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# An Exploration of One School Leader's Experience of Creating a School Culture that Fosters Inclusion for Students in Special Education

Stephanie L. Chattman  
*Georgia State University*

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## ACCEPTANCE

This dissertation, AN EXPLORATION OF ONE SCHOOL LEADER'S EXPERIENCE OF CREATING A SCHOOL CULTURE THAT FOSTERS INCLUSION FOR STUDENTS IN SPECIAL EDUCATION, by STEPHANIE L. CHATTMAN, was prepared under the direction of the candidate's Dissertation Advisory Committee. It is accepted by the committee members in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree, Doctor of Education, in the College of Education and Human Development, Georgia State University.

The Dissertation Advisory Committee and the student's Department Chairperson, as representatives of the faculty, certify that this dissertation has met all standards of excellence and scholarship as determined by the faculty.

---

Sheryl Moss, Ph.D.  
Committee Chair

---

Yinying Wang, Ed.D.  
Committee Member

---

James Kahrs, Ed.D.  
Committee Member

---

Date

---

William L. Curlette, Ph. D.  
Chairperson, Department of Educational Policy Studies

---

Paul A. Alberto, Ph.D.  
Dean  
College of Education and Human Development

## **AUTHOR'S STATEMENT**

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Stephanie Lucille Chattman  
Department of Educational Policy Studies  
College of Education and Human Development  
Georgia State University

The director of this dissertation is:

Sheryl Moss, Ph.D.  
Department of Educational Policy Studies  
College of Education and Human Development  
Georgia State University  
Atlanta, GA 30303

## CURRICULUM VITAE

Stephanie L. Chattman

ADDRESS: 30 Pryor Street, Suite 450  
Atlanta, GA 30303

### EDUCATION:

Ed.D.	2017	Georgia State University Educational Policy Studies
Ed.S.	2013	Georgia State University Educational Policy Studies
M.Ed.	2010	Georgia State University Educational Policy Studies
B.A.	1997	University of Alabama at Birmingham Sociology

### PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE:

2014-present	Principal Evansdale Elementary
2011-2014	Assistant Principal Laurel Ridge Elementary
2005-2011	Interrelated Teacher Hawthorne Elementary

### PRESENTATIONS AND PUBLICATIONS:

Chattman, S. L. (2010). *How to Use Primary Sources in Social Studies*. Presented at the DeKalb County School District's Teacher's Academy.

Chattman, S. L. (2011). *How to Make Co-Teaching Work*. Presented at the DeKalb County School District's New Teacher's Academy.

### PROFESSIONAL SOCIETIES AND ORGANIZATIONS

2009-2017 Alpha Delta Kappa

AN EXPLORATION OF ONE SCHOOL LEADER'S EXPERIENCE OF CREATING A  
SCHOOL CULTURE THAT FOSTERS INCLUSION FOR STUDENTS IN SPECIAL  
EDUCATION

by

STEPHANIE CHATTMAN

Under the Direction of Sheryl Moss, Ph. D.

ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** This study aimed to analyze a school culture's response to the principal creating an inclusion program for students with disabilities. The present study specifically analyzed the principal's traits of social justice leadership and how she applied them to fostering an inclusion program. The study also examined the principal's actions to create an inclusion program and the characteristics of the school culture.

**Method and Analysis:** The study was conducted at one southeastern, urban K-5 public elementary school in a large school district. A case study design was used to guide data collection in a systemic manner and grounded theory was used to guide data analysis. Multiple data

sources were collected through semi-structured interviews, observations, and a review of artifacts. Open coding, axial coding, and selective coding strategies were utilized to allow for emerging categories with which a constant comparative analysis was used to compare against existing theoretical frameworks.

**Findings:** The following unique emergent categories were identified (a) equity mindset (b) exceeding minimal compliance and (c) tiered support system. Discussion of the findings, implications for research and practice, and limitations of the results are provided. Suggestions for future inquiry are also included.

**INDEX WORDS:** Inclusion, School culture, Social justice leadership, Special education

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A Dissertation

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Degree of

Doctor of Education

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in

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Georgia State University

Atlanta, GA  
2017



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## DEDICATION

I could never have gotten to this point in my life without God. He has guided me down this crazy path called life. There have been many times I did not know where I was going but I had to trust and had faith in God. I feel so blessed to have been part of this doctorate program and I want to thank God for all of the many opportunities that he has granted me.

This dissertation is dedicated to very important people in my life: *my children and my husband*. They have always stood by me, no matter what I took on.

To my children, you inspire me every day to be the best that I can be. Thank you for understanding that time spent writing was a sacrifice we all had to make, but it would be worth it in the end. Thank you for seeing me as a role model and learning that hard work pays off.

To my husband, you have always been my biggest supporter. You never complained when I had to spend time working; instead, you encouraged me to do my best.

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# **1 THE INTERSECTION OF INCLUSION, SCHOOL CULTURE, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE LEADERSHIP**

Educating students with disabilities has evolved immensely throughout history. Initially, students with disabilities were isolated and institutionalized. Society's perception was that it was not necessary or beneficial to invest time or resources into this group of people (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015; Dybwad, 1990; Winzer, 1998). Direct advocacy and litigations caused changes in federal legislation (Griffith, 2015; Lloyd & Lloyd, 2015). Due to the civil rights movement, students with disabilities became part of the public educational system. Our current system has evolved to the level that educators work as teams to create individual learning plans for students with disabilities. The academic curriculum is modified based upon student's specific needs, and accommodations are made to address their disabilities (Hernandez, 2013; Wright & Wright, 2009). Special education laws mandate that students enrolled in special education be given an equitable education in the general education classroom to the greatest extent possible (Colber, 2010). General education classes are considered to be the least restrictive environment (Fleischer, Zames, & Zames, 2012). This classroom model allows for students with disabilities to be educated with their non-disabled peers. This model is based on an ideal known as inclusion.

For the purpose of this study, inclusion is an educational philosophy that encourages members of the school community to embrace all students regardless of their exceptionalities (Katzman, 2007). Implementing inclusion involves changes in curriculum, staffing, the physical environment and the attitudes of all stakeholders. School leaders are responsible for initiating

these changes. To make changes, the school leader must believe in inclusion and equity for students with disabilities. An equitable and optimal education for all students and philosophy of social justice leadership are aligned (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014).

The concept of social justice school leadership has emerged within the last two decades in response to the shifting demographics of society, increased achievement gaps of underserved populations, accountability pressures, and high stakes testing (Jean-Marie, Normore, & Brooks, 2009). Theoharis (2007) defines social justice leadership whereby principals "make issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically and currently marginalized conditions in the US central to their advocacy, leadership practice, and vision" (p. 223). Leaders with a social justice orientation create a strategic plan that seeks to inform and educate stakeholders about inclusion. These leaders work to transform a school culture that embraces inclusion to support students with disabilities (Cohen, 2015). Hence, inclusion can substantially affect school culture. School leaders must find a way to infuse inclusion into school culture for students with disabilities to be successful.

According to Coulston and Smith (2013), school culture and inclusion rely on each other to create the greatest impact on students. School leaders must have a positive attitude regarding inclusion for it to work. The attitude of school leaders is critical in shaping school cultures that embrace inclusive practices to meet the social, academic, and emotional needs of all students (Peterson & Deal, 2016). Attitudes of all stakeholders are developed based on the support they receive in an inclusion program. Avramidis and Norwich (2002) found that the most influential factor that leads to positive attitudes toward inclusion related to support from parents, teachers, and school leaders as well as physical support such as instructional resources, teaching materials, and technology resources.

School leaders should investigate and generate solutions on how to provide support to promote inclusion within the school culture. If leaders do not support inclusion, stakeholders view the model in a negative light (Ball & Green, 2014). Support is crucial for inclusion to increase student achievement (Billingsley, McLeskey, & Crockett, 2014). Professional learning is needed to train staff on how to work with students with disabilities as well as each other in an inclusion program. Educational resources are necessary for the general education classroom in order to serve all students in this model. Time is needed for staff to collaborate and plan for instruction. There should be an adequate amount of staff to meet the needs of all students (Cook & Friend, 2010; Cosier, 2010; Costley, 2013; DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014; Kluth, 2010). School leaders play a critical role in providing support for teachers and students which shape an inclusive school culture (Little & Dieker, 2009; Styron & Styron, 2011).

Students with disabilities are placed in the general education classroom more since the latest revision of special education laws. There is often an absence of general training about students with disabilities in leadership preparation programs (Bateman & Bateman, 2002). There is also a lack of common understanding of language. There is no formal definition of inclusion in any law; therefore, inclusion means different things in different school districts (DeMatthews and Mawhinney, 2014). Leadership programs which are supposedly designed to prepare future administrators to be the "experts" in education rarely provide depth to issues related to children with disabilities (Capper, Theoharis, & Sebastian, 2006; Riester, Pursch, & Skrla, 2002). School leaders must get proper training on how to prepare teachers to work with students with disabilities.



For the purpose of this dissertation, I am conducting a case study to present a perspective on one school culture responded to a principal's efforts to create an inclusion program for students with disabilities using social justice leadership. This study will be useful because it will allow practitioners and universities to explore the lived experiences of one practitioner who has embraced social justice leadership and used it as she attempts to create an inclusive environment.

### **Guiding Questions**

The following research questions will guide my study.

- How does one school culture respond to its principal's efforts to create an inclusion program for students in special education?
- What actions does this leader use in attempts to create a school culture that promotes inclusion for students in special education?
- What are the characteristics of this school culture?
- What skills does this leader use to infuse inclusion into the school culture effectively?

### **Review**

#### **The historical context of educating people with disabilities.**

The records of organized advocacy for students with disabilities and the evolution of special education began a century ago. Reformers began this endeavor by establishing legal rights and ensuring training and education for people with disabilities. These actions began the process of changing societal attitudes about this marginalized group (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015). To learn from the past, we must continue to use it as a reference today.

Dating back to the 1800's, the majority of societies believed people with disabilities were inhumane and deviant. They shunned people with disabilities by hiding them away in institu-

tions and hospitals (Carey 2009; Winzer 1998). By the 1900's, with the advancement of scientific and medical technologies, people became more interested in people with disabilities. Society had become more aware, informed, and motivated to educate children with disabilities. Organizations to teach and train medical professionals about the untapped cognitive abilities of people with disabilities began to emerge (Wright & Wright, 2009). Unfortunately, even with these advancements, little progress was made until the middle of the twentieth century.

The civil rights movement was the primary influence on the evolution of special education laws. Ignited by the 1954 Supreme Court ruling in *Brown versus the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, separate but equal schools became unconstitutional (Hernandez, 2013; Minnesota Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities, 2007; Wright & Wright, 2009). This landmark ruling provided a blueprint on how to advocate for people with disabilities (Banks, 2006; Hernandez, 2013; Wright & Wright, 2009). The civil rights movement was only the beginning of the fight for educational rights for people with disabilities. It took over a decade for advocates to gain legal rights for students with disabilities. Disability advocates teamed up with other disenfranchised groups to demand equal opportunities for people with disabilities (Wright & Wright, 2009). The struggle that people with disabilities have faced is similar to other disenfranchised groups. Local activists demanded national initiatives to address the barriers confronting the disabled community. Parent advocates began demanding their children be taken out of institutions, and placed into neighborhood schools (Vaughn, 2003).

In the 1970's, disability rights activists lobbied Congress and marched on Washington to include civil rights language for people with disabilities into the 1972 Rehabilitation Act (Fleischer, Zames, & Zames, 2012). The law passed, and for the first time in history, people with disabilities had legal protection. The new law extended rehabilitation services to all individuals

with disabilities, gave priority to those with severe disabilities, provided for extensive research and training for rehabilitation services, and coordinated federal disability programs (Hernandez, 2013).

Federal legislation in the 1970's made a profound impact on public education. Federal funding was mandated for special education when Congress passed The Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) of 1975. Under this law, students with identified disabilities were to receive a free and appropriate education (FAPE) as well as an individualized education plan (IEP). The IEP includes instructional goals and objectives, an appropriate educational placement, and criteria to be used in evaluations (Wright & Wright, 2009). The IEP was designed to ensure that all students with disabilities received an education with accommodations and modifications unique to their specific needs. As a result, the legislation mandated access to education for people with disabilities. Despite this mandate, in actual practice, many students were still isolated from their non-disabled peers (Wright & Wright, 2009).

In 1990, legislation renamed EAHCA to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). In 1997, IDEA was reauthorized to require the inclusion of students with disabilities in statewide and district-wide assessments, measurable IEP goals and objectives, and functional behavioral assessment and behavior intervention plans for students with emotional or behavioral needs (Wright & Wright, 2009).

IDEA states that a child with a disability has the right to FAPE in the least restrictive environment (LRE). The guidelines detailed within the LRE mandate that a child with a disability must receive his education in the school in his geographic attendance area, to the maximum extent appropriate, with supportive services (Fleischer, Zames, & Zames, 2012). Children with

disabilities have the right to participate in classrooms with their non-disabled peers unless the IEP committee decides it is not in their best interest because of their unique needs.

Each school must ensure that LRE is available to meet the needs of students with disabilities. The entire spectrum can range from general education classes with special education consultative services to home-based instruction. The resource setting, in which students with disabilities split their time between a self-contained room and a general education classroom is in the middle of the spectrum (McLeskey, J., Landers, E., Williamson, P., & Hoppey, D., 2012). Specialized schools and home-based instruction are other educational options for students with disabilities. Home-based instruction involves the delivery of educational services by school district personnel within a student's home. This educational model differs from homeschooling, which is usually delivered exclusively by a parent (Zirkel, 2003). These services are primarily for students who are too medically fragile to attend school outside the home. Specialized schools focus on students with a range of disabilities. Most schools specialize in one type of disability; it is rare to find schools that serve every disability (Quality Assessment, 2016).

The LRE and inclusion are often used interchangeably, but they do not mean the same thing. The word inclusion does not exist in IDEA, and case law rarely references it. No federal appellate court has held that inclusion in the general education classroom is required or a right of all students with disabilities. According to researchers (Griffith, 2015; Hernandez, 2013; Kluth, 2010), the inclusion debate began in the 1990s due to students with disabilities having more access to their neighborhood schools. The evolution of inclusion has resulted in a dramatic increase in a number of time students with disabilities spend in general classrooms (Yadav, 2015). IDEA was amended in 1997 and guaranteed more than access to education for students with dis-

abilities. It ensured the rights to a quality education. This legislation provides a free and appropriate public education for more than five million children with disabilities and prohibits states from eliminating educational services to students with disabilities. Changes in IDEA occurred again in 2004 to align it more closely with the general education No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. The revision mandated equity, accountability, and excellence in education for children with disabilities (Wright & Wright, 2009). This revision is aligned with social justice leadership.

### **Social justice leadership.**

Since the 1954 ruling of *Brown v. Board of Education*, there has been an intrinsic link between social justice and education (Pazey & Cole, 2013). The guiding principles of social justice were the foundation for the movement that facilitated this law. The principles include providing equity, celebrating diversity, and providing opportunities for all (Furman, 2012). Advocates have used this philosophical concept to fight for the rights of numerous marginalized groups. The theory of social justice leadership has evolved over the last two decades. Several researchers have discussed what social justice means and have defined it (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014; Furman, 2012; Jansen, 2006; Theoharis, 2007). For the purpose of this study, the definition of social justice leadership is "making issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically and currently marginalized conditions in the United States central to their advocacy, leadership practice, and vision" (Theoharis, 2007, p. 17). Social justice leadership requires action to identify oppressive practices and replaces them with equitable ones (Furman, 2012). Social justice leadership requires a leader who takes risks, questions decisions made for the majority, and implements innovative practices.

As the needs of students have progressed throughout history, so has the role of school administrators. It has become more involved, carrying a greater weight of responsibility. The role

has evolved from a managerial position to an instructional leader, one that is responsible for the continuous advancement of students as well as professional development of staff to educate diverse groups of students (Davis & Darling Hammond, 2012; Lynch, 2012). School leaders are responsible for determining the needs of all students and ensuring resources are put in place to meet those needs. The lens of social justice leadership shapes how leaders view students' needs and how they choose to allocate resources. Social justice leaders continually work to improve instruction so that all students have equitable opportunities to excel (Dantley & Tillman, 2006; Furman, 2012; Rivera-McCutchen, 2014; Theoharis, 2007; Theoharis & O'Toole, 2011). Social justice supports a process built on respect, care, recognition, and empathy (Theoharis, 2007). School leaders have to first critically reflect on their beliefs to ensure they do not perpetuate any biases towards students (Kemp-Graham, 2015; Miller & Martin, 2015). Social justice leaders can then demonstrate their beliefs through actions, skills, habits and competencies that are continually being created, questioned, and refined. They must evaluate school policies, identify oppressive and unjust practices, and substitute them with equitable ones. School leaders should not only recognize inequality but should also have the necessary competencies to take actions in ways that replace preexisting structures of inequality with more equitable structures. Social justice leaders employ the democratic processes to engage marginalized communities. They create these processes by being reflective in their practices, creating a collaborative environment, and implementing best practices proven to close the achievement gap among their students (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2015).

When social justice leaders take action to create a more inclusive school for students in special education, they redistribute resources, create goals, and shift their vision to support the cause (Cambron-McCabe & McCarthy, 2005). When considering ways in which socially just

leaders can address the needs of students with disabilities, Theoharis' (2007) four components of social justice leadership provide direction. These components include advancing inclusion, access, and opportunity; creating a climate of belonging; improving core teaching and curriculum; and raising student achievement. Utilization of this framework, however, is not possible without a strong understanding of special education and special education law. School leaders must make a concerted effort to understand special education laws and how to use them to gain full access to education for students with disabilities.

In addition to the law, it is critical that leaders move beyond compliance to advocacy for these students to reach their highest potential. Social justice school leaders embrace this way of thinking to ensure the academic success of all children, regardless of their disabilities (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014, Theoharis, 2007). School leaders who promote inclusion can influence school culture by communicating values, sharing beliefs, conveying attitudes, modeling behaviors, providing supports, and addressing problems and concerns related to inclusion (Lewis & Doorlag, 2003). Social justice leaders shape school cultures by enacting policy and procedures that deter inequalities based on religion, race, or disabilities (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014). Transforming school culture is the key component of developing an environment that fosters inclusive practices for students in special education.

### **School culture.**

The environment defines a school's culture, facilitated by its mission, and nurtured by its purpose (Banks, 2006; Carroll, Fulmer, Sobel, Garrison-Wade, Aragon, & Coval, 2011; Dumay, 2009). A school's culture consists of underlying social meanings that shape beliefs and behaviors over time. School culture determines the mission, vision, priorities, goals and objectives of a school. School culture affects how problems are solved, the implementation of new ideas, and

how people work together. Culture keeps the focus on what is important. The culture of a school breathes life and defines where meaning takes place.

The formation of a school culture is a complex process that includes many variables including interactions, rituals, routines, influence, and hierarchy (Turan & Bektas, 2013). Stakeholders, including staff, parents, students, and community partners along with school leaders are all involved in the development of school culture (Ball & Green, 2014; Carroll et al., 2011).

The values and beliefs of a culture are internalized and expressed in three levels where collections take place (Hall, 1990). Artifacts are the first level of school culture. They are representations of what stakeholders see, hear and feel. Artifacts include physical objects, such as documents and buildings, but also how people interact with one another. It encompasses how individuals interact with each other and routine behavior. All stakeholders observe this level including people outside of the organization. Some examples of artifacts in a school are the master schedule, the instructional curriculum, and the educational settings that are available. It is also how the front office staff greets you when you walk in the door, how people solve conflicts, and how they spend their day. Artifacts represent the beliefs and values of an organization (Hall, 1989). Artifacts will have a distinct look in an inclusive school culture. The master schedule will reflect collaborative planning time for general and special education teachers to plan lessons together. There will be multiple versions of the curriculum to include accommodations and modifications for students with disabilities. Inclusive classroom models will be available for students with disabilities. Students with disabilities are part of the general education instead of isolated and diversity is celebrated.

The middle layer represents the expression of the values and beliefs. In this level, people share their values and beliefs in a trusted environment. Individual members of the community



achieve real harmony and maintain it in this layer lying just below the surface (McMaster, 2015). Values and beliefs are relayed through daily operations, protocols, and procedures. They are interpreted by conversations in a faculty meeting, parent conferences, and fundraisers. Values and beliefs are intermingled through daily life, and they show what is important within an organization. In an inclusive school culture, values and beliefs revolve around social justice. All students including students with disabilities are provided an equitable education. All stakeholders are valued for their strengths they contribute to the school community.

The third level of this model is the assumptions on which culture is based. These assumptions are often not clearly expressed or articulated. It is referred to as the common sense of the school culture (McMaster, 2015). They are elements that are taken for granted, but if someone new comes to the school culture and does not abide by these assumptions, then they are immediately seen as an outsider. As the culture of the institution is made up of many individuals, on a deep level, these people share core values. In an inclusive school culture, the assumption is students with disabilities should be included in the general education model as much as possible. Individual needs are always taken into consideration, and students with disabilities are seen as part of the norm of the culture. It would seem unnatural if they were not included. An example is an ideal of always focusing on school improvement and serving the "whole child" and placing it as an important aspect of a school's culture. It is that sharing that creates the collective culture (Fullan, 2007; Levin, 2008; Schein, 2010).

It is clear that school culture is associated with students' academic achievement. According to Dumay (2009), there are four ways to measure school culture: collaboration, innovation, emphasis on disciplines and academic focus. School leaders should evaluate if their teachers make time to collaborate and share new ideas regularly. They should also evaluate if teachers

are concerned about students' negative behaviors as well as their academics. They should also take into consideration if teachers have high expectations for their students.

School culture is critical to the successful improvement of teaching and learning. The culture of an organization plays a dominant role in an exemplary performance of students with disabilities (Deal & Peterson, 2016). In study after study, when cultural patterns did not support and encourage school reform, changes did not take place (Deal & Peterson, 2016). Inclusive school reform looks not only at students with disabilities, but at all marginalized groups, and prioritizes full-time access to the general education curriculum and peer groups (Cook, Bennett, Lane, & Mataras, 2013). The focus of the school culture must be providing students the services and supports they need within the context of general education for all students to reach their social and academic potential. The staff must have a collective understanding they are responsible for all students' success including those with disabilities (Ball & Green, 2014).

By contrast, educational experiences for students with disabilities improved in schools where customs, values, and beliefs reinforced a strong, educational mission, a sense of community, social trust among staff members, and a shared commitment to staff improvement (Deal & Peterson, 2014). Research on school improvement and change highlights the central importance of the culture in enhancing and improving curriculum, instruction, and professional development. A school with a strong, shared mission is more likely to initiate improvement efforts. School cultures with a strong dedication to improvement are more likely to implement new complex instructional strategies (Deal & Peterson, 2014). Achievement within a school is largely influenced by the culture practiced in that particular organization. If the culture can be accepted by all members, and they work together to increase the performance of the team, then the culture practiced in the organization is positive (Daud, Raman, Don, Sofian, & Hussin, 2015). There can be

negative repercussions if members have different agendas and goals. School leaders have to ensure that all stakeholders have the same goals and objectives and work toward creating a positive school culture.

During the formation of school culture, school administrators have some basic tasks, such as collaborating with other stakeholders to set goals and objectives for the school, setting the tone for what is expected, and building a climate of trust (Fisher & Carlyon, 2015). The primary task of the principal in creating a positive atmosphere is to contribute to the creation of a strong school culture. Some ways school leaders can strengthen a positive school culture is through celebrations. Leaders can share successes in faculty meetings and ceremonies, always looking for opportunities to tell stories about success and cooperation, and using a shared language to strengthen the commitment of staff and students. School leaders should show they care about students with disabilities (Turan & Bektas, 2013).

The responsibility of replacing or changing school culture is placed on school leaders. Changes are based on the assessment of the current school culture and the priorities of the school community. How you go about changing school culture can afford it in a positive or negative way (Deal & Peterson, 2016). The way to do this is by clearly conveying reasons behind why changes need to be made and getting buy-in from all stakeholders.

School leaders with a social justice orientation shape a school culture by recognizing unequal circumstances of disenfranchised groups and take action to eliminate inequalities (Bogotch, 2002; Dantley & Tillman, 2006, 2010; Furman, 2012; Gerwitz, 1998). Students with disabilities are one of those groups that social justice leaders have fought for throughout history. Social justice leaders interrogate policies and procedures that shape schools (Dantely & Tillman, 2006). These leaders have advocated for students with disabilities to ensure inclusion programs have

been implemented to provide an equitable education for students with disabilities. The task of creating the least restrictive environment and utilizing a collaborative approach to facilitate a culture that embraces inclusion is the role of the social justice leader.

### **Creating a school culture that promotes inclusion.**

An increased number of schools have become inclusive for students in special education since the enactment of IDEA (Wright & Wright, 2009). Currently, the law does not define inclusion, but it does ask the departments of education to promote collaboration between special education and general education teachers. Although laws have been established to foster collaboration, so students are placed in the least restrictive environment, there have not been any legal guidelines set on how to implement this process in schools. Most educators do not feel prepared to properly implement an inclusive classroom (Friend, 2013; McLeskey & Waldron, 2015). The purpose of an inclusive school culture is to give students with disabilities equitable access to the general curriculum alongside their peers. In today's era of standards-based curriculum, districts have become more accountable for the academic achievement of students with disabilities. These issues coupled together have created an increased need for inclusive frameworks to ensure that students who have greater challenges are brought into the culture in ways that communicate an expectation of success and progress for them.

Since students with disabilities gained access to public education, scholars have done extensive research on the impact of inclusive services for students with disabilities (Ball & Green, 2014; Billingsley, McLeskey, & Crockett, 2014; Cook & Friend, 2010; Waldron & Redd, 2011; Sapon-Shevin; 2007; Scanlan, 2009). The research found that for every additional hour students with disabilities spend in general education; there is a significant gain of achievement across all disability categories (Cosier, 2010). Therefore, it is imperative that all students with disabilities

have access to general education as much as possible. The responsibility of this endeavor falls upon the school leader to put processes in place to create and encourage an inclusive school culture.

Creating an inclusive school culture starts with an administrator who leads with a social justice orientation. This type of leader engages in critical reflection and acts in ways that empower everyone rather than marginalize any group. This kind of leadership will result in equitable schools for all students (Cambron-McCabe & McCarthy, 2005; Capper et al., 2006; Evans, 2007). It is the leader's responsibility to prepare the school and the staff for inclusion and to provide resources and personal commitment for it to succeed (Bateman & Bateman, 2002). According to researchers, Theoharis and Caustin (2014), there are steps to guide leaders in the process of creating an inclusive school culture. This process is adapted from the Planning Alternate Tomorrows with Hope planning process (Pearpoint, O'Brien, & Forest, 1993). The first step is to establish a clear vision. The vision should be centered on the ongoing improvement of instruction for students, coupled with support for teachers to improve their practice (Theoharis & Caustin, 2014). Setting the vision should be a collaborative effort between the school leader and other stakeholders. The leader should appoint a team which includes representatives from all stakeholder categories to help lead the school reform. The leader must be engaged in creating a school culture of shared expectations for all stakeholders. This shared leadership will gain buy-in from everyone; hence, they will be more invested in the process.

The next step is to conduct an assessment of the current strengths, areas of growth, and existing structures of the school (Theoharis & Caustin, 2014). This process requires the team to map out their current service delivery and the way they use the staff to meet the range of student needs. This outline involves creating a visual representation of the classrooms and how students

receive their special education services. An essential part of creating service maps is to indicate which staff members pull students from which classes, which students learn in self-contained classes, and which paraprofessionals are used in parts of the school. This plan provides a complete picture of how and where all staff at the school work. This will help the team create short and long-term goals and objectives for the vision to be fulfilled.

The third step for the team is to create an implementation plan to meet the goals and objectives (Theoharis & Causton, 2014). The plan should be an outline of how the school structure, the staff, and the curriculum will be utilized. Physical school structures should support and foster the inclusion process. The classrooms should be conducive to teaching students in small groups to differentiate instruction (Cosier, 2010). The hallways should be clear so any students that have physical disabilities can move freely without risk of harm. Common areas should promote inclusion by promoting students to work collaboratively in groups and sit together at lunch. Students with disabilities should never be isolated in classrooms without access to general education students (Colber, 2010).

All staff members need to be involved in the inclusive service delivery (Waldron & Redd, 2011). A person will be designated to facilitate efficient monthly communication meetings for staff members to discuss various topics surrounding inclusion. There also needs to be an appointed person on every grade level and department to ensure inclusion services are being rendered and can report back to the leadership team program, questions, and concerns (Waldron & Redd, 2011). The team will place students in a variety of classroom settings based on their needs with teachers who believe in the idea of inclusion and are educated on how to implement the program. The logistics of setting up inclusive classrooms is often the biggest obstacle to a program's success (Theoharis & Causton, 2014). There are often not enough special education

teachers to fill the need, and they have to work in several different classrooms. They must work their schedules around literacy blocks, lunch times, and other set scheduling challenges that force leaders to group students with disabilities together rather than spread them out evenly among all the classrooms (Scanlan, 2009). A social justice leader believes in investing time and money in hiring qualified special education and general education teachers that can implement inclusion successfully. Another crucial component to take into consideration is the school's master schedule. At the school level, inclusive service delivery requires school leaders to create a student schedule in a way that promotes heterogeneous, flexible grouping of students and fosters collaborative relationships among faculty and students alike (Little & Dieker, 2009; Scanlan, 2009). Collaborative teams will deliver instruction to meet the needs of all students.

The next step is to develop and implement approaches and procedures that promote a professional learning community. For students to progress in inclusive classrooms, school leaders must provide professional development, so teachers are equipped with the tools necessary to educate their students (Shady, Luther & Richman, 2013; Waldron & Redd, 2011). To provide optimal instruction and meet the needs of all students, all educators including school leaders must increase their knowledge and understanding of special education (Little & Dieker, 2009; Lynch, 2012). School leaders are responsible for providing training to teachers to build capacity and provide support for students, to differentiate instruction, and to collaborate. Inclusion can be extremely beneficial if students are placed with educators who have adequate training on how to teach in an inclusive setting and work with students enrolled in special education.

A critical factor of a successful inclusion program is the positive role of teachers, their attitudes, and confidence in their preparation to teach their students (Cook & Friend, 1995; Costley, 2013; Friend, Cook, Hurley-Chamberlain, & Shamberger, 2010). This type of attitude also

helps to promote a positive school culture where all students can be successful (Theoharis & Causton, 2014). The support given by the principal, based on the beliefs about the importance of including children with disabilities, strongly affects the general educators' teaching methods and behavior (Ross-Hill, 2009). Teachers are more willing to accommodate students in their classrooms when school administration fosters a supportive climate and when the culture of the school encourages teaming and collaboration (Soodak et al., 1998). Administrator support is likely to increase teachers' likelihood of collaborating with special educators to solve problems in the inclusive classroom (Ross-Hill, 2009). It is probable that these partnerships and support systems increase overall acceptance of inclusion and improve educational teachers' attitudes towards having students with disabilities in the general education classroom (Soodak et al., 1998). Costley (2013) indicated that school leaders need to take appropriate measures to provide the proper professional development, so teachers feel comfortable working in an inclusive classroom. A lack of professional development can result in teachers feeling frustrated in their abilities to teach in inclusive settings. Studies found that teachers who have more training in special education, more teaching experience with students with disabilities, and access to a variety of instructional supports are more likely to have a positive attitude about inclusion (Ernst & Rogers, 2009). Additionally, having a positive attitude about inclusion will improve school culture (Dary & Pickeral, 2013). It is the school leaders' responsibility to put supports in place for professional development, so teachers feel more comfortable and confident working in an inclusive environment.

Finally, the team will continually monitor, assess, and adjust the inclusion program each year. Throughout this process, the team will find ways to develop a climate of belonging for students and staff members. They will purposefully build a classroom and school culture that is



warm and welcoming for children and staff and fosters active, engaging learning. School leaders should be role models for the teachers and have welcoming attitudes for students with special needs. They should display a positive attitude toward all stakeholders, promote collaboration among faculty and administration, and provide necessary resources to promote inclusion (Theohauris & Causton, 2014). Attitudes and beliefs have been shown to be one of the biggest barriers to inclusion (Hwang & Evans, 2011). A school leader's beliefs, attitudes, and values regarding inclusion set the tone and help to create a vision of inclusion (Schmidt & Venet, 2012). School leaders who have positive attitudes will continue to be actively involved because that is the key to both the planning and the implementing a successful inclusive school culture (Phillips & McCullough, 1990). They will monitor the progress of all students, continue to provide professional development and resources. These types of leaders will continue to encourage partnerships and collaboration among the staff that supports inclusion to increase educational opportunities for all students (Billingsley, McLeskey, & Crockett, 2014). The resulting school culture relies upon shared learning, collaborative support, and the expectation that all stakeholders are actively engaged in helping all students, including those with and without disabilities (Billingsley, McLeskey, & Crockett, 2014; Cohen, 2015)

### **Models of Inclusion.**

There are a variety of settings in which students with disabilities and general education students are educated together. Historically, special education departments managed special education services such as individualized education plans (IEPs) (Hernandez, 2013). IEPs are plans written for students enrolled in special education that include instructional goals and objectives, specifications as to the length of the school year, determination of the most appropriate educational placement, and descriptions of criteria to be used in evaluation and measurement

(Wright & Wright, 2009). A team of educators, parents and the student creates IEPs, but the responsibility of providing the actual special education services is left up to the principal. The IEP is a legal document that must be implemented; yet, the methods and fidelity with which it is followed are determined by the principal (Ruppar & Gaffney, 2011). For the purpose of this study, the models researched included co-teaching, special education consultative services, and special education paraprofessional support (Wright & Wright, 2009).

Co-teaching is the partnering of a special education teacher and a general education teacher in the classroom together to deliver instruction to general education and special education students simultaneously (Friend, 2013; Friend, Cook, Hurley-Chamberlain, & Shamberger, 2010). Co-teaching can be provided for as little or as much of the school day depending on the needs of the students with disabilities. There are several different models of co-teaching: one lead, one assist, parallel teaching, and station teaching (Cook & Friend, 2010) but they all have the same goal to include students with disabilities in the classroom. It also cuts the teacher-student ratio in half, and studies have proven that it can be very beneficial for all students (Friend, Reising, & Cook, 1993). School leaders can support co-teaching teams by giving teachers a common planning time, going to their team and IEP meetings, and continually monitor the team's efforts (Little & Dieker, 2009). It is the leader's responsibility to put the right teachers together in a grade level or co-taught setting. Putting the right teams together is imperative to the success of the teachers actualized by the students. Co-teaching has been very successful for some students but is not always appropriate for every student (Salem, 2013).

Class consultation is another strategy to support students with disabilities in a general education setting. Class consultation supports the general education teacher by the special educa-

tion teacher providing strategies and materials for use with special needs students with disabilities in their classes, while not being physically in the classroom (Theoharis & Causton, 2014). This model can be a very effective approach for many students because it provides support for the classroom teacher, and support to each student's specific areas of need, while allowing for growth towards independence (Scanlan, 2009).

Paraprofessional support is another model that is used quite often. A paraprofessional is a teacher's assistant that is in the general education classroom to help students with disabilities as needed (Cook & Friend, 2010). She can assist with academics as well as adaptive skills. She can be assigned to a group of students with disabilities or an individual student depending on the students' needs. Ideally, paraprofessionals should plan for instruction with the teachers, but this often does not happen due to scheduling constraints (Scanlan, 2009).

All of these models are very different than more restrictive classroom settings, such as a resource or self-contained class in which students with disabilities are isolated in a separate classroom part or all day (Scanlan, 2009). It is the school leaders' responsibility to ensure a variety of models are available based on the student's needs. To provide leadership for effective inclusive models, principals must have an understanding of the needs of students with disabilities and the models (Billingsley, McLeskey, & Crockett, 2014). These models should be avenues to create a more inclusive culture.

### **Characteristics of an Inclusive School Culture.**

Several studies revealed that inclusive school cultures shared several common characteristics, including (a) a culture that is welcoming, accepting, and cohesive (b) a shared philosophy that inclusion is the norm, (c) a school leader who practices social justice leadership (d) an expectation that is high for all students, (e) a practice of daily collaboration among all stakeholders

(f) tracking systems that are used to monitor individual student progress, (g) resources are used flexibly to support student needs (Sapon-Shevin, 2007; Danforth & Naraian, 2015; Francis, Blue-Banning, Turnbull, Hill, Haines, & Gross, 2016; McLeskey, Waldron, & Redd, 2012).

Inclusive schools are led by school leaders who are enthusiastic and caring. They greet their students by name and interact with the parents. These interactions put parents at ease, making them feel “safe” and “good” about their child going to school (Francis et al., 2016). Parents are more willing to trust their child with a disability will be cared for, and their needs will be met. Inclusive practices also play a significant role in creating a sense of belonging to families and students. The culture is relaxed and welcoming, and you can feel it immediately when you walk into the school (Carroll, et al., 2011). Students with disabilities and their parents felt more comfortable and accepted in an environment such as this.

Inclusive school cultures are led by committed leaders who are supportive and understanding. They understand diversity should be celebrated and discussed openly, and oppression should be challenged (Sapon-Shevin, 2007). Students with disabilities are not see as different. They are considered to be a unique part of the school community. These school leaders understand that teachers need to have time to collaborate and plan for instruction to meet the needs of all students. They value inclusion and want students with disabilities to be successful. One component of strong, effective leadership is hiring and mentoring quality staff. School leaders hire staff with the same vision of inclusion and want to further the endeavor. The principal’s clear commitment to families, school staff, and student outcomes “attracts other people who are committed,” including staff and family leaders (Rose-Hill, 2009).

Instruction is distinguished by a flexible curriculum and differentiated instruction (Kluth, 2010; Colber, 2010). There are high expectations for all students. School leaders are actively

involved, and a progress monitoring system is put in place to assess if all students are learning and instruction is effective. With the implementation of Every Students Succeeds Act (ESSA), state and local government will have more control and each state has to create an accountability system that includes all students. A tracking system will be put in place to ensure all students including those with disabilities are making significant progress. “Meaningful reform” will be implemented in those schools that have underperforming students including those with disabilities (Fact Sheet, 2015). School professionals’ address students’ individual needs, they are willing to learn new techniques and act proactively rather than reactively to students’ needs. They employ “outside of the box” strategies to address unique academic, behavioral, social, and emotional needs inside and outside of the school environment, sometimes adapting on the spot (Francis et al., 2016).

All resources are allocated as needed to meet the needs of students with disabilities. Professional learning is seen as a norm of the culture and is expected to continue to evolve educational practices to keep up with the changing needs of the students (Ball & Green, 2014). The staff is disbursed based on the inclusion models which is determined by the current needs of the students. There is an unspoken understanding that resources may frequently change as students enroll and withdraw from school (McLeskey & Waldron, 2015).

### **Summary.**

Since the enactment of federal laws in 1975, special education has begun to transform from isolation to inclusion. Each revision of the laws has strengthened the notion that educating students with disabilities in the general education classroom is the best option (McLeskey & Waldron, 2015). The percentage of students with disabilities who spent most of the school day (80 % or more of their time) in general classes in regular schools increased from 33 % in 1990–

91 to 62 % in 2013–14 (“The Condition in Education”, 2016). Inclusion is not a place; it is a mindset (Kurth, Lyon, & Shogren, 2015; Little & Dieker, 2009). It is a belief that students with disabilities should be celebrated and given the opportunity to be educated with their non-disabled peers. The school leader infuses this mindset in the teachers and staff, and it becomes a cornerstone of the school’s culture. This type of mindset is aligned to the philosophy of social justice leadership.

Social justice leadership has been at the forefront of supporting inclusion programs in schools. A social justice leader’s expectation is all students should be valued for their uniqueness and included as essential members of a school community (Theoharis, 2007). “Social justice is a grounding principle of inclusion since it supports respect, care, recognition, and empathy and challenges beliefs as well as practices that directly or indirectly encourage the continuation of marginalization and exclusion” (Theoharis, 2007, p. 223). Social justice leaders feel responsible for transforming school cultures where every student is offered an equitable education.

Ballard (2004) called for a cultural transformation in ideas about disability and education in schools, a new way of thinking. The inclusion of students with disabilities makes a considerable impact on a school culture, but it also can be a positive experience for everyone involved. Creating an inclusive school culture requires effort, commitment, and perseverance on the part of the school’s leaders and staff. School leaders must provide all the resources so students with disabilities can be taught in an inclusion setting (Cook & Friend, 2010). Teachers need professional development regarding special education and differentiation of instruction, there needs to be a sufficient number of qualified teachers, and a sufficient amount of collaborative planning time for teachers to plan lessons (Carroll et al., 2011). These resources are all components of an inclusive school culture.

School leaders who are driven by social justice have the responsibility of leading a school culture that ensures every single student feels valued (Dary & Pickeral, 2013). For students with disabilities to reach their maximum potential, research shows that inclusion is the preferential setting for academic achievement (McLeskey, Waldron, & Redd, 2012). This type of school culture provides challenges but accommodates the needs of each student. Creating a culture such as this is not an easy task. It takes hard work and commitment, but research has shown that it is the most beneficial for students with disabilities.

An inclusive school culture must be led by an administrator who believes in providing an equitable education for all students. This leader must be knowledgeable about special education and how to infuse inclusion into the school culture. This immersion involves making certain leadership preparation programs are taking the appropriate steps to educate future leaders on how to build an inclusive school culture.

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## **2 ONE SCHOOL CULTURE'S RESPONSE TO SOCIAL JUSTICE LEADERSHIP AND INCLUSION**

Federal legislation to protect the educational rights of students with disabilities was first enacted in 1975 (Wright & Wright, 2009). The most recent revision of the Individual with Disabilities Act in 2005 (PL-94-142) mandated that students with disabilities be educated in the least restrictive environment. What this means is students with disabilities should be with other students in general education to the “maximum extent that is appropriate” (Wright & Wright, 2009). Special classes, separate schools or removal from the general education class should only happen when a student’s disability is so severe that supplementary aids and services cannot provide him with an appropriate education. A key word here is “appropriate.” It refers to what is suitable or right for a student. Sometimes, putting a child in a general education classroom isn’t appropriate because a specific service or program can’t be provided there. When LRE comes up, so does the word “inclusion.” Many people think these terms mean the same thing, but they’re slightly different. For the purpose of this study, inclusion is defined as an educational philosophy that promotes the school community to embrace all students regardless of their exceptionalities (Katzman, 2007). Inclusion goes beyond placement in a general education class. It also aims to have a child participate in the general classroom environment, including academic lessons and extracurricular activities. Today, students with disabilities have more access than ever to general education classrooms (Fleischer, Zames, & Zames, 2012).

Unfortunately, with these mandates, schools in most states were not held accountable for the academic outcomes of students with disabilities. As inclusive programs were first being developed, the emphasis was more on inclusion than efficacy (McLeskey, Landers, Hoppey, & Williamson, 2012). Schools in most states were not held accountable for the academic outcomes

of students with disabilities when legislation was first enacted. There were no guidelines on how to produce a quality inclusion program. Since PL-94-142 there has been a requirement for LRE. The concept of inclusion has been elusive, and it has been implemented with-out any criteria or formalized expectations (Dyssegaard, & Larsen, 2013). Inclusion is more than equitable access. It is the expectation that all students are encouraged and engaged in school activities to his or her fullest potential (Coulston & Smith, 2013). As more mandates came along, accountability for students with disabilities' academic achievement came more into question. Researchers began questioning how to create a school culture that produced a quality inclusion program (Banks, 2006; Hernandez, 2013; Wright & Wright, 2009).

Even though physical changes can result in equitable access, we must move our practice beyond the physical environment to support an inclusive environment that embraces and celebrates the abilities, perspectives, and contributions each makes to the school community (Coulston & Smith, 2013). We must transform the school culture into a place where all students are celebrated, and equitable opportunities are given. A school's culture is defined by its environment, facilitated by its mission, and nurtured by its purpose (Banks, 2006; Carroll, Fulmer, Sobel, Garrison-Wade, Aragon, & Coval, 2011; Dumay, 2009). A school's culture consists of underlying social meanings that shape beliefs and behaviors over time. School culture determines the mission, vision, priorities, goals and objectives of a school. School culture affects how problems are solved, the implementation of new ideas, and how people work together. Culture keeps the focus on what is important. The culture of a school breathes life and defines where meaning takes place. An ideal school culture focuses on school improvement and serves the "whole child" (Fullan, 2007; Levin, 2008; Schein, 2010). According to Dumay, there are four compo-

nents to measure school culture: 1) collaboration 2) innovation 3) emphasis on discipline 4) academic emphasis. It is the school leader's responsibility to continually measure the school culture to ensure students' needs are being met.

Researchers found the success or failure of special education services is based on the principal's perception of how special education students should be educated and instructional resources are required including staffing, professional development, and classroom models (Styron & Styron, 2011). School leaders play a critical role in creating inclusive schools that are responsive to meeting the needs of students with disabilities (Billingsley, McLeskey, and Crockett, 2014). They are responsible for setting the tone of the school culture as well as providing resources and professional development for the staff. Therefore, it is necessary to be explicit regarding the knowledge and skills that are required for school leaders to address the needs of students with disabilities through inclusion. Researchers have found that school leaders with a social justice orientation are more apt to embed inclusion into a school culture (DeMatthews, 2015).

Review of literature shows that social justice leadership has been proven to be effective about inclusion of students with disabilities (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014). A major reason is social justice leaders are always seeking ways to improve the educational outcomes for historically marginalized groups such as students with disabilities (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014). Theoharis (2007) defines social justice leadership whereby principals "make issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically and currently marginalized conditions in the US central to their advocacy, leadership practice, and vision" (p. 223). A social justice leader has the responsibility of ensuring that students with disabilities receive an equitable education in a school culture that embraces their differences.

Serving students with disabilities in an inclusion program has changed the way we look at how school cultures are formed. Social justice leadership plays a vital role in creating a successful inclusive school culture for students with disabilities (DeMatthews & Mawhinney). There is a great need to determine how we can incorporate social justice leadership into school culture to make the environment inclusive, so students with disabilities feel welcome, safe, and reach their maximum potential.

### **Purpose of study**

The primary purpose of this study was to explore how one school culture responded to a school leader's efforts to create an inclusion program for students with disabilities. Specifically, I researched how the principal's qualities of social justice leadership were used to foster an inclusive school culture. For the purpose of this study, the inclusion models investigated included co-teaching, special education consultative services, and special education paraprofessional support (Wright & Wright, 2009).

### **Guiding Questions**

The following research questions will guide my study.

- How does one school culture respond to its principal's efforts to create an inclusion program for students in special education?
- What actions does this leader use in attempts to create a school culture that promotes inclusion for students in special education?
- What are the characteristics of this school culture?
- What skills does this leader use to infuse inclusion into the school culture effectively?

Researchers have studied inclusion, but it has been difficult to define exactly what is required for students to achieve success (Dyssegaard, & Larsen, 2013; McLeskey, Landers, Hoppey, & Williamson, 2012). Also, researchers have begun to critically review the collective body of work on the topic of social justice leadership and inclusion in order to provide greater clarity to the meaning of how they relate to each other and to set new directions for research, practice, and principal preparation guidelines (Capper & Young, 2014; Furman, 2012). Research to date includes various studies that were completed when special education laws were first enacted and special education students began to receive their education in the least restrictive environment (Banks, 2006; Bateman & Bateman, 2002;). Limited research has focused on school leaders' practices and processes that create an inclusive school culture (Billingsley, McLeskey, & Crockett, 2014). There has been limited research on how social justice leadership plays a part in creating an inclusion model and how this leadership style transforms a school culture (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014). This case study added to the body of knowledge already obtained and give an in-depth analysis of how one school culture responded to a principal using social justice leadership to attempt to create an inclusion program for students with disabilities.

After reviewing the literature, there is a great need for school leadership preparation programs to support candidates in developing the knowledge and skills necessary to address inequities and marginalization related to class, gender, race, ethnicity, disability, and economic status (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014). School leaders with social justice orientations investigate and generate solutions to social inequality (Dantley & Tillman, 2006; Theoharis, 2007). Leadership programs that are supposedly designed to prepare future administrators to be the "experts" in education rarely touch upon issues related to children with disabilities (Capper, Theoharis, &

Sebastian, 2006; Riester, Pursch, & Skrla, 2002). Inclusion is highly encouraged in public education, but there is often an absence of general training about students with disabilities in leadership preparation programs. This study will prepare school leaders to use social justice leadership to provide an equitable education for all students. I conducted a case study to give a perspective on how one school culture responded to a principal's efforts to create an inclusion program for students with disabilities. Universities can use this study as one piece of leadership that will help them design leadership programs that prepare future leaders on how to create a school culture that embraces inclusion for students with disabilities.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for this study was social justice leadership. A small but growing body of research on social justice leadership has investigated the orientations of social justice-minded principals, effective leadership practices, barriers to equity in schools, and positive outcomes achieved through heroic efforts (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014; Furman, 2012; Jansen, 2006; Theoharis, 2007). Social justice leadership is about understanding the inequities that persist in schools and taking action (Bogotch, 2002; Dantley & Tillman, 2006). The practice of social justice leadership begins with an ability to recognize inequity amongst other issues associated with school administration (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014). According to researchers (Jean-Marie, Normore, & Brooks, 2009), this theory has emerged due to changing demographics in society, larger achievement gaps, and high stakes testing. The following are components of social justice leadership: 1) high expectations for all students 2) support learning for all students 3) recognizes unequal circumstances 4) advocates for equity 5) critically reflective (DeMatthews, & Mawhinney, 2014). Social justice leadership lays the foundation for a

school culture that promotes an inclusive education for students in special education. This type of school culture provides an equitable education for all students.

The equality of education for students with disabilities began in the 1950's during the civil rights movement. It began with the 1954 Supreme Court ruling in the Brown versus the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas, segregated but equal schools became unconstitutional (Hernandez, 2013; Wright & Wright, 2009). Before that time, students identified with a disability were mainly educated in separate institutions. This landmark civil rights ruling encouraged advocates for students with disabilities to voice their beliefs that it was also unconstitutional to segregate students because of disability (Banks, 2006; Hernandez, 2013). The struggle for disability rights has followed a similar pattern of many other civil rights movements. It has challenged negative attitudes and stereotypes, rallying for political and institutional change, and lobbying for the self-determination of a minority community (Fleischer, Zames, & Zames, 2012). Social justice leadership was embedded in the civil rights movement to ensure an equitable education for all students.

Social justice leadership is grounded in equity, ethical values, justice, care and respect for all students regardless of race and class. This theory emphasizes a high-quality education for all students; and therefore closes the achievement gap (Marshall and Olivia, 2010). Rivera-McCutchen (2014) argued that social justice leadership is a mindset that requires action to right what is wrong, just as inclusion is a mindset that has the same goals. These two mindsets must be intertwined for inclusion to be a successful model for students in special education. Social justice leaders actively work to improve teaching and learning so that all students have equitable opportunities to learn and excel. Leadership for social justice must involve the recognition of the



unequal circumstances of marginalized groups with actions directed toward eliminating inequalities (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014).

A culture of inclusion is not merely created; it is based on norms, core values, and beliefs that are ingrained, so students in special education have all the resources they need to receive an equitable education. Leaders who operate from a framework of social justice must look at the barriers they experience as they develop and sustain a learning culture supportive of effective inclusion for students in special education. Furman (2012) concluded that leadership for social justice is action oriented and involves changing oppressive practices and replacing them with more equitable ones.

School leaders for social justice need to know about research-based practices that can create an equitable school and equitable education for all students (Capper, 2006). If educators move past seeing educating students with disabilities in a self-contained classroom and embrace teaching them in an inclusive classroom, then we have the opportunity to challenge and transform society (Sapon-Shevin, 2003). Inclusion is not about disability or schools. Inclusion is about social justice (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014).

## **Methodology**

This research employed a qualitative case study examining how one school culture responded to a principal's efforts to foster inclusion for students with disabilities. Qualitative case studies are common in educational research when researchers seek to describe educational systems, such as a classroom, a school, or a college campus (Clark & Creswell, 2010). Another reason a case study design was an appropriate method to use for this research study was because of the types of research questions. The research questions that surround this case study specifically

delve into how a school culture reacted to the principal creating an inclusion program for students with disabilities. The more a researcher's questions seek to explain how or why something works, the more the case study method will be relevant (Yin, 2014). Also, this method was appropriate because my research gave an extensive and in-depth description of a social phenomenon (Yin, 2014). I sought a detailed analysis of one principal's lived experience as she attempted to create a school culture based on the principal's beliefs of social justice leadership and the response of the school culture.

For the purpose of this research, I conducted a single case study. Yin (2014) suggested the objective of a single case study is to capture the circumstances and conditions of an everyday situation. Focusing on a single case study forced me to devote careful attention to a single case. This case study allowed me to delve into a principal's day-to-day operations to get an accurate picture of the principal's efforts to embed inclusion in the school culture.

A qualitative case study is an exploration of a system based on data collection (Creswell, 2014). This case study included interviews, observations, and examination of artifacts. The product of a qualitative inquiry is richly descriptive. Words and pictures used to convey what the researcher has learned about a phenomenon (Merriam, 2009). I have included descriptions of the interviews and quotes from the participants, descriptions of the observations, and references to the artifacts to support the findings of the study (Merriam, 2009). In this study, I interviewed teachers as well as administration, observed the principal in a variety of settings, and reviewed artifacts about the school culture.

### **Data collection.**

The data sources for the case study consisted of interview transcripts, field notes from the observations, and artifacts. Six interviews were conducted, and all of them were digitally recorded. All of the observations were recorded on the observation protocol form (see Appendix C for the observation protocol form). Copies were obtained of all artifacts including professional learning agendas, special education meeting minutes, IEPs, collaborative meetings minutes, and the principal's observation notes for reference as needed. I carefully listened to the interviews numerous times and then transcribed them carefully checking along the way to make sure the transcriptions were written correctly. After transcriptions had been completed, a copy was sent to the interviewee to verify that her intentions, perceptions, and thoughts had been accurately recorded. Each participant was invited to provide additional information for clarity. Follow-up interviews were conducted and transcribed as necessary. The transcriptions were written in narrative form.

### ***Interviews.***

Members of the school staff were the key informants in the case study. Samples were large enough to assure that all of the perceptions that were important were uncovered, but at the same time, not repetitive. This study followed the concept of saturation at which point the collection of any new data does not shed any further light on the issue under investigation (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). To lead to saturation, I interviewed teachers that worked in every special education model and the administrators in the school. Saturation occurred when I had exhausted the evidence I could gather from this group.

Interviews were conducted with a pair of co-teachers who worked in a classroom together to serve special education and general education students simultaneously, a special education teacher who served special education students in a self-contained setting, and a special education

teacher that served special education students in a resource classroom where they were instructed in small groups for a portion of the day. Interviews with the principal and assistant principal were also conducted.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the informants to give them some predetermined questions but also give them the flexibility to discuss their experiences (see Appendix A and B for a list of the interview questions). The questions developed around literature I reviewed about school culture, social justice leadership, and inclusion. Qualitative interviews are guided by conversations rather than structured queries (Yin, 2014). They lasted up to one hour each over a period of ten days, and everyone was interviewed individually. They were given an opportunity to discuss their experiences using protocols to guide conversations and focused on (a) the principal's orientation, values, and conceptions of inclusion and how it relates to their leadership role; (b) specific principal actions related to creating a more inclusive school; (c) challenges to inclusion and student achievement; (d) the history of inclusion and achievement at the school; and (e) characteristics of the inclusive school culture. Individual follow-up interviews were conducted for a maximum of an hour for any clarifications from the initial interviews. During the first interview, the proposed questions were asked to each participant. In the potential follow-up, questions such as, "What did you mean by this? Can you clarify," were asked? For member checking (Yin, 2014), the transcript was sent to the participant to ensure what had been recorded and transcribed was accurate and adjusted if necessary. I observed the principal in different facets of the school and focused on her involvement with inclusion. All interviews took place within the school setting, and all were digitally recorded and transcribed. The interviews with the principal and assistant principal were administered individually. Their questions centered on their experiences with special education, their personal views of what characteristics were necessary for a school

culture that fosters an inclusive model of instruction, their ability to identify instructional supports and resources used to promote inclusion, and their reflections about the school culture when they attempted to create inclusive practices.

The interviews with the teachers were conducted individually. The questions provided opportunities for teachers to describe their experiences with special education students, to explain the various instructional strategies used to effectively support students enrolled in special education, to describe what makes inclusive education work in their classrooms, and to explain what additional supports would be helpful from the school, the school principal, and the school district.

### ***Observations.***

Formal observations provided a secondary source of information. Observations are important for two reasons. First, observations take place in a natural setting rather than a controlled environment such as interviews. Second, researchers get to observe the phenomenon that is being studied first-hand instead of gathering information second-hand like interviews (Merriam, 2009). Observations and artifacts were used to triangulate data collected from interviews with the staff members. Triangulation refers to when data from one source is checked for consistency with data from other sources (Thomas, 2006). Observations also help the researcher become more familiar with the key stakeholders, organizational structures, school culture, and interventions present in the schools (Yin (2014)). The observations took place within a ten-day window. The principal was observed in various settings, including classrooms, common school areas, IEP meetings, grade-level team meetings, and special education team meetings for a maximum of five hours. I took notes on how the principal interacted with the students and staff, how the school

leaders interacted with each other and how each area of the school flowed. I also looked for evidence of leadership traits that are associated with social justice leadership.

***Artifacts.***

I also looked at artifacts that showed evidence of embedding the inclusion process into the school culture, including students' individualized education plans, collaborative meetings minutes, lesson plans, and professional development plans for the staff. All participants involved in the observations and interviews were serving on a voluntary basis and gave written consent to be part of the study. All of the participants and the school were given a pseudonym. Table 1 lists the case study participants.

Table 1

*Case Study Participants*

Participant Number	Pseudonym	Position
1	Ms. Lane	Principal
2	Ms. Baptiste	Assistant Principal
3	Ms. Johnson	General Education Teacher
4	Mr. Thomas	Self-Contained Special Education Teacher
5	Ms. Dade	Resource Special Education Teacher
6	Ms. Anderson	Special Education Teacher (Co-Teacher)

**Data analysis.**

For the purpose of this research study, deductive and inductive approaches were used to analyze data. Creswell and Plano Clark (2007) say that the deductive researcher “works from the ‘top down,’ from theory to hypotheses to data to add to or contradict the theory” (p.23). In contrast,

they define the inductive researcher as someone who works from the “bottom-up, using the participants’ views to build broader themes and generate a theory interconnecting the themes” (p. 23). Both of these approaches were appropriate for this study because I compared previous research conducted on inclusion, school culture, and social justice leadership to the data that was collected from this case study. The analytic process consisted of three main coding strategies: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1994).

First, I used open coding in which data was broken down analytically. The data obtained from the interviews, observations, and artifacts was divided into categories described as codes. For example, the principal stated, “You have to be available for the teachers when they need you. You need to be supportive and set the tone for the school”. The statement was coded into several codes: need, supportive, available, and set the tone.

Next, I conducted axial coding by clustering open codes around concepts through inductive and deductive thinking. I used beliefs and behaviors associated with social justice leadership as an analytic angle to continually examine whether the emerging codes occurred (Strauss, 1994). For example, several participants discussed the character traits of the principal. They discussed how she was knowledgeable about special education and the needs of students with disabilities. They also discussed her commitment to inclusion. The principal also discussed her process of hiring staff that also believed in inclusion. I observed the principal in an IEP meeting when she discussed the individual needs of a student and the students’ rights based on the special education laws which confirmed her knowledge of the law. Her commitment to inclusion was also evident in meeting agendas I collected which outlined multiple co-teaching training and collaborative planning sessions between general education and special education teachers. I checked for consistencies

throughout all the data points including interviews, observations, and artifacts. The data was triangulated which confirmed the character traits of the principal. Table 2 provides a list of concepts that emerged from the codes.

Table 2

*Codes of Emerging Concepts*

Description of Codes	Emerging Concepts
Welcoming environment; diversity celebrated; acknowledge frequently; visible leaders; empathetic	Supportive culture
Teamwork; collaborative planning; shared decision making;	Collaboration
Always evolving; own experts; flexible use of resources; accountability; data driven	Professional Development
Based on students' needs; equitable; IEP driven, behavioral and academic	Differentiation
Responsive to stakeholders; everyone accountable for actions; effective communication; maintain relationships	Action Oriented
Courageous; sets the tone of the school; compassionate; commitment to inclusion; high expectations; intuitive	Social Justice Traits of Principal
Understands special education law; understands needs of students with disabilities; collaborative; supportive	Principal's Unique Skill Set

Third, I utilized selective coding which is a process by which all concepts were unified around core categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). I used a constant comparative method which is a process in which newly collected data is compared with previous data that was collected in one



or more earlier studies (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). I examined the concepts obtained from the coding process with the major components of the existing research on school culture and social justice leadership to validate and further theorize the understanding of each one as well as create unique emergent themes (Gough & Scott, 2000). I compared the emergent categories to the components of social justice leadership: demonstrates high expectations, supports, recognizes, advocates, practices critical reflection (DeMatthews, & Mawhinney, 2014; Theoharis & Caustin, 2014). I also compared them to the components of school culture: (1) consists of underlying social meanings that shape beliefs and behaviors over time, (2) determines the mission, vision, priorities, goals and objectives of a school (3) affects how problems are solved, the implementation of new ideas, and how people work together (4) keeps the focus on what is important (Banks, 2006; Carroll, Fulmer, Sobel, Garrison-Wade, Aragon, & Coval, 2011; Dumay, 2009). For example, I analyzed the concepts of the social justice traits of the principal and the principal's unique skill set. Based on the codes that were identified in the concepts such as commitment to inclusion, understanding of special education, and support of inclusion; I identified a category that is related to mindset. From previous research, I identified equity as a profound factor of social justice leadership. Based on the findings of the current case study and previous research, I can determine one of the main categories as "equity mindset".

### **Trustworthiness.**

Several methods were used to ensure the trustworthiness of the themes that emerged from this investigation (Merriam, 2009). First, triangulation across observations, interviews, and artifacts was used to support the credibility of the themes that emerged. Field notes from interviews and observations were compared to artifacts to determine validity. For example, Ms. Lane discussed that one of the major initiatives was providing co-teaching training to all the staff. She

provided me a copy of the professional development plan that outlined the staff training throughout the school year. Co-teaching training was provided during preplanning week, and there were follow-up meetings every other month along with focus walks scheduled so teachers could observe each other co-teaching in the classrooms. Also, collaborative meeting minutes were provided that documented meetings grade level teachers held to plan for instruction. Accommodations and modifications for students with disabilities were discussed as well planning for small group instruction in each classroom to accommodate the needs of students including those with disabilities. I also examined the IEPs for each student in the school. Based on the data collected from the IEPs, 93% of the students were instructed in the general education setting at least 80% of each school day. I was able to confirm the validity of the interviews and artifacts through observations. I observed the principal for five hours in a variety of settings including a meeting with the assistant principal regarding a behavior incident with a student with a disability, a meeting with the principal and a student regarding academic goal setting, the principal's daily school walkthrough where she interacted with teachers, other staff members, and students. It was evident the principal had relationships with the staff and students. For example, she stopped and had a quick informal discussion with one of the teachers regarding recent student test scores. She also stopped to talk to one of the students about a recent project he had completed. I also observed the principal using principles of social justice leadership. One conversation I saw was the principal and assistant principal discussing a teacher's concerns about a student. According to Ms. Baptiste, the teacher was concerned that the student was not "appropriate" for inclusion. Ms. Baptiste indicated she thought the student was in the correct placement in inclusion, but the teachers were not giving him the appropriate accommodations. The two school leaders discussed

how they could provide the teacher support while ensuring the students had a fair chance to succeed in the teacher's classroom. They considered asking the teacher to observe in a co-teacher's classroom as well as a veteran teacher mentoring the novice teacher. They also discussed observing in the classroom themselves to ensure the student was being given the accommodations and modifications that were noted in his IEP. They also discussed facilitating a conference with the parent and the teacher so a home school connection could be established. The school leaders also discussed placing a paraprofessional in the classroom to assist with the students' needs if the teacher was feeling overwhelmed and did not have the skills necessary to meet the students' needs.

Second, the investigators engaged in prolonged engagement and persistent observation, spending a considerable amount of time in the setting conducting the case study and examining specific themes as they emerged. I observed the principal in various settings including meeting with her staff, interacting with her students and staff, meeting with her assistant principal, and providing professional development regarding collaboration. Third, a member check was conducted with teachers and administrators to provide input regarding the credibility of the themes as they emerged. I did follow up interviews with the staff regarding the themes that emerged to confirm the findings.

### **Limitations.**

This case study has the potential to advance research regarding how school cultures react to the implementation of inclusion programs for students with disabilities. There are some limitations when referring to this study.

One limitation is the use of a single case study during this research. Some researchers have argued that case studies have become a type of "freeform research where anything goes"

(Maoz 2002, p. 164-165). The absence of systematic procedures for case study research is something that is seen as the greatest concern due to a relative absence of methodological guidelines (Yin, 2014). This criticism does not seem accurate because many current researchers have developed their methodological techniques and epistemological grounding (Bennett and Elman, 2010: 499-500). A second concern involves the reliability of various forms of single case study analysis. The third critique of a single case study analysis is the issue of external validity (Yin, 2014). Validity comes into question since this is a single case study, and only one school was studied. Due to the limitations of interviews, observations, and artifacts coming from only one school, the research may be more difficult to generalize the data collected in comparison to other schools (Yin, 2014). The lived experience of a small sample of participants cannot be used to generalize the experiences of all.

Another limitation is this study's narrative methodology. It allows for deep understanding of a participant's life experiences and the meaning they make of it. However, the participant's views may be biased. The purpose of this methodology is for the leaders to make meaning of their experiences so that readers can learn from them. The richness regarding what we can learn from looking in depth at a small sample of leaders comes with a risk that the information we take from the interviews may not be accurate.

Another limitation of this study is the uniqueness of this school. This school houses the district's vision impaired and multiple disabilities program, so there is more opportunity for inclusion with a variety of students with varying levels of challenges. The school offers a variety of classroom models for students with specific learning disabilities including inclusion, self-contained, and resource models. These factors can become limitations due to the specialization of

classes because it may not give us an accurate picture of how inclusion works in most elementary schools

### **Participants.**

#### ***Forrest Elementary.***

This case study was based on a school in a southeastern city in a large school district with a population of approximately four hundred fifty students. This school was chosen using a purposeful sampling strategy (Maxwell, 2008). Purposeful sampling is a technique used in qualitative research for the identification and selection of cases that would give the most information and have the greatest impact on the development of knowledge (Patton, 2002). There were five criteria used to select the school. The (a) school had a large population of students enrolled in special education with a broad range of disabilities, (b) the principal had previous experience working in special education, (c) the principal made a considerable impact on promoting inclusion by providing staff with professional development regarding inclusion and instructional resources to use with students with disabilities, (c) the principal created a master schedule and provided other resources that promoted inclusion, (d) standardized assessment scores have increased since the principal took over the school, and (e) the principal showed traits of social justice leadership in her practice. Forrest Elementary School was the only school in the district that met all the criteria.

The students come from a wide variety of cultural and economic backgrounds. The school's population consisted of 44% Caucasian students, 35% African American students, 15% Hispanic students, and 16% Asian students. The school's population consisted of 19% percent special education, 12% ESOL, 25% gifted students, and 45% of the students are considered economically disadvantaged. The school staff was made up of a mixture of veteran and novice

teachers. Eighty-three percent of them had a master's degree or higher. Additionally, they had a very engaged parent teacher organization.

The school serviced some students who had varying disabilities including autism, orthopedic impairments, specific learning disabilities, speech and language impairments, and visual impairments. Eighty-nine percent of the students with disabilities were served in the general education setting 80% or more of the school day. They also housed a special education resource program in which some students with disabilities, which required more intense academic support, could be pulled out of the general education classroom to be taught in a small group setting with only students enrolled in special education. The school also provided a self-contained special education program for students who were considered to have multiple disabilities where they had to spend the majority of the day there. These students still went into the general education classrooms for social studies or science and all extracurricular activities, so they had the opportunity to socialize with general education students. Most of these students had some physical limitations being restricted to a wheelchair or walker for most of the day. Paraprofessionals, teachers' assistants, were employed to assist teachers with the physically impaired, as well as other students who had a variety of disabilities. Each grade level had at least one or two co-taught classrooms in which a special education and general education teacher taught together. Students with disabilities were included in these classes with general education peers.

The principal, Ms. Lane, had been leading the school for the last three years at the time of this case study. Over the past three years, academic achievement improved significantly. The Georgia Department of Education (2013) reported College and Career Ready Performance Index, shared, students with disabilities were not meeting state performance targets in any content ar-

eas. Conversely, the Georgia Department of Education (2016) revealed in the College and Career Ready Performance Index Report, students with disabilities were meeting all state performance targets. Ms. Lane contributes this drastic change to the inclusion program.

***The principal's vision for inclusion.***

This narrative represents what Ms. Lane reported as her lived experience. Ms. Lane, the principal, was a Caucasian woman in her mid-forties who had been working in education for almost fifteen years. She had been a special education teacher for six of those years and a general education teacher the rest of the time. So, she had seen education from both the general education and special education perspective. As a teacher, she had worked for principals who she felt did not advocate for students with disabilities. According to her, most students in special education were isolated in classes in the back of the building and did not integrate with the other students. She reported that when she was a teacher, the district did not encourage an inclusion model for students with disabilities. When she became an assistant principal after nine years of teaching, she had more control over classroom models, but the principal she worked with did not have much experience working with students with disabilities. She was open to the idea of inclusion, but Ms. Lane had to train her principal about special education and inclusion. By the time the school culture was beginning to transform to embrace the inclusion model, Ms. Lane was promoted to principal. Ms. Lane vowed to implement the inclusion model in her new school. She was driven by her personal belief that “every child deserves to be in a general education class which provides an equitable education for all students” (Lane, personal communication, November 14, 2016). This was evident throughout all of my data collection. All of the participants I interviewed reiterated Ms. Lane’s commitment to inclu-

sion. Throughout the observations, Ms. Lane collaborated with teachers regarding instructional strategies in order to proactively provide accommodations and modifications to set up students with disabilities for success. The artifacts were another indication that Ms. Lane was committed to the inclusion program. Many IEPs, conference notes, and professional learning meetings documented Ms. Lane's participation, leadership and guidance.

*Assessing school culture.*

Ms. Lane immediately began evaluating each facet of the new school. She noticed that some students with disabilities were placed in the general education classroom for instruction, but they just seemed to be housed there for the sake of the IEP. There did not appear to be any partnership between the general education and special education teacher. Also, the special education teachers had a very irregular schedule in which they served many grade levels during the day. There was a lack of consistency in the special education program.

Ms. Lane surveyed all of the teachers, and very few reported having any training about inclusion, but still they were attempting to use the model every day in class. It seemed as if no professional development of any kind had been offered to the staff for a long time and each class operated as a separate entity. Collaboration among the teachers did not exist.

Ms. Lane indicated that she knew the culture of the school needed to change, but it would not be possible without buy-in from the staff. She remarked that she would have to teach them why inclusion was necessary for all students. She stated that she spent the first year of her principalship forming relationships with the staff and continuing to assess the current school culture. During the first year at the beginning of the second semester, she built a leadership team that she could collaborate with to make decisions regarding the school. She felt a shared leadership model was the best way to get the staff engaged in the new initiatives, and she



needed their knowledge of the history of the school. She formed subcommittees within the team to analyze each component of the school so the team could set goals and objectives for the upcoming school year. The first task for the leadership team was to revise the vision and mission of the school. Ms. Lane explained they revised it to reflect a culture of support for all learners. Ms. Lane shared a copy of the vision and mission statement. It read, “Students, staff, parents and community will collaborate to provide and ensure a safe, nurturing, child-centered environment that builds self-esteem, self-discipline and the essential academic and social skills for creative life-long learning in a global society. The vision is to have all students achieve to the best of their individual potential in a safe, nurturing environment” (Ms. Lane, personal communication, November 16, 2016).

Ms. Lane also showed me the school’s website. There is a written explanation of how students in special education add value to the school. It read, “We serve a very diverse student population which include special needs students from throughout the county. These students add a unique aspect to the school as the students interact on a daily basis in the classrooms and other activities. The staff and parents of this community strive to make this a school that is warm, safe and welcoming. Our students consistently perform well on standardized tests as a result of our excellent teaching and support staff” (Lane, personal communication, November 16, 2016).

The next goal was to have more continuity and collaboration within the inclusion classrooms. Due to restrictions with staffing, there could only be one or two inclusion classes per grade level. There was also a goal to provide more professional development. Some of the topics teachers wanted to provide were differentiated instructional strategies and special edu-

cation. Another goal was to assess the physical space to determine the best use of all classrooms and common areas. Another aspect the team wanted to assess was the best and most efficient way to use the staff to best meet the needs of the students. Another goal was to celebrate the diversity within the school and make everyone feel welcome.

***Implementation of an inclusive school culture.***

Ms. Lane reported that during the teacher's preplanning week of the next school year, she scheduled district professional liaisons to conduct training on models of co-teaching. She then scheduled them to return periodically throughout the school year to work with teachers and paraprofessionals that worked together in the classroom to monitor their progress with collaboration. Ms. Lane stated that she set the tone for collaboration at the beginning of the school year by making it a school wide initiative, giving grade level teachers a common planning time, and providing training on how to conduct collaborative meetings.

Ms. Lane and her team conducted an assessment of the physical space and moved some classrooms around for students with physical disabilities to have more access to shared spaces so they could interact with general education students more. They also moved the resource and self-contained classroom among the general education and co-taught classrooms.

The team assessed the use of staff and wanted to create a master schedule, so the special education teachers and paraprofessionals were in one co-taught class all day. Luckily, they had enough staff to create at least one co-taught classroom per grade level.

The team also surveyed the teachers to get ideas about how to celebrate diversity more and have more celebrations in school to build morale. After they had received the survey results, a "staff shout out" board was put in place so staff could celebrate each other and a "student of

the month” program was started. The team also implemented a program to celebrate “Exceptional Children’s Week” and an “International Night” to celebrate diversity throughout the school.

After all of these things were implemented, the team had to continually monitor the changes to determine if they were being implemented, and make a decision about any changes that needed to be done.

### ***Current School Culture.***

At the time of the interview, Ms. Lane had been the principal of Forest Elementary for three years. She stated that “things are not perfect, but we have come a long way. Teachers are collaborating and co-teaching students” (Lane, personal communication, November 16, 2016). She indicated she never wanted to create an inclusion program to raise test scores; yet, organically test scores improved but it actually did. Three years ago, students in special education were failing every subject on the state standardized assessments, but their scores had improved in the last three years. They were all meeting state performance targets. She remarked, “Building the inclusion program is a continual process that requires dedication, perseverance, and courage. I couldn’t do it without the support of my staff” (Lane, personal communication, November 16, 2016).

### **Findings**

The results of the data analysis are presented in this section. Several categories emerged from the analysis of interviews, observations, and an examination of artifacts, categories emerged. I first compared these categories with research already conducted on school culture and social justice leadership and then the following unique themes emerged: (a) equity

mindset, (b) exceeding minimal compliance, and (c) tiered support system. The unique emergent themes are outlined in Table 4.

Table 3

*Relationship of Unique Emergent Categories and Guiding Questions*

Category	Description of Category	Selected Descriptive Code
	What skills does this leader use to infuse inclusion into the school culture effectively?	
Equity Mindset	Purpose driven	Belief that every child equitable education
	Knowledge of marginalized groups	School leader has a background in special education.
	Making issue of inequality	All students should have the same access and opportunities.
	Action oriented	Transformed staff's mindsets regarding inclusion.
	Intentional Integration	All students are taught in the general education classrooms.
	Not afraid to take chances	Observed the principal having a courageous conversations with staff.
	Advocacy	Must be willing to advocate for the rights of others and take chances
	How does one school culture respond to its principal's efforts to create an inclusion program for students in special education? What are the characteristics of this school culture?	
Exceeding Minimal Compliance	Serve the "whole child"	Look at every facet of the child because all are intermingled.
	Individualized behavior and academic plans	Goals are set based on their individual needs.
	Accountability	Multiple sources of data are used to track progress.
	Continual improvement processes	Inclusion is a process that requires dedication, perseverance, and courage.
	Feel part of the community	Culture embraces students with disabilities.
	Engaged leadership	Principal is visible and involved
	Meaningful relationships	Relationships build trust and collaboration.

What actions does this leader use in attempts to create a school culture that promotes inclusion for students in special education?

Tiered Support System	Teamwork mentality	Team building activities are part of the cultural norm.
	Collaboration	Staff and administration plan and learn together.
	Continuous professional development	Ongoing training occurs based on needs.
	Instructional supports	Staff embraces inclusion because they are supported.

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### **Equity-mindset.**

Before Ms. Lane came to Forrest Elementary, she was already committed to inclusion. Her purpose was to implement inclusion into the school. She knew she had to educate the staff on the importance of inclusion and get buy-in from them first. She explained during her interview that she believed inclusion provided an equitable education for students with disabilities. She explained that equity was different than equality. She indicated that an equal education occurred when all students received the same education. She wanted all students to have access to education. She explained it might look different for each student but she wanted them to all receive an equitable education.

During the case study, Ms. Lane displayed many characteristics of a social justice leader. She was a role model for her staff and based on the teacher and administrator interviews, transformed many of the staff's mindsets regarding inclusion. She turned her staff into advocates for inclusion. Based on the study, Ms. Lane transformed her staff's mindset by educating them about special education and the benefits of inclusion as well as providing instructional supports and enough staffing to implement inclusion. Ms. Lane explained that transforming the school culture took time and it was still a continual process. She explained that she and the other staff

members had to advocate for their students on a daily basis. I observed her having taking action to have courageous conversations with a teacher regarding behavior modifications. I also observed her during a special education meeting discussing the importance of co-teaching and best practices for the model. She explained that a leader must be willing to advocate for the rights of others and take chances. She explained that her goal was to ensure that all students were treated with respect and provided an equitable education. She never wanted teachers to allude that having a disability was a reason a child should not be given an adequate education. One of the first statements Ms. Lane (personal communication, November 11, 2016) said to me was, “Inclusion is necessary. We have to go above and beyond because we are an inclusive school. I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

During the observations, Ms. Lane was involved in a variety of meetings including a student’s IEP, a collaborative planning meeting with teachers, and a special education meeting with all of the special education teachers and paraprofessionals. During the meetings, she reiterated her commitment to the inclusion program and the students with disabilities. Ms. Lane expressed how her expertise in special education helped her hire staff that believed in the inclusion model.

“I am very intuitive, and that helps me hire staff for our school. I am very transparent with candidates regarding our inclusion program. I explain to them our vision and goals for the school, as well as the classroom models of inclusion. I can tell quickly if a candidate has a similar philosophy, or if they are totally opposed to this type of culture. If they are excited about our school, I will consider them for a position. If they are totally opposed to what we do, of course, I won’t hire them. I am also good at matching up staff to work together. Working in the same classroom is like a marriage. I need it to work, or they will not be able to meet the students’ needs. Of course, I haven’t gotten it right

every time. If I don't, I'll make a change if needed. I'm the type of principal that if something doesn't work, then I'll change it. I'm very flexible, and change doesn't bother me. I realize not everyone is like that. My staff knows me, and they know if I make a change it's because it is best for our students" (Lane, personal communication, November 14, 2016).

Ms. Baptiste discussed how she and the principal work collaboratively to ensure everyone felt supported. She gave several examples of how they support the stakeholders. She said she and the principal completed a school walkthrough every morning in which they go around to each classroom and speak with the staff and students. She said they stop and talk with any of the teachers that may have questions or concerns. She said they always try to make a point to check in with any teachers they are working with individually to show they remember their needs, and they are concerned about them. During one of the observations, I participated in one of these walkthroughs, and all the staff and students seemed pleased to see the principal and assistant principal. The walkthrough seemed to be a normal part of the day. During this observation, I observed one of the teachers speaking with the principal about a concern she had with one of the student's behaviors. The principal asked her to stop by her office during her planning to discuss it. I was also present when the teacher met with the principal to discuss her concern. From the conversation, it was evident that the behavior she was describing had been ongoing and previous conversations had already transpired. They discussed the behavior interventions that had previously been put in place and also discussed previous contacts that had been made to the parents. An individual behavior chart had already been implemented, and the student was receiving a reward at the end of the day if he earned it. The principal recommended that the students be given rewards throughout the day because she felt trying to follow the behavior chart all day was not

feasible. The teacher was open to the discussion, and she and the principal further discussed how they could break his day up with rewards for him to be successful. The principal discussed how inclusion was the best model for every student. She talked about how education had changed so much over time, and sometimes it was hard for some teachers to accept the changes. The special education teacher stated,

“Co-teachers need to mesh to be effective. Our principal does a good job of pairing up the co-teachers. I think she takes into consideration our strengths and weaknesses and tries to put co-teachers together that will complement each other. Every year at the beginning of the year, someone from the administration will meet with the co-teachers to discuss roles and responsibilities and how they are divided in the classroom. I think it starts off the year on a positive note with clear communication between everyone. If there is a paraprofessional in the classroom, they meet with us as well” (Dade, personal communication, November 11, 2016).

Based on the researched conducted, equity mindset is at the core of this inclusion program. Ms. Lane’s mindset of equity started the transformation in the school culture, and then it spread to the other staff members once she took the time to educate them on the importance of inclusion. Transforming a person’s mindset takes time, but it helps to hire people and bring them into the organization if they already believe in the inclusion model. Ms. Lane only hired staff members who embraced inclusion. She wanted to make sure all stakeholders were working to meet the need of students with disabilities while providing them an opportunity to be part of the school community.

### **Exceeding minimal compliance.**



Based on special education laws, students with disabilities must have individualized education plans that include a free and appropriate public education, and that these students are entitled to receive their education within the least restrictive environment. Just following these laws would be considered minimal compliance. One could abide by these laws without changing school culture but students with disabilities would likely not thrive and feel part of the community. Going beyond minimal compliance means transforming the school culture so that students with disabilities are embraced by the school community. Students' accommodations and modifications become part of the norm of the culture.

Ms. Lane wanted to create a school culture that was inclusive of her students with disabilities. Ms. Lane discussed the importance of looking at the individual student in everything especially academics and discipline. She reported,

“Some students with disabilities may be seen as getting preferential treatment because they are disciplined differently, but you have to take into consideration their disabilities. For example, throughout the last three years, we had several students who were physically aggressive with the staff due to their disabilities. All of them had been diagnosed with autism. Some staff members complained they should have been suspended due to their physical aggressiveness. I knew I couldn't suspend them, nor did I want to because the physical aggressiveness was a manifestation of their disability. They were physically aggressive because they didn't have the coping mechanisms to express themselves any other way” (Lane, personal communication, November 14, 2016).

Ms. Baptiste discussed how teachers have to also look at each student individually when it comes to academics. She exclaimed, “You have to be intentional about serving the whole child. You have to look at every facet of the child because every component affects the other.

You have to be very creative and intentional in order to meet all of the needs of the students in your class” (Baptiste, personal communication, November 13, 2016).

Mr. Thomas discussed the complexities of assessing his students’ progress since all of his instruction is differentiated.

“We use multiple sources of data to track progress since students are all on different levels. We first use the universal screener the district provides to start, but then we also use other data like IEP data, common assessments, and observation data. Because all students learn differently they also need to be assessed differently. Not everyone is a good test taker. I firmly believe standardized tests don’t give us an accurate picture of what students can do. At our school, each student has a portfolio with individualized goals. We assess their progress with academics and behavior based on their goals based on individual needs” (Thomas, personal communication, November 11, 2016).

The case study findings showed that there has been a continual effort to foster inclusion in a school culture. Ms. Lane, Ms. Baptiste, and several teachers discussed how everyone had to be flexible within the school community. The school improvement process was ever evolving in order to improve the inclusion program. The changes were based on data analysis of student achievement, educational initiatives, and needs of the students. Ms. Lane discussed that progress monitoring of the inclusion program was a continual process because they wanted to continue to improve the program.

The reactions of the stakeholders varied but overall, the staff that have remained had a positive outlook on the changes that were made. The process started with taking meaningful actions with specific purpose to create the current school culture. During an interview with the general education teacher who worked in a co-taught classroom, Ms. Johnson, mentioned that

she previously worked at the school a couple of years ago, but left for other opportunities. She stated she decided to come back to the school because it was close to her home. She commented how different the culture was now. Ms. Johnson (personal communication, November 11, 2016) stated, “The culture is welcoming and inviting; it’s different now because of the new leadership. The current leadership is positive and has an open door policy. They listen, ask questions, and take advice. The principal is very visible and very involved with the students. She collaborates with the teachers and knows what is going on day to day in the classrooms.”

Ms. Johnson went on to discuss how “inclusion is the real world.” Throughout the interviews, I found that several of the teachers compared inclusion to reality. They also talked about how inclusion instilled empathy in students and staff members. The special education co-teacher, Ms. Anderson, discussed how she felt students with disabilities would be mocked or made fun of if they were in a regular school without inclusion. She said she often partners up general education students with students with disabilities to teach tolerance and acceptance. Ms. Baptiste discussed serving the “whole child”. She discussed how she trained the teachers to meet all of the needs of the students. She talked about how teachers, counselors, and administrators teamed up to provide “wrap around” services to address the social, emotional, physical and academic needs of students. Ms. Baptiste explained that many of the students at her school were diagnosed with Autism and they often struggled with the lack of social skills. She gave examples about how the teachers would take time to read social stories to them daily to teach them how to interact with other students at school.

Being compliant with the law is all that is required for IDEA but exceeding minimal compliance is what is needed in order to serve students in an inclusion program. Legislation mandates that students with disabilities be given an individual educational plan but it is up to the

educators to make this plan meaningful and integrate the student into the school culture where they are supported, safe, and are flourishing.

### **Tiered support system.**

From the findings, a tiered support system is needed to foster an inclusion program. First, they need school leaders that are involved in the inclusion program. All of the teachers and administrators discussed how challenging the inclusion model was for everyone. Ms. Johnson discussed the challenges, but said the principal always made sure they had everything they needed so it made implementing the model easier. She stated, “I feel confident I can handle any students that come into my classroom because my administration supports me and the students” (Johnson, personal communication, November 11, 2016).

All of the teachers discussed how they felt supported by the administrative staff. The principal had experience working with special education but the assistant principal reported that she had no experience. The assistant principal, Ms. Baptiste (personal communication, November 11, 2016) commented, “I had never worked with inclusion until coming here. I started working with Ms. Lane, and the transformation to an inclusion model had changed my career. My eyes have been open to a whole new way of looking at education.” She emphatically stated, “That support is the most important thing for inclusion.” Teachers, parents, and students have to feel supported in order for it to work” (Baptiste, personal communication, November 14, 2016). Mr. Thomas, the self-contained special education teacher, reported that the administration liked the staff to use positive reinforcement with the students instead of negative consequences as much as possible. He also stated that the administrative staff also liked to celebrate staff and students accomplishments as much as possible. Mr. Thomas (personal communication, November 11, 2016) indicated, “Students are rewarded and celebrated for their individual goals because

each child is so different. We always try to focus on their strengths, while constantly working on their areas of growth”.

Ms. Lane talked about how team building is important for her school culture. They form relationships to build trust so they can collaborate freely. She explained

“One thing we do to build relationships among the staff is kick off our preplanning week with team building activities. It is very important our staff builds relationships with each other since they often work in the classrooms together or collaborate outside of the classroom. I try to make it fun for them by having a theme every year. For example, Star Wars was our theme this year. All of our activities were based on it, and we had a blast. We also try to do at least one team building activity every month to keep the momentum going. We are a family here, not just co-workers” (Lane, personal communication, November 14, 2016).

All of the teachers discussed collaboration, but one example that was impactful came from the resource teacher, Ms. Dade. She explained, “My administration has very high expectations for all the staff members. Collaboration is an expectation, and it is not an option. We are expected to collaboratively plan with our grade level every Tuesday and Thursday. Our instructional coaches meet with us as well. We are expected to talk about instruction as well as look at student work to find out which students are struggling and what we need to do about it” (Dade, personal communication, November 11, 2016). She also discussed how the IEP team for each student collaborates. She explained that every student with a disability had an IEP team that worked collaboratively to make decisions regarding their education. The IEP team consisted of the special education teacher, the general education teacher, and any support teachers that work

with the students such as speech or occupational therapy teachers, an administrator, and the parents. Ms. Dade explained that the administrative staff knew every student with a disability and their needs.

Based on the findings, professional development was also one of the most important initiatives that started with Ms. Lane. She explained, “I knew I had to provide some professional development on behavior strategies for students with disabilities and special education laws because students were being punished for behaviors that were manifested due to their disability, and it was evident some of them didn’t know anything about special education” (Lane, personal communication, November 13, 2016). I asked our lead teacher for special education and one of the special education teachers to lead the training. One thing I have found is the district provides some training for the special education teachers, but no training to the general education teachers that work in inclusion. Ms. Lane went on to explain the administrative team decided to assess each staff member’s strengths, and they created their own “experts” so they could learn strategies and skills from each other.

Ms. Anderson discussed the types of professional learning the staff received. “Our administration offers tiered Professional Learning. It is differentiated for each person based on his or her needs. A new teacher may go to a co-teaching 101 session, but a more experienced teacher who has taught in a co-taught class may only need a technology course” (Anderson, personal communication, November 8, 2016).

Ms. Johnson commented that she did not think general education teachers got enough training through the district regarding special education. She stated the principal tries to supplement some of the training by bringing in people from the outside. She explained that special education teachers were also asked to conduct a lot of the training. Ms. Anderson reported, “Ms.

Lane gives us incentives for doing training like getting to wear jeans to work, giving us a comp day, or buying us lunch. Our principal tries to make us feel special. She knows we work hard, and she does special things for us like go around during the morning with a breakfast cart handing out muffins and coffee” (Anderson, personal communication, November 8, 2016).

Ms. Baptiste explained that the teachers and the special education paraprofessionals collaboratively plan together twice a week per grade level and attend professional development for an hour once a week. She stated the instructional coaches meet with the teachers during collaborative planning to help guide their conversations and improve practice. She indicated the teachers should be focused on discussing lesson plans, instructional ideas, and modifications and accommodations so all of the students have an opportunity to master the standards. She indicated that the teachers always analyze some form of student data in order to guide their instruction and identify students who need remediation or enrichment. Ms. Baptiste (personal communication, November 13, 2016) explained, “In order for the staff to plan together, they need a common planning time. Inclusion can take a toll on your master schedule if you’re not careful.”

As reported, the students with disabilities are included with the general education students during all day or the majority of their schedule. Mr. Thomas discussed how his students received math and reading instruction in his classroom with only a few special education students in the class, but there were other opportunities for them to be integrated in with the general education students. He stated they always went to lunch and specials (art, music, physical education, and library) with the general education students. He discussed how the physical education coach always modified his instruction so the physically impaired students could participate with the other students. Ms. Dade reported she had worked at the school for over twenty years. She stated that special education students came to her class for only reading and math but they participated with

the general education students during the rest of the day. She stated she felt new teachers accepted inclusion easier than veteran teachers. She explained,

“Education has changed so much since I started. There is always some new initiative. As a special education teacher, I received training in school on how to instruct students with disabilities. I know many general education teachers that started about the same time I did that didn’t receive any special education training. It’s hard to change old habits. I think veteran teachers want to meet of all their students, but it’s hard to change what you’ve been doing for years” (Dade, personal communication, November 11, 2016).

From my findings, this school culture has several different classroom models that encourage inclusion. One of the models was paraprofessional support. In this model, paraprofessionals supported students in general education classes. The paraprofessional can be in a classroom with just the general education teacher or the special education teacher can also teach in the classroom if more support is needed. Paraprofessionals can be used for students who need less support instead of needing a special education teacher, or they can be an extra set of hands in a co-taught classroom with a special education and general education teacher. Ms. Lane discussed how paraprofessionals were seen as educators in her school, and they always facilitated their own small instructional group. She said, “When someone walks into our classrooms with multiple adults, I don’t want them to be able to distinguish between the general education teacher, the special education teacher, and the paraprofessional. All of them should be involved in instruction and small group differentiated instruction should be going on all the time” (Lane, personal communication, November 14, 2016). She also went on to discuss that if students with disabilities need supportive services like speech or physical therapy, then those specialists also came into the general education setting to teach. “We try to minimize pulling students out of instruction as



much as possible” (Lane, personal communication, November 14, 2016). Another inclusion model that used is consultative support. This is when the student enrolled in special education needs minimal support in the general education setting. They were still assigned to a special education teacher, but they were not in the classroom with them. They only consulted with the general education teacher outside of the classroom to give strategies or support that the general education teacher can use with the student. As reported, consultative services are often used when students are preparing to exit special education very soon.

With all of the new initiatives over the past few years, the principal reported that accountability measures were put in place. Ms. Lane reported,

“I, Ms. Baptiste, and the instructional coaches observe and teach in the classroom quite a bit. The instructional coaches model for our teachers, and Ms. Baptiste and I mostly observe. We always try to give constructive feedback to the teachers. We call it, “*grows and grows*.” We discuss with the teachers what we observed that was really good and areas of growth. I think the teachers feel comfortable with having conversations about their observations. I think a big reason why is that we spend a lot of time on the front end forming relationships with the staff. I think they trust us” (Lane, personal communication, November 14, 2016)

From the findings, it was evident that Ms. Lane took a practical approach to solving problems or taking on challenges. She had a hands-on approach with staff, students, and parents. Teachers gave several examples regarding her taking action. For example, Ms. Anderson reported,

“One challenge we have is maintaining fidelity of what the inclusion program is supposed to be. In the last year, a couple of students were placed in co-taught classrooms,

but I felt they were not appropriate for the class due to behavior issues and low academic performance. I spoke with my administrators about it, and we were able to meet with the parents to discuss other alternatives. The parents were receptive to our feedback, and we decided to place the students in our resource program a couple hours of the day to give them more intensive support. My principal always supports us when decisions like this come up. She always collaborates with us and respects our judgment” (Anderson, personal communication, November 8, 2016)

Ms. Lane talked about having courageous conversations with parents when students needed a more restrictive setting. She indicated it was very difficult, but it was best for everyone involved. She also discussed having courageous conversations with staff members as well. “Inclusion is not for everyone in terms of staffing either. When I first started at the school there were teachers who had difficulty adjusting to working in an inclusive model, and I had to have conversations with them about if this was the best work environment for them. Some staff members left, and some bought into the idea of inclusion once they started seeing students making progress and other staff members thriving in it” (Lane, personal communication, November 14, 2016).

Multi-level layers of support are required in order to create and sustain a successful inclusion program. It starts with a school leader who is dedicated to the implementation of an inclusion program, fosters a culture of relationship building among staff, and establishes certain requirements. Staff are expected to collaborate and participate in professional development in order to provide an equitable education within the inclusion program. School leaders provide pro-

fessional development and instructional supports such as an adequate number of staff and a flexible master schedule which promotes inclusion. All of these supports are integral components to create a successful inclusive school culture.

Ms. Lane had the belief that students with disabilities should receive an equitable education before she came to Forrest Elementary. Her beliefs and mindset laid the foundation for a school culture that embraced students with disabilities. She advocated for these students and was not afraid to start an inclusion program. Ms. Lane had the skill set to get buy-in regarding inclusion from the staff. She collaborated with them to assess the school culture to determine how the school community could foster an inclusion program. Ms. Lane partnered with other staff members to set goals and objectives that would create a school culture that provided for students with disabilities. In order to create an inclusive atmosphere, Ms. Lane had to provide resources to the staff.

Ms. Lane used her special education background and her knowledge of the laws to educate her staff about students with disabilities. She provided training regarding inclusion models like co-teaching. She hired an adequate amount of staff including special education teachers and paraprofessionals to support students with disabilities. She collaborated with other staff members to create a flexible master schedule which allowed for inclusion models throughout the school day. The teachers reported feeling supported by Ms. Lane. According to the interview comments, Ms. Lane and Ms. Baptiste were visible throughout the day and were readily available to assist whenever they were needed.

Based on the interviews, observations, and artifacts, Ms. Lane fostered an inclusion program that exceeded the minimal compliance of special education laws. During the observations, I witnessed staff collaboratively planning, discussing student needs, and working together as a

team to meet students' needs. Based on the staff's perceptions, the culture was welcoming and embraced students with disabilities. Based on the comments, Ms. Lane and Ms. Baptiste were seen more as partners than administrators. Based on the findings, a social justice mindset was the foundation, the resources helped teachers to provide and equitable education to students with disabilities, and the partnerships between the staff members allowed them to exceed minimal compliance in an inclusion program.

### **Discussion**

This section expounds upon the connection between the existing literature and the case study research. Review of the literature shows that progress has been made toward including students with disabilities in general education settings for much of the school day in many schools (McLeskey, Landers, Hoppey, & Williamson, 2011; McLeskey & Waldron, 2011). Based on previous research, school culture has a direct impact on the successful implementation of inclusion of special education services (Hudgins, 2012). Since Ms. Lane began her principalship at Forrest Elementary three years ago, students being served in inclusion has increased from 72% in 2013, to 89% in 2016. The number of students in special education has also increased. Sixty-nine special education students were served in 2013, and the numbers rose to eighty-five students in special education in 2016. Ms. Lane reported that the school had a good reputation in the community, and parents have reported they have moved into the neighborhood so their children could be enrolled in Forrest Elementary. Teachers said they felt supported by the administration. Based on the findings, the school culture responded positively to the implementation of an inclusion program for students in special education. This was due to Ms. Lane's skill set and traits of social justice leadership.

Ms. Lane was committed to creating an inclusion program for students with disabilities. This was due to her belief in social justice. Social justice leadership requires action to identify oppressive practices and replace them with equitable ones (Furman, 2012). Based on the findings, Ms. Lane believed in an equitable education for students with disabilities. There are certain character traits a leader must possess to transform a school culture into inclusion. Social justice leadership requires a leader who takes risks, questions decisions made for the majority, and implements innovative practices (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014). Based on the findings, Ms. Lane was not afraid of change or adversity. Her social justice orientation and expertise of special education gave her the confidence and courage to promote inclusion. School leaders are responsible for establishing a school culture that rejects segregation and inequitable treatment (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014). Their daily work must reflect this responsibility. Based on the findings, Ms. Lane was involved in every facet of promoting the inclusion program. She was trained in special education laws and how to educate students with disabilities, unlike most school leaders. She knew what was required to create an effective inclusion program for students in special education. Ms. Lane gave her time, energy, effort, and resources to inclusion to change the school culture.

Based on previous research, school leaders must get buy-in from the staff to transform the school culture (McLeskey & Waldron, 2015). Ms. Lane comprised a team of staff members to assess the current school culture and determine what supports were needed to be put in place to implement the inclusion model. Once the assessment was complete, the team had to rethink how structures and staff were being used so they could create a new service delivery model. School leaders must put specific supports in place redistribute resources to provide an inclusion program for students with disabilities (Theoharis & Caustin, 2014). The master

schedule also has to be modified to enable time for collaboration, provide necessary classroom resources, and assess students' needs (Ubben, Hughes, & Norris, 2001). Another support Ms. Lane emphasized was professional development. Previous research found that special education teachers and general education teachers are typically undertrained on special education issues (Sands, Adams, & Stout, 1995; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 2013). She provided training by connecting with outside resources and creating a tiered professional learning community in which the teachers taught each other. Observations and interviews revealed that teachers were immersed in high-quality professional development. Continual professional development is necessary to provide innovative instructional strategies in an inclusion program (Desimone, 2011; McLeskey, Landers, Hoppey & Williamson, 2011). Previous research and current findings demonstrate that teachers have a more positive attitude regarding inclusion when they feel supported and prepared (Avramidis and Norwich, 2002). Reviews of research regarding teacher perspectives on inclusion have shown that a significant concern relates to having resources in the classroom to make inclusion successful (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 2013). School leaders need to use limited resources efficiently. Ms. Lane and her team made distinct changes to promote inclusion.

Participants believe that Ms. Lane's leadership is what transformed the school culture and made inclusion a successful program. Previous research reported that leaders must promote shared leadership, shared decision-making, and collaboration (Hudgins, 2012). Based on the findings, Ms. Lane met with the staff on a consistent basis to ask for input and participated in shared decision-making. Teachers reported feeling empowered by the collaboration. Researchers found that school leaders can influence school culture by communicating values, sharing beliefs, conveying attitudes, modeling behaviors, providing supports, and addressing

problems and concerns related to inclusion (Lewis & Doorlag, 2003). By communicating her vision, acting on her beliefs, and supporting her staff and students, Ms. Lane was able to foster an inclusion program students with disabilities.

### **Implications.**

#### ***Practical implications.***

The findings of this case study have some practical implications for the field of education. First, it is necessary to have a shift in mindset and attitudes towards students with special educational needs. The entire community needs to embrace inclusion as a practice that is required to provide an equitable education for students with disabilities. The school community needs to be reflective about inclusion to take action. The purpose should be to provide every student in the classroom with the possibility to feel included and part of the community. The school community should take into account not only their needs but also their abilities and what they can bring to the school community (Riester, Pursch, & Skrla, 2002). It is necessary to hire a school leader with a social justice mindset who has the traits necessary to transform a school culture that embraces inclusion. It is incumbent on the leader to provide all the necessary resources to the staff, so they have the skills required to work in an inclusion program. These resources include professional development regarding varying disabilities and how to teach in an inclusive environment. Teachers also need instructional materials unique to the accommodations and modifications that are often included in IEPs. School leaders also need the skills necessary to hire staff that supports inclusion and will promote it within the school culture. School leaders also have to know how to create a schedule that encourages inclusive classroom models and adequate time for students with disabilities to socialize with other students in common areas of the

school. This type of inclusiveness will provide opportunity for students with disabilities to interact with other students in a social setting. It teaches empathy and provides a realistic view of the world.

School leaders need to be informed and committed to guiding every single step of the inclusion program. They need to become agents of change; monitoring, evaluating, and giving feedback to continuously improve the inclusion program and the educational community members' performance based on what she observes to develop a successful process of inclusion in the school.

School leaders must promote of a culture of collaboration. School leaders are responsible for collaborating with teachers to share decision making regarding the inclusion program. It is important to discuss the decision that needs to be made, get feedback from teachers, and input since they are on the frontline of instruction. This type of decision making also creates buy-in from teachers, and they feel more valued when asked for input as well as feeling ownership in creating and maintaining an inclusion program. Teachers must collaborate to plan for instruction and learn from each other. This type of teamwork can improve teachers' overall instructional delivery. They can learn instructional strategies from each other, brainstorm with each other to create innovative lessons and make sure the needs of students with disabilities receive equitable opportunities. It is imperative that teachers have high expectations for all students and they monitor progress to plan for instruction.

School leaders must educate the school community to become aware of the importance of creating real inclusive environments not only to help students achieve their goals but also to help



teachers improve their teaching practices. Thus, teachers have the possibility to grow in the professional career, while transforming their students' reality and contributing to creating a better society (Sapon-Shevin, 2003).

***Policy implications.***

The finding of this study also has policy implications for legislation, government education, and leadership preparation programs. First, legislation must be enacted to define inclusion and provide specific guidelines as to what is necessary to create a successful inclusion program for students with disabilities. Once these guidelines are set, it is incumbent on the government to support inclusion programs. It is fundamental that the governmental agencies in charge of education provide the financial resources, and continuous professional development to promote inclusion in schools. Also, educational facilities need to be adapted and modified based on students' unique needs, to guarantee all students access to all the school facilities. As policies pertain to staffing, there is a necessity to have an adequate number of trained staff to teach in an inclusive school culture. Students with disabilities have varying needs which must be met with a variety of staff. These implications involve the state and federal government's commitment to inclusion.

Leadership programs, which are supposedly designed to prepare future administrators to be the "experts" in education, rarely touch upon issues related to children with disabilities (Capper, Theoharis, & Sebastian, 2006; Riestler, Pursch, & Skrla, 2002). Programs can use this case study to engage future leaders in the topic of special education and the idea of inclusion. The finding can assist leadership program faculty members in exposing leadership candidates who

have limited experience in special education to the lived experiences of a leader who is passionate about providing inclusive services for these students. There is a gap in the literature when it comes to the voice of current administrators and their insights, struggles, successes, and opinions about inclusive environments (Billingsley, McLeskey, & Crockett, 2014; McLeskey, Landers, Hoppey, & Williamson, 2011). Knowledge of such administrator accounts could enhance awareness about how to best implement ideal practices of inclusion. These could also confront realities that challenge such efforts. Some actions related to establishing the necessary conditions for creating more inclusive schools have been described in this case study. This study has shown how a school reacted to a principal who demonstrated the behaviors related to social justice leadership as she worked to create an inclusive environment for special education students. The study explored the perceptions of administrators and key faculty members who believe that the principal's personal philosophy and leadership style allowed an inclusive culture to flourish in the school."

Principals are key to shaping a positive culture within a school. This case study outlines the important role a school leader played in supporting instructional practices and how she affected school culture (DiPaola, Tschannen-Moran & Walther-Thomas, 2004). Preparing administrators for creating a shared and productive learning environment where inclusion is the result is not easy. Effective leadership preparation is crucial in order to achieve this goal (Hudgins, 2012).

Enacting policies that provide a framework and resources for inclusion will encourage more school leaders to embrace the model. Therefore, more students with disabilities will be included in the general education classroom. Research overwhelmingly shows that students with disabilities, when included in general education classrooms, make greater academic progress (Hudgins, 2012).

### ***Theoretical implications.***

To date, there has been no profound theory of how to transform a school culture into a community embraces inclusion. Rather there have been many suggested practices to create an inclusion program for students with disabilities (Dyssegaard, & Larsen, 2013; McLeskey, Landers, Hoppey, & Williamson, 2012). There are still questions that remain about how to create and maintain an inclusion program in which students with disabilities can thrive.

The evidence from this study combined with previous research suggests that effective models of inclusion are driven by a leader who has a social justice mindset. Theoharis' (2007) four components of social justice leadership provided direction. These elements included advancing inclusion, access, and opportunity; creating a climate of belonging; improving core teaching and curriculum, and raising student achievement. Findings from this study supported these elements as well extended the research into how school culture was affected by inclusion. This study demonstrated that social justice could drive the implementation of inclusion for students with disabilities and it can profoundly change school culture. It is evident based on the findings of this study that a successful inclusion program cannot stand alone. The key to success is the component of social justice.

There have been numerous theories formed regarding the preparation of school leaders (Bateman, & Bateman, 2002; Salisbury, & McGregor, 2002). Previous research on social justice, inclusion, and school culture (Brown, 2004; Capper, Theoharis, & Sebastian, 2006; Furman, 2012; McKenzie et al., 2008), should be fused to create a theoretical framework for leadership preparation programs. Both current and future school leaders should learn about this theoretical framework and use it as a guide to provide an equitable education for students with disabilities.

### **Suggestions for future inquiry.**

Future research should continue to focus on the relationship between social justice leadership, inclusion, and school culture. Researchers should continue to investigate the experiences of leaders with social justice orientations and examine how servicing marginalized groups create obstacles for the school community. These studies should continue to examine the relationship between leadership actions and personal beliefs. Researchers should also move forward with researcher more school leaders lived experiences.

In this study, the school principal had a background in special education. Most leaders have limited knowledge of issues to students with disabilities (DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2003). There should be more research done regarding what knowledge school leaders need to have to create a successful inclusion program. It is also important to study school leaders who do not have any background in special education and if they were able to create an inclusion program that was beneficial to students with disabilities.

To date, researchers have done minimal research on district-level policies that help promote equity in schools (DeMatthews, 2013). This pertains to district assessments, placement policies, funding, and staffing. This type of research can potentially help to move legislation forward in providing more equitable resources to marginalized groups.

Another area of the investigation to be investigated is sustaining a successful inclusion program and how it affects school culture. Based on this study, there are many components to creating an inclusive school culture. There has been much research regarding school culture, social justice, and inclusion. A longitudinal study relating to a long-standing, successful inclusion pro-gram would help confirm what is truly needed to support students with disabilities within an inclusive school culture.

## **Conclusion**

There are multiple benefits of serving students with disabilities in an inclusion program. Students with disabilities included in general education classes have fewer absences, fewer behavior referrals, have more developed social skills, and perform better academically than students in more restrictive settings (Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Levine, and Garza, 2006). Previous research suggests that implementing inclusion in schools can affect school culture (DiPaola, Tschannen-Moran, & Walther-Thomas, 2004). The purpose of this case study was to research how a school culture responded to a principal's efforts to create an inclusion program for students with disabilities. Other topics that were also researched were supports needed and characteristics of an inclusion program, as well as the skills leaders, needed to create an inclusion program. Through interviews, observations, and examination of artifacts, three themes emerged that can add to the current body of knowledge: (a) equity mindset, (b) exceeding minimal compliance and (c) tiered support system.

The findings of this study reiterated the process of developing practices of inclusion involving a change in beliefs, attitudes, and practices within a school culture (Makoelle, 2014). It is up to school leaders to set the tone for the vision of the school which shape beliefs, attitudes, and practices. It takes a skilled leader with a social justice orientation that is willing to advocate for all students to ensure an equitable education for all.

These leaders usually have some background knowledge of marginalized groups, and they are advocates for them. School leaders that have a social justice mindset take action to eliminate inequity and are not afraid of any repercussions.

Second, to provide an equitable education, educators must go beyond just complying with special education laws. They must serve the "whole child" by meeting academic, social, emotional and physical needs. Individual academic and behavior plans must be created based

on the unique needs of students with disabilities. It is important that each member of the school culture embraces students with disabilities, so they feel part of the community. For an inclusion program to be effective, school leaders must collaborate with other staff members to continuously monitor the effectiveness program while improving along the way.

Lastly, school leaders must provide a tiered support system must be put in place to provide instructional resources, an adequate number of staff and professional development must be given to create a successful inclusion program. Teachers need to feel supported by school leaders throughout the process of implementing an inclusion program. The more they feel supported, the more of a positive attitude they will have about education students with disabilities in general education classes.

There are several implications based on this case study. First, practical implications consist of ways to infuse inclusion into school culture. The findings revealed the community needs to embrace students with disabilities, so they feel part of the community. To do this, all stakeholders must shift into an equity mindset. Once the mindset has changed, resources should be provided to support the inclusion program including instructional resources, adequate staff, and a time for collaboration among teachers.

Second, policy implications pertain to legislation, governmental agencies, and leadership program. Legislation should be enacted that defines inclusion and provides guidelines on how to implement inclusion. Regulatory agencies should fund inclusion programs by providing them with resources, professional development, and an adequate amount of staff. The movement of inclusion is led by social justice leaders. Previous leadership programs have not provided the knowledge or skill set for future leaders to understand how to create an inclusion

program (Capper, Theoharis, & Sebastian, 2006). This study provides policy implications regarding how to foster an inclusion program in a school culture. It can be used to engage future or current school leaders on the importance of inclusion program and how school culture can be impacted.

Third, there are also theoretical implications which include combining research previously conducted on school culture, inclusion, and social justice creates a framework for creating an inclusive school culture. There are also suggestions regarding a guide for future or current school leaders to use when implementing an inclusion program.

Future research is needed to create successful inclusion programs. There should be further research regarding lived experiences of school leaders who have successfully created inclusive school cultures. There should also be longitudinal studies regarding sustainable inclusion program.

Based on this case study, there are several components needed to create an inclusion program. Stakeholders in a school culture are more likely to react positively to inclusion if the necessary resources are available. This type of implementation took a leader with a social justice mindset who is knowledgeable, advocates for students with disabilities and dedicated to creating an inclusive school culture.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A

#### Administrator Interview Protocol

##### A. School Culture

How do you as a principal set the tone for the culture?

How would you describe the sense of community that exists in your school?

What are your thoughts on inclusion of special education students and school culture?

What was the response from the school culture when inclusion was implemented?

##### B. Inclusion

How was the inclusive program planned and implemented in your school?

Do inclusion work? Why or why not?

What are the barriers or impediments to a successful inclusive program?

What are the characteristics of a school culture that fosters inclusion for students in special education?

##### C. Instruction

How do teachers and other school staff plan for, implement, and assess learning opportunities for students in special education?

How do you as a leader assure that general and special education teachers at your school learn specific instructional strategies and interventions for serving the learning needs of students in special education?

##### D. Collaboration

In what ways do general and special education teachers collaborate to address the needs of students in special education?

Who beside teachers are involved in these collaborations?

How do you as a leader build coordinated team commitment at your school?

Who is involved in the assessment and IEP development process at your school?

##### E. Professional Development

What professional development do you provide to the staff that is specific to the inclusion program?

How do you differentiate professional development among the staff?

### **F. Support**

What supports are necessary when creating an inclusion program for students with disabilities?

How do balance resources and supports in your school?

### **G. Evaluation of Inclusion Processes**

What sorts of data do you use to assess the effectiveness of the inclusion program at your school?

How do you gauge the health and vitality of your school's learning culture?

Describe some of the specific ways you as a principal measure progress toward the realization of your vision for inclusive education.

What are the key factors that support inclusion and improved academic achievement outcomes in your school?

### **H. Leadership Skills**

What leadership qualities must a school leader have to create an inclusion program for students in special education?

What experience do you have working with students with disabilities?

What experience do you have with working with an inclusion program?

Adapted from Williams-Lewis, Y. (2014). *Principal leadership that creates a school culture supportive of inclusive education for students on the autism spectrum*. (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from SDSU Library and Information Access. (2015-04-22T21:51:04).

## Appendix B

### Teacher Interview Protocol

#### A. School Culture

What input do you have in shaping the school culture?

What are your thoughts on inclusion of special education students and school culture?

How would you describe the sense of community that exists in your school?

#### B. Inclusion

How was the inclusive program planned and implemented in your school?

Why does inclusion work?

What are the characteristics of an inclusion program for students in special education?

What are the barriers or impediments to a successful inclusive program?

#### C. Instruction

How do you as a teacher plan for, implement, and assess learning opportunities for students in special education?

To what extent does instruction focus on IEP goals?

How do your school leaders assure that general and special education teachers at your school learn specific instructional strategies and interventions for serving the learning needs of students in special education?

What kinds of strategies are used to increase desired student performance?

How would you describe how services are delivered to students with disabilities?

#### D. Collaboration

In what ways do general and special education teachers collaborate to address the needs of students in special education?

Tell me about the composition of your IEP teams. Who participates?

How does your school administration ensure that teachers collaborate?

How are related services for students delivered at your school?

#### E. Support



What type of professional development have you received to support inclusive practices in your classroom?

How do you balance the use of resources and providing sufficient student support?

How are school leaders involved in supporting the inclusive program and improved student achievement?

#### **F. Evaluation of Inclusion Procedures**

How do you gauge the vitality of your classroom's learning culture?

Describe some of the specific ways you as a teacher measure progress toward the realization of the school's vision for inclusive education.

Are there specific/additional measures for assessing the effectiveness of inclusive education for students in special education?

What are the key factors that support inclusion and improved academic achievement outcomes in your school? What are the issues or key factors that make inclusion and improved academic outcomes difficult to achieve?

Adapted from Williams-Lewis, Y. (2014). *Principal leadership that creates a school culture supportive of inclusive education for students on the autism spectrum*. (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from SDSU Library and Information Access. (2015-04-22T21:51:04Z)

## Appendix C

### Principal Observation Protocol

Date \_\_\_\_\_ Setting \_\_\_\_\_ Time In \_\_\_\_\_ Time Out \_\_\_\_\_

Domain	Observations
Interactions with Teachers	
Interactions with Students	
Topic	
Collaboration	
Social Justice Leadership	

Adapted from Williams-Lewis, Y. (2014). *Principal leadership that creates a school culture supportive of inclusive education for students on the autism spectrum*. (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from SDSU Library and Information Access. (2015-04-22T21:51:04Z)

## Appendix D

### Georgia State University Department of Educational Policy Studies Informed Consent

#### AN EXPLORATION OF ONE SCHOOL LEADER'S EXPERIENCE OF CREATING AN INCLUSIVE SCHOOL CULTURE FOR STUDENTS IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

**Principal Investigator:** Dr. Sheryl Cowart Moss

**Student Principal Investigator:** Ms. Stephanie Chattman

#### **Purpose:**

You are being invited to participate in the above titled research study. The purpose of this study is to explore how one school culture responded to a school leader creating an inclusion program for students with disabilities. You are being invited to participate because your school was selected for this study. A total of eight participants will be invited to participate in the over-all study. As one of these eight individuals, your participation will require a minimum of two hours of your time and no more than four hours of your time to participate in interviews with the researcher.

#### **Procedures:**

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to complete in at least one semi-structured interview with the researcher. The identity of all participants, schools, and school systems will be masked in the final document order to maintain confidentiality. The interviews will be held in a private location and will be audio-recorded. The interviewer will conduct the first interview around specific questions. Each participant will meet with the interviewer at least once for a minimum of one hour between June and December 2016 to respond to the initial interview questions. The interviewer will record interviews with a digital recorder and transcribe all recordings within five days. All recordings and transcriptions will be stored securely in a locked filing cabinet, in a locked office located in Evansdale Elementary in DeKalb County School District, specifically keyed so that only one person has access and a key. The first interview will be a one-hour interview where the student principal investigator will ask the proposed questions to the participant. In the potential follow up interviews, which can take up to two additional hours, the student principal investigator will ask questions such as "what did you mean by this? Can you clarify", etc... You will receive transcripts of your interview(s). The student investigator will ask you to proof your responses to be sure that she has accurately captured your comments. You will have the opportunity to edit your responses. There is no cost to participate in this study, and you will not be compensated for your participation.

#### **Risks:**

Possible risks for this study are no greater than those you would encounter in everyday life.

**Benefits:**

Participation in this study may benefit you personally, offering the opportunity to reflect on your position within the school and system. Overall, the study hopes to gain information about how school leaders create a school culture that fosters inclusion for students in special education to enhance student learning.

**Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal:**

Participation in research is voluntary. You do not have to be in this study. If you decide to be in the study and change your mind, you have the right to drop out at any time. You may choose not to answer questions or stop participating at any time. Whatever you decide, you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

**Confidentiality:**

We will keep your records private to the extent allowed by law. Only the student principal investigator and the principal investigator will have access to the information you provide. Information may also be shared with those who make sure the study is done correctly (GSU Institutional Review Board, and the Office for Human Research Protection (OHRP)). The transcribed data will be kept for 6 years after completion of the study before being destroyed. All audio data will be destroyed following transcription, which will occur within 5 days of the interview. We will use an alias rather than your name on study records and this alias is in no way linked to any personally identifiable information. Only the student principal investigator will know the association of you to your alias. All recordings and transcriptions will be stored securely in a locked filing cabinet, in a locked office, specifically keyed so that only one person has access and a key. Your name and other facts that might point to you will not appear when we present this study or publish its results.

**Contact Persons:**

Contact Dr. Sheryl Cowart Moss at [smoss13@gsu.edu](mailto:smoss13@gsu.edu) or Stephanie Chattman at 404-908-5377 or [schattman@gmail.com](mailto:schattman@gmail.com) if you have questions, concerns, or complaints about this study. You can also call if you think you have been harmed by the study. Call Susan Vogtner in the Georgia State University Office of Research Integrity at 404-413-3513 or [svogtner1@gsu.edu](mailto:svogtner1@gsu.edu) if you want to talk to someone who is not part of the study team. You can talk about questions, concerns, or suggestions about the study. You can also call Susan Vogtner if you have questions or concerns about your rights in this study.

**Copy of Consent Form to Subject:**

We will give you a copy of this consent form to keep.

If you are willing to volunteer for this research and be audio recorded, please sign below.

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 Participant

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 Date

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 Principal Investigator

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 Date