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Improving Special Education Outcomes through Policy, Teacher Practice, and Student

Support: A Qualitative Study

A Dissertation by

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Irvine, California

School of Education

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership

January 2017

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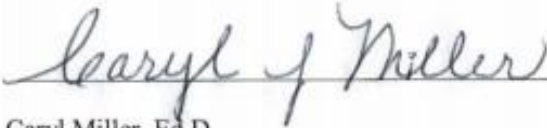
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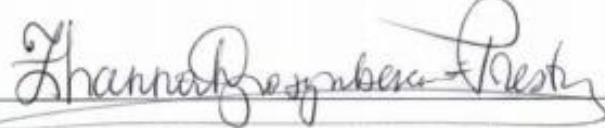
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January 2017

Improving Special Education Outcomes through Policy, Teacher Practice, and Student

Support: A Qualitative Study

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## ABSTRACT

Improving Special Education Outcomes through Policy, Teacher Practice, and Student

Support: A Qualitative Study

by Barbara Wolford

**Purpose:** The purpose of this grounded theory qualitative study was to discover the perceptions of special education directors regarding the changes in special education at the policy level, teacher practice level, and student support level necessary to improve the academic achievement of students with disabilities in California.

**Methodology:** The study employed an emergent approach to grounded theory. Grounded theory utilizes a homogenous sample of participants with similar backgrounds and experiences to allow for theory development. A series of face-to-face and phone recorded structured interviews addressing the research questions were conducted. The researcher transcribed and coded the interviews for emergent themes which answered the research questions and addressed the problem.

**Findings:** Research Sub-Question 1 generated four policy related interview questions and four major themes emerged from the questions: (a) the topics of funding; (b) due process; (c) decision-making; and (d) SELPA governance. Research Sub-Question 2 prompted the directors to describe five major themes for the teacher practice level: (a) nothing eliminated, (b) inclusion, (c) teacher preparation, (d) professional development, and (e) CDE compliance monitoring. Research Sub-Question 3 focused on the student support level and elicited the response that supplementary aids and services are dependent on individual needs. Two major themes emerged from this section: (a) interventions, and (b) credentialing.

**Conclusions:** The major conclusions of the study are funding for special education is inadequate, current teacher preparation programs in California are not meeting the needs of special education directors, inclusion of special education students and teachers is still developing, and teachers need on-going relent professional development.

**Recommendations:** During the re-authorization of IDEA discussion regarding the funding mechanism need to occur to ensure that the funding mechanism positively impacts states to provide for local contributions and inclusion at the state level. Administrators as well as general and special education teachers need to know how to collaborative, accommodate, differentiate and support the learning process for all students. For current teachers offer the courses as a certificate in inclusive education or as part of a master's degree. Embed an overview of the different disabilities in the mild to moderate program and eliminate the current added authorizations.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION.....	11
Background.....	3
Policy .....	4
Conceptual Background to the Problem .....	5
Teacher Practice Level in Special Education.....	7
Student Support Level.....	8
Supplementary aids, supports and accommodations. ....	9
Academic Achievement .....	10
Statement of the Research Problem .....	11
Purpose Statement.....	13
Research Question (RQ) .....	13
Research Sub-Questions (RSQ).....	13
Significance of the Problem.....	13
Definition of Terms.....	15
Theoretical .....	15
Operational.....	16
Delimitations.....	19
Organization of the Study .....	19
 CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW .....	 21
Introduction.....	21
Policy .....	23
History of Education Policy and Litigation .....	25
IDEA.....	26
State performance plan .....	28
Special Education Task Force.....	31
Concepts Related to the Problem.....	33
Loosely Coupled Organizational System.....	33
Inhabited Institutions .....	35
Closing the Achievement Gap .....	36
Professional development. ....	41
Recommendations for students with disabilities.....	43
Special Education Leadership.....	45
Teacher Practice Level in Special Education.....	47
Inclusion.....	49
Co-teaching.....	50
Specialized Academic Instruction (SAI) in Separate Setting .....	52
Student Support Level.....	53
Supplementary Aids, Supports and Accommodations.....	53
Accommodations. ....	54
Academic Achievement .....	56
Research Gap .....	57
Summary.....	59

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY .....	61
Overview.....	61
Purpose Statement.....	61
RQ.....	61
RSQs .....	61
Research Design.....	62
Population .....	64
Target Population.....	64
Sample.....	66
Sample Selection Process .....	67
Instrumentation .....	68
Expert Panel .....	68
Interview Process .....	69
Reliability.....	70
Pilot Test.....	70
Validity .....	71
Data Collection .....	72
Data Analysis .....	74
Limitations .....	76
Summary.....	77
CHAPTER IV: RESEARCH, DATA COLLECTION AND FINDINGS.....	78
Introduction.....	78
Purpose Statement.....	79
RQ.....	79
RSQs .....	79
Instrumentation .....	79
Qualitative Interviews.....	79
Central RQ .....	80
RSQ 1:.....	80
IQ 1. ....	80
IQ 2. ....	80
IQ 3. ....	80
IQ 4. ....	81
RSQ 2.....	81
IQ 5. ....	81
IQ 6 .....	81
IQ 7 .....	81
IQ 8 .....	81
RSQ 3.....	81
IQ 9 .....	81
IQ 10 .....	82
IQ 11 .....	82
Expert Panel/ Pilot Study .....	82
Methodology.....	82



Population and Sample .....	83
Demographic Data .....	84
Data Analysis .....	85
Qualitative Individual Interviews Analyzed .....	86
Qualitative Interview Collection Results .....	89
RSQ 1 .....	90
Theme 1: fund special education .....	90
Theme 2: due process .....	91
Theme 3: decision makers .....	93
Theme 4: SELPA guidance .....	94
RSQ 2 .....	95
Theme 1: nothing eliminated .....	95
Theme 2: inclusion .....	96
Theme 3: teacher preparation .....	98
Theme 4: professional development .....	99
Theme 5: CDE compliance monitoring .....	100
RSQ 3 .....	101
Theme 1: intervention practices .....	101
Theme 2: credentialing .....	101
Summary of Findings .....	102
CHAPTER V: FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS .....	105
Summary .....	105
Purpose Statement .....	106
Research Question .....	106
RSQs .....	107
Methodology .....	107
Population and Sample .....	108
Major Findings .....	108
Interview Data .....	109
RSQ 1 .....	109
RSQ 2 .....	110
RSQ 3 .....	112
Unexpected Findings .....	113
Conclusions .....	113
Implications for Actions .....	116
Recommendations for Further Research .....	118
Concluding Remarks and Reflections .....	119
REFERENCES .....	122
APPENDICIES .....	151

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1.	Organization of the Literature Review .....	22
Table 2.	Provisions of FAPE in IDEA for Students with Disabilities .....	27
Table 3.	Strategies for Closing the Achievement Gap.....	40
Table 4.	Co-teaching Model Strategies.....	51
Table 5.	Steps to Accommodating Classroom Instruction and Curriculum .....	55
Table 6.	Strategies to Enhance Validity.....	72
Table 7.	Qualitative interview Participants’ Demographic Data: Gender, Position Held, and CA Region.....	84
Table 8.	Qualitative interview Participants’ Demographic Data: Background position before Administration .....	85
Table 11.	Participants Responses for the Changes Needed to Improve Special Education .....	87
Table 12.	Top 10 Theme areas with at least 50% Support .....	89
Table 13.	Responses and Text References and Emergent Themes for RSQ 1 .....	103
Table 14.	Responses and Text References and Emergent Themes for RSQ 2 .....	103
Table 15.	Responses and text references and emergent themes for RSQ 3.....	104

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Continuum of Placement Options .....	8
Figure 2. Targeted Tiers for Closing the Achievement Gap .....	38
Figure 3. Distributed Leadership: Relation between Variables .....	46
Figure 4. Qualitative IQs and Relationship to RSQs .....	89

## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

The number of individuals with special needs has been increasing worldwide in the last 20 years. In 1994, United Nations reported about 600,000 individuals with disabilities and created standard rules regarding individuals with disabilities in the areas of health, education, work and social participation (United Nations, 1994). According to the United Nations (2015) report, over 1 billion people about 15% of the global population have disabilities and “the majority live in developing countries” (United Nations, 2015, p. 1). The United Nations continues to advocate for the needs people with disabilities in the identified areas. Access to individual rights continues to be a need worldwide. “Compared to non-disabled persons, people with disabilities are less likely to be in full-time employment; more likely to be unemployed; and significantly more likely to be economically inactive” (United Nations, 2015, p. 1).

Special education globally is moving from an isolated island amongst the mainstream into a system of integrated and leveled supports in the general environment (Cardona, 1997; Lopez-Torrijo & Mengual-Andres, 2014; McMaster, 2014). Improving and developing special education worldwide is a focus of the Council of Exceptional Children, the World Health Organization, and education systems around the world including the United States.

Special education appeared in Europe by the close of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as an alternative to regular schooling. “Often parallel to compulsory education, parents were obligated to send their disabled child to a state institution, an obligation that for a time resembled that of general compulsory education laws” (Richardson & Powell, 2011, p.

97). In 1975, the United States responded to the need for educating individuals with disabilities with the landmark legislation, The Federal Education for All Handicapped Children Act, Public Law (P.L.) 94-142. P.L. 94-142 has become an ever changing and developing law guiding education in the United States (Keogh, 2007).

In prior times children who did not ‘fit’ schools were often excluded; the effect of the P.L. 94-142 legislation was to turn it around so that schools were mandated to ‘fit’ the needs and abilities of the child. P.L. 94-142 contained specific language guaranteeing many things we now take for granted: A free and public education, due process, nondiscriminatory assessment, and an Individual Educational Program (IEP) for every child. (Keogh, 2007, p. 67)

The law sparked decades of discussions and debates over the types of services students receive and where they receive them (R. Gersten, Walker, & Darch, 1998; McLeskey, Landers, Williamson, & Hoppey, 2010). The passage of P. L. 94-142 ensured that all students would have access to a Free and Appropriate Education (FAPE). The law mandates that the services meet the unique individual needs of students. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was reauthorized in 2004, which expanded the access to the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) mandating IEP teams to consider the general education setting to the greatest extent possible.

In 2001, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) added accountability and mandates to access to the core curriculum for students with disabilities. The NCLB included an accountability piece to education of mandated annual assessment on the state adopted standards in which students with disabilities were included and mandated to receive. For the first time since P.L. 94-142, an accountability measure outside of the IEP mandate

was required (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Stecker, 2010). The state developed a technical assistance and monitoring department that monitors the 17 State Performance Plan (SPP) indicators to ensure compliance with IDEA and NCLB.

Districts are monitored yearly toward their progress in meeting the 17 indicators and not meeting the indicators could result in consequences. In response to the progress districts have made towards the indicators, the state of California (CA) commissioned a Special Education Task Force to examine special education services across the state and make recommendations for improvement (Berman et al., 2015). The task force is calling for One System of education for all students. Although, the task force focused on seven areas, the following select areas are included in the focus of this study: (a) early childhood education, (b) evidence based practices, and (c) teacher preparation and education. Access to the LRE and the improvement of education for students with disabilities continues to be of utmost importance to districts. The policy implications for the different areas of focus will drive the ultimate implementation in each areas so it is important to understand how policy relates to overall implementation.

### **Background**

The background includes an overview of the topics included in this study. The historical and current policies affecting special education are introduced. The topics of closing the achievement gap, inhabited institutions, and loosely coupled organizational systems serve as a framework for this study. Additionally, the background introduces the key concepts of the teacher practice level, student support level, and academic achievement for students with disabilities.

## **Policy**

Several key pieces of federal and state mandated legislation guide the education of students with disabilities. The key policies are P.L. 94-142, IDEA 2004, NCLB 2002, Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) 2015, and the California Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) 2013. The policies create guidelines and guidance which direct the services offered through special education.

“The federal Education for All Handicapped Children Act, Public Law 94-142 passed in 1975, became one of the most dynamic pieces of legislation in the history of the country” (Berman et al., 2015, p. 1). The passage of P. L. 94-142 enacted several requirements for students with disabilities to be educated in the most appropriate manner by having access to a FAPE. The law mandates an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) which needs to be updated at least once annually to meet the unique individual needs of students. In 1990, the IDEA was enacted which reauthorized the 1975 law and expanded the definition of FAPE to include expanded access to the LRE (IDEA Part B, 2004). In 2004, IDEA was amended to expand the access to the LRE to the greatest extent possible.

The state of CA has enacted a policy of the LCFF and the Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP). “After decades of research, policy discussions, and legislation promoting finance reform, in 2013, California adopted a major change in how schools are funded and held accountable: the LCFF” (Children Now, 2014, p. 3). This new funding formula brings a great number of changes to the way schools are funded and how school districts can utilize that money. The funding control is given to school communities to determine the local need for education through the development of a community stakeholder LCAP. In a memorandum, Torkelson (2016) summarized key

issues as it relates to special education and the LCFF and the LCAP. Four of the priorities of the state of CA align with the SPP indicators mandated through IDEA and should be included in the LCAP (Torkelson, 2016). These include: (a) student achievement; (b) student engagement; (c) school climate; and (d) parent involvement.

The newest addition to the policy and legislation guiding the education of students is the ESSA of 2015. The ESSA replaces NCLB as the guiding legislation ensuring accountability and achievement in education in the United States (The Every Student Succeeds Act [ESSA], 2015). In 2001, NCLB added accountability with mandatory annual state assessment including students with disabilities and mandates districts to provide highly qualified teachers with access to the core curriculum for students with disabilities. The ESSA legislation builds on the progress made through NCLB. The ESSA has five focus areas: “(1) ensure states set high standards; (2) maintain accountability; (3) empower state and local decision makers;(4) preserve annual assessments but limits ineffective iterative testing; and (5) access to high quality preschool” (ESSA, 2015, p. 1). This policy continues the accountability piece for all students including students with disabilities to be included in annual assessment and achievement targets.

### **Conceptual Background to the Problem**

The conceptual background to the problem for this study includes: (a) loosely coupled systems, (b) inhabited institutions, and (c) closing the achievement gap. Loose coupling is used as a framework due to the autonomous nature that policies are interpreted at the classroom level (DeRoche, 2013). Inhabited institutions involve the idea that the people who work in the institutions have predetermined beliefs and ideas



towards their job (T. Hallet, 2010). Finally, the themes from research on closing the achievement gap for students with disabilities serves as additional framework for current trends.

The concept of inhabited institutions involves the idea that the people who work in the institutions have predetermined beliefs and ideas towards their job (T. Hallet, 2010) and refers to the people, beliefs, and experiences they have that interpret and implement the practices and policies (T. Hallett, 2007). Coburn (2004) describes the common reaction that teachers have to administrators as demonstrated as one of five responses: (a) rejection, (b) symbolic response, (c) parallel structures, (d) assimilation, and (e) accommodation. However, Bascia, and Rottman (2011) describe that teachers respond to directives and interpret policies through their own perceptions of success and their own definition of good teaching.

Used as a theoretical framework combined with the concept of inhabited institutions due to the autonomous nature that policies are interpreted at the classroom level (DeRoche, 2013). A loosely coupled system refers to the practice of policy being legislated and the autonomy given to enact that legislation (DeRoche, 2013; T. Hallet, 2010; McMaster, 2015). According to DeRoche (2013), loosely coupled systems needs to be examined in conjunction with inhabited institutions. The two systems may not align and the interpretation of the policy varies between institutions.

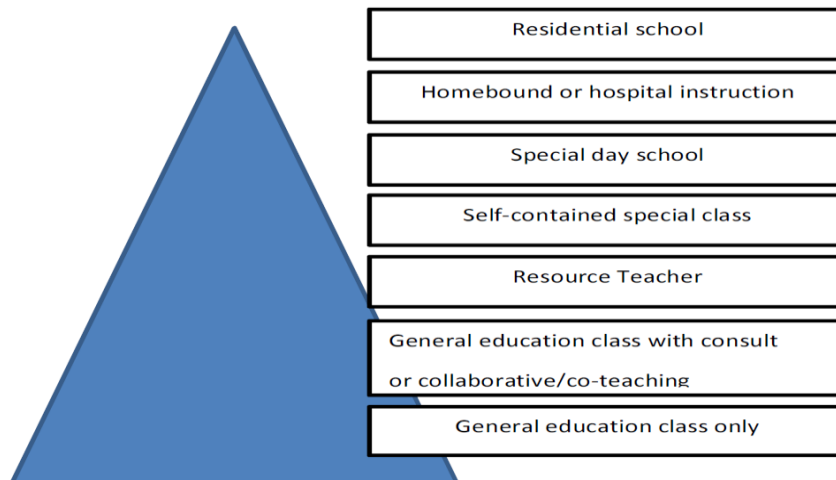
A persistent educational achievement gap exists in the United States between minority and low-income students and affluent non-minority students (Hanover, 2015). This gap also exists between students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers (Buerman et. al., 2015; Hanover 2012). Closing the achievement gap and increasing

student achievement in all sub-groups is important to increase the strength and vitality of the American Economy (McKinsey & Company, 2009). Many researchers on the achievement gap divide the research by the following content areas: (a) reading and writing; (b) mathematics; and (c) science (Billig, 2005; Hanover; 2012; Hanover; 2015; Hattie, 2008). Additionally, researchers categorize and analyze the research by themes. The following themes in closing the achievement gap exist in the literature: (a) cultural competence; (b) learning opportunities; (c) student supports; (d) teaching practices; (e) school culture; (f) district supports, (g) teacher effectiveness and (h) financial resources (Billig, 2005; Hanover; 2012; Hanover; 2015; Hattie, 2008). Furthermore, Billig (2005), Hanover Research (2012; 2015), and Hattie (2008) analyzed the studies conducted about academic achievement over the past 20 years to develop the themes and identify high impact strategies utilized to lessen the achievement gap.

### **Teacher Practice Level in Special Education**

The teacher practice level in special education refers to the continuum of services of direct and indirect services provided to the students by a teacher specially trained to instruct special education students (Burns, 2004; Fuchs, Fuchs & Stecker, 2010). IDEA (2004) mandates the services and supplementary aids provided to students ensure access to the LRE to the greatest extent possible. The LRE for a majority of students with high incidence disabilities is considered to be the general education environment (Burns, 2004). The IEP team should first consider indirect services and supports necessary for a child to be included in the general classroom. The supports and indirect services may include planning time, curriculum accommodations, or classroom accommodations, classroom supports such as an aide or interpreter (Burns, 2004). Services are provided in

both general education and separate settings. The variety and difference in programs and services exist to meet the individual needs of students. Burns (2004) and Fuchs and Fuchs (2010) identified the next level of services as direct services in the general classroom setting. Burns (2004) described direct services in the general classroom as one to one, remedial, small or large group instruction, co-teaching, team teaching, collaborative teaching that can be provided to children with and without disabilities. Additionally, the next level of services is direct services outside the general classroom in a separate setting (Burns, 2004; Hallahan, Kauffman, & Pullen, 2015) (see Figure 1).



*Figure 1.* Continuum of Placement Options depicts the continuum of special education services from the least specialized/least separate services to the most specialized/most separate services. Adapted from “Exceptional Learners. An introduction to Special Education,” by D. P. Hallahan, J. M. Kauffman, and P. C. Pullen, 2015, p. 30. Boston, MA: Pearson Education, Inc.

### **Student Support Level**

The student support level refers to supports the student receives before “the removal of the student from the general education environment occurs only if the nature or severity of his/her disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily” (IDEA, 2004, Sec.

612 (a)[5]). The services to students includes access to supplementary aids and supports and accommodations/modifications to the general curriculum (IDEA, 2004).

**Supplementary aids, supports and accommodations.** IDEA requires a statement of the special education and related service and supplementary aids and services to be included in the IEP (IDEA, 2004).

The section §300.320 (a)(4) stipulates that each child's IEP must contain:

4) A statement of the special education and related services and supplementary aids and services, based on peer-reviewed research to the extent practicable, to be provided to the child, or on behalf of the child, and a statement of the program modifications or supports for school personnel that will be provided to enable the child

- (i) To advance appropriately toward attaining the annual goals;
- (ii) To be involved in and make progress in the general education curriculum in accordance with paragraph (a)(1) of this section, and to participate in extracurricular and other nonacademic activities; and
- (iii) To be educated and participate with other children with disabilities and nondisabled children in the activities described in this section... (IDEA, 2004, §300.320(a)(4))

McDonnell, Mathot-Buckner, Thorson, and Fister (2001) completed a study in which a variety of supplementary aids and accommodations were implemented in the general program to include students with moderate to severe disabilities. "The general and special education teachers jointly developed accommodations for each student that would better meet their learning needs" (McDonnell, Matlot-Buckner, Thorson, & Fister,

2001, p. 132). Several types of accommodations and supports are noted in the literature such as peer tutoring, classroom friends, cooperative grouping, guided note taking, preferential seating, modified work, scaffold instruction, and strategy instruction (Bodilly, Karam, & Orr, 2011; Corbett, 2001; R. Gersten, Schiller, & Vaughn, 2000; Kauffman & Crockett, 1999; McDonnell et al., 2001; Wade, 2000). Identifying accommodations and supplementary aids and supports is an important duty of the special education teacher (Burns, 2004).

### **Academic Achievement**

IDEA (2004) describes academic achievement as educational benefit for the student by making progress toward the grade level curriculum and IEP goals. In the legislation NCLB (U.S. Department of Education & Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2002), districts monitored academic achievement through annual achievement targets named the Annual Yearly Progress (AYP), and districts progressed toward 100% proficiency of all students. Most currently, ESSA (2015) in conjunction with monitoring systems monitors academic achievement by measuring student achievement in terms of meeting or exceeding grade level standards. Academic achievement through the legislation is measured through annual assessment on the standards. Academic achievement for students with disabilities is a complex subject with the addition of the IEP and the supports and accommodations allowed to the student to access the assessment (IDEA, 2004). In 2001 The Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, reported one of the most critical tools in ensuring access to effective instruction, and increased achievement for all students with disabilities is the IEP process (as cited in S. Thompson, Thurslow, Whetstone, & National Center on Educational Outcomes

(2001). According to LaSalle, Roach & McGrath (2013) “little research regarding the effect of IEP quality on student access to the general curriculum and student performance on standardized assessments is available” (p. 135). The IEP team meets yearly to review academic progress and create new goals to encourage increased academic achievement (IDEA, 2004; LaSalle et al., 2013).

### **Statement of the Research Problem**

Since the passage of Public Law 94-142, many policies regarding student achievement and outcomes have been mandated by the passage of NCLB, the IDEA and most recently the ESSA (IDEA, 2004; ESSA, 2015). The legislation mandates that students with disabilities receive the full core curriculum, participate in assessment accountability measures and have access to the LRE to the greatest extent possible. From 1989 to 1990 approximately 22% of students with learning disabilities nationally were educated in the general education classroom for 80% or more of their day. Nationally in 2007 to 2008, 62% of students with learning disabilities were educated in the general environment for more than 80% of their day. In 2012, CAs established target of LRE indicator 5A which mandates 76% of students with disabilities in the general education environment for at least 80% of the day. In 2012, the actual percent of students with disabilities in the general education classroom at least 80% of the time was a 52.6% across the state (CDE SPP, 2011). This is considerably below the national average of 62%. In high schools, the average number drops to 40% of students with disabilities in the general classroom at least 80% of the day (Berman et.al. 2015).

In the 2014 to 2015 school years, the state of CA created a Special Education Task Force to examine the special education services across the state. The Task Force

recommended change in special education in seven areas. Including students in the mainstream has been evidenced to demonstrate academic and social benefit for students (Dessementet & Bless, 2013; Jackson, Ryndak, & Wehmeyer, 2008; Ryndyk, Jackson, & White, 2013). Stodden (2013) explained that too many IEP teams still envision special education as a placement, often in a special class or school, rather than a continuum of services, supports, or accommodations that a student needs to succeed in general education. “Parents, teachers, and administrators often see ‘more,’ in terms of specialized services, as ‘better’ and think that a student with a disability will receive more services in a special class. These perceptions are actually fundamental misperceptions” (Stoden, 2013, p. 6). Additionally, a study conducted by Santoli, Sachs, Romey, and McClurg (2008) researched educators in the Southeastern United States about their attitudes towards inclusion. They found that a majority of the teachers participating in the research (76.8%) believed that students with disabilities should not be educated in general classrooms no matter the type of disability. Even though they have this belief, the teachers have a positive attitude toward inclusion and believe that with training and support they can accommodate students with disabilities in their classroom. Barriers to inclusion can include finding time to communicate, collaborate, determining the service delivery model and implementing instructional strategies (M. Friend, 2008; R. Villa, 2002). Training and professional development of the staff members involved in the inclusive model can be an additional barrier (Aoron & Loprest, 2012; M. Friend, 2008).

In order to address the issues of Special Education implementation in CA there are policy issues, teacher practice issues, and student support issues that must be

identified and addressed. The problem is that there is minimal research related to these issues in the current literature. This research will address that gap in the literature.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this grounded theory qualitative case study was to discover the perceptions of special education directors regarding the changes in special education at the policy level, teacher practice level, and student support level necessary to improve the academic achievement of students with disabilities in CA.

### **Research Question (RQ)**

This study was guided by the following RQ: *What changes in policy, teacher practice, and student support do California Special Education Directors perceive will improve academic achievement of special education students?*

### **Research Sub-Questions (RSQ)**

1. What can be done at the policy level to improve the academic achievement of special education students in California?
2. What can be done at the teacher practice level to improve the academic achievement of special education students in California?
3. What can be done at the student support level to improve the academic achievement of special education students in California?

### **Significance of the Problem**

The Statewide Special Education Task Force calls for a unified system in which all students are general education students first (Berman et al., 2015). Educating students with disabilities is the responsibility of both general and special education teachers and should have seamless unified response to address the needs of students, as they need



assistance (Berman et al., 2015). The improvement of achievement results for students with disabilities is the responsibility of the educational system as a whole and is tasked to the responsibility of local districts to respond to policy and implement the recommendations being handed down to them (Torkalson, 2016).

The Statewide Special Education Task Force issued the *One System Report* reported by Berman et al. (2015) which had three major recommendations for the improvement of special education in CA. The state's new accountability plan builds on the LCFF which consists of the LCAP, annual update and evaluation Rubrics for individual districts (CDE, 2014). The LCAP has established eight priority areas in which all districts must develop goals and action plans specific to their district's needs. Stemming from the recommendations from the one system (Berman et al., 2015), the CDE (2016) has issued a memorandum to districts to focus and include special education students in four main priority areas of the LCAP: (a) student achievement, (b) students engagement, (c) school climate, and (d) parent involvement specific to the States Special Education monitoring unit.

As education has been referred to as a loosely coupled system of policies and regulations as well as autonomy to interpret and execute those policies some disconnect may occur in a loosely coupled system between policy and practice (DeRoche, 2013; T. Hallet, 2010). This study is significant because it captures the opinions of special education directors on how to improve special education at the local level (Berman et al., 2015; CDE, 2011; ESSA, 2015; Harr-Robbins et al., 2015). This study captures the opinions of an infrequently researched population. Many studies focus on the perceptions and opinions of principals and teachers but the literature does not focus on

the experts in the field of special education directors (Kennedy, 2008).

The need to localize and interpret policies to ensure understanding and implementation is evident in the research on loose coupling (Harr-Robbins et al., 2015). At the local level, special education directors apply district policy into their creation of programs and services to students. A list of recommendations that can be implemented by other administrators, teachers, and practitioners in the field would serve as a reference for improvement. Additionally, the recommendations regarding policy can help guide the implementation and interpretation of the ESSA. In the climate of continuing education reform and ever changing policies, this study would be an addition to the literature from a unique perspective of initiating improvement from the local level.

### **Definition of Terms**

#### **Theoretical**

*Academic Achievement.* Academic achievement refers to the level of achievement a student obtains towards meeting the CA state standards. Currently there are four academic levels of achievement: standard not met, standard nearly met, standard met, and standard exceeded.

*Co-teaching.* Co-teaching is defined as two teachers (teacher candidate and cooperating teacher) working together with groups of students; sharing the planning, organization, delivery, and assessment of instruction, as well as the physical space. (Washut Heck & Bacharach, 2010).

## **Operational**

*Accommodation.* Changes that allow a student to access the general education curriculum but do not fundamentally alter or lower the standard or expectation for the course, standard or assignment.

*Academic Achievement.* The evidence of a student making academic progress toward goals and objectives on the IEP.

*Achievement Gap.* The difference in academic achievement between low income and sub group students and high income and non-minority students (Hanover, 2015).

*Co-teaching.* One general education and one special education teacher or a general education teacher and one para educator under the direction of a special education teacher teaching a class together with shared planning, organization, delivery, and assessment and shared physical space (R. Villa, 2002).

*Continuum of Services.* The array of direct and indirect services, supplementary aids and supports, accommodations and modifications available to the student from the least restrictive to the most restrictive environment (IDEA, 2004).

*Every Student Succeeds Act.* The reauthorization of NCLB and updates, adds and changes key provisions of the former law (ESSA, 2015).

*Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).* IDEA was originally enacted by Congress in 1975 as the Public law 94-142 to ensure that children with disabilities have the opportunity to receive a free appropriate public education, just like other children. The law has been revised and re-named IDEA in 1990 and revised again in 2004 (NICHY, 2013).

*Individualized Education Program (IEP).* An IEP is a written statement of the educational program designed to meet a child's individual needs and every child who receives special education services must have an IEP (NICHY, 2013).

*Inclusion.* For the purposes for this study, inclusion refers to the practice of including students with disabilities into the general education environment to the greatest extent possible.

*Inhabited Institution.* Refers to the sociological theory that work places are inhabited with individuals that have their own preconceived ideas about their work and conflict may arise due to these preconceived ideas.

*Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP).* A plan where each school district must engage parents, educators, employees and the community by establishing these plans on a three year basis. The plans will describe the school district's overall vision for students, annual goals and specific actions the district will take to achieve the vision and goals (CDE, 2014).

*Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF).* As part of the LCFF, school districts, COEs, and charter schools are required to develop, adopt, and annually update a three-year Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) using a template adopted by the California State Board of Education (SBE) (CDE, 2014).

*Loosely Coupled System.* The concept that the rules which govern an organization are not aligned with the organization and a great deal of autonomy is used in interpreting rules into policies and procedures.

*Modifications.* Changes to the students program that fundamentally lower or alter the standard or expectation.

*Mild to Moderate Disabilities.* This includes the following primary disabilities: specific learning disabilities, mild/moderate mental retardation, other health impairment, emotional disturbance, and autism spectrum disorders (Zentell, 2016).

*Moderate to Severe Disabilities.* This includes, but not limited to, developmental disabilities, mental retardation, severe behavior and emotional disturbance, autism, and multiple disabilities (CalState LA, 2016).

*Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS).* MTSS is a cohesive and comprehensive framework that focuses on core instruction, differentiated learning, intervention and individual student's needs by aligning systems for the success of all students in academic, social and behavior (CDE, 2016).

*No Child Left Behind.* The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) is the most recent iteration of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), the major federal law authorizing federal spending on programs to support K-12 schooling and required assessment for students in core academic areas (Atlas, 2015).

*Specialized Academic Instruction (SAI).* The primary service provided to students who qualify for special education and is available in the general education or separate setting.

*Special Education Task Force.* Commissioned by the State of CA to review, audit and make recommendations for Special Education.

*Separate Setting.* An instructional setting that is away from the general education environment in which special education services are performed.

*Special Education.* CA Education Code (section 56031) defines special education as specially designed instruction to meet the unique needs of individuals with exceptional

needs, whose educational needs cannot be met with modification of the general instruction program; and related services that help individuals with special needs to benefit from specially designed instruction. Special education is an integral part of the total public education system.

*Supplementary Aids and Supports.* Aids, services, and other supports that are provided in regular education classes, other education-related settings, and in extracurricular and nonacademic settings, to enable children with disabilities to be educated with nondisabled children to the maximum extent appropriate (IDEA, 2004).

*Instructional Support.* For the purpose of this study student, support refers to the accommodations, modifications, supplementary aids and services to assist the child to gain educational benefit.

### **Delimitations**

The delimitations of the study are the following:

1. The study was delimited to special education directors with at least three years as a director, and at least 10 years in special education.
2. The study was delimited to directors with experience as a service provider such as a special education teacher, Speech and Language Pathologist, or school psychologist.
3. The study was delimited to CA.

### **Organization of the Study**

This study is organized in five chapters: an introduction, review of literature, methodology, findings, and conclusion. Additionally, the study includes sections for the references and appendices. Chapter I introduced the problem, purpose, RQs and the

significance of the study. Chapter II continues to develop the background for the study and includes an in-depth review of the literature on the components of the following concepts: policy, theoretical background, teacher practice level, co-teaching, specialized academic instruction, student support level, accommodations, supplementary aids and supports, and academic achievement. Chapter III includes the research design and methodology for the study. This includes the population, sample, sample selection, instrumentation, data collection, and analysis procedures. Chapter IV includes the results from the data collection and analysis. Additionally, a discussion of the findings is presented. Chapter V presents the summary, findings, conclusions, and recommendations for further research.

## CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Introduction**

Newman and Benz (1998) described literature review as containing literature directly related to the topic, background to the topic, or contributing to the understanding about the topic. Patten (2012) posited that the literature review allowed the researcher to narrow a larger problem into a “specific research purpose” (p. 31) and develop RQs. The literature review connects the definitions, RQs, the problem and the review of the literature (Newman & Benz, 1998). The researcher develops a research approach from the review of past research and finds a gap in the research prompting the need for further study (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010; Newman & Benz, 1998; and Patten, 2012). In qualitative research, the review continues during the data collection and analysis process to strengthen the current literature of the topics and the problem pertaining to purpose of this study. The depth of the research from an evolving research focus and development of questions (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010).

The literature review of this study includes an in depth examination of study and employs an emergent grounded theory methodology. An emergent approach embodies the researcher to focus on the feelings, perceptions and beliefs of the participants (J. W. Creswell, 2008). The topics of closing the achievement gap, inhabited institutions, loosely coupled organizational systems and special education leadership serve as a framework for this study as these concepts are directly related to the participants’ perceptions of their world and their viewpoint of their lived experience. Additionally, the literature review includes an examination in the literature of the three levels of special education related to this study, which include: (a) policy level; (b) the teacher practice



level; and (c) the student support level. Related topics to the problem will be reviewed. Each level related to this study included an in-depth examination of the concepts and topics pertaining to that level (see Appendix A).

The policy level includes the related topics of the history of special education policy, IDEA, SPP, and CA Special Education Task Force. The teacher Practice level describes the current state of teacher practice in regards to service delivery and instruction for students with mild to moderate disabilities in that service delivery model. An in-depth examination of the continuum of services and the LRE directed the review to examine inclusion of students with disabilities and the service delivery practices of co-teaching. The review of the literature of the teacher practice level examined SAI in a separate setting. The student support level contains a review of the practices currently used to support students by providing supplementary aids and accommodations. Academic achievement for students with mild disabilities finishes the review of literature followed by a summary relating the concepts to the research gap identified in the study. Table 1 directs and outlines the review of the literature.

Table 1

*Organization of the Literature Review*

Review of Literature	Sub-Topics
Policy Level	History of Policy IDEA SPP CA Special Education Task Force
Concepts Related to the Problem	Loosely Coupled Systems Inhabited Institutions

(continued)

Table 1

*Organization of the Literature Review*

Review of Literature	Sub-Topics
Concepts Related to the Problem	Closing the Achievement Gap Professional Development Recommendations for Students with Disabilities Special Education Leadership
Teacher Practice Level	Inclusion Co-teaching SAI in separate setting
Student Support Level	Supplementary Aids and services Accommodations
Academic Achievement	Educational Benefit State Systematic Improvement Plan (SSIP)
Research Gap	-
Summary	-

**Policy**

“Children with disabilities and their families constantly experience barriers to the enjoyment of their basic human rights and to their inclusion in society” (UNICEF, 2013, para. 1). In the United States, the preservation of rights for individuals with disabilities began with the 1973 Section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act and was followed by the 1975 Education for All Handicapped Children Act, PL 94-142. Since that time policy has taken a global approach with the United Nations and World Health Organizations standard rules for the rights of individuals with disabilities. The United Nations stated that the global approach to individual rights needs to be followed by strong national policy (United Nations, 2015). Globally, national educational reform movements have focused on educating students with disabilities in inclusive environments (Norwich, 2014; Smith, 2014; Thurston, 2014; Ware, 2014). In England, the Children and Families Act of 2014 changed several policies on assessment, inclusion,

and educational support for students with special needs (Norwich, 2014). In Northern Ireland, new legislation “Every School a Good School: the way forward for special educational needs and inclusion” (Smith, 2014, p. 382) is proposed to change educating students with special needs. The policy focuses on “inclusion, barriers to learning and additional educational needs” (Smith, 2014, p. 383). In addition, the countries of Wales, New Zealand and Australia are legislating new policies for students with disabilities. The United States last update to special education law occurred in 2004 but is ever changing due to the interpretation of case law (Wright & Wright, 2016).

Legislative policies are created at both the federal and state levels (ECS, 2015). Federal policies create regulations that the states and school districts interpret and implement. In special education, the current major federal policies affecting special education are IDEA of 2004 and ESSA of 2015. As the statutes and regulations are challenged in court judicial interpretation and case law influence how policy and regulations are interpreted (Wright & Wright, 2016). Additionally, federal policies drive many aspects of state and local policy. The policies create guidelines and are interpreted by the states and local districts (ECS, 2015). The SPP, district level special education annual performance measures for the SPP indicators, and the creation of special education task forces in some states are examples of policies mandated by state interpretation of federal policy (Berman et al., 2015; CDE, 2016; Children Now, 2014). The following operational policies stem from the legislative policies and have been implemented as part of the teacher practice level: (1) continuum of services; (2) least restrictive environment; and (3) inclusion. Case law furthers the interpretation of

educational policy and drives the practice of special education at the district and classroom levels (Hallahan et al., 2015; Wright & Wright, 2016).

### **History of Education Policy and Litigation**

The history of public education and the emergence of the landmark legislation PL 94-142 is important to understand when comprehending the complex educational issues of today. As the United States grew and diverse population immigrated to the country, a need to educate the children developed from the need to assimilate them into the values and ideals of countries. Horace Mann, an early educational reformer, developed a solution of “creating common schools” (Wright & Wright, 2016, p.11) paid by local tax dollars. This concept evolved into the public schools of today and developed into the compulsory education laws present today (Hallahan et al., 2015; Wright & Wright, 2016).

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, special education existed for individuals who were deaf, blind or intellectually disabled (Hallahan et al., 2015; Wright & Wright, 2016). The educational methods prevalent in today’s educational pedagogy were strongly rooted in “the techniques pioneered during the early 1800’s” (Hallahan et al., 2015, p. 9). Special education continued to vary in quality and availability in the states. “In 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court issued a landmark civil rights decision in *Brown vs. the Board of Education*” (Wright & Wright, 2016, p.12). The ruling stated that segregated public schools were “inherently unequal and deprived them equal protection under the law” (Wright & Wright, 2016, p. 9). This decision prompted parents of students with disabilities to initiate litigation regarding “the excluding and segregating of students with disabilities” (Wright & Wright, 2016, p. 13). To address the issues of inequality of education for underprivileged students, congress passed the Elementary and Secondary

Education Act of 1965. This was followed by amendment in 1966 expanding the act to include grant programs to help states with “initiating, improving and expanding programs for handicapped students” (Wright & Wright, 2016, p. 13). In 1970, Congress expanded the amendment with passage of the Education of the Handicapped Act Public Law 91-230, which directed states to develop programs for students with disabilities.

Special Education developed independently at the state level through the legal direction of the federal government (Wright & Wright, 2016). Two legal cases in the early 1970 s prompted a more detailed approach to educating students with disabilities. The cases Pennsylvania Association of Retarded Children vs. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania (PARC) and Mills vs. Board of Education prompted change to resolve the cases claims of segregation and infringements of due process for students with disabilities. In 1972, congress enacted a congressional investigation regarding the education of individuals with disabilities and this investigation of landmark cases led congress to eventually enact PL 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA) (Wright & Wright, 2016).

## **IDEA**

P. L. 94-14, the EHA, mandated several key provisions for students with disabilities. The original purpose for the EHA included four main provisions: “(1) education for all; (2) parent and student rights; (3) federal assistance; and (4) ensuring a quality education” (US Dept. of Ed, 2014, Part B IDEA section). The law was re-authorized in 1990, then again in 2004, and evolved into the IDEA. The law remained consistent in the provisions for students but added additional provisions of access to the least restrictive environment to the greatest extent possible (see Table 2).

Table 2

*Provisions of FAPE in IDEA for Students with Disabilities*

IDEA Mandate
A free, appropriate public education to all children with disabilities.
Services to each student with disabilities must be based on their individualized education program (IEP).
IEPs for each student must be developed by teams that include the child’s parent or guardian, along with a special educator, a regular educator, a representative of the school district and if appropriate other individuals.
A student’s education must be provided to the maximum extent possible in the least restrictive environment.
All services are provided regardless of cost to the student’s local education agency (LEA)

*Note.* IDEA = Individuals with Disabilities Educational Act. Adapted from “Building the Legacy: IDEA” by the Education Commission of the States, 2015, and the U.S. Department of Education (2014). Copyright 2012 by the Education Commission of the States.

The provision guaranteed for students with disabilities directs the education at the state and local district level. The provision of the LRE ensures that IEP teams will consider educating students to the maximum extent possible in the LRE (IDEA, 2004). This has led to the policy of inclusion of students with disabilities into the general environments (Berman et al., 2015; Education Commission of the States, 2015; Salend & Duhaney, 1999). Additionally, IDEA 2004 aligned the law with NCLB of 2001 to ensure the annual assessment, access to the core curriculum and a highly qualified teacher (Wright & Wright, 2016).

IDEA directs the funding policies of states and local entities for over the past 40 years. The law changed and directed states to fund education differently. The law funds 40% of the average cost per pupil in the United States, not 40% of the cost of educating a special education student. The federal government allocates and funds about one- third of the funds originally allocated for special education which places a larger financial

responsibility on states and local entities (ECS, 2015). The cost of special education and increase of students with disabilities since the original law was passed in 1975 has caused states to re-evaluate their funding formulas to account for the cost of educating students with disabilities (ECS, 2015).

Key pieces of litigation influence the interpretation of the provisions of IDEA creating a living piece of legislation that is ever-changing (Wright & Wright, 2016). For example, the Board of Education vs, Rowley endures to be a key landmark ruling that influences the interpretation of the key provision of FAPE. Irving School Direct vs. Tatro describes the FAPE standard for the need of related services including medical services for students to access their education. Additionally, each year case law defines the interpretation of IDEA (Wright & Wright, 2016).

**State performance plan.** In response to policies of IDEA and NLCB, the state of CA imposed 17 indicators that is monitored through the in its SPP annual report. The SPP guides the implementation of IDEA's Part B and given explicit guidelines how the state will meet the implementation targets (Torkelson, 2016). In the annual letter from the Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) (Ryder, 2016) to CA's State Superintendent Torklelson, OSEP determined CA needed assistance in implementing Part B of IDEA on the Results Driven Data Matrix (RDA Matrix). CAs identification as needing improvement was based on the four-year graduation rate for SWD, dropout rate for SWD, participation of SWD in statewide assessments, and SWD performance on statewide assessment (Ryder, 2016).

The CASBE held a meeting in March 2016, which focused on Indicator 17 of the SPP and CA's annual performance report (APR) for special education. The new indicator 17

mandates states to develop a state systemic improvement plan (SSIP) which monitors student outcomes (California Department of Education [CDE], 2016). The OSEO added a focus of “improved outcomes for student with disabilities” (CASBE, 2016, p. 1) in addition to compliance monitoring of state and federal regulations.

Districts are monitored yearly toward their progress in meeting the 17 target areas. For the purposes of this study, the SPP Indicator 3 – “Statewide Assessments: Academic achievement testing to meet the requirements of No Child Left Behind (NCLB)” (SPP, 2005, p. 22), the SPP indicator 5- least restrictive environment (LRE), and the SPP indicator 17- State Systemic Improvement Plan will be utilized. Currently the state monitors English Language Arts and Math assessment participant rate through the CDE AYP report (CDE, 2016).

Indicator 17 mandates SSIP generated by the Special Education Division of CDE and input provided by OSEP and a diverse stakeholder group. During the March 15, 2016 SBE meeting, phase 2 of the SSIP was explained with a detailed description. Phase 2 included the following three elements, which are divided into sections A, B, and C:

- (a.) Improvement in state infrastructure to support LEAs to implement evidence based practices to improve the academic achievement of students with disabilities (SWD), including aligning SSIP activities with implementation of California’s Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) and Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP) processes to support coordination of local improvement activities;
- (b.) A framework for the types of supports the CDE will provide to LEAs that will result in changes in school practices leading to the improved academic performance of SWD, with a proposal to develop the specific details about the



system of supports and proposed performance standards/targets for SWD academic performance after the Board takes action to finalize the LCFF evaluation rubrics in October 2016 to ensure alignment of Indicator 17 with the broader state and federal accountability system;

(c) The process the CDE will use to evaluate the effective implementation of California's SSIP, the impact of the plan in terms of positively affecting school and classroom practices, and the impact on the academic performance of SWD. (CASBE, 2016, p. 2)

Section A mandates the improvement of the state's infrastructure to implement evidence-based practices to improve academic achievement of SWD. The state has implemented a new fiscal and programmatic accountability system, which complies with Indicator 17, the LCFF and LCAP. The LCFF and LCAP have evaluation rubrics to ensure transparency in decision making and funding.

The SPP is a guide to help districts direct their efforts towards continuous improvement. Sanctions and an identification of significant disproportionality for inclusion, over identification of students by disability or ethnicity and discipline may occur if districts do not meet the state requirements. Districts will be subject to 15% of Federal IDEA money and required to complete the Coordinated Early Intervening Services (CEIS) requirements. Additionally, performance on the 17 SPP indicators guides CDE to assist districts with technical assistance and reviews progress with the individual districts depending on the performance on the indicators (CDE, 2016).

## **Special Education Task Force**

States, school board associations, special education local planning regions, and school districts originated special education task forces to improve special education (Bueraman et. al., 2015; Vernotica et. al., 2016). Each task force has a vision and specific goals to the organization's individual needs. For example, the New Jersey School Boards Association's special education task force concentrated on answering 12 key questions (New Jersey, 2014). Six out 12 driving questions focused on funding. The remaining questions focus on improving programs, services and achievement of students with disabilities. In addition, New Jersey's special education task force created the following vision for recommendations, observations and research on the current state of special education in New Jersey.

The members of the Task Force share a common vision, which is the desire to break down the historically perceived silos of special education and general education, and employ all of the resources that are available to improve the service delivery and effectiveness of programs for all students, including students who are eligible for special education services (New Jersey, 2015).

New York and Minnesota are some of the additional states that have commissioned investigative special education tasks force with the vision of improving special education services. Additionally, special education local plan areas (SELPAs) and individual or a consortium of districts assemble task forces to investigate the implementation of IDEA services in their district with a goal on improving services. Some common themes found in the literature for SELPA and district focuses are improving parent involvement, increasing student achievement, increasing involvement

of all stakeholders and maximizing funding (Berman et al., 2015; Minnesota, 2014; New Jersey, 2015). The federal government has imposed a new Indicator 17 which mandates that states adjust and evaluate their funding sources to provide for the academic achievement for SWD (CASBE, 2016).

CA launched a state Special Education Task Force to examine the special education services across the state and to make recommendations for improvement (Berman et al., 2015). They call for a comprehensive cohesive education system where general education and special education are integrated to meet the needs of all students. The state task force focused on seven areas for improvement: (a) early learning, (b) evidence-based school and classroom practices, (c) educator preparation and professional learning, (d) assessment, (e) accountability, (f) family and student engagement, (g) and special education financing. Several of the task force's recommendations pertained to this study in the areas policy, practice and student supports.

The state task force recommended a policy change of teacher education for both general and special education teachers being trained together (Berman et. al., 2015). Universal Design for Learning (UDL) allows access for all students to core curriculum and is a key component of the teacher practice level. Finally, the state task force recommended implementation of multi-tiered systems of support for students need extra support and intervention. The final recommendations to promote sustained improvement evolved around accountability.

The state task force suggested an integrated special education data system, outcomes-based accountability through the policy of LCAP, and coordinated federal and state monitoring system (Berman et. al., 2015). As a result of the state task force

recommendations and the new Indicator 17 of the SPP, many of the recommendations have been incorporated into the state's SSIP. The LCAP and LCFF in CA brings a new system of accountability and provides a funding stream for districts to implement MTSS, evidence based practices and other priorities in raising the academic achievement for students in the target sub-groups.

### **Concepts Related to the Problem**

The concepts related to the problem for this study include an organizational theory, sociological theory, and research on a related topic: (a) loosely coupled systems (b) inhabited institutions; and (c) closing the achievement gap. Loose coupling is used as a framework to explain the autonomous nature that policies are interpreted at the classroom level (DeRoche, 2013). Inhabited institutions, a sociological theory, gives guidance to how employees interpret their surroundings and employ their philosophical belief at the workplace. (T. Hallet, 2010). Finally, research on closing the achievement gap, including research for students with disabilities, functions as a framework to guide instruction and academic achievement.

### **Loosely Coupled Organizational System**

Loose coupling originated as a construct of the relationship between computer programs and the systems they operate in and the concept of misaligned systems evolved into an organizational theory to describe educational systems, governments, and other loosely aligned systems (Weick, 1976). According to Weick (1976), "In contrast to the prevailing image that elements in organizations are coupled through dense, tight linkages, it is proposed that elements are often tied together frequently and loosely" (p. 2). Coupling can be referred to as the relationship between elements in an organization and

how they are aligned with each other to help the organization run smoothly. Weick referred to coupled systems as responsive but still maintains a degree of acceptable separateness. For example, in education the counselor's office could be referenced as being "loosely coupled with the principal's office" (Weick, 1976, p. 3) as they are connected but are separate with different functions. The loose coupling could be described as the glue holding organizations tighter with policy and performance of different departments in that organization. Glassman (1973) furthers the explanation of loosely coupled systems as two systems functioning and working together through common shared variables. The coupling elements in an organization or between organizations vary and are specific to the organization and field affecting the organization (Weick, 1976).

March and Olsen (1975) described the existence of the social elements of intention and action as a loosely coupled system in psychology. For example, a person's intentions do not directly result in quantifiable actions. In education, planning and training does not equate to implementation of those thoughts or ideas (Weick, 1976). This furthers the idea that the inhabitants of an organization play a key role in the implementation of policies and actions in a loosely coupled system (DeRoche, 2013; Gamoran, 2008; T. Hallet, 2010; McMaster, 2015; Weick, 1976). For example, Gamoran (2008) identified the policy of NCLB to strengthen and align the loosely coupled system of Federal Policy and State implementation of that policy. The intention of NCLB instituted a clearly definable action of assessment and accountability by states and LEAs due to the threat of federal funding loss.

As a theoretical framework, loosely coupled systems cannot be examined as a standalone framework; however, when combined with the concept of inhabited institutions, the relationship between the organization and the proposed actions are explained more clearly (DeRoche, 2013). This is due to the autonomous nature that policies are interpreted at the classroom level. The practice of policy being legislated and the autonomy given to enact that legislation in an inhabited institution or organization describe the relationship between the loosely coupled systems existing in the organization (DeRoche, 2013; T. Hallet, 2010; Koff, DeFriese, & Witzke, 1994; McMaster, 2015). According to DeRoche (2013), loosely coupled systems in conjunction with the theory of inhabited institutions explain misalignment and interpretation of policy variations between organizations.

### **Inhabited Institutions**

Inhabited institutions consist of the idea that the people who work in organizations have predetermined beliefs and ideas towards their job (T. Hallet, 2010). Inhabited institutions refer to their beliefs and experiences people have which contribute to their interpretation and implementation of practices and policies (T. Hallett, 2007). Coburn (2004) stated teachers react in one of five responses when presented with a new idea from administration: rejection, symbolic response, parallel structures, assimilation, and accommodation. However, Bascia and Rottamn (2011) described responses to directives and interpretation of policies through the teacher's own lens of success and definition of good teaching. T. Hallet (2010) described the scenario in which teachers established "individual work routines that created a stable set of meanings, knowledge, and expectations" (p. 62).

When the accountability movement emerged and a recoupling of systems commenced with high standards and expected classroom routines, teachers were displaced from their comfort zone (T. Hallet, 2010). This lack of routines and meanings disrupted their existence and challenged their beliefs of that was known (Weick, 1993). Everitt (2012) explained that the emergence of the accountability system in education of NCLB created a “degree of coordination and centralization in education” (p. 205). Additionally, Diamond (2007) discovered, that under the system of accountability, teachers changed what they taught but not how they taught. Instructional strategies or practices did not change with the alignment to standards based instruction.

The loose coupling between policy of standards-based instruction and the implementation of instructional process were influenced by the teacher’s beliefs on teaching and instructional practices (Everitt, 2012). As teachers embraced standards-based curriculum, the implementation in practice varied from teacher to teacher (Coburn, 2004; Spillane, 2015). T. Hallet (2010) explained that institutions need to be viewed as “inhabited” by people whose belief systems and procedures for completing tasks influence the overall functioning of the organization. T. Hallet’s (2010) study demonstrated that when new rules are enforced, teachers develop their own definition of implementation and may differ from the new policy. Past practice guides and defines people’s meaning and interpretation of new policies and procedures (T. Hallett & Ventresca, 2006).

### **Closing the Achievement Gap**

An educational achievement gap exists in the United States between minority, low-income, and SWDs and affluent non-minority students (Hanover, 2015). This gap

exists between SWDs and their peers without disabilities and results in lower performance on standardized assessments, SATs for college, and graduation rates from high school (Buerman et. al, 2015; CDE, 2014; Hanover 2012). Closing the achievement gap, by increasing student achievement in all sub-groups, has potential long lasting effects on the strength and vitality of the American Economy (McKinsey & Company, 2008).

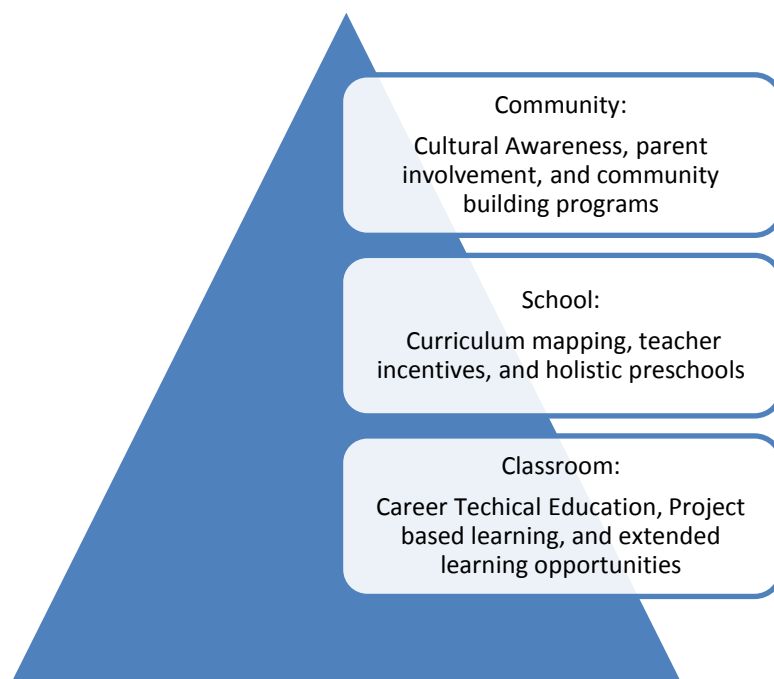
If the United States had closed the income achievement gap between 1983 and 1998, the performance of students from families with income below \$25,000 a year had been raised to the performance of students from homes with incomes above \$25,000 a year, then GDP in 2008 would have been \$400 billion to 670 billion. (McKinsey & Company, p.17)

Researchers focus on the following content areas in regards to student achievement: (a) reading and writing; (b) mathematics; and (c) science (Billig, 2005; Hanover; 2012; Hanover; 2015; Hattie, 2008). Hattie (2008) conducted a meta-analysis of over 800 research studies on academic achievement for size affect, and comprised a list disaggregated by the impact of the size affect for the strategies and programs impact on the academic achievement of students. Hanover (2015) conducted a study in for the Riverside County Office of Education dedicated to closing the achievement gap in Riverside County. Several years after implementation of NCLB, the U.S. Department of Education conducted a review of assessment scores and qualitative research on districts that increased student achievement on yearly academic achievement assessments (Billig, 2005). The researchers analyzed these studies conducted over the past 20 years to develop the themes and identify high impact strategies utilized to lessen the achievement



gap. The following themes in closing the achievement gap exist in the literature: (a) cultural competence; (b) learning opportunities; (c) student supports; (d) teaching practices; (e) school culture; (f) district supports; (g) teacher effectiveness; and, (h) financial resources (Billig, 2005; Hattie, 2008; Hanover; 2014; Hanover; 2015).

Additionally, specific themes and characteristics emerged for closing the achievement gap for SWDs. Figure 2 displays the tiers of intervention and levels of support needed to close the achievement gap for targeted student sub-groups including students with disabilities. A combination of interventions across the tier will enable the school to make progress in closing the achievement gap (NEA, 2006).



*Figure 2.* Targeted Tiers for Closing the Achievement Gap. Adapted from “CARE: Strategies for Closing the Achievement Gaps” by The National Education Association, 2005, pp. 18-19. Copyright 2002-2015 by the National Education Association. Retrieved from [http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/mf\\_CAREbook0804.pdf](http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/mf_CAREbook0804.pdf)

The NEA identified and described the strategies recommended to close the achievement gap (NEA, 2006). The strategies evolved from the Department of Education Study (Billig, 2005) and the NEA (2006) review of successful schools and districts in

making strides towards closing the achievement gap. The Department of Education also conducted quantitative review of assessment results and a qualitative research review consisting of focus groups and observations of schools that made significant gains in closing the achievement gap (Billig, 2005). The two studies were aligned in several areas; however, the Department of Education study focused on the themes of school culture, curriculum and instruction, and leadership for change, whereas the NEA study addressed eight overall themes. The Department of Education study identified a collaborative and optimistic attitude was a key factor in school culture which was unique strategy to this study. The NEA (2006) focused on the culture of competence for teachers to understand diversity and the student's culture, and supportive schools as the indicator of school culture (Billig, 2005; NEA, 2006). Another key difference between the two studies appeared in the theme of curriculum and instruction. The Department of Education researcher identified creating schedules with more instruction time and engaging teaching techniques as key characteristics in the four successful schools examined (Billig, 2005). Wixom (2015) researched four states: (a) Connecticut, (b) Massachusetts, (c) Washington; and, (d) Wisconsin for commonalities and approaches to closing the achievement gap. The four states approached closing the achievement gap in different ways which were unique to their population and state. Policy and implementation of new policy was a key commonality for the four states (Wixom, 2015). Additionally, the state's practices had commonalities with the other research studies identified in this section. The following Table 3 outlines the strategies and practices identified through the NEA (2006) assessment, the Department of Education Study

(Billig, 2005), study of four states (Wixom & Education Commission of the States, 2015) and the 2014 Hanover research study (see Table 3).

Table 3

*Strategies for Closing the Achievement Gap*

Level	Strategy
Policy Level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Extend learning to include before and after school programs</li> <li>• Institute pre-school or pre-kindergarten</li> <li>• Full day kindergarten</li> <li>• Safeguard instructional time</li> <li>• Implement policies which use data and research to improve practice</li> </ul>
Teacher Practice Level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Implement evidence based instructional practices to support diverse learners</li> <li>• Create classrooms that support learning</li> <li>• Academics are a focus</li> <li>• Safe and orderly learning environments</li> <li>• Closing gaps are a priority</li> <li>• Data informed instruction</li> <li>• Use evidence based strategies and programs to increase student achievement</li> </ul>
Student Support level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Connect students to community agencies for related services</li> <li>• Provide intervention for students who need it</li> <li>• Provide mentors, tutoring and positive role models</li> <li>• Implement an RTI process</li> </ul>
Administrative Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop effective school-wide and district leadership teams</li> <li>• Make closing achievement gaps a district priority</li> <li>• Engage teachers in strengthening curriculum and student assessments</li> <li>• Decrease class sizes</li> </ul>

(continued)

Table 3

*Strategies for Closing the Achievement Gap*

Level	Strategy
Administrative Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide schools with timely test and other assessment information</li> <li>• Involve teachers in the design of ongoing professional development</li> </ul>
Culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus on cultural competency</li> <li>• Positive culture of the school</li> <li>• Culture of high expectations</li> <li>• Culture of positive relationships with staff and students</li> <li>• Culture of high expectations</li> </ul>

*Note.* Adapted from “Strategies for Closing the Achievement Gaps” by the National Education Association, 2006. Copyright 2006 by the NEA. Retrieved from <http://www.nea.org/home/13550.htm>.

**Professional development.** Professional development is an important part of closing the achievement gap and improvement in academic achievement for students with mild to moderate disabilities (Hanover, 2015; Hattie, 2009). The reauthorization of IDEA and the implementation of NCLB require teachers to implement research-based strategies when instructing students with disabilities (B. Cook, Smith, & Tnakersley, 2012). The reform policies of IDEA and NCLB central focus relied on teacher training to bring forth the provisions in the policies (Minor, Desimone, Lee, & Hochberg, 2016). “Teachers are one of the strongest factors in effective education systems” (Haines & Ruebain, 2012, p. 24). Professional development provides teacher’s with the information, strategies and tools to teach with clarity. “Professional development (PD) has long been recognized as an effective strategy for training educators about changes within the field” (Flannery & Helleman, 2015, p. 68). Despite ongoing training efforts, teacher efficacy in new concepts such as transition continues to be reported as a low level of understanding (Flannery & Helleman, 2015). Multiple states launched concerted

efforts towards building and sustaining effective professional development to build instructional strategies and content knowledge (Minor et al., 2015).

Changing professional development programs and methods used to train teachers needs to be adjusted and reexamined periodically to ensure effectiveness (Flannery & Helleman, 2015). According to Hattie (2008), teacher clarity continued to demonstrate large gains in student achievement. The ability for a teacher to explain, organize, and present materials is integral to student learning. Teachers' instructional skills and knowledge of their content drive the success of the policy reforms (Minor et al., 2015). According to Minor, Desimone, Lee, & Hochberg, (2016), previous research indicated that several principles need to be implemented for effective professional development. Content knowledge needs to be incorporated into the teacher's work-day to allow for practice, implementation, collegial conversations, and productive feedback. Additionally, professional development needs to allow time for practice to build confidence and comfortability with the instructional strategies to allow for ease of implementation. According to Minor et al. (2016), teacher's use of professional development varies on "what they learn and how to put it into everyday practice" (p. 3).

The study from Minor et al. (2016) discovered the response to high-quality content-focused professional development depended on the prior knowledge and expertise of the teacher. Adults learn differently than children due to the prior-lived experiences, mature thinking, and focus. Andragogy is the concept of adult learning theory through the four premises of "self-concept, adult learner experience, readiness to learn, orientation to learning and motivation to learning" (Leigh, Whitted, & Hamilton,

2015, p.10). The premises of andragogy necessitate the need to integrate the strategies into the professional development of adult learners (Leigh et al., 2015).

These design elements include (a) preparing the learning, (b) offering a mutually respectful climate, (c) mutual planning [by learners and facilitators], (d) mutual assessment of needs, (e) mutual negotiation of learning objectives, (f) designing learning plans that involve learning 10 contracts and projects, (g) learning inquiry and independent study projects, and (h) evaluation through evidence. (Leigh et al., 2015, p. 9)

Research demonstrates that teachers need more support in implementing new teaching methods or strategies (Holm & Kajandeer, 2015). Professional learning communities allow for sustained professional development by “teachers working collaboratively, supporting each other, and change practice” (p. 263). Research stresses the need for teachers to be involved in constant growth and development (Opfer & Pedder, 2011).

**Recommendations for students with disabilities.** “When it comes to closing the achievement gap for any group of students, we know that a focused and targeted professional learning agenda is a critical feature of the effort” (J. Thompson, 2005, p. 1). Implementing a new initiative requires professional planning and development in addition to understanding the challenges, strengths and skills of the team (J. Thompson, 2005). When addressing the achievement gap for students with disabilities, a set of unique challenges exists that needs to be reviewed. Some of these challenges require additional planning and professional development to accomplish gain in these areas. Some of the common day-to-day challenges in closing the achievement gap can be

aligning curriculum and instruction with the IEP in a manner that increases the overall academic achievement of the student. The University of Michigan recommended implementing UDL to support students' strengths through differentiated instruction and performance evidence” (J. Thompson, 2005, p. 1). The implementation of formative assessments and MTSS enhances the academic achievement of students with disabilities. Additionally, the CA special education task force recommended the implementation of MTSS and UDL to support students in the classroom.

Another challenge identified by the University of Michigan is teachers’ beliefs, and perceptions about students with disabilities (J. Thompson, 2005). As previously identified as a key strategy, high expectations for all includes SWDs. Teachers need to use People First language rather than labels that limit learning (ARC, 2015; J. Thompson, 2005). One key strategy identified by the University of Michigan addresses the application of accommodations and assistive technology for students with IEPs. The supports outlined on IEPs need to be tied to everyday practice in the classroom. Professional development is the key to implementing and embracing these strategies in the classroom (J. Thompson, 2005).

Hanover (2014) identified the following common characteristics for the academic achievement of students with disabilities:

- (a) curriculum aligned with state framework;
- (b) systems to support curriculum alignment;
- (c) an emphasis on inclusion and access to the general education curriculum;
- (d) culture that support high standards and student achievement;
- (e) well-disciplined academic and social environments;

- (f) data to inform decision making;
- (g) targeted professional development;
- (h) access to targeted resources to support key initiatives;
- (i) effective staff recruitment; and,
- (j) effective leadership that works dynamically with staff. (Hanover, 2014, p. 14)

The key differences between the article by J. Thompson (2005) and research review by the United States Department and Hanover Research lied in the difference of focus. J. Thompson (2005) concentrated on the challenges set forth in implementing the IEP while aligning curricular standards and meeting individual need; however, the Hanover Research (2014) focused on quality teaching and experiencing the whole curriculum.

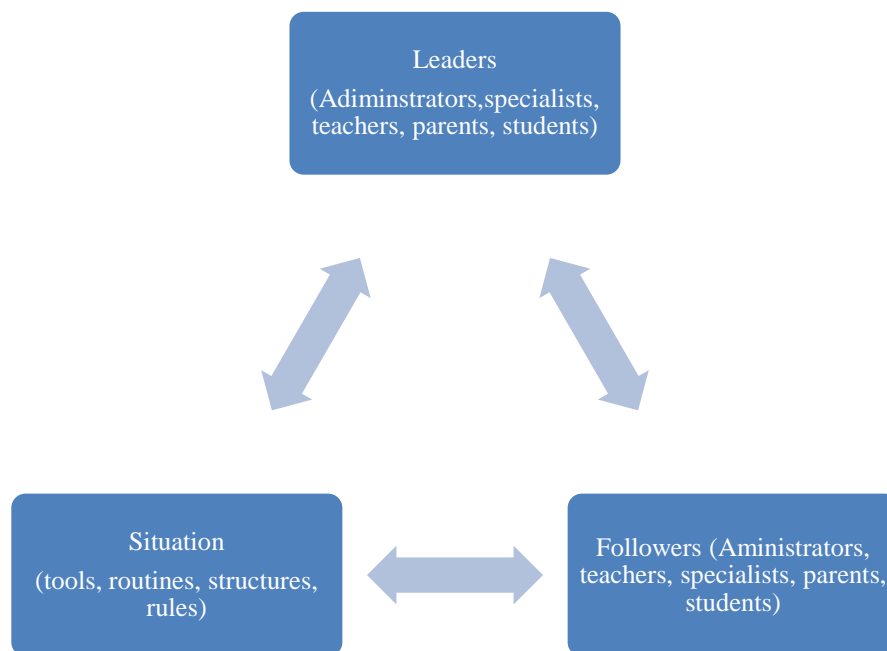
### **Special Education Leadership**

Leadership in special education in CA utilizes a centralized model from the federal government, to the state, then the SELPA, and finally to the district (CaSBE, 2016; CDE, 2015; Tudrin, Boscardin, & Wells, 2016). The federal government issues policies and regulations through law and OSEP, which is filtered to the state for interpretation and implementation (CaSBE, 2016). Additionally, the state mandates policies and monitors progress, which filters through the SELPA to local educational agencies. At the district level, leadership is centralized through a director or coordinator with specialists and centralized employees to implement IDEA (CaSBE, 2016; CDE, 2015; Tudrin et al., 2016).

Due to the centralized model of leadership in special education, distributed leadership is important for special education teams to function and be effective (Talbot,



Mayrowetz, Maggin, & Tozer, 2016; Tudrin et al., 2016). Distributed leadership can be described by the type of leadership distribution utilized. The following represent the types of distributed leadership: (a) formally, (b) pragmatically, (c) strategically, (d) incrementally, (e) opportunity, and (f) culturally (Talbot et al., 2016; Tudrin et al., 2016). Spillane (2015) described the relationship between administrative practice and instructional practice utilizing distributed leadership concepts. Figure 3 demonstrates the relationship between the concepts of distributed leadership and the school setting.



*Figure 3.* Distributed Leadership: Relation between Variables. Adapted from “Leadership and learning: Conceptualizing relations between school administrative practice and instructional practice,” by Spillane, 2015, *Societies Journal* 5(2). 277-294. doi: 10.330/soc5020277

This distributed model allows for teams to share and distribute leadership to where it is needed. In special education, teacher leaders lead on a daily basis through the IEP process and make important day-to-day decisions for the success of students (Talbot et al., 2016; Tudrin et al., 2016). Leadership is dependent on the situation and the need that arises with a variety of leaders and stakeholders. “Given the nature of special

education policy and centrality of the individual needs as determined by the IEP team, we foreground leadership in that team as a central element of special education leadership” (Talbot et al., 2016, p. 25). Due to the IEP team process and the decisions made by that team, it is necessary to take a broad view of leadership as it relates to special education.

### **Teacher Practice Level in Special Education**

The teacher practice level in special education refers to how services are provided to students by specially trained staff ensuring the full continuum of service options protecting the least restrictive environment for the student (LRE) (Burns, 2004; Dev & Haynes, 2015; Fuchs et al., 2010; Vaughn & Thompson, 2003). IDEA (2004) mandates services to be provided in the LRE to the greatest extent possible. The full continuum of services pertains to the services and supplementary aids provided to students ensuring access to the LRE to the greatest extent possible (IDEA Part B, 2004). The LRE for a majority of students with high incidence disabilities is considered to be the general education environment (Burns, 2004).

Dev and Haynes (2015) discovered that the participants in their study indicated that the general education classroom is not the LRE for all students with disabilities. Vaughn and Thompson (2003) researched the effectiveness of programs for students with learning disabilities and described a service delivery model for treatments that focused on prevention and intervention. Dev and Haynes researched studies on inclusion and explored teacher perceptions across the continuum of services of inclusion, resource room, and self-contained classrooms. It was determined that a focus on inclusion did not include comparisons from teachers that had taught students previously in self-contained

or pull-out resource room models and the impact inclusion had on those students (Dev & Haynes, 2015).

For many students with disabilities, the initial goal of special education was to ensure that they were provided an opportunity to attend profit from education, that is, that a free appropriate education be provided to them, just like to all other youngsters. (Vaughn & Thompson, 2003, p. 140)

Services are provided in both general education and separate settings. The variety and difference in programs and services exist to meet the individual needs of students. The primary goal of direct services in the classroom is to enable students with disabilities to participate in the classroom and curriculum (Burns, 2004, p. 18). For the purpose of this background, co-teaching, which includes team teaching, consultation, and the collaborative/consultation model, will be the inclusive service delivery model referred to in the study. R. Villa (2002) combined the collaborative teaching model with co-teaching renaming it as the co-teaching model. The pull-out model for the purpose of this study will be referred to as Specialized Academic Instruction (SAI) in a separate setting.

Services for students with disabilities vary due to the perspective of the education. Hallahan et al., (2015) and Zentall (2014) described strategies for serving students with specific disability types. The interventions and instructional strategies utilized are dependent upon the disability of the student. This technique contrasts the inclusive service delivery model that focuses on accommodations and scaffolding to support students in the general environment.

## **Inclusion**

The practice of providing services to special education students in the general education classroom has been referred to as inclusion (Burns, 2004; Hallahan et al., 2015; Dev & Haynes, 2015). For successful inclusion in the LRE to occur, the participants must believe and embrace equity and diversity (McMaster, 2015). Additionally, Dev and Haynes (2015) discovered through their research on teacher perceptions on inclusion, teachers who had professional development on inclusionary education felt more positive towards the inclusion. McMaster (2015) asserts that inclusion is value-based and develops from the culture of the school. It is not merely about measuring and evaluating practices to ensure inclusion. Values embedded in this definition of inclusion include supporting everyone in the classroom to feel that they belong (McMaster, 2015). “Restructuring cultures, policies, and practices to respond to diversity in ways that value everyone equally” (Booth & Ainscow, 2011, p. 11) is inherent in the culture of the school.

Inclusion as a service delivery model developed in the mid- 1990s as a shift from the mainstreaming model. This trend emerged due to updates in IDEA and the Regular Education Initiative (REI) (McMaster, 2015; Dev & Haynes, 2015). Dev and Haynes (2015) outlined a variety of inclusive service delivery models which emerged from the research: (a) consultation; (b) co-teaching; (c) dually certified teachers with instructional assistant support; (c) supportive teacher who rotates from class to class. E. Muller and Burdette (2007) proposed five strategies for implementing best practices at the high school for special education students. The strategies include both general and special education teachers where applicable. The practices are (1) professional development for

all teachers; (2) task forces and work groups; (3) instructional strategies for students with disabilities; (4) clear expectations for staff and students; and, (5) assessment and data gathering procedures (Pierson, & Howell, 2013). Additionally, the educational reform of inclusion requires administrative support by creating a clear vision that develops people, builds capacity, and monitors policies and regulations (Pierson, & Howell, 2013). However, McMaster (2015) acknowledged in his study that inclusive education related to the social model of disability and was a social construct influenced by cultural values. For diversity to be embraced, a shift in cultural values and perspectives needs to occur (McMaster, 2015). McMaster (2015) described teacher's attitudes as a barrier to inclusion and for inclusion to flourish barrier need to be indemnified and removed.

**Co-teaching.** The seminal authors in the area of co-teaching are L. Cook and Friend (1995), M. Friend (2008), and R. Villa and Thousand (2013). Each of these authors have written countless articles and books on co-teaching. Co-teaching is defined as two teachers working together to provide instruction for a group of students. However, differences of opinion exist in the naming and delivery of co-teaching. M. Friend (2010) described co-teaching and the collaborative model as two types of service. Additionally, M. Friend described co-teaching as a relationship between two licensed or credentialed professionals. Whereas, R. Villa (2013) states co-teaching exists when two or more individuals are working in a classroom together. R. Villa included Para educators as co-teachers. Guidelines on effective co-teaching have been established through countless research on the topic. R. Villa (2013) explained that the first year of co-teaching is about building a relationship and trust. Depending on the author, there are four to six different co-teaching strategies.

R. Villas (2013) explained the different types of co-teaching to be supportive co-teaching, parallel co-teaching, complementary, co-teaching, and team teaching. M. Friend (2008) adds station teaching, and one observes one assist to the different models of co-teaching. Co-teaching can be described as a relationship between two educators where parity is demonstrated; differentiated instruction is evident through the mutual planning of instruction (M. Friend, 2008; R. Villa & Thousand, 2013). Table 4 displays the co-teaching concepts and the essential components involved. The data describes each of the co-teaching model strategies, the use and level of planning needed to implement. The purpose of the table is to introduce and give background knowledge of the concepts to understand the in-depth analysis of the literature review.

Table 4

*Co-teaching Model Strategies*

Co-teaching Strategy	Description	Uses	Level of Planning
One Teach, One Observe	One of the two teachers teach the lesson and the other observes and may take notes	This method may be useful in determining the effectiveness of a lesson, determining the antecedent to behavior	Low level of planning, may require post planning and debriefing of observation
One Teach, One Assist	One teacher teaches the lesson and the other walks around assisting students as needed	Provide individual attention to students and helping all students in the room	Low level of planning
Parallel Teaching	Each teacher teaches the lesson but may teach it slightly differently depending on the needs of the students in the group.	To teach and reinforce concepts when a smaller group may be needed	Medium level of co-planning, high level of individual planning

*Note.* Adapted from “Co-teaching Model Strategies,” by Villa, R., Thousand, J., & Nevin, A. (2013). *A guide to co-teaching: New lessons and strategies to facilitate student learning* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

(continued)

Table 4

*Co-teaching Model Strategies*

Co-teaching Strategy	Description	Uses	Level of Planning
Team Teaching	When two teachers plan, teach and work together as a team in the classroom	Both teachers teach and work seamlessly and the observer cannot tell which person plays which role in the classroom	High level of Planning as all planning is done together

*Note.* Adapted from “Co-teaching Model Strategies,” by Villa, R., Thousand, J., & Nevin, A. (2013). *A guide to co-teaching: New lessons and strategies to facilitate student learning* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Co-teaching needs to have several variables in place to be an effective strategy (M. Friend, 2008; Hanover, 2012; R. Villa, 2002). Some of these variables include strong administrative support that ensures common planning time for teachers, match teachers by strengths, and schedule less than one-third of students with disabilities in the classroom (M. Friend, 2008; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2002; Hanover, 2012).

**Specialized Academic Instruction (SAI) in Separate Setting**

Services can encompass placement in specially designed classes for part or the majority of the day (Burns, 2004). This type of services is a direct service which only be instituted after all services in the LRE have been exhausted for the student to make progress. Burns (2004) explains some students may need a pull-out setting for services, and the special education teacher needs a separate location to develop the skills necessary to participate in the general classroom. Several guidelines are given to ensure the LRE is protected by keeping services as minimal as possible, focusing on classroom access, determine the effect on the classroom, and ruling out if services can be provided within the classroom. Pull-out services can focus on teaching reading, math, writing, social

skills, behavior, and any other skill needed to access the general education environment (Burns, 2004; Hurt, 2012; Marston, n.d.). Evidenced in the literature exists a debate on the progress of students in the pullout setting exists (Hurt, 2012; Marston, n.d.). Marston (n.d.) studied the effectiveness of pullout, inclusion programs, and a blend of both services. The results of his study concluded that students who received both types of services scored higher on achievement tests.

### **Student Support Level**

“The removal of the student from the general education environment occurs only if the nature or severity of his/her disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily” (Maryland State Dept. Ed., 2000, p. 8) requires a strong instructional support level. The instructional support level includes the services to students, which includes access to supplementary aids and supports, and accommodations/modifications to the general curriculum (IDEA, 2004). The student support level includes a description of the supplementary aids and supports, accommodations, and evidence based practices that encompass this level.

### **Supplementary Aids, Supports and Accommodations**

IDEA requires a statement of the special education and related service and supplementary aids and services to be included in the IEP (IDEA, 2004).

The section §300.320(a)(4) stipulates that each child’s IEP must contain:

- 4) A statement of the special education and related services and supplementary aids and services, based on peer-reviewed research to the extent practicable, to be provided to the child, or on behalf of the child, and a statement of the



program modifications or supports for school personnel that will be provided to enable the child:

- (i) To advance appropriately toward attaining the annual goals;
- (ii) To be involved in and make progress in the general education curriculum in accordance with paragraph (a)(1) of this section, and to participate in extracurricular and other nonacademic activities; and
- (iii) To be educated and participate with other children with disabilities and nondisabled children in the activities described in this section...

(IDEA, 2004, §300.320(a)(4))

Identifying accommodations and supplementary aids and supports is an important duty of the special education teacher and needs to be agreed upon by the IEP team (Burns, 2004). Supplementary aides and supports depend on the child's strengths and weakness and may be determined by disability type (Hallahan et al., 2015; Zentall, 2014). Research has been conducted for evidence-based practices by instructional strategy for all disabilities as a whole or by individual disability type (Hallahan et al., 2015; Zentall, 2014). Browning Wright (2003) stated that when students make academic progress, then problematic behaviors are reduced (as cited in Pent, 2016). Sprague (2014) stated that when instruction is difficult or not adapted based on the needs of the child, the child will misbehave. Additionally, Browning Wright described the need for differentiated instruction and an accommodation plan.

**Accommodations.** The OSEP created a manual to help IEP teams determine and develop accommodations (S. Thompson, Morse, Sharp & Hall, 2005). In this manual, OSEP expects students with disabilities to achieve grade level standards.

“Accommodations are practices and procedures in the areas of presentation, response, setting, and timing/scheduling that provide equitable access during instruction and assessments for students with disabilities” (J. Thompson et al., 2005, p. 14). Browning Wright (2003) developed a systematic procedure for informing teachers of accommodations through distributing an accommodation plan to all necessary staff. Browning Wright (2003) described nine areas in which curriculum can be adapted or accommodated. The accommodations in each area depend on the need of the students (Hallahan et al., 2015; Wright, 2003; Zentall, 2014). Sprague (2012) described a 12-step accommodation plan for students by adapting three areas of instruction such as change the context, change the presentation, and change the behavior expectations.

Accommodating the curriculum and instructional strategies used in the classroom stems from a belief that teachers need to meet students where they are functioning (Sprague, 2012). Accommodating allows for the teacher to evolve from teaching in the middle or for “the test” (Sprague, 2012, p. 3). Sprague (2012) described a seven step plan for adapting curriculum and instruction and a problem solving strategy matrix to adapt curriculum. Table 5 outlines the 7-step process for accommodating the curriculum (Sprague, 2012).

Table 5

*Steps to Accommodating Classroom Instruction and Curriculum*

General Curriculum	1. Select the subject area
	2. Select the topic
	3. State the goal for the majority of the class
	4. Create the lesson plan for most
Adapted Curriculum	5. Identify learner who need accommodations or help
	6. Choose the adaptations or accommodation
	7. Evaluate the plan

*Note.* Adapted from “Adapting the Curriculum and Instruction: A Primer,” by J. Sprague, 2012. Special Edge, CA.

Accommodations can also be applied to each disability type by the evidence-based practices for that disability (Hallahan et al., 2015; Zentall, 2014). Hallahan et al. (2015) referred to this practice as responsive teaching, which uses research to inform instructional practices. Specific strategies are given for students with disabilities and adaptations are used. For example, Positive Behavior Interventions of Support and Augmentative Adapted Communication are examples of responsive teaching. Zentell (2014) described accommodations and intervention by a response to intervention model of three tiers for each of the mild to moderate disabilities.

### **Academic Achievement**

IDEA (2004) describes academic achievement or educational benefit as making progress toward the grade level standards and IEP goals. The ESEA was reauthorized into NCLB and most currently ESSA, which include accountability for academic achievement. The NCLB and ESSA reauthorizations of the ESEA added an academic achievement accountability piece that included students with disabilities. The Federal government increased the monitoring of outcomes for students with disabilities by adding the new Indicator 17: State Systematic Improvement Plan (CaSBE, 2016). The SSIP holds states accountable for the academic and social outcomes for SWD. The Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services [OSERS]) reported one of the most critical tools in ensuring access to effective instruction, and increased achievement for all students with disabilities is the IEP process (S. Thompson et al., 2001). According to LaSalle, Roach, and McGrath (2013) “little research regarding the effect of IEP quality on student access to the general curriculum and student performance on standardized assessments is

available” (p. 135). The IEP team meets yearly to review academic progress and create new goals to encourage increased academic achievement (IDEA, 2004, LaSalle et al., 2013).

### **Research Gap**

Special education has been evolving for over the last 40 years and the legal mandates have been updated to direct and continue the improvement of special education (IDEA, 2004; NCLB, 2002). As IDEA (2004) evolved and the provisions awarded to students with disabilities changed, special education policies developed to enforce the new provisions. The 2004 update of IDEA changed the provision of including students in the mainstream to the LRE model of including students for the greatest extent possible. This developed into a loosely couple system of policy and procedure without clear expectations of the policy (Weick, 1996). With these changes, inclusion evolved into a service delivery model (DeRoche, 2013). This evolution brought change and challenges for educators. McMaster (2015) stated that inclusion is a culture change and requires a vision, professional development, and a paradigm shift to difference instead of disability. It was noted that teachers’ beliefs and feelings towards inclusion developed into a key barrier to inclusion (McMaster, 2015).

The concept of inhabited institutions with loosely coupled systems explains the resistance and barriers towards inclusion (DeRoche, 2013; T. Hallet, 2010; McMaster, 2015). Teachers’ preconceived beliefs and ideas create a barrier for reform and inclusion (DeRoche, 2013; T. Hallet, 2010; McMaster, 2015). “Implementing and Sustaining schoolwide inclusive practices” (Shorgren et al., 2015, p. 244) depend on the school including all stakeholders from the site, district and state level which influence and

implement the practices to ensure a transformation in culture. The concept of distributed leadership in special education is important and necessary as special education leadership is usually centralized and site based leadership is important in creating a cohesive and effective team (Tudryn, Boscardin, and Wells, 2016). Administrators and instructional staff need to work on building a culture of inclusion to transform practices (Shorgren et al., 2015). Administration's role in leading and building a common school or district vision requires the administrator to work in with all appropriate stakeholders to create a common purpose (Pierson & Howell, 2013). Pierson and Howell (2013) emphasized the need for administrators to build capacity, develop staff and monitor policies.

Special education mandates and provisions to monitor policies and practices developed into a monitoring system of SPP and special education task forces to evaluate the current state of special education at the federal, state and local level (CDE, 2016). The policies develop into procedures and practices implemented at the classroom level. The classroom level for the purposes of this study was divided into distinct levels of teacher practice and student support which align with the research on closing the achievement gap (Billig 2005; Hanover 2014; NEA, 2006; Wixom, 2015). The federal government has imposed the new Indicator 17 to ensure states comply with IDEA and focus on student outcomes (CaSBE, 2016). Indicator 17: The State Systematic Improvement Plan mandates states to develop a plan that aligns current policies, structures and funding sources to ensure student outcomes. The SSIP for the state of CA aligns the SSIP with the LCFF and LCAP to ensure accountability for target student groups (Special Edge, 2016). As districts are evaluated for their SWD outcomes in the areas of academic achievement and graduation, the state will monitor the implementation of

evidence based practices as recommended in the special education task force report and in phase one of the SSIP (Berman et al., 2015; CASBE, 2016). Additionally, the SSIP places focus on Indicator 5- Least Restrict Environment and districts will be monitored towards making progress to include more students in the general environment. The continuous of improvement of special education and the alignment of the SSIP to the implementation at district level will unfold over time. This current development in special education reinforces the need for research investigating the improvement of the special education at the director level on the levels of policy, teacher practice, and student support.

### **Summary**

A plethora of literature exists on the topic of special education. Therefore, as the literature was reviewed definite themes emerged organizing the literature into the following levels: (a) policy; (b) teacher practice; (c) student support. The literature supported a pattern and explanation that policy is closely related to practice but sometimes there is a breakdown in implementation. Leadership was identified as a key topic in many articles on practice and student support (Talbot, Mayrowetz, Maggin, & Tozer, 2016; Vernotica et al., 2012; R. Villa, 2002; Weiss, 2002). It was important to note the inter-relationship between the levels. Many of the articles reviewed focused on policy and teacher practice. The articles also focus on teacher practice and student support. Additionally, as the review of literature evolved new topics emerged that were related to the problem. The topics of inhabited institutions, loosely coupled organizational systems, closing the achievement gap, and special education leadership emerged as important topics to support and explain the problem. The authors discovered

that policy loosely aligned with classroom practices and that teacher's depending on their belief systems about teaching may not implement new practices in their classrooms (DeRoche, 2013; T. Hallet, 2007; T. Hallet, 2010). The literature review indicates the identified the problem, the research gap and the need for additional research on improving special education. With the implementation of the new Indicator 17, this research is timely and will fill the gap in literature on how to improve special education.

## CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

### Overview

Chapter III describes the research methodology employed for this study. The methodology section includes a purpose statement that warrants the reason for the study along with the three central RQs that examine the issue to be explored. Additionally, the research design, population and sample, data-collection procedures, and data-analysis process are included in this chapter. Lastly, the limitations of the study and a summary of the methodology are included in this section.

### Purpose Statement

The purpose of this grounded theory qualitative case study was to discover the perceptions of special education directors regarding the changes in special education at the policy level, teacher practice level, and student support level necessary to improve the academic achievement of students with disabilities in California.

### RQ

This study was guided by the following RQ: *What changes in policy, teacher practice, and student support do California Special Education Directors perceive will improve academic achievement of special education students?*

### RSQs

1. What can be done at the policy level to improve the academic achievement of special education students in California?
2. What can be done at the teacher practice level to improve the academic achievement of special education students in California?



3. What can be done at the student support level to improve the academic achievement of special education students in California?

### **Research Design**

Qualitative data present the research as trends or themes in the data (M. Q. Patton, 2002). According to J. W. Creswell (2008), grounded theory utilizes three types of design: (a) systematic; (b) emerging and (c) constructivist. “Grounded theory is a widely used qualitative research methodology that seeks to inductively distil issues of importance for specific groups of people, creating meaning about those issues through analysis and modeling of theory” (Mills, Bonner, & Francis, 2006, p. 8). The systematic approach involves an inductive thinking process to interpret the data by following a three step process of coding: (a) open coding, (b) axial coding, and (c) selective coding. The emerging approach developed by Glasser allows for the theory to surface and emerge from the data (as cited in Darrin, 2016). According to McMillan and Schumacher (2010), the constructivist approach focuses on “the perspectives, feelings and beliefs of the participants” (p. 347). Charmaz (2014) cautions researchers on the use of the constructivist approach as the theory is driven by the researchers prior biases than through objective criteria. The study employs an emerging approach to the grounded theory design. The researcher on premise of theory development selects grounded theory. Grounded theory utilizes a homogenous sample of participants with similar backgrounds and experiences to allow for theory development. The grounded theory study allows the researcher to explore the perceptions of the special education directors in their environment.

A qualitative research method was employed to address the RQs by exploring the thoughts, feelings and opinions of special education directors on how to improve special education at the levels of policy, teacher practice, and student support. “Qualitative research is more concerned with understanding the social phenomenon from the participant’s perspective” (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p. 12). Interviews and written documents were the qualitative research data-collection techniques utilized to capture how the participants process their experiences.

A grounded theory qualitative methodology is appropriate for this study as it can provide significant contributions on theory, practice, and influence policy (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p. 320). Additionally, qualitative methodology “increases the depth of understanding of the cases and situations studied” (M. Q. Patton, 2002, p. 14). The perspectives of the participants and their experiences are revealed through this type of research and a deep understanding can be revealed (M. Q. Patton, 2002). “Qualitative research is intended to build, rather than test, understanding and theory” (Newman & Benz, 1998, p. 24). Examining the opinions of special education directors on improving programs and services for students with disabilities will provide detailed information from a variety of perspectives to inform the levels of policy, teacher practice, and student support for continuous improvement.

A variety of research designs encompasses qualitative inquiry. “Research design is very important because certain limitations and cautions in interpreting the results and related to each design” (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p. 20). McMillan and Schumacher (2010) described that when data are gathered on natural phenomena, qualitative research can be as systematic as quantitative research. This study employed

the grounded theory case study methodology to examine the lived experiences of the participants. “The case may be a program, an event, an activity, or a set of individuals bounded in time and place. The researcher defines the cases and its boundary” (McMillan & Schumacher, p. 24). The researcher focused on the opinions of special education directors in CA. By examining this set of individual opinions, the researcher investigated how to improve special education at the levels of policy, teacher practice, and student support.

### **Population**

A population is the group of participants or cases that conform to a specific criterion that is being studied as defined by McMillan and Schumacher (2010). For the purpose of this study, special education directors in California comprise the population studied. For the purpose of this study, special education directors in CA comprise the population studied. Special Education Directors oversee the general special education functions for their district which include but not limited to compliance with IDEA, ESSA, AYP, LRE, inclusion, compliance, need for special education, early identification, child find, paraprofessionals in special education, mental health services for special education students, and oversight of all instructional programs for special education students (Balliet, 2010). There are 977 Special Education Directors in CA (DataQuest, 2016).

### **Target Population**

A target population for a study is the entire set of individuals chosen from the overall population for which the study data are to be used to make inferences. The target population defines the population to “which the findings of a survey are meant to be

generalized” (Sage Publications & Lavrakas, 2008, p. 876). This definition determines the eligibility of the participants of the study (Sage Publications & Lavrakas, 2008).

The study’s target population was special education directors in CA that met the following criteria:

1. Participant worked in special education as a teacher, speech and language pathologist, school psychologist or counselor for at least five years before going into administration.
2. Participant has been a special education director for at least three years.
3. Participant has a total of ten years in special education.
4. Participant has experience in working with students with mild to moderate disabilities.
5. Participant is currently a special education director in a school district.
6. Participant has participated in policy making activities at the local SELPA or State level.

The general population was too large and impossible to study which directed the researcher to limit the population by creating requirements of special education district directors by location, experience, and area of expertise. In the Riverside county SELPA, there are 23 directors and seven directors meet the requirements. This was determined through asking individual directors their background as it relates to the requirements. This number is about 33% of the population of Riverside County Directors and is used as a basis to generalize the number of qualified directors to the larger population. The overall number was lower to 25% due to a number of small districts in the state that have

directors for more than one concentration area. There are approximately 250 Special Education Directors that met the criteria.

### **Sample**

The sample is the group of participants from which the researcher collects data (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Purposive sampling uses a non-probability sampling technique. This type of sampling is used when the researcher needs participants who have relevant information about the topic of interest (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010; Patten, 2012). A wide variety of purposive sampling techniques can be used depending on the topic being researched.

The qualitative sampling strategies for purposive sampling used were criterion sampling and expert sampling. The researcher worked with a panel of three experts in the field of special education to determine the criteria and to determine if the potential participants were identified as experts in the field of special education for students with mild to moderate disabilities.

The sample group was selected from special education directors in CA. Directors were selected from the various regions in CA: seven from northern; seven from southern; and, six from central for a total of 20 participants. The central CA region is less populated so one less director was selected from this region. The criteria for the participants in this were selected from the larger population if the following requirements were met.

- Participant worked in special education as a teacher, speech and language pathologist, school psychologist or counselor for at least five years before going into administration.

- Participant has been a special education director for at least three years.
- Participant has a total of 10 years in special education.
- Participant has experience in working with students with mild to moderate disabilities.
- Participant is currently a special education director in a school district.
- Participant has participated in policy making activities at the local SELPA or State level.

### **Sample Selection Process**

The sample selection process was a multi-step process that consisted of emailing study requirements and a process of experts identifying if possible participants that met the requirement to participate in the study. With the assistance experts in the field of special education and through email correspondence, 20 special education directors were selected from the northern, southern, and central regions of CA to participate in this study. Of the participants, seven resided in northern CA, seven resided in southern CA, and six from central CA. McMillan and Schumacher (2010) stated qualitative samples can range from one to 40 or more. A qualitative sample appears small compared to the sample needed for generalization to a larger population. The small sample group for this study was selected by the researcher to ensure the opportunity to conduct detailed interviews with identified participants.

1. To identify and recruit participants by phone, email, or face-to-face, an invitation (see Appendix B) with research participant criteria checklist (see Appendix C) was used to recruit possible participants.
2. The participants were chosen by meeting the checklist criteria and residing in

the specified CA region.

3. The researcher met with three special education experts to narrow the population to prospective candidates and the survey with the checklist was distributed to those candidates.
4. The experts agreed to select and recruit participants based on selection criteria and each participant's willingness to participate.
5. The researcher contacted the participants and explained the purpose of the study and clarified the participant criteria for the study as well as providing informed consent and participants' Bill of Rights materials.

### **Instrumentation**

According to McMillan and Schumacher (2010), the researcher either directly observes a natural setting or acts as an interviewer observing the interactions at that time. The researcher can be considered as one of the instruments used in the research. "The credibility of qualitative methods, therefore, hinges to a great extent on the skill, competence, and rigor of the person doing the fieldwork as well as things going on in the person's life that might prove a distraction" (Patten, 2012, p. 14). To limit sample bias and increase the credibility of the research study, the researcher employed several strategies to collect data to increase the validity and reliability (Noble & Smith, 2015).

### **Expert Panel**

"Expert panels are used when specialized input and opinion is required for an evaluation" (Laidlaw, 2016, p.36). The expert panel for this study consisted of two special education professionals with experience in policy, practice and student support. The experts reviewed and collaborated on the interview questions with the researcher.

The researcher developed the initial questions and consulted the experts for input and to revise the questions.

To identify participants for the study, the researcher collaborated with two experts in the field of special education to identify some of the possible participants and additionally the researcher distributed an email survey to potential participants to additional district directors until the 20 participants were obtained. Participants who met the selection criteria were given a Letter of Invitation from the researcher, which detailed the research study's reasons and purpose.

### **Interview Process**

At the beginning of each interview, the researcher read and reviewed the Letter of Invitation, Informed Consent Form (see Appendix D), and Brandman University Institutional Review Board (BUIRB) Research Participant's Bill of Rights (see Appendix E), and had each participant sign the Informed Consent Form. "Informed consent is achieved by providing subjects with an explanation of research, an opportunity to terminate their participation at any time with no penalty, and full disclosure of any risks associated with the study" (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p. 118). The researcher provided a consent packet to each participant, which included letter of invitation, informed consent, BUIRB Bill of Rights, explanation of the study purpose, description of the research process, and extent of confidentiality. An audio or video release (see Appendix F) was included on the informed consent form providing consent for the interviews to be recorded.

The researcher created an invitation with qualifications and contacted the proposed participants by email. The demographic data were necessary to determine and



validate that study participants met the sample criteria. The researcher with the expert panel developed interview questions (see Appendix G) for the individual interviews that addressed each of the RQs and variables of the study.

### **Reliability**

Many strategies can be implemented to increase reliability and validity of qualitative research. For research to be considered worthwhile and reliable rigor is an important component of the research. Morse, Barret, Mayan, Olson, and Spiers (2002) explain, “Hence, a great deal of attention is applied to reliability and validity in all research methods” (p. 2). Adopting the reliability criteria ensures rigor in the research (Morse et al., 2002). According to McMillan and Schumacher (2010), reflexivity is important in ensuring reliability in qualitative research by identifying biases and applying strategies to maintain neutrality. Reflexivity requires extreme self-reflection and scrutiny on the behalf of the researcher, which identifies biases to the research. This process is important in developing credibility and reliability in the research. Two experts in the field of special education were used as peer debriefs to increase the awareness of possible bias in the research. Additionally, a field log describing daily activities revolving around the research was maintained to help document events.

### **Pilot Test**

A video recorded pilot test was implemented with two control group participants. The interview questions were asked in a controlled environment. The researcher and two expert consultants watched the video to determine if any biases were emerging from the interviews. McMillan and Schumacher (2010) stated that pilot testing is an important component to the research, which allows the researcher to test the questions and make the

necessary changes or adjustments if necessary from the results of the pilot test. The pilot test was conducted through face-to-face interviews and via Adobe Connect, an online meeting platform. Participants for the pilot test were in close proximity to the researcher. A virtual format was tested during the pilot test due to the possibility of some participants being located a far distance from the researcher. The method used for obtaining the data was the interview utilizing unstructured broad questions. According to McMillan and Schumacher, unstructured broad questions give the research a large amount of flexibility possibly increasing the data gathered. The question will be reviewed after the pilot interviews and adjusted if necessary. The participants will be asked about the appropriateness of the questions and offer any suggestions for improvement.

After the pilot test was completed, the researcher discussed the results of the pilot test with the committee chair and experts. The chair and experts gave feedback and suggestions to the interviews and questions. Any suggestions to enhance reliability and credibility were employed by the researcher.

### **Validity**

“Validity, in qualitative research, refers to the degree of congruence between the explanations of the phenomena and the realities of the world” (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p. 330). The researcher can take steps to increase the validity of the research by reducing bias and using standardized methods of data collection. “For the novice researcher, demonstrating rigor when undertaking qualitative research is challenging because there is no accepted consensus about the standards by which such research should be judged” (Noble & Smith, 2015, p. 34). Table 6 outlines the strategies that were

employed to enhance the validity on data collection and interpretation of findings (McMillan and Schumacher, 2010; Noble & Smith, 2015).

Table 6

*Strategies to Enhance Validity*

Strategy	Description
Engage with other researchers to reduce bias	Talk to other researchers in the field and review results
Meticulous record keeping	Use of recorders, photographers, and/or video recorders, clear decision trail to ensure transparency
Respondent validation	Record comments on interview participant regarding the interview
Verbatim account of interviews	Use of verbatim notes, videotaping, recorders, and record keeping
Account for personal biases	Describe and list personal biases to enable researcher to avoid them.

**Data Collection**

Prior to collecting data for this study, approval to conduct the study was received from the BUIRB.

Interviews, observation, and/or documents are the common methods used for data collection in qualitative inquiry (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010; M. Q. Patton 2002).

The data collection for this research study consisted of individual interviews and a review of existing reform documents. The researcher conducted 20 individual interviews through face-to-face interviewing or via Adobe Connect online meeting platform. The researcher conducted interviews with special education directors across the state of CA that met the sample selection criteria.

During each interview, the researcher employed the interview strategies as suggested by McMillan and Schumacher (2010). The researcher asked the participants to introduce themselves and provide their background. Additionally, the nature of the study was disclosed. The researcher assured the respondents of confidentiality and asked them to sign the confidentiality agreement. The researcher built rapport with the participants by asking control questions that were of a personal nature. The benefits of the study were explained to the participants. The interview questions were asked in a controlled manner using an interview script. The script included three to four scripted probing questions to elicit a further response to the question.

To ensure the interviews were professional and well run, the researcher followed several of the Do's and Don'ts strategies from McMillan and Schumacher (2010). The interviewer dressed appropriately and was friendly and non-threatening. The face-to-face interviews were conducted in a quiet place. The remote interviews were tested for strength of internet connection and headphones were used to limit feedback. The interviewer employed active listening by listening more than talking. The interviewer kept the respondent comfortable, focused, and tolerated silence.

The data collection process employed the four-phase process to data collection. In phase one, planning the data collection occurred (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). The researcher with the help of field experts designed the questions. A pilot test was conducted and adjustments were made as necessary. In phase two, data collection began with building rapport, trust, and a relationship with the respondent. Interviewing and recording procedures were fine-tuned during this phase. Phase three commenced with basic data collection by conducting the interviews. The researcher ensured that all

interviews were recorded and all recordings were transcribed by a transcription service. The researcher initiated tentative data analysis during this phase by processing the facts and answers given in the interviews. Phase four began with closing the data collection and finishing the interviews and organizing the data obtained from the interviews.

Additionally, documents relating to the reform of special education were reviewed and coded for themes. The researcher employed a method of triangulating the data from the interviews, with existing documents on educational reform in special education. The themes from the interviews were compared and contrasted with the current research reform documents to examine similarities and differences in the data. This added an additional method of data collection to process increasing validity. McMillan and Schumacher (2010) stated that multiple data collection strategies increase validity.

### **Data Analysis**

In grounded theory, an emphasis is made toward building an analytic story by focusing on concept themes instead of descriptions (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). “Qualitative data analysis is primarily an inductive process of organizing data into categories and identifying patterns and relationships among the categories” (p. 367). The researcher utilized an inductive analysis procedure to analyze and organize the data for coding. A template analysis was used with an initial set of codes and categories assigned to the data. This method allowed for flexibility of updating codes and categories as the coding progressed.

The researcher needed to prepare and organize the data in order to be able to code the data appropriately. The researcher organized the data into the following workable units:

1. RQs and sub-questions;
2. Research instrument: the interview guide;
3. Themes, and concepts used by other researchers;
4. Personal knowledge; and,
5. The data from the interviews.

After the data were organized into units, the data were transcribed into segments and then coded for themes. The codes were described and categorized which were then developed into clear patterns for the researcher to synthesize and analyze. To increase validity, the data from the interviews were triangulated with the data from the educational reform research on special education for common patterns and themes. The emerging rounded theory format allowed the researcher to use open coding to develop the themes of the data (Darrin, 2016). The study used a process of inter-coder reliability which used two raters to determine codes and allowed the researcher to assess the degree of which the different rater estimate the same phenomenon (Trochim, 2006).

The researcher secured and monitored the use of all research data, audio recordings, and other documents maintained confidentiality and security of the data. Study transcripts, audio-recordings, and any other documents that identified participants will be destroyed after three years.

## **Limitations**

Limitations of the study are the variables that the researcher cannot control. The small sample size, which was limited to 20 special education directors in the three CA regions, may create limitations in generalizing the data. Grounded theory methodology usually employs small sample sizes to keep the research manageable. Also, the researcher's personal biases can easily influence the data, which tends to be typical in qualitative research design and will be recognized in the recommendation section of the dissertation. In response to this limitation of bias, the researcher took extra measures to mitigate ramifications of bias.

The voluntary nature of a research study creates limitations in the participation rate of those selected. The number of individuals who participated can become a limitation by reducing the sample size and limiting the study for generalization. Additionally, this study was limited to participants' opinions on how to improve special education at the levels of policy, teacher practice, and student support.

One purpose of qualitative research was detailed description of the phenomena. The ambiguity of the English language as it relates to the field of special education may present itself as a limitation in this study. Attention will need to be paid to the use of language and vernacular as it relates to special education. Language can vary greatly between participants depending on background and area of expertise. This discrepancy in vocabulary may create difficulty for the researcher to develop patterns and themes due to variations in vernacular.

Another limitation to the study was the participant's response to the questions. The researcher assumed that the participants answered the interview questions openly and

honestly. The researcher used a technique to asking follow-up questions to elicit full complete answers from the participants. Clarification techniques were used throughout the interview process to elicit the most accurate data.

Finally, the nature of qualitative research tends to be time consuming and creates challenges for the researcher by the large amount of data created. The volume of data created took the researcher more time to organize and sift through the data for themes and patterns. The researcher needed to adhere to strict guidelines and procedures to ensure reliability and validity when analyzing the data.

### **Summary**

This chapter presented the methodology for this study. The purpose and RQs were reviewed. The research design, population and sample, instrumentation, data-collection and analysis procedures were presented. The limitations of the study were discussed. The data and findings from the study are identified in Chapter IV. Chapter V discusses major findings, conclusions, implications for action, and recommendations for future research.



## CHAPTER IV: RESEARCH, DATA COLLECTION AND FINDINGS

### **Introduction**

This dissertation contains five chapters. The Chapter I introduced the problem and identified the gap between the research and implementation of special education in CA on the levels of policy, teacher practice and student support. Additionally, Chapter I introduced the question of what changes in policy, teacher practice, and student support do CA Special Education Directors perceive will improve academic achievement of special education students. The significance of this study was also introduced in Chapter I. The climate of continuing educational reform and ever changing policies signified the importance a list of recommendations on improving special education would have on the special education community. Chapter II included an in-depth review of literature of the following topics: (a) policy, (b) concepts related to the problem, (c) teacher practice in special education, (d) student support level, and (e) academic achievement. Chapter II introduced the methodology by stating the purpose and the RQs. A detailed explanation of the research design and sample were explained. The instrumentation, reliability and limitations of the study were outlined. Chapter IV presented the data from the research study by an in-depth explanation of the instrumentation, methodology, and analysis of the data.

The California Special Education Task Force outlined detailed recommendations for the state to improve special education in CA. The federal government has imposed a new Indicator 17 upon states mandating a state SSIP. This indicator mandates that the state improvement plan impose more regulations upon SELPAs and districts to comply with IDEA measured by student outcome data. Ascertaining the perceptions of special

education directors on the changes needed to improve special education on the levels of policy, teacher practice and student support will facilitate improvement in special education in CA.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this grounded theory qualitative study was to discover the perceptions of special education directors regarding the changes in special education at the policy level, teacher practice level, and student support level necessary to improve the academic achievement of students with disabilities in CA.

### **RQ**

This study was guided by the following RQ: *What changes in policy, teacher practice, and student support do California Special Education Directors perceive will improve academic achievement of special education students?*

### **RSQs**

1. What can be done at the policy level to improve the academic achievement of special education students in California?
2. What can be done at the teacher practice level to improve the academic achievement of special education students in California?
3. What can be done at the student support level to improve the academic achievement of special education students in California?

### **Instrumentation**

#### **Qualitative Interviews**

The 12 qualitative interview questions (IQ) addressed the central RQ and the three RSQs. The interview questions were developed to answer the RSQs and to engage the

participant into a deep reflective discussion on the levels of policy, teacher practice, and student support. Each level created an over-arching theme that explored change, elimination or modification, and actions that need to be taken to fully explore the sub-questions. The open-ended nature of the questions allowed for in-depth responses that generated rich data that generated sub themes to explore the RQ. Each interview began with one question to develop a relationship with the participant and to gather demographic information.

### **Central RQ**

The central RQ was: *What changes in policy, teacher practice, and student support do California Special Education Directors perceive will improve academic achievement of special education students?* Below is the sub-questions with their corresponding interview questions.

**RSQ 1:** The first sub-question focused on the level of policy and was: *What can be done at the policy level to improve the academic achievement of special education students in California?* Four interview questions were developed to answer this question.

The following are the four policy interview questions:

**IQ 1.** *What existing policies do you believe should be changed to improve special education in California?*

**IQ 2.** *What new policies do you believe should be implemented to improve special education in California?*

**IQ 3.** *What actions need to be taken to improve implementation of Federal and State policies at the SELPA level?*

***IQ 4.** What actions need to be taken to improve implementation of Federal and State policies at the District level?*

**RSQ 2:** The second sub-question focused on the level of teacher practice and was: *What can be done at the teacher practice level to improve the academic achievement of special education students in California?* Four interview questions were developed to answer this question.

The four teacher practice interview questions follow here:

***IQ 5.** What new teacher practices should be implemented to improve the achievement of special education students in California?*

***IQ 6.** What teacher practices should be eliminated or modified to improve the achievement of special education students in California?*

***IQ 7.** What actions need to be taken at the state level to improve teacher practices?*

***IQ 8.** What actions need to be taken at the district level to improve teacher practices?*

**RSQ 3:** The third sub-question focused on the student support level and was: *What can be done at the student support level to improve the academic achievement of special education students in California?* Three interview questions were created to address this level.

The three student support interview questions were:

***IQ 9.** What new student supports should be implemented to improve the achievement of special education students in California?*

*IQ 10. What student supports should be eliminated or modified to improve the achievement of special education students in California?*

*IQ 11. What actions need to be taken at the state level to improve student support in the classroom?*

### **Expert Panel/ Pilot Study**

The expert panel consisted of two special education experts: one former Assistant Superintendent and SELPA Director and one former Director of Special Education. The experts reviewed the interview questions, provided input, and assisted in adjusting the questions to ensure an unbiased interview approach to improve reliability and validity. The researcher conducted two initial interviews as part of the pilot study and reviewed the results with the two experts. This review resulted in the elimination of two interview questions. Additionally, the researcher adjusted the questions on student support from the results of the pilot study.

### **Methodology**

The study employed an emerging approach to the grounded theory design. On the premise of theory development, the researcher selected grounded theory. Grounded theory utilizes a homogenous sample of participants with similar backgrounds and experiences to allow for theory development. Approval from the BUIRB was granted on October 6, 2016 and allowed the study to proceed. A purposive sample was required to meet sample requirements for a ground theory study. The researcher gained permission from each individual participant to participate in the study. The two special education experts facilitated the creation of the sample. The experts recruited participants for the study based on knowledge of special education, experience, and personal knowledge of

their expertise in the field. The researcher contacted each potential participant and made contact by an initial participation email. Individual informed consent forms were collected by each participant, either by email submission or in person depending on the type of interview performed. Interviews were conducted in person and/or over the telephone. Each participant was provided a Brandman University Participants Bill of Rights, and signed an informed consent form and audio release form.

The emerging approach developed by Glaser allowed for the theory to surface and emerge from the data (Darrin, 2016). The study employed an emerging approach to the grounded theory design. On the premise of theory development, the researcher utilized grounded theory. A homogenous sample of participants, with similar backgrounds and experiences, allowed the researcher to gain a sample of participants with the experiences necessary for theory development. Twelve interviews with District Special Education Directors and/or SELPA Directors were conducted over a three-week period.

### **Population and Sample**

For this study, District Special Education Directors and/or Single District SELPA Directors in CA comprised the population studied. They oversee the general special educational functions for their district which include but not limited to compliance with IDEA, ESSA, AYP, LRE, inclusion, compliance, need for special education, early identification, child find, paraprofessionals in special education, mental health services for special education students, and oversight of all instructional programs for special education students (Balliet, 2010). The sample of special education directors was obtained through the recommendation of the two experts in special education regarding

participants that would have the background knowledge to thoroughly answer the RQs. The demographic data of the sample are explained in the next section.

### **Demographic Data**

All 12 directors have had at least 10 years of educational experience, with 11 of the 12 directors serving in special education roles in various capacities for at least 10 years. All nine of the special education directors have at least one year in their current roles, with one director in his/her second year, and two directors in their third year.

Table 7 and 8 display the demographic data by gender, District or SELPA, CA region, and position held before special education administration. Two of the directors came from a general education background and taught general education. Both were previously principals with special education on their school site. Eight of the participants had a background as a special education teacher. Two of the directors were previously school psychologists.

Table 7

*Qualitative interview Participants' Demographic Data: Gender, Position Held, and CA Region*

Total Number of Participants	Female	Male	Single District SELPA Directors	District Directors	Northern CA	Southern CA	Central CA
12	8	4	3	9	2	8	2

Table 8

*Qualitative interview Participants' Demographic Data: Background position before Administration*

Total Number of Participants	General Ed Teacher and Principal	Special Ed. Teacher	School Psychologist
12	2	8	2

**Data Analysis**

An emergent approach to grounded theory was utilized to analyze the data. This approach enabled the researcher and second reader to read through the interview scripts several times to identify themes that emerged from the data (Darrin, 2016; McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). The researcher employed a sequential process to coding the data by utilizing an initial set of codes and categories which allowed the researcher to update the codes as they emerged from the data. The emerging grounded theory format allowed the researcher to adjust the pre-codes by the use of open coding to develop the themes of the data (Darrin, 2016). The data was organized into three units or themes based on the RSQs, which include: (1) changes in policy; (2) teacher practice; and, (3) student support.

To increase validity, the data from the interviews were triangulated with the data from the educational reform research on special education for common patterns and themes. The themes from qualitative interviews were triangulated with the recommendations of the California Special Education Task Force. Common themes from the interviews and research were mentioned in respective interview sections. The study used a process of inter-coder reliability which used two raters to determine codes and caused the researcher to reflect on the degree of which the different rater estimated the



same phenomenon (Trochim, 2006). The data analysis section includes the following: (a) qualitative interviews analyzed; and, (b) qualitative interviews emergent themes.

### **Qualitative Individual Interviews Analyzed**

Twelve individual qualitative interview questions were conducted from participants in northern, southern and central CA. Two special education experts recommended the participants for the study. The researcher contacted each participant by email invitation and phone call. The interviews were conducted both by phone and/or face-to-face. The participants received the informed consent form, audio release form, and Brandman University Participant's Bill of Rights by email prior to the phone interview. Participants returned the signed documents via email prior to the scheduled interview.

The individual interviews were the primary method of data collection. The in-depth interviews consisted of one background question and 12 questions which focused on the three sub-questions. The interviews provided the researcher with data that were coded for themes. The themes emerged into the findings of the study. Each interviewee was provided a number to maintain confidentiality and the interviews were scribed, recorded, and then transcribed. The interviews are close to verbatim except sensitive data was removed that could divulge the participants' identify.

The 12 IQs were directly related to the central RQ. The IQs were divided by the three sub-questions which emerged to the three central themes of the study. The data responses were coded by the researcher and a second rater to ensure validity in the codes. Each sub-question developed into themes or patterns for each level. For each of the three sub-questions, a set of themes emerged from the data. There were 17 factors which

emerged from the data. The initial set of pre-selected codes were organized by sub-question. RSQ 1 focused on the Policy Level and had the following pre-selected codes; (a) funding, (b) new policies and (c) SELPA. The data was organized by common characteristics and themes emerged from the data which created new codes. New Policies as a code was eliminated due to the data not supporting the theme. Additionally, the themes of due process and decision makers emerged from the data. RDQ 2 focused on the Teacher Practice Level and had the following pre-selected codes: (a) new practices, (b) eliminated practices and (c) professional development. As the data was coded the following two codes were eliminated: (a) new practices, and eliminated practices. The following codes emerged from the data: (a) nothing eliminated, (b) inclusion, (c) teacher preparation, (d) professional development, and (e) CDE compliance monitoring. Table 11 organizes the themes by sub-question and level and displays the themes coded by participant.

Table 11

*Participants Responses for the Changes Needed to Improve Special Education*

	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	P10	P11	P12	%	Responses
RSQ 1: Policy Level														
Funding	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	91.6%	
Due Process	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	91.6%	
Decision Makers	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	100%	

*Note.* P = Participant; RSQ = Research Sub Question; SELPA = Special Education Local Plan Areas; CDE = California Department of Education.

(continued)

Table 11

*Participants Responses for the Changes Needed to Improve Special Education*

	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	P10	P11	P12	% of Responses
SELPA Guidance	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	100%
RSQ 2: Teacher Practice Level													
Nothing Eliminated	X	X	X		X			X	X	X			58.3%
Inclusion	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	x	X	X	X	X	100%
Teacher Preparation	X	X		X	X		X	X	X		X	X	75%
Professional Development	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	100%
CDE Compliance Monitoring			X	X	X	X		X			X		50%
RSQ 3: Student Support Level													
1:1 aides	X	X			X		X						33%
Intervention Practices		X	X		X	X			X		X		50%
Credentialing			X			X	X	X	X	X		X	58.3%
Implement One-System			X		X	X	X			X			41.6%
New System						X							8%
Guidance Counselors						X					X		16%
Transition									X				8%
Eliminate Lecture												X	8%

*Note.* P = Participant; RSQ = Research Sub Question; SELPA = Special Education Local Plan Areas; CDE = California Department of Education.

The following Figure 5 displays the relationship between the IQs with the RQ and sub-questions.

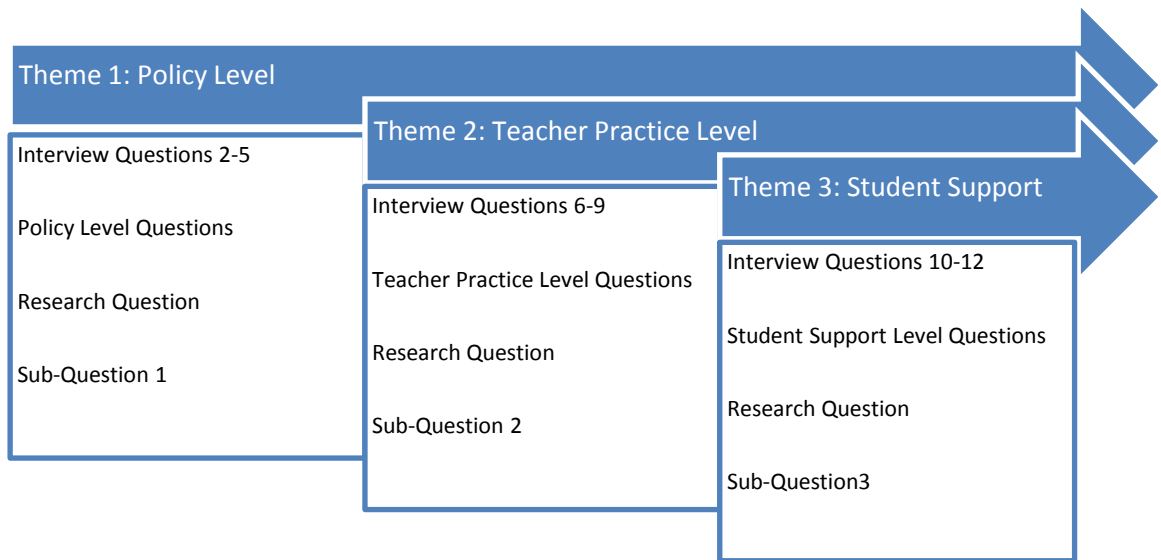


Figure 4. Qualitative IQs and Relationship to RSQs

### Qualitative Interview Collection Results

This section captured and reported the participants' answers and stated emergent themes from the three RSQs. Based on results from the individual interviews, there were 10 theme areas with at least 50% rate of respondents mentioning the theme (see Table 12).

Table 12

*Top 10 theme areas with at least 50% support*

Theme Areas	Results
Decision-Makers	100%
Inclusion	100%
Professional Development	100%
Funding	91.6%
Due Process	91.6%
Teacher Preparation	75%
Nothing Eliminated	58.3%
Credentialing	58.3%
CDE Compliance/Monitoring	50%
Intervention Practices	50%

The following are the major themes of this study with at least 50% rate of the respondents mentioning the theme. Quotes from interview participants are used to fully understand the perceptions of the special education directors. Each section is organized by the RSQ and the corresponding themes for each section.

**RSQ 1:** *What can be done at the Policy Level to improve the academic achievement of special education students in California?*

**Theme 1: fund special education.** During the interview process, funding for special education evolved into a major theme of the research, as 91.6 % of the respondents mentioned funding for special education. The answers varied from four participants focusing on the LCAP and seven focusing on Federal funding. Three participants stated the method that districts look at special education funding; encroachment needs to be changed at the district level. Participant 1 expressed her perception in her district by stating, *“The funding policies create difficulties with being able to provide competitive salaries, training and causes a problem with encroachment on the general fund.”* Another Director, Participant 7 simply responded, *“We need appropriate and adequate funding.”*

Participant 1 continued the discussion of funding by stating, *“This issue regarding the funding piece causes a lot of problems. The federal government needs to reimburse at the rate that they said they would.”* Participant 6 described the idea of eliminating the concept of maintenance of effort to allow districts to design inclusive and cost effective programs. Four respondents stated the need to be included into LCAP because it would help better fund the programs and change the perception of special education. Participant 6 expressed concern over the LCAP by stating, *“Our district doesn’t benefit from the*

*LCAP due to our make-up.*” While eight participants referenced both federal and state funding mechanisms at the same time, Participant 1 stated, *“The ties and policies towards funding to ensure that they provide equity such as Program Improvement or Title One.”*

Participant 2 declared,

The funding structure needs to be changed to eliminate the use of the word encroachment. This needs to be changed because things are changing and mostly we need to discuss about inclusion. Federal and state funding needs to be changed.

The funding theme was consistent with the recommendations made by the California Special Education Task Force (Berman et al, 2015).

***Theme 2: due process.*** Eleven of the 12 respondents mentioned due process as an area requiring change, modification, or regulations eliminated. Six of participants, or 50% of the respondents, directly stated the “parent consent laws” and additional requirements placed on CA special education directors drive decisions by fear of litigation rather than the needs of the child. Five of respondents described the need for change due to the extreme costs of due process impacting the district and the non-student based decisions that occur due to litigation.

Participant 1 expressed her perception of due process by stating, *“The additional extras in California for IDEA such as the parent consent clause on the IEP increase liability and presence of litigations.”* Participant 10 simply responded, *“Most may not agree with me but the parent consent clause in California needs to go.”* Participant 1 explained,

If at the state level, they would remove some of the pressures of litigation that we sometimes use in our decision-making piece. If they felt that we didn't have to give in to parent demands, then we can defend our data and defend the good work that's being done.

Participant 2 stated, *“If we don't have something always hanging over our heads which creates a legal situation in California that would be acceptable in any other state due to the extra parent demands.”* Participant 7 continued the theme with stating,

A key feature in California is the ineffective whole due process system. Due process drives a lot of what we do. Districts act due to fear of litigation and not by what is best for the child. It hampers us from what we should be doing.

Participant 3 explained,

Well, parents decide legal action and maybe if there was a policy where no guarantee of legal costs then if the money part was taken care of due process may not occur as frequently. That would make it fairer for the district and would reduce the motivation for litigation and be a motivator for change.

The sentiment of lawyers driving due process is continued within several participant's comments. Participant 5 explained,

We need to change the due process practice in special education. There needs to be an objective governing body or authority independent of districts and lawyers that are trying to profit from special education to oversee due process. Alternative dispute resolution needs to be more formal. An appointed body of independent decision-makers needs to hear cases and try to mediate them before they go to litigation. It is too easy to profit from special education.

**Theme 3: decision makers.** One-hundred percent of participants made a statement regarding decision-making in special education. Four participants expressed the need to be involved in the decision-making process in their district. Three participants stated the special education director's positions needs to be a cabinet level position. Three participants expressed the need for legislators to consult educators before creating policy. Four participants explained that the legislators and cabinet level positions do not fully understand the function of special education. Participant 1 stated, "*County Superintendent may not be Educators creating and the new policies they may not be based in education and not be benefiting the students.*" Four participants expressed a need for cabinet level members to understand special education and that the budget issues are not all special education's fault. This sentiment resonated in Participant 10s response to the question by stating, "*Too many demands are placed on a school district. They are unrealistic demands and legislators need to have a greater understanding such demands create a disconnect to the classroom.*" Participant 2 explained,

Well, I believe we need to educate the cabinet and the folks who aren't in special education who make decisions about special education. For example one of my cabinet members did not understand why we needed to run preschool programs. They believe all the faults of the budget are on special education.

Another response from Participant 6 captured the sentiment, "*Maybe we need to have a go-between the states and the federal government and the school district. There tends to be a disconnect between the school district and the state.*"



**Theme 4: SELPA guidance.** All 12 directors commented on SELPA governance and structure and the actions needed to improve the implementation of policies. The answers varied from two participants stating that SELPA is no longer necessary. Six others stated that they needed more from SELPA such as training and programmatic guidance. One respondent felt his SELPA did a good job in policy making but needed to focus on more training. Participant 4 expressed,

At the SELPA level as a director, and you're given knowledge of what the SELPA did for you last year. I was not aware of the fiscal side to special education. When the two merged, I could expand my knowledge base. I was able to have more knowledge and determine how to better implement.

Participant 5 stated,

There are two models of SELPAs. One model of multidistrict SELPA does a good job with policy writing but needs to be more hands-on with a professional development system. Those who carry out the policies but don't have the training on the policy causes us to be non-compliant without meaning to. Professional development offerings need to include offerings on policy implementation but they're not as accessible as it needs to be. We need to change and we need to end the interpretation of policy. Our needs to have training to understand and more current on the information.

Participant 7 continued the theme by stating,

The SELPA needs to give more guidance to the directors. There is a need for professional development. We need guidance on private school, medical billing

and mental health. The focus should be more on instructional practices and less on policy making. We need to discontinue the development of policy making.

Another respondent, Participant 7, added to the theme by contrasting a single district SELPA to a multi-district by stating,

The upside to a single district SELPA is our policies are our policies. We have more freedom in implementing programs and policies. In a multidistrict SELPA your hands are tied. Depending on the county services, districts are limited through SELPA such as county services, and mental health services.

Participant 10 proposed the elimination of the SELPA and to have CDE to the compliance monitoring and instructional support.

**RSQ 2:** *What can be done at the teacher practice level to improve the academic achievement of special education students in California?*

**Theme 1: nothing eliminated.** “Nothing Eliminated” refers to array of services on the full continuum available to students and maybe modifying the use and access to these services is needed but not eliminating any service for the service delivery menu. Six participants could not think of anything to be eliminated from teacher practice.

Participant 8 commented,

Nothing eliminated. The full continuum needs to be available. NPS to full inclusion depending on the student’s need. An IEP is individualized. It will just need to be determined how extensive it is with what type of supports and sometimes that is outside supports.

Participant 2 explained, “*What supports need to be modified that is making sure our human resources are trained. Increase training in terms of curriculum and technology. And funding for curriculum and technology.*”

**Theme 2: inclusion.** One-hundred percent of all participants mentioned inclusion and the theme was consistent throughout the respondents. Two main sub-themes on inclusion surfaced throughout the interviews: (a) “all means all students,” and (b) include all teachers. The inclusion theme is consistent with One System Report and finding that two distinct educational systems exist in CA (Berman et al, 2015). Participant 1 described a perceived practice to improve achievement by stating,

This is not what my district is practicing. I think the push-in model where we have co-teaching models with general education and special education specialists who have the expertise and accommodating and modifying is needed. If we could go ahead and have that be the norm, I think you would have huge amounts of students with mild to moderate disabilities being able to learn and achieve at the level of their non-disabled peers.

Participant 8 continued the theme by stating,

The process of remediation as the primary form of instruction slows our students’ progress. Sometimes our students spend way too much time on goals. Rather than focusing on weaknesses, we need to use the supplementary aids and supports with the curriculum and teach the curriculum. We need to get rid of inappropriate curriculum.

Participant 3 explained,

The basis of all students should start in general education. We want exposure to general education and their peers. I don't mean no support if they need to leave the general education setting for support that's fine but they should always start in general education. It'd be best if the support was brought to the general education setting but pull out support for some students is necessary. Teachers need to accommodate and not to marginalize the student but allow them to gain access to the general curriculum.

Five participants explained that teachers need to understand that “all means all students.” Teachers are there for everyone with support from special education, intervention and administration. This is echoed in Participant 8’s response, “*Environmental supports are needed. Our general education teachers need to implement accommodations.*” Participant 4 continued the theme with the statement, “*Teachers need to acknowledge kids as kids first and then they receive the service but are not special education kids.*” Four participants used strong imagery by stating the elimination of segregation policies that exclude our kids. This is resonated in Participant 4’s response, “*Segregation should be gotten rid of and the culture of separate but equal will not change and can't change until we can change the culture.*”

In the second sub-theme of inclusion, comments on the inclusion of special education teachers in trainings, being provided materials and being accepted in the general classroom are presented below.

Participant 4 explains,

District level policies which include special education need to be created and not separate policies for special education. District level general education inclusion of special education is needed instead of training them separately. Train them both together so they can access the curriculum and access all trainings in the district.

Participant 5 stated,

The policy on special education students that are included or segregated needs to be changed. We need to add something about least restrictive environment into policy. We need to impose sanctions. We need to have strong beliefs and behavior and disability with teeth in implementation behind it. There needs to be sanctions.

Participant 5 continued, “*We need to break the culture of separation. Special education has difficulty getting general education to the table.*”

**Theme 3: teacher preparation.** Seventy-five percent of the participants discussed teacher preparation and the need for credentialing programs to be changed to instruct new teachers on teaching all students. Four participants called for a universal credential that authorized teachers to teach both general education and mild to moderate students. This theme is consistent in the One System recommendations from the California Special Education Task Force (Berman et al, 2015). Participant 2 described,

Teacher preparation programs come with one class on special needs and when I started 30 years ago, they had one class on special needs. Administrative programs have very little emphasis on special education. Differentiation and what

it means to have a kid in your class who needs differentiation would be a good place to start to improve teacher practice.

Participant 5 stated, *“What is needed? Well that is a complete overhaul of teacher preparation program in CA. It seems that out of state candidates seem to be better prepared.”* Participant 7 continued the theme by stating, *“Teacher preparation for both general education and special education teachers which infuses them with the philosophy that they are there to teach all learners is needed.”*

**Theme 4: professional development.** One-hundred percent of the participants described the need for ongoing relevant professional development for special education teachers and general education to be trained together. Fifty percent of the participants focused on the need for training general education and special education on supports, interventions, MTSS, common core, universal design and accommodations. The other 50% focused on professional development as improving the skills of special education teachers in accommodating, strategies, behavior, autism, and applied behavioral analysis (ABA) strategies. Participant 5 declared,

Professional development needs to be more accessible to special and general education staff. Professional development needs to be hands-on. You need to walk through and look at classrooms. You need support with the program manager to walk you through the process. We need more hands-on professional development to be able to meet the needs of our teachers and support from the state with instructional professional development.

Additionally, Participant 1 stated,

When it comes to teacher practices, I'm only speaking from my experience as in my district. When it comes to Common Core, general education teachers were given quite a bit of training. Mild moderate teachers were included for some of that training but they were not offered as many trainings as the general education teachers. They were not offered the training to be able to fully understand the curriculum to be able to accommodate or modify the curriculum. There were funds available for training but it was taken up by the general education teachers.

Participant 8 declared,

We need something to provide for greater opportunities for our students to participate in general education. We need access to core educators for training. General education needs more training on disabilities, accommodating, and working with our kids. They feel uncomfortable with our children and they feel they are not qualified to provide instruction.

***Theme 5: CDE compliance monitoring.*** Fifty percent of the participants stated the need for CDE to modify their practice of compliance monitoring and 25% of the participants desired CDE to place a greater emphasis on instructional support given from practitioners. Five participants emphasized not just checking boxes and have CDE limit the number of demands on the district in order to create a more manageable system.

For example, Participant 6 stated,

I think there needs to be a movement away from oversight of the state and more of the movement towards support. CDE needs to focus less on punitive oversight and punishment and employ people who are practitioners that can help and focus

their efforts on instruction. This creates natural compliance which is the intent of the law. There needs to be oversight, supports and experts that can help implement those supports at the district level.

The topic of oversight emerged from the conversation with Participant 3 stating, Another thing at the state level is the technical support or compliance to the district. Right now, it's which box do you check. We need to develop an instructional component to State special education compliance monitoring. It's very important to have support and know the instructional component to the classroom.

**RSQ 3.** *What can be done at the student support level to improve the academic of special education students in California?*

**Theme 1: intervention practices.** Six participants mentioned intervention practices as a need in special education. The following are list of the intervention practices mentioned in the participant's responses: student study team (SST) process, MTSS, learning centers, UDL, interventions and accommodations.

**Theme 2: credentialing.** Credentialing created a theme with 58% of the participants commenting about credentialing and the added authorizations added to the mild-moderate credential. Participant 9 described, "*Credentialing is especially a difficult issue. It is hard to staff and hire with all of the additional authorizations.*" Participant 4 stated, "*It would be good to have a universal credential that both General and Mild moderate credentials are combined so all teachers can teach all students.*" Three participants resonated the idea that additional authorizations are causing problems in providing appropriate services.



## Summary of Findings

In chapter IV, an overview of the study was presented by stating the purpose, the RQ, the methodology, population, and the sample. The instrumentation of the qualitative interview was presented and aligned to the central RQ and sub-questions. The presentation of data and the analysis of the data were described in detail with the prevalent themes described.

RSQ 1 elicited a variety of central themes that were present in not only the level of policy but in the areas of teacher practice and student support. The themes that crossed the levels and demonstrated the intricate relationship between themes were funding, due-process/ litigation, teacher preparation, teacher professional development, inclusion, and decision making.

The main themes for RSQ 1 were funding, due process, decision makers, and SELPA guidance. Funding presented two major sub-themes of state and federal funding. Twenty-five percent of the participants described the need to be included into the LCAP and 75% of participants wanted the federal government to fully fund special education. Due process was stated by 91.6% of participants as an issue with 50% of the participants stating parent consent laws in CA as a theme. Fifty percent of the participants felt SELPA needed to provide more support and instruction on policies (See Table 13).

Table 13

*Responses and Text References and Emergent Themes for RSQ 1*

-	Fully Fund	Due Process	Decision Makers	SELPA Guidance
Participant Responses	91.6%	91.6%	100%	100%
Text references in Participant interviews	40	35	32	12

RSQ 2 elicited a variety of themes: (a) inclusion, (b) teacher preparation, (c) professional development, and (d) CDE compliance monitoring. Inclusion created two distinct sub-themes from the data (a) all means all students, and (b) include all teachers. Seventy-five percent of participants felt that teacher preparation programs needed an overhaul. Twenty-five percent of the participants felt that CDE needed an instructional division and 25% felt that CDE needs to limit demands and focus on meaningful support (see Table 14).

Table 14

*Responses and Text References and Emergent Themes for RSQ 2*

-	Nothing Eliminated	Inclusion	Teacher Prep.	PD	CDE Compliance
Participant Responses	58.3%	100%	75%	100%	50%
Text references in Participant interviews	7	50	18	35	6

RSQ 3 focused on student support. A variety of answers were elicited from this topic. The main themes focused on 1:1 aides, intervention practices, implement “One System” and credentialing. The added authorizations were mentioned by 58% of

participants as a limitation in providing support services. Intervention practices such as PBIS, MTSS, and RTI were described as necessary to fully support students by 58% of the respondents (see Table 15).

Table 15

*Responses and text references and emergent themes for RSQ 3.*

-	Intervention Practices	Credentialed
Participant Responses	50%	58.3%
Text references in Participant interviews	24	8

The data were presented and themes emerged from the data. The themes represent the findings for this qualitative grounded theory study. The major findings will be presented and explained further in Chapter V. Additionally, Chapter V includes conclusions, implications for action, and recommendations for further research.

## CHAPTER V: FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### Summary

The study commenced in Chapter I examining special education globally and in the United States. Access to individual rights is a continued need worldwide.

“Compared to non-disabled persons, people with disabilities are less likely to be in full-time employment; more likely to be unemployed; and significantly more likely to be economically inactive” (United Nations, 2015, p. 1). Globally, special education has moved from an isolated island amongst the mainstream into a system of integrated and leveled supports in the general environment (Cardona, 1997; Lopez-Torrijo & Mengual-Andres, 2014; McMaster, 2014). Chapter I introduced the significance of the study, the research gap and the research questions for the study.

Chapter II literature review of this study included an in-depth examination of the study and employed an emergent-grounded theory methodology. An emergent approach embodied the researcher to focus on the feelings, perceptions and beliefs of the participants as they developed through the research (Fernandez, 2016). The topics of closing the achievement gap, inhabited institutions, loosely coupled organizational systems and special education leadership served as a framework for this study as these concepts directly related to the participants’ perceptions of their world and their viewpoint of their lived experience. Additionally, the literature review included an examination of three levels of special education related to this study, which included: (a) policy level; (b) teacher practice level; and (c) student support level. Related topics to the problem were reviewed. Each level related to this study included an in-depth

examination of literature by concepts and topics pertaining to that level in the synthesis matrix.

The study continued with Chapter III which explained the methodology, population and sample in detail. Chapter IV presented and analyzed the data from the study. The voices of the directors were presented in the data analysis section of Chapter IV for each emergent theme.

This study examined the perspectives of special education directors on the changes needed to improve special education of the levels of policy, teacher practice and student support. The responses were coded for emergent themes, organized and categorized most significant themes by the percentage of the theme that occurred. Chapter V of this dissertation examined the themes and drew conclusions from the themes. The conclusions are the basis of the implications for action and recommendations for further research.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this grounded theory qualitative study was to discover the perceptions of special education directors regarding the changes in special education at the policy level, teacher practice level, and student support level necessary to improve the academic achievement of students with disabilities in CA.

### **Research Question**

This study was guided by the following RQ: *What changes in policy, teacher practice, and student support do California Special Education Directors perceive will improve academic achievement of special education students?*

## **RSQs**

1. What can be done at the policy level to improve the academic achievement of special education students in California?
2. What can be done at the teacher practice level to improve the academic achievement of special education students in California?
3. What can be done at the student support level to improve the academic achievement of special education students in California?

## **Methodology**

The study employed an emerging approach to the grounded theory design. On the premise of theory development, the researcher selected grounded theory. Grounded theory utilizes a homogenous sample of participants with similar backgrounds and experiences to allow for theory development. Approval from the BUIRB was granted on October 6, 2016 and allowed the study to proceed. A purposive sample was required to meet sample requirements for a ground theory study. The researcher received permission from each individual participant to take part in the study. Two special education experts facilitated the creation of the sample. The experts recruited participants for the study based on knowledge of special education, experience, and personal knowledge of their expertise in the field. The researcher contacted each potential participant and made contact by an initial participation email. Individual informed consent forms were collected from each participant, either by email submission or in person depending on the type of interview performed. Interviews were conducted in person and/or over the telephone. Each participant was provided a Brandman University Participants Bill of Rights, signed an informed consent form, and signed an audio release form.

The emerging approach developed by Glaser allowed for the theory to surface and emerge from the data (Darrin, 2016). On the premise of theory development, the researcher employed an emerging approach to the grounded theory design. A homogenous sample of participants, with similar backgrounds and experiences, allowed the researcher to gain a sample of participants with the experiences necessary for theory development. Twelve interviews with District Special Education Directors and/or SELPA Directors were conducted over a three-week period.

### **Population and Sample**

For this study, District Special Education Directors and/or Single District SELPA Directors in CA comprised the population studied. They oversee the general special educational functions for their district which include but not limited to compliance with IDEA, ESSA, AYP, LRE, inclusion, compliance, need for special education, early identification, child find, paraprofessionals in special education, mental health services for special education students, and oversight of all instructional programs for special education students (Balliet, 2010). The sample of special education directors was obtained through the recommendation of the two experts in special education regarding participants that would have the background knowledge to thoroughly answer the research questions.

### **Major Findings**

The following section presents a summary of the key findings that emerged from the literature. The findings resulted from the interview data and are organized by the three research sub-questions.

## Interview Data

**RSQ 1.** *What can be done at the Policy Level to improve the academic achievement of special education students in California?* Four major themes emerged from the policy questions. Director commented on the topics of funding, due process, decision-making, and SELPA governance.

- Funding for special education evolved into a major theme of the research, as 91.6% of the respondents mentioned funding for special education. The answers varied from four participants focusing on the LCAP and seven focusing on Federal funding. Three participants stated that the method that districts look at special education funding; encroachment needs to be changed at the district level.
- Eleven of the 12 respondents cited due process as an area requiring change, modification, or regulations eliminated. Six-participants, or 50% of the respondents, directly stated the “parent consent laws” and additional requirements placed on CA special education directors drive decisions by fear of litigation than the needs of the child. Five respondents described the need for change due to the extreme costs of due process impacting the district and the non-student based decisions that occur due to litigation
- One-hundred percent of the participants made a statement regarding decision-making in special education. Four participants expressed the need to be involved in the decision-making process in their district. Three participants stated the special education director’s positions needs to be a cabinet level position. Three participants expressed the need for legislators to consult



educators before creating policy. Four participants explained that the legislators and cabinet level positions do not fully understand the functions of special education.

- All 12 directors commented on SELPA governance and structure and the actions needed to improve the implementation of policies. The answers varied from two participants stating that SELPA is no longer necessary. Six others stated that they needed more from SELPA such as training and programmatic guidance. One respondent believed his SELPA did a good job in policy making but needed to focus on more training.

**RSQ 2.** *What can be done at the teacher practice level to improve the academic achievement of special education students in California?* Five major themes emerged from the questions on teacher practice. The directors described their perceptions of what happens in their district in teacher practices and the changes needed to improve the academic achievement of special education students. The director's answers divulged five major themes for the teacher practice level: (a) nothing eliminated, (b) inclusion, (c) teacher preparation, (d) professional development, and (e) CDE compliance monitoring.

- Six participants could not think of anything to be eliminated from teacher practice. The Directors perceived all services as important and dependent on the individual needs of the students. The full continuum services and the ability to blend programs were important in meeting the needs of students. However, the directors indicated modifying how services are accessed and implemented at the various levels of restriction is important.

- One-hundred percent of all participants mentioned inclusion and the theme was consistent throughout the respondents. Two main sub-themes on inclusion surfaced throughout the interviews: (a) “all means all students,” and (b) include all teachers. Teachers need to understand that “all means all students.” Teachers are there for everyone with support from special education, intervention to administration. Four participants used strong imagery by stating the elimination of segregation policies that exclude our kids. In the second sub-theme of inclusion, comments on the inclusion of special education teachers in trainings, being provided materials and being accepted in the general classroom were presented.
- Seventy-five percent of the participants discussed teacher preparation and the need for credentialing programs to be changed to instruct new teachers on teaching all students. Four participants called for a universal credential that authorized teachers to teach both general education and mild to moderate students. This theme is consistent in the One System recommendations from the California Special Education Task Force (Berman et al, 2015).
- One-hundred percent of the participants described the need for ongoing relevant professional development for special education teachers and general education to be trained together. Fifty percent of the participants focused on the need for training general education and special education on supports, interventions, MTSS, common core, universal design and accommodations. The other 50% focused on professional development as improving the skills

of special education teachers in accommodating, strategies, behavior, autism, and applied behavioral analysis (ABA) strategies.

- Fifty percent of the participants stated the need for CDE to modify their practice of compliance monitoring. Twenty-five percent of the participants desired CDE to place a greater emphasis on instructional support given from practitioners. Five participants emphasized not just checking boxes and have CDE limit the number of demands on districts to create a more manageable system.

**RSQ 3.** *What can be done at the student support level to improve the Academic achievement of special education students in California?* The student support level elicited the response that supplementary aids and services are dependent on individual needs. Two major themes emerged from this section: (a) interventions, and (b) credentialing.

1. Interventions before assessment for special education were a change that the directors would like to see implemented. The following are list of the intervention practices mentioned in the participant's responses: SST process, MTSS, learning centers, UDL, interventions and accommodations.
2. Credentialing created a theme with 58% of the participants commenting about credentialing and the added authorizations added to the mild-moderate credential. Three participants resonated the idea that additional authorizations are causing problems in providing appropriate services.

## Unexpected Findings

An unexpected finding was the variance of answers between the participants. The major unexpected finding was that special education implementation and needs of the district depend on the culture of that district. Many answers were clarified in the interviews as *this pertains for my district, I can only answer for my district* or *this is not what we do in my district but what I would like to do*. Another unexpected finding was the amount of separation of general education to special education as it pertains to the teachers receiving core materials and being included in core training especially since it is inclusive in the mandate for special education students to have access to the core no matter the setting. Finally, the focus on parent consent laws as an area need change or elimination was unexpected.

## Conclusions

Improving the outcomes of special education students has been the focus of educational reform in the past few years. Understanding the changes needed to improve the academic achievement at the levels of policy, teacher practice and student support can facilitate improvement in special education. Based on the review of the literature, the interviews and the triangulation of the literature to the interview data, the researcher developed the following conclusions:

- Funding for special education is inadequate and the funding structure needs to change to facilitate inclusion of special education staff and students by eliminating the encroachment model.
- It is perceived by directors that the categorical funding of special education separate outside of the LCAP increases encroachment on the general fund and

contributes to the use of separate environments impacting: (a) how classes are funded; and (b) general education teacher staffing ratios and adequate space/seats available for including or returning special education students to general education classrooms.

- The literature (Special Edge, 2016) and the interviews support a revision of the funding model for special education to allow CA to include special education in the LCAP as a mandatory sub-group to foster inclusion of special education at the state level.
- Due process is negatively impacting districts financially and affects program decisions due to the time directors spend in due process.
- The “parent consent laws” and additional CA state statute that exceed federal law drive directors’ decisions based on the fear of litigation rather than the needs of the child.
- Special education directors need to be part of the decision-making process at the district level and included in the development of the LCAP.
- Unify the purpose of SELPAs across the state and standardize the oversight structure of SELPA to serve districts as an instructional support and not a compliance oversight governing body.
- The Directors’ perception of modifying how services are accessed and implemented at the various levels of restriction is important. The full continuum of services and the ability to blend programs are critical in meeting the needs of students. Services and supports should be determined by

individual needs of each student and application of one size fits all services and accommodations should be eliminated.

- General education teachers do not feel they are qualified to teach special education students; the continued overuse of separate environments will continue until the culture changes.
- In some districts, the following areas continue to be a struggle: including special education teachers in professional development activities with general education staff; providing them adopted core curriculum materials; and, special education teachers accepted as a collaborative partner in the general classroom.
- Current teacher preparation programs in CA are not meeting the needs of special education directors for both general and special education candidates.
- Special education teachers need ongoing relevant professional development that includes special education and general education to be trained together-on supports, interventions, MTSS, common core, universal design and accommodations. Special education teachers need additional training in accommodating, strategies, behavior, autism, and applied behavioral analysis strategies.
- Current state compliance monitoring system places too many demands on special education directors and lacks an instructional component for overall improved instructional practices. A system that balances document compliance and provides technical assistance in instructional practices would give districts the support to improve programs.

- Current practicing teachers need additional training on the SST process, MTSS, learning centers, UDL, interventions and accommodations.
- Mild-moderate credential added authorizations limit services to students and cause problems with implementation of services.

### **Implications for Actions**

- Fully fund special education.
- The funding structure for special education funding needs to consider special education students as general education students first and have an additional separate funding structure that fully funds the needed services and supplementary aides and support services.
- During the reauthorization of IDEA discussion regarding the funding mechanism need to occur to ensure that the funding mechanism positively impacts states to provide for local contributions and inclusion at the state level.
- Special Education students need to be included in the LCAP as a significant sub-group population for monitoring and inclusion in supplemental and concentration funds.
- The Special Education community needs to organize itself in a way that both Federal and State legislation can be affected in ways that reflect the findings of this study.
- Create a task force to study the impact of due process on special education in CA and study the impact alternative dispute resolution has had on resolving disputes.

- Modify the parent consent laws in CA to free the districts to implement the offer of free and appropriate public education without mandatory filing due process on the parent.
- Multi-district SELPAs need to work collaboratively with their stakeholders on a yearly basis to determine the priorities of the SELPA for the participating districts to determine if the SELPA is meeting the needs of its districts by disseminating a needs survey that encompasses (a) professional development of administrative positions, (b) professional development of instructional staff, and (c) types of services provided beyond professional development.
- Enhance teacher training programs and administrative programs by including a strand of three to five classes on inclusion of special education for both programs. Administrators as well as general and special education teachers need to know how to collaborative, accommodate, differentiate and support the learning process for all students. For current teachers offer the courses as a certificate in inclusive education or as part of a master's degree.
- Embed an overview of the different disabilities in the mild to moderate program and eliminate the current added authorizations.
- Create a tier-two credential for general education for new teachers and an added authorization for current teachers in inclusion and collaboration which would include a three to five class strand on UDL, MTSS, positive behavioral interventions of support, accommodating, and working collaborative as team to teach all students. Include the three to five classes in the current mild to moderate tier tow credential.



- Develop an instructional support division to CDE compliance monitoring that employs practitioners to support the implementation of IDEA at the instructional level.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

The study's findings suggest the following recommendation to expand further research in improving special education student's academic outcomes:

- Conduct a Delphi Study with a larger population of 40 to 50 directors on the specific actions needed to improve special education at the levels of policy, teacher practice and student support to determine if the findings of this study are consistent.
- Conduct a study to determine the types of professional development opportunities general education and special education teachers need to support classroom instruction, meet the needs of all students, and develop a culture of collaboration that benefits all students.
- Conduct a study from the perspectives of general and special education teachers on the changes needed to improving the academic achievement of special education students.
- Conduct a study on due process and the impact the parent consent laws have on districts in the state of CA.
- Conduct a study on how special educators are currently implementing to close the achievement gap and improve the academic achievement of students in CA.

- Conduct a study which examines the key activities at the district and teacher levels related to the key factors impacting achievement of special education students as identified by Hanover (2014) research for districts achievement the academic achievement target for the students with disabilities sub-group. The factors include emphasis on curriculum aligned with state framework, inclusion, culture of high standards, well-disciplined environments, data-informed decision-making, targeted professional development, access to resources, effective staff recruitment, effective leadership that works dynamically with staff.

### **Concluding Remarks and Reflections**

An immense amount of literature exists regarding special education and the various practices involving special education. Expectations for special education evolve and change due to outcomes in litigation and compliance demands from OSEP and CDE with most recently Indication 17 and SSIP (Berman et al., 2015; CaSBE, 2016, Special Edge, 2016). The literature review in Chapter II directed the study by definite emerging themes which organized the study into the following levels: (a) policy; (b) teacher practice; and, (c) student support. It is important recognize that the literature and interview data both supported a pattern and explanation that policy is closely related to practice with a breakdown in implementation (DeRoche, 2013; T. Hallet, 2007; T. Hallet, 2010). It was important to note the inter-relationship between the levels. Many of the interview themes were repeated in the different levels with some details relevant to the level discussed. Many of the articles reviewed focused on policy and teacher practice.

The interviews on teacher practice and the theme of inclusion divulged the sub-theme of general education teachers perceiving that they are not qualified to teach students with disabilities in their classrooms. Additionally, the interview also stated that directors perceived new special education teachers lacking important skills to implement strategies, differentiation and accommodations in the general classroom. Some articles focused on teacher practice and student support. The topics of inhabited institutions, loosely coupled organizational systems, closing the achievement gap, and special education leadership emerged as important topics to support and explain the problem. The authors discovered that policy loosely aligned with classroom practices and that teacher's depending on their belief systems about teaching may not implement new practices in their classrooms (DeRoche, 2013; T. Hallet, 2007; T. Hallet, 2010). Inhabited institution theory may explain the disconnect teacher's feel in implementing differentiated instruction and accommodating for special education.

Additionally, educational systems are a loosely coupled organization with direction being legislated and direction given to implement the policy without much direction (DeRoche, 2013; T. Hallet, 2007; T. Hallet, 2010). This was echoed in the participant's perceptions of: (a) believing instructional models limit them, (b) legislators impose unrealistic demands which are difficult to implement, and (c) the need to build a culture of inclusion to be able to serve and teach "all students." Directors perceived the compliance monitoring as needed to be changed and an instructional component needed to be implemented improve the implementation of state and federal policies.

This study provided findings and recommendations for the changes needed to improve the academic achievement of special education mild to moderate students on the

levels of policy, teacher practice and student support. The researcher hopes that this study will lead to changes in the legislation of policy to support teacher practice and student support in the classroom. The researcher enjoyed interviewing the participants and appreciates their candor in answering the interview questions. The open and honest answers give validity to the study and hopefully will place this study as unique contribution to the literature on improving special education and educational reform.

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APPENDIX A

Synthesis Matrix

Source	History and Policy	Loosely coupled System & Inhabited institution	Closing the Achievement Gap	Special Education Leadership	Teacher Practice Level	Student Support Level	Method
34 CFR 30034	X				X	X	
34 CFR 30039	X				X	X	
35 th Annual Report (2013)	X				X	X	
Achieve (2015)	X				X	X	
Affeldt (2015)	X						
Andrews, T., (2012)							X
Andrew, Pederson, McEvoy (2011)							X
ARC. (2015)	X				X		
Armstrong (2004)	X				X		
Aronson (2002)			X				
Atlas (2014)	X						
Bascia& Rottman (2011)	X		X				
Baylis (2011)						X	
Beaton, M. C., & Black-Hawkins, K. (2014).	X				X		
Berg & Wehby (2011)					X		
Berbaum, K. A. (2009)					X	X	
Berman et al (2015)	X			X	X	X	
Billig (2005)			X				
Blake (2016)					X		
Bodily et al (2015)	X				X		
Bottage et al.					X		

(2015)							
Booth, T., & Ainscow, M. (2011)					X		
Bouck, E. C. (2009)					X		
Braaten, B., & et al. (1992)					X		
Browning Wright, D. (2003)					X	X	
Browning Wright, D. (2003)					X	X	
Bradley, M. et al. (2011)	X						
Burns, E. (2004)					X		
Bussing, R (1998)					X		
CDE (2014)	X						
CDE (2014)	X						
CDE (2011)	X						
CDE. (2015)	X						
CDE. (2016)	X						
CaSBE(2016)	X						
CalState LA (2016)					X		
Ca PTA (2014)	X						
Cardona, C. (1997)				X	X	X	
Carmeli, A., et al . (June 2014)							
Casale-Giannola, D. (2012).				X	X	X	
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Chalmers, L., & Faliede, T. (1996).				X	X	X	
Children Now. (2014).	X						
Clarke, S. (1993).					X	X	
Coburn, C. E. (2004).		X			X		
Coburn, C. E., & Russell, J. L. (2008).		X					
Combs, S., Elliott, S., & Whipple, K. (2010).					X	X	
Cook, L., & Friend, M. (1995).				X	X	X	
Colker, R. (2013).	X			X	X		
Corbett, J. (2001).				X	X	X	
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Cramer, E. (2015).				X	X	X	
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Creswell, J.W. (2008).							X
Crockett, J., & Kauffman, J. (1999).	X			X	X		
Cook, B., Laandrum, M. & Tankersley, M., (2012)				X	X	X	
Cumings Mansfield, K., & Thachik, S... (2016).			X				
DeRoche, C. (2013).		X		X	X	X	

Dessemontet, R. S., & Bless, G. (2013).				X	X	X	
DeVore, S., Miolo, G., & Hader, J. (2011)					X	X	
Dev, P., & Haynes, L. (2015).	X			X	X	X	
DiBiasio, D. A., & Ecker, G. (1982).		X					
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Disability & poverty (2015)	X						
Dobson, E. & Gifford- Bryan, J. (2014)					X	X	
Doktor, J. (2010)					X	X	
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Eagleton, M. (2015).					X		
Education Development Center, (2001).				X	X	X	
Edwards, B., Barondess, H., Perry, M., Leichty, J., & EdSource. (2009).	X			X	X	X	
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ESSA. (2015).	X						

Everitt, J. G. (2012).				X	X		
Executive Office of the President (2015).	X						
Farrell, M. (2003).					X		
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Friend, M. (2007)					X		
Friend, M. (2015)					X	X	
Friend, M., Cook, L., Hurley-Chamberlain, D., & Shamberger, C. (2010).					X	X	
Friend, M., & Reising, M. (1993).				X	X	X	
Fuchs, D., Fuchs, L. S., & Stecker, P. M. (2010).				X	X	X	
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Hurt, J. M. (2012).					X		
IDEA (2004)	X						
IDEA. (34 C.F.R. § 300.226(b). (2004).	X						
IDEA Part B. (2004).	X						
Illinois Univ, (1995).					X	X	
Jackson, L. B., Ryndak, D. L., & Wehmeyer, M. L. (2008).					X	X	
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Knowles, M.S., Holton, E.F., & Swanson, R.A. (2011).					X		
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McMillan, J. H., & Schumacher, S. (2010).							X
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Morningstar, M. E., Shogren, K. A., Lee, H., & Born, K. (2015).					X	X	
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Muller, E., & Burdette, P. (2007).							
Muller, E., Burdette, P., & National Association of State Directors							

of Special Education (NASD SE), P. F. (2007).							
Muller, E., Friend, M., Hurley-Chamberlain, D., & National Association of State Directors of Special Education, P. F. (2009).							
Murawski, W. A. W., & Swanson, H. L. (2001).					X	X	
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Murphy, C., Carlisle, K., & Beggs, J. (2009).					X	X	
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National Association of State Directors of Special Education, A. V. A. (1998).	X						
National Center for Education, S. (2013).	X						
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New Editions Consulting, I., & Office of Special Education and	X						

Rehabilitative, S. (2014).							
Newman, I., & Benz, C. (1998)							X
New Jersey (2015)				X	X	X	
Nichols, J., Dowdy, A., & Nichols, C. (2010).	X				X		
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Noble, H. & Smith, J. (2015)							X
Norwich, B. (2014).	X						
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Patten, M.L. (2012).							X
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PENT (2016)					X	X	
Phillips, K. (2015).					X		
Pickens, J. L. j. i. e., & Dymond, S. K. (2014).				X	X		

Pierson, M. R., & Howell, E. J. (2013).					X		
Purcell, S. L., & Grant, D. (2002).						X	
Rainforth, B., Allegheny-Singer Research Inst, P. P. A., & Consortium on Inclusive Schooling Practices, A. V. A. (1996)					X		
Richardson, J. G., & Powell, J. W. (2011).					X		
Riddell, S., & Weedon, E. (2014a).	X				X		
Riddell, S., & Weedon, E. (2014b).	X				X		
Roberts, C. M. (2010).							X
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Salend, S., & Duhaney, L. (1999).					X	X	
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Samuels, C. A. (2015).					X		
Scanlan, M. (2009).							
Schmoker, M. (2006).					X	X	
Shah, N. (2011).	X				X		
Shogren, K. A., Gross, J. S., Forber-Pratt, A. J., Francis, G. L., Satter, A. L., Blue-Banning, M., & Hill, C. (2015).					X		
Smith, R. (2014).	X						
Snyder, T. D., Dillow, S. A., & National Center for Education, S. (2013).	X						
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Spillane, J. (2015).				X			
Sprague, J., (2012)					X	X	
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Strogilos, V., & Stefanidis, A. (2015).	X				X		
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Thompson, S., Thurlow, M., Whetstone, P., & National Center on Educational Outcomes, (2001).					X		
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Thompson, S., Morse, A., Sharpe, M., & Hill, S. (2005)	X				X		
Thorius, K., & Simon, M. (2014).					X	X	
Thurston, M. (2014).						X	
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United Nations (1994).	X						
United Nations (2015).	X						
UNICEF (2013)	X						
U.S. Department of Education. (2014).	X						



U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education. (2002).	X						
U.S. Department of Justice (2014)	X						
Vaughn, S., Moody, S. W., & Schumm, J. S. (1998).					X	X	
Vaughn, S., & Thompson, T., (2003)					X	X	
Vernotica, G., et. al...	X			X	X	X	
Verstegen, D. A. (2015a).			X				
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Villa, R. (2013).				X	X		
Villa, R., & Thousand, J. (2011).				X	X		
Villa, R., Thousand, J., & Nevin, A. (2013).				X	X		
Wade, S. E. (Ed.). (2000).					X		
Wagner, S. J. (2014).	X				X		
Walsh, J. (2012).					X		
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Ware, J. (2014).	X						
Washut Heck, T. &					X		

Bacharach, N. (2010).							
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Weick, K. E. (1976).		X	X				
Weiss, M. P. (2002).					X	X	
Welch-Ross, M. K., & National Research, C. (2010).			X				
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WHO (2015).	X						
Williams, B. (1996).			X				
Wilson, C. H., & Weston, M. S. (2010)			X			X	
Wixom, M. A., & Education Commission of the, S. (2015).			X				
Wright, P. & Wright, P. (2016)	X						
Zentell, S. (2014)	X			X	X	X	

## APPENDIX B

### **Invitation to Participate in the Research Expert Panel**

**STUDY:** Improving Special Education Outcomes through Policy, Teacher Practice, and Student Support: A Qualitative Study.

Dear Potential Expert Panelist:

This letter is to invite you to participate in a grounded theory case study qualitative research study as a professional expert. My name is Barbara Wolford, and I am a doctoral candidate in the Organizational Leadership Doctoral program at Brandman University. I am currently conducting research under the supervision of Dr. Phillip Pendley on improving special education to improve academic achievement of students with mild to moderate disabilities.

#### **What is the purpose of this research study?**

The purpose of this qualitative grounded theory case study is to discover the opinions of special education directors to improve special education at the policy level, teacher practice level, and instructional support level to improve the academic achievement of students with mild to moderate disabilities in California.

#### **What will your involvement in this study mean?**

Participating as the professional expert involves discussing, reviewing and developing the research questions and pilot test. The process of involving experts helps to minimize researcher bias and helps protect the safety of the research participants. I would like you to review and scrutinize the interview questions and provide feedback on improving the questions. Upon the completion of a pilot test, I will share the results with you and ask for feedback after reviewing the data to ensure the reliability and validity of the instrument.

While participating in this study is completing voluntary, there may be minimal risks involved to the participants. Your participation as the expert in the field will minimize these risks.

If you have any questions regarding this qualitative grounded theory case study, please do not hesitate to call me at (951) 532-6725 or by email at [bwolford@mail.brandman.edu](mailto:bwolford@mail.brandman.edu). You can also contact Dr. Phillip Pendley at [pendley@brandman.edu](mailto:pendley@brandman.edu).

Thank You for your consideration and assistance in this grounded theory case study.

Sincerely,

Barbara Wolford

## APPENDIX C

### **Email of Invitation and Qualifications**

Investigator: Barbara Wolford, doctoral candidate (Brandman University)

Population: Special Education Directors in Southern, Northern, and Central California

Purpose: Identify participants of the study

Sender: bwolford@ mail. brandman.edu

Subject Line: Special Education Director Experts needed for doctoral research study

Message:

Hello Directors,

My name is Barbara Wolford and I am a doctoral candidate for Brandman University. As a fellow special education director, I am seeking to discover ways to improve the academic achievement of students with mild to moderate disabilities. The purpose of this qualitative grounded theory case study is to discover the opinions of special education directors to improve special education at the policy level, teacher practice level, and instructional support level to improve the academic achievement of students with mild to moderate disabilities in California.

I would like to invite you to contribute in this study by participating in a 20 to 30 minute interview to gather your opinions on policy, teacher practice and instructional support for students with mild to moderate disabilities. If you agree to participate, you can be assured that all measures will be taken to ensure your confidentiality. The following measure will be taken:

- (1) Interview information will be completely confidential.
- (2) Numbers or pseudonyms will be used to identify participants
- (3) Data will not reference your school, District, or your name.
- (4) All information will be secured in locked file cabinet.

You are encouraged to engage in the study by asking questions at any time to understand the study. Additionally, you have the right to refuse to answer a question, stop answering a question or withdraw your participation in the study at any time.

To participate in this study you must meet all of the following criteria:

7. Have worked in special education as a teacher, speech and language pathologist, school psychologist or counselor for at least five years before going into administration
8. Have been a special education director for at least three years

9. Have a total of ten years in special education
10. Have experience in working with students with mild to moderate disabilities
11. Currently working as a special education director in a school district
12. Participant has participated in policy making activities at the local SELPA or State level.

I appreciate your time and consideration in participating in my research study. Please do not hesitate to contact me further at [bwolford@mail.brandman.edu](mailto:bwolford@mail.brandman.edu) or by phone at (951) 532-6725. You may also write or call the Office of the Vice Chancellor Academic Affairs, Brandman University, 16355 Laguna Canyon Road, Irvine, CA 92618 Telephone (949) 341-7641.

Thank You for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Barbara Wolford

## APPENDIX D

### Informed Consent Form

**DATE:** 07/01/2016

Page 1 of 2

**INFORMATION ABOUT:** Improving Special Education Outcomes through Policy, Teacher Practice, and Instructional Support: A Qualitative Study. –

**RESPONSIBLE INVESTIGATOR:** Barbara Wolford, M.S.

**PURPOSE OF STUDY:** The purpose of this qualitative grounded theory case study is to discover the opinions of special education directors to improve special education at the policy level, teacher practice level, and instructional support level to improve the academic achievement of students with mild to moderate disabilities in California.

This study will fill in the gap in the research regarding the actions necessary to facilitate improvement in policies, teacher practice and instructional supports to increase academic achievement for students with mild to moderate disabilities. The results of this study may assist legislators, directors and superintendents in improving the academic outcomes for students with mild to moderate disabilities by implementing the recommendations from the study.

By participating in this study, I agree to participate in an individual interview either by phone, in person or through an online conference room. The individual interview will last between 20 to 30 minutes. About 21 directors across the state of California will be interviewed for this study. Interviews will take place in August and September 2016.

I understand that:

- a) There are minimal risks associated with participating in this research
  - i. I understand that the investigator will protect my confidentiality by storing any research material collected in the interview process in a locked file drawer.
- b) The possible benefit of this study is that my input may help inform policy and improve special education at the levels of policy, practice and support.
- c) I understand that I will not be compensated for my participation in this study.
- d) Barbara Wolford will answer any question regarding my participation in this study. She can be contacted by phone at (951) 532-6725 or by email at [bwolford@mail.brandman.edu](mailto:bwolford@mail.brandman.edu).
- e) Person with access to the recordings. The recording will be used to ensure the interviews are transcribed accurately and that all information was captured. On completion of the study, the researchers will shred and destroy all transcripts and notes appropriately.

Participating in this research study is voluntary. I understand that I may refuse to participate in or I may withdraw from this study at any time without any negative consequences. Also, the investigator may stop the study at any time. I also understand that no information that identifies me will be released without my separate consent and that all identifiable information will be protected to the limits allowed by law. If the study design or the use of the data is to be changed, I will be so informed and my consent obtained. I understand that if I have any questions, comments, or concerns about the study or the informed consent process, I may write or call the Office of the Vice Chancellor Academic Affairs, Brandman University, 16355 Laguna Canyon Road, Irvine, CA 92618 Telephone (949) 341-7641. I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this form and the Research participant's Bill of Rights.

I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this form and the research participant's Bill of Rights. I have read and understand the above and consent to the procedures set forth.

---

Signature of Participant

---

Date

---

Signature of the Principal Investigator

---

Date

## APENDIX E

### Participant's Bill of Rights



#### BRANDMAN UNIVERSITY INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

##### Research Participant's Bill of Rights

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

1. To be told what the study is attempting to discover.
2. To be told what will happen in the study and whether any of the procedures, drugs or devices are different from what would be used in standard practice.
3. To be told about the risks, side effects or discomforts of the things that may happen to him/her.
4. To be told if he/she can expect any benefit from participating and, if so, what the benefits might be.
5. To be told what other choices he/she has and how they may be better or worse than being in the study.
6. To be allowed to ask any questions concerning the study both before agreeing to be involved and during the course of the study.
7. To be told what sort of medical treatment is available if any complications arise.
8. To refuse to participate at all before or after the study is started without any adverse effects.
9. To receive a copy of the signed and dated consent form.
10. To be free of pressures when considering whether he/she wishes to agree to be in the study.

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



APPENDIX F

**Audio or Video Release**

I hereby grant Barbara Wolford the right and permission to use audio tape and/or video record me for the purpose of the research project. I understand and agree that the recordings will be used for the sole purpose of collecting accurate data of the research study.

I understand that my identity will be kept confidential and all my individual rights regarding the Bill of Participant's Rights will be adhered to and kept confidential. The recordings will be kept in a locked cabinet for three years and destroyed after that time frame.

Participating in this research study is voluntary. I understand that I may refuse to participate in or I may withdraw from this study at any time without any negative consequences. Also, the investigator may stop the study at any time. I also understand that no information that identifies me will be released without my separate consent and that all identifiable information will be protected to the limits allowed by law. If the study design or the use of the data is to be changed, I will be so informed and my consent obtained. I understand that if I have any questions, comments, or concerns about the study or the informed consent process, I may write or call the Office of the Vice Chancellor Academic Affairs, Brandman University, 16355 Laguna Canyon Road, Irvine, CA 92618 Telephone (949) 341-7641. I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this form and the Research participant's Bill of Rights.

I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this form and the research participant's Bill of Rights. I have read and understand the above and consent to the procedures set forth.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of the Principal Investigator

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## APPENDIX G

### Interview Questions

#### **Research Questions**

1. What can be done at the policy level to improve the academic achievement of special education students in California?
2. What can be done at the teacher practice level to improve the academic achievement of special education students in California?
3. What can be done at the student support level to improve the academic achievement of special education students in California?

#### **Questions:**

##### **Background**

1. Can you tell me a little bit about yourself?
2. What is your background in special education?

##### **Research Question 1**

3. What existing policies do you believe should be changed to improve special education in California?
4. What new policies do you believe should be implemented to improve special education in California?
5. What actions need to be taken to improve policies at the federal level?
6. What actions need to be taken to improve policies at the state level?
7. What actions need to be taken to improve implementation of Federal and State policies at the SELPA level?
8. What actions need to be taken to improve implementation of Federal and State policies at the District level?

##### **Research Question 2**

9. What new teacher practices should be implemented to improve the achievement of special education students in California?
10. What teacher practices should be eliminated or modified to improve the achievement of special education students in California?
11. What actions need to be taken at the state level to improve teacher practices?
12. What actions need to be taken at the district level to improve teacher practices?

##### **Research Question 3**

13. What new teacher practices should be implemented to improve the achievement of special education students in California?
14. What teacher practices should be eliminated or modified to improve the achievement of special education students in California?
15. What actions need to be taken at the state level to improve student support in the classroom?

16. What actions need to be taken at the district level to improve student support in the classroom?