theory is connected to the teaching-learning process while assessing the experience within each situation and identifying methods that bring out perceptions and descriptions of their experiences (Neubauer et al., 2019). This approach allows educators to correlate their situations and lived experiences to their teaching and learning experiences, thus impacting student learning and development (Ho & Limpaecher, 2022).

**Setting**

The district of study is one of the 10 largest school systems in the state of North Carolina. The district currently serves approximately 30,000 students in grades prekindergarten through 12. There are 56 schools in the district, three of which serve special populations. Of the approximate 30,000 students, 4,522 are students with disabilities receiving special education services, accounting for roughly 15% of the student population. The district used in this study is the county's second-largest employer, with over 3,800 full-time and part-time employees, including 1,950 classroom teachers; 83% of these classroom teachers are experienced, while 16% are first-year teachers.

The vision and mission of the district are to inspire success and learning for all stakeholders involved. The district believes that through strong partnerships with employees, parents, and the community, innovative educational opportunities can be provided for all students in a safe and nurturing learning environment.

The research study specifically focused on how teachers of students with disabilities in reading provide SDI in order to close student achievement gaps in reading. Also, a review of the appropriate instructional strategies, resources, and professional development that allow students to master their IEP goals thus resulting in a minimal number of students actually exiting their special education programs was researched. Recommendations from this study will be shared in efforts to strengthen and improve the instructional resources, materials, and professional development that have been proven effective in helping students master their IEP goals and increase the likelihood of exiting from special education services.

## **Definition of Terms and Key Concepts**

### ***Individuals With Disabilities Education Act***

The Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) ensures that all children with disabilities have access to a free appropriate public education that includes support tailored to their specific needs (U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

### ***IEP***

Created for a child who is eligible for special education services. The IEP is intended to address a child's unique functional, academic, and behavioral needs. The IEP will include learning objectives as well as any additional support or services the student requires (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2021).

### ***Inclusion***

Providing individual goals, accommodations, modifications, and related services to students with disabilities in order for them to access the general curriculum in a general education setting (Francisco et al., 2020).

### ***Least Restrictive Environment***

An IDEA requirement that students with disabilities receive their education with nondisabled peers to the greatest extent possible (U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

### ***MTSS***

Focuses on data-driven problem-solving utilizing practices that are research-based targeting academics, behavior, and social and emotional learning to foster maximum growth and development for all students (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2016b).



***Professional Development***

Specialized training, formal education, or advanced professional learning related to a specific field of study or career. Professional development is intended to teach new concepts or improve skills, provide opportunities for continuous improvement, or aid in training for new practices or approaches (Roberts et al., n.d.).

***Progress Monitoring***

The regular, ongoing collection of data from informal assessments of a student's progress toward the intervention's goals. The primary goal of progress monitoring is to document changes in student outcomes in order to assess goal achievement and inform instructional decisions (University of Connecticut, 2014).

***SDI***

The adaptation of the content, methodology, or delivery of instruction to meet the needs of a child eligible for special education services (U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

***Specific Learning Disability***

One of IDEA's 14 eligibility categories. A specific learning disability is defined as a disorder in the processes involved in understanding or using language in all its forms, including written and spoken language, that manifests as a deficit in the ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or perform mathematical calculations (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2021).

**Summary**

In summary, this chapter gave a thorough explanation of the purpose, setting, and factual information regarding conducting a study on how stakeholders perceive the

effectiveness of professional development and other resources when working with students with a disability in reading. The theoretical framework of phenomenology helps explain how a person applies perceptions and perspectives from events actually experienced to new learning and situations. Research questions were then formulated and the study's focus was narrowed down to how stakeholders perceive the effectiveness of professional development when learning how to apply SDI to teaching practices, as well as other resources that will help students with a learning disability in reading close achievement gaps. Finally, specific aspects of special education were reviewed and explained, as these topics are referred to throughout the study.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

Special education is a complex and ever-changing concept that has faced constant opposition and questioning since its inception. While the United States Constitution guarantees fundamental rights and protections to all citizens, each state is ultimately responsible for ensuring equal access to appropriate education for all citizens (Shallus, 2015). Prior to 1970, there was little legislation governing the education of disabled students (Wilcher & Wilcher, 2018). In fact, each state decided how to educate disabled students (Wilcher & Wilcher, 2018). As a result, each state has control over funding for students with disabilities, which has resulted in refusals to enroll students with disabilities or provide adequate services to help these students succeed in their educational setting in some cases (Wilcher & Wilcher, 2018).

The variances from state to state related to the education of handicapped individuals led the federal government to provide sustenance and clarity in the legislation to ensure an appropriate education for all individuals. The first legislative act that addressed these variances was the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. The primary purpose of this act was to ensure that states receiving federal funds must use those funds to educate both general education and special education students combined. The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 prohibited discrimination against those with disabilities (Wilcher & Wilcher, 2018). The legislation not only addressed the physical and societal barriers that prevented individuals with disabilities access to public buildings, but it also addressed the practices related to the education and employment of disabled citizens (Wilcher & Wilcher, 2018).

The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 was a precursor to PL 94-142, Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, which was specifically for students with special

needs. This policy established the right for children with disabilities to attend school and receive instruction and services that were appropriately aligned to meet their needs, building on the foundational principles of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2019). Since its passage, this legislation has continued to transform special education.

After PL 94-142 was passed, school districts were mandated to identify students with disabilities and provide them with a free appropriate public education, which includes an IEP created to meet the child's specific needs for the benefit of their education while preparing them for further education, employment, and independent living (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2019). The financial part of PL 94-142 offers compensation for special education services for children with disabilities. A student who is suspected of having a handicap is assessed under this law to see if they meet the requirements for eligibility listed in PL 94-142. The learner has a right, if determined to be eligible, to an annual meeting to create an IEP, which details the necessary services the student needs to make satisfactory development. A 3-year reevaluation to see if a learner still qualifies for special education services is guaranteed under PL 94-142 for each child who meets the criteria for such assistance. If it is found that the child is not eligible for special education services, the parent has the chance to appeal under the procedural safeguards outlined in PL 94-142 (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2016a). A parent may file a complaint with the state “on any matter relating to a proposal or a refusal to initiate or change the identification, evaluation, or educational placement of their child, or the provision of a free appropriate public education to your child” (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2016a,

p. 25), thanks to the procedural safeguards that ensure due process.

Public Law 94-142 contains the official text of the IDEA. Students with disabilities have rights under the Americans With Disabilities Act of 1990 and the 1973 modifications to Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. While they have rights under both of these acts, it is Public Law 94-142 that provides protections for such students.

Table 3 portrays a comprehensive and chronological history of special education starting with the 1600s and progressing through 2004. Table 3 provides brief descriptions of events that occurred during various time periods. Table 3 also includes key implications and the impact on special education.

**Table 3***Chronological History of Special Education Timeline*

Date	Brief description	Key implications for special education
1600s	Oralism developed by Ponce de Leon for deaf students	First attempts at specially designed instruction
1800s	Rise in institutionalization, specialized schools, and classrooms in an attempt to educate those previously deemed ineducable	Led to segregation of individuals with disabilities
1848	Common Schools- Tax dollars used to fund education for All.	Birth of public education
1896	Plessy v. Ferguson-Separate but Equal	Landmark case focusing on equality for all students
1914	Term Special Classes became widely used	Led to the idea of special classes and special instruction for identified students
1917	Robert Yerkes develops IQ testing for the Army	First measure of intelligence used in education to identify those of inferior or superior intelligence
1920s	Braille developed	Supported specially designed instruction for those with visual impairments
1922	Council for Exceptional Children- Professional Advocacy Group	One of the first advocacy groups pushing for public education for students with disabilities
1933	Cuyahoga County Ohio Council for the Retarded Child-Parent Advocacy Group	Parent advocacy group rallying for public education for students with disabilities
1947	Brown v. Board of Education	Landmark Supreme Court Case ruling that separate is not equal
1975	PL 94-142 signed into law by President Gerald Ford	Birth of special education guaranteeing a free appropriate public education for students with disabilities
1990	EAHC reauthorized and became IDEA	Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, further defined policies governing special education
2002	No Child Left Behind	Defined the process for finding a child eligible for special education services
2004	IDEA Reauthorization	Further defined identification of special education criteria

## **SDI**

Although special education professionals refer to PL 94-142 as the crucial starting point, the first attempts to provide special education and give specially created teaching trace back far longer. A Spanish Benedictine monk named Ponce de Leon created a lip-reading alternative to sign language in the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, which he taught to affluent deaf people. From the 1890s until the 1920s, this language, also known as Oralism, developed as the main means of communication taught in deaf schools. Following the success of these initiatives, efforts were made to develop instructional strategies to aid blind students. Braille was created as a result of this study, which was one advancement.

The new concept of SDI focused explicitly on individuals with sensory issues. The success of this method of teaching traveled quickly, and efforts to expand these instructional practices ensued (Yee & Butler, 2020). Eager to expand upon these ideas, educators began developing instructional methods for students with cognitive issues (Minnesota Government Council on Developmental Disabilities, 2015). The idea of special education was developed via these initiatives to create specialized instruction and interventions for students with cognitive problems. A greater awareness of students with impairments resulted from the shift in focus. This realization ultimately led to increased fear and negative stereotypes regarding this population. The focus on educating individuals with cognitive issues coincided with the rise in evangelical Christianity, Enlightened Thought, and a shift in social thinking. These movements placed a commitment to caring for and protecting those deemed poor, frail, or disabled. Fear and uncertainty about how to provide this care gave rise to institutionalization for individuals

with social, emotional, behavioral, and cognitive deficits (Rotatori et al., 2011). While some viewed institutions as a means to rehabilitate through vocational and educational programs, others perceived them as a way to provide medical or custodial care while separating disabled individuals from society and the general population (Yee & Butler, 2020).

The belief that society was responsible for taking care of individuals who were poor or disabled was grounded on the premise of charity and duty; to protect the children while protecting society (Rotatori et al., 2011). The development of institutions for students with disabilities reflected society's views as a whole. This led to a dramatic rise in institutionalization. Placing individuals with disabilities in institutions became a common practice that followed special education into the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Kober & Rentner, 2020). The public stated that the goal of these facilities was to guarantee that children with disabilities may receive compassionate and humane care. Although these institutions had the intention of assisting individuals in becoming contributing members of society, they also served as a means of eradicating those with disabilities from society (Kober & Rentner, 2020). In this manner, institutions and special schools became places to send students with disabilities who did not fit societal norms (Minnesota Government Council on Developmental Disabilities, 2015).

As early as the 1800s, attempts to educate those previously deemed uneducable were made (Winzer, 2009). The work of Jean-Marc-Gaspard Itard, a pioneer in research concerning the teaching of students with intellectual disabilities using a scientific approach, became a pivotal point in the special education discipline (Rogers, 2022). His efforts sparked a shift in the perception of individuals with cognitive issues as teaching



methods, and instructional practices began to evolve and spread, shifting the paradigm for individuals with disabilities (Rogers, 2022). As a result, attempts to educate these individuals in specialized schools and classrooms increased as laws and advocacy groups supporting this pedagogical shift in education emerged (Minnesota Government Council on Developmental Disabilities, 2015). Many approaches and methods Itard discovered and utilized are still the foundational practices used today. These practices include methods rooted in behaviorism, individualized plans for students based on their needs, social stimulation, and environmental awareness (Plucker & Esping, 2014). Many of these instructional practices are still relevant and commonly used in today's educational settings with students who have disabilities.

### **Development of the Common School**

The rise in industrialization, Christianity, and democracy in 1848 created a growing need to educate and train individuals with various disabilities. This new focus on educational and vocational training led to the birth of the common school (Kober & Rentner, 2020). This was the first time in the history of the United States that tax dollars supported public education. This was a result of the belief that it was society's responsibility to produce productive citizens and as a uniform way to instill Christian beliefs (Kober & Rentner, 2020).

The initial vision for the common school was to create a place for all children to attend free of charge, where a common ideology relating to politics and society was taught; however, this vision was skewed from the onset when students perceived as deviant or nonconforming began attending. These students who were deemed unruly were moved into separate classrooms to be taught at a different pace and in a different

manner. These classes were called ungraded classrooms, meaning students did not receive a grade for their work. The original intent of these classrooms, in theory, was to restore and remediate (Rotatori et al., 2011).

In 1914, J.E. Wallace Wallin, a leader in researching methods of providing direct learning for special instruction to those with mental deficits and impairments, recommended that the ungraded classrooms be utilized for students who were behind academically and use the classrooms as a place to restore and remediate (Ferguson, 2014). He also recommended that elementary schools develop industrial classes for young adolescents who showed themselves as skilled in a particular area. He wanted special classes for students who were deemed, in psychological terms, as imbeciles, idiots, and morons (Kline, 2014), for students who were clearly disabled and needed to be taught using different content and different methods. Wallin's phrase, special classes, became widely accepted and used to describe these classrooms (Ferguson, 2014).

The development of special classes and the education for students with special needs in segregated classes were impacted by two factors: compulsory education laws and the development of a theory of measurement for intelligence. These events occurred almost concurrently. Collaboratively, they were a catapult for special education in public schools (Naicker, 2018).

Due to the negligence or decline of students attending school on a daily or consistent basis due to families requiring help at home, farming requirements to sustain the welfare of the family, taking care of siblings or other family members, or other issues, laws were established that held parents accountable for sending their students to school. Compulsory education laws were established that protected the rights of students to

attend school on a regular basis. These laws required every child between 8 and 12 to attend the school continuously for 4 months a year. According to these laws, parents were penalized for not following this explicit expectation. In addition, child labor laws were changed, nicking a raise in the minimum working age (Justesen & Matthews, 2006). Compulsory education laws created schools that were flooded with diversity due to a variety of students with different abilities and needs as well as races and ethnicities coming to school on a more regular basis due to the stringency of the law. In addition, the influx of immigrants into the United States also influenced compulsory education laws and services and also directly led to the birth of special education (Fawbush et al., 2016). With these compulsory education laws, families were pressured to send their children to school. This forced responsibility on the schools to educate all students and quickly became a burden as schools were unequipped to meet the challenges the laws created (Rotatori et al., 2011).

Before laws related to compulsory education, education was typically provided only by private schools run by churches (Fawbush et al., 2016). This meant that the poor did not have access to formal education. With the rise in industrialization came a rise in immigration between the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Public schools were the best avenue to acclimate immigrant children into society. Schools were also a way to ensure that immigrants and those in poverty were educated. Due to the increase in students attending public schools as a result, teachers are under more pressure to address the demands of a diverse student body (Fawbush et al., 2016).

### **Influence of Intelligence Quotient Testing**

Along with compulsory attendance laws, Intelligence Quotient (IQ) testing

became a focus in the public school system. In 1917, Robert Yerkes served as the chair of the Committee on the Psychological Examination of Recruits for the United States Army. As chair, he developed the Army Alpha and the Beta IQ test (Rotatori et al., 2011). In basic terms, an IQ test measures reasoning and problem-solving abilities (Wiseman, 2022). These tests aimed to determine which recruits would be the best fit for specific positions or leadership roles within the Army (Greenwood, 2017). News of these newly developed tests quickly traveled, and advocates for individuals with disabilities were thrilled at the thought of using Army testing to identify those with inferior or superior IQs (Ferguson, 2014). Scales were quickly developed to rate the mental abilities of those in schools and were met with a favorable welcome. Psychologists swiftly shifted their focus to evaluating children and using the new insight to place these students in special programs and classrooms (Winzer, 2009). These measures allowed for a standard form of identification of students who needed to be removed from the regular education classroom.

### **Supreme Court Influence**

Court cases, policies, and legislation were produced as a result of new educational efforts and developments. Throughout the late 1800s and early 1900s, the Supreme Court was involved in a number of civil rights disputes. *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) was one such case. The U.S. Supreme Court decided in this case, which was heard in 1896, that racial segregation statutes were not unconstitutional as long as facilities for each race were of an equal standard. This philosophy came to be known as "separate but equal," a phrase that is still used today.

The Supreme Court heard the landmark case in education, *Brown v. Board of*

*Education*, in 1954. This historical incident served as the starting point for reform in special education. The precedent-setting "separate but equal" doctrine from *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) case was overturned by the U.S. Supreme Court in *Brown v. Board of Education*. Even though the segregated schools were otherwise equally excellent, the court determined that American statutes creating racial segregation in public schools were unconstitutional. This judgment served as the starting point for the subsequent civil rights battle, which was centered on the education of students with disabilities. Separate schools for students with impairments were no longer legal under the decision. This implied that equal access to public schools was ensured for all students (*Plessy v. Ferguson*, 1896).

Due to the outcome of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), many advocacy groups began to develop. One such advocacy group that emerged was the Council for Exceptional Children in 1922. This was founded by a group of professionals who aimed to advocate for children with disabilities. The Cuyahoga County Council for the Retarded Child was founded in Ohio in 1933 (Winzer, 2009). This group was one of the first advocacy groups formed by families of individuals with disabilities, and these families worked together to advocate for their children.

As advocacy groups continued to form, educating students identified with a disability became the forefront of civil rights activists. This ultimately resulted in the 1970 statute known as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (Winzer, 2009). This act shifted the responsibility of children deemed as mentally handicapped from mental health agencies to the educational system. These children could no longer be deemed uneducable, and the school systems were required to educate mentally

handicapped students. Additionally, school districts had to enforce truancy policies that applied to both disabled and nondisabled children.

Many laws and regulations were challenged and changed between 1975 and 1990 in order to clarify roles and enhance instruction for students who received special education services. *Board of Education of Hudson Central School District v. Rowley* was heard in 1982 (Winzer, 2009). This lawsuit looked at every student's right to a free appropriate public education. According to the judgment, every student has the right to an education that is either deemed acceptable for the learner or coincides with their instructional level, as well as the right to be registered in school without having to pay any direct expenditures. In order to profit from their education while preparing for further study, career, and independent living, certain students need an IEP that is tailored to their unique needs; however, while giving a student the right support to access a free appropriate public education may not always be viewed as being equivalent to doing the same for other students (Legal Information Institute, 1982). The ruling of the Supreme Court with *Board of Education of Hudson Central School District v. Rowley* (1982) was the preface to the American With Disabilities Act in 1990 that prohibited discrimination or segregation based on disability in attempts to create the fair and equitable treatment of these individuals (Martin et al., 1996).

President Gerald Ford revised the Education for All Handicapped Children Act and signed it into law in 1975. All public schools that received federal funding were obligated under PL 94-172 to offer equitable access to a free and suitable public education. Every student with a handicap in every state and municipality was entitled by law to access a free and suitable education. Additionally, states have to take the special

needs of children with impairments into account. Due to these standards, education for all kids with impairments has substantially changed (U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

The Handicapped Children's Protection Act was added to the Education for All Handicapped Act in 1985. This law included provisions to safeguard the child's right to a free appropriate public education. It also permitted the award of reasonable attorneys' fees, expenses, and charges to parents or guardians of a disabled child who win a civil lawsuit (University of Massachusetts Global, 2020).

IDEA was updated and renamed from the Education for All Handicapped Act in 1990. In this edition, the categories for disabilities were expanded to include traumatic brain injury, autism, and additional help for students. In 1997, IDEA was reauthorized. Through this reauthorization, general education access for children with disabilities was guaranteed, and they were given the same rights to the curriculum, placements, disciplinary processes, and transition programs as their counterparts without disabilities. The amendment also established controls to guarantee that students with impairments were accommodated in least restrictive environments (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). The law was again reauthorized in 2004. There were several significant changes as part of this reauthorization. One of the primary changes was identifying students with a significant learning disability. According to the new rules, each state must establish clear standards for identifying children who have learning disabilities (Yell et al., 1998). The decision must be made based on a student's response to scientifically and research-based interventions rather than on a big gap between intellectual ability and success, which means that employing a discrepancy model cannot be one of the criteria (Yell et al., 1998).

The emphasis on family involvement during IDEA's reauthorization in 2004 was another significant change. Although studies show that parent involvement can enhance educational achievements, involving parents in the special education process was not done primarily with this in mind. Students with impairments had few safeguards prior to the passage of PL 94-142, and they were regularly excluded from public schools (Wright, 2020). Parents of children with disabilities who fought for equal rights started the institutional transformation that finally resulted in the passage of PL 94-142. Parent involvement in the special education process was made a legal requirement by policymakers once they understood the beneficial effect parent advocacy for children has. In this aspect, IDEA allowed for the inclusion of parents in the decision-making process for special education. This gave parents the opportunity to defend the rights of their children to a free education and held educational systems responsible for upholding those rights (D'Amora, 2007).

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was the most recent piece of law pertaining to students with disabilities. President George W. Bush signed this legislation into law in 2002. This law's main goal was to hold schools accountable for student results by ensuring that students with disabilities are subject to the same instructional and evaluation requirements as their classmates without disabilities. Additionally, rules were introduced that let states change examinations for some learners with disabilities. According to these rules, assessments might be changed to include easier questions for children who received support services and were not expected to succeed on the standard test. For children with the most severe cognitive problems, there was an alternative exam with fewer topics and simpler questions. Additionally, the department established upper



and lower bounds for the proportion of students whose scores on modified (2%) and alternative (1%) exams might be deemed proficient. The objective was to include every child while also considering the possibility that those with severe disabilities might not be able to function at grade level (Bleiberg & West, 2013).

States were also obligated by the law to guarantee that all teachers met strict qualifications. These requirements mandated that every teacher must hold a bachelor's degree or higher. Additionally, teachers must have appropriate certification in the subject area they are teaching. It also included requirements relating to paraprofessionals. All paraprofessionals are required by law to have an associate's degree or higher or to have completed at least 2 years of college. This new requirement gave non-specialist teachers more responsibility for teaching core topics, which increased the use of inclusive practices for students with disabilities (Klein, 2020).

### **Eligibility for Special Education**

The procedure for determining whether a student qualifies for special education was laid forth in IDEA. If a handicap is detected, a parent or state agency may request a special education evaluation. A multidisciplinary team must convene upon the submission of the request and receipt of the written parental agreement to assess the student's academic and behavioral strengths and weaknesses and to pinpoint any particular areas of concern (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). A decision regarding whether to move forward with an evaluation will be made in light of the team's findings. Testing in the areas of psychology, intelligence, behavior, adaptive skills, motor coordination, and spoken language will be done if it is decided to move on with an evaluation (U.S. Department of Education, 2019).

The evaluation procedure must be finished and a meeting to discuss the findings must be held within 90 days of the signed parental consent. The team assesses all data, evaluates evaluation findings, and decides eligibility during this meeting. The team will create a suitable IEP that offers the required academic, functional, and behavioral support once it has been determined that the student is eligible.

To choose the best educational environment for the student and the duration of each service as part of the IEP, the team considers all data acquired throughout the evaluation process. During the meeting, the parent is given this information and is informed of their rights under the *Policies Governing Services for Children With Disabilities* handbook if they disagree with the public agency's choice with regard to due process (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2021). Services for the student may start once the parent has provided their consent (U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

### **Eligibility Areas**

A student may be entitled to receive specially crafted instruction through an IEP in one of 14 IDEA-covered categories. Autism, deaf-blindness, deafness, developmental delay (for students ages 3 to 7), emotional disability, hearing impairment, intellectual disability, multiple disabilities, orthopedic impairment, other health impairment, specific learning disability, speech-language impairment, traumatic brain injury, and visual impairment are some of these conditions. Depending on where a student is declared eligible, there could be a primary and secondary eligibility area. If a child is determined to be qualified under one or more of these categories, they should receive support and resources to address the appropriate educational, behavioral, and emotional requirements

as part of the tailored educational plan (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, n.d.).

In order to be eligible for special education services in the state of North Carolina, a student must meet the requirements for at least one of the 14 qualifying categories in which they have shown a need or deficit. This judgment and placement are driven by specific placement standards and criteria for each eligible category. The 14 eligibility areas are identified by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (2021) as follows.

***Autism***

A student with autism is characterized as having a developmental condition that significantly impairs both verbal and nonverbal communication as well as social interaction. The child performs poorly in both academics and social interactions. Students who have been diagnosed with autism may exhibit traits including repetitive behavior, stereotypical motions, limited interests, severe resistance to environmental change or modifications to daily routines, and strange and variable responses to sensory stimuli (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2021).

***Deaf-Blindness***

A student who is deaf-blind has both a deaf and a blind handicap. Due to this, there are severe communication, developmental, and educational needs that cannot be satisfied by any one group alone (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2021).

***Deafness***

A hearing impairment that is so severe that it impairs a student's ability to process

linguistic information through hearing, with or without amplification, and negatively impacts that student's academic performance is known as deafness (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2021).

### ***Developmental Delay***

When tested in the developmental domains of cognition, physical development, adaptive development, social-emotional development, and communication, a student with a developmental delay is defined as a youngster between the ages of 3 and 7 whose behavior and development are not typical. To remedy these deficiencies, special education and related services are required (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2021).

### ***Emotional Disability***

A student is considered to have an emotional disability if they consistently display one or more of the following traits that have a negative impact on their academic performance over time: academic stagnation that cannot be accounted for by other factors such as intellectual, sensory, or health; inability to develop or maintain relationships with teachers and peers; inappropriate behavior displayed in the context of normal situations; a generalized feeling of depression or unhappiness; tendency to experience physical symptoms; or generalized fear associated with issues. Schizophrenia is a form of emotional dysfunction (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2021).

### ***Hearing Impairment***

A student with a hearing impairment, commonly known as "hard of hearing," is described as a youngster whose educational performance is negatively impacted by a permanent or fluctuating hearing impairment but who does not fit the criterion of

deafness (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2021).

### ***Intellectual Disability***

An intellectual disability, traditionally known as "mental retardation," is characterized by severely below-average general intellectual functioning and deficiencies in adaptive behavior, both of which have a negative impact on a child's academic performance (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2021)

### ***Multiple Disabilities***

When two or more disabilities coexist, a student is said to have multiple disabilities, which results in significant educational needs that cannot be met in special education programs designed primarily for one of the disorders. Deaf-blindness is not included in this category (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2021).

### ***Orthopedic Impairment***

A student with an orthopedic impairment is defined as having a physical disability that is so severe that it has a negative influence on the child's academic performance. Congenital defects, disease-related disabilities, and other conditions like cerebral palsy, burns, amputations, and more are all included in this category (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2021).

### ***Other Health Impairment***

A student with other health impairments is one who has diminished strength, vitality, or alertness as a result of a long-term or recent health issue, such as asthma, attention deficit disorder, diabetes, epilepsy, a heart condition, hemophilia, lead poisoning, leukemia, nephritis, rheumatic fever, sickle cell anemia, Tourette's Syndrome, etc., that causes diminished alertness with regard to the educational environment and

negatively impacts a student's ability to access their education (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2021).

### ***Specific Learning Disability***

According to the definition of a specific learning disability, a student has a disorder in the processes necessary to comprehend or use language in all its written and spoken forms. This disorder may show up as a deficit in the ability to speak, think, listen, read, write, spell, or perform mathematical calculations. Conditions may include but are not limited to dyslexia and dyscalculia. They do not, however, include learning difficulties brought on by mental or physical impairments; sensory or motor impairments; emotional disturbances; or social, cultural, or economic disadvantages (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2021).

### ***Speech-Language Disability***

A child who has been classified as having a speech-language disability has a communication disorder that negatively impacts fluency, language, articulation, or voice/resonance. When evaluating eligibility, this disability may be regarded as the predominant disability, or it may coexist with other disabilities (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2021).

### ***Traumatic Brain Injury***

A learner with a traumatic brain injury is a person who has suffered a brain injury from an internal or external event that results in entire or partial functional disability as well as psychosocial damage that compromises a child's capacity to learn. Open or closed head wounds, cerebrovascular accidents (such as stroke or aneurysm), infections, renal or heart failure, electric shock, anoxia, tumors, metabolic abnormalities, poisonous

substances, or medical or surgical procedures are some possible causes. A single event or a string of events can lead to brain damage. Traumatic brain injury can occur whether or not a person loses consciousness at the time of the incident. Cognitive, language, memory, attention, reasoning, abstract thought, judgment, problem-solving, sensory, perceptual, and motor abilities, as well as psychosocial behavior, bodily functioning, information processing, and speech, may all be affected by traumatic brain injury. Congenital or degenerative brain conditions are excluded from the definition of traumatic brain injury, yet birth trauma can result in brain injuries as well (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2021).

Additionally, complimentary assistance may be provided to disabled students. Transportation and any other developmental, corrective, or supportive services necessary to help a child with a handicap benefit from special education are examples of related services. Speech-language pathology and audiology services; interpreting services; psychological services; physical and occupational therapy; therapeutic recreation; early identification and assessment of disabilities in children; counseling services, including rehabilitation counseling, orientation and mobility services; and medical services for diagnostic or evaluation purposes are just a few examples of related services. Other related services include parent training and counseling, school social work services, school health services, and school nurse services (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2021).

### **Educational Settings**

Congress provides details in the law ensuring that the education for disabled students must be appropriate to meet their individual needs. The statement "appropriate to

student needs" as outlined in North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (2021, p. 112) has been challenging because of the diverse needs of this student population. Additionally, Congress mandated that to the greatest degree practicable, students with disabilities be educated alongside peers without impairments in a setting known as their least restrictive environment (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). With very minor modifications or assistance, this least restrictive environment setting enables students with disabilities to access content in the general education environment. A least restrictive environment is important in deciding not only where a student will spend their time in school but also how special education services will be delivered (Lemons et al., 2018). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2022), 64% of students who are categorized as students with a disability spend the majority of their day, 80% or more, in a regular education setting. This is promising for students with disabilities because it supports the efforts to include them in the regular classroom.

Regular education is one of the settings deemed appropriate for serving students with an IEP. Based on current data from the National Center for Education Statistics (2022), the majority of learners who are classified as having a disability will find it to be the least restrictive environment, according to the IEP team. IDEA has clearly defined least restrictive environment with the following:

Children with disabilities, including those in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated alongside children without impairments as much as is appropriate. Special classes, separate schooling, or other removals of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occur only when the nature or severity of the disability of a child is such that education in regular



classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily. (U.S. Department of Education, 2021, p. 61)

Once eligibility for a student is determined, the team uses all relevant information related to the student to make decisions about the appropriate educational setting concerning the least restrictive environment (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2021). The least restrictive environment is on a continuum from most restrictive to least restrictive, ranging from entirely separate from nondisabled peers to spending most of the day in a classroom setting with nondisabled peers. The most inclusive setting is regular education. Placement in the regular education setting constitutes a student spending over 80% of their day with peers who do not have a disability. The resource setting involves students spending 40% to 79% of their day within the special education classroom away from nondisabled peers. The separate setting removes students from nondisabled peers for more than 60% of their academic day (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2021). The settings considered most restrictive occur outside of a typical school building. These include a residential facility, a separate school, or a home or hospital setting. These educational settings are intended to support students with intensive medical, cognitive, behavioral, or emotional needs that the public school cannot meet even with special education support (IRIS Center, 2020).

The team must consider each student's unique needs while deciding where to place them. The setting must be that which will provide the most academic, behavioral, functional, and social-emotional benefits. The team must also consider the impact the placement will have on the education of other students and what accommodations or modifications will be needed best to support the student (IRIS Center, 2020).

## **Appropriate Services**

According to PL 94-142, schools are required to give all students access to a free education in a setting with the fewest restrictions. What constitutes acceptable support for students with impairments has been debated in recent court cases. According to the court's decision in *Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District* (2017), a school must provide a child with an IEP that is reasonably created to enable the child to make sufficient progress in light of the child's particular needs. After the recent Supreme Court decision in *Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District*, school districts were required to stop simply allowing students with IEPs access to the general curriculums and to start making sure students received SDI to produce sufficient progress (Yell, 2019).

The ruling that districts were required to provide instruction ensuring adequate progress came in part due to the findings that despite federally funded special education programs across the nation, students receiving these services still lag behind their nondisabled peers and are often held to lower expectations. As a result of a continued gap in performance between students with and without disabilities, the dropout rate among students participating in special education is higher (Aron & Loprest, 2012). To ensure students with an IEP are provided SDI that is adequate to promote progress, progress monitoring and evidence-based practices are vital (Rodgers et al., 2021).

Over the past 30 years, school districts all over the nation have tried a variety of strategies to enhance results for students with disabilities. Mainstreaming and inclusion are two of the main strategies that have been employed to encourage student achievement in the least restrictive environment (Francisco et al., 2020). According to each student's unique requirements and abilities, mainstreaming involves including students who have

been identified as having a handicap in the regular education classroom. It is predicated on the idea that the services a student receives depend on where they are. Students with disabilities are taught in regular education classrooms in mainstream settings, although they have limited access to the general curriculum. Fully integrating students with and without impairments, as well as altering and adapting the curriculum to provide access for students with disabilities, is inclusion (Francisco et al., 2020). Children should receive an education together, special education is a service rather than a location, and professionals should collaborate to deliver these services in the general education context, according to advocates for inclusion (University of Washington, 2021).

## **MTSS**

As part of NCLB, school districts must separately report yearly achievement scores for students identified with disabilities. According to Schulte et al. (2016), students within the student with disabilities subgroup show achievement that is lower than average. They also exhibit a growth rate that is slower than nondisabled peers. Furthermore, even students who exit special education continue to be at risk.

A continuous rise in the number of students determined to be eligible for assistance under IDEA occurred as states started to strengthen eligibility testing when selecting a learner for special education services. At the same time, efforts to improve outcomes for these students, including increased proficiency in reading and math as outlined in NCLB, seemed to have a minimal impact. Despite the transition from segregation to more inclusive practices for students with disabilities through continuous legislative updates through IDEA and Supreme Court involvement, students with disabilities remain behind (Schulte et al., 2016).

The reauthorization of NCLB in 2004 caused a substantial change in how states classified students with learning disabilities. Prior to this, states had relied on the discrepancy model, which found a sizable gap between intellectual capacity and achievement. The reauthorization mandated that states abandon this approach in favor of one that is based on a student's reaction to interventions that are both evidence-based and scientific (Preston et al., 2016). This additional requirement was brought about primarily by the wide variations between states in the standards for determining whether a child qualifies for special education under the heading of "learning handicapped," as well as the rise in the number of students who were found qualified under this heading. In 2000, 50% of the students with disabilities were identified as learning disabled. Researchers argued that this overrepresentation was due to misidentification from poor testing measures coupled with many teachers believing that any struggling student would benefit from special education services (Burton & Kappenberg, 2012).

For 8 years, from 2002 through 2010, policymakers and local educational leaders explored methods of integrating scientifically based methods of delivering instruction into improving educational practices for children (Preston et al., 2016), rather than a "wait to fail" approach that had been associated with the discrepancy model, since students were unable to receive immediate support to help them improve (Fletcher et al., 2005). As a result, researchers started to promote a more proactive strategy for using diagnostic tests to identify students with learning difficulties and for enhancing the efficiency of the assessment and education for these individuals. During this time, research was also starting to show the importance of early assistance for learners who were failing (Preston et al., 2016).

Researchers began finding evidence that supported early intervention; as a result, a paradigm shift occurred regarding special education. Research showed that for children who began to struggle early without appropriate intervention, the struggle continued into their upper levels of education and even into postsecondary situations (Fletcher & Lyon, 1998); however, suppose teachers and staff can intervene early and meet students' academic needs. There is a greater chance of higher academic achievement and a reduction in adverse outcomes such as dropout, delinquency, and unemployment (Alexander et al., 1997). Special education was no longer perceived as a means to an end for struggling learners, and preventive measures became the focus in the regular education setting before referring a student for special education (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2015).

The National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities had a big impact as well. The Office of Special Education Programs received a letter from the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities in 1997 explaining their concerns with the discrepancy model utilized to identify individuals with learning difficulties. In response, the Office of Special Education Programs established the Learning Disability Initiative in 2000, inviting a group of partners to look into ways to enhance the requirements for learning disability eligibility (Walker, 2020). The Response to Intervention (RTI) model was born of these efforts as an alternate method for identifying learning disabilities (Bradley et al., 2007).

The Office of Special Education Programs formed the National Research Center for Learning Disabilities the following year and tasked them with conducting further research on the RTI model and exploring other models for identifying students with learning disabilities (Preston et al., 2016). They were also tasked with communicating

these data to every state. The changes that were made as part of the 2004 reauthorization of IDEA, which removed the requirement to utilize the discrepancy model for this purpose and instead permitted the use of data relating to the response to research-based interventions, were significantly influenced by the work of this agency. The reauthorization also called for a more proactive rather than reactive approach by including components relating to early intervention (Preston et al., 2016).

RTI was the response to the ever-widening achievement gap. RTI also pushed to use interventions that are research-based proactively. This model satisfied the requirements of the 2004 reauthorization of NCLB. As a result of the IDEA reauthorization in 2004, RTI became a factor in identifying students with learning disabilities (Walker, 2020).

RTI is a component of an MTSS (American Institutes for Research, 2021). The focus of an MTSS is to provide layered or tiered support to struggling students and track their progress in response to research-based interventions. Research-based interventions, also called evidence-based or scientifically based, are backed by research that validates their effectiveness (University of Missouri College of Education and Human Development, 2022). Either large or small group research validates these interventions for a specific purpose with a specific population. Once students are identified as needing additional support, they are placed on a tiered structure based on the intensity of their academic or behavioral needs (Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports Technical Assistance Center, 2019).

The National Center on Response to Intervention (2010) has described RTI as a method that increases student success and decreases behavioral issues by integrating

evaluations and interventions into a school-wide, multi-level preventative system. According to the National Center on Response to Intervention, this model has four specific parts:

- screening—typically conducted at the beginning, middle, and end of the year to identify students who might be at risk;
- multi-level prevention—includes a continuum of support for academics, behaviors, social and emotional that are evidence-based;
- progress monitoring—uses valid and reliable tools for tracking student progress; and
- data-based decisions—data analysis and problem-solving at all levels of implementation and instruction.

When implemented effectively, this system is designed to identify children early and reduce the number of special education referrals. This system can identify students with learning disabilities more accurately and earlier and reduce the disproportionate rate of eligible students under this category (National Center on Educational Outcomes, 2020).

### **Specific Learning Disability Policy Changes in North Carolina**

After the reauthorization of IDEA in North Carolina in 2004, the trend toward identifying students as having a learning disability kept changing. According to a North Carolina Department of Public Instruction Specific Learning Disability Task Force white paper from 2015,

Although the IQ-achievement discrepancy model has been the cornerstone of SLD [specific learning disability] determination nationally for more than thirty

years, there have been, and continue to be, significant criticisms surrounding its efficacy and efficiency in classifying students with SLD. (Fofaria, 2020, para. 1)

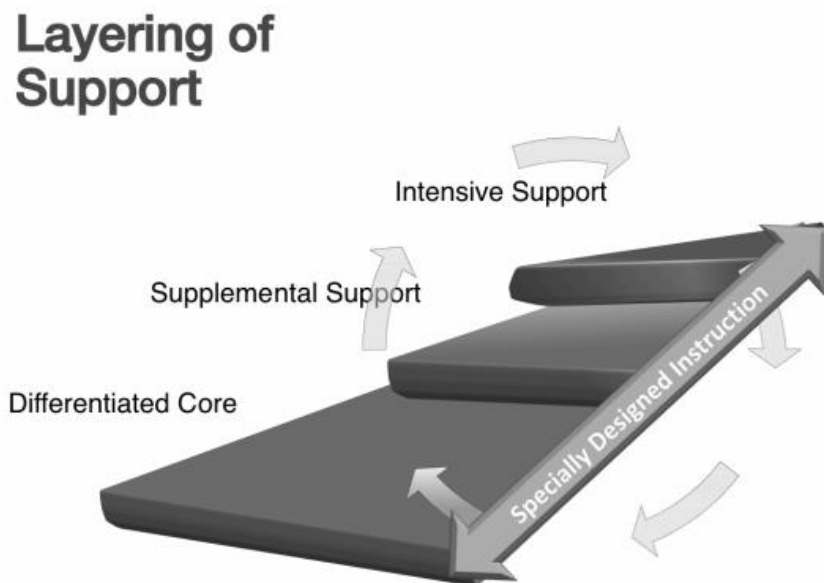
As a result, the North Carolina policies on the requirements for a learning disability were modified. The North Carolina State Board of Education authorized revisions to the policy relating to defining, assessing, and identifying students with specific learning disabilities in 2016. This was the most current version. The difference between academic success and intellectual aptitude cannot be used, according to the new regulation. It also forbids identification based on a pattern of strengths and weaknesses, which entails looking at cognitive processes other than IQ scores in order to determine IQ scores. Instead, as part of a thorough evaluation, the new policy mandates evidence demonstrating a student's RTIs that are grounded in science and research and use an MTSS. Beginning on July 1, 2020, all school districts in the state were obligated to apply the new rule. This policy change was based on the premise that an RTI-based determination for a specific learning disability cannot be utilized in the absence of an MTSS, and the determination is integrated within this framework.

The MTSS framework, which includes six domains including building capacity/infrastructure for implementation, leadership, data-based problem-solving, multiple tiers of support, collaboration, and communication, aims to provide adequate support for all children, according to the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (2018). The goal of this approach is to identify struggling children early so the right interventions may be put in place and help them catch up with their peers (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2018).

MTSS focuses on a whole-child approach, and it supports behavioral, academic,



and social-emotional teaching and learning into a system that is fully integrated. This framework hinges upon the concept that universal support (Tier 1) is provided for all students; however, some students may need supplemental support, which is provided (Tier 2), and there are a marginal few learners who require more intense support (Tier 3). The intent of this three-tiered instruction/intervention model is to ensure equitable and inclusive learning opportunities involving high-quality instruction for all students (Sailor et al., 2021). Figure 1 identifies the SDI that correlates with the types of support presented in the MTSS model. As Figure 1 displays, differentiated core instruction requires 63% less SDI than supplemental and intensive supports do.

**Figure 1***Layering of Support***Strengths and Limitations of MTSS**

The main goal of MTSS is to prevent and treat academic and behavioral impairments by providing appropriate training and intervention, rather than to identify specific learning disabilities. This is done by removing gaps between actual and expected performance (Alfonso & Flanagan, 2018). This paradigm has many benefits, but there are also drawbacks to consider.

Within MTSS, struggling students are identified more quickly and are provided the support they need to make gains. Early identification eliminates the approach that students have to wait until a certain point of being unsuccessful before interventions can be implemented that tend to be associated with previous models.. Additionally, by monitoring student response to interventions, changes can be made easily within the framework to better support students (Sailor et al., 2021). Additionally, the framework

uses multiple data points for making decisions so that no one point of data is the determining factor. The framework also calls for universal screening measures for all students. These screenings identify students who may be at risk or who warrant additional diagnostic measures to determine where to target instruction. These data serve as a baseline for developing an appropriate instructional plan paired with ongoing progress monitoring. Progress monitoring data are used to assess student reactions to interventions; modify instruction as necessary; or decide whether more intense help, such as a referral to special education, is required (D. Jackson, 2021).

This framework slows down the pipeline to special education. Students are less likely to be identified as having a learning disability as quickly, which should reduce the overidentification of students in this category. MTSS is designed to ensure that appropriate supports and interventions are in place to assist in closing the achievement gap for students before needing SDI through special education (D. Jackson, 2021).

While there is research that supports early intervention, there are limitations with an MTSS that should also be considered due to the variability of interventions across the school districts. Because the types of interventions are often left to the teacher's discretion and based on data interpretation, there can be vast differences from school to school and even from classroom to classroom. There are also inconsistencies surrounding the length of time interventions should occur and how frequently progress monitoring should occur. Since interventions are based on these data, this leads to discrepancies in decisions (Walker, 2020).

Another weakness in the framework lies within the implementation of the interventions. For students to benefit, interventions must be implemented accurately and

with fidelity. When analyzing progress monitoring data, schools must determine that the interventions were implemented appropriately before determining that the student did not respond (Etscheidt, 2006).

### **SDI Within MTSS**

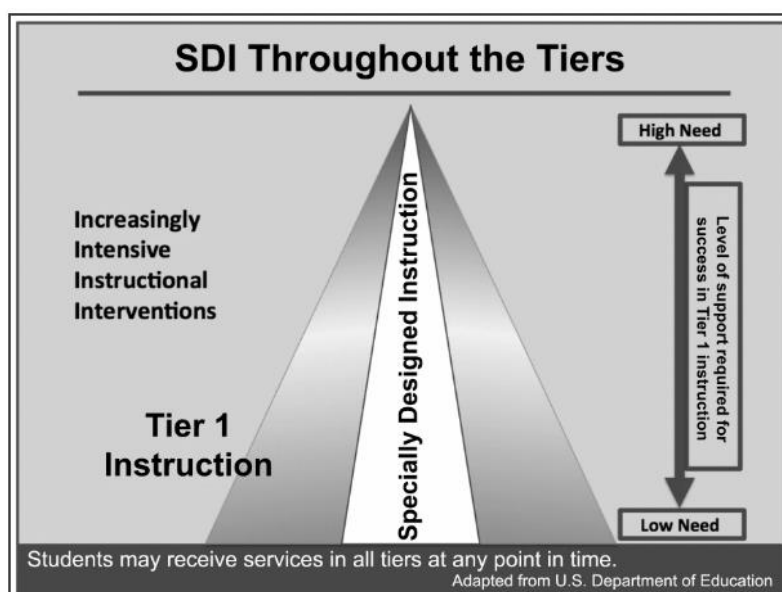
When interventions are implemented appropriately, students at risk can be identified early and provided the appropriate support before the previous waiting-for-failure approach. MTSS provides the framework to support RTI so that struggling learners, including those with reading difficulties, can benefit from needed interventions. For the model to be effective, teachers and staff must learn to analyze data from the universal screener, determine the appropriate interventions, collect progress monitoring data, and make appropriate decisions based on the results. When a student does not demonstrate adequate progress based on data analysis, a referral for special education may occur (Gillis, 2017).

MTSS is a program for all learners, including those with impairments, even though it is not a special education effort. Since the IDEA was reauthorized in 2004 to designate students who would gain from more comprehensive support, MTSS has foundations in special education (Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports, 2017). Ninety-five percent of students with impairments spend a part of their day in the general education setting, and 63% spend 80% or more of their day there, according to the American Institutes for Research (2021). As a result, they benefit from the strengths of MTSS. Special education services through an IEP are implemented through the MTSS framework as an additional support layer. This framework enables IEP teams to write appropriate goals, gather efficient data to assess student mastery toward IEP goals, and

provide SDI based on student needs. It also enables teams to have concise information to define current levels of academic and functional performance (American Institutes for Research, 2021). Figure 2 shows the increasing need for instructional interventions and SDI as students move through tiered plans and instruction. The intensity of the intervention as well as the type of SDI will vary depending on where students fall in their tier placement.

**Figure 2**

*SDI Within MTSS*



### *SDI for Exceptional Learners*

SDI is the nucleus of special education. The interpretation and implementation of SDI can be ambiguous across settings, especially in the general education setting, where 72% of students with learning disabilities spend 80% or more of their day (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). SDI is not only required by IDEA but is a critical factor in the success of students identified with a learning disability; however, research shows that SDI is often misunderstood or absent, putting students with learning disabilities at

greater risk of falling further behind (Rodgers et al., 2021).

This framework enables IEP teams to write appropriate goals, gather efficient data to assess student progress toward IEP goals, and provide SDI based on student needs. It also enables teams to have clear information to define present levels of academic and functional performance. Once a student is recognized as having a disability, it is crucial to have a clear understanding of the services, supports, and SDI the student requires in order to achieve optimum growth. The team working with the student must be able to provide a clear description of, plan for, and effectively implement SDI and distinguish it from core instruction occurring in the regular education setting (Rodgers et al., 2021).

The reauthorization of IDEA in 2004 came with a broad definition of SDI. The U.S. Department of Education (2021) defined SDI as,

- adapting, as appropriate to the needs of an eligible child under this part, the content, methodology, or delivery of instruction;
- addressing the unique needs of the child that result from the child's disability; and
- ensuring access of the child to the general curriculum so that the child can meet the educational standards within the jurisdiction of the public agency that apply to all children. (Sec. 300.39[b][3])

This wide definition has given rise to legal disputes like *Andrew F. v. Douglas County School District* (2017). In this case, the court determined that education provided through the IEP must be specifically tailored to a child's individual needs. Additionally, it must foster meaningful academic and/or functional growth (Wright, 2020).

Since the reauthorization of IDEA in 2004 required RTI as the measure for

finding a student eligible under the category of specific learning disability, there has been an increased focus on developing intensive interventions as part of an MTSS. Students with a learning disability can receive support at any tier; however, there is debate on whether intensive intervention, Tier 3, is the same as special education. MTSS intends to provide layers of support for the whole child. Because special education and general education students can receive support at any tier, SDI through special education services is an additional layer above and beyond the three-tiered system (Rodgers et al., 2021).

In accordance with the State Systemic Improvement Plan from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, there is a deliberate focus on the implementation of multiple tiers of instruction that differ in intensity, aligned to student needs, and professional learning involving SDI within an MTSS. North Carolina started implementing RTI within an MTSS framework to comply with IDEA requirements (Wright, 2020). The MTSS framework encourages the delivery of high-quality instruction and interventions that are individualized for each student's needs, regular evaluation of results to determine whether to change the curriculum or the goals, and the use of student response data to guide important educational decisions (Elliott, 2008). This framework helps educators provide strategies to support all students and is developed from the correlation between RTI and positive behavioral and intervention supports.

The Tuchman et al. (2018) study found that special education instructors self-report a need for support with implementation. Additionally, the study found a need for professional development and effective strategies to use with students with disabilities. Delivering SDI to all children with a plan based on their individual needs remains the special education teacher's primary responsibility (Tuchman et al., 2018).

## **SDI Strategies for Students With Learning Disabilities**

Even with the best models, frameworks, and guidelines, studies have proven that some SDI strategies are more effective than others. Closing achievement gaps and fostering mastery of goals and objectives related to reading success in students with learning challenges require specifically planned education (Roberts et al., n.d.). For working with students who have learning deficits in reading, successful SDI includes using effective strategies such as explicitly teaching phonics sounds and skills; using multisensory approaches to teach comprehension skills; and using repeated readings, poetry, and songs to teach reading fluency (Joseph, 2019).

When students are able to interact with their learning by using strategies as well as participate in learning that is meaningful and even enjoyable, they tend to retain the strategy used and will often implement that strategy when reading in the future. Some successful reading strategies utilized that have been proven effective include identifying letters to sounds to pictures; using tracking or chunking strategies while reading to help keep the pace of the text; utilizing context clues when encountering unknown words or vocabulary; engaging in repeated readings to solidify comprehension and increase fluency; and participating in reading and reenacting plays, songs, or other texts to spark interest and creativity in reading (Joseph, 2019).

When these strategies are paired with settings such as a small group that targets specific strategies, one-on-one instruction with an educator well versed in the area of reading instruction, or through direct instruction programs that focus on explicitly teaching skills and strategies related to reading, students tend to show an increase in reading proficiency, comprehension, and fluency (Roberts et al., n.d.). SDI is only as



effective as the strategy used and the teacher providing the instruction.

### **Phenomenology in Education**

Phenomenology is defined as the study of “phenomena,” or how things appear in relation to our experiences or how individuals experience things, therefore providing meaning to individualize experiences (Ho & Limpaecher, 2022). Research has proven that the theoretical framework of phenomenology plays a pivotal role in educational careers and practices (L. S. Jackson, 2021). Studies have proven that educators tend to draw on their own experiences and prior learning or knowledge when implementing practices and procedures in their classroom settings. In one research study, educators were correlating their training in special education services to that of providing SDI to their students. SDI is a major tenet in ensuring students who have an IEP are receiving the proper education and assessment to ensure the students with a learning disability in reading will be able to reach mastery of their IEP goals (L. S. Jackson, 2021). Educators who had prior training on how to deliver SDI commented that they were able to take a student’s IEP goals and create individualized instruction based on what the student needed. However, educators who had not had any training or assistance in delivering or creating any SDI tended to lean towards using direct instruction programs or preplanned material instead of trying to create activities that would be individualized for student learning (D. Jackson, 2021).

In an additional study, educators who were trained in specific reading methodologies such as word mapping, chunking, “clozed” reading, and fluency strategies were able to integrate these strategic ways of learning into their instruction due to having the prior experience of learning, training, and coaching, therefore allowing educators to

create learning situations that were rigorous and relevant and aligned to student need. Educators who were engrossed in professional learning have stronger connections to utilizing the resources they have been trained in as well as having more confidence in trying new ways of teaching and learning (Koellner & Jacobs, 2015).

As research shows, students with learning disabilities in reading require an educator with a specialized skill set (Koellner & Jacobs, 2015). Many times, this skill set is provided through professional development or workshop opportunities. The students will not gain from the instructor's training, though, if the teacher lacks the background knowledge, self-direction, and motivation to put what they have learned into place in the classroom setting (Carswell, 2020). Even though teachers are participating in the training, they are not making the connections necessary to their own learning experiences or they lack the self-determination needed to connect the training to their teaching practices; therefore, students are not benefiting from the professional development opportunities their educators are involved with (Koellner & Jacobs, 2015).

In a research study conducted by L. S. Jackson (2021), professional development was only beneficial to an educator if they were able to relate the training to prior knowledge or experiences that would help in truly understanding the concept at hand. L. S. Jackson went further to explain, once this correlation is made, an educator then experiences a certain amount of self-efficacy. This allows the educator the motivation needed to execute what was learned during the training with more confidence and self-assuredness (L. S. Jackson, 2021). When the professional development experience is then followed up with reflection and feedback, the educator feels even more empowered in utilizing what was learned in a classroom setting.

Another research study focused on the importance of coaching and feedback as part of the professional development cycle (Talbert, 2010). Participants found that when they attended professional development opportunities that were lecture style, with limited interaction and no continued coaching and follow-up, they were far less likely and motivated to even attempt to put into practice what was learned in the session (Talbert, 2010). However, when the participants were able to collaborate with other participants and interact with the material being presented in the session and were provided coaching sessions, reflection time, and follow-up opportunities, the participants felt more determined and motivated to try and implement the new strategies or methodologies acquired during the training (Talbert, 2010). When all these components were then combined with the participants' prior knowledge or any previous learning experiences, true teaching and learning were brought back into the classroom setting (L. S. Jackson, 2021).

When professional development is delivered with fidelity, practices are modeled, support and coaching are provided, and feedback is reviewed, teachers are able to merge their own abilities and learning profiles to create SDI that is effective for exceptional learners. In addition, these educators will be able to create goals and objectives for student IEPs that will work on deficits and close the achievement gap (Carswell, 2020). When a true collaboration between effective professional development and a recognition of how an educator perceives themselves as a learner exists, a positive impact on a student's learning will be achieved (Carswell, 2020).

For example, research has shown that when participants of professional development have been presented with information in an informative yet engaging

manner, had follow-up sessions, and were offered coaching and support, teachers were twice as likely to take the knowledge learned in the professional development training and apply the information to their own teaching and learning practices (Carswell, 2020). Teachers who participated in professional development focused on how to provide SDI appropriately were able to return to the classroom and create learning environments that specifically met student needs (Carswell, 2020). In turn, these educators were able to take the progress attained by these students and monitor their mastery of goals set forth by the IEPs written for each student. Teachers were then able to reflect on the progress monitoring data and revise curriculum, plans, goals, or assessments based on student responses to their SDI (Carswell, 2020).

Phenomenology correlates with how adults learn and how their own personal learning impacts their teaching pedagogy and instructional practices (L. S. Jackson, 2021). Educators spend a great deal of their time in professional development training and workshops; therefore, it is imperative that teachers understand the key components of their own learning experiences so the information provided in the sessions can be learned and applied in their classrooms to successfully intervene with what students need. Teachers know that professional development is essential to the continuation of their growth and development, but how the sessions are presented, supported, and followed up with makes all the difference in the effectiveness or implementation of information learned (L.S. Jackson, 2021). It is also imperative that those leading the professional development training understand and apply components of phenomenology to effectively utilize these methodologies in their training. This will increase the likelihood that participants will learn and retain the information presented and more importantly will

implement it in classroom practice (L.S. Jackson, 2021).

Research and studies have been conducted to allow teachers to express their ideas and opinions related to the effectiveness of professional development as well as how these trainings can be presented that will appeal to adults and their own learning preferences. Teachers are providing input, suggestions, and ideas related to how to improve professional development so it resonates more with the adult learner to then help impact the students in the classroom (L. S. Jackson, 2021). With more effective and applicable professional development as well as more positive perceptions from teacher perspectives, students could be more successful. This would also allow teachers to be more effective in closing student learning deficits, making adequate progress towards mastering IEP goals, and increasing the likelihood of exiting students from the exceptional children's program.

### **Professional Development**

Educators are required to attend professional development opportunities through the tenure of their career while earning continuing education credits to keep their teaching license current (Neubauer et al., 2019); therefore, it is imperative that these opportunities provide an experience that allows the educator to comprehend the presented information in hopes of implementing the concept as it may apply to their teaching practice (Neubauer et al., 2019). For effective and practical learning to occur during a professional development session, the theoretical framework of phenomenology impacts this experience (Williams, 2021).

Phenomenology is pivotal for educators who are participants in professional development. These participants are relying on real-life perspectives and perceptions to

assist in their learning and understanding of information being presented (Williams, 2021). They are drawing on their previous knowledge of topics and applying how they learn to the subject matter at hand. Therefore, the correlation between phenomenology and professional development is paramount in truly evaluating and understanding the effectiveness of professional development (Neubauer et al., 2019).

One additional element that is crucial in bridging the performance gap for students with a reading deficit is the importance of professional development. This is in addition to the history and extensive research linked to serving students with disabilities (L. S. Jackson, 2021). Administrators, teachers, and various stakeholders are invested in the teaching and learning of students who demonstrate deficits but need explicit and direct instruction and support in ensuring their practices are effective. Professional development is an integral part of this process (Wright, 2020).

Professional development is lifelong learning that influences teacher practices, beliefs, and knowledge (Whitworth & Chiu, 2015). For teachers, professional development is seen as an obligation as well as an opportunity. It serves as a vehicle for change as well as reinforcement and improvement of current practices (Patton et al., 2015). School administrators must offer teachers professional development that is relevant to their practices and encourages change, not just the acquisition of knowledge or abilities (Patton et al., 2015). Additionally, professional development is most effective when new knowledge is modified in light of the experiences of the instructors who will be receiving it (Popova et al., 2018).

Effective professional development opportunities for educators are those that are in line with school and district priorities and contain content geared toward having an

impact in the classroom, according to a meta-analysis (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). They are distinguished by adult learning forms that include interactive exercises, introspection and research, and group problem-solving in a supportive learning atmosphere. Collaboration, whether it be in one-on-one, small group, or staff-wide settings, is crucial in boosting the possibility that the professional development content will be incorporated into the curriculum. The utilization of modeling via video and/or live demonstration, backed by curricular materials and sample lesson plans, is similarly linked to effective professional development. Support from those who are experts in the subject matter in the form of in-person coaching, individual coaching sessions, remote coaching, and written feedback is most beneficial to ensure effective implementation in the classroom. Last but not least, good professional development includes several opportunities for each topic to be learned, practiced, and given feedback (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

Additionally, research suggests that advances in student accomplishment are associated with effective and ongoing professional development for teachers. Despite the fact that many researchers and organizations come to the same conclusion, determining the causal relationship between professional development and student accomplishment may be challenging, if not impossible (Patton et al., 2015). In-depth professional development that incorporates knowledge application to lesson preparation and instruction for teachers is most likely to have an impact on instructors' practices and, in turn, improve student achievement. In contrast to the implications of professional development's impact on student learning, research indicates that it is too frequently planned and implemented based on new teaching techniques or other concepts. In

actuality, very few studies go beyond self-reports of beneficial effects (Patton et al., 2015).

Through a variety of activities and programs, traditional professional development programs aim to better prepare teachers for their responsibilities (Best, 2022). These events frequently occur after school, on a weekday without students, over the weekend, or at a conference that is held at the educator's school or an alternate location. These initiatives often involve hiring a content expert to lead training sessions with the personnel in an effort to enhance their practices. These largely consist of lecture-style activities with, at best, minimal participant interaction and engagement. Teachers frequently offer criticism about this type of professional development, feeling that it offers little to no individualization based on the unique needs of the participants, no modeling of what is being taught, and no follow-up after the professional development. Teachers claim that this type of professional development has little, if any, beneficial influence on their instruction (Best, 2022). Despite teachers' discontent with this style of professional development, schools have continued to implement this model (Best, 2022).

Perceptions and perspectives related to professional development vary among stakeholders. Educators who attend professional development opportunities and are able to comprehend and implement the practices into their current teaching seem to have a more positive view of these types of training. Conversely, if the professional development is not helpful or if the educator does not see the importance of the training in regard to their teaching practice, a more negative connotation is attached to the opportunity (Wright, 2020). Therefore, the role of professional development as well as the perceptions surrounding the training is instrumental in the research and analysis of



effective teaching practices and student learning.

### **Summary**

I reviewed research that showed students who have been identified with a specific learning disability do not close their success disparities quickly enough. Through a comprehensive review of educational history, terminology, legislation changes, SDI methodology, and an examination of how professional development is perceived and utilized based on the educator's prior learning experiences and motivation, research shows that individuals with a learning disability in reading are shown to be making inadequate progress preventing a timely exit of services related to special education. In conjunction with the comprehensive review of educational practices and procedures, numerous studies were conducted validating the effectiveness of SDI in closing the achievement gap for learners with disabilities. Also, utilizing progress monitoring for evaluating effective instruction on the mastery of IEP goals as well as exiting students with a disability in reading from special education was researched and reviewed.

Lastly, the phenomenology theoretical framework was applied to the research study of the effectiveness of professional development related to SDI. Research studies were reviewed regarding how this framework impacted educator perceptions and internalization of the effectiveness of professional development as applied to teachers' teaching and learning. All these components assist in the development and implementation consistent with the research study.

## Chapter 3: Methodology

### Purpose

The purpose of this study was to discover, from teacher and other stakeholder perspectives, the implementation and understanding of SDI through the review of effective professional development, an examination of appropriate SDI tools and strategies, and an analysis of the exit rate of students with a learning disability in the area of reading from special education for a North Carolina Public School system. Some teachers in the study area were effective in bridging the educational gap for students with reading deficits; however, this has not been the situation for many of them.

The problem of the study was the lack of teacher knowledge related to effective implementation of instruction that is designed especially for a student's need as well as the selection and use of appropriate resources. Barriers are attributed to limited access to appropriate professional development, utilization of high-quality instructional practices, and adequate knowledge of how to perform and analyze progress monitoring data and support for students. To understand the components of SDI and the role that teacher knowledge attributes to effective implementation, the manner in which adults learn must be considered. This led to a review of the role of professional development and the theoretical framework of phenomenology. These data were used to investigate how stakeholders see the success of professional development according to strategies for tracking student achievement and particularly prepared training. I gauged how these procedures affect bridging the performance gap for students who struggle with reading. Extensive research surrounding MTSS was also reviewed to gain insight into high-quality instructional practices and appropriate support for students (D. Jackson, 2021).

## **Setting**

The study was conducted in a large district located in the southwestern portion of North Carolina. Located in the Piedmont region, this school district is made up of 56 schools: 30 elementary, 11 middle, 12 high, one alternative, one public separate, and one virtual. There are currently 4,522 students in the district of study classified as students with an exceptionality; 1,837 are identified as learning disabled with 1,763 having reading goals on their IEP. Therefore, approximately 41% of students who qualify for special education are classified under the category of learning disabled, with 96% of these students being identified as having a learning disability specifically in reading. With these percentages, it is imperative to examine how SDI affects the achievement of these students in closing gaps in their reading skills, as well as being able to eventually exit from special education services as a whole.

## **Participants**

To identify the participants for the research study, ECATS was reviewed and data were pulled from the system. ECATS has the ability to provide data concerning the teachers who have exited students in the past 3 years or who are effectively progress monitoring. Effective progress monitoring is demonstrated by how many students (50% of the caseload) are mastering IEP goals. Teachers, administrators, and district staff have the ability to review and monitor how student IEPs are being implemented and monitored, as well as when students are at the point of exiting the program. A review of the ECATS system allowed for certain teachers to be selected for the survey and interview process. Only the participants who met these criteria were utilized in this study. After an analysis of ECATS in regard to the criteria related to this study, 70 to 80

stakeholders were eligible for participation, which included teachers as well as administration and district leaders who worked with these teachers.

### **Research Design**

The research design for this study was an implementation of a mixed methods study design. Informal interviews were conducted, and surveys were completed to establish perspectives on implementing SDI from stakeholders, including administrators, district leaders, and teachers. Information shared by participants was analyzed to determine how professional development guides SDI. In addition, information related to barriers as well as successes was analyzed to determine the way professional development impacted teacher and student learning. Data were analyzed to determine what tools teachers feel are needed to increase reading proficiency for these students.

### **Research Questions**

For this research study, a mixed methods design was the most appropriate approach to yield valid and reliable data. Mixed methods employ a combination of qualitative and quantitative design elements allowing the researcher to gather varied types of data (Carswell, 2020). Quantitative research focuses on the statistical measures associated with data including averages, means, and standard deviations. This allows for a computational approach to analyzing and quantifying data (Şahin & Öztürk, 2019).

Another component of a mixed methods design is a qualitative approach. This involves gathering perspectives and perceptions from research participants concerning a given topic. These data can be analyzed for trends and themes to help identify patterns to explain the qualitative associations to the research study (Creswell, 2007).

With the use of both a survey and interview protocol to gather data and

information, the mixed methods approach aligns with this study. With the data being collected, both quantitative and qualitative designs are needed to collect, analyze, and explain data. Also, this is an effective method to review both statistical measures from the Likert scale numerical values as well as a trend analysis from qualitative data (Şahin & Öztürk, 2019). This mixed methods research design assisted in gathering and processing data to answer the research questions as well as provide additional recommendations for future study and use (Creswell, 2007).

For this mixed methods research design, three main research questions were addressed, researched, and analyzed. These three questions were utilized as interviews were conducted, surveys were completed, and trend analysis was determined.

1. How do teachers of students identified as specific learning disabled perceive the way SDI is being delivered?
2. What elements of the professional development processes do administrators feel are impactful in improving teacher practice?
3. What elements of the professional development processes do district staff feel are impactful in improving teacher practice?

### **Research Design Implementation**

The research design implementation involved multiple data collection measures. These included a survey and interviews utilizing open-ended survey questions of various stakeholders from the district and school levels. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analyzed, and recommendations were made based on trends obtained from the analysis of the data. Qualtrics was utilized to analyze survey metrics and quantitative measures.

### *Data Collection Measures*

To describe the aspects of the study, various instruments were provided to collect both qualitative and quantitative data. These instruments were chosen to gain the most information relating to perspectives of current instructional practices in special education (Creswell, 2007). The purpose of the survey was to gain perceptions of effective professional development that contributes to adequate growth for students with learning disabilities in reading (Şahin & Öztürk, 2019).

Before beginning the research, I wrote an email to the superintendent designee to obtain permission to conduct the study on behalf of the school system (Appendix A). Additionally, the study's purpose was shared in this email. Following approval from the superintendent's office, stakeholders, including administrators, district leaders, and teachers, were informed via email of the details of the study. The Jackson-validated electronic survey was emailed through district email to all identified participants who met the given criteria for participation.

The survey design allowed for the analysis of participant attitudes, perspectives, and behaviors, which allowed me to query precisely about participant impressions of SDI and their professional development techniques. Because of its speedy delivery to participants and efficiency in data collecting, the strategy of employing an online questionnaire was effective. In addition, quantitative data were able to be derived and analyzed due to the statistical nature of a survey allowing for more succinct numerical data and percentages to be reviewed and interpreted.

Interviews were scheduled next with each of the teachers, administrators, and district staff identified as part of the study who agreed to participate. The interview

consisted of open-ended survey questions delivered in an in-person or virtual format. Pseudonyms were used to protect the privacy of the teachers in order to encourage more honest feedback. With my role in the district, interviews were handled in a varied format. Teacher and administrator interviews were conducted in my presence; however, interviews with district staff participation were conducted via proxy as my role in the district involves the supervision of these participants.

### **Survey Instrument**

As part of the research, a four-part data collection system including surveys and interviews was utilized. For the first part of the data collection process, L. S. Jackson (2021) designed and validated a survey pertaining to SDI and the techniques used to train and utilize these methods effectively. Section 1 of the survey contained four demographic questions: (a) school/location, (b) current position, (c) level of education, and (d) years of experience in education.

A 4-point Likert scale survey was employed in Section 2 of the survey data collection instrument to examine participant perceptions of professional development designed to increase their knowledge of SDI, their level of implementation of SDI, and their use of progress monitoring (Appendix B). Participants were given four response options and asked to select the one that was most relevant for them. The following is the rating scale that was used to gauge participant perceptions: strongly disagree, disagree, agree, and strongly agree.

Surveys were shared via district email with all participants of the study in order to collect quantitative data. The deadline for completion was established for 2 weeks (Appendix C). Responses were kept anonymous, and survey responses were held until the

end of the 2-week period before being reviewed. To help increase the number of survey responses, electronic reminders were sent to participants every 3 days reminding them how long they had to complete the survey (Appendix D).

At the end of the survey, a conclusion statement was provided letting the participants know they had completed the survey. The statement addressed the opportunity for participants of the survey to be referred to a Google Form to sign up for an interview. For those who selected the option to participate, the form was provided for further involvement. The goal of this project, which was to gain perceptions of instructional methods related to SDI that contribute to adequate growth for students with learning disabilities in reading, was shared with participants. The Jackson survey protocol has valid, reliable, vetted, and comprehensive questions that identify participant perspectives on acquiring and applying professional development, utilization of progress monitoring, and implementation of SDI. Dr. Jackson provided consent to the use of her survey (Appendix E). The Jackson survey also utilized open-ended survey questions. Jackson recommended that these open-ended questions be presented in an interview format to gather more precise and consistent data; therefore, in this study, the open-ended questions were utilized in that manner.

### **Interview Instrument Using Open-Ended Survey Questions**

The data collection's third section included six open-ended survey questions presented in an interview format related to evidence-based strategies for students with disabilities, with primary focuses on SDI, instructional strategies, progress monitoring, and professional development. These open-ended survey questions allowed the interviewee to provide perceptions and perspectives related to how instruction is



delivered in classrooms, the adequacy of the training provided, the confidence in the implementation of the training acquired, and ongoing modifications or adjustments that may need to be provided to ensure appropriate teaching and learning is taking place. Each component of evidence-based practices was defined and explained to the participants (Appendix F).

After completion of the survey, participants were asked if they would be willing to be interviewed using a set of open-ended survey questions. If the participant agreed, the following questions were used and provided to the stakeholders participating in this next step (Appendix G).

Open-Ended Survey Question 1: What are you currently doing to provide specially designed instruction to students with disabilities in the general education classroom?

Open-Ended Survey Question 2: What roadblocks do you encounter when you provide specially designed instruction to students with disabilities in the general education classroom?

Open-Ended Survey Question 3: How can the school/district assist you in providing specially designed instruction to students with disabilities in the general education classroom?

Open-Ended Survey Question 4: How would you describe your district's plan for professional development?

Open-Ended Survey Question 5: How do professional development activities affect your practice in the classroom?

Open-Ended Survey Question 6: What modifications would you recommend in

regards to the professional development plan and/or process that would improve your practice? (Appendix H)

Individual in-person interviews utilizing the open-ended questions with each of the stakeholders who agreed to participate were scheduled and held at the Department of Exceptional Children, and a virtual option was also offered. This location was selected since meetings and professional development for teachers and staff who work with Exceptional Children are held at this familiar site. Also, this site is located in a central location that can be accessed within 20 minutes from schools in the district. Prior to beginning the interview process, participants were given a consent to participate form to sign explicitly agreeing to participate in the interview process and agreeing to the process as a whole. For district staff, interviews were conducted via a proxy. All sessions were voice-recorded and transcribed through an online transcription service for accuracy and clarity. Upon obtaining the transcriptions, emerging themes and trends surrounding effective implementation of SDI were analyzed. The information gathered was examined, evaluated, coded, and organized into topics. These topics were then referenced and interpreted when examining data, providing information as well as making recommendations related to the research questions. It should be noted that the original Jackson survey contained seven questions; however, for the purpose of this study, one question was eliminated from the open-ended survey questions.

Upon completion of both the survey and interview processes, statistical measures and trends were analyzed, and correlations were established in relation to adult learning theory and phenomenology as well as the established research questions. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected and interpreted as part of the research

methodology to provide a conclusive representation of the information obtained.

Recommendations from these data were made.

### **Analysis of Data and Interpretation of Findings**

The Jackson survey was given to stakeholders, including administrators, district leaders, and teachers. Surveys were given to assess their perceptions of how the successful mastery of IEP goals correlates to the direct use of SDI, effective implementation of progress monitoring, and data-based instructional decisions. I was also interested in comparing how years of experience impacted participant perceptions of professional development related to the implementation of SDI. Participants were divided into three groups based on years of experience. Group 1 included participants with 5 to 15 years of experience, Group 2 included participants with 16 to 24 years of experience, and Group 3 included participants with 25+ years of experience. A MANOVA was conducted with a teacher group, an administrator group, and a district staff group in terms of teacher lens, administrator lens, and district staff lens. MANOVA was conducted using Questions 8, 9, 11, and 14 to compare how participants with varying years of experience responded differently to the questions. All participants completed Questions 8, 9, 11, and 14, and these questions are closely related. I was also interested in comparing perceptions of professional development between teachers and non-teachers. As a result, a series of independent sample *t* tests were conducted. Data were analyzed to look for established trends in these selected areas related to outcomes for students with learning disabilities in reading.

In addition to groups related to years of experience, stakeholders were divided into two categories based on their role within the district. Group 1 was composed of

classroom teachers. Group 2 was composed of non-teachers including administrators and district-level staff. Descriptive statistics were utilized to analyze these stakeholders' perceptions of professional development as related to SDI.

At the school level, administrators were surveyed to gain an overarching perspective of the effectiveness of professional development offered to teachers as well as the achievement outcomes of students with a learning disability in reading as measured through effective data collection and progress monitoring. In addition, teachers who have exited students from special education in the past 3 years due to effective instructional practices that have closed the achievement gap for students with a learning disability in reading were interviewed if they chose to participate. This information was used to establish trends related to pedagogical practices, data collection, and analysis that led to closing the educational gap resulting in exiting special education services.

A correlation among the research questions, survey questions, and open-ended survey questions was collected, reviewed, and analyzed. Findings and statistical measurements were interpreted, trends were identified, and data were analyzed in an effort to answer the research questions using both qualitative and quantitative data and measurements. Table 4 shows the alignment of all three sets of questions used including research, survey, and interviews. The integral weaving of these sets of questions helped create data and findings that led to recommendations for improving learning and achievement in students with reading disabilities.

**Table 4***Alignment Among Research, Survey, and Interview Questions*

Research question	Survey question(s)	Open-ended survey question(s)
1: How do teachers of students identified as specific learning disabled perceive the way SDI is being delivered?	5, 6, 7, 10	1: What are you currently doing to provide specially designed instruction to students with disabilities in the general education classroom?  3: How can the school/district assist you in providing specially designed instruction to students with disabilities in the general education classroom?  6: What modifications would you recommend in regards to the professional development plan and/or process that would improve your practice?
2: What elements of the professional development processes do administrators feel are impactful in improving teacher practice?	6, 8, 9, 11	2: What roadblocks do you encounter when you provide specially designed instruction to students with disabilities in the general education classroom?  3: How can the school/district assist you in providing specially designed instruction to students with disabilities in the general education classroom?  5: How do professional development activities affect your practice in your classrooms?
3: What elements of the professional development processes do district staff feel are impactful in improving teacher practice?	11,12, 13, 14	3: How can the school/district assist you in providing specially designed instruction to students with disabilities in the general education classroom?  4: How would you describe your district's plan for professional development?

As noted in Table 4, each research question correlates with either one or more survey items, excluding Questions 1-4 since these were demographic questions, as well

as an interview question. This allowed for each research question to have both a quantitative and qualitative component that was included in data analysis and trend setting; therefore, both statistical and perceptual data were available for review.

### **Summary**

As part of this study, an analysis of the findings was provided including recommendations for the overall improvement of effective implementation of SDI through correlations among progress monitoring data collection and implementation, stakeholder perspectives on effective instructional tools and strategies, and stakeholder perceptions of progress monitoring training and implementation as well as the exit rate of students with a reading disability from special education. This detailed analysis focused on the responses and statistical data or trends associated with the given research questions obtained through the research study. Specifically, descriptive statistics were provided for Survey Questions 6-14. I was interested in comparing how years of experience would impact participant perceptions of professional development related to SDI. A MANOVA was conducted in terms of teacher lens, administrator lens, and district staff lens.

Finally, I was also interested in comparing whether or not the perceptions of professional development related to SDI were different among teachers and non-teachers, which includes district staff and administrators. As a result, an independent sample *t* test was conducted. These findings are discussed in Chapter 4 comparing the perceptions of the two groups by analyzing trends and patterns.

In Chapter 5, a combination of the literature and research reviewed from Chapter 2 along with the data gathered and analyzed from the interpretation of information obtained through the mixed methods research design in Chapter 4 are combined to do

further analysis. Both qualitative and quantitative evaluative data are presented in response to each research question based on trends discovered through surveys and interviews. Implications for practice including recommendations for further research using these data sources are discussed.

## Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this phenomenology study was to examine the perceptions of teachers and other stakeholders regarding professional development related to SDI as it pertains to the exit rate of students with a learning disability in reading. Chapter 4 explores the perceptions of teachers and other stakeholders and the results of the survey and interviews. This research study presents findings related to the guiding questions of the study through an analysis of data collected from teachers, district leaders, and administrators.

1. How do teachers of students identified as specific learning disabled perceive the way SDI is being delivered?
2. What elements of the professional development processes do administrators feel are impactful in improving teacher practice?
3. What elements of the professional development processes do district staff feel are impactful in improving teacher practice?

The district of study provides a free public education following all rules and regulations stated in the district board policies. To adhere to the district's policies, a request was made to the district's assistant superintendent asking permission to invite special education teachers, administrators, and district leaders to participate in the electronic survey as well as to participate in an interview. Participants accessed the survey through a Qualtrics link that was provided within the email explaining the purpose of the study and inviting participation.

### Demographic Information

Based on the results of the survey, demographic information of the participants



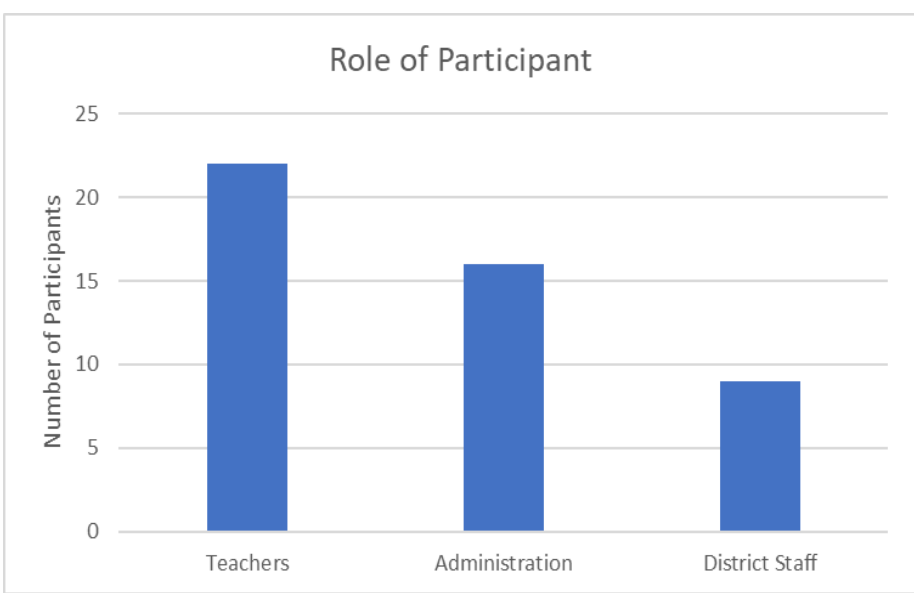
was gathered in this study. The focus population for the study was special education teachers who have exited students in the past 3 years or who were effectively progress monitoring. In addition, the administrators and district leaders who work with these teachers were also included.

Effective progress monitoring is determined by how many students (50% of the caseload) were mastering IEP goals. The survey was sent to 100 employees of a large school district in the Piedmont region of North Carolina. After the invitation, 47 stakeholders responded with an overall return rate of 47%. There was a total of 47 completed responses. The demographic questions were included to gain insight into the composition of the participants.

As shown in Figure 3, of the 47 participants, 22 were special education teachers, 16 were administrators, and nine were district support staff. Sixty-nine percent of the participants hold a master's degree or higher. As seen in Figure 4, 13 participants had 5 to 15 years of experience. Twenty-one participants had 16 to 24 years of experience, and 13 participants had 25 or more years of experience.

**Figure 3**

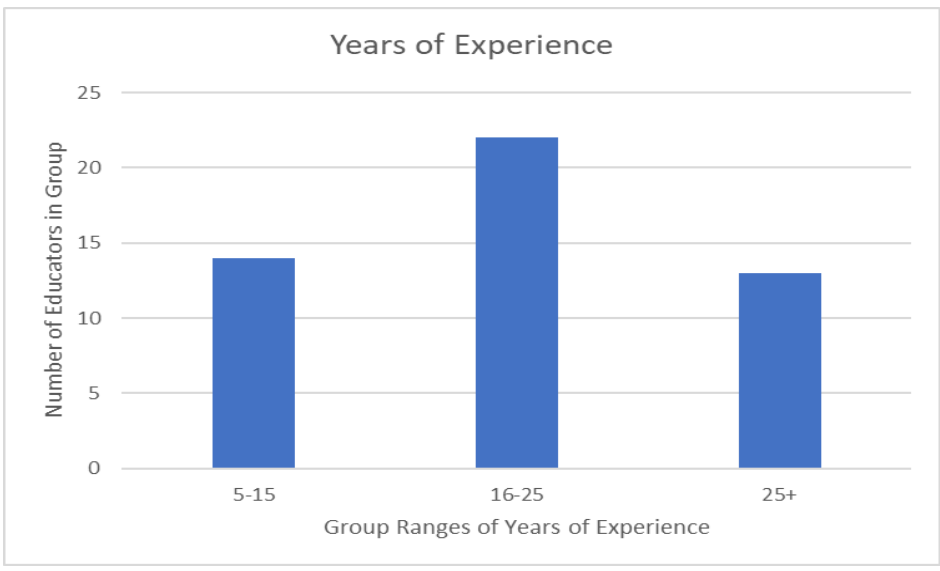
*Role of Participant*



The sample includes 22 teachers, 16 administrators, and nine district support staff.

**Figure 4**

*Years of Experience*



The sample includes 13 participants with 5 to 15 years of experience, 21 participants with 16 to 24 years of experience, and 13 participants with 25+ years of experience.

## **Data Analysis**

After completing the Demographic Survey Questions 1-4, participants answered ten 4-point Likert scale questions. Question 15 provided participants with the option to participate in an interview. The following were analyses of the three research questions for this study using descriptive statistics. The data analysis was quantitatively summarized to identify trends and patterns based on responses from information provided by participants through the survey.

This mixed methods study also includes a qualitative component. This data analysis reviews the perceptions of SDI and professional development through the lens of teachers, administrators, and district office staff. The researcher identified participants who agreed to a voluntary structured interview. Fourteen participants of the 47 who completed the survey agreed to participate in a structured interview via a Google virtual session. Of the 14 participants, six were teachers, three were administrators, and five were district office staff. The data analysis and trends are identified by participant responses and summaries that are aligned with each research question.

Table 5 shows teacher perceptions of professional development as it relates to SDI.

**Table 5***Teacher Perceptions of Professional Development Related to SDI Survey Responses*

Question #- Keywords	N	Sd	Mean	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
5-Relevant professional development	22	.56	3.14	0%	9.52%	66.67%	23.81%
6-Multiple professional development opportunities	22	.75	2.90	0%	33.33%	42.86%	23.81%
7-Enhances teacher knowledge	22	.75	3.10	0%	23.81%	42.86%	33.33%
10-Feel prepared to support students	22	.75	2.86	0%	42.86%	38.10%	19.05%

Table 5 portrays teacher perceptions of whether the professional development offered is applicable to teacher needs, offers a variety of opportunities, enhances the knowledge and understanding of teachers, and allows the teacher to return to the classroom setting prepared to support students. As seen in table 5, between 57.15% and 90.48% of the participants either agreed or strongly agreed that professional development provided to teachers to learn strategies to teach students with a learning disability in reading is effective. There were 42.86% who disagreed that the professional development allowed teachers to feel prepared to support student learning.

Table 6 shows the trend data of teacher perceptions of professional development as it related to SDI.

**Table 6***Trend Analysis of Teacher Perceptions of Professional Development as Related to SDI*

Interview question	Trends
1. What are you currently doing to provide specially designed instruction to students with disabilities in the general education classroom?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Direct instruction programs</li> <li>• Pulling small groups</li> <li>• Utilizing manipulatives</li> <li>• Computer programs (i.e., iReady, iSpire, IXL)</li> </ul>
3. How can the school/district assist you in providing specially designed instruction to students with disabilities in the general education classroom?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Professional development</li> <li>• Face-to-face training</li> <li>• Virtual training</li> <li>• Modules to preview or review</li> <li>• Coaching</li> <li>• Modeling</li> <li>• Provide more time to focus and attend professional development opportunities related to EC topics</li> </ul>
6. What modifications would you recommend in regard to the professional development plan and/or process that would improve your practice?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Survey asking participants what professional development is needed</li> <li>• Stipends for attending professional development</li> <li>• Having lead teachers in the district present professional development sessions</li> <li>• Having more time to participate in professional development sessions</li> <li>• Coaching with a mentor who understands the EC role</li> <li>• Making sure professional development is applicable to the EC teacher</li> </ul>

Responses varied when teachers were asked how SDI is delivered in the classroom. Many teachers rely heavily on computer programs to deliver SDI for reading. Participant one commented, “Without the computer, I am not really sure how I could get instruction to all my students.” Even though they recognize that this is not SDI in its true form, they shared that time, number of students, and complex schedules hinder the ability

to appropriately group and put students into small groups. This negatively impacts the teacher's ability to intentionally work with students and their goals in a direct manner. Many teachers felt as if they did not always provide the instruction a student really needed, causing them to feel less effective and unsuccessful as a teacher. Participant 3 noted, "I would love to do more small groups so I could really have a more hands-on approach to my students' learning. It is just not always possible."

Specific quotes from participants' real-world experiences depict true feelings of how SDI looks and feels in the classroom. For example, Participant 1 stated, "I have to use computer programs since I have such large groups. The program provides data I can use to see where my students are and is on their level." Participant 2 explained, "I feel like students are coming and going all day and I don't have a lot of time with any of them. I use centers and small groups to help with their SDI for reading." Participant 3 noted, "I love doing small groups where I can interact with my students, use manipulatives, and really determine what they can and cannot do."

When asked how the school system or district could assist teachers in providing SDI in their classrooms, many teachers responded with a need for more professional development or time to focus on their practice. Many teachers feel as if professional development is a useful and worthwhile experience but find it very difficult to fit into their schedules with all the other responsibilities related to the job. Participant 2 noted, "I would love to spend more time perfecting my practice, but who has the time? I would also like some incentives for spending my time to do so." The teachers find the virtual option more easily accessible but will honestly admit that face-to-face requires more focus and concentration and yields more effective results in the classroom. Participant 5

stated,

It is much easier to log on to a session than have to take the time, leave campus, drive, and then get settled in a new place, but I feel like I get more out of it when I am face-to-face.

Teachers did note that having a coach or support person in place to model lessons, brainstorm ideas, or problem-solve with allows for revisions to be made and more effective instruction to occur. Participant 6 explained, “I know I am going to do things better and with fidelity if I know someone is holding me accountable.”

Many participants provided direct examples of how the district could help support SDI in the schools and classrooms. Participant 3 stated, “It is time to go back to face-to-face work sessions. Virtual is good as a refresher and for review but we need to collaborate and work together.” Participant 4 noted, “Coaching is helpful since I have someone I can call or talk to when I need help or need to process how to deliver the SDI.” Participant 5 suggested, “Professional development is essential for learning and growth but only if it is pertinent to what we need to know as EC teachers.” Participant 6 commented, “I would like a hub or a platform where trainings are housed that we could review or watch to help as we deliver SDI for various subjects and behaviors.”

When asked about modifications or adjustments that could be made to the professional development district plan, teachers felt that professional development should be applicable to their needs and practice. Many times, the entire staff is pulled in for a professional development training, but the training truly does not relate or apply to the special education teacher. Teachers noted that if a survey could be created and distributed for feedback on what type of professional development may be needed or preferred,

teachers would have more buy-in. Teachers also noted that many professional development opportunities are delivered after school or during a teacher's after-school time; therefore, a stipend or incentive would be a way to ensure teacher attendance and participation.

Participant 1 shared, "I do not mind going to any professional development that will help me or my students as long as it is pertinent and not a waste of time." Participant 3 noted, "It would be nice to be asked what type of professional development we might want or need, like in a survey, and not just be given ones to go to. Having a say would be nice." Participant 6 explained, "I would like to see more lead teachers and district staff who are actually in the classrooms doing the strategies to come and deliver the professional development. I would learn more from them."

Table 7 shows administrator perceptions of professional development as it relates to SDI.



**Table 7***Administrator Perceptions of Professional Development Related to SDI Survey Responses*

Question #- Keywords	N	SD	Mean	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
6-Multiple professional development opportunities	16	.75	2.90	0%	33.33%	42.86%	23.81%
8-SDI professional development	16	.78	2.88	6.25%	18.75%	56.35%	18.75%
9-Extended support	16	.72	2.53	13.33%	20%	66.67%	0%
11-Self-efficacy	16	.50	2.87	6.67%	0%	93.33%	0%

Table 7 addresses administrator perceptions of professional development related to students with a disability in reading. Of all administrators surveyed, 42% strongly agreed and 23% agreed that the district offers multiple professional development opportunities. Administrators also felt like professional development related to SDI was beneficial as long as extended support was provided. One area of strength that came from the analysis was the increase in self-efficacy. Over 93% of administrators felt their teachers experienced increased self-efficacy due to having effective professional development that led to the successful implementation of teaching and learning strategies.

Table 8 shows the structured interview trend data of administrator perceptions of professional development as it relates to SDI.

**Table 8***Trend Analysis of Administrator Perceptions of Professional Development as Related to SDI*

Interview question	Trends
2. What roadblocks do you encounter when you provide specially designed instruction to students with disabilities in the general education classroom?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Scheduling</li> <li>• Staffing</li> <li>• Number of students</li> <li>• Variety of disabilities</li> </ul>
3. How can the school/district assist you in providing specially designed instruction to students with disabilities in the general education classroom?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure all teachers have proper training in programs or materials</li> <li>• Increase allotments for teachers, teacher assistants, or support staff</li> </ul>
5. How do professional development activities affect your practice in your classrooms?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers feel more confident</li> <li>• Teachers feel readier to try something new or different</li> <li>• Improved self-esteem for students and teachers</li> <li>• Improved scores and growth on assessments based on strategies learned during professional development</li> </ul>

During the interview, teachers shared what roadblocks they felt they encountered when providing SDI. Scheduling and staff were significant trends and patterns identified in all interviews. Similarly, administrators shared that they are required to do more with fewer teachers, less time, and more students. Participant 7 stated, “I schedule with my EC teachers every summer and by fall it has all changed and not for the better.” Some administrators stated that students are not always getting their needs met or services rendered due to inexperienced staff, limited time for services, and increased class sizes. Participant 9 commented, “I know we are following their IEPs, but sometimes it just feels like we are barely making ends meet.”

Administrators provided a different viewpoint on how SDI and professional development affected their schools and teachers. Participant 7 explained, “Scheduling,

staffing, and increased student enrollment of students with disabilities is a never-ending battle.” Participant 8 noted, “When I think I have a schedule, I have to change it due to a teacher leaving or a group of students needing a different service. I feel like it is a merry-go-round at times.” Participant 9 commented, “If I had a full staff with experienced teachers and support, I could make great things happen.”

When asked how the district could assist in providing SDI for students, administrators noted that professional development and appropriate training were necessary for both new and veteran teachers. Participant 8 stated, “Both my veteran and EC teachers need training and refresher professional development. Times have changed and everyone needs a restart.” In addition, an increase in allotments for staffing so that more support could be provided to both teachers and students directly was a way the district could assist with these needs.

Administrators understand that SDI is vital for students with disabilities; however, the district could assist the administrators in various ways to make it more effective. Participant 7 stated, “I believe all teachers need training in SDI. Times have changed, and students have changed so new and experienced teachers alike need to have up-to-date training to be effective.” Participant 8 explained, “The more staff I have the more support I can put in place. SDI can be delivered with fidelity and students can receive all they need and more when we have people to help them.”

Lastly, when asked how professional development impacts the activities and practices occurring in their classrooms, there were mixed reviews. Administrators shared that they felt that teachers feel more prepared and confident in their teaching and pedagogy when they have had professional development that is applicable and relevant to

what as well as who they are teaching, although when teachers have to attend professional development that is not applicable, a negative connotation then becomes associated with having to go to workshops or trainings. However, administrators did note that teachers who feel confident and prepared are able to implement what has been learned in the professional development trainings more successfully and effectively.

Administrators agreed that when teachers feel prepared and have knowledge, materials, and resources through professional development opportunities, they witness classrooms that have teachers delivering SDI with fidelity. Participant 8 noted, “When my teacher feels prepared and is properly trained, her self-esteem is higher and her confidence is improved. She feels she can face any challenge and make growth.”

Participant 9 commented, “Student achievement and growth are directly related to how prepared and confident a teacher feels in working with students. Closing gaps using SDI is imperative for EC students to excel.”

Table 9 shows the perceptions of professional development related to SDI from the district office staff.

**Table 9***District Office Staff Perceptions of Professional Development Related to SDI Survey Responses*

Question #- keywords	N	SD	Mean	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
11-Self-efficacy	9	.69	3.40	0%	0%	60%	40%
12-Model/practice	9	.49	3.60	0%	0%	40%	60%
13-Confident implementation	9	.40	3.20	0%	0%	80%	20%
14-Confident skills	9	.40	3.20	2.27%	0%	80%	20%

Table 9 examines the district office perceptions of professional development related to SDI. Between 40% and 80% of district office staff invariably agreed that the professional development offered helps to increase teacher self-efficacy and is more effective if modeling and practicing are incorporated during and after the professional development session. Also, over 80% of district office staff agreed that the professional development provided created teachers who felt confident in implementing learned strategies and newly acquired skills.

Table 10 shows the structured interview trend data of district office staff perceptions of professional development related to SDI.

**Table 10**

*Trend Analysis of District Office Staff Perceptions of Professional Development Related to SDI*

Interview question	Trends
3. How can the school/district assist you in providing specially designed instruction to students with disabilities in the general education classroom?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Having assigned days and times for professional development with specific focus</li> <li>● Providing models for teachers on how specially designed instruction should be delivered</li> <li>● Coaching and supporting schools that are fully staffed as well as those that have vacancies</li> <li>● Provide incentives for staff to attend professional development</li> </ul>
4. How would you describe your district's plan for professional development?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● District driven and not always pertinent to Exceptional Children Teachers</li> <li>● Heavy focus on virtual with a need for more face-to-face sessions</li> <li>● Seems more for new teachers and veteran teachers are often less supported</li> <li>● Short-lived due to many initiatives not being seen through full implementation</li> </ul>

When asked how the school system can assist in providing SDI, the district staff shared that assigned times and topics for professional development related to SDI strategies and implementation should be based on teacher need and input. Participant 10 stated, "Teachers tend to buy into training that means something to them and is something they can use." The district staff believes that modeling, coaching, and providing incentives would also increase participation, motivation, and implementation of topics and skills used in the professional development sessions. District office staff have been trained and are currently implementing coaching skills and techniques they are

finding useful in helping teachers put professional development into practice. Participant 10 noted, “Coaching and follow-through are imperative if we are going to see good practices put in place and student growth.”

District office staff responses were similar to the responses of both administrators and teachers. Participant 10 commented, “I would love to spend more time with teachers so we can work on specific skills like specially designed instruction and other areas they may need help in.” Participant 11 explained, “Our teachers need to go back to the basics of EC and that requires coaching, modeling, and face-to-face training. We need to be reminded of what SDI is and how it needs to be delivered.” Participant 12 noted,

We need to remember our schools that have full staffs and continue to support their efforts while still trying to help schools with vacancies. Even some of our veteran teachers need help delivering SDI to students with various disabilities in different areas.

When asked to describe the district’s plan for professional development, many participants stated that a return to face-to-face sessions is vital for the proper implementation and facilitation of these trainings. Participant 11 stated, “When I am doing PD, I can tell a big difference in others’ participation on the computer versus when they are in front of me. I feel as if I lose them in the virtual world.” District staff also expressed that veteran teachers report to them that they would like additional training, as they often feel they are excluded from training and learning because of a focus on new teacher growth and development. Participant 13 noted, “It is amazing the number of veteran teachers who have reached out for training. They have stated that COVID-19 has made them forget the basics.” Also, district staff would like to see new initiatives actually

be seen through full implementation to truly assess the effectiveness of the training and not be a short-lived experience due to lack of follow-through or feedback. Participant 14 mentioned, “I want to see PD followed through and that means going out into the schools and helping.”

District office staff agreed with teachers and administrators on some aspects of the district’s professional development plan. Participant 13 commented,

It is hard to ask teachers to come to trainings after a long day of work or to work through modules online. Providing incentives like stipends or trade time would go a long way in motivating teachers to continue to grow in their field.

Participant 14 suggested,

We need to see some of our initiatives, learned through professional development, through to completion and take the time needed to gather data, make decisions, and revise as needed. Sometimes we move on to the next thing before we know if what we are doing even works.

In conclusion, special education teachers, administrators, and district office staff shared many of the same trends and patterns in their responses to the questions presented in the interviews. From all three perspectives, face-to-face professional development is needed, staffing and vacancies are a concern in the schools, and professional development needs to be relevant and applicable to the teachers and their practice.

Another common theme indicated that professional development was a powerful and needed tool for teachers in order to work successfully and efficiently with students with disabilities but only if feedback and coaching are paired with the experience. It is evident that teachers, administrators, and district office staff perceive professional development,



as it relates to SDI, as effective when working on direct reading goals for students with disabilities.

To further explore teacher, administrator, and district staff perceptions of professional development as it is related to SDI, a MANOVA was conducted. Additionally, compared to years of experience, a MANOVA was conducted in terms of teacher, administrator, and district staff. Table 11 shows that the MANOVA used Questions 8, 9, 11, and 14 to determine if participants with varying years of experience responded differently to the questions. All participants completed Questions 8, 9, 11, and 14, and these questions are closely related.

**Table 11***MANOVA Results Comparing Years of Experience to Role of Participant*

<b>MANOVA</b>						
Cases	df	Approx. F	Trace <sub>Pillai</sub>	Num df	Den df	p
(Intercept)	1	236.600	0.970	5	37.000	< .001
Years of experience	2	0.411	0.103	10	76.000	0.937
Residuals	41					
<b>ANOVA</b>						
Variables	Cases	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	p
Q8	(Intercept)	426.568	1	426.568	952.413	< .001
	Years of experience	0.069	2	0.034	0.077	0.926
	Residuals	18.363	41	0.448		
Q9	(Intercept)	311.114	1	311.114	586.191	< .001
	Years of experience	0.126	2	0.063	0.119	0.888
	Residuals	21.760	41	0.531		
Q11	(Intercept)	390.023	1	390.023	1070.821	< .001
	Years of experience	0.044	2	0.022	0.060	0.942
	Residuals	14.933	41	0.364		
Q14	(Intercept)	414.205	1	414.205	924.808	< .001
	Years of experience	0.432	2	0.216	0.483	0.621
	Residuals	18.363	41	0.448		
<b>Assumption checks</b>						
<b>Box's M-test for Homogeneity of Covariance Matrices</b>						
$\chi^2$	df	P				
34.052	30	0.279				

Based on MANOVA results, the *p* values for all of the ANOVA were greater than .05, which indicates that there were no significant mean differences among the three groups for all included questions.

To determine whether the perceptions of professional development related to SDI were different among teachers and non-teachers, which includes district staff and administrators, descriptive statistics were utilized and an independent sample  $t$  test was conducted as shown in Table 12. Participants were divided into two groups. Group 1 included teachers, while Group 2 was comprised of non-teachers, including administrators and district staff. Participants answered Questions 6-14; therefore, these questions were included in the  $t$  test.

**Table 12**

*Independent Samples  $t$  Test Related to Perceptions Between Teachers and Non-Teachers*

	t	df	p
Q6	-0.624	44	0.536
Q7	-0.665	44	0.510
Q8	0.852	44	0.399
Q9	0.000	43	1.000
Q10	-0.739	43	0.464
Q11	0.033	43	0.974
Q12	0.550	41	0.585
Q13	0.021	42	0.983
Q14	1.113	42	0.272

**Table 13***Descriptive Statistics for Survey Questions 6-14*

	Group	N	Mean	SD	SE	Coefficient of variation
Q6	1	24	2.958	0.751	0.153	0.254
	2	22	3.091	0.684	0.146	0.221
Q7	1	24	3.083	0.717	0.146	0.233
	2	22	3.227	0.752	0.160	0.233
Q8	1	24	3.167	0.565	0.115	0.178
	2	22	3.000	0.756	0.161	0.252
Q9	1	24	2.667	0.702	0.143	0.263
	2	21	2.667	0.730	0.159	0.274
Q10	1	24	2.708	0.751	0.153	0.277
	2	21	2.857	0.573	0.125	0.201
Q11	1	24	2.958	0.690	0.141	0.233
	2	21	2.952	0.498	0.109	0.169
Q12	1	23	3.174	0.778	0.162	0.245
	2	20	3.050	0.686	0.153	0.225
Q13	1	23	2.957	0.562	0.117	0.190
	2	21	2.952	0.740	0.161	0.251
Q14	1	23	3.174	0.650	0.136	0.205
	2	21	2.952	0.669	0.146	0.227

Table 13 displays the descriptive statistics from Questions 6-14 based on an independent samples *t* test as shown in Table 12 between teachers and district staff including administrators. There were no statistically significant differences in terms of perceptions of professional development related to SDI. Taking Question 6 as an

example, the average score for the teacher group was 2.95 and for the district staff including the administrator group, their average score was 3.09. Even though it was slightly higher than the teacher group, the difference was not statistically significant.

### **Summary**

In conclusion, Chapter 4 provided a detailed analysis with both descriptive quantitative statistics and a review of qualitative trends and patterns. When the age or experience of the participant was reviewed, there was no significant correlation that demonstrated any true relationship between perceptions of professional development pertaining to SDI and the role of the participant or the experience of the participant. Most participants believed that professional development related to SDI that was provided by the district was effective and useful as long as it was appropriate and relevant to the teachers of exceptional children. However, there are roadblocks and barriers to effective implementation of the professional development that hinge on scheduling and vacancies throughout the district being studied. This analysis and data summary will lead to recommendations on how to deliver successful and effective professional development related to SDI within the district of study.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

The primary purpose of this phenomenological study was to gain insight into the perceptions of special education teachers, administrators, and district staff regarding professional development pertaining to SDI in reading from a large school district within the southeast region. A total of 47 participants completed a 14-question survey comprised of demographic information and survey questions based on a 4-point Likert scale. Fourteen participants agreed to be interviewed, and the conversations were recorded and analyzed. The areas of progress monitoring, self-efficacy, and opportunities for growth were key trends discovered from the analysis of the data of participant perceptions. Data were collected and analyzed, and trends and patterns were identified based on these three research questions:

1. How do teachers of students identified as specific learning disabled perceive the way SDI is being delivered?
2. What elements of the professional development processes do administrators feel are impactful in improving teacher practice?
3. What elements of the professional development processes do district staff feel are impactful in improving teacher practice?

Chapter 5 begins with a summary of the main findings of the research. Next, the findings are discussed as they relate to the context of the research. The impact of the findings from the research on future professional development plans is also discussed as are the implications and recommendations for future research related to professional development pertaining to SDI.

The participants of this phenomenology study presented with various

demographic differences. The demographic portion of the survey identified the participant's age, level of experience, role in the district, and educational level. The study recognized each participant's experiences with professional development as it relates to providing SDI for students with disabilities. Specifically, I focused on key components of professional development related to the perceptions of participants regarding the types of professional learning opportunities provided by the district. I also considered the self-efficacy attained by the participants in relation to progress monitoring, as well as participant levels of confidence in implementing concepts learned during professional development.

In Chapter 2, the findings from Best (2022) examined the strengths and barriers that either strengthen or hinder special education teacher perceptions of professional development and alignment with their inclusive practice experiences. The three research questions in this study identified specific themes identified in survey participant responses. Themes and trends were also analyzed from the interviews with participants.

### **Research Question 1: How Do Teachers of Students Identified as Specific Learning Disabled Perceive the Way SDI Is Being Delivered?**

Research indicates that teachers require professional development opportunities that are applicable to their areas of study and expertise (L. S. Jackson, 2021). Based on data collected through the surveys which utilized a 4-point Likert scale, 23.81% strongly agreed and 66.67% agreed that the professional development opportunities offered were specific to the teacher position and area. Participant 1 indicated, "I do not mind going to any professional development that will help me or my students as long as it is pertinent and not a waste of time." Participant 5 said, "Professional development is essential for

learning and growth as long it is pertinent to what we need to know as EC teachers.”

Additionally, 23.81% strongly agreed and 42.86% agreed that the district offers multiple professional development opportunities. Of the teachers surveyed, 33.33% strongly agreed and 24.86% agreed that the professional development offered by the district enhances teacher knowledge. Koellner and Jacobs (2015) indicated that teachers require a specialized skill set to address the instructional needs of students with a specific learning disability. After participating in professional development offered by the district, 19.05% strongly agreed and 38.10% agreed that they feel more prepared to support their students.

Based on information shared by participants, scheduling and large group sizes impact the ability to effectively implement SDI. Teachers feel that they have the self-efficacy to implement appropriate SDI but are often forced to use resources and tools, such as computer-based programs, that are less effective. Additionally, teachers would like coaching specific to the implementation of SDI as well as opportunities to have choices related to the types of professional development offered. According to Carswell (2020), educators must have the knowledge and confidence to implement the learning from professional development; however, almost 43% of teachers surveyed shared that they do not feel prepared to support students with disabilities within the inclusion setting after attending professional development. As Participant 3 noted, “It would be nice to be asked what kind of professional development we might want like in a survey and not just be told what to go to. Having a say would be nice.” Participant 6 explained, “I would like to see more lead teachers and district staff who are in the classes actually doing the strategies to come and deliver the professional development I would learn more from them.” Participant 4 noted, “Coaching is helpful since I have someone I can call or talk to



when I need help or process how I need to deliver the SDI.” Teachers noted that having a coach or support person in place to model, brainstorm, and problem solve is critical. Participant 6 said, “I know I am going to do things better and with fidelity if I know someone is holding me accountable.” Teachers also shared that ongoing access to resources related to SDI for specific content is important. Participant 6 shared, “I would like a hub or platform where trainings are housed that we could review or watch to help as we deliver SDI for various subjects and behaviors.”

**Research Question 2: What Elements of the Professional Development Processes Do Administrators Feel Are Impactful in Improving Teacher Practice?**

Of the administrators surveyed, 23.81% strongly agreed and 42.86% agreed that the district offers multiple professional development opportunities. Additionally, 93% of the administrators agreed that the professional development provided by the district increases teacher self-efficacy with implementing SDI with 18.75% who strongly agreed and 56.35% who agreed that the district professional development related to SDI addresses the instructional, behavioral, and functional needs of special education students. Participant 8 shared, “When my teacher feels prepared and is properly trained her self-esteem is higher and her confidence improved. She feels she can face any challenge and make growth.”

Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) indicated the professional development related to SDI in the areas of academics, behavior, and social-emotional needs enhances teacher practice as well as student learning. To prove this point, 18.75% of administrators strongly agreed and 56.35% agreed that the district provides professional development around SDI to meet the needs of students served in special education classrooms.

Participant 9 commented, “Student achievement and growth are directly related to how prepared and confident a teacher feels when working with students. Closing gaps using SDI is imperative for EC students to excel.” Of the administrators surveyed, 66.67% agreed that professional development offers extended support in the classroom setting. Participant 8 shared, “The more staff I have, the more support I can put in place. SDI can be delivered with fidelity and students can receive all they need and more when we have people to help.” Administrators indicated that with professional development that is applicable and relevant, teachers are more prepared; however, teachers being required to attend professional development that is not applicable leads to pushback from teachers.

Research conducted by Neubauer et al. (2019) suggested that professional development that relates to what teachers need increases their self-efficacy and allows them to implement strategies in an effective and successful manner. In addition, administrators shared that with increased self-efficacy, teachers are equipped to implement what has been learned in the professional development trainings more successfully and effectively. Overall, this results in SDI being effectively delivered in the classroom, which leads to increased student achievement. It was also shared that access to professional development related to SDI is critical for new and veteran teachers as it ultimately impacts student progress.

### **Roadblocks to Effective Implementation**

Administrators shared that scheduling and staff vacancies are barriers to effectively implementing SDI despite the professional development opportunities provided to teachers. Participant 7 commented, “Scheduling staffing and increased student enrollment of students with disabilities is a never-ending battle.” Participant 8

noted, “When I think I have a schedule, I have to change it due to a teacher leaving or a group of students needing a different service. I feel like it is a merry-go-round at times.”

Also, administrators shared that with the significant changes in education over the past few years, increased needs of students, and inexperienced staff, teachers are challenged to meet the needs of students and effectively implement the strategies gained through professional development. Participant 8 stated, “Both my veteran and EC teachers need training and refresher professional development. Times have changed and everyone needs a restart.”

Additionally, large class sizes and reduced allotments have created barriers to providing adequate support for teachers and students. It should also be noted that 20% of administrators indicated that professional development within the district does not offer extended support within the classroom to ensure effective implementation triggering a need to address this issue. Based on Talbert’s (2010) participants who have the opportunity to interact with the material presented during the professional development as well as through follow-up activities and coaching sessions are more equipped to implement new strategies and methodologies gained from the professional development. Furthermore, 33.33% of administrators surveyed shared that they disagreed that the district offers multiple professional development opportunities. Participant 7 stated, “I believe all teachers need training in SDI. Times have changed and students have changed so new and experienced teachers alike need to have new and updated training.” Wright (2020) explained that professional development is needed for effective student growth and achievement by new and veteran teachers alike. Teachers need to have continued professional development to enhance and improve new skills and those previously

learned. Whitworth and Chiu (2015) additionally reported that professional development is lifelong learning that influences teacher practices, beliefs, and knowledge.

**Research Question 3: What Elements of the Professional Development Processes Do District Staff Feel Are Impactful in Improving Teacher Practice?**

According to Best (2022), when professional development is followed with feedback, debriefing, follow-through, and support, the information learned is used with more fidelity and is sustained for longer periods of time. Sixty percent of participants agreed that professional development provided by the district consists of learning, modeling, and practice to increase teacher self-efficacy related to implementing SDI. Participant 10 noted, “Coaching and follow-through are imperative if we are going to see good practices put in place and student growth.” This perception was reiterated during the district staff interviews where it was shared that teacher self-efficacy was positively impacted as a result of effective professional development. Participant 10 stated, “Teachers tend to buy into training that means something to them and is something they can use.” Additionally, 60% of participants strongly agreed that after attending professional development, teachers are confident in implementing skills acquired to support student progress, with almost 80% agreeing that after attending professional development, teachers are confident in implementing the learning immediately. Tuchman et al. (2018) noted that when teachers feel they can relate to professional development, they can then use this learning and prior knowledge, allowing them to be more confident in utilizing the concepts in their own teaching and learning. District staff also indicated that when coaching is utilized, professional development learning is more likely to be implemented effectively for student growth. Participant 14 mentioned, “I want to see PD

followed through and that means going out into the schools and helping.” Additionally, district staff shared that having easy access to resources related to previous professional development would be beneficial for teachers.

### **Roadblocks to Effective Implementation**

District staff expressed that the lack of incentives offered for teachers to pursue professional development after hours or on their own time creates barriers. Participant 13 commented,

It is hard to ask teachers to come to trainings after a long day of work or to work through modules online. Providing incentives like stipends or trade time would go a long way in motivating teachers to grow in a field.

Also, participants shared that the absence of a coaching plan or follow-up sessions coinciding with professional development reduces the likelihood of implementation or sustainability of the learning. In fact, Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) pointed out that support from experts in the form of coaching and feedback is paramount to ensure effective implementation in the classroom and that a good professional development plan includes these opportunities. Additionally, time and scheduling were also identified as roadblocks to effective implementation of the learning from professional development. Participant 10 commented, “I would love to spend more time with teachers so we can work on specific skills like specially designed instruction and other areas they may need help in.” While it is a nominal number, it is worthy to note that 2% of district staff strongly disagreed that after attending professional development, teachers are confident that the skills gained can support students in making adequate progress towards IEP goals. Participant 11 explained, “Our teachers need to go back to the basics of EC and

that requires coaching, modeling, and face-to-face training. We need to be reminded of what SDI is and how it needs to be relieved.”

## Findings From the Research

Table 14 outlines the significant findings of this research and the connections to the literature from Chapter 2.

**Table 14**

*Connections Between Findings and Literature*

Findings	Connection to literature
1. Teachers collectively agreed relevant professional development practice increased self-efficacy and effectiveness of implementation. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teachers felt that the strategies learned through professional development positively impacted instruction.</li> <li>Teachers felt that professional development related to specially designed instruction led to mastery of IEP goals.</li> <li>Teachers felt that ongoing coaching and feedback related to professional development improved their practices.</li> </ol>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Effective instructional strategies (Joseph, 2019)</li> <li>● Specially designed instruction (Roberts et al., n.d.)</li> <li>● Mastery of IEP goals (D. Jackson, 2021)</li> <li>● Coaching leads to increased motivation (L. S. Jackson, 2021)</li> <li>● Feedback improves practice (Carswell, 2020)</li> </ul>
2. Administrators agreed that professional development led to increased teacher self-efficacy. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Administrators felt the district offers multiple opportunities for teachers to participate in professional development</li> <li>Administrators felt that professional development related to SDI addresses the instructional, behavioral, and functional needs of students with disabilities in reading.</li> <li>Administrators felt that ongoing coaching and feedback related to professional development improved teacher practices.</li> </ol>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Utilizing resources with confidence for teaching and learning (Koellner &amp; Jacobs, 2015)</li> <li>● Applicable professional development opportunities (Talbert, 2010)</li> <li>● Coaching leads to increased motivation (L. S. Jackson, 2021)</li> <li>● Feedback improves practice (Carswell, 2020)</li> </ul>
3. District staff collectively agreed that the implementation of professional development was more likely to be sustained with the presence of coaching and feedback. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>District staff shared that providing models for teachers allows for increased implementation into practice of the learning from professional development.</li> </ol>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Coaching leads to increased motivation (L. S. Jackson, 2021)</li> <li>● Feedback improves practice (Carswell, 2020)</li> <li>● Student growth and achievement (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017)</li> </ul>

## **Implications for Practice**

Based on data collected through the quantitative and qualitative data analysis, it would be beneficial for the district to provide explicit and intentional assistance in the area of professional growth and teacher development. Some implications for practice include teacher feedback for professional development, developing a coaching plan, and reviewing the barriers of scheduling, time, and personnel needs. These three key trends were common in the three participant groups.

## **Teacher Feedback**

Teachers shared that having a voice in their professional development opportunities would increase the incentive to attend the training as well as a motivation to try new strategies and learning. Participant 2 noted, “I would love to spend more time perfecting my practice but who has the time? I would also like to have some incentives for spending my time to do so.” Participant 3 shared, “It would be nice to be asked what type of professional development we might want or need like in survey and not just be given ones to go to. Having a say would be nice.” The theoretical practice of phenomenology states that when educators are able to relate their experiences and learning to real-world, relevant experiences, their self-efficacy is improved and the willingness to try new things is activated (Williams, 2021). Based on participant comments in the interview sessions, teachers feel that if they are able to be involved in deciding what professional development should be offered and attended, they would have a better attitude towards the sessions and see the importance of going and learning. Many times, the professional development does not pertain to the participant and makes professional development in general seem a waste of time, therefore leaving a bad taste in

their mouth concerning future sessions. Participant 5 suggested, “Professional development is essential for learning and growth but only if it is pertinent to what we need to know as EC teachers.”

Therefore, inquiring about what professional development topics, ideas, and training are needed would allow for teachers and even administrators to develop professional development plans that align with what their students need as well as the strategic goals of the school. Everyone feels more empowered when they feel as if they contribute to the success of their school and students.

### **Coaching and Feedback**

Thirty-three percent of all participants indicated that professional development does not offer extended support or coaching within the classroom setting after the initial training; therefore, developing a coaching plan to coincide with professional development offerings would assist with effective implementation of the professional development as it relates to SDI in reading. Participant 4 shared, “Coaching is helpful since I have someone I can call or talk to when I need help or when I need to process how to deliver SDI.” Participant 14 mentioned, “I want to see PD followed through and that means going out into the schools and helping.” Having ongoing support through coaching, modeling, and other effective professional practices increases the likelihood that strategies learned during professional development sessions will be continued and improved upon with support (Carswell, 2020).

Participants stated during the interview that accountability is powerful. When a teacher knows that someone will be coming to observe them, work with them, or coach them, the educator is more likely to put the time and effort into making sure what was



taught in the professional development session is effectively put into practice. Participant 6 explained, “I know I am going to do things better and with fidelity if I know someone is holding me accountable.” Administrators and district staff feel that when they are coaching teachers, they are able to see the effects of the professional development in real time as well as start to see the impact it is making on student growth and learning; however, all participants noted that a plan needs to be in place for coaching, and it should be intentional and focused.

Coaching and follow-up practices following professional development sessions and opportunities allow for teachers to gain a feeling of confidence, increase their self-efficacy, and provide new ways of teaching and learning for students. Participant 9 commented, “Student achievement and growth are directly related to how prepared and confident a teacher feels in working with students closing gaps using SDI is imperative for EC students to excel.” As L. S. Jackson (2021) noted, when multiple stakeholders are able to collaborate and communicate with an intentional focus or plan, everyone benefits from the outcomes.

### **Scheduling, Time, Personnel**

All participants noted that for professional development to be implemented successfully and effectively, some barriers would need to be addressed. Administrators and district staff noted that having professional development related to scheduling dilemmas, time restraints, and excessive vacancies would assist in allowing teachers to more effectively focus on student learning using strategies and methods acquired from professional development. Patton et al. (2015) stated that professional development must be relevant to the teacher’s practice and promote change, not just acquisitions of

knowledge or abilities. Participant 7 noted, “I schedule with my EC teachers in the summer and by fall it is all changed and not for the better.” Participant 8 stated, “Vacancies are a huge factor in how we schedule and how we provide service delivery. It is a challenge at best.” Professional development is only effective when the learning is implemented into practice. Addressing the barriers to implementation, such as scheduling, time restraints, and teacher vacancies, will increase the capacity and sustainability of the learning.

In discussions with the participants, roadblocks were identified and explained. These barriers affect all the participants in some form or fashion. Based on research by Darling-Hammond et al. (2017), effective professional development opportunities for educators are those that align with school and district priorities such as creating effective routines and practices. Participants noted that even though a great deal of time and energy is put into an effective schedule, this gets changed many times before the students actually grace the door in August. District initiatives are pushed down, schedules have to change, times are altered, and the needs of students vary drastically. Trying to put all these pieces together sometimes is close to impossible. Participant 8 noted, “When I think I have a schedule or a group of students needing a service. I feel like it is a merry-go-round at times.”

Also, getting teachers hired and trained is a major difficulty. By the time teachers are in the hiring process and trained, many times they do not remain the entire year, causing yet another change in scheduling and how students are served. Participant 8 stated, “Many times we spend time and energy getting a teacher hired and trained only to have them resign leaving us in the same situation we started in.” The vacancies are a

huge factor in ensuring students are growing and learning to the maximum extent possible. It is clear that administrators are frustrated with the various scheduling difficulties, time constraints, and lack of qualified teachers.

### **Delivery of Professional Development**

All participants shared that due to COVID-19, there was a shift to virtual delivery of professional development. Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) noted that for professional development to be effective, participants should have the opportunity to collaborate, communicate, and share knowledge and ideas. Participants need to have experiences with other colleagues that will allow for introspection and critical thinking; therefore, a virtual platform may not be the most beneficial means for professional development delivery. Many professional development trainings were provided virtually using platforms such as Google Meet, Zoom, or WebX. This proved challenging for some of the teachers who were less experienced with technology. Participant 3 noted, “I would miss part of the training due to technology problems, sound issues, or just user error. I miss real-live instruction.”

Research from Talbert (2010) indicated that when teachers can collaborate with participants and interact with the material being presented, they feel more determined and motivated to try and implement the strategies being learned. Participant 3 stated, “I learn so much more when I am in front of a person presenting and paying attention. I get too distracted when I am virtual and lose focus.” Participant 13 noted, “I would much rather deliver professional development in person. The participants interact more and show enthusiasm. When it is virtual I lose them and they just don’t seem as invested.”

Participants also commented that having a hybrid model of professional

development could be an option for future training. Participant 4 noted, “Having a platform where training is housed so we can go back and review what we have learned in person would be beneficial to provide resources and support as we implement new ideas.” Participant 12 noted, “Being able to record and post sessions would help teachers refer to what was learned when implementing strategies from professional development.”

### **Limitations of the Study**

As with any study, there are factors that limit the trajectory of the research. For example, the participants selected for this study unintentionally included primarily K-8 teachers and administrators due to the factors related to the selection criteria. For a more diverse perspective, it would have been beneficial to have participants who included those involved in Grades 9-12.

COVID-19 has impacted the methods by which the district of study delivers professional development. Because of the heavy use of virtual platforms to deliver professional development, participant views may have been unintentionally biased. It would have been advantageous to have participants base their answers solely on face-to-face professional development to gain a more direct perception.

Due to the teacher shortage in North Carolina, there is a vast number of vacancies impacting the district. This unprecedented staff shortage is perceived as the antecedent to the various issues and challenges the district is facing. It must be considered that the vacancies within the district may be influencing participant perceptions. Because of the consideration that COVID-19 and the pandemic may have unintentionally skewed the responses, it would have been advantageous to have participants respond to the questions based on perceptions and experiences prior to the pandemic.

Another limitation of this study would be the position I hold within the county. I am the executive director of exceptional children and work closely with special education teachers, administrators, and district staff. While I did use a proxy for my interviews and pseudonyms for the participants, I feel my participants may still have been hesitant to share information, knowing it would be reviewed.

Another limitation presented in this research was the sample size. Once the criteria were met, it limited the number of participants in the study to a smaller size. If the criteria had been broader, a larger sample could have been attained; therefore, additional data could have been collected and analyzed that would have impacted some of the results related to the research study.

Lastly, the criteria used for participant selection included having a caseload of students who had mastered at least 50% of their IEP reading goals or having exited students from special education. In addition to these teachers, the administrators who worked with these teachers were also included in the study; however, there may have been incidences in this study where administrative movement had been made and the administrator currently with that teacher may not have been the administrator when the criteria were met. Therefore, some administrators may not have been as knowledgeable about the participants included in the study due to turnover.

### **Considerations for Further Research**

To further progress this research, different considerations and variations could be applied.

- Further research could be considered by changing the criteria used to select participants to gain a larger sample size, and additional quantitative and

qualitative data could be gathered and analyzed. Utilizing the same format but expanding the sample size would provide for a more comprehensive data set. This additional analysis could guide professional development plans leading to improved recommendations for student growth and achievement.

- Using this same research study but applying it to additional areas including math, writing, behavior, and social-emotional needs related to professional development could also be explored. Establishing criteria that meet these various disciplines and areas of need could be developed. The Jackson survey could provide a model to help develop and vet a survey that attains information on stakeholder perceptions of professional development related to these areas.
- A focus on how professional development related to progress monitoring impacts SDI could be examined. The research by Rodgers et al. (2021) indicated that in order for SDI to be effectively implemented, progress monitoring should occur in tandem. Research centered on how goals related to SDI in reading or other areas could be studied. Insight into how teachers deliver SDI as well as monitor student progress would be instrumental in developing effective goals that meet student needs.
- Through this research, self-efficacy became a topic that was impacted by this study. Research provided by Carswell (2020) explored the impact of professional development on a teacher's self-efficacy as well as confidence. Further research on how professional development relates to self-efficacy and teacher success in the classroom could lead to additional recommendations for

further training opportunities.

- It would be beneficial to conduct this study in other districts to correlate findings. This would provide a wider lens related to effective professional development methods and assist in guiding decisions related to professional development.
- Senate Bill 387, Excellence Public School Act of 2021, was passed in the state of North Carolina as a means to modify the Read to Achieve Act. The purpose of this bill was to charge school districts with obtaining reading proficiency by the third grade. As part of this bill, every prekindergarten through fifth-grade teacher, including elementary special education teachers, is required to gain knowledge and skills related to the science of reading in order to provide effective reading instruction to all students (Fofaria, 2021). The law provides funding and mandates that all prekindergarten through fifth-grade teachers including elementary special education teachers participate in a 2-year professional development course related to the science of reading. Within this district of study, teachers are required to participate in intensive professional development related to the science of reading. Once the teachers complete this professional development, further research to identify the impact this knowledge has on the progress of students with IEPs in mastering their goals in reading would be a beneficial study for continuous improvement and sustainability of the practices related to effective reading instruction.
- Providing participants with a survey containing questions specifically aligned to the role of each participant would afford the opportunity to gain more

concise and detailed data. Having questions specific to the roles and responsibilities of each stakeholder would provide a more comprehensive view of how professional development impacts various positions throughout the school district. The analysis of these data would provide detailed recommendations related to each stakeholder's impact on student learning and growth.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions and perspectives of teachers, administrators, and district office staff on the effectiveness of professional development related to SDI for students with learning disabilities in reading. The study was a mixed methods research design focused on three research questions. A survey was administered electronically through the Qualtrics platform, and participants volunteered to be interviewed. The theoretical framework of phenomenology was a guiding principle in aligning the results to the data used to evaluate the questions.

Teachers, administrators, and district office staff feel as if professional development related to SDI for students who have a learning disability in reading is of the utmost importance. These participants felt that professional development that is applicable to their needs proved more beneficial and yielded more long-lasting results. The participants believed that offering a variety of professional development opportunities related to the instructional, behavioral, and functional strategies that utilize both face-to-face options as well as virtual instruction meet the needs of all learners. Lastly, a key component to the success and effectiveness of the implementation of professional development content is ongoing coaching, feedback, and follow-up sessions.



Without this element of practice, the learning related to professional development is not sustained and proves to be ineffective for student growth.

As effective as professional development can be for students with disabilities in reading in relation to their delivery of SDI, all participants could agree that the state of education has changed since pre-pandemic. School schedules often impose limitations on instructional time due to having to make up for the extreme deficits of all learners. Also, vacancies for teachers and administrators are numerous and fluid; therefore, many schools are unable to establish a cohesive team that can focus on working with students. The inconsistency of staff also leads to having less experienced teachers working with students who require direct instruction and SDI to close the gap in their reading deficits.

Overall, professional development related to SDI for students with a disability in reading is positively received and most definitely requested. To achieve the outcome of having students with learning disabilities master their goals related to reading as well as exit students from the program, intentional and effective professional development is needed. There is a strong correlation between effective professional development and sustained implementation of practices that support student achievement and growth.

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**Appendix A**

**Consent From Superintendent/Designee**



RE: Request to Conduct Research

Mrs. Huffman,

Your request to study “The Impact of Professional Development on Specially Designed Instruction for Students with a Specific Learning Disability” has been approved. Please let me know if you have any questions or concerns.

Thanks,

Associate Superintendent of Academic Services

**Appendix B**  
**Survey Questions**

Survey will be delivered through Qualtrics-These are the questions and answering procedures.

Please answer the following demographic questions:

1. Current Position:
2. Age:
3. Level of Experience: Bachelor's Degree Master's Degree Doctoral Degree
4. Years of Experience:

Please rate your responses to these questions with 1 being Strongly Disagree to 4 being Strongly Agree

Statement	1- Strongly Disagree	2- Disagree	3- Agree	4- Strongly Agree
5. The district provides professional development that is relevant to your teaching position.				
6. The district provides special education teachers multiple professional development opportunities.				
7. The district provides professional development that enhances the special education teacher's knowledge and using progress monitoring to measure the student's goals and objectives that are included in their Individualized Education Plan or IEP.				
8. The district provides professional development around Specially Designed Instruction or SDI to meet the instructions, behavioral, and functional needs of students served in Special Education classrooms.				
9. Professional development in my district offers extended support within the classroom setting.				

10. After attending professional development in my district, I am prepared to support students with disabilities within the inclusion setting.				
11. District level professional development increases the teacher's self-efficacy within the implementation of Specially Designed Instruction or SDI.				
12. Professional development that consists of learning, modeling, and practice increases the special education teacher's self-efficacy around implementing the learning to students serviced in a special education within the inclusive setting.				
13. After attending professional development in my district, I am confident in implementing the learning immediately within the inclusive classroom.				
24. After attending professional development in my district, I am confident that the skills I have gained can support students in making adequate progress on their IEP goals.				
15. I am interested in participating in an interview either in-person or Google meet. Please click this link.				

**Appendix C**

**Email to Participant for Survey**

Hello,

My name is Stacy Huffman and I am currently a doctoral candidate at Gardner-Webb University. I am writing to you to extend an invitation to participate in a research study to gain perspectives and perceptions regarding professional development related to specially designed instruction for students who have a learning disability in reading. You are receiving this email because you have been successful in meeting a level of mastery for reading goals on at least fifty percent of your caseload or you have exited students from special education. Through this study, my goal is to gain insights and feedback from our teachers, administrators, and district staff related to the effectiveness of professional development. I am asking you to consider volunteering to participate in this study.

As a participant in this study, you will be asked to complete a survey asking seven demographic questions as well as ten survey questions related to how effective professional development opportunities have been in relation to educating students with a learning disability in reading. The survey will take 10-15 minutes to complete. At the conclusion of the survey, you will be asked if you would be willing to participate in an interview. There will be a link that will refer you to a Google Form to sign up to volunteer to participate in the interviews. The interviews will be one-on-one, in person or virtual, and should last 20-30 minutes. Participation in this survey and/or interview is completely voluntary with no repercussions for not participating.

At any point in the research study, you will have the right to withdraw your participation without any recourse. All data will be anonymous and your security will be protected at all times. Your name will not be connected to the survey or interviews as pseudonyms will be utilized in the writing of the outcomes, There are no anticipated risks in this study and no payment will be rendered. You have a right to end your participation at any time by exiting the survey. Data from this study will be used to make recommendations for a school district in regard to holding effective professional development for teachers, administrators, and district staff working with students with learning disabilities in reading.

If you would like to participate in this study, please complete the survey. In the closing comments of the survey, an invitation and a link to a Google Form will be provided for those volunteering to participate in an interview.

If you have any questions about this study, contact:

Researcher's Name: Stacy Huffman  
Researcher telephone number: XXXXXX  
Researcher email: [XXXXXX](mailto:XXXXXX)

Faculty Advisor name: Dr. Kristina Benson  
Faculty Advisor telephone number: XXXXXX

Faculty Advisor email address: kbenson@gardner-webb.edu

Dr. Sydney K. Brown  
IRB Institutional Administrator  
Telephone: 704-406-3019

If you are not 18 years of age or older or chose to not participate, please close the window.

If you have any questions, please email me at: [XXXXXXX](#)

Thank you for your time and consideration,  
Stacy Huffman

**Appendix D**

**Email Reminder After 3 Days**



Hello,

My name is Stacy Huffman and I am currently a doctoral candidate at Gardner-Webb University. This is a reminder that you have been invited to participate in a research study to gain perspectives and perceptions regarding professional development related to specially designed instruction for students who have a learning disability in reading. Through this study, my goal is to gain insights and feedback from our teachers, administrators, and district staff related to the effectiveness of professional development.

As a participant in this study, you will be asked to complete a survey asking seven demographic questions as well as ten survey questions related to how effective professional development opportunities have been in relation to educating students with a learning disability in reading. The survey will take 10-15 minutes to complete. At the conclusion of the survey, you will be asked if you would be willing to participate in an interview using open-ended survey questions. There will be a link that will refer you to a Google Form to sign up to volunteer to participate in the interviews. The interviews will be one-on-one, in person or virtual, and should last 20-30 minutes. Participation in this survey and/or interview is completely voluntary with no repercussions for not participating.

At any point in the research study, you will have the right to withdraw your participation without any recourse. All data will be anonymous and your security will be protected at all times. Your name will not be connected to the survey or interviews as pseudonyms will be utilized in the writing of the outcomes, There are no anticipated risks in this study and no payment will be rendered. You have a right to end your participation at any time by exiting the survey. Data from this study will be used to make recommendations for a school district in regards to holding effective professional development for teachers, administrators, and district staff working with students with learning disabilities in reading.

If you would like to participate in this study, please complete the survey. In the closing comments of the survey, an invitation and a link to a Google Form will be provided for those volunteering to participate in an interview.

If you have any questions about this study, contact:

Researcher's Name: Stacy Huffman

Researcher telephone number: XXXXXX

Researcher email: [XXXXXX](#)

Faculty Advisor name: Dr. Kristina Benson

Faculty Advisor telephone number: XXXXXX

Faculty Advisor email address: [kbenson@gardner-webb.edu](mailto:kbenson@gardner-webb.edu)

Dr. Sydney K. Brown  
IRB Institutional Administrator  
Telephone: 704-406-3019

**Appendix E**

**Consent From Dr. Jackson to Utilize Survey and Open-Ended Survey Questions for Interview**

RE: Consent to use survey questions

Hi Stacy,

You have my permission to use my survey questions as part of your research.

Dr. LaShondra Jackson

**Appendix F**

**Email to Interview Participants**

Hello,

Thank you for volunteering to participate in the interview portion of this research project, The Impact of Professional Development on Specially Designed Instruction for Students with a Specific Learning Disability.

I will send you a date and time that meets your schedule and availability. Please select if you would like to participate virtually through a Google Meet or in-person at the Department of Exceptional Children. If you select in person, please plan to come to Gaston County's Department of Exceptional Children located at 215 W. Third Avenue, Gastonia, NC 28052. This interview should only take 20-30 minutes of your time. Below you will find an informed consent form that will be read aloud to you prior to the interview. The form will require your signature on DocuSign prior to the beginning of the interview. I will have printed copies available on the day of the interview.

If you need to change your time and date or are unable to participate in this portion of the study, please contact me by email or phone using the information below.

Thank you for your time and willingness to participate in the research study.

If you have any questions about this study, contact:

Researcher's Name: Stacy Huffman

Researcher telephone number: XXXXXX

Researcher email: [XXXXXX](#)

Faculty Advisor name: Dr. Kristina Benson

Faculty Advisor telephone number: XXXXXX

Faculty Advisor email address: kbenson@gardner-webb.edu

Dr. Sydney K. Brown

IRB Institutional Administrator

Telephone: 704-406-3019

**Appendix G**

**Informed Consent for Individual Interviews**

Title of Study:

The Impact of Professional Development on Specially Designed Instruction for Students with a Specific Learning Disability.

Researcher:

Stacy Huffman-Doctoral Candidate/ College of Education

**Purpose:**

The purpose of this study is to gain perspectives and perceptions regarding professional development related to specially designed instruction for students who have a learning disability in reading. I hope to take feedback discovered during this research study to our district to improve and establish effective professional development practices for teachers, administrators, and district staff who work with students with learning disabilities in reading.

**Procedure**

An interview time and date will be established between the researcher and the participant. If the participant works for the district office, this interview will be conducted via proxy as I am an evaluator for these participants. The proxy will be the Coordinator of English as a Second Language who does not serve as a supervisor of these district leaders. This interview will be voice recorded. During this conversation, I will ask you questions related to your views and perspectives of effective professional development practices as related to helping students with disabilities in reading learn.

**Time Required**

This interview will be approximately 20-30 minutes of your time.

**Voluntary Participation**

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You have the right to withdraw from any portion of this study at any time with no penalty or recourse. You also have the right to refuse to answer any question without penalty or recourse. If you choose to withdraw, you can request that your data be deleted unless it is in a de-identified state.

**Confidentiality**

The information and data given in this study will be handled with extreme confidentiality and security. Your data will be anonymous and a pseudonym will be used in exchange for your name or identity. Your name will not be used in any report. All recording and transcriptions collected from this study will be destroyed 3 years from the conclusion of this study.

**Risk**

No more than minimal risk is involved.



**Benefits**

There are no direct benefits related to participating in this study. The study will help the district understand methods and strategies that will improve professional development practices for teachers, administrators, and district staff when working with students with learning disabilities in reading.

**Payment**

There will be no payment for participating in this study.

**Right to Withdraw From the Study**

You have the right to withdraw from this study at any point without penalty. If you choose to withdraw, your audio will be deleted.

**How to Withdraw From the Study**

-You may choose to refrain from answering any questions and leave the room or meet during the interview. There is no penalty for withdrawing.

-If you would like to withdraw after the interview has been conducted and data has been collected, please contact Stacy Huffman.

**Data Distribution**

All data, research, and results may be made available to other researchers or parties for further research. Findings will also be shared with the school district in order to improve professional development practices for teachers, administrators, and district staff when working with students with learning disabilities in reading.

If you have any questions about this study, contact:

Researcher's Name: Stacy Huffman

Researcher telephone number: XXXXXX

Researcher email: [XXXXXX](#)

Faculty Advisor name: Dr. Kristina Benson

Faculty Advisor telephone number: XXXXXX

Faculty Advisor email address: kbenson@gardner-webb.edu

**If you have any concerns about your rights or how you are being treated, or if you have any questions, want more information, or have suggestions please contact the IRB Institutional Administrator listed below.**

Dr. Sydney K. Brown

IRB Institutional Administrator  
Telephone: 704-406-3019  
Email: [skbrown@gardner-webb.edu](mailto:skbrown@gardner-webb.edu)

**Voluntary Consent by Participant**

I have read and/ or listened to the information presented in this consent form and understand fully the contents of this document. I have had a chance to ask questions concerning this study and the answers have been provided and clarified for me. I agree to participate in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_  
Participant Printed Name

\_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_  
Participant Signature

A copy will be provided for your records.

**Appendix H**  
**Interview Questions**

Open-Ended Survey Question 1- What are you currently doing to provide specially designed instruction to students with disabilities in the general education classroom?

Open-Ended Survey Question 2- What roadblocks do you encounter when you provide specially designed instruction to students with disabilities in the general education classroom?

Open-Ended Survey Question 3- How can the school/district assist you in providing specially designed instruction to students with disabilities in the general education classroom?

Open-Ended Survey Question 4- How would you describe your district's plan for professional development?

Open-Ended Survey Question 5- How do professional development activities affect your practice in the classroom?

Open-Ended Survey Question 6- What modifications would you recommend in regards to the professional development plan and/or process that would improve your practice?