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This dissertation, directed and approved by the candidate's committee, has been accepted by the College of Graduate and Professional Studies of Abilene Christian University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

## **Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership**

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Understanding Barriers That Exist to Campus Administrators' Support for Special Education  
Programs and How Principals Use Special Education Needs Coordinators As Change Agents

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership

by

Kevin L. Lanxon

August 2023

## **Dedication**

This work is dedicated to all those I have had the pleasure of working with to support students with disabilities. I am honored by your sacrifice of self to put students first as you work to meet the needs of the disadvantaged. As your work behind the scenes goes largely unnoticed, I hope this dissertation will highlight your sacrifices and love for our students. Thank you for walking this path with me. This journey would not have been possible without you believing in me, cheering me on, and being a part of my support system. Thank you for supporting me as I attended this journey, acknowledging the importance of this study to influence change in our community.

I also dedicate this dissertation to my wife, Karen. Thank you for being my biggest supporter, walking this journey with me every day as you spent endless nights listening to me talk about what I was studying and how I would change the world for our students. Thank you for cheering me on as you cared for our three children so I could do my schoolwork peacefully. I am grateful to have you in my life, as God has allowed us to share our accomplishments as you also achieve your dreams. For our children, David, Daniel, and Leairah, I pray that someday you will be able to use this work as motivation to achieve your dreams. Know that all things are possible with God as long as you have faith and believe. I love you all and look forward to seeing you achieve your dreams, just as I did.

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I want to thank my parents for supporting me throughout this process. Despite being challenged with your personal health concerns, you took the time to check on me to encourage me to keep moving. Thank you for being in my corner and supporting my wife and kids as we all work to achieve our dreams.

A special thank you to my chair, Dr. Lane. Thank you for choosing to walk this journey with me. I believe God placed you in my life for a reason; you have provided me with unwavering support from beginning to end. Thank you for answering my questions and always being willing to listen to and provide advice. I would also like to thank my committee members, Dr. Bledsoe and Dr. Peronto, for their guidance and support throughout the process. Your encouraging words, whether in class discussions or the dissertation process, pushed me to improve and gave me confidence that I would succeed.

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## Abstract

Several barriers exist that impact campus administrators' use of special education needs coordinators (SENCOs) as change agents. Using grounded theory, this study aimed to understand the barriers that exist for campus administrators regarding their ability to support special education programs and how principals use SENCOs as change agents. The study was conducted on a secondary campus with participants engaging in participatory action research (PAR) within a professional learning community. Data was collected using a triangulation of PAR forms, interviews, and reflective journals. While the study focused on understanding the barriers that impact administrators utilizing their SENCOs as campus leaders, the qualitative descriptive study also provided a platform for administrators to employ SENCOs as campus leaders to support change. The PAR group members worked collaboratively on the research site to identify barriers that limited SENCO leadership opportunities to act as campus leaders. They also identified ways administrators can support relationship-building opportunities with their SENCO to support change. The PAR group then analyzed leadership through the leader–member exchange and transformational leadership models, focusing on how administrators interact with their SENCOs to support change. The study found that due to a lack of special education background knowledge and time available on campus, administrators need help engaging in relationship-building practices with their SENCOs, thus limiting SENCO development and leadership opportunities. The researcher concluded that campus administrators have acknowledged they are not adequately prepared to lead special education programming, thus relying on the SENCO to manage special education processes, with limited administrator input on best practices. The study found that administrators face significant challenges in building relationships with their SENCOs due to campus roles and responsibilities. Previous studies have shown that administrators need

help understanding SENCO needs and job roles; this study found that administrators need to be proactive to engage in purposeful relationship-building practices to support SENCOs as change agents. This study found that PAR effectively creates a forum where teachers can serve as change agents.

*Keywords:* PAR, LMX, transformational leadership, special education



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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Campus principals have demanding jobs requiring them to work with various community members with day-to-day operations and personnel concerns, and principals are also accountable for instructing all students on campus (Bateman et al., 2017). Principals are required through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA; 2004) to use district resources to ensure that special education services are met. Therefore, principals engage with partnerships throughout the campus and school district to ensure special education students are provided a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) in the student's least restrictive environment (LRE; Turnage, 2020).

Principals may face challenges in following special education laws and best practices as they may not have the prerequisite leadership skills and special education knowledge. Using the distributed leadership model, principals often delegate the supervisory role of special education to a special education needs coordinator (SENCO), who may also carry other functions within the learning community, leading SENCOs to work in a dual capacity, sometimes as a teacher or an administrator (Girelli et al., 2019). Other principals can hire a SENCO whose sole role is to facilitate the special education process for the campus. Yet, the principal's role is to create a culture of collaboration with other staff members to provide the resources and support needed for staff to function at their jobs (Schechter & Feldman, 2019).

Campus principals, including those with a deficit in special education knowledge, are the instructional leaders for their campus (Sun & Xin, 2020). Principals must use various leadership styles to interact with their staff members to motivate and encourage them to use best practices, even when the principal is not a subject-level expert. Issues arise when principals do not consider the needs of special education students who require specific classroom accommodations to be

successful. Maggin et al. (2020) discovered that many administrators lack knowledge in special education to accommodate the requirements of students and staff. Bateman et al. (2017) argued that many principal preparation programs have failed to include classes related to special education, thus inadequately preparing campus leaders to address special education concerns.

For special education programs to be managed effectively, building principals utilize the expertise of special education staff as instructional leaders within the campus. Principals use their influence to engage their staff to achieve an effective special education program based on the principal's leadership style and their perspectives on special education. Atasoy (2020) found a correlation between transformational leadership behaviors and organizational management that profoundly affect school culture and influence. Transformational leadership is defined as a leader's ability to motivate followers to go beyond their personal goals for the organization's greater good (Bass, 1996; Berkovich & Eyal, 2016). Building leaders have a critical impact on the success of their special education programs, as principals have the power to influence the campus culture. Principals must build on their leadership capabilities to meet the needs of their staff (Murphy, 2018).

### **Statement of Problem**

The general problem addressed in this study was that many U.S. public school principals lack the prerequisite leadership skills and special education knowledge needed to encourage collaboration for SENCOs to serve as leaders of the learning organization and as specialists for inclusive special education practices (Lynch, 2012; Roberts & Guerra, 2017). Thompson (2015) found that the leadership role of campus principals has changed as special education students are increasingly included in the general education environment, thus forcing principals to learn special education best practices while collaborating with the campus community to support

special education students. While principals may not be special education experts, they must involve other stakeholders to rely on their skills as special education leaders. Principals must create direction and processes while coordinating initiatives that engage employee cooperation (Mastrangelo et al., 2014). According to Cornelius and Gustafson (2021), administrators can establish campus support groups that operate as professional learning communities (PLC) for special education teachers the principals oversee to monitor staff and ensure organizational goals are reached.

The specific problem addressed in this study was principals have not been sufficiently prepared to supervise special education programs due to inadequate educational leadership and administrative training (Templeton, 2017). Principals in many schools and districts, while overseeing general education, must also provide effective leadership over special education teaching and learning of students with disabilities. However, many principals lack knowledge and fail to grasp some of the essential concerns in special education (Sun & Xin, 2020). School administrators face challenges in implementing effective leadership in special education as they are perceived to be more concerned with the advancement of general education students than special education students (Mosbiran et al., 2021). Most school administrators receive minimal if any, hands-on experience in working with children who have disabilities. This leads to a lack of knowledge of special education issues and inclusive practices (Bateman et al., 2017; DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003).

The IDEA necessitates that local education agencies (LEAs) provide FAPE for special education students in their LRE and to ensure student success through the individualized education plan (IEP) process (Turnage, 2020). This process requires the collaboration of SENCOs as mid-level managers to establish communication channels between special education



and general education instructors, support personnel, and paraprofessionals. As mid-level supervisors and experts in the field, SENCOs advocate for an inclusive, strategic, school-wide approach with experience in supporting special education students' unique needs (Fitzgerald & Radford, 2017). SENCOs operate as a conduit for special education-related information, communication, and control, frequently reporting back to senior leadership (Girelli et al., 2019). As long as principals are unaware of the leadership skills and special education knowledge needed to support special education programs, SENCOs will be unable to position themselves as leaders. If SENCOs are continually limited in their roles, the effects will continue to restrict program development and adherence to IDEA, resulting in deficits in program effectiveness for special education students and a lack of staff support.

### **Background and Need**

In 2020–2021, 15% of all students aged 3–21 received special education services, with 96% of students receiving services within the mainstream classroom (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2022). IDEA has a “child find” requirement that compels states to identify, find, and evaluate all children suspected or known to have a disability (Turnage, 2020). The IDEA’s LRE mandate requires LEA and their representatives to teach students with disabilities in general education classrooms to the full extent possible to receive a FAPE. Thompson (2017) found that special education programs must be integrated into the public school system to ensure that students with disabilities receive FAPE.

Building principals are the LEA’s representatives for the campuses they oversee. According to Bateman et al. (2017), not only are principals responsible for the daily operations of the campus, but also they are responsible for the instruction of all students. Principals serve as

instructional leaders and are required to adhere to the requirements of IDEA. Problems arise when principals lack knowledge of special education processes and laws.

While the principal is responsible for ensuring provisions of FAPE are followed, principals can distribute the LEA responsibility to qualified personnel (IEP Team, Fed. Reg. § 300.321, 2022). However, Bateman et al. (2017) argued that to guarantee student success, principals need to be familiar with IEP, the IEP's purpose, and the methods used to track student progress. The responsibility of the school principal is to ensure that school personnel serving students with IEPs are supported and held responsible for IEP compliance. As instructional leaders, principals directly affect IEP service delivery and are positioned to support personnel who manage IEPs and the systems. Yet, many school administrators do not understand the full scope of what it takes to provide special education services, including the (a) administrative requirements, (b) the procedures that must be followed, (c) the legal mandates, and (d) underlying policy goals (Pregot, 2020). For example, many administrators lack special education training to assist with student and staff requirements (Maggin et al., 2020). Regardless, principals operate as instructional leaders by managing performance and as operational leaders by managing personnel (Texas Education Agency, n.d.-d). This includes hiring and training all employees to address students with disabilities. Principals are, therefore, responsible for improving student learning, school culture, and operations (Texas Education Agency, n.d.-d).

Transformational leadership theory increases employee engagement as the leader serves as a role model for their followers by assessing their talent and potential by boosting their confidence and ability (Purnomo et al., 2020). For example, leaders get followers' best efforts by inspiring them to identify a vision that surpasses their immediate self-interests as principals display positive attitudes toward inclusive practices influencing the attitudes of teachers, parents,

and students toward inclusion (Magaña-Medina et al., 2021). School administrators' perspectives on inclusion influence their school's atmosphere and culture, student placement decisions, and a shared idea that all students can learn (Murphy, 2018). This is important because a principal's ability to respond, influence, and advocate is linked to their understanding of leadership (Wasonga & Fisher, 2018).

School culture creates relationships within the school community by providing a sense of identity and behavior patterns (Teasley, 2017). Culture is the school characteristics that represent values, beliefs, and traditions that have evolved into established norms (Atasoy, 2020). Administrators are responsible for shaping school culture through their daily actions; principals must comprehend and master all their responsibilities as educational administrators to promote organizational culture and school performance (Tonich, 2021). A positive school culture promotes professional satisfaction, effectiveness, morale, and the creation of an environment that enhances learning outcomes while encouraging collaboration (Glossary of Education Reform, 2013; Teasley, 2017).

Special education teachers balance challenging roles as they often serve as teachers, IEP facilitators, and advocates for special education (Lin et al., 2022). Special education teachers function as formal and informal campus leaders by partnering with campus staff to improve learning outcomes for students with disabilities (Maggin et al., 2020). Their knowledge of educating students with disabilities helps them serve as campus leaders to promote inclusive opportunities for students. Many SENCOs are given administrative roles with monitoring and supervision responsibilities. Some principals use special education teachers or assistant principals for these responsibilities, giving them a dual role (Maggin et al., 2020). In a study by Fitzgerald and Radford (2017), respondents described their excessive and demanding workload.

The authors concluded that these roles and responsibilities should be filled by a committed administrator who specializes in special education and can work in both management and leadership roles to maximize the effectiveness of SENCOs.

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive study was to understand the barriers that exist for campus administrators regarding their ability to support special education programs and how principals use SENCOs as change agents. The study used a grounded theory approach to identify how leadership preparation programs affect administrators' ability to influence special education effectiveness and best practices to support their special education staff. The study collected data through interviews with campus-based staff members engaged in participatory action research (PAR).

### **Significance to the Field**

This study was designed to determine the barriers campus administrators encounter in their ability to support special education programs and how principals utilize SENCOs as change agents. This area needs further research as accrediting bodies do not provide guidance regarding special education knowledge, thus affecting the principal's perspective of special education's importance (Bateman et al. 2017). For example, Girelli et al. (2019) found that the issue needs further research as principals' perspectives of special education influence how the SENCO is recognized on campus as a mid-level leader. This research is essential as it gives school administrators the opportunity to assess the impact that their administrator preparation programs have on leading special education teams. Leadership knowledge is an important aspect of the field of special education. The study also investigated potential obstacles that inhibit campus administrators from working productively with their SENCOs.

This study explored the lived experiences of building principals and SENCOs to develop best practices to increase collaboration between these two parties. The finding of this study aimed to support principals in developing special education knowledge while supporting their SENCO as mid-level leaders.

### **Research Questions**

**RQ1:** How do campus administrators support SENCOs as applied to special education law and best practices?

**RQ2:** How do campus administrators apply their special education training to the administrator role?

**RQ3:** What are the barriers that prevent campus administrators from being effective communicators with SENCOs?

**RQ4:** Is participatory action research (PAR) effective in creating a forum where teachers can serve as change agents?

### **Key Terms and Definitions**

**Child find.** A legal requirement under IDEA that requires all education agencies to require states to identify, locate, and evaluate all children known or suspected to have a disability residing in the district's boundaries, regardless of the severity of their disabilities, and who require special education and related services (Turnage, 2020).

**Every Student Succeeds Act.** A U.S. federal law that reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) and supersedes No Child Left Behind (NCLB). ESEA permits federal investment for K–12 education and represents the nation's commitment to equitable educational opportunity for all students, irrespective of race, ethnicity, disability, English proficiency, or income (Darrow, 2016; Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015).

**Free and appropriate public education.** Special education and related services specially designed to meet the needs of students with disabilities (Turnage, 2020).

**Inclusion.** An educational concept that promotes students with learning disabilities an appropriate education with their general education peers in the least restrictive environment. The idea of inclusion encompasses the physical placement of the student in a classroom with students without disabilities and opportunities to choose courses that impact the student's future (Kirby, 2017).

**Individual education plan.** A legally binding document developed by an IEP team, following federal special education laws mandated under IDEA for every student who qualifies as a student with a disability. IEPs are individualized for each student based on the student's need for services (Beck & DeSutter, 2021).

**Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act.** A U.S. federal law ensures special education and other related services are provided to students aged 3–21 who qualify as students with a disability that adversely affects academic performance and needs services (Individuals With Disabilities Education Act, 2004).

**Leadership preparation programs.** In this study, college or university training programs and district in-service training available for the administrators to learn leadership and special education skills (Sun & Xin, 2020).

**Leadership role.** In this study, the direct supervision of special education programs and staff to influence educational outcomes for students with disabilities through acquiring knowledge and professional skills (Sun & Xin, 2020).

**Least restrictive environment.** A legal requirement under IDEA that ensures LEAs provide educational opportunities for students with disabilities in the general education classroom to the full extent possible (Thompson, 2017).

**Local educational agency.** In this study, public boards of education or other public authorities that are legally constituted as administrative agencies for public elementary schools in a state for administrative control of public elementary or secondary schools in a city, county, township, school district, or other political subdivision of a state, or a combination of school districts or counties.

**Principal.** The instructional leader of all education programs and services offered within the boundaries of a school (Bateman et al., 2017).

**Response to intervention.** A program that necessitates pedagogical strategies based on research-based best practices, continuous monitoring of student progress, a variety of academic and behavioral interventions, and assessments of student learning (Sansosti et al., 2010, Sun & Xin, 2020).

**Special education needs coordinator.** An educator who acts in a leadership role. A SENCO is responsible for overseeing the monitoring and supervision of special education programs on their assigned campus (Fitzgerald & Radford, 2017).

**Special education teacher.** An educator who is certified in special education and uses specialized knowledge in special education pedagogy to provide education for students with disabilities (Firestone et al., 2021).

**Transformational leadership.** A leadership style that leaders utilize to inspire followers to look beyond their self-interest for the organization's needs through employee empowerment and motivation (Berkovich & Eyal, 2016).

## Chapter Summary

Building principals are often not equipped to manage special education programs on their campuses. The scope of the principal's special education knowledge and leadership is impacted by their preparation programs, which often lack development in special education law and best practices. As the campus's instructional leader, principals must develop partnerships with the learning community to meet the needs of children with disabilities. Many campuses utilize SENCOs as mid-level managers to establish communication channels between special education and general education teachers, support staff, and paraprofessionals (Fitzgerald & Radford, 2017). SENCOs facilitate communication, control, and information. When principals do not have the leadership skills and knowledge of special education needed to support special education programs, SENCOs will not be in a position to serve as special education leaders for their campuses.

Chapter 2 will provide a detailed review of the literature available to understand the historical view of special education and its impact on the roles of campus administrators and staff as they work to address the needs of students with disabilities. Furthermore, the literature will address the role administrator preparation programs have on the readiness of administrators to address special education programs and serve as educational leaders. Additionally, the literature review will examine the role school culture, leader-member exchange (LMX), and transformational leadership has on team building and collaboration.



## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

This chapter presents a comprehensive overview of the relevant literature to understand how administrator training programs influence the leadership of special education programs and the collaboration of campus resources to address student needs. This chapter discusses transformational leadership's impact on the principals' ability to inspire their staff to achieve organizational goals and objectives. This chapter focuses on the theoretical framework of LMX as a means to develop relationships between principals and their staff and the impact that transformational leadership has on the PLC to address the effect of principals' training and their ability to lead special education programs effectively.

The literature review (a) defines transformational leadership's impact on a principals' ability to inspire their staff to achieve organizational goals and objectives, (b) explores the history of special education in the United States and its impact on principals' roles and responsibilities, and (c) explores how principals use their special education and leadership knowledge to develop school culture to foster collaborative relationships in the learning community to meet the needs of students with disabilities through SENCOS and special education staff members.

### **Leader–Member Exchange**

LMX is a concept based on social exchange theory that emphasizes the importance of relationships between members of an organization (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Vermeulen et al., 2022). The LMX concept describes a dyadic relationship that relies on negotiating behaviors between members with continuous exchange interactions with the leader. According to LMX, in-group and out-group relationships can be used to foster a collaborative working environment to meet organizational goals (Northouse, 2018), with a central notion that leader engagements with

followers are unbalanced and bilaterally aimed at mutually beneficial outcomes (Mushonga, 2018). Followers are classified as in-group or out-group members based on how well the member works with the leader and how well the leader works with them (Northouse, 2018). Gómez and Rosen (2001) found that LMX serves as a connection between leader actions and employee empowerment.

Within the group interactions, members utilize LMX as a continuous exchange of high and low exchanges as both parties work to identify members' standings within the organization. As principals hire and interact with staff, as leaders, principals use high- and low-quality exchanges to develop a relationship with their employees; during this interaction, both parties learn more about each other. Employees engage in role-taking opportunities to identify areas to utilize their skills to add value to the organization. Likewise, principals operate in role-making as they assign tasks and monitor the employees' effectiveness to see how their skills fit within the organization (Northouse, 2018). During this process, both parties explore more about each other while deciding what group to fit in.

For example, in the relationship between principals and SENCOs, these interactions continually utilize high- and low-quality exchanges as the two parties discuss special education concerns and processes on campus. The relationship between the campus principal and the SENCO will influence the operations of the special education programming on the campus. SENCOs need to create positive exchange relationships with their principal to obtain access to information and resources required to overcome feelings of isolation (Gajendran & Joshi, 2012; Wong & Berntzen, 2019). Northouse (2018) found that members of the in-group are provided more access to resources compared to those in the out-group. Access to resources can be vital to

meet the needs of special education staff to meet the needs of their students while promoting collaboration among the team.

The relationships between principals and SENCOs are often uneven, as SENCOs spend most of their time in IEP meetings and facilitating paperwork and have limited interactions with principals compared to other campus community members. The SENCO job is constrained because of the responsibilities that come with the role, the absence of sufficient time and resources, and the low perceived status of the role all affect how the SENCO is viewed as a leader (Dobson & Douglas, 2020). Likewise, Curran and Boddison (2021) argued that due to the interpretation of the SENCO role, there is a disparity in the role being viewed as a leadership position due to the time commitment required to complete the job functions. This lack of interaction affects SENCOs membership in either the in- or out-group. Being an out-group member will severely impact a SENCO's ability to function as a leader to support the campus principal. The social exchange between campus principals and their SENCO needs to be explored as the two parties work together; their interactions will influence campus culture and the success of special education programming.

High-quality transactions using LMX center on social relationships such as respect, trust, loyalty, cooperation, and collaboration. These interactions frequently involve members of the in-group (Mushonga, 2018). Northouse (2018) asserted that a follower's membership in the in-group or out-group depends on how well members cooperate with the leader and how well the leader cooperates with them. Members of the in-group work collaboratively with the leader because they have taken the time to establish a positive rapport. As the leader reciprocates the follower's goodwill, the follower will take on more responsibility within the leader's boundaries.

Followers in the in-group tend to volunteer for extra responsibilities because they believe the leader will support them.

Much like transformational leadership, LMX focuses on building relationships with employees. On a campus, trust between a principal and their employees is vital to the campus's success in achieving its goal for school improvement. Enabling a school structure focused on high-quality exchange supports principals' and staff interactions. As principals promote high-quality exchanges with their staff, employees develop a sense of trust in their principals that encourages proactive behavior. Employees who engage in high-exchange relationships may be willing to take on extra roles and duties outside the formal job description as in-group members (Vermeulen et al., 2022). LMX is associated with teachers' proactive behavior, such as organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and overall performance (Cerit, 2017; Thomas et al., 2010). Cerit (2017) found that developing the exchange relationship between leader and follower might be facilitated by a school structure that allows communication and cooperation in both directions. Employees with high-quality LMX interactions exhibit the reciprocal and mutual trust of a healthy social exchange relationship, which might also result in proactive behaviors.

On the other hand, low-quality exchanges are focused on economic exchanges, often with out-group members. Low-quality exchanges occur when interactions between leaders and followers go along with formal role-defined interactions. Job descriptions support low-quality exchanges as they restrict interactions between members of the organization (Cerit, 2017). Out-group members tend to have minimal relationships with the leader and do not look for extra responsibilities. Followers in the out-group believe they have been left out of the conversations the in-group receives. Unlike the in-group members, these employees' feelings can lead to disenchantment with the leadership, thus affecting productivity and job performance.

Members of the out-group typically have a minimal relationship with the leader and are not interested in taking on any additional responsibility. Out-group followers may feel as though they have been excluded from the discussions that the in-group hears. Out-group employees' feelings, unlike those of the members of the in-group, can lead to dissatisfaction with the leadership, which in turn influences productivity and job performance (Uhl-Bien et al., 2022).

Cerit (2017) conducted a study that found that enabling school culture, directly and indirectly, affects the school staff's proactive behavior. Campuses with a supportive enabling culture allow for a flexible, unformalized, and decentralized structure that encourages employees to take on new roles as they believe they have the freedom and support from the campus principal (Cerit, 2017). Similarly, according to a study by Uhl-Bien et al. (2022), followers who can work independently, demonstrate a higher degree of competence, and are invested in the vision of the leader and company are viewed by the manager as contributing more to the organization's objectives. The authors also found that these members can add value to the organization by relieving the leader's stress by taking on roles and responsibilities.

### **Transformational Leadership**

Transformational leadership is characterized as a leader's capacity to inspire followers to transcend their own personal ambitions for the organization's larger good (Bass, 1996; Berkovich & Eyal, 2016). These leaders serve as role models in searching for ways to help followers grow and develop by responding to individual follower needs through empowerment and linking follower aspirations with those of the organization. Transformational leadership assesses followers' talent and potential by boosting their confidence and ability (Purnomo et al., 2020). According to Magaña-Medina et al. (2021), leaders win followers' best efforts by motivating

them to establish goals that surpass their immediate self-interests. Dung and Hai (2020) found that good employee attitudes influenced employee acceptance of organizational reform.

Transformational leadership arose from the concept of social exchange between leaders and followers. This interaction occurs when leaders emphasize the interchange taking place while laying the foundation for the conditions needed for a successful exchange (Hickman, 2016). Transformational leadership is recognized for assessing each follower's skill and potential by increasing their confidence and capacity (Purnomo et al., 2020). The interaction of social exchange between leader and follower creates trust to influence employee actions. Charismatic leaders utilize transformational leadership to inspire their followers behind a shared goal. Due to its association with charismatic leadership, transactional leadership has become increasingly popular. The transformational leadership approach is open-minded, allowing followers to be more imaginative (Purnomo et al., 2020).

Transformational leadership benefits principals' leadership by providing a model for staff members to follow and to influence change within the school community. Principals use the transformational leadership theory to develop the capacity of their teams to confront challenges and reframe problems through employee empowerment (Eliophotou Menon & Lefteri, 2021). Transformational leaders recognize their followers' talents and can work proactively to build future leaders through organizational structure and collaboration. Transformational leadership theory motivates followers to achieve their goals and feel a sense of belonging to the organization where the member works. Many principals use SENCOs to make educational decisions for children with disabilities to succeed in special education programming. Through this model, SENCOs have the authority to represent the building principle as mid-level

managers. Since these leaders have the authority to act on behalf of the LEA, transformational leadership gives substance to the SENCO job role.

Transformational leadership has been linked to the successful implementation of special education programs. Transformational leadership has been shown to promote a positive culture and increase teacher efficacy and student achievement (Bonar, 2000; Louis & Marks, 1998; Lucas & Wayne, 2002; Zohar & Tenne-Gazit, 2008). The use of transformational leadership in combination with a positive school culture has affected perceptions of special education programming and opportunities for students with disabilities. Murphy (2018) stated that school leaders should conduct a needs assessment to reflect on how a leader's roles and responsibilities support transformational leadership traits that influence special education programs. Once leaders have identified areas of opportunity, they should take action by developing them through professional development and purposeful activities toward inclusive practices (Murphy, 2018).

Using transformational leadership, school leaders can empower members of the learning organization to function as the LEA on their behalf and make decisions in the school's best interest. Employee empowerment enables followers to achieve a higher level of morale and motivation; leaders can motivate followers to work and strive to do more than expected through staff development (Sivarat et al., 2021). Transformational leadership is comprised of four competencies, which include (a) ideal influence, in which leaders accomplish success by serving as role models for their followers; (b) inspirational motivation, in which leaders encourage by giving followers work purpose; (c) intellectual stimulation, where leaders encourage followers to ask innovative questions to solve challenges and create creative solutions; and (d) individualized consideration, in which leaders understand the needs of followers and serve as a mentor to offer new learning possibilities (Sivarat et al., 2021). Many principals use SENCOs to make

educational decisions for children with disabilities to succeed in special education programming. Through this leadership model, SENCOs have the authority to represent the building principle as mid-level managers. Since these leaders have the authority to act on behalf of the LEA, transformational leadership gives substance to the SENCO job role.

For LMX to be effective, leaders must utilize transformational leadership to build quality employee relationships. Even though some of these ties may be between members of in-groups and members of out-groups, the overall effect of these relationships will be beneficial to the culture of the campus and its progress. Without transformational leadership, the relational balance between principals and SENCO cannot occur. Wong and Berntzen (2019) argued that transformational leadership is effective because it is an ongoing process of inspiring followers to focus on the team's needs over their self-interest. LMX starts with leaders effectively building relationships with members of the learning community to engage staff to meet the needs of the campus. Whereas through transformational actions, leaders shape the working environment in which their followers operate (Podsakoff et al., 1996; Wong & Berntzen, 2019). Building a relationship with SENCOs is important because, due to the isolation of their role, conditions exist for SENCOs to have limited opportunities to build relationships with their principal. Feeling isolated due to a lack of physical interaction can impact the development of a positive relationship (Dulebohn & Hoch, 2017; Liao, 2017; Wong & Berntzen, 2019).

### **Special Education Law**

Special education began because impassioned parents of children with disabilities believed their children were being segregated from educational opportunities due to their disabilities. Court cases have shaped special education today. *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling ended segregation in public schools and established that all students have the right to an



equal education regardless of color (Shealey et al., 2005). Heard by the U.S. Supreme Court, the case was a combination of five separate cases, each concerning segregation in public schools. The ruling found that separating students based on race from educational opportunities with their peers has a negative impact on the student's social well-being and future opportunities (Shealey et al., 2005). As a result of the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, parents of students with disabilities began to file lawsuits to bring equal protection to their students who were being segregated based on their disabilities.

In 1971, the *Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* (PARC) case overturned a Pennsylvania law that denied students with a mental age of 5 an education (Public Interest Law Center, n.d.). The ruling ensured that students, regardless of disability, had the right to educational opportunities equal to their nondisabled peers (Public Interest Law Center, n.d.). PARC provided a basis for the ESEA of 1965. ESEA was signed into law to serve low-income students and provide funding for special education centers (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.-a). Similar to PARC, the *Mills v. Board of Education of the District of Columbia*, 1972, stated that students could not be denied a public education due to their disability and that funding must be made available to ensure students with disabilities are not excluded from educational opportunities (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.-e, n.d.-f).

The ESEA of 1965 was signed into law to serve low-income students and provide funding for special education centers (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.-c). The law, reauthorized as the NCLB Act of 2001, mandated research-based instruction and comprehensive school data collection (Hill & Hill, 2012). In 2018, NCLB was reauthorized and revised as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) to include protocols for standardized testing, accountability standards, and school improvement (Adler-Greene, 2019).

NCLB changed how principals view special education as it forced them to make changes to meet the newly established standards to close the student achievement gap. NCLB changed the hiring practices of campus staff to ensure that teachers were highly qualified in their subject area knowledge (Dee & Jacob, 2010). Under NCLB, all special education teachers must be state-certified to function in the teacher role. In addition to that requirement, NCLB requires that all special education teachers be duly certified in the core content area they teach and in special education to teach in special education roles unless the special education teacher is teaching in the same class as a highly qualified general education teacher (Mooney et al., 2004). The focus on highly qualified teachers was to ensure disadvantaged students received education from content area experts.

NCLB also increased accountability standards in math and reading for students in grades 3–8 (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.-b), as well as ensuring states test students during 9–12 grade years at least once in core content areas to academic progress (Dakroub et al., 2020). NCLB provided states with a student achievement goal of all students reaching proficiency in math and reading by 2014 (Adler-Greene, 2019). In addition to increased accountability, NCLB mandates states to develop rating systems to monitor school performance. NCLB states must test students annually to identify schools not making adequate yearly progress (AYP) and establish consequences and rewards based on each school's AYP status. The school rating would then be made public for accountability, transparency, and impacted school funding. School districts were motivated to increase performance as the state proposed significant consequences to increase public school attention and productivity (Dee & Jacob, 2010). Schools that failed to meet state standards were placed under corrective action. If a school continued to fail to meet state

standards, it would face consequences that could relocate staff and allow students to attend a new school (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.-b).

With the increasing number of special education students gaining inclusion opportunities in the general education classroom, schools are challenged to develop IEPs that support students with disabilities with an emphasis on the general education curriculum to meet the requirements of NCLB (Wanker & Christie, 2005). NCLB forced school districts to change state curriculum requirements to include scientifically evidence-based instructional strategies that support a rigorous academic environment. Due to this refocused attention and obligation for students to engage in the general education curriculum, instructors and schools have been forced to explicitly address academic instruction and accomplishment for students with disabilities (Mooney et al., 2004). Hoover and Patton (2008) found that a multitiered instructional approach was needed for schools to provide access to the general education curriculum for students with disabilities. The authors stated that the tiered system is designed so that students may receive instruction in the general education classroom. Then, as the students either show progress or require more intensive instruction, the student can move through the tiered system to support access to the general education curriculum. The idea of the tiered approach is to implement strategies for students with disabilities so that implementing strategies early in a student's educational career would increase the likelihood of success in a general education setting while teachers monitor progress (Hoover & Patton, 2008). Special education teachers support general education teachers to ensure students with disabilities receive accommodations and appropriate instruction.

The ESSA, unlike NCLB, empowered and awarded substantially greater control to the states, all while continuing to mandate schools to report on student achievement to include

students with disabilities (Darrow, 2016). ESSA gave states control over educational goals, allowing states to create long-term attainment targets that are more targeted to their schools and students while identifying specific strengths and weaknesses of student groups to support student needs better (El Moussaoui, 2017). With states gaining control over goals, LEAs can now address student success using multiple sources other than standardized testing, including attendance, advanced placement coursework, and vocational planning, replacing the NCLB mandate of adequate yearly progress (Adler-Greene, 2019). ESSA eliminated the NCLB mandate for all students reaching the proficient level and allowed states to determine academic indicators (Darrow, 2016). Due to this transition, the states can now manage a significant portion of the educational process previously mandated at the federal level.

### **State Mandated Testing**

In 2012, Texas increased the rigor of its state-mandated test by implementing the State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR) test (Dakroub et al., 2020). The STAAR test is given to students in public school grades 3–12 and is based on the state’s curriculum standards in the core subjects of reading, writing, mathematics, science, and social studies (Texas Education Agency, n.d.-b). The STAAR test introduced new challenges for special education teachers, forcing staff to start looking at STAAR scores, specifically in math and reading, as a tool to develop IEPs. Dakroub et al. (2020) argued that state assessments do not align with students’ IEPs or specific needs, thus causing a misalignment between the state-sponsored test and instructional practice built on the needs of the IEP. The misalignment has created a challenge for special education teachers to meet the requirements for NCLB, as students with disabilities who receive special education support in the general education classroom are required to take the same test as their general education peers. Students with disabilities are given specific

accommodations based on student needs to be used on the STAAR test to overcome this disadvantage. The campus must have an IEP meeting to address the student's need and how stating accommodations will impact the student in both the general education setting and on the STAAR assessment to add or change testing accommodations.

Unlike NCLB, which allowed three levels of mandated testing, ESSA placed a cap of 1% of all students permitted to participate in alternative testing, also known in Texas as STAAR Alt. The alternative test is limited to only students with the most significant cognitive disabilities with allowable accommodations (Darrow, 2016). Students with disabilities taking the regular STAAR test are also afforded appropriate testing accommodations appropriate to what would be needed to participate in grade-level curriculum and assessment. For the IEP team to recommend testing accommodations, special education teachers would need to gather classroom data to support the need for accommodations. The accommodations selected are based on the student's IEP and agreed upon in the IEP meeting.

ESSA also eliminates the requirement that schools could only employ highly qualified teachers and provide proof of teacher qualification to receive Title I funds. ESSA empowers states to provide guidance on teacher qualifications. Under ESSA, staff working with students need to meet state certification requirements, which can be obtained through alternative or college training programs (Adler-Greene, 2019). ESSA also eliminates the requirement for standardized test scores to be included in teacher evaluations. ESSA provides the states the flexibility to develop their own evaluation criteria.

Unlike NCLB, ESSA provides an English language competency indicator to help students accomplish their goals. School districts must now account for English Language Learners in their

accountability plans and give teacher training support. Title III funding is authorized under ESSA for initiatives that benefit this student demographic (Adler-Greene, 2019).

In addition, ESSA mandates that states develop strategies to combat bullying and harassment, which can have a negative impact on students with disabilities (Darrow, 2016). ESSA strengthens the support for students with disabilities by promoting supportive school discipline policies that support inclusive schools through relationship-building practices and interventions (Adler-Greene, 2019). ESSA endorses the inclusion of students with disabilities and empowers schools to develop strategies to support student needs.

### **Rehabilitation Act of 1973**

The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 Section 504 was established as a civil rights law and prohibits discrimination against students with disabilities while ensuring funds are made available so that students are not denied a FAPE. Section 504 of the act specifically addresses providing appropriate accommodations for individuals with disabilities and is enforced by the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (OCR). The purpose of OCR is to ensure equal access to education and promote educational excellence through the protection of civil rights (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.-b).

The Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (EHA) was the first law to ensure students with disabilities receive a FAPE and related services based on their individualized needs (Alvarez, 2022). EHA also protected the rights of students and parents while assisting states in providing services for students with disabilities. EHA was renamed the IDEA in 1990. The act has been reauthorized multiple times since its conception in 1975 to reflect best practices and to address the needs of children ages 0–21, including transition planning and achievement accountability (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.-b).

## **Individuals With Disabilities Education Act**

To be eligible for IDEA services, a student must fulfill the statute's definition of a "child with a disability" (Raj, 2021, p. 942), meaning the student must fall into one of thirteen disability categories, the disability must adversely impact education, and the child must need special education and related services to access the educational curriculum (Raj, 2021). IDEA requires LEAs to provide FAPE for all students with disabilities in their LRE through the IEP process (Turnage, 2020).

IDEA has six federally mandated standards, which include (a) school districts shall provide FAPE to all students with disabilities aged 3 to 21; (b) school districts must identify, locate, and evaluate all students with disabilities to determine eligibility and need for services; this is known as child find; (c) each student eligible for special education services shall receive an IEP that includes collaboration between the parent and educational staff to address the student's needs; (d) students must receive instruction in their LRE as frequently as possible, alongside students with and without disabilities; (e) students and families are afforded due process safeguards, such as the right to mediation, complaint inquiry, and due process rights; and (f) parents and students must be allowed to participate in establishing the IEP based on student needs (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.-c).

According to IDEA, every student with a disability is granted a FAPE, with the required special education and related services, which must be developed to fit each child's unique requirements. Under the supervision of the principal, SENCOs are responsible for leading and coordinating IEP meetings on behalf of the LEA (Girelli et al., 2019). IDEA requires schools to develop IEPs for each student who has a disability. The IEP is developed through the collaboration of the IEP team to provide the student with support in their LRE and meaningful

educational benefits. Students with disabilities are given special education case managers from the campus the student attends to oversee the IEP development and compliance of the IEP.

IDEA requires school districts to conduct *child find*. *Child find* requires schools to identify, locate, and evaluate all students with disabilities to determine eligibility and need for services who reside in the school district's jurisdiction, including students who are homeless, attend private school, and are under the care of the state (Individuals With Disabilities Education Act, 2004). Under child find, school districts are required to conduct a nondiscriminatory assessment to identify all areas of a suspected disability (Texas Education Agency, n.d.-c). Child find is not limited to students who are not yet identified; the process also applies to identifying previously unfounded disabilities in students who may have been previously identified.

In the case of *Greenwich Board of Education v. G.M.*, the parent requested assistance for their student in the area of reading (*Greenwich Board of Education v. G.M. ex rel. K.M.*, 3:13-cv-00235, 2016). The school district developed a plan that included the student visiting with the reading specialist three times a week for 30-minute sessions using a scientific research-based intervention. In this case, the court ruled that the school district did not properly identify a student with a disability. The principal notified the parents that the student was not performing satisfactorily in the response to intervention (RTI) process and would adjust the student's RTI plan. The parents requested an outside evaluator to assess the student, and the evaluator found that the student had a disability. At this same time, the teachers provide parents with information stating the student was meeting RTI progress. The school district then gathered the IEP team to find that the student was ineligible for special education services due to progress made on the RTI plan. Not present at the IEP meeting was the principal. Instead, the assistant principal acted as the SENCO and stated that though the student was below grade level, the student made



progress and would be closely monitored, contradicting the letter sent to the parents from the principal. The parents then filed a due process complaint, which afterward ruled in the parent's favor, finding the district violated child find, resulting in the student receiving special education services (Zirkel, 2018).

The IEP is designed to meet the unique needs of each child. The purpose of the IEP is to address how the student's disability affects a student's progress in the general education curriculum (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.-a). IDEA requires a student's IEP to address a student's present level of performance, goals and objectives, and related services. The IEP team is required to get together once a year to review the IEP, which must include transition planning (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.-a). The IEP team is comprised of the parent, the student, the special education teacher, the general education teacher, and a representative of the LEA who is knowledgeable to supervise and make decisions regarding special education resources (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.-a), many school districts utilize SENCOs to fulfill this requirement.

IDEA also requires students with disabilities to receive an education in their LRE to the maximum extent possible (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.-a). Student involvement includes having opportunities to learn with their nondisabled peers while receiving services needed to support education in the general education environment. Administrators are to collaborate with general education and special education teachers to provide them with resources and training to support student needs to support the LRE.

IDEA requires parent participation to make placement decisions. Parents have a right to participate in the IEP process, including agreeing or disagreeing with the recommendations made by the campus. Campus leaders must ensure that one or both parents of a student with a disability

are aware of their rights and are offered the opportunity to participate in IEP meetings for their students (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.-a). IDEA has procedural safeguards in place that shall be provided to parents, notifying them of their educational rights to participate in the student's IEP meeting, due process rights, and information sharing (Beck & DeSutter, 2021).

Parents have the right to request a special education referral for their students. The request, written or verbal, may be made to any school district administrative employee. The school district has 60 school days from the request to conduct the evaluation. During this time, the school will gather supporting documentation to determine if a referral is necessary for the student. The multidisciplinary team will examine classroom data, behavioral data, RTI data, and staff and parent observations to determine whether the student has an educational need for services. If it is determined that the student may benefit from special education services, the staff will reach out to the parent to gain consent for testing. Once the evaluation is complete, the district has 30 calendar days to review the full and individual evaluation (FIE) in an IEP meeting to determine the student's disability and develop an IEP based on evaluation data, student needs, goals, and objectives (Texas Education Agency, n.d.-c).

If the multidisciplinary team concludes that there is no educational need, the school district will send a prior written notification to the parent explaining why the district will not test the student and the factors that support the district's decision. If a parent disagrees with the district's decision, the district will also provide them with procedural safeguards so the parent is knowledgeable on how to address their disagreement (Lipkin & Okamoto, 2015). The SENCO is responsible for addressing all concerns, whether the concern is from parents or staff. To be prepared for potential conflicts, SENCOs need to collaborate with IEP meeting participants

before the meeting to include the principal to identify conflict areas and work to find solutions (Beck & DeSutter, 2021).

The IEP team determines what services and environments constitute the LRE (Hill & Hill, 2012). The purpose of the LRE is to ensure that students with disabilities are being educated with their nondisabled peers while receiving exposure to educational material and social situations that might not be present in a more restrictive setting (Lipkin & Okamoto, 2015). Texas requires local school districts to provide instructional settings in accordance with the student's IEP in the following contexts (19 Tex. Admin. Code § 89.1005): (a) mainstream, (b) homebound, (c) hospital, (d) speech therapy, (e) resource room or services, (f) self-contained, (g) nonpublic day school, (h) vocational adjustment class/program, (i) residential care facility, and (j) state-supported living center (Texas Education Agency n.d.-c). Supporting students attending the Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired and the Texas School for the Deaf is mandated by Chapter 89, adaptations for special populations.

The IEP team is composed of the following parties: (a) the parent, (b) the general education teacher, (c) the special education teacher, (d) the LEA representative, and (e) a person who can interpret evaluation results (Texas Education Agency, n.d.-a.). When a student reaches the age of 18, the student is legally considered an adult and must provide consent for their parent or guardian to attend the IEP meeting. The SENCO is responsible for scheduling IEP meetings, including working with the principal to identify available meeting times. A challenge the SENCO experiences when scheduling the IEP meeting is working around the campus calendar and classroom schedule to ensure IEP meeting members are present (Beck & DeSutter, 2021).

IDEA requires school districts to follow several criteria, including providing all students with a FAPE through the special education process. SENCOs are responsible for leading and

coordinating IEP meetings on behalf of the LEA. FAPE requires school districts to develop an appropriate IEP in collaboration with the IEP team members to ensure that students receive educational opportunities to be successful in the educational curriculum (Lipkin & Okamoto, 2015). To receive federal funds, schools must follow IDEA and report findings to the state (Beatty, 2013).

IDEA also protects the rights of families to work constructively with campus employees on their child's IEP (Alvarez, 2022). While parents and school districts work collaboratively to develop an IEP that both parties believe will benefit the student, occasionally, there are disagreements in how services shall be rendered. The *Burlington Sch. Committee v. Mass. Bd. of Ed.*, 471 U. S. 359 (1985) decision supported by EHA, requiring states and LEAs to ensure that students with disabilities and their guardians are given procedural safeguards and FAPE (Wrightslaw, 2010b). This provision also includes parents' right to participate in the creation of the IEP and to disagree with the district on proposed IEPs. The court found that, in this case, the school district did not properly evaluate the student's IEP by proposing to place the student in a nearby district at the parent's expense, believing that the proposed private school would support the student's LRE. After review, the hearing officer ordered the district to reimburse the parents for educational expenses. The school district disagreed with the decision and appealed. The Court of Appeals for the First Circuit ruled that the district did not properly evaluate the student's IEP. After several reviews, the court ruled that students with disabilities are to be afforded FAPE to meet their needs and to protect the rights of students and parents (Wrightslaw, 2010b).

IDEA provides options for parents who disagree with the IEP or its process. Parents may follow the complaint resolution process. This process involves a formal complaint by the parent to the state education agency, enabling them to investigate the complaint while issuing a decision

(Blackwell & Lilly, 2022). Parents may also participate in a mediation process. During this process, a mediator provided by the state education agency will conduct a collaborative process working with both sides to examine differences and create an outcome that both the parent and the district will agree with ((Blackwell & Lilly, 2022). If this process is unsuccessful, parents are given the option to file special education due process. Due process hearings are formal court proceedings often involving attorneys with a legally mandated outcome (Blackwell & Lilly, 2022). IDEA safeguards disabled students' due process rights to appropriate education, evaluation, and placement modifications. *Amanda C. v. Clark Co Sch. Dist. & Nevada Dept. of Ed*, (9th Cir. 2001; Wrightslaw, 2010a) decision provided judgment against a school district for failing to provide parents evaluation data that would affect the parent's ability to make informed decisions on what would be best for their student. The case found that the student was denied a FAPE as the student was misdiagnosed and misplaced (Wrightslaw, 2010a).

IDEA also protects the rights of families to work constructively with campus employees on their child's IEP (Alvarez, 2022). In the case of *Doug C. v. Hawaii* (9th Cir. 2013), the court ruled that the school district violated IDEA by conducting an IEP meeting without parent participation (Wrightslaw, 2013). IDEA safeguards provide students with disabilities due process rights to appropriate education, evaluation, and placement modifications with parent participation (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.-a). In this case, the parent attempted to reschedule the IEP meeting but instead was denied access to participate in the meeting. The school district changed the student placement to a private school setting without parent input. The district conducted the IEP meeting without the parent because the IEP was set to expire. The parent notified the district of the willingness to participate in the IEP meeting but wanted to reschedule due to an illness. According to Mueller (2015), there are a number of factors that act

as impediments to parental involvement. Some of these factors include late notices, problems with scheduling, and an emphasis on paperwork rather than parent participation. In this case, the court ruled that prioritizing deadline compliance over parental participation was unreasonable and that the district should have rescheduled the IEP meeting to ensure parent participation (Wrightslaw, 2013). As managers of the IEP process, SENCOs are responsible for ensuring the IDEA requirement of parent participation (Beck & DeSutter, 2021).

## **School Structure**

### ***Role of the Principal***

Principals are responsible for the education of all students, including special education students (Bateman et al., 2017), and the day-to-day operations of the campus. As leaders, principals set the vision and utilize human resources to meet campus goals (Madlena, 2015). To serve special education students, leaders must recognize the IDEA's campus-wide and legal effects. As instructional leaders, principals must understand the legal requirements of an IEP, including how to read, implement, and monitor IEPs in the classroom setting (Bateman et al., 2017). Principals are expected to model and support teachers on education strategies that support the learning of all students, including students with disabilities.

School administrators play a vital role in supporting special education teachers. The collaborative atmosphere and the structures that promote teachers' leadership opportunities to influence school decision-making policies are shaped by the principals' role in creating this environment (Brezicha et al., 2020). Principals' knowledge and understanding of special education is a factor in how principals perceive special education needs on campus and identify ways to provide support. Perceptions of special education needs influence shared decision-making practices that support teacher leadership opportunities (Maggin et al., 2020).

School administrators' knowledge of special education affects how principals view the role of special education teachers. Maggin et al. (2020) argued that principals' lack of understanding of laws and regulations affects how special education teachers are used on campus as instructional leaders. At the same time, Luckner and Movahedazarhouli (2019) found that special education teachers were critical to campus culture to support their peers. Sun and Xin (2020) recommended that school principals acquire the skills necessary to become instructional leaders for special education by becoming personally involved in facilitating teaching and learning opportunities in special education. Furthermore, the authors argued that principals could develop positive perceptions of special education by promoting collaboration through PLCs as a meeting point for all stakeholders to share ideas and best practices.

**Principal Leadership.** Principals must use professional leadership to set the direction and processes while coordinating activities that engage staff member cooperation (Mastrangelo et al., 2014). Principals oversee the personnel on campus and ensure organizational objectives are being met. Principals, to be successful, must be able to negotiate in micro politics to influence power structures between the learning community members while also promoting school improvement and resolving conflict (Wasonga & Fisher, 2018). Principals have the legitimate power to influence change within their campus through the democratic authority given to them by the local school board to make decisions that the principals believe are in the best interest of the campus (Nelson et al., 2000; Wasonga & Fisher, 2018). Principals use their power to establish control by setting boundaries to which all learning community members are expected to adhere under the notion of what is best for students (Wasonga & Fisher, 2018).

Principals must also use personal leadership to build positive relationships with their staff to form trust and ethical leadership decision-making. Positive relationship building attracts

employees to the organization and promotes relationships between learning community stakeholders (Cornelius & Gustafson, 2021). Tonich (2021) stated that principals are responsible for developing an organizational culture for education in their schools to increase performance and employee development. Similarly, Carpenter (2015) argued that school leaders must provide supportive leadership and collaborative structures for teachers to foster a healthy campus culture and an effective PLC that contributes to continuous school improvement. Principals must comprehend and grasp all their tasks as educational administrators to improve organizational culture and school performance.

Using transformational leadership, principals use the PLC process to establish a culture of learning and networking for special education teachers. Through the PLC process, principals empower their special education teachers to leverage their unique skill sets to benefit instructional practices by opening the lines of communication among staff. This shift in leadership culture emphasizes the need for communication, listening to others, and giving them authority, in addition to having good interpersonal skills (Schechter & Feldman, 2019). Eliophotou Menon and Lefteri (2021) found that transformational leadership supports teacher self-efficacy as teachers are placed into positions that directly impact on campus improvement. Teacher effectiveness is influenced by working with the principal to develop relationships based on in-group and out-group positioning. As campus leaders, principals are in a position to influence employee satisfaction and commitment using transformational leadership strategies. Eliophotou Menon and Lefteri (2021) also argued that transformational leadership behaviors are linked to employee goals and teacher outcomes.

It is the responsibility of principals to help members of the learning community acquire leadership abilities. Leaders who utilize LMX want their employees to act as partners who can



meet role requirements by helping the leader contribute to the organizational goals (Uhl-Bien et al., 2022). This shift in the leadership culture from what was once the principal had sole control emphasizes the importance of communication, listening to others, and employee empowerment (Schechter & Feldman, 2019). Principals must provide special education teams with learning opportunities to develop networks with their counterparts and to discover and share best practices. Principals set the tone as leaders in having the authority to empower employees to act in the best interest of the campus and student body. By utilizing LMX behaviors, principals can develop relationships with their staff to learn more about how their employees can contribute to meeting organizational goals (Uhl-Bien et al., 2022).

### ***Special Education Needs Coordinator's Role***

In Texas, special education SENCOs are middle-level managers who oversee the special education process for their assigned campus under the distributive leadership of their building principal. Middle managers have the authority to change systems and use resources to improve special education best practices (Girelli et al., 2019). Unlike principals, who operate as the campus instructional leader, setting the vision for the campus, SENCOs operate as managers to ensure the principal's agenda is met specifically in the area of special education. As managers, SENCOs work alongside the principal to monitor and evaluate (Madlena, 2015) special education programs to ensure IDEA is met.

SENCOs' primary role is to identify special education needs, use resources for special education students, collaborate with the campus community, and audit all special education paperwork for legal compliance (Fitzgerald & Radford, 2017). SENCOs are responsible for ensuring special education laws are being followed and that students with disabilities receive a FAPE (Thompson, 2017). To oversee special education procedures and instructional practices,

SENCOs must have decision-making authority on campus given by the building principal to collaborate with learning community members.

SENCOs are often specialists in special education who utilize their expertise to support the building principal in the special education decision-making process that ensures student needs are met through the IEP process and instructional practice. As managers, SENCOs must have strong interpersonal skills to work with learning community members to resolve conflict management concerns and to promote a collaborative environment. While seen as experts, Smith and Broomhead (2019) found that SENCOs were often placed between acting as specialists for special education and balancing the growing needs of a job they are not fully trained for. The job's requirements can often cause conflict as SENCOs attempt to balance supporting staff and the overall effectiveness of the job.

When working with campus community members, SENCOs act as advocates for students in special education programs (Lin et al., 2022). Through mentoring and guidance, SENCOs help ensure that students with disabilities can achieve their full academic potential (Girelli et al., 2019). SENCOs are responsible for guiding effective practices in special education and encouraging collaboration among learning community members. At the same time, SENCOs are obligated to collect data on the development of the students to guarantee that the needs of the students are being satisfied. The collecting of data is an essential part of the SENCO function since it ensures there is openness regarding the services that are rendered to maintain legal compliance (Girelli et al., 2019).

SENCOs serve in complex roles from campus to campus, as some are hired in administrative positions with oversight and supervisory responsibilities. On the other hand, some campuses use their special education teachers or assistant principals to fulfill these roles, creating

dual capacity roles. SENCOs are expected to provide leadership for special education needs. However, there is often disagreement about how the role is interpreted and supported, which contributes to a discontinuity in SENCO leadership from one campus to the next (Curran & Boddison, 2021; Hallett & Hallett, 2017). Fitzgerald and Radford (2017) revealed how workloads are overwhelming and stressful when balancing multiple responsibilities. Although the SENCO position is operational and strategic, there is often a disparity regarding the position as a leadership position (Curran & Boddison, 2021). SENCOs find it can be difficult to act and be seen as leaders of special education policy while not being regarded as members of the senior leadership team (Smith & Broomhead, 2019). SENCO roles should be filled by a dedicated administrator who is a special education expert and who operates in both management and leadership roles to increase the effectiveness of SENCOs (Fitzgerald & Radford, 2017).

Girelli et al. (2019) argued that SENCOs would be more effective being placed as middle-level leaders within the campus, given authority by the principal in a distributed leadership role. Similarly, Fitzgerald and Radford (2017) argued that SENCOs need to be positioned to develop collaboration systems within the learning community. As special education leaders, SENCOs are responsible for listening and talking to all learning community members and supporting teachers and instructional aides in meeting student needs. SENCO must also act as a mediator for families concerned about their students' needs. SENCO works with learning community members to promote educational networks to support students with disabilities (Girelli et al., 2019). SENCOs serve a key role as they are an integral part of advocacy for student rights and ensuring positive parent–campus relationships.

### ***Special Education Teachers' Role***

Special education teachers' role on campus is to serve as case managers for special education students, develop student IEPs, and provide support for staff on how to best meet students' IEP goals (Blackwell & Lilly, 2022). Special education teachers must have a special education certification and, sometimes, a general education certification. Many receive their certification through alternative certification programs, which offer intensive preparation to help teacher candidates meet or exceed certification standards (Hollo et al., 2019). In contrast to the educational knowledge of principals, special education teachers can leverage their skills and abilities to support the campus as experts in their field (Cornelius & Gustafson, 2021).

School districts face staffing shortages due to the unique demands placed on special education teachers to fulfill teaching and case management roles, along with limited administrative support (Hagaman & Casey, 2018). Compared to other first-year teachers, special education teachers have a 2.5 times higher likelihood of leaving their classrooms after the first year of teaching than any other beginning teacher (McLeskey & Billingsley, 2008; Robinson et al., 2019). Cornelius and Gustafson (2021) found that this demand increased the need for special education teachers to be experts in their field, as teachers are often relied on for support and advice to meet the growing demands of special education services. At the same time, Hagaman and Casey (2018) argued that special education teachers lack training, which affects the teacher's ability to meet job responsibilities. The likelihood of special education teachers remaining in the field increases as they are provided opportunities to participate in meaningful professional development (Billingsley, 2004; Boyer, 2005; Brownell et al., 2004; Brownell et al., 2010; Carr & Evans, 2006; Hardman, 2011; Little & King, 2008).

As special education has evolved, teachers' responsibilities have expanded from self-contained classrooms to coteaching and supportive roles. As students' needs vary, so do teachers' expectations to address them (Gavish, 2017). The increase of students with disabilities receiving inclusion services within the general education environment continues to increase as schools recognize the impact inclusion has on student performance and social well-being (Maggin et al., 2020; Snyder et al., 2019). Special education instructors help campuses by cooperating with general education teachers, assuming instructional leadership positions, and handling administrative duties (Lashley, 2020). As case managers, special education teachers must have the authority to coordinate and supervise the provision of services to students on the supervised caseload (Blackwell & Lilly, 2022).

Special education teachers are also vital members of establishing campus–parent partnerships. Farley et al. (2022) found that special education teachers are to share information on student learning and the effect of the disability based on their knowledge and experience compared to their general education peers. Many parents of students with disabilities rely on teachers to provide information about their student's performance and disability. Farley et al. (2022) argued that a positive relationship between the parent and school is influenced by parent–teacher communication.

**Special Education Teacher Leadership.** Special education teachers act as leaders on the campus level by actively collaborating with campus-based staff to improve instructional practices and learning outcomes for students with disabilities (Maggin et al., 2020). Special education teachers act in both formal and informal roles. Formal teacher leadership is shown when special education teachers serve in supervisor roles or as mentors to peers, using transformational leadership. As informal leaders, special education teachers use content

knowledge in special education to support the campus community. Opportunities for special education teachers to shape policy and practice for children with disabilities through instructional teacher leadership exist in curriculum preparation, workshop facilitation, and the design of education systems (Maggin et al., 2020).

As students with disabilities are increasing access to the general education classroom, campus principals increasingly rely on special education teachers to serve as leaders of school-wide improvement. Even though special education teachers are relied upon for their knowledge, Zarate et al. (2022) found that special education teachers are often overlooked for formal leadership roles. Due to this, authors argue that special education teachers must be empowered to function as leaders. The author also argues that special education teacher shares similar attributes as their general education peers, such as collaboration skills and supporting the needs of diverse learners (Zarate et al., 2022), so special education teachers should be afforded the same opportunities to lead.

Zarate et al. (2022) found that special education teacher leadership skills are required for special education teachers to influence organizational change within the campus community effectively. Special education teachers are conduits for special education knowledge and understanding of special education policy and best practices. Due to the advanced training special education teachers receive during the certification process compared to their general education peers, they are seen as subject-level experts in special education. Campus administrators often utilize the contributions of special education teachers to create an inclusive school environment for students with disabilities (Zarate et al., 2022). Principals rely on special education teachers to provide collaboration opportunities for staff to increase knowledge of inclusion practices for students with disabilities in FAPE to promote school improvement.

Special education teachers must work to engage the campus community to build positive relationships between all stakeholders to impact the school climate and improve outcomes (Cornelius & Gustafson, 2021).

While special education teachers desire to impact the campus positively, with the current staff shortages and increased demands of the position, special education teachers must balance several roles that create added stress to the job. Robinson et al. (2019) argued that many teachers experience burnout as they cope with these demands, leading special education teachers to leave the profession. Special education teachers find they lack the planning time and professional development opportunities. These challenges include communication opportunities between stakeholders to implement policies and support collaboration. Blackwell and Lilly (2022) found that the school's organizational structure often limits collaboration opportunities for all special education stakeholders. The lack of collaboration leads to issues in developing IEPs, meeting timelines, and decision-making opportunities.

Lastly, special education teachers must use self-efficacy to build their confidence to lead others. Campus principals often find that despite the demands placed on special education teachers, their self-efficacy enables them to meet the campus community's needs (Maggin et al., 2020; Zarate et al., 2022). Special education teachers are often faced with barriers in caseload management as they typically have no authority to influence other campus community members. Cornelius and Gustafson (2021) found that the teachers reported being overwhelmed due to not having influence, causing teachers to leave the profession. When special education teachers have no authority, they cannot support student needs with other learning community members. As this is the case, special education teachers must be given the opportunity to collaborate with other stakeholders to build self-efficacy under the supervision of the principal (Blackwell & Lilly,

2022). Special education teachers can improve their self-efficacy by advocating for positive relationships between all stakeholders. Cornelius and Gustafson (2021) found that building relationships on trust, respect, and communication support relationship building, placing special education teacher in positions to function as leaders within the campus.

### ***School Culture***

**Administration and Teacher Relationships.** School culture is found within the shared relationships within the school community by providing a sense of identity and behavior patterns (Teasley, 2017). Administrators influence school culture through daily activities. The concept of culture is designed to explain the school's characteristics. It represents values, beliefs, and traditions that have evolved into established norms (Atasoy, 2020), setting expectations for teachers to follow. Atasoy (2020) found that school administrators must create and maintain a strong school culture to support organizational change.

**Professional Learning Communities.** While principals may not be special education experts, principals must involve the special education experts within the learning community to rely on their expertise as special education leaders. According to Cornelius and Gustafson (2021), administrators can establish support groups on their campuses that can act as PLCs for special education teachers. During PLC meetings, members of the teacher support group can share their knowledge and critically assess the instructional approaches used in the classroom. With the support of the campus principal, the group is inspired to engage in candid and purposeful conversation regarding the members' respective fields of special education and the development of their respective students (Akiba & Liang, 2016; Cornelius & Gustafson, 2021; De Neve et al., 2015). Correa and Wagner (2011) found that when principals facilitated



collaboration among teachers, the teachers were more likely to work together, sharing a clear vision and exchanging collaborative problem-solving strategies.

The ESSA has increased the need for special education teachers to become involved in the planning and implementing of services for students with disabilities (Brezicha et al., 2020; Claycomb, 2016). Special education teachers often struggle with meeting the job demands due to communication difficulties between stakeholders, collaboration opportunities with multiple personnel throughout a district, and inefficiencies in implementing IEPs (Blackwell & Lilly, 2022; DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003). Additionally, special education teachers find that principals do not understand special education, which requires teachers to take on extra duties outside the normal scope of the job. Cornelius and Gustafson (2021) provided an example of a special education teacher being asked to substitute for an absent general education teacher for the day. This experience makes special education teachers feel undervalued and unable to meet the job demands.

First-year teachers anticipate challenges when taking on special education responsibilities (Gee & Gonsier-Gerdin, 2018). However, special education teachers often find themselves working in isolation, leaving them to become overwhelmed and unable to influence special education programs on campus (Cornelius & Gustafson, 2021). For example, special education teachers often find themselves working in isolation, leaving them to become overwhelmed and unable to influence special education programs on campus (Cornelius & Gustafson, 2021). In addition, special education teachers often struggle to meet their job requirements as many stakeholders push back against support, including general education teachers not wanting students with disabilities in their classrooms (Gee & Gonsier-Gerdin, 2018). In addition, previous teachers sometimes established classroom norms that encouraged low expectations,

leaving many components of the role unfilled (Gee & Gonsier-Gerdin, 2018). The teachers can also have difficulty collaborating with other special education teachers throughout their district (Gee & Gonsier-Gerdin, 2018). PLCs enable teachers to build collaborative relationships with stakeholders to increase student outcomes and teacher satisfaction (Cornelius & Gustafson, 2021). This is important because PLCs provide opportunities for teachers to practice self-advocacy and work with other teachers to analyze data and share best practices.

Principals can utilize the PLC framework to develop professional learning opportunities for sharing knowledge and best practices to set a tone of a positive campus culture among the special education staff. PLC meetings also serve as a time of collaboration between educators and administration to understand the needs of staff and students. A challenge for principals is that special education teachers need to have knowledge of the general education curriculum to provide interventions needed for the students on the special education caseload (Bettini et al., 2017; Brownell et al., 2010). PLCs bring general education and special education teachers together, promoting a positive relationship between the administration and staff, built on forming trusting relationships to overcome challenges (Cornelius & Gustafson, 2021). In a study by Fitzgerald and Radford (2017), principal leadership was vital to developing staff expertise to support inclusive special education practices and pedagogical approaches.

Principals' managerial ability directly influences organizational performance (Tonich, 2021). The principal's role on campus is not only to act as the instructional leader but also to manage the school personnel resources to meet campus-driven goals and objectives. Principals are responsible for creating a supportive environment that motivates students and staff to reach the goal of school performance. Principals play a vital role in developing and sustaining the special education PLC within the campus (Schechter & Feldman, 2019). Principals coordinate

processes and personnel to structure an environment suitable for collective learning and problem-solving, ensuring all learning community members are represented and supported.

Administrators must also be instructional leaders, concentrating on teachers, caregivers, and community members to achieve college and career readiness criteria (Luckner & Movahedazarhouli, 2019). As a result, principals affect the education of every special education student on campus, including creating a curriculum, organizing meetings, supporting teachers in diverse classrooms, evaluating progress, and working with challenging parents. Principals are expected to work with staff to address special education legal concerns from teachers and parents (Bateman et al., 2017).

### ***Special Education Knowledge***

**Principal Knowledge.** While administrators have a general grasp of a campus's generic leadership day-to-day operations, principals often struggle to understand and implement leadership in special education (Pregot, 2020). Principals are in charge of the building and all education on their campus, including the education of children with disabilities. A principal must have a thorough, fundamental understanding of the scope of special education and the processes utilized for evaluating and educating students protected under IDEA to manage special education programs successfully (Bateman et al., 2017). Research on campus administrators' and teacher preparation programs lacks courses on special education law and best practices, instead relying on their peers to obtain advice on how to serve students with disabilities (O'Conner et al., 2016). Roberts and Guerra (2017) also concluded that principals are unprepared to oversee special education programs due to their lack of familiarity with special education policy and, more significantly, the unique traits of each student and how their disability impacts them.

Even though school administrators are responsible for providing instructional leadership for schools, a significant number of administrators have not received training in special education, which hinders their capacity to implement a schoolwide vision for inclusive practices (Pazey & Cole, 2013; Zarate et al., 2022). According to Bateman et al. (2017), principals must be able to comprehend IEPs, understand how IEPs are monitored, and execute IEPs to ensure student achievement. Many principals are unaware of all aspects of special education, including administrative needs, procedural requirements, legal requirements, and the law's intent to regulate special education services. Adding to the challenge, Maggin et al. (2020) found that many administrators lack special education training to support student and staff needs as their training programs do not address this area. Bettini et al. (2017) found that due to having limited knowledge in special education, principals often struggle with designing professional development for special education teachers. At the same time, Roberts and Guerra (2017) stated that principal preparation programs must train future administrators in special education needs.

Building principals' perceptions of special education and leadership are often influenced by their preparation programs and personal experiences as teachers and mid-level administrators. Principals' special education knowledge impacts their attitudes and viewpoints on staffing, student discipline procedures, and services provided to special education students (Sun & Xin, 2020). Administrator preparation programs must account for training in implementing IDEA, RTI, and school leadership to develop an understanding of special education leadership and its impact on the learning community (Sun & Xin, 2020).

**Principal Responsibilities in Special Education.** The 19 Texas Administrative Code Section 89.1005 describes the principal standards as having the duty of ensuring that every student receives a quality education. Roberts and Guerra (2017) argued that as mandated by

federal and state laws, principals must have the knowledge and abilities to advocate for the placement and services of all students enrolled on their campuses. By overseeing key performance indicators and personal management, principals are expected to serve as instructional leaders for their campuses (Texas Education Agency, n.d.-d). Principals, working along with the special education department representing the LEA, are responsible for reporting outcomes of the following 16 state performance plan indicators as identified by the United States Department of Education. The indicators include the following:

1. Graduation rates;
2. Dropout rate;
3. Participation and performance rates on state assessments;
4. Suspension and expulsion rates;
5. Education environments;
6. Preschool environments;
7. Preschool outcomes;
8. Parent involvement;
9. Disproportionate representation of special education;
10. Disproportionate representation of disability category;
11. Timely initial evaluation of child find;
12. Early childhood transition;
13. Secondary transition;
14. Postschool outcomes;
15. Resolution sessions; and
16. Mediation (Texas Education Agency, n.d.-d).

With the principals responsible for school improvement and ensuring the reporting of the mentioned indicators, it is vital that principals work alongside the SENCO to ensure that special education goals, objectives, and timelines are being met.

Principals are also responsible for hiring and training all staff to ensure they are highly trained to address the needs of special education students. The leadership of principals is an essential component in the process of developing environments that assist new teachers in meeting the varying needs of their students. For school administrators, supporting special education teachers can frequently be more difficult and necessitate different types of support than those given to inexperienced general education teachers (Correa & Wagner, 2011). Principals are required to collect data and utilize best practices to identify areas of need. Principals are accountable for setting an example that demonstrates a dedication to improving student learning, the culture of the school, and strategic operations (Texas Education Agency, n.d.-d). Correa and Wagner (2011) found that principals were responsible for setting the campus environment to support collaboration between stakeholders, though due to the lack of knowledge in special education, teachers are leaving the profession, making the principal's role of supporting special education more challenging.

The difficulty for principals is that many administrators lack the necessary educational skills to lead special education programs effectively. However, they are the most important individuals in terms of influencing teacher attitudes regarding special education practices, and principals play a crucial part in the process by providing support and confidence for all stakeholders (Bateman et al., 2017). Sun and Xin (2020) reported that principals face challenges in supporting special education programming as administrators need to learn how to promote relationships between special education and general education staff. Schechter and Feldman

(2019) argued that principals should develop PLCs to enable teachers to work collaboratively to support special education programs on campus. With principals leading the PLC, the participants perceive one another not as experts mentoring less knowledgeable teachers but as equal collaborators for their mutual improvement. This allows for the PLC to be organized into more personal, educational environments for the growth of the teachers involved.

### ***Special Education Teacher Knowledge***

**Teacher Knowledge.** Special education teachers need specialized pedagogical content expertise that differs from their general and subject-specific counterparts. Special education teachers must be certified in both special education and general education. Many obtain their accreditation through alternative certification programs, which provide extensive preparation to assist teacher candidates in fulfilling the obligations of a special education teacher (Hollo et al., 2019). Special education teachers must utilize diverse customized instruction, related services, and extra support to support student achievement. Special education teachers must thoroughly understand evaluation, individualized instruction, and research-based interventions (Firestone et al., 2021). In addition to the additional responsibilities, special education teachers are responsible for working with the general education teachers to provide curricular modifications and classroom accommodations for the students the teacher serves, then reporting on student progress with all stakeholders (Blackwell & Lilly, 2022).

Special education teachers utilize their knowledge to meet the needs of special education students by building positive relationships with members of the learning community. The PLC framework provides special education teachers with collaborative opportunities to establish relationships with stakeholders to support learning outcomes for students. Special education teachers can use PLCs to self-advocate and share knowledge of special education practices with

the campus administrators (Cornelius & Gustafson, 2021). Correa and Wagner (2011) found that special education teachers are more likely to work to develop positive relationships when supported by the administration and given opportunities for collaboration and problem-solving.

**Teacher Responsibilities in Special Education.** The 19 TAC Chapter 149 contains requirements on teacher standards. There are six professional practices and responsibilities teachers must fulfill. These include the following:

1. Instructional planning and delivery;
2. Knowledge of the student and student learning;
3. Subject knowledge and expertise;
4. Maintaining the learning environment;
5. Use of data-driven practices; and
6. Professional practices (Texas Education Agency n.d.-d).

Special education teachers have been widely known for having expertise and knowledge of how to use evidence-based practices to support the needs of students with disabilities (Bettini et al., 2017). In comparison to general education teachers, special education teachers have additional responsibilities above their general education counterparts. Special education teachers are responsible for caseload management, student IEP development, facilitating IEP meetings, and managing the procedural due process (Beck & DeSutter, 2021). Simultaneously, Blackwell and Lilly (2022) discovered that special educators have a more congenial work relationship with parents, establish progress monitoring and reporting requirements, and frequently have case management responsibilities that include collaborating with related service providers distributed across various campuses and communicating with district-level special education administrators.



Special education teachers are also responsible for serving as educational leaders to support general education teachers with students' special education needs (Alghazo & Alkhazaleh, 2021).

Special education teachers' effectiveness in roles is often challenged by large case management loads, unclear job descriptions, inadequate administrative support, and little to no collaboration with peers (Albrecht et al., 2009; Cancio et al., 2018; Futernick, 2007; Kaff, 2004; Katsiyannis et al., 2003; Prather-Jones, 2011; Schlichte et al., 2005). Special education instructors frequently experience role ambiguity and isolation from the administration due to the lack of knowledge and comprehension of special education and a lack of an organizational structure of support (Cornelius & Gustafson, 2021). Cornelius and Gustafson (2021) also argued that administrators and teacher relationships are often complicated as teachers rely on administrators for job security and growth. Whereas when teachers are given instructional support to improve quality teaching practices and emotional support to manage caseloads, teachers feel supported, thus leading to improved outcomes for students and staff (Cancio et al., 2018; Wong et al., 2017). Bettini et al. (2017) found that due to principals' limited knowledge of special education, coupled with heavy workloads and limited time, special education teachers cannot attend PLCs. This challenge is intensified as special education teachers need to know the general education curriculum and how it is being taught to provide special education interventions for students (Bettini et al., 2017; Brownell et al., 2010).

Roberts and Guerra (2017) argued that the principal serves as a role model for the ethical and legal norms that are expected inside the school, emphasizing the requirement for greater knowledge to supervise both regular and special education programs effectively. Principals who participated in a variety of special education classes during their preparation programs had favorable attitudes toward providing services to students with disabilities (Praisner, 2003;

Roberts & Guerra, 2017). At the same time, Roberts and Guerra (2017) found that principals are not adequately prepared to supervise special education programs or to understand how disabilities affect student success.

The perspectives of school administrators play an important role in establishing opportunities for special education teachers to act as leaders for special education services (Maggin et al., 2020). The principal sets the conditions of the school; Carpenter (2015) contended that to promote a positive campus culture and a productive PLC that supports ongoing school improvement, school administrators must offer supportive leadership and collaborative structures for teachers. For example, administrators were found supportive of special education teachers' leadership opportunities, though many principals acknowledged that many special education teachers are not included in leadership opportunities due to limited time and view of teachers' expertise (Maggin et al., 2020).

### ***Participatory Action Research and PLC***

Communication and teamwork between special education teachers and learning community stakeholders are essential to the success of special education programs. The PLC framework allows stakeholders to develop collaborative learning opportunities to support campus improvement. PLCs are opportunities for special education teachers to self-advocate, develop instructional best practices, and engage with experts in the field of education (Woulfin & Jones, 2021). The goal of professional development is to engage educators in the process of analyzing and improving so that they emerge feeling inspired to bring about changes that are essential to student improvement outcomes (James et al., 2008).

PLCs are often school-based and emerge informally around a specific interest (Hardman, 2011; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006) as general education and special education teachers work

together to design lesson plans, learn how to modify lessons for students with disabilities, and share instructional ideas. As the general education teacher is designing the instruction, the special education teacher is working with the special education student's IEP to identify how to apply accommodations or modifications to the assignment. The collaboration between general education and special education teachers supports shared knowledge by encouraging communication and allowing others to share ownership of student learning (Cornelius & Gustafson, 2021).

The role of the principal in school development is to utilize human capital to ensure that the educational needs of students are met. James et al. (2008) argued that principals should establish cooperative professional development so that all participants can see each other as equals focused on the growth of the educational environment. The principal, though lacking in the area of special education expertise, has the power to influence special education programs. The principal and administrative staff plan the work environments, establish collaborative teams, and arrange meeting times for all PLCs in the school. The PLC framework is important as it serves as a collaboration between teachers to improve, while at the same time, learning communities are often fraught with competition for professional legitimacy and political power as teachers attempt to share knowledge, limiting authentic collaboration (Schechter & Feldman, 2013). Special education teachers find that the working conditions affect teacher burnout, as teachers report limited professional development opportunities and a perceived lack of support from the administration (Woulfin & Jones, 2021). The formed learning environment can produce fear as members of the learning community tend to focus on their agenda instead of working as a community of practice. The authors found that despite the learning communities' fear, PLCs are needed to support teachers' pedagogy and collaboration between principals and teachers.

On the other hand, participatory action research (PAR) is a method that involves the learning community to understand issues and develop solutions through qualitative research. Used as professional development, PAR incorporates the belief in human capital and the value of collaboration between teachers and their schools. As PAR takes into account both the context and the content of the topics being examined, it is an effective method of professional development for educators (James et al., 2008) to promote teachers' active engagement in professional development and the generating of new knowledge (Hardman, 2011). PAR is referred to as a community of practice, a group of people who operate in different roles, all of whom have an equal say and are willing to work together in a collaborative environment to study a specific issue (James et al., 2008). The learning communities that are the most successful are the ones that involve numerous perspectives from a variety of levels of competence, including school and district-level administrators and teachers (Hardman, 2011; National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education [NCATE], 2008). A community of practice is described as a group of people who share a concern and work to deepen their knowledge through regular interactions (James et al., 2008; Wenger, 2004) to seek solutions to problems. The PLC framework supports the community of practice process as principals and teachers come together to explore ways to improve instruction.

PAR within the PLC framework engages teachers and administrators to engage in reflection to identify common issues in special education and work together to find solutions through data collection (James et al., 2008). While principals may not have vast special education knowledge as compared to the staff they supervise, the PLC framework enables principals to work collaboratively with staff to share knowledge to improve outcomes for

students with disabilities. Through PAR, special education teachers are seen as equals, thus giving supporting teacher self-advocacy in a supportive environment.

### **Chapter Summary**

In conclusion, the chapter provided a comprehensive description and review of the proposed research using the available literature, explaining why researchers advocate the necessity for this study. Special education programs are influenced by the principal's leadership, regardless of the principal's special education content knowledge. When principals lack knowledge in leading special education programs, staff and students are affected. This study is essential to understand principals' impact on SENCO through creating collaborative relationships and professional development.

Principals who utilize transformational leadership as a social exchange serve as role models for their staff by empowering others to improve organizational outcomes (Eliophotou Menon & Lefteri, 2021). The success of special education programs has been linked to transformational leadership. Transformational leadership has been shown to build a positive culture, make teachers more effective, and help students achieve academic success (Bonar, 2000; Louis & Marks, 1998; Lucas & Wayne, 2002; Zohar & Tenne-Gazit, 2008). While transformational leadership inspires, principals utilize LMX to develop working relationships with followers through in-group and out-group relationships to foster a collaborative working environment to meet organizational goals such as improving state testing outcomes. Creating working relationships is often developed through the PLC as principals establish support groups for special education teachers. Chapter 3 outlines the proposed research methodology and design of the study. In addition to discussing methods for data analysis and my ethical considerations, Chapter 3 will outline the study's research topic to analyze the specified research questions.

### **Chapter 3: Research Methods**

Principals lack the prerequisite leadership skills and special education knowledge needed to encourage collaboration for SENCOs to serve as leaders of the learning organization and as specialists for inclusive special education practices (Lynch, 2012; Roberts & Guerra, 2017). While principals may not be special education experts, they must rely on experts in the field to develop their skills as special education leaders. Principals must create direction and processes while coordinating initiatives that engage employee collaboration (Mastrangelo et al., 2014). This chapter describes the methodology and research approach for this study. This study's purpose was to understand the barriers that exist for campus administrators regarding their ability to support special education programs and how principals use SENCOs as change agents. The following questions guided this study.

**RQ1:** How do campus administrators support SENCOs as applied to special education law and best practices?

**RQ2:** How do campus administrators apply their special education training to the administrator role?

**RQ3:** What are the barriers that prevent campus administrators from being effective communicators with SENCOs?

**RQ4:** Is participatory action research (PAR) effective in creating a forum where teachers can serve as change agents?

#### **Research Design and Method**

The research design selected for this study was a qualitative study with a grounded theory approach. Grounded theory, established by sociologists Glaser and Strauss in 1967, uses an inductive process guided by theoretical sampling to collect data using interviews, observation,

and documentary resources to create codes to analyze data (as cited in Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A qualitative study using grounded theory explores the participants' lived experiences to understand how experiences shape outcomes, unlike quantitative analysis, which is focused on statistical calculations to describe a smaller sample to represent a larger population (James et al., 2008). This study will blend grounded theory and PAR within a PLC. When employing grounded theory, the goal is for participants to use the data to construct a substantive theory that can be applied to real-world scenarios (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). However, PAR initiatives are frequently challenging to complete because the action process involves taking clear, manageable steps to achieve the desired change. As the group works collaboratively, the action in PAR will ensure that the participants are working toward the goal of affecting change (Guy et al., 2019; McIntyre, 2008). To improve the overall quality of the research, I will make it a point to ensure that all the participants take an active role in the procedures of theoretical sampling, coding, and comparative analysis (Bergold & Thomas, 2012; Canlas & Karpudewan, 2020; Crawford Barniskis, 2013; McIntyre, 2008; Springett et al., 2016).

For this study, participants were members of a PLC and exchanged ideas to find solutions to barriers impacting SENCO's special education leadership opportunities. The PAR framework was used as participants worked collectively as a group to drive discussion and inquiry. PAR is an approach that acknowledges the need to involve participants in the design and implementation of the research to study areas of interest that directly impact the participants (Canlas & Karpudewan, 2020; Vollman et al., 2008). PAR intends to (a) determine what can be learned about barriers impacting special education leadership and (b) where improvements are needed (James et al., 2008). PAR provides opportunities for participants to access their practices through reflection to make positive changes throughout the study while giving all participants an equal

say in the study's actions and findings (James et al., 2008). A critical idea of PAR is the participation of all group members as a collective unit to be decision-makers of the study, responsible for how the study moves forward (Canlas & Karpudewan, 2020; McIntyre, 2008).

PAR is a cyclical process that supports participants' learning and understanding while implementing changes based on data. PAR is enacted in four steps. These steps include the following: (a) diagnose the problem to be studied. In this stage, the learning community evaluates what is currently known about leadership influences on special education practices; (b) acts on the findings by creating courses of action (participants work individually and as a group to identify ways to measure the findings); (c) measure how actions affect the group being studied, and in this stage, participants measure the results of the actions taken, and (d) participants reflect on the process to brainstorm situations and additional steps (James et al., 2008). The participants completed the PAR process in two cycles, lasting 6 weeks each. Using grounded theory, the data created from the PAR group is generated through repeated data analysis to break it down into smaller parts to develop new concepts or patterns of change (James et al., 2008).

To strengthen the study, I recruited two critical friends who assisted in providing an outsider's view of the study. Critical friends, as described by Costa and Kallick in 1993, are those who can be relied upon and who make use of a variety of perspectives to take the time to grasp the work that is being given and the objectives that the group is working toward (James et al., 2008). Critical friends must have at least the same expertise as the researcher to steer the conversation and provide a critique to be effective (Mat Noor & Shafee, 2021; Petroelje Stolle et al., 2019). Critical friends' primary role is to ask probing questions, acting as both direct and indirect participant observers and peer reviewers (Costa & Kallick, 1993; Mat Noor & Shafee,



2021). In this study, the critical friends I selected analyzed the data through a planned course of action to examine what barriers exist for campus administrators regarding their ability to support special education programs and how principals use SENCOS as change agents. The critical friends used their outsider perspective to assist with developing a PLC that was used as a channel for collaboration between SENCOS and the campus community.

The critical friends I recruited had vital roles as they provided support by examining each step of the study while holding the group accountable to remain on task to ensure the quality of the group's work (James et al., 2008). Critical friends supported the PAR group in achieving validity, credibility, and reliability as they critique the study through a nonbiased approach (Mat Noor & Shafee, 2021). The critical friends' roles were supported through a critical friends protocol (see Appendix A) adapted from James et al. (2008).

### **Population**

The study focused on a middle school in a large Texas school district. The middle school has an enrollment of 900 students, with 120 students receiving special education services and 130 who receive accommodations under Section 504. The middle school has four administrators, 50 full-time teachers, and eight special education teachers. A purposeful sampling of campus administrators, special education teachers, and general education teachers was done.

### **Study Sample**

This study used purposeful sampling to understand the barriers affecting principals leading special education programs effectively. Maximum variation sampling was used to identify critical elements and variable features from diverse stakeholders to provide informed decision-making (Suri, 2011). The purposeful sampling method of maximum variation sampling allowed the study to collect data from a diverse range of participants (Suri, 2011). The diverse

nature of PAR groups adds further data for the study as it engages participants' unique backgrounds and experiences as data points (James et al., 2008). The study used current campus relationships to develop a PAR team to generate and share information. The sample size for study participation and data collection is eight to 12 participants.

The campus principal was contacted via email and phone to gauge interest in recruiting participants for the study. Once the principal agreed to the study, I collaborated with the principal to identify campus staff who could be potential study participants according to job roles that influence special education to meet maximum variation. Purposeful sampling seeks out participants who have knowledge of the subject (Suri, 2011). I wanted to ensure that I had a sample size reflective of administrators, special education teachers, and general education teachers to develop a PAR team to work collaboratively through various perspectives within a research PLC. Given that PAR considers the context and substance of the researched topic, PAR is an effective method of professional development (James et al., 2008). A flyer was created with an open-question survey distributed via email within the campus selected by the principal and myself to gauge staff interest in the study. The survey gathered data on potential participants' gender, age, ethnicity, current job role, years of experience, and certification area. Once initial participation data was collected, a purposeful sampling of participants was then selected to reflect staff participation and experience with special education programs and job roles.

### **Materials and Instruments**

The study used an open-ended question survey to gather information concerning participants' experiences and LMX roles within a middle school campus (see Appendix B). The initial survey was sent electronically from my personal computer and email address. Once the participants were selected through purposeful sampling, the participants were invited to

participate in a PLC through the PAR framework through a follow-up email (see Appendix C). PAR uses focus group interviews conducted with several participants at one time (James et al., 2008). Participants completed the PAR procedure in two separate cycles, which ran for a period of 6 weeks. Meetings were held biweekly via face-to-face and Zoom virtual meeting platforms, with each PLC lasting 60 minutes. Each PLC was transcribed and recorded.

Semistructured interviews with probing questions were used to drive discussions (see Appendix B), with additional questions produced based on the participant's responses throughout the PAR process. In line with PAR, participants supported the creation of interview questions, establishing themes, and interpreting findings (Littman et al., 2021). Semistructured interviews allowed for deeper clarity of participants' responses to understand when a response is given that has not been stated before or when the response is contrary to the response of other participants (James et al., 2008). MAXQDA, a thematic analysis software, was used to transcribe and code the qualitative data from interviews. The qualitative analysis supported the PAR group in comparing data.

For this study, I used a template for triple-entry reflections (see Appendix D) as a reflective journal to assist in recording my thinking process. The reflective journal supported decision-making as the PAR group progressed through each cycle. The reflective journal is comprised of five steps that include (a) deciding on the method of recording data, (b) starting with a date, (c) deciding what issues need to be reflected on, (d) reviewing progress, and (e) recording conversations with the PAR group (James et al., 2008).

### **Data Collection and Analysis Procedures**

Prior to collecting data, I requested an exempt review and permission from the institutional review board (IRB) at Abilene Christian University and site approval through the

Texas school district's research guidelines process. The study used purposeful sampling to collect data on staff experiences within the middle school. The campus principal was contacted via email (see Appendix E). With the collaboration of the principal, a solicitation flyer with a link to a survey was created and sent out via email (see Appendix F) to staff outlining the study's purpose and invitation to participate in the open-ended survey and obtain consent. All potential participants in the online survey were required to identify gender, age, ethnicity, current job role, years of experience, and certification area. I used email and interviews to collect information as part of this qualitative research design. Once participants were identified, all participants met in one PLC through a series of meetings that were held face-to-face and via Zoom to allow for participant flexibility and digitally recorded responses. In the event of participant absences or weather-related issues, part of the PLC reconvened. All data was collected using my personal computer with One Drive and Microsoft Office applications. The interviews were transcribed and coded with the assistance of the MAXQDA software.

In the first PLC meeting, the PAR group discussed the study's purpose and objectives. The participants introduced themselves to each other and discussed what they would like to learn from this study. The PAR group created agreed-upon ground rules for collaboration to ensure the participation of all PAR group members. The PLC started the discussion with a semistructured guided question, seeking input from all participants, with further questions to be developed. Further semistructured questions were also used to further the discussion (see Appendix B).

Using grounded theory, participants engaged in interviews within the PLC, using the PAR framework to create data to generate themes for constant comparison to identify categories (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). While there is no specific time to develop categories and theory, I followed Creswell's (2011) recommendation of collecting at least 20 to 30 interviews during data

collection to reach data saturation. Once themes were identified, the study followed the six learning cycles of PAR presented by Visser and Kreemers (2020). These learning cycles included (a) identifying a theme, (b) conducting a situational analysis of the environment, (c) discussing the situation with the participants, (d) formulating an action plan, (e) implementing the action plan, and (f) the PAR group evaluating the action plan (Visser & Kreemers, 2020).

Participants engaged in the PAR framework through a series of cycles to generate initial themes. Participants' responses were collected using in vivo coding to create codes based on the actual language used by the participants. Data collection occurred within the PLC framework and PAR process. The study used a data collection planning matrix (see Appendix G) to identify what the PAR group needs to know, why it is relevant, and why data is needed to answer the question. After reviewing the transcripts, I used the phases of thematic analysis developed by Braun and Clarke (2006) to identify themes. The thematic analysis is comprised of six phases, which include (a) familiarizing the data, (b) generating initial codes, (c) searching for themes, (d) reviewing themes, (e) defining and naming themes, and (f) producing the report (Nowell et al., 2017).

I generated, through theoretical sampling, a list of key concepts that influenced collaboration between learning members. The thematic analysis supported a flexible approach that could be modified to yield a diverse set of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; King, 2004; Nowell et al., 2017). In this study, I used grounded theory to analyze the data using the constant comparative method to determine similarities and differences in the data. The qualitative data analytic strategy of in vivo coding produced codes aligned with grounded theory data to create categories and identify patterns (Creswell, 2011). In this study, I used data to identify themes in further detail to explore how principals can influence SENCOs serving as leaders of the learning

organization as specialists for inclusive special education practices. This study used the systematic design to analyze data using open, axial, and selective coding to develop a visual picture of the theory generated (Creswell, 2011).

PAR becomes cyclical as it alternates between investigation, action, and reflection (James et al., 2008). Action within PAR occurred through a variety of activities that were participant-driven and relied on the participant's knowledge of the subject matter being studied (Guy et al., 2019). The study used the action research model of knowledge implementation, where knowledge is gained from the research study and used to influence change (Guy et al., 2019; Mosher et al., 2014). PLC meetings were held weekly via face-to-face and Zoom virtual meeting platforms in two 6-week cycles. The flexibility in meeting arrangements supported participation in the study. Throughout each cycle, participants repeated the procedure in the six PLC meetings while expanding their knowledge and expertise and then applying modifications based on the findings (James et al., 2008). PAR within a PLC is a process that involves participants focusing on reflection and collaboration with each other to bring about change to a specific practice (Guy et al., 2019).

Participants created a PLC that can be utilized on campus to create change for special education leadership. I achieved data validation through triangulation by collecting data from multiple sources to develop thematic categories for constant comparison data analysis. Through grounded theory, data was analyzed through cycles as the participants met to review data to create new ideas (James et al., 2008). Participants developed reflective questions to work through the PAR process. The PAR study supports participants' decision-making processes on campus.

As the researcher, I used grounded theory to build the trustworthiness of the results through several vital components, as the PAR group is challenged by critical friends to ensure

data is credible. Credibility is important because it addresses the relationship between the data and how the data is presented. For PAR to be credible, relevant and available data must be used to produce positive results for participants (James et al., 2008). Transferability is the ability to transfer findings from one location to another. Dependability is achieved as readers can examine the procedures used in the research process. Confirmability establishes that the results are developed from the data to form conclusions. Audit trails provide evidence for the decisions made throughout the study. Lastly, grounded theory utilizes reflexivity to reflect on the data recorded based on personal values and insights to determine a theory (Nowell et al., 2017).

In this study, I used the analyzing force fields template (see Appendix H) to aid the PAR group in confronting forces that may impede the study based on PAR group members' previously held beliefs. The purpose of analyzing the PAR group's force field template is to identify the focuses that work for and against the study while developing strategies to support overcoming barriers to the study. The analyzing force field took place in three steps, which included (a) identifying forces that create tension between the ideal and the status quo, (b) introducing the imbalances to enable change, and (c) moving changes forward and create stabilizing influences (James et al., 2008). The analyzing force fields template was used to collect data to create cognitive dissonance, enabling the PAR group to reevaluate their current thoughts and actions (James et al., 2008).

Critical friends assisted the PAR group in establishing validity, credibility, and reliability in the study as they objectively evaluated the research. A critical friends protocol (see Appendix A) adapted from James et al. (2008) supported the critical friends' roles. The critical friend's protocol consists of four phases that include (a) the reconnaissance; in this phase, I worked with my critical friends to identify the study's problem and the critical friends' roles in addressing the

research; (b) planning; in this phase, with the collaboration of critical friends, I developed a plan of action to study what the critical friends observed; (c) acting and observing; during this stage, the critical friends acted as observers both directly and indirectly, as they support the study through an active partnership; and (d) reflecting; I reflected on the research process with my critical friends during this stage (Kemmis et al., 2013; Mat Noor & Shafee, 2021).

### **Ethical Considerations**

Participation in the research study was voluntary, and all participants were expected to agree to and sign the informed consent document to establish participation and confidentiality. Participants' identities remained private and confidential. PAR is a collaborative research design, providing participants with opportunities to work together through the PLC, thus enabling the participants to know information about each other. Participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identity and participation. All participants received full disclosure on the purpose of the study and the use of collected data.

Risks to the participants included time commitments to attend PLC meetings and interviews, which occur after school hours. There was a risk to personal time that must be considered. Campus leaders participated in the study; there was a risk to their identity as they shared experiences through PAR. Participation in the study did not expose participants to any predicted risks to their health. I requested an exempt review and permission from the IRB at Abilene Christian University and a request through the school district's research guidelines process (see Appendix I).



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

### ***Assumptions***

I used the surfacing assumptions activity (see Appendix J) to identify assumptions and reflect on the findings. An assumption of the study was that all participants were honest during the study by professionally answering the semistructured questions to limit bias and add value to the discussion. Another assumption was that all participants had the knowledge and experience in education to facilitate as a PLC on special education and supported one another in the PAR procedure. As the researcher, I also assumed that the critical friends supported the PAR participants by taking time to understand the study's context and asking probing questions that point out assumptions that may be made (James et al., 2008). The study assumed that all participants supported the confidentiality of the research study and were respectful of the diversity and experience of the participants.

### ***Limitations***

The study had several limitations, notably arising from the sample size of the population studied because it focused on one high school in Texas, with a sample size of 11 participants. The study was impacted by the participation of the participants. In PAR, participants may have limited their responses to the questions due to administrator and peer involvement. Also, a potential limitation of this study was researcher bias because I was conducting research within a district I was familiar with regarding a subject that I work in. I, therefore, worked to reduce researcher bias by collaboratively working with the principal to identify potential study participants. I also worked collaboratively with the PAR team through the cyclical process to develop questions to guide the study. I also worked to limit researcher bias by using in vivo

coding to identify and interpret the exact wording and phrases that participants used in the way they intended, as suggested by Saldaña (2014).

### ***Delimitations***

The study was delimited to a middle school in Texas. The target school was chosen based on state reporting criteria that revealed areas of possibility for growth. Because the study focused on the barriers that hinder SENCO's leadership, recruitment was delimited to active school district workers certified by the state of Texas to operate in their chosen job roles. The PLC framework was chosen as a field of study to serve as a campus guide for establishing future learning opportunities.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter describes the research design and methodology used throughout the study. The study's purpose was to understand the barriers that exist for campus administrators regarding their ability to support special education programs and how principals use SENCOs as change agents. Using qualitative methodology found in grounded theory, I explored the lived experiences of the study's participants to understand how experiences shaped outcomes. PAR within a PLC provides opportunities for the selected participants to access their practices through reflection as the PAR team works collaboratively to make positive changes. Chapter 4 provides a comprehensive overview of the study's findings.

## Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive study was to understand the barriers that exist for campus administrators regarding their ability to support special education programs and how principals use SENCOs as change agents. The grounded theory approach allowed the PAR group to identify how leadership preparation programs affect an administrator's ability to influence special education effectiveness and best practices to support their special education staff. The study collected data through interviews with campus-based staff members engaged in PAR. Study participants responded to an initial semistructured questionnaire (see Appendix B) to start the conversation on understanding the barriers for campus administrators regarding their ability to support special education programs and how principals use SENCOs as change agents. Data were coded to identify themes to understand the barriers affecting administrators' support for special education programs.

This chapter briefly discusses the qualitative grounded theory, PAR, and PLC approach used to conduct the study. The chapter describes the study, participants, and data collection methods. The findings are consistent with the study's objectives and provide answers to the questions posed by the research.

### Research Questions

**RQ1:** How do campus administrators support SENCOs as applied to special education law and best practices?

**RQ2:** How do campus administrators apply their special education training to the administrator role?

**RQ3:** What are the barriers that prevent campus administrators from being effective communicators with SENCOs?

**RQ4:** Is participatory action research (PAR) effective in creating a forum where teachers can serve as change agents?

### **Grounded Theory, PAR, and PLC**

The qualitative grounded theory study approach used throughout the research procedure increased the interaction of the PAR group participants. Results from the semistructured interviews, scheduled discussions, and observations provided a theoretical sampling of data grounded in the participants' lived experiences shaping outcomes (James et al., 2008). Grounded theory can enable the PAR group to develop a substantive theory that can be applied to their specific real-world situation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The PAR participants participated in 12 biweekly meetings as a PLC to find solutions to barriers impacting SENCO's special education leadership opportunities. The PAR framework supported participants as they worked collectively as a PLC to drive the discussion to (a) determine what can be learned about barriers impacting special education leadership and (b) determine where improvements are needed (James et al., 2008). The PAR group interacted in the PLC by following the four steps of PAR: (a) diagnose, (b) act, (c) measure, and (d) reflect. All participants provided input throughout the cyclical PAR process.

The PAR group's data was analyzed; we then discussed the identified themes for further exploration. The triangulation of data was consistent throughout the study. Themes revealed why barriers exist for administrators to support special education and for SECNOs to act as change agents on the campus. An overview of the research results from the PAR team is provided.

### **Study Site**

Participants of this study included members of a 6A high school in Central Texas. The high school has a student population of 2,600. Fourteen percent of the student population is

identified as special education, 32% is economically disadvantaged, and 15% are Section 504. The campus sits within a large district that has experienced great growth in its student population and class sizes. The PAR group met weekly to understand the barriers that exist for campus administrators about their ability to support special education programs and how principals use SENCOs as change agents.

### **PAR Team Participants**

The PAR team participants included teachers and administrators from the PAR team site (see Table 1). The PAR team members comprised verified levels of content area expertise in their current positions and previously held positions and earned degrees. Sixty teachers and eight administrators were asked via email to participate in the study. Eighteen teachers and five administrators responded. Participants were then selected using a purposeful sampling method of maximum variation to ensure participation from a heterogeneous population within the school. The study population consisted of three administrators, three general education teachers, and five special education teachers. The study population averaged 13 years of educational experience. The diversity in the PAR team enabled verifying opinions of the problem studied. Throughout the PAR team PLC, the team came ready to discuss the study. The PLC was a safe place for the PAR team to reflect, ask questions, and problem-solve.

**Table 1***PAR Participants*

PAR team	Role	Gender	Years in education	Certification
Participant 1	Administrator	Female	15	Business Education 6–12, Generalist 4–8, Principal EC–12
Participant 2	Administrator	Male	14	Science 4–8, Principal EC–12
Participant 3	Administrator	Female	9	ELAR 4–8, Reading Specialist EC–12, Principal EC–12
Participant 4	Teacher	Female	5	EC–12 Special Education, EC–6 Core Subjects
Participant 5	Teacher	Female	23	Elementary Self-Contained, Generalist 4–8, Special Education EC–12
Participant 6	Teacher	Female	16	Mathematics 4–8, Mathematics 7–12, ESL, Principal EC–12
Participant 7	Teacher	Female	16	Special Education EC–12, Core Subjects 4–8
Participant 8	Teacher	Female	17	Special Education EC–12, Generalist EC–6, Generalist 4–8, Science 4–8, ESL
Participant 9	Teacher	Female	15	PE, Reading/English 4–8, 9–12, Special Education EC–12
Participant 10	Teacher	Male	4.5	ELAR 7–12, ESL
Participant 11	Teacher	Male	8	Social Studies 7–12, Principal EC–12

## **Trustworthiness**

Transferability, dependability, conformability, and credibility constitute trustworthiness (Nowell et al., 2017). The coding process used supports transferability. Dependability can be found through the study process and use of the PAR and PLC structure. Conformability is established through the conclusions derived from the data. Credibility is found in addressing the relationship between the data and how the data is presented. James et al. (2008) found that credible PAR requires using appropriate and readily available data to improve the lives of those participating. Trustworthiness was also increased by adopting in vivo coding; exact phrasing and phases were identified via participants' intentions to address researcher bias (Saldaña, 2014).

Grounded theory was used to develop the trustworthiness of the results through several vital components. The use of grounded theory employed reflexivity through journaling to reflect on the facts collected to develop a theory based on personal values and insights (Nowell et al., 2017). The PAR group was challenged by critical friends to ensure that the data was credible and to increase trustworthiness. Critical friends were used throughout the interview protocol to analyze the data and explore the next steps.

## **Journal Reflections**

The PAR team collaborated on a journal displayed on the whiteboard via a projector to collect thoughts on the data collection process. Through each meeting, the journal allowed the PAR team to share reflections, develop questions, and address the next steps. As questions were developed, PAR team members were given the opportunity to reflect on and answer the questions based on their lived experience of the problem. Journaling as a group enabled the PAR group to develop new ideas on the topic collaboratively, keep current with the discussion, and be personally involved in the study (James et al., 2008) as it progressed through the PLC. During

the data collection phase of action research, journaling also facilitated the formulation of measurement variables (James et al., 2008). Writing reflections as a PAR group aided in focusing the PLC meetings on the developing questions and next steps to ensure the PAR group worked collaboratively.

### **Data Coding**

Data were triangulated using the PAR data collection forms, journal reflections, and research. Data collection occurred within the PLC framework and PAR process. The qualitative data analytic strategy of in vivo coding produced codes aligned with grounded theory data to create categories and identify patterns (Creswell, 2011). In vivo coding aligned with grounded theory was used to collect actual words spoken by the participants to create categories and identify patterns (Creswell, 2011). MAXQDA software was used to collect and analyze the data. Grounded theory was enacted in three stages: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Once the codes were identified, the PAR group worked to identify themes.

### **Themes**

The triangulation of the PAR data collection forms, journal reflections, and research enabled the constant comparison of data from different sources. MAXQDA software was used to collect data and create in vivo codes to develop themes using keywords and phrases used by the PAR group. The developed themes were determined to be barriers that exist for campus administrators regarding their ability to support special education programs and how principals use SENCOs as change agents.

### ***Expectations of the SENCO Role***

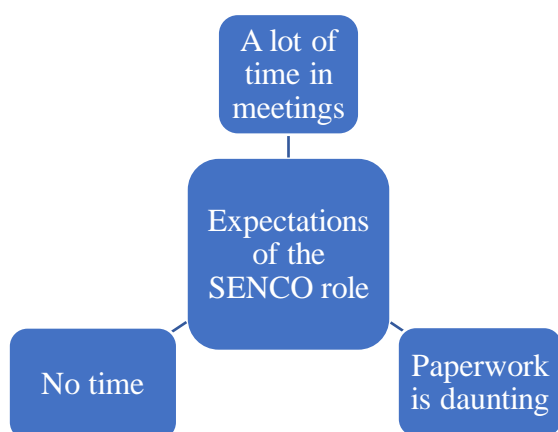
On the research site, the expectations of the SENCO were a major factor in their ability to influence change. It was determined that the SENCO, while acting as a campus administrator,



cannot often influence change based on their campus role. The SENCO is responsible for overseeing the special education process on campus, which requires them to attend IEP meetings and work with campus stakeholders to meet the needs of special education students. SENCOs work to identify needs, employ resources, cooperate with the campus community, and audit special education documentation for legal compliance (Fitzgerald & Radford, 2017). It was found through the interviews that SENCOs' participation in special education administrative processes negatively impacts their ability to serve as campus leaders (see Figure 1).

### Figure 1

*Expectations of the SENCO Role In Vivo Codes*



Participant 5 stated:

As a SENCO, we spend a lot of time in meetings and doing paperwork and administrative tasks, so we miss out on other staff members' interactions. The ARD meeting is required, and we act as the LEA, so we must attend. Furthermore, paperwork is a daunting task, especially at a high school, but it is a legal requirement, so there is no way around that either. Other staff do not have these legal requirements, so while they do not have to

manage this process, we do. They also do not understand the process, which makes it even more difficult because they think we just sit behind closed doors.

Participant 5 also said, “As an administrator of special education, sharing special education information with staff is difficult because there is no time. When we do share information, it is typically in the hallway or after an ARD.” Participant 2 said:

The expectation is for the administration team to meet, and special education is to be addressed at least once per month. To be honest, it turns into a compliance report more than an effective conversation regarding the identification of students.

It is evident through the PAR group that a once-a-month administration meeting was insufficient to impact special education outcomes.

### ***Influence of Education on Special Education Outcomes***

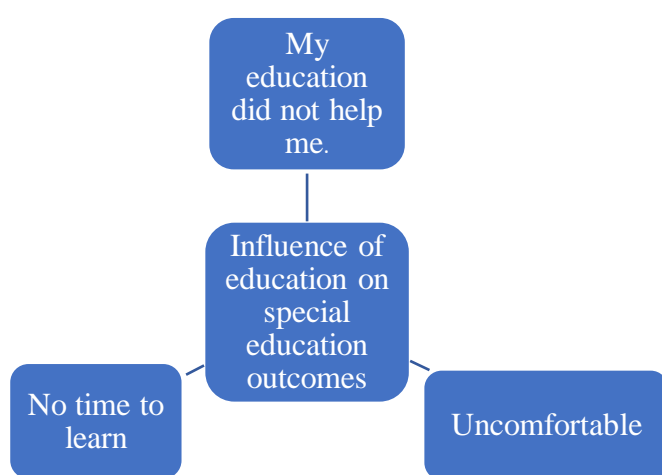
Throughout the PAR group, it was evident that some participants did not have the educational background to influence special education on the research site. The PAR group identified that not having a background in special education played a part in their inability to participate in special education objectives successfully. Participant 3 said, “Sometimes I feel uncomfortable discussing special education, not because I do not want to, but because I do not understand it. I was trained in general education pedagogy, so that is where I am comfortable.” When asked how their education prepared them for special education, Participant 11 said, “I only took one course in special education, so my education really did not help me.” Maggin et al. (2020) discovered that many administrators lack special education training to meet student and staff needs because their training programs do not target this area.

Participants noted that many in the PAR group lacked education in special education best practices and laws, which affected their ability to understand special education. The PAR group

also stated that while they come into the campus with limited special education experience, they would like to learn more about how to meet the needs of students who receive special education services. However, there is no time during the school day (see Figure 2). Participant 3 stated, “There is not enough time in the day to pursue knowledge in special education along with the job duties required of administration.”

**Figure 2**

*Influence of Education on Special Education Outcomes In Vivo Codes*



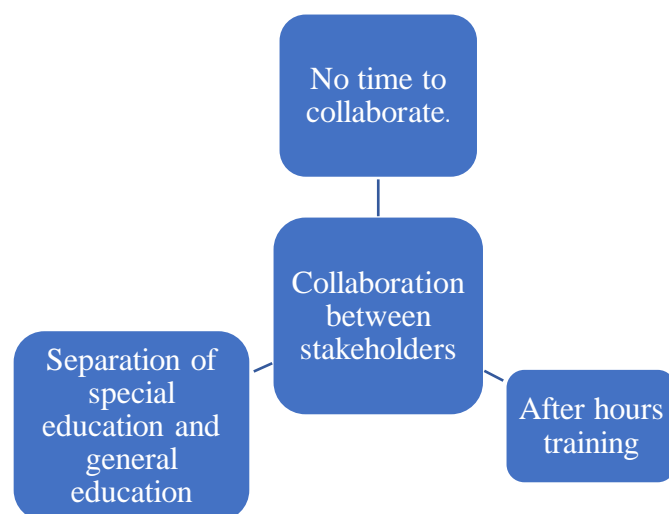
### ***Collaboration Between Stakeholders***

The PAR group identified the lack of time, lack of systems, and support from leadership as factors that impact collaboration between campus stakeholders (see Figure 3). As stated earlier, some of the PAR group found that due to job roles and campus obligations, there is insufficient time for participants to meet to review or learn special education processes. The part group also found there is a lack of systems that promote collaboration, such as program-specific PLCs. The PAR group agreed that a PLC would be beneficial in supporting and sharing special education knowledge in the research site but had reservations about how to conduct a PLC due to time restraints. Participant 6 said, “PLCs need to involve all stakeholders so that everyone can

learn from each other. The problem is most training and PLC happen in the evening, which affects people's personal time." Participant 2 said, "We need not separate special education and general education, but they need to work together. We have professional isolation when we separate the two programs. We need a forum where the two can work together."

### Figure 3

#### *Collaboration Between Stakeholders In Vivo Codes*



#### ***Leadership Support***

The PAR group found that while the research site has a supportive culture, collaboration opportunities are often missed due to the lack of special education knowledge and time.

Participant 2 said:

I work to serve as a role model for the staff to follow. As a leader, I know I set the tone of the campus, so I must work with them to achieve campus objectives. I have expectations for how we work toward common goals. I am an advocate for their needs, and I am always there if they need support.

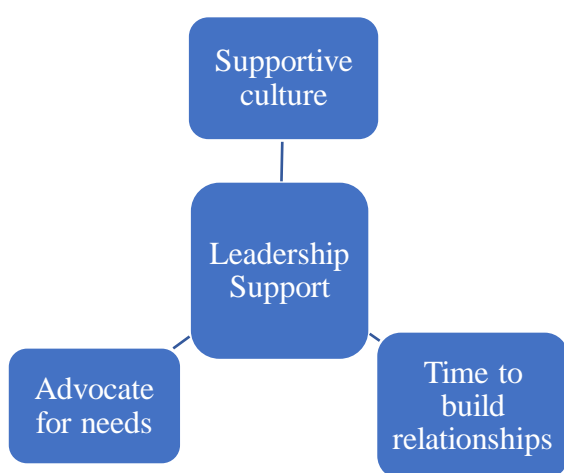
According to Atasoy (2020), to enable organizational transformation, school administrators must build and sustain a strong school culture. As the administration manages and

provides campus oversight, being available to offer support to staff supports LMX and transformational leadership behaviors (see Figure 4). Participant 6 said:

Our administration is always there when we need support and willing to engage in conversations. I feel motivated when I know that my admin care[s]; I have worked on other campuses when the admin could care less, so it makes a big difference.

#### Figure 4

##### *Leadership Support In Vivo Codes*



#### Overview of PAR Study

The PAR group met as a PLC after school in a classroom at the study site. Throughout the process, the PAR group worked collaboratively in the PLC by following the four steps of PAR: diagnose, act, measure, and reflect (James et al., 2008). All PLC meetings were recorded, transcribed, and coded. The PAR participants all brought their specific experiences in specialty areas to support the group discussion. Some of the PAR participants were unable to attend all the meetings due to scheduled school events. When participants missed meetings, their input was gathered at the next meeting. Some of the PLC meetings had to be rescheduled due to the

weather and end-of-year activities at the research site. The study was completed in the allotted time frame.

### **Critical Friend Interviews**

Two critical friends were invited to support the study as they had experience in the subject matter. Critical friend #1 was a coworker with experience in education at the campus and district levels. Critical friend #1 is a special education coordinator assisting campuses with special education oversight. This friend provided a neutral insight from the mindset of various perspectives based on held experiences. Table 2 is a summary of the interviews.

**Table 2***Critical Friend #1 Interviews*

Date of interview	Critical friend	Interview focus	Interview outcome and how outcome informs PAR study and personal leadership
04/18/2023	Critical Friend #1	Review meeting information and PAR study. Questions to ask for the next meeting.	My friend and I addressed concerns about participants sharing information in front of the admin. Would staff be comfortable expressing concerns? My friend was very supportive and helped to develop questions that could drive the discussion.
05/02/2023	Critical Friend #1	How do administrators use their leadership skills to inspire staff outcomes?	My friend discussed transformational leadership and LMX.
05/08/2023	Critical Friend #1	Professional development practices	We discussed professional development held on campus. We also developed questions to support the conversation.
05/13/2023	Critical Friend #1	Factors that influence time and administrator knowledge of special education.	We discussed how to find time to meet as a PAR group. Power hour is a way to meet during regular school hours, not to add more to staff plates. Admin needs more information on special education and ways to access information.

*Note.* Critical friend feedback took place throughout the PAR process. Adapted from

*Participatory Action Research for Educational Leadership: Using Data-Driven Decision Making to Improve Schools* (1st ed., p. 30), by E. A. James, M. T. Milenkiewicz, and A. J. Bucknam, 2008, SAGE Publications. Copyright 2008 by SAGE Publications (see Appendix A).

Critical friend #2 was invited to support the study as they have experience as an administrator overseeing the SENCO and special education programs on their campus. Critical friend #2 has previous experience in the classroom and participating in IEP meetings. This critical friend provided a neutral insight into the study as they provided an administrator's perspective. Table 3 is a summary of the interviews.

**Table 3**

*Critical Friend #2 Interviews*

Date of interview	Critical friend	Interview focus	Interview outcome and how outcome informs PAR study and personal leadership
04/17/2023	Critical Friend #2	Assumptions made by the PAR team. Next steps.	My friend discussed PAR and the next steps needed to move the discussion. Concerns that with the meeting on Fridays would PAR group members be able to participate due to extracurricular activities.
05/01/2023	Critical Friend #2	How to measure findings.	My friend reviewed identify codes and themes.
05/09/2023	Critical Friend #2	Supporting administrators.	My friend discussed how time is utilized on campus and its impact on training opportunities. They questioned if there was time to conduct a PLC and options that could be utilized to support collaboration.

*Note.* Critical friend feedback took place throughout the PAR process. Adapted from

*Participatory Action Research for Educational Leadership: Using Data-Driven Decision Making to Improve Schools* (1st ed., p. 30), by E. A. James, M. T. Milenkiewicz, and A. J. Bucknam, 2008, SAGE Publications. Copyright 2008 by SAGE Publications (see Appendix A).



## **PAR Team Meetings**

PAR group discussions focused on the components of the PAR process and PLC framework and the research questions.

### ***First PAR Team Meeting: April 14, 2023***

The PAR group discussed the study's purpose and objectives in the first PLC meeting. The participants introduced themselves and identified what they would like to learn from the study. The PAR group discussed the study's objectives and anticipated completion time frame. The reflective journal was placed on the overhead projector for the PAR group process throughout the study. The PAR group also discussed individual factors that might limit study participation, as some participants had other obligations and responsibilities that might impact participation. The PAR group created agreed-upon ground rules for collaboration to ensure the participation of all PAR group members. The agreed-upon norms for collaboration were as follows:

- Answer study questions and be honest.
- Participation in the discussion.
- Be respectful and value the opinions of the PAR group.
- Keep discussion on task and aligned with the study purpose.

The PAR group then started the discussion with semistructured guided questions (see Appendix B) to get the PAR group to start discussing the problem being studied. The PAR group started the cyclical process by using semistructured questions to diagnose the problem.

- How do campus staff perceive their administrator's ability to promote and support special education?
- What barriers does campus staff identity affect special education?

- How does your campus support special education?
- How did your education prepare you for special education?
- How does your campus use professional development to improve special education best practices?

The PAR group then agreed to focus on RQ1 to discuss administrators' supporting SENCOs regarding special education law and best practices. The PAR group's initial discussion was that most administrators do not have a background or education in special education; therefore, they do not understand the legal requirements SENCOs and teachers are legally bound to. Some members of the PAR group find that this lack of education in special education often creates conflict when student needs must be addressed.

RQ1: How do campus administrators support SENCOs as applied to special education law and best practices?

- The PAR group worked collaboratively to develop questions to support the study.
- What training do staff receive in special education laws and best practices?
- How often do administrators receive special education training?
- How is special education supported on campus?
- How is the SENCO utilized to support administrators' understanding of special education?
- Is the SENCO viewed as an expert in the area of special education?
- Does the campus have professional development for special education? General education?

The PAR group identified that the lack of training in special education has impacted administrators' ability to support SENCOs. The PAR group discussed the need for a PLC to

increase the collaboration between special education and the campus community. The PAR team decided to move forward with the research to explore ways to overcome barriers limiting administrators' support for SENCOS, special education law, and best practices. The PAR group felt this area needed further exploration to identify factors leading to support for special education at the research site.

***PAR Team Meeting: April 21, 2023***

After the PAR group identified the potential barrier of lack of training in special education for administrators, the PAR group utilized a data-planning matrix (see Table 4) to understand better the factors leading to support for SENCOS as change agents.

**Table 4***Data-Planning Matrix*

What do I need to know?	Why do I need to know this?	What kind of data will answer the question?	Where can I find the data?	What is my timeline for acquisition?
What training does the SENCO receive from the campus or district level?	Does the SENCO receive training that can be shared with the campus? Shared learning?	Qualitative data from meetings/PLCs.	District staff.	Prior to next meeting.
How does the SENCO share information from the district level with the administrators?	Does the SENCO have the opportunity to share information with administrators? Shared learning	Qualitative data from meetings/PLCs.	District staff.	Prior to next meeting.
How does the SENCO share information from the campus level with the SPED teachers?	Does the SENCO have the opportunity to share information with teachers? Shared learning.	Qualitative data from meetings/PLCs.	District staff.	Prior to next meeting.
What training do administrators receive in special education?	Is special education a topic in education programs?	Interviews.	District staff.	Prior to next meeting.

*Note.* Adapted from *Participatory Action Research for Educational Leadership: Using Data-*

*Driven Decision Making to Improve Schools* (1st ed., p. 82), by E. A. James, M. T. Milenkiewicz,

and A. J. Bucknam, 2008, SAGE Publications. Copyright 2008 by SAGE Publications (see

Appendix G).

Through the PLC, the PAR group addressed assumptions based on their beliefs about the barriers impacting SENCOS' utilization as change agents and administrators' knowledge of special education laws and best practices. The PAR group utilized the surfacing assumptions activity (see Table 5).

**Table 5**

*Surfacing Assumptions Activity: PAR Meeting April 21, 2023*

What you know or think you know about your topic.	Qualitative data available to verify this knowledge.
Campus staff relies on the coordinator to do everything without input from other administrators, sometimes working in dual roles.	Girelli et al. (2019)
College education does not prepare you for teaching special education.	Maggin et al. (2020)
My relationship with my administration has helped me to do my job, though my relationship is different from administrator to administrator.	Atasoy (2020) Bass (1996); Berkovich & Eyal (2016)
I feel supported by my administration most of the time, but they don't understand special education.	Lynch (2012); Roberts & Guerra (2017)

*Note.* The qualitative data sources supported the awareness of the noted assumptions. They also provided information on the barriers that prevent administrators from leading special education programs. Adapted from *Participatory Action Research for Educational Leadership: Using Data-Driven Decision Making to Improve Schools* (1st ed., p. 50), by E. A. James, M. T. Milenkiewicz, and A. J. Bucknam, 2008, SAGE Publications. Copyright 2008 by SAGE Publications (see Appendix J).

Throughout the PLC, the PAR group discussed the relationship between administrators and SENCOS and its impact on special education leadership. The PAR group researched and

discussed LMX to explore its impact on administrator and SENCO relationships. The PAR group also researched and discussed transformational leadership as a leadership style to influence change on the research site.

In this meeting, the PAR group collectively reviewed the reflective journal and utilized the analyzing force fields template (see Figure 5). Evident throughout the discussion was that some of the PAR groups were uncomfortable addressing areas of growth in their practice. The PAR group discussed the differing mindsets between the special education staff and their general education peers. Participant 1 said, “Sometimes I feel uncomfortable discussing special education, not because I do not want to, but because I do not understand it. I was trained in general education pedagogy, so that is where I am comfortable.” Participant 5 said, “The mindset of special education and general education is different and separate. Trying to get everyone to understand we are all in this together.”

**Figure 5***Analyzing Force Fields*

1. List the forces that work for change in the situation under study by the PAR group and those that work against it.
  - Admin is open to discussing areas for change.
  - Admin willingness to address areas of change based on staff needs.
  - SENCO leadership is not always present due to the responsibilities of the job role.
  - SENCO leadership must involve members of the learning community.
  - Campus staff are willing to buy into change to improve the current situation.
2. Brainstorm other data, communication systems, or actions that can be added to create a tipping point that propels change to occur.
  - Time is a major factor in collaboration.
  - Peer leadership opportunities.
3. List the major stakeholders, including yourself.
  - SENCOS
  - Administrators
  - Teachers
4. Reflect on the areas of action or change in personal and institutional behaviors that are likely to cause defensive behaviors.
  - Confronting beliefs around PLCs and areas of need.
  - Willingness of staff to admit that change is needed and act.
  - Understand why change is needed and its impact on the campus community.
5. List possible underlying motivations and ideals for education that can be enlisted to ease defensive behavior.
  - Support staff.
  - Provide opportunities for staff to voice concerns.
  - Seek out staff thoughts on change or need.
6. Note which motivation may be driven by an assumption. Do data exist that challenge the assumption?
  - The assumption that administrators do not know how to support special education.
  - Assumption there is not enough time to collaborate.
7. Brainstorm ways to confront defensive mechanisms in yourself and others.
  - Reminder of purpose.
  - Provide opportunities for opinions and concerns to be shared.

*Note.* Adapted from *Participatory Action Research for Educational Leadership: Using Data-*

*Driven Decision Making to Improve Schools* (1st ed., p. 137), by E. A. James, M. T.

Milenkiewicz, and A. J. Bucknam, 2008, SAGE Publications. Copyright 2008 by SAGE

Publications (see Appendix H).

Having open discussions as a PAR group in a PLC is intimidating for some; as the PAR researcher, I relied on the group norms of collaboration and valuing the participant's participation in the study. I ensured the PAR group's participation was vital to understanding the barriers that exist for campus administrators regarding their ability to support special education programs and how principals use SENCOs as change agents. The PAR group utilized the analyzing force fields template (see Figure 5) to identify forces working against change.

***PAR Team Meeting: April 28, 2023***

The meeting started with the PAR group reflecting on the analyzing force fields document created in the previous meeting. After analyzing the force fields document, the PAR group moved to RQ2.

RQ2: How do campus administrators apply their special education training to the administrator role?

The PAR group held a discussion to address RQ2. The administrators in the PAR group answered questions first as they were asked to speak on how they apply special education training to the administrator role. Participant 1 was the first to answer as they stated they have very limited training in special education, with most of their training coming during professional development at the beginning of the school year. Participant 1 said that they could not apply any training to the administrator role due to having limited subject area knowledge. They rely on the special education department to be experts and share information. Also noted was time as a factor, as there is limited time or availability to learn about special education.

Participant 2 followed up on Participant 1's statement by addressing that they support special education by providing the SENCO to address the administrators monthly. They also expect the SENCO to conversate with the campus intervention team to address areas of need.



Participant 3 stated that since they do not have formal training in special education, they hire staff who display subject area expertise and support them as needed. Participant 6 stated that since most administrators are not trained or have experience in special education, they do not understand the laws that must be followed. When there is a lack of an understanding of what the team does, it affects the SENCO's ability to lead effectively. Participant 6 said, "I feel like they do not apply the training they do receive because it often does not fit within what they want to do."

Participant 1 followed by arguing that there is not enough time in the day to pursue knowledge in special education along with the job duties required of administration. Throughout a given day, administrators can be pulled into different directions; they must rely on special education staff to lead special education objectives, but they understand that can make them appear uninterested in the needs of special education staff or students.

In this meeting, the PAR group acted on the discussion and observations to plan possible courses of action. The PAR group agreed with the previously identified need for professional development for special education to occur, supported by the leadership of the SENCO. The PAR group discussed possible ways to implement professional development and limit barriers that affect an effective PLC.

The PAR group identified two areas worth further discussion: the lack of time to focus on special education and the relationships between administrators and special education staff. Further discussion is needed to understand how relationships impact SENCO leadership opportunities. The PAR group agreed to examine LMX and transformational leadership, which were discussed in a previous meeting. The PAR group also agreed to explore opportunities that exist with time on campus to collaborate and train staff on special education needs and best

practices. The PAR group ended the meeting by completing a surfacing assumptions activity (see Table 6) based on the areas the PAR group agreed on in the previous meeting. Assumptions were identified in the areas of the allotted time for meetings and relationships between administrators and special education staff.

**Table 6**

*Surfacing Assumptions Activity: PAR Meeting April 28, 2023*

What you know or think you know about your topic.	Qualitative data available to verify this knowledge.
No one knows what we need. Staff forgets that students are in special education due to the amount of time.	Fitzgerald & Radford (2017)
Everyone has a lot of work on their plate.	Fitzgerald & Radford (2017)
Though it varies by administrator, my relationship with my administration has helped me perform my job.	Atasoy (2020) Bass (1996); Berkovich & Eyal (2016)
My administration mostly supports me, but they don't understand special education.	Tonich (2021) Lynch (2012); Roberts & Guerra (2017)

*Note.* The qualitative data sources supported the awareness of the noted assumptions. They also provided information on the relationships between administrators and special education staff.

Adapted from *Participatory Action Research for Educational Leadership: Using Data-Driven Decision Making to Improve Schools* (1st ed., p. 50), by E. A. James, M. T. Milenkiewicz, and A. J. Bucknam, 2008, SAGE Publications. Copyright 2008 by SAGE Publications (see Appendix J).

***PAR Team Meeting: May 5, 2023***

This week's PAR group PLC focused on Vermeulen et al. (2022) article, which discussed transformational leadership, LMX, and teacher behavior. As a group, we reviewed the terms transformational leadership and LMX, as some in the PAR group had no experience with the terminology. Once the group understood the terms, the PAR group agreed to move forward as the

group shared experiences with leadership that met the criteria of the definitions. It was discussed that LMX impacts relationships between administrators and staff. As the two parties interact on a regular basis, those interactions support increased opportunities for staff members to increase their campus involvement. These staff members are often given extra tasks and responsibilities with the administration's support. The PAR group agreed that LMX offers opportunities for SENCOs to act as change agents. The PAR group developed the following questions to identify LMX and transformational leadership opportunities exhibited on campus.

- What are LMX and transformational leadership?
- How does LMX influence administrative–SENCO relationships?
- How does transformational leadership influence your relationship with your special education staff?
- How do in-group and out-group memberships impact employee empowerment?

The PAR group agreed that the next step was to observe and reflect on LMX and transformational leadership opportunities on the research site. Through the discussion, I saw a high regard for some of the staff members' perception of their leadership, though it is not felt equally throughout the administration-staff relationships. Participant 5 said, "Some leaders are more supportive than others; I think they just do not know what we do, so it is hard for them to relate." This unequal feeling is closely tied to some administrators' lack of knowledge in special education, not necessarily leadership.

***PAR Team Meeting: May 12, 2023***

This week's meeting was to review the reflective journal to include observations made by the PAR group throughout the week. The group discussed examples of LMX and

transformational leadership they have seen or experienced throughout the week. This discussion led to the PAR group addressing RQ3.

RQ3: What are the barriers that prevent campus administrators from being effective communicators with SENCOs?

Throughout the discussion, the PAR group completed a surfacing assumptions activity (see Table 7) to explore barriers preventing campus administrators from effectively communicating with the SENCO.

**Table 7**

*Surfacing Assumptions Activity: PAR Meeting May 12, 2023*

What you know or think you know about your topic.	Qualitative data available to verify this knowledge.
Communication and lack of knowledge are missing. There is a lack of training.	Fitzgerald & Radford (2017)
There is a lack of collaboration between special education and general education.	Schechter & Feldman (2019) Blackwell & Lilly (2022) Cornelius & Gustafson (2021)
We need a change of mindset.	Cerit (2017) Eliophotou Menon & Lefteri (2021) Uhl-Bien et al. (2022)

*Note.* The qualitative data sources supported the awareness of the noted assumptions. They also provided information on barriers preventing campus administrators and SENCOs from effectively communicating. Adapted from *Participatory Action Research for Educational Leadership: Using Data-Driven Decision Making to Improve Schools* (1st ed., p. 50), by E. A. James, M. T. Milenkiewicz, and A. J. Bucknam, 2008, SAGE Publications. Copyright 2008 by SAGE Publications (see Appendix J).

Using the assumptions activity enabled the PAR group to identify what they assumed about RQ3. This activity led to a discussion on communication barriers and why they exist.

Some in the PAR group felt that barriers exist due to administrators' lack of knowledge in special education and not being sure how to communicate to support a program they are not training in. Participant 1 stated, "Sometimes I feel uncomfortable discussing special education, not because I do not want to, but because I do not understand it. I was trained in general education pedagogy, so that is where I am comfortable."

The PAR group discussed how the lack of time is a factor in communicating due to a large number of students and issues that must be managed daily. Participant 10 said:

I agree that time is an issue. I know how it is in the classroom; we have large classes and are always managing students, so we do not have time to meet to discuss every need.

With 120 students on my roster, I will be lucky to remember their names.

As a SENCO, Participant 5 stated that they spend the majority of their time in IEP meetings and doing paperwork. The focus on administrative tasks impacts their ability to interact and communicate with the staff. They feel that due to the legal requirements of the SENCO role, there is no way to limit the administrator's duties, and it is difficult for those not in special education to understand all that needs to be done.

The meeting was limited due to a major storm in the area. The research site was placed on shelter-in-place for 2 hours. The PAR group agreed to conduct an additional meeting to close out this meeting to ensure the PAR group was in place to complete the study.

### ***PAR Team Meeting: May 19, 2023***

This PAR meeting started by using the reflective journal and reviewing what was discussed at the previous meeting. The PAR group focused on identifying how to overcome barriers that impact communication. Throughout the discussion, time and lack of knowledge were identified as major influences on communication. The PAR group discussed PLCs and how

they are currently formatted on the research site. It was discovered that the site does not currently have a special education-specific PLC where SENCOs can collaborate with the campus community. Participant 2 stated that the research site does not meet as often as they would like to due to logistical issues. However, they do allow the SENCO to address special education needs during administration meetings and the beginning of the year meetings.

The PAR discussed what a PLC would look like and what steps would be taken to ensure an effective meeting. To answer this question, the PAR group developed the following questions to identify specific, actionable steps needed to conduct a PLC.

- What is needed in a PLC?
- Who is the attended audience?
- What does an effective conversation in a PLC look like?
- When would a PLC be held?
- Who will lead the PLC?

The PAR group then worked collaboratively to discuss and answer the developed questions. After the discussion, the PAR group identified that the following was needed to conduct an effective PLC.

PLC can be held during the campus Power Hour (flexible tutoring or lunch period for students and staff).

- PLC will occur once a month (every first Wednesday).
- All campus stakeholders are invited.
- SENCO and staff with specific areas of strength will lead the PLC.
- An agenda is needed for every PLC.

***PAR Team Meeting: May 23, 2023***

This final PAR group meeting began with a collective reflection using the reflective journal. The participants reviewed the previous meeting and discussion on an effective PLC. This discussion led the PAR group to answer RQ4, the final research study question.

RQ4: Is participatory action research (PAR) effective in creating a forum where teachers can serve as change agents?

Participant 1 said, "I would hope so, but I am questionable on what it can look like and if we can keep the momentum going to support it long term."

Participant 2 reported, "Yes, they can be effective when given opportunities and resources."

Participant 3 stated, "I like the idea of the PAR PLC led by the SENCO; I think it can have some real value to our campus."

Participant 4 commented, "I am not sure; I want to say yes, but I hope people participate."

Participant 5 said, "I think so. I would like to see the process followed through and continue, not stop after this study."

Participant 6 replied, "Absolutely, yes. I think it is a great tool to use. When people are involved, they take ownership of the problem, so yes, I think it will work because it supports the collaboration of different voices."

Participant 7 stated, "Yes, I think it can be useful to provide a space for special education leaders to share information."

Participant 8 said, "Yes if supported by leadership. PAR targets areas that concern teachers."

Participant 9 replied, “I feel like this is a method that can support collaboration; I feel safe sharing my opinions and feel like I am being heard.”

Participant 10 reported, “I think it can be beneficial if it involves more than just the special education teachers. It is an effective reflection tool that can be used.”

Participant 11 said, “PAR can be effective as it supports collaboration in a trusting environment. It targets those who are in the field and doing the work, so I think it can be a useful platform.”

This final meeting allowed the PAR group to reflect on the study and add any closing thoughts. The discussion began by reviewing the reflective journal used throughout the study. The participants were given time to collaborate and share their thoughts on the study and how they would like to move forward in the future. The group stated they enjoyed the collaborative experience of PAR as it enabled them to work with members of the research site they normally do not interact with. They agreed that they see a need to institute campus change that supports the SENCO as a leader who can share information with the campus community.

### **Chapter Summary**

The chapter described the study results, qualitative grounded theory, PAR, and PLC approaches utilized to convert open codes into new theoretical opportunities through the grounded theory methodology. Eleven campus-based participants provided insight and feedback regarding their experiences with identifying barriers that exist for campus administrators regarding their ability to support special education programs and how principals use SENCOs as change agents. Categories were developed through the PAR process. Interviews were semistructured within a PLC. MAXQDA software was used for a constant comparison of data throughout the process. The identified themes found in the study were (a) the expectations of the



SENCO role, (b) the influence of education on special education outcomes, (c) collaboration between stakeholders, and (d) leadership support. The study produced a grounded theoretical model that describes the relationships between the four research questions. In Chapter 5, I will discuss the study and the conclusions and recommendations.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations**

This study focused on the problem of administrators supporting special education programs and using SENCOs as change agents. The PAR group worked collaboratively within a PLC to study the problem. Using the PAR framework through the PLC process, the PAR group worked collaboratively in a cycle to diagnose, act, measure, and reflect. The PAR group identified barriers that exist for campus administrators regarding their ability to support special education programs and how principals use SENCOs as change agents. The research questions supported the study's purpose to encourage collaboration for SENCOs to serve as leaders of the learning organization. The study occurred at a secondary campus. A purposeful sampling of campus administrators, special education teachers, and general education teachers was used to collect data for the study.

The PAR group worked collaboratively through a series of PLC meetings to explore barriers that exist for campus administrators to support special education programs and how principals use SENCOs as change agents. The PAR group participants each brought multiple years of experience to support their perspectives of the problem. The PAR group participants worked through a theoretical sampling of data grounded in the participants' lived experiences to identify themes. This chapter presents the PAR research findings, which could aid in identifying and removing barriers that exist for campus administrators regarding their ability to support special education programs and how principals use SENCOs as change agents.

### **Discussion of Findings in Relation to Past Literature**

During this study, it was discovered that while administrators are vital to supporting SENCOs as change agents for special education best practices, many administrators lack the educational background needed. To meet the needs of students and staff, Maggin et al. (2020)

found that many administrators lack special education understanding. According to Bateman et al. (2017), many principal preparation programs have neglected to include special education-related topics, undermining their ability to prepare campus leaders to address special education issues adequately.

RQ1: How do campus administrators support SENCOs as applied to special education law and best practices?

During this study, while campus administrators were responsible for the education of all students, findings show they lacked the educational background and experience to successfully manage special education laws and best practices for the campus. This finding aligned with Roberts and Guerra (2017) and Sun and Xin (2020). Roberts and Guerra (2017) found that principals were unprepared to oversee special education programs due to their lack of understanding of special education policy and the impact of the student's disability on educational performance. Similarly, when it comes to campus administrators supporting special education, Sun and Xin (2020) noted that administrators' views on leadership and special education are frequently shaped by their training programs and previous experiences as teachers and mid-level administrators. The attitudes and perspectives of principals concerning staffing, student disciplinary policies, and services offered to students with disabilities are influenced by their knowledge of special education.

During this study, the PAR group discussed the impact of administrator educational programs on administrators' knowledge of special education law and best practices. This discussion led the PAR group to ask questions and reflect on their attended educational programs and PLC opportunities on campus to increase knowledge in special education. Bateman et al. (2017) stated that to manage special education programs successfully, principals must have a

comprehensive, fundamental comprehension of the scope of special education and the processes used to evaluate and educate students with disabilities. Through the PAR process, it became clear that the participants who identified as administrators had not received adequate training to be positioned to support SENCOs as applied to special education law and best practices.

Several studies have focused on identifying how preparation programs have failed to position administrators to support SENCOs. Maggin et al. (2020) noted that since training programs do not include this subject, many administrators lack the special education training necessary to support students with disabilities and the staff who serve them. The PAR group supported this finding through discussions and reflections on their own experiences. Bettini et al. (2017) found that principals frequently have difficulty creating professional development for special education teachers since they have limited experience in this area. Adding to that finding, Maggin et al. (2020) asserted that principals' lack of legal understanding impacts how SENCOs are utilized as instructional leaders on campus.

The PAR group discussed LMX and transformational leadership theories to understand how leadership affects an administrator's ability to support the SENCO. LMX is based on a social exchange between members of an organization (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Vermeulen et al., 2022). Northouse (2018) found that LMX uses in-group and out-group relationships to create a working environment that encourages collaboration through continuous high and low exchanges. The PAR group agreed that LMX affects SENCO leadership opportunities as the group discussed administrator-staff relationships. PAR revealed that SENCOs who are willing to engage with their administrators through purposeful relationship-building practices had more opportunities to lead compared to those who do not. At the same time, participants argue that due to SENCO job responsibilities, they have limited relationship-building practices with their

administrations compared to other campus community members. Curran and Boddison (2021) agreed with this finding as the authors argued that the job roles impact a SENCO membership in either the in-group or out-group. At the same time, Fitzgerald and Radford (2017) found that SENCO's workload was often overwhelming due to its caseload requirements, thus impacting time to work collaboratively with the campus community.

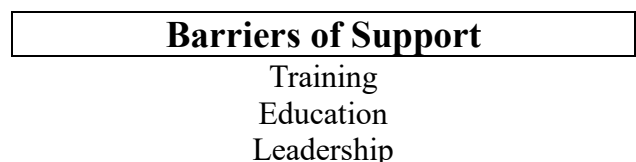
Through transformational leadership, the PAR group discussed how administrators motivate the campus community to meet the needs of the overall goals of the campus. Magaña-Medina et al. (2021) found that leaders motivate followers by establishing goals that surpass their immediate self-interests. The PAR group found that on the research site, administrators work closely with their staff to facilitate the merging of the staff's talents and the campus's goals. The PAR participants noted how campus administrators are always available to offer support by having an open door of communication and empowering staff to invoke change. Agreeing with this finding, Eliophotou Menon and Lefteri (2021) contend that transformational leadership theory is used to build the capacity of teams through employee empowerment. According to Cerit (2017), campuses with a positive work environment encourage employees to take on new responsibilities since they feel they have the freedom and support of the administration. However, just like LMX, transformational leadership is affected by the SENCO's job responsibilities and administrative leadership (Dulebohn & Hoch, 2017; Liao, 2017; Wong & Berntzen, 2019).

The PAR group identified that administrators' support for SENCOs as applied to special education law and best practices is impacted by the leader's educational background and leadership. PAR found that the knowledge administrators have in special education law and best practices are foundational in understanding the needs of SENCOs and how they need to be

utilized on campus. The PAR group also found that leadership opportunities are affected by the administration's leadership style and the job constraints of the SENCO job role, limiting opportunities for collaboration and support (see Figure 6).

## Figure 6

### *Barriers of Support*



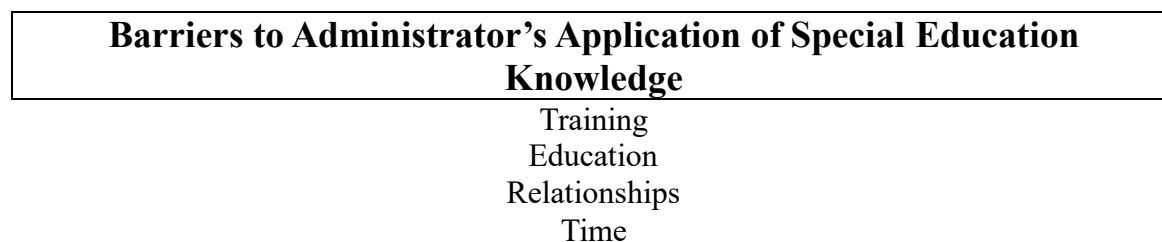
RQ2: How do campus administrators apply their special education training to the administrator role?

During this study, the administrators noted that they received limited special education training in their preparation programs. At the same time, the teachers also noted similar experiences. This finding is essential to the study as current administrators were once teachers and future administrators are currently in teaching roles. Participants who are knowledgeable about special education stated they had to go outside the school to receive training from either professional development or special education-specific certification programs. Most school administrators receive limited practical training, if any at all, in assisting students with special needs. Studies have found that administrators who lack special education training have difficulty managing special education programs that support inclusive practices (Bateman et al., 2017; DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003). Templeton (2017) confirmed that educational leadership and administrative training had left principals unprepared to handle special education programs.

The PAR group found that preparation programs have failed to adequately prepare campus administrators to lead special education programs. The PAR group identified limited special education training as a barrier preventing administrators from supporting the SENCO. To

support this finding, Maggin et al. (2020) found that many administrators lack the needed training to support special education programs and the staff who manage them. During this study, most administrators agreed that limited special education knowledge had impacted their ability to promote special education effectively. Instead, administrators rely on the SENCO and the special education staff to manage the program. Administrators agreed that this approach had impacted their perspective of special education as they tend to focus on other campus-related issues they are more familiar with. Girelli et al. (2019) confirmed that principals' views on special education impact how the SENCO is recognized and utilized on campus. At the same time, Smith and Broomhead (2019) found that SENCOS often struggled to drive special education policy when they were not viewed as leaders on the campus.

The PAR group identified that administrators could not apply special education training to the administrator job role due to not being certified in special education and receiving limited training once they became an educator. While some participants stated they had gained limited knowledge in special education since becoming an administrator, they still believe they are ill-equipped to support special education. Uhl-Bien et al. (2022) found that administrators set the tone as learning community leaders. At the same time, Tonich (2021) stated that administrators are responsible for establishing an organizational culture for education in their institutions to enhance all staff's performance and professional growth. The administrators who participated in the study noted that they would like to learn how to apply special education knowledge to the administrator role (see Figure 7).

**Figure 7***Barriers to Administrator's Application of Special Education Knowledge*

RQ3: What are the barriers that prevent campus administrators from being effective communicators with SENCOs?

Previous studies showed that SENCOs were utilized as mid-managers to facilitate communication channels throughout the campus community to support students with disabilities and the staff who support them. For example, Fitzgerald and Radford (2017) found that campus administrators should develop partnerships with the SENCO to establish communication channels on campus. Likewise, Schechter and Feldman (2019) found that the importance of communication channels enables administrators to develop partnerships that support best practices. Increasing communication opens the door for LMX behaviors, thus promoting relationships between administrators and their staff (Uhl-Bien et al., 2022).

The partnership between campus administrators and SENCOs is often uneven; SENCOs spend most of their time facilitating IEP meetings and administrative demands, thus limiting interactions between the two parties. Dobson and Douglas (2020) found that this limited interaction impacts the SENCO's perceived status as a campus leader. As stated previously, having limited interactions with campus administrators impacts LMX and transformational leadership opportunities for the SENCO. Transformational leadership and LMX interactions increase employee engagement as the administrators develop relationships with their staff and

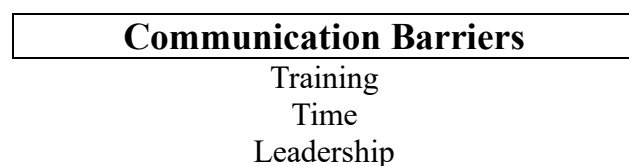


serve as role models, assessing talent and promoting leadership opportunities (Purnomo et al., 2020).

Through observations, discussions, and reflections, the PAR group worked closely to identify barriers preventing campus administrators from effectively communicating with SENCOs. The PAR group provided personal examples of barriers they have experienced in both the administrative and teaching job roles. Regardless of their role on the research site, all participants provided insight and contributed to the findings. Time was a commonality between the two participant groups, as both agreed that time was a barrier that prevented campus administrators from being effective communicators with SENCOs (see Figure 8).

### **Figure 8**

#### *Communication Barriers*



The PAR group noted that the absence of time negatively impacted LMX behaviors between administrators and staff. Participants found that high-quality exchanges are limited based on employee job roles and the needs of the campus. PAR found that the focus on job roles and campus needs increased low-quality exchanges, though not intentional by either party. Leader–follower relationships are low quality when formal role-defined interactions are included. Job definitions limit employee interactions, leading to poor communication (Cerit, 2017). Participants stated they enjoy learning from one another and are open to finding new ways to collaborate and increase LMX behaviors.

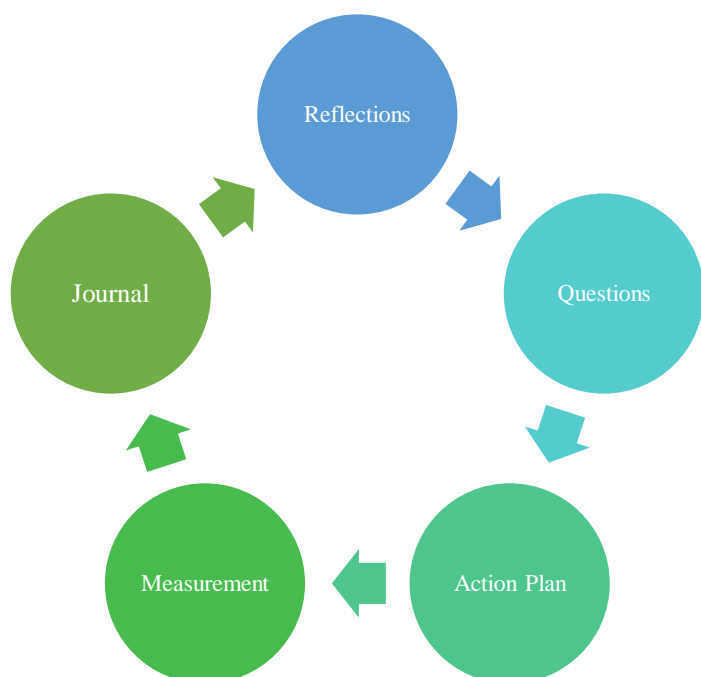
RQ4: Is participatory action research (PAR) effective in creating a forum where teachers can serve as change agents?

Even though this study revealed the lack of time and education as barriers to administrators supporting SENCOS, the PAR group believed that conditions on the research site supported a culture for teachers to serve as change agents. PAR research enabled participants to become aware of current opportunities and collaborate ideas for improvement (James et al., 2008). Cornelius and Gustafson (2021) found that administrators could create campus support groups to serve as special education teachers' PLCs.

The PAR group worked collaboratively throughout the PAR process as it focused on the discussion to understand the barriers for campus administrators regarding their ability to support special education programs and how principals use SENCOS as change agents. Using the PLC process and the PAR framework, the PAR group worked together cyclically to diagnose, take action, measure results, and reflect on their work (see Figure 9).

### Figure 9

#### *PAR Meeting Structure*



*Note.* Figure created by the author.

The PAR group agreed that PAR effectively creates a forum where teachers can serve as change agents. PAR noted that administrators' lack of knowledge and limited collaboration time would impact teachers' ability to act as change agents. The PAR group agreed that PAR would be effective if those concerns were addressed.

### **Limitations**

This study had several limitations. One limitation was that some PAR participants had conflicting schedules due to afterschool duties that required their attendance. This absenteeism impacted real-time discussions as the PAR group collaborated in the PLC. Any absent participant's input was collected via email or phone call to ensure their feedback was collected. The participant's feedback was shared with the PAR group at the next meeting through reflection and journal processes to ensure discussion participation.

Another limitation of the study was that the research was conducted at a single research site with 11 participants. All participants were from the research site, which could have impacted the PAR discussion. Some participants found it challenging to discuss concerns while their administrators and peers were present. Research findings are based on one site; therefore, a different research site may confirm or contrast the PAR findings.

Additionally, a limitation of the study was a weather emergency that took place during one of the meetings. The campus was placed on lockdown due to a tornado in the area. This had an impact on the PAR group as they were not able to conduct the meeting as initially planned. The PAR group agreed to conduct an additional meeting to close out this meeting to ensure the PAR group was on pace to complete the study.

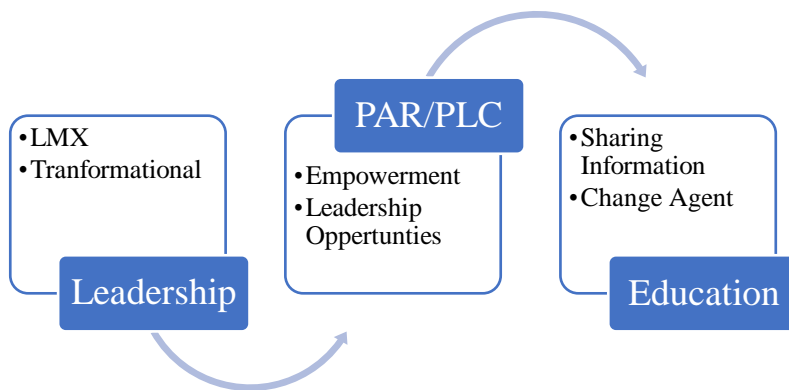
## Recommendations

The research showed that while administrators desire to learn more about special education laws and best practices to support their SENCOs, time and educational experience are barriers they must work to overcome. The PAR participants agreed that there is a need for specific special education training to support the staff in managing special education laws and best practices. The PAR group also agreed that additional staff duties must align with what they are already responsible for. Adding more to the teacher's workload should be considered and avoided.

The following theory (see Figure 10) was developed based on the findings of this qualitative grounded study. The figure shows the relationship between leadership, the PAR/PLC process, and increased educational opportunities for collaboration. Administration teams can utilize this theory to support SENCOs as change agents on their prospective campuses.

**Figure 10**

*Developed Theory*



*Note.* Figure created by the author.

Based on the findings, focusing on areas to support SENCOs as change agents should be considered. LMX behaviors should be used to build high-quality exchanges between administrators and SENCOs. These interactions can occur during regularly scheduled meetings

between administrators and SENCOs to ensure that each side shares information. Administrators must consider proactively reaching out to their SENCO to engage in LMX behaviors. Due to the duties of the SENCO, many do not have time to initiate interactions with their administration.

Also, based on the findings, it is recommended that transformational leadership be used as a means for campus administrators to empower SENCOs as leaders of the learning organization. Once LMX behaviors have been established, transformational leadership provides opportunities for administrators to inspire their SENCO to look beyond self-interest and meet the campus's needs. To initiate transformational leadership behaviors, administrators should empower their SENCOs to service leaders within the campus by providing opportunities for SENCOs to lead professional development. Having the SENCO lead a PLC will develop them as leaders as they grow in their ability to communicate and transcend the needs of the campus. At the same time, members of the leadership community will see them as leaders as they take on more responsibilities with the administration's support.

Focusing on special education, PLC is recommended to share information with the campus community during school hours, not after or during planning time. The study showed that the staff are busy and may reject another thing added to their plate. Providing PLC during school hours will increase commitment as it does not require staff to attend after hours. This campus has a "Power Hour" block of time split in half and used for study hall and lunch. This time section is recommended monthly during the study hall period as a staff PLC. The campus can hold a round-robin PLC format to address multiple campus concerns during this period without adding more to the day.

Using PAR to conduct research effectively yields valid, credible, and trustworthy results (James et al., 2008). PAR is a tool that can be used for professional development as it seeks

solutions to real-world problems through the lens of those affected. Using the participants' lived experiences, PAR provides an opportunity to discover the perspectives of a vast array of staff to ensure everyone is heard. For future research, it is recommended that novice PAR teams use the structure presented in this research to support the meeting process.

Lastly, a recommendation would be to conduct similar research at other sites. This research was conducted at one secondary campus. It is recommended that the study be held at an elementary campus site to compare results. Conducting a PAR study at different research sites should open the study to explore the problem from other perspectives further.

## **Conclusions**

This study was designed to understand the barriers that exist for campus administrators regarding their ability to support special education programs and how principals use SENCOs as change agents. This study identified the education and experience administrators bring to the administrator role to support SENCOs as a significant barrier. While this study did not address how to improve preparation programs for administrators, it did work to address how to empower SENCOs and create learning opportunities for administrators and the campus community.

The study also found that campus administrators and staff do not have time within the normal functions of their job roles to engage in PLCs, as a significant barrier to professional development opportunities. As many educators come into the teaching and administration roles with limited knowledge of special education laws and best practices, time must be allotted to enable them to learn in areas they are not familiar with. Professional growth must be a priority for all campus stakeholders to position SENCOs as leaders of the learning organization and support the needs of the campus.

Lastly, these two barriers further hinder the relationship between administrators and SENCOs, thus creating another barrier. The relationship between administrators and SENCOs must be prioritized through LMX and transformational leadership. Building relationships with their SENCOs should be a significant priority for administrators who seek to understand how to impact change in special education on their campus. Doing so will show that the SENCO is a valuable campus community member, ready to support the administration as a change agent.

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**Appendix A: Critical Friends Interview**

Date of Interview	Critical Friend	Interview Focus	Interview Outcome and How Outcome Informs PAR Study and Personal Leadership

### **Appendix B: Semistructured Interview Questions**

1. How do campus staff perceive their administrator's ability to promote and support special education?
2. What barriers does campus staff identify that affect special education?
3. How does your campus support special education?
4. How did your education prepare you for special education?
5. How does your campus use professional development to improve special education best practices?

### **Appendix C: Participant Recruitment Letter**

Hello,

I am doing a research study entitled “Understanding Barriers That Exist to Campus Administrators’ Support for Special Education Programs and How Principals Use Special Education Needs Coordinators As Change Agents.” The purpose of the study is to understand the barriers that exist for campus administrators regarding their ability to support special education while developing their special education knowledge to assist SENCO as middle-level leaders. To qualify to participate, you must be currently employed as an administrator or teacher.

Participation would require about 12 biweekly meetings, lasting 60 minutes each of your time to participate, and you will work collaboratively within a PLC with eight participants, along with me, the primary investigator. Interviews will be recorded and securely stored.

If you are interested in participating, please *\*use this link\**, and you will be presented with a Consent Form via Adobe Sign with more info.

Sincerely,

Kevin Lanxon  
Primary Investigator



**Appendix D: Triple Entry Reflections**

	What Happened?	How Does This Inform Your PAR Next Steps?	What Have You Learned About Your Leadership?
Event #1			
Event #2			
Event #3			
Event #4			

### **Appendix E: Principal Email**

Principal,

I am contacting you to ask you to participate in a collaborative research study to understand the barriers that exist for campus administrators regarding their ability to support special education programs and how principals use special education need coordinators as change agents.

Your participation in this study will include working collaboratively in a PLC with eight campus-based participants to formulate and answer interview questions, interpret data, and discuss outcomes. If you have questions, please feel free to contact me by email at xxxxx@acu.edu or call me at xxx-xxx-xxxx.

Please reply to this request by (date). I am grateful for your time and consideration in advance.

Kevin Lanxon

**Appendix F: Initial Participant Background Questionnaire**

Name:

Gender:

Age:

Ethnicity:

Years of teaching experience:

Years of special education experience:

Years of administrative experience:

Current role:

Area(s) of certification:

### Appendix G: Data-Planning Matrix

**Working Purpose Statement:**

**Working Research Question(s):**

What do I need to know?	Why do I need to know this?	What kind of data will answer the question?	Where can I find the data? Who can I contact for access?	What is my timeline for acquisition?

1. Ethical issues associated with your area of study:
2. Validity or trustworthiness of your study:
3. Role in study:

## Appendix H: Analyzing Force Fields

Purpose:

1. List the forces that work for change in the situation under study by the PAR group and those that work against it.
2. Brainstorm other data, communication systems, or actions that can be added to create a tipping point that propels change to occur.
3. List the major stakeholders, including yourself.
4. Reflect on the areas of action or change in personal and institutional behaviors that are likely to cause defensive behaviors.
5. List possible underlying motivations and ideals for education that can be enlisted to ease defensive behavior.
6. Note which motivation may be driven by an assumption. Do data exist that challenge the assumption?
7. Brainstorm ways to confront defensive mechanisms both in yourself and in others.

## Appendix I: IRB Approval

**Date:** March 13, 2023

**PI:** Kevin Larxon

**Department:** 17205-ACU Dallas CGPS, ONL-Online Student

**Re:** Initial - IRB-2023-37

*Understanding barriers that exist to campus administrators' support for special education programs and how principals use Special Education Needs Coordinators as change agents.*

The Abilene Christian University Institutional Review Board has rendered the decision below for *Understanding barriers that exist to campus administrators' support for special education programs and how principals use Special Education Needs Coordinators as change agents*. The approval is effective starting March 13, 2023.

**Admin Check-in Date:** --

**Expiration Date:** --

**Decision:** Approved

**Category:** 7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

**Research Notes:**

**Additional Approvals/Instructions:**

Upon completion of this study, please submit the Inactivation Form within 30 days of study completion. If you wish to make any changes to this study, including but not limited to changes in study personnel, number of participants recruited, changes to the consent form or process, and/or changes in overall methodology, please complete the Modification Form. If any problems develop with the study, including any unanticipated events that may change the risk profile of your study or if there were any unapproved changes in your protocol, please inform the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs and the IRB promptly using the Incident Report Form. All approval letters and study documents are located within the Study Details in Cayuse IRB.

The following are all responsibilities of the Primary Investigator (PI). Violation of these responsibilities may result in suspension or termination of research by the Institutional Review Board. If the Primary Investigator is a student and fails to fulfill any of these responsibilities, the Faculty Advisor then becomes responsible for completing or upholding any and all of the following:

- If there are any changes in the research (including but not limited to change in location, members of the research team, research procedures, number of participants, target population of participants, compensation, or risk), these changes must be approved by the IRB prior to implementation.
- Report any protocol deviations or unanticipated problems to the IRB promptly according to IRB policy.
- Should the research continue past the expiration date, submit a Continuing Review Form approximately 30 days before the expiration date.

<https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/?ik=264a704b8b61e6e-pf&search=alisp&rrh=d-th&read-f:1760260365995122369&siml=msg-f:1760260365995122369>

23, 11:09 AM

myACU Mail - IRB-2023-37 - Initial: Initial - Expedited --ACU

- When the research is completed, inform the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs. If your study is Expedited or Full Board, submit an Inactivation Form.
- According to ACU policy, research data must be stored on ACU campus (or electronically) for 3 years from inactivation of the study, in a manner that is secure but accessible should the IRB request access.
- It is the investigator's responsibility to maintain a general environment of safety for all research participants and all members of the research team. All risks to physical, mental, and emotional well-being as well as any risks to confidentiality should be minimized.

For additional information on the policies and procedures above, please visit the IRB website <http://www.acu.edu/community/offices/academic/osp...> or email [osp@acu.edu](mailto:osp@acu.edu) with your questions.

Sincerely,

Abilene Christian University Institutional Review Board

### Appendix J: Surfacing Assumptions Activity

The purpose of this study is:

What you know or think you know about your topic.	Qualitative data available to verify this knowledge.	Quantitative data available to verify this knowledge.	Rate on a scale of 1–10, where 10 constitutes a convincing argument and 1 is a pure assumption.

Reflective Questions:

1. Have you recently investigated a topic by searching the Internet for new resources?
2. What is exciting and what is frustrating about investigating resources?
3. What standards do you apply to determine the credibility of your resources?