PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP AND TRUST WITHIN THE IEP PLANNING PROCESS

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A Capstone Project

Presented to the Faculty of the School of Education and Human Development

University of Virginia

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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By

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Principal Leadership and Trust Within the IEP Planning Process

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APPROVAL OF CAPSTONE PROJECT

This capstone project, "Principal Leadership and Trust Within the IEP Planning Process," has

been approved by the Graduate Faculty of the School of Education and Human Development in

partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education.

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Capstone Committee Member (Michelle Beavers, Ed.D.)

Dedication

My best love, Ethan.

You are braver than you believe,

stronger than you seem,

and smarter than you think.

~ A.A. Milne

Once upon a time…

a teacher in special education and art and…

a reading teacher, who held a Doctorate in Education, …

told their little girl that one day she too could grow up to earn her Doctorate…

and she did.

I miss you both so very much.

I know that G~d will not give me anything I can't handle.

I just wish he didn't trust me so much.

~ Mother Teresa of Calcutta

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Abstract

This study addresses trust between principals and parents of students with disabilities specifically within the context of special education Individualized Education Program (IEP) planning and implementation, particularly the influence of the legal requirements of Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004). Existing research often focuses on parental involvement for typically developing students, overlooking the unique dynamics and legal requirements involved in special education. To address this gap, this study uses a conceptual framework combining relational trust (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 1998; Bryk & Schneider, 2003) and a strategic alliance framework (Das & Teng, 2004) to examine factors influencing trust in the principal-parent dyad. The purpose of this explanatory case study is to identify and analyze factors affecting the development of trust between principals and parents of students with disabilities during the educational planning and implementation process. The method applied was a qualitative study, relying on semi-structured interviews with three school leaders, three special education teachers, two general education teachers, and a district parent liaison. The analysis involved thematic coding based on the conceptual framework to identify patterns and themes in the data. High level results revealed that principals' commitment to a positive, transparent, and accountable climate coupled with dedication to implementing the IEP with fidelity fosters empathetic communication and active listening, supporting parental engagement. Principals' mastery of special education requirements equips principals to guide parents through complex materials, articulate decisions clearly, and problem-solve more resourcefully. Effective communication, shared decision-making, and collaboration strengthen trust, and increase the likelihood for trust with parents of students with disabilities cultivating meaningful parental engagement.

Chapter 1

The benefits of parental involvement in the education of their children are widely agreed upon and undisputed in the literature. A significant body of research has examined the necessary elements to build trust and involve parents as part of the general school population (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015; Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 1999). However, this work largely applies to typically developing students. The role of trust in the relationship between principals and parents of students with disabilities during the educational planning and implementation for a student with a disability has additional, influencing dimensions because of the student's disability, their individual needs, and the requirements of the authorizing legislation. As a result, the role of trust between the principal and the parent of a student with a disability during the mandated educational planning and implementation process is far less understood and lacking in the literature.

In the United States, public schools are required to provide special education services to students who have an identified disability that interferes with their ability to access the general education curriculum (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA], 20 U.S.C. §1400 et seq.; 34 C.F.R. Part 300, 2004). While there are many mandated steps to planning and providing these services, the primary document for assessing, identifying, negotiating, and documenting needed services for the individual student is the Individual Education Program (IEP) (IDEA 20 U.S.C. §1414(d); 34 C.F.R. § 300.320, 2004). The IEP addresses individual students' needs, how and where (the educational setting) students will be educated, and what services will be required to facilitate students' attainment of the stated goals and objectives. The IEP is developed annually by a team of stakeholders, all of whom are expected to collaborate during the educational planning process: parents, advocates, education professionals, and sometimes, as

appropriate, students. If a district does not implement the special education services outlined in the IEP, or insufficiently document a student's progress, it risks legal, compliance, and reputational challenges (Zirkel, 2020). This integrated requirement creates a legally interdependent dynamic between the principal and the parents of students with disabilities that is specifically unique and distinct from that of parents of typically developing students. While principals generally aim to foster strong, positive relationships with all parents of students in their schools, their interactions with parents of students with disabilities often requires additional collaboration, legal consideration, and negotiation advocacy efforts to ensure inclusive and supportive educational environments.

Due to this IEP development and implementation process, examining trust in the relationship between principals and parents is particularly important for students with disabilities. For these students, parental involvement has been found to contribute to the emotional development and behavior of their child, advancement of their social skills, educational and developmental growth, and overall well-being (Leiter & Krauss, 2004). Similar results have been found in the research of Flores de Apodaca et al. (2015) and Bariroh (2018) however, these findings focused more on parents' advocacy for their students, the need for effective communication, and the parental need to have greater knowledge of special education processes.

The role of parents in this context extends beyond the general support provided by parents of typically developing students. Parents of students with disabilities are essential collaborators in the educational process. Their contributions are not merely supplemental; they are legally mandated and inextricably linked to the student's success (Burke, 2013). This

spotlights the necessity of examining how principal leadership can either enhance or hinder the essential contributions of parents in the educational planning of their student with disabilities.

The most significant difference in the research, between the parent involvement for students with disabilities and that for typically developing students, is in the specificity of the parent role. The research cited focused primarily on parents of typically developing students which highlighted the work of parents to enhance the overall academic and motivational outcomes, providing a supportive home-based environment with an emphasis on universal strategies for improving school engagement and performance, with minimal focus on the home-school communication. In contrast, research focusing primarily on parent involvement for students with disabilities emphasized the crucial role of parents in securing accommodations, navigating the IEP process, and advocating for collaboration with schools. Parents often face challenges related to the barriers posed by the disability itself or the lack of access to necessary services for their children. Additionally, they must possess a solid understanding of special education laws and processes. Since parents serve as intermediaries in the educational planning for their children under special education regulations, and principals are responsible for ensuring compliance with these rules—such as fostering parental involvement and implementing the supplementary aids, services, and program modifications outlined by the IEP team—it is vital to examine the role of principal leadership. Principals play a critical role in shaping the student's experience within the education system.

Problem of Practice

The relationship between principals and parents of students with disabilities is significantly different from the relationship between principals and parents of typically developing children. The development and practical implementation of the IEP is a personalized,

legally bound process, where the parent is designated an equal team member (Yell et al., 2020).

For students with disabilities, collaboration of parents with school leaders is essential for

educational success. Failure to secure proper supports and services may result in hindered

educational progress for students with disabilities and regression of students' skills, behaviors,

and abilities previously attained (Burke, 2013). Identifying and acknowledging factors that may

impact trust between the principal and parents of students with disabilities is fundamental to

developing, implementing, and maintaining the effective collaboration necessary for the

educational planning and implementation for these students' goals and services.

However, principals may be unaware of the core factors that affect trust within this

relationship, which may have consequences for the provision of educational support and

outcomes for students with disabilities. The recognition that the role of parents of students with

disabilities is distinctly different within the educational context is seminal when considering

strategies to engender trust (Wellner, 2012). Trust is essential and requires a strong foundation

on which to build effective communication and collaboration, ensure alignment of goals and

resources, and manage goals and expectations. Absent trust, the entire IEP development and

implementation process becomes challenging, impacting not only planning and implementation

but most importantly the student (Learning Policy Institute, 2020).

Preview of the Literature Review

This literature preview begins with an overview exploring trust and the potential impact

of contextual factors such as parents, school, and legislation. It then examines contextual factors

that could impact the quality of trust in the principal-parent dyad. Lastly, the review combines

components of the Das and Teng (2004) theory of strategic alliance risk-based views on trust

along with the relational trust framework of Tschannen-Moran (2014) and Tschannen-Moran and

Hoy (1998) to form the basis from which to understand how the demands of meeting legal IEP requirements and implementation while also fostering meaningful relationships with families may be affected by competing factors within the principal's role. This duality creates a tension between the relational and regulatory/contractual aspects of trust within the IEP process.

To identify and understand factors that may impact trust between school principals and parents of students with disabilities during the IEP educational planning process, trust frameworks focused on both the educational setting and strategic alliances were examined in the literature. Specific attention was paid to how the framework based in educational settings considered parents and the school, and how strategic alliance framework informed the dynamics between the parents and the school regarding the IDEA (2004) legal requirements.

Trust in the relationship between principals and parents of students with disabilities may be impacted by the legal requirements of special education. Requirements such as the involvement of parent as an equal partner (IDEA, 34 C.F.R. §300.322, 2004), procedural safeguards and timelines (IDEA, 34 C.F.R. §300.503, 2004), and the content, decision making process, and implementation of the student's IEP (IDEA, 20 U.S.C. §1414(d)(1)(A), 2004) are binding with legal consequence and thus could influence trust between the principal and the parents of a student with a disability. Due to the contractual nature of the mandated educational planning process, the strategic alliance framework of Das and Teng (2004) stems from the business dynamics of gains and losses. This framework was selected to inform the influential factors in a contractually based trust relationship, and how the compounded experience of trust over time affects trust between two parties.

Along with Das and Teng's (2004) strategic alliance framework, the research of Tschannen-Moran (2014), Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (1998) and Bryk and Schneider (2003) on

relational trust were investigated to understand the needs, goals, and conditions toward building

trust within an educational setting. Elements of these trust frameworks were synthesized to help

form the conceptual framework through which this study is interpreted.

There are many factors that may influence parental involvement during the educational

planning process. Given the unique dynamics between principals and parents of students with

disabilities in the context of this study, the next section introduces relevant, contextual concepts

affecting trust that are discussed throughout the literature review specifically, parent-related,

school-related, and the influence of the legislation.

Defining Trust

The role of trust has been widely examined as a primary factor toward engaging the

parent community and fostering relationship building in educational environments (Bryk &

Schneider, 2003; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015; Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 1999). While the

definitions of trust vary across the literature, dependent on context (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy,

1998), there are central themes that emerge when operationalizing the term. Interdependence

between two entities is a key factor when defining trust. Researchers agree that trust is

foundational to a myriad of positive or successful dyads between individuals, groups, and

organizations (Das & Teng, 1998, Forsyth et al., 2011). For the purposes of this study, trust will

be referred to as a) trust that exists between two people (an interpersonal relationship) and b)

trust established in an organization (organizational trust). Across both relationships, there is a

level of vulnerability and interdependence (Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 1999; Tschannen-Moran

& Hoy, 1998), an essential component when defining trust.

Parent-related Factors. Parent-related factors consist of a set of socio-political factors – such as the parents' years of education and their socioeconomic condition. For example, Lee and Bowen (2006) found that parents with higher education are more likely to be present in meetings or activities organized by the school, which may impact their comfort with navigating the educational environment and communication with principals. Additionally, these parents have been found to have increased communication with their children on topics such as education, tend to dedicate more effort to increase the academic success rates of their children, and are more likely to understand the educational processes and nomenclature involved in the implementation of special education (Lasater, 2016). In contrast, parents with limited education participated less in the educational process of their children and reported feelings of being overwhelmed and lacking self-confidence to communicate effectively with the school principals and the educators (Barnard, 2003; Leiter & Krauss, 2004).

Parents' level of education also plays a role in their interaction with various school related activities such as homework engagement. Parents with limited education may not be able to help their children with academic assignments or other school-related matters since their knowledge base is limited and may have difficulty effectively participating in educational planning (Jafarov, 2015). Alternatively, parents with a university degree reported having limited time for actively engaging in their children's school life and communicating with school administration and principals (Lee & Bowen, 2006). This suggests that parental education is a significant factor in students' education and warrants further examination.

School-related Factors. School related factors, such as the school climate fostered by leadership, mutual perceptions among stakeholders, and the school's commitment to ensuring content is understandable to parents, significantly impact parent involvement. Effective

leadership fosters a climate that supports relationships, develops trust and ensures accessibility for all members of the school community (Leithwood & Louis, 2012). Effective leaders provide a clear vision and direction that aligns the school's goals with the needs of all students, inclusive of those with disabilities, and this vision should include promoting inclusivity and equity as core values.

Tschannen-Moran and Gareis' (2015) focus on trust within the school setting, and how principals build trust to cultivate vibrant school communities; principals are central to building trust, and their leadership practices directly influence the school climate. For students with disabilities, effective principal leadership positively influences teacher attitudes and nearly all key facets of special education teachers' working conditions during the implementation of inclusive education (DiPaolo et al., 2004). In this context, climate directly relates to the conditions that could foster partnerships between the school and parents of students with disabilities.

Research on educator perceptions of parent participation in the educational planning process is limited; however, existing studies suggest that teachers generally acknowledge the importance of collaborating with parents (Zeitlin & Curcic, 2013). Conversely, a significant body of research indicates that parents often feel they are not full participants in the educational planning process and that the school is not committed to ensuring parents understand the necessary information about their child's assessment and the educational planning process to participate actively (Zeitlin & Curcic, 2013). Teachers view parents as an important source of information for the student, however, that does not equate to productive collaboration (Prunty et al., 2012).

Another school-related factor influencing parental involvement for parents of students with disabilities is the terminology and technical language used during the educational planning and implementation process, and the school's commitment to ensuring that parents understand the necessary information about their student's assessment and the educational planning and implementation process to actively participate. Even without language barriers, educator attitudes can affect the level of parental involvement in the educational process and their interactions with school principals (Broomhead, 2013; Leiter & Krauss, 2004).

Research indicates that parents of students with disabilities are more likely to get involved when they trust the attitudes of the school personnel and principal, because parents want to trust the educational setting of their child and to be trusted in return (Deal & Peterson, 2016, Mapp, 2003). Research in education indicates that a positive and supportive learning environment also significantly influences parents' decisions to engage (Deal & Peterson, 2016).

Influence of Legislation. Legislative factors define the rules for parental engagement in the educational planning process for students with disabilities (Yell et al., 2020). Federal special education funding is allocated based on a legislative formula that calculated on base funding, population, and poverty levels (IDEA, 20 U.S.C. § 1411, 2004). Is distinct from other educational funding because it guarantees an individual entitlement for students with disabilities. In this circumstance, the IEP serves as a formal agreement between the educational service providers and parents, acting on behalf of the student with a disability. The IEP outlines the student's needs, annual goals, the educational setting in which they should be served, and the necessary support services, such as speech therapy or special education contact hours, to help the student achieve their goals (Yell et al, 2020). The IEP documents represent a collaborative plan and define the school's commitment to providing the agree upon services (Yell et al., 2020).

Summary

Research has shown that increased parental involvement is associated with improved academic performance of students with disabilities (Broomhead, 2013). Despite the benefits, challenges persist in establishing and maintaining the school-parent relationship (Bryk & Schneider, 2003). Trust is essential in the educational planning process highlighting the need for principals to have the ability to actively build connections with parents and foster trust to increase parent participation during the IEP process (Lasater, 2016, Zeitlin & Curcic, 2013). The research shows some parents reported feeling overwhelmed by engaging with the school (Leiter & Krauss, 2004) and lack the confidence and understanding of educational jargon which hinders their ability to participate effectively (Zeitlin & Curcic, 2013). Therefore, it is crucial to examine how educational administration can foster improved relationships with parents during the IEP planning and implementation process to improve educational outcomes for students with disabilities.

Study Context

While research demonstrates that parental involvement positively impacts student educational outcomes, and despite legal mandates emphasizing parental participation, outcome disparities persist for students with disabilities. This study focused on special education, examining the factors that influence trust during engagements between principals and parents of students with disabilities within the IEP planning and implementation process.

This principal parent relationship differs from that of parents with typically developing students due to the unique legal requirements, personalized nature of the IEP, and the specific needs of the student (IDEA, 20 U.S.C. §1400 et seq.; 34 C.F.R. Part 300, 2004). By expanding our understanding of the factors within a principal's control that foster trust with parents of

student with disabilities, we can enable researchers and practitioners to refine their understanding of this interdependent relationship and develop more effective leadership practices. Specifically, this study explored how a principal's leadership can shape the school climate to build trust and foster positive relationships (Leithwood & Louis, 2012), and how this impacts the parental involvement for parents of students with disabilities.

This study was conducted as a case study of three school leaders in a single district. It examined the principal practices of three school principals recognized for their commitment to and ability in building trust with parents of students with disabilities during the educational planning and implementation process. The district, considered medium-sized in its state, has almost 13 percent of its student population identified as students with disabilities. The findings from this case study informed the development of a professional development proposal designed to equip principals, teachers, staff, and stakeholders with pragmatic tools and practical applications to foster stronger, more trusting relationships with parents of students with disabilities in this context (Appendix H). The study acknowledged that parents are an integral role to the educational planning of their students, as they act as intermediaries and advocates when navigating special education. Further, this study acknowledged principal leadership can significantly impact a student's experience, especially given the parent's role in educational planning under the special education rules. The goal of the professional development sessions is to facilitate the collaborative partnership and understanding necessary to ensure delivery of needed student services to improve student outcomes for students with disabilities, as trust is essential to this process.

Research Questions

In this study, I explored three targeted questions:

1. In what ways, if any, do principals in three schools characterize trust as an element in promoting parental engagement in the educational planning process?

2. What factors do principals report as having the most significant effect on the quality and strength of trust between the parents of students with disabilities and the principals during the educational planning process?

    a. How does the legally mandated relationship that exists between principals and parents of students with disabilities affect the development of trust during the required educational planning process?

3. What principal leadership practices do principals report using to strengthen and build the quality of trust with parents of students with disabilities during the educational planning process?

    a. How do principals determine the efficacy of the practices employed to strengthen trust with parents of students with disabilities during the educational planning process?

Overview of Methods

This explanatory case study relied on the use of semi-structured interviews with three school leaders within a single district to investigate the research questions above. The primary purpose of this approach was to examine the practices of principals recognized for their success in fostering trust with parents of students with disabilities and to understand the factors contributing to the effectiveness of these strategies. The interviews explored the complexities of trust inherent in this context, revealing key principal leadership practices such as creating open and transparent communication, building parent confidence through demonstrations of

knowledge, and fostering school climates that prioritize honesty and care during the educational planning and implementation process.

To incorporate the parent perspective, a district parent liaison was interviewed. While acknowledging that this interview is not equivalent to first-hand parent reports, it provided valuable insights into areas of assistance sought by parents during the IEP process, as well as an overall perspective on principal performance. In addition to these semi-structured interviews, publicly available state performance district data and data from the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics were reviewed. This data analysis provided a comprehensive understanding of district performance trends in serving students with disabilities as compared to their typically developing peers.

The qualitative data collected during this case study revealed themes among the principal practices, specifically practices that intentionally or unintentionally aimed to build trust with parents of students with disabilities. A conceptual framework guided the analysis of these emergent themes. That framework, synthesized elements of the relational trust frameworks of Tschannen-Moran (2014) and Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (1998) and the strategic alliance framework of Das and Teng (2004) to consider the role of communication, knowledge, school climate, and one's ability to act. The results of this case study will be shared with the district once completed.

Delimitations

This study specifically examined the relationship and trust dynamic between school principals and parents of students with disabilities, the principal parent dyad, within the context of educational planning and implementation process. The research did not explore other potentially influential relationships such as parent-teacher relationships, or the broader

educational team. This focus was intentional, to allow for a deeper understanding of the principal's specific role and the practices employed.

While the IEP team consists of various members, this study focused on the principal's role and leadership practices with respect to the team. The study did not directly examine the perspectives or roles of central district office staff, service providers, other stakeholders, or parents directly. The absence of firsthand parent experience was a difficult decision given the import of that perspective; however, the study was focused on principal practices. Research illustrated that there are several factors that could confound the data gleaned from this study. Specifically, some parents, especially those who may have had negative prior experiences with the school system, may convey skepticism or mistrust based on prior experience rather than current (Fish, 2008). Additionally, there is literature indicating that parents have reported the educational planning process as contentious (Lasater, 2016; Zagona et al., 2019); there would be no way to know the variables that could inform that contention. Recognizing the importance of the parent perspective in this context, the decision to include the district parent liaison was made in an effort to reflect parent experience while mitigating against potential bias.

The research, by design, is confined to a single, medium-sized school district. This approach was chosen to provide a focused and in-depth analysis of the specific district context, as interpretations of IDEA (2004) influence district policies and procedures and thus may influence the principal's practices in building trust with parents of students with disabilities.

Limitations

This study had several limitations. The lack of operationalized standard definitions for parental involvement, parent engagement, and trust impacted how these factors were explored in

the literature. While IDEA (2004) provides a definition for parent involvement, the terms

parental involvement and parental engagement are used more broadly and interchangeably in the

literature. Further, the term trust lacks a standard definition and is subjective to the individual

and the context in which it is being examined (Das & Teng, 2004). There were personal factors

of the principal, such as if they have a child with disability, that could have remained unknown

during data collection (unless spontaneously disclosed), which may have impacted their

knowledge, views, and responses based on their personal experiences.

  Research was conducted in a traditional public school district. While the school district

was categorized as mid-sized for the state, it was also part of a larger service provider

consortium which augmented the district's ability to provide resources special educational

related service providers. There is no way to know the impact of the support received from that

larger entity or what, if any, effect that may have had on the development of trust with parents.

  Lastly the nature of the study, an explanatory case study, limits the generalizability of

study findings. While there are many principal practices that may inform future research and

improvement of principal practice, the overall upscaling of these strategies are minimal.

Role of Researcher and Researcher Bias

  As the principal investigator of this study, I maintained an "insider-outsider" status

(Connor & Cavendish, 2018), My experience in the field of special education is both

professional and personal, direct service provider, writer of policy and conductor of oversight,

and as the parent of a child with a disability. This perspective offered a unique experience into

the topic at hand, and the challenges embedded throughout the educational system for educators,

parents, and students with disabilities. Given my experiences, I was mindful to remain neutral

throughout data collection and was mindful of interpreting data without influence of my own

personal biases. I strongly believe that this research can advance principal leadership practices, awareness, and skills necessary to engender trust in the principal-parent dyad and impact the educational planning process for children with disabilities.

Conclusion

All students, especially those with disabilities who require additional support, deserve an educational environment where they can thrive and achieve their educational goals. The relationship between principals and parents is particularly crucial in ensuring this success, particularly within the context of special education IEP planning and implementation. Therefore, understanding the factors that influence this relationship, and the central role of trust, is vital.

This study aimed to identify factors that impact trust and partnership building within the complex relationship between principals and parents of students with disabilities. Specifically, it focused on actions undertaken by principals that may impact the trust on which the partnership is built. Chapter two reviews key literature in three areas: the value of relational trust in interdependent relationships, the strategic alliance framework and its interplay within the principal-parent dynamic, and the educational planning process for students with disabilities and the dynamics of parent participant engagement. Chapter Three details the methods, study design, and conceptual framework.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this study was to examine the leadership practices principals use that may impact trust when working with parents of children with disabilities through the educational planning and implementation process. There is an interdependence and vulnerability between principals and parents of students with disabilities, principals are accountable for the legal aspects of ensure the implementation of IDEA (2004) while parents wrestle with the emotional and personal responsibility of advocating for their student (Osborne & Russo, 2007). As such, it is important to understand the factors influencing trust between principals and parents of children with disabilities during educational planning. For the purposes of this study, these factors are divided into either parent-related, school-related, or legislatively related factors and are examined in the context of influencing trust during the educational planning of a child with a disability.

Search Methodology

The literature search was conducted using a variety of search terms and methods. Google Scholar and EBSCO were the primary search engines used along with secondary targeted searches via the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC), ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global, and JSTOR and SAGE Journals. The primary searches were conducted using terms such as 'special education,' 'Individuals with Disabilities Education Act,' 'parent involvement,' 'parents of children with disabilities,' 'socio-economic', 'principal leadership,' 'trust,' 'strategic alliance trust', 'relational trust,' and 'determinants of trust' to help establish a framework for the study. Then, Boolean searches were conducted combining terms to narrow in on specific factors for example, 'special education +parent involvement,' 'parental engagement

OR family involvement,' and 'special education AND parent partnership.' Zotero software was

used to save, organize, and search research materials and capture citations

In addition to data base searches, a citation tracking approach was utilized, wherein

references in key articles were reviewed for additional sources and to conduct additional

databased searches to identify more recent works. To maintain the relevance and quality of

sources, the following inclusions and exclusions criteria were applied. Inclusion criteria included

peer-reviewed journal articles, studies focusing on K-12. And exclusion criteria included

research without explicit methodology or opinion pieces. Further, due to the legislative

component to the study, research was conducted on publicly available policy at the federal, state,

and local levels. Expert consultation was sought by discussing emerging themes with state and

federal policy makers and professionals in the field.

In analyzing and synthesizing the qualitative data gathered during this study, I used a

thematic analysis approach to identify patterns and themes in the data. To do this, categories

were created based on the conceptual framework and research questions and data was coded

accordingly. Once data coded, themes were identified and interpreted.

Role of Parental Involvement

This study examined the critical role of trust when principals seek parental involvement,

with a specific focus on the unique dynamic between principals and parents of students with

disabilities. While there is no widely agreed upon definition of parent involvement, researchers

have found that parental involvement has a positive influence on student academic achievement

(Ates, 2021; Erdem & Kaya, 2020). Two recent meta-analyses affirmed the importance of

parental involvement but differ in their scope and focus. Both Ates (2021) and Erdem and Kaya

(2020) focused on parental involvement with respect to the general student population, and while

the range of effects was from weak to strong based on the respective variables such as parental

control, learning assistance, and expectation, all results trended in a positive direction. They also

highlighted specific findings around students with disabilities. Ates (2021) highlighted inclusive

practices for students with disabilities while Erdem and Kaya (2020) emphasized the role of

culture and the need for systemic changes. They both identified the fact that parental

involvement positively influences students' academic achievement and that the role of school

principals in facilitating that involvement through open communication, workshops, and

inclusive school environments. Successful partnerships between principals and parents of

children with disabilities entail additional sensitivity and understanding, knowledge about special

education policies, and involvement of parents in the decision-making process (Lasater, 2016).

Despite the legal and research-backed emphasis on parental involvement, disparities persist due

to systemic and relational barriers that disproportionately affect parents of children with

disabilities (Lasater, 2016; Zagona et al., 2019; Zeitlin & Curcic, 2013).

The performance data on students will disabilities illustrates the disparity in student

achievement. In 2022-23, approximately 15% (7.5 million) of all students enrolled in public

schools, ages 3–21 received special education services under the IDEA (2004) (National Center

for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2025). Data on the performance of special education students

from the U.S. Department of Education reflects a performance gap suggesting the needs of

students with disabilities are not being sufficiently met nor are they properly prepared for post-

secondary endeavors. Gilmour et al. (2019) conducted a meta-analysis to examine the reading

performance of students with and without disabilities, their analysis of the literature led them to

conclude there is a significant gap with students with disabilities performing approximately 1.17

standard deviations below their non-disabled peers. This translates into a difference of 3-4 grade

levels. Further, Gilmour et al. (2019) found that the disparity has been relatively stable over the

past two decades, suggesting limited success in closing the achievement gap. Moreover, data

from the National School Boards Association (NSBA) illustrates a 17.5 percentage point

difference between the number of students with a disability graduating with a diploma, 67.1%,

and that of their non-disabled peers, 84.6% (National School Boards Association, 2023)

The data on parity and transparency of courses and diplomas for students with disabilities

is also illustrative. The Achieve Organization, a non-profit organization examined the various

diploma and course work options available to students with disabilities across the various states

(Achieve, 2016). Researchers found that many states have different course and assessment

requirements for students with disabilities than their non-disabled peers; this flexibility created a

less rigorous academic standard for these students (Achieve, 2016). Further, the requirements for

standardized courses could be modified or exchanged for other courses that were not necessarily

equivalent.

In addition to student performance disparities for students with disabilities, there is a

financial impact to school districts that can result from poor parent involvement and/or parent

disputes. The IDEA (2004) legislation (IDEA, 20 U.S.C. §1400 et seq.; 34 C.F.R. Part 300,

2004) carries legal requirements for resolving disputes between schools and parents of students

with disabilities. Options range from informal mediation to filing a Due Process Hearing (DPH)

request which entail legal litigation and adjudication, and comes with a large financial cost

(CADRE, 2018; Mueller et al., 2008; Blackwell & Blackwell, 2015). As an example of financial

impact, Pudelski (2016) lists the average legal fees entailed in dispute resolution:

The average legal fees for a district involved in a due process hearing were $10,512.50.

Districts compelled to compensate parents for their attorney's fees averaged $19,241.38.

The expenditures associated with the verdict of the due process hearing averaged districts

$15, 924.14. For districts that chose to settle with a parent prior to adjudication of the due

process hearing, the settlement costs averaged $23,827.34. (p.3)

The funds referenced are directly paid from school district budgets, which then diverts

funds from staffing, instructional materials, or extracurricular programs and may limit the

district's ability to provide services that directly benefit students with disabilities such as

individualized instruction, assistive technology, or related services (Yell et al, 2011; Zirkel,

2008). This highlights the critical role of collaboration between principals, parents, and IEP team

to prevent costly legal disputes. Further understanding the development of legislation to protect

students with disabilities provides insight into prior challenges within the special education

system, which may inform factors that can be mitigated by the principal to ensure appropriate

provision of services for students.

The Legislative Underpinnings

The legislative history of educating students with disabilities has been litigated in court

over the course of the 20th century and undergone significant change and implications for leaders

within the education system. Prior to the Education of the Handicapped Act (EHA) in 1975 (later

to become IDEA) children with disabilities had little to no educational opportunities. Until the

mid-1970s, schools were permitted to refuse access to children with disabilities, deeming them

uneducable (Ross & Nichols, 2022). The landmark case of Brown v The Board of Education,

encouraged parent advocates to leverage the legal system as a mechanism to fight for educational

services for children with disabilities (Katsiyannis et al., 2002). This led to monumental changes

in the education system such as the 1972 decision on Mills vs. Board of Education, where no

child could now be denied a public education due to mental, behavioral or emotional

deficiencies, and the Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children (PARC) vs.

Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, where states could not deny an individual's right to equal

access to education based on an intellectual or developmental disability (Zirkel, 2020).

The outcome of these hearings continues to hold significant consequences for students

and school districts. As of March 2023, the Supreme Court ruled that not only could a student

exercise their rights to sue for compensatory services should they not be provided a free and

appropriate public education, as required under IDEA (2004), but they could sue for financial

damages under other relative legislation like the Americans with Disabilities Act (Luna Perez v.

Sturgis Public Schools, No.21-887, argued January 18, 2023). This ruling underscore the

importance of properly understanding and implementing the special education rules and policies,

as failure to provide appropriate services can lead to both financial and legal repercussions for

school districts.

The successful development and implementation of the IEP (standards and evaluation of

contents) was been the subject of legal challenges and adjudicated for decades within the federal

courts. The IDEA (2004) prescribes roles, responsibilities, rights, and procedures for ensuring

that children with disabilities are afforded a free and appropriate public education (IDEA, Act,

20 U.S.C. § 1400, 2004). A key element to this process is the development of an individualized

educational plan (IEP). The IEP, as a legal document, outlines the individualized annual

educational goals of the child with a disability, the supports and services needed to implement

those goals, frequency of service provisions, and the measures of their respective success.

The IEP is a central component to the IDEA (2004). Under the IDEA (2004), once the

IEP is developed and agreed upon by the IEP team, the school is legally obligated to implement

it as written. Failure to do so can lead to legal action. The rights afforded under IDEA (2004)

include required participation and collaboration amongst a mandated team of professionals and

the parent, dispute resolution processes (e.g., complaints, mediation, due process), and the stated

rights in the event of disagreement or failure to implement the IEP as agreed. The legislation

requires that the IEP team be comprised of the parent, or guardian, of the child with a disability,

one regular education teacher, one special education teacher, a school administrator, an

individual who can interpret the instructional implication of evaluation results, the child when

appropriate and at the discretion of the parent or the school division, and other individuals with

knowledge or special expertise regarding the child (IDEA, 20 U.S.C. § 1407, 2004). Further,

the law outlines specific dispute resolution actions that could be taken in the event that either

party, representatives of the school district and/or the parent, can exercise in the event that one

party feels that the other party is being unreasonable or failing to appropriately serve the student.

The interplay between students' educational rights, mandated parent and school team-

involvement, and district accountability for provision of services is complex. These varied

requirements create high, yet diverse, stakes for all parties involved, and are unique to the

population of students with disabilities and those who serve those students. The IDEA (2004)

legislation establishes a contractual relationship between the school district and the parent of a

child with a disability, and the principal serves as an intermediary overseeing its implementation.

This legislatively driven, formal yet intimate relationship, does not exist between principals and

parents of typically developing students, and it is integral to understand factors that may impact

and improve this relationship within the context of special education.

Factors that may Influence Trust

Given the intimate relationship between principals and parents of students with
disabilities, it is critical to examine factors that may influence trust within the context of special
education. A range of scholars have focused primarily on the function of trust within educational
settings Hoy (1990), Tschannen-Moran (2014), Tschannen-Moran and her colleagues (2006,
2015), Bryk and Schneider (2003). Trust within a general educational setting, does not
necessarily consider the contract negotiation-like requirements established in the special
education legislation. Contract negotiations entail two or more parties deliberating the terms of
the contract, expectations, and obligations of each party, and have legal consequences (Marsh,
2001). Given this complexity, the strategic alliance theories of Das and Teng (1996, 1997, 1998,
2004) were included as a framework to consider the interplay of risk perceptions and behaviors
with respect to decision-making within contexts that require collaboration and interdependence.
The following section examines factors that may influence trust during the educational planning
for a student with a disability specifically focusing on the following themes: parent-related,
school-related, and legislatively related factors.

Defining Trust

Within the literature, the definition of trust varies based on discipline and context
(Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 1998), however it is agreed upon that there is a vulnerability and
interdependence that exists between two entities (Leiter & Krauss, 2004; Zagona et al., 2019).
Researchers have described the role of trust in the trustor/trustee dynamic as follows: trustor (the
person doing the trusting) relies on the trustee (the person being trusted) to do something that is
needed and beyond the control of the trustor. In engagements of trust, the trustor must consider
the trustee's ability and willingness to act toward the fulfillment of the commitment and, during

interactions between people each party works to discern the intentions, motives, and actions of

the other (Das & Teng, 2004; Vangen & Huxham, 2003). This highlights that the trust that exists

between two people (an interpersonal relationship) includes an element of vulnerability and a

dependence on other (Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 1999; Tschannen-Moran, 1998). For the

purposes of this study, trust is defined as a relationship with elements of vulnerability and

interdependence between two parties with consistent, open, and transparent communication,

reliability, and with positive expectations about the other party's intentions, behaviors, and

ability to act in ways that uphold mutual goals and responsibilities.

Relational Trust

The relationship between the principal and parent of a child with a disability dyad is

complex, and researchers have stated that trust is the foundational element that may strengthen

this relationship (Stoner et al., 2014). Tschannen-Moran's (2014) model of relational trust

establishes five facets of trust: benevolence, honesty, openness, reliability, competence.

Benevolence is defined as someone, or something acting in the best interest of others. The

researchers highlight that parents' trust within the school setting "relies heavily on the perceived

benevolence of school personnel" (Tschannen-Moran, 2014, p. 190).

Honesty is defined as the degree to which what an individual says is true. Openness is

defined by willingness and comfort with communication. Reliability, the confidence one has that

the trusted party will do as they say, and competence, as one's ability to meet the stated

expectations. The competence component of trust is essential within the context of special

education, specifically, the principal's contribution of knowledge, practice, and applicability.

Relational trust, in the context of this study, is grounded in the way people engage with

one another and can be affected by historical experiences of the people involved, leadership, and

resources (Bryk & Schneider, 2003). Relational trust can be established when each person understands their own role and responsibilities and that of the other in the exchange (Bryk & Schneider, 2003).

Power dynamics also play a role in relational trust, where one party is reliant on the other to do something that they either cannot or are not able to accomplish (Tschannen-Moran, 2014). This can impact the level of vulnerability one party or the other may experience within the trust relationship, which can influence the overall nature of the relationship. For special education, the principal-parent dyad, relational trust and social exchanges are inherently associated with legally mandated communication and exchange. The influence of the mandated communication is affected by the role that each person holds in the exchange. As the parties within the trust relationship build experience with one another, the basis on which each party gauges trust for one another evolves. Similarly, the balance of power experienced within the relationship applies to the severity of consequences should one party fail to fulfil their commitment. Tschannen-Moran (2014) touches on the role of an imbalance in the power dynamic within the context of principals and their school-based teachers. In this context, the power imbalance highlighted by Tschannen-Moran may be instrumental to the trust dynamics between principals and the parents of students with disabilities during the IEP educational planning process.

In line with Tschannen-Moran (2014), Bryk and colleagues (2010) describe social respect, interpersonal regard, integrity, and competence as foundational components for relational trust. Social respect refers to whether each individual recognizes the role and value of the other and their contribution. Interpersonal regard refers to behaviors that are effective to make the other person feel safe during this period of vulnerability. Integrity refers to one acting in a way that is consistent with what they say, and competence speaks to one's knowledge and/or

the ability to achieve the stated goal. Across both conceptualizations, relational trust consists of

expressing these characteristics through actions, imbued with respect and regard for the

individual, and entailing some level of reciprocity (Bryk & Schneider, 1996).

Contractual Trust

Given the legally mandated nature of the principal-parent relationship in the education of

students with disabilities, Das and Teng's (2004) strategic alliance framework provides a unique

lens through which to examine the role of historical experience, risk perceptions, and behaviors

during the compulsory collaboration and interdependence involved in special education

planning. This perspective is enriched by the work of Tschannen-Moran (2014) and Bryk and

colleagues (2010) on relational trust. The theories of Das and Teng are based on business

principles related to assessing trust based on risk. Das and Teng (2004) would argue that the

elements framed by Tschannen-Moran (2014) and Bryk et al., (2010) are important, however, do

not reflect the gravity of the IEP process for such things as student development and/or legal

ramifications for the parties involved. Integrating models of trust across both the education and

business literature allow for a more comprehensive view of trust which may more accurately

capture the experience of the principal-parent dyad within the context of the educational system

for children with disabilities.

Conversely to the previously presented models of trust within the education system, the

trust framework presented by Das and Teng (2004) proposes that integrity and competence are

not mutually exclusive, they are distinct concepts that are interdependent. Integrity reflects in a

partner's ethical and consistent behavior (Das & Teng, 2004). While a party may have every

intention to act on what their commitment, some external or uncontrollable factors prevent the

successful implementation of the commitment made; this is known as performance risk. (Das &

Teng, 2001). If an agreed upon outcome fails due to uncontrollable/unforeseen factors, a partner's integrity may remain intact as their intention was honest. However, if a pattern of failures exist the party must consider relational risk. Das and Teng distinguish relational risk from performance risk, as being associated with the true intention or motive e.g. opportunistic behavior of their partner.

Das and Teng (2004) contend that engagements involving trust also involve risk. Das and Teng consider the degree to which an individual perceives potential outcomes, past experiences that the parties have either with one another or in similar situations, and the value of what is at stake for the parties involved. The intent is that the extent to which a party can confidently predict a positive or negative outcome reflects the degree of trust held in the other party. The underlying premise is that having authentic, willing partners alone may not be enough for success. The level of trust between the parties is influenced by their previous experiences, and their motivation may shape the development of shared objectives based on their respective goals and interests (Das & Teng, 2004).

Within Das and Teng's (2004) model, each interaction or engagement in a manner affects subsequent engagements. Interpersonal interactions carry history and therefore inform the future trust, such as the experience and competence of the parties, follow through on commitments, earnestness, and candor. These experiences serve to either strengthen or undermine future trust within the relationship. While Hoy and Tschannen- Moran (1998) and Tschannen-Moran (2014) consider previous experience in the development of relationships within the education system, Das and Teng's (2004) model creates a tangible cause and effect relationship missing from previous relational trust models. This highlights the impact of historical experience, integrity, and reliability on a party's ability to engage in trust dependent activities.

The business perspective on strategic alliances suggests that outcomes are influenced by each party's ability to act effectively, which is shaped by their perceived risk or uncertainty. While Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (1999) examine factors that undermine trust, such as conflicting needs among school constituencies, Das and Teng's (2004) model incorporates past experiences—whether between the parties or in similar situations—and considers whether those experiences led to success or failure, as well as the impact of unfulfilled commitments. In the educational context, however, previous experience places greater emphasis on respect and collaboration between the parties, rather than on the risks or consequences of a failed collaboration.

Strategic alliance-based trust is defined by the extent to which one party can confidently predict a positive or negative outcome based on the trust they have in the other party. Key factors in the development of this trust over time include probability, motivation, and consequence, all of which are shaped by past experiences and the potential impact of those experiences (Das & Teng, 2004). Both Hoy and Tschannen-Moran (1999) and Tschannen-Moran (2014) align with Das and Teng in recognizing that trust develops gradually through reinforcing interactions between the parties. However, they differ in how much emphasis they place on managing divergent interests and power dynamics (Vangen & Huxham, 2003).

Summary of Trust Related Factors

As a result of the uniquely complex relationship in this principal-parent dyad, the proposed argument highlights a divergence between the educational models of relational trust and trust developed in strategic business alliances. Table 1 clearly establishes the foundational aspects of trust within the respective frameworks. The table defines the specific context, the role of risk, dimensions and goals of trust, how trust is measured, the role of communication, and the

impact of interdependence and vulnerability. Displayed in this manner, its overlapping

similarities and specific differences are highlighted. The research of Tschannen-Moran and Hoy

and Bryk and Schneider (2003) are situated within educational settings, focusing on relational

trust among school stakeholders and focus on the contributing factors within education. Das and

Teng (2004), on the other hand, focus on strategic alliances, analyzing trust in business

partnerships which considers the role of the IEP and its contractual obligations and consequences

for failure to act.

Das and Teng (2004) explicitly address the role of risk, categorizing it into relational risk

(opportunistic behavior) and performance risk (external factors). In contrast, Tschannen-Moran

& Hoy (1998) and Bryk & Schneider (2003) mention risk but do not systematically analyze it.

While risk management is a central theme in Das and Teng's framework, it is more implicit in

educational trust models. Das and Teng take a more quantitative and formalized approach,

integrating trust into structured risk analysis. On the other hand, Tschannen-Moran & Hoy

(1998) and Bryk & Schneider (2003) approach trust qualitatively, focusing on relational

interactions and descriptive frameworks. Furthermore, the educational trust models (Tschannen-

Moran & Hoy, 1998; Bryk & Schneider, 2003) are geared toward fostering improved

collaboration, school reform, and student success. In contrast, Das and Teng view trust as a

strategic tool for achieving performance and managing uncertainties.

All the frameworks recognize communication as a critical element. Das and Teng (2004)

analyze the role of communication in aligning risk and reducing uncertainties, while the

educational models emphasize communication's role in building relationships and fostering

respect. Vulnerability, a key component in this study's definition of trust, is explicitly linked to

risk-taking behaviors in Das and Teng's strategic partnerships. In the educational models, vulnerability arises from interpersonal relationships and reliance on shared commitments.

The key divergence from the theories lies in the respective context, risk focus, measurement, and goals. Das and Teng frame trust as a tool for managing risk and performance in organizational alliances, adopting a more structured and quantitative approach. Whereas the educational models (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 1998) emphasize relational trust in schools, focusing on qualitative relationships.

Table 1

Foundational Aspects of Trust within the Respective Frameworks

Aspect	Tschannen-Moran et al (1998, 2006, 2014, 2015) (Relational Trust)	Bryk & Schneider (1996, 2003) (Relational Trust)	Das & Teng (1996, 1997, 1998, 2004) (Strategic Alliance-Based Trust)
Context of Trust	Focus on trust within **educational settings**, specific to relationships among school leaders, teachers, and parents.	Focus on trust-building in **schools** with attention to social exchanges among teachers, leaders, parents, and students.	Focus on trust in **strategic alliances** and partnerships within a business context (I am linking to IEP development).
Role of Risk	Trust reduces perceived risk due to vulnerability in relationships. Risk is acknowledged but not systematically classified.	Risk is implied in trust but not explicitly discussed as a specific component.	Risk management is a core focus Explicitly classifies risk into **relational risk** (intentional opportunism) and **performance risk** (external failure).
Trust Dimensions	Highlights dimensions of **benevolence, honesty, competence, openness** in relationships.	Focus on **respect, personal regard, competence, and integrity** as trust dimensions.	Trust is analyzed quantitatively as a strategic tool. Combines **competence, integrity**, and risk perception (relational and performance risks).

Aspect	Tschannen-Moran et al (1998, 2006, 2014, 2015) (Relational Trust)	Bryk & Schneider (1996, 2003) (Relational Trust)	Das & Teng (1996, 1997, 1998, 2004) (Strategic Alliance-Based Trust)
Goal of Trust	Trust fosters **collaboration** and **organizational performance** in schools through improved relationships.	Trust supports **school reform**, enhanced cooperation, and improved student achievement through relational trust.	Trust serves as a mechanism for achieving **business goals** and reducing uncertainties in alliances.
Measurement of Trust	Primarily qualitative, grounded in relational observations and interactions within schools.	Observed through social exchanges, with a focus on qualitative descriptions of trust-building.	More **quantitative** and systematic, integrating trust as part of formalized risk management frameworks.
Communication Role	Open and transparent communication is critical to building trust but not deeply analyzed.	Trust relies on **respectful and transparent communication** in social exchanges.	Communication serves a risk-reduction role, helping align expectations and reducing uncertainty in alliances.
Interdependence	Interdependence is relational and tied to shared goals within the school community.	Relational trust emerges from interdependence among school stakeholders.	Interdependence is explicitly tied to **mutual reliance for performance outcomes** in strategic alliances.
Focus on Vulnerability	Vulnerability arises through trust placed in individuals (e.g., teachers, principals).	Vulnerability is a byproduct of interdependent relationships in the school community.	Vulnerability is directly linked to **risk-taking behavior**, framed as an integral part of trust in partnerships.

Bryk et al., (2010) and Bryk and Schneider (1996) discuss how the actions of others influence risk; it is within the context of reciprocity between two parents, imbued with respect and regard for the individual, that such interactions entail some level of mutual trust and vulnerability, fostering collaboration and reducing perceived risks in decision. While Das and Teng (2004) would assert that integrity and competence are not mutually exclusive, they are interdependent, one can be cooperative, imbue actions with respect, and mean what is said yet

lack the ability to carry out on the actions required to fulfill the commitment. This juxtaposition illustrates performance risk and speaks directly to ones' ability to act, a factor that may affect the quality of trust despite the willingness of the partners (Das and Teng 1996). Having authentic willing partners may be insufficient. One's trust is affected by the parties' previous experiences, and the motivation of the parties and their respective agendas (Das & Teng, 1996).

The Principal-Parent Dyad

Within the described frameworks trust is vulnerability and interdependence, both of which are influenced by the actions and behaviors of both parties over time (Tschannen-Moran, 2004; Das & Teng, 1996, 2004). While trust is integral within the principal-parent dyad, other relevant factors may also influence the principal-parent relationship such as parent-related factors, school-related factors, and legislatively related factors.

Parent-related Factors

Families of students with disabilities face challenging demands that may require an increased awareness of emotional, logistical, financial, and legal understanding and needs (Gorman, 2001). Researchers have found that families of children with disabilities have reported increased family demands and higher levels of stresses compared to those families with typically developing children highlighting the need for targeted support and interventions to alleviate these challenges (Hayes & Watson, 2013; Theule et al., 2013; Wondim et al., 2021). Several key factors have been identified that contribute to increased stress and affect parental involvement, including educational attainment, family demands, social stigma, and financial pressure. These findings highlight the importance of addressing the complex challenges families face. They emphasize the need to build trust with partners and provide support to families as they navigate these demands, while also strengthening their ability to support their child.

Educational Attainment. Research has found that socio-political factors – such as the parents' socioeconomic and education status, impact parent engagement. For example, highly educated parents tend to spend more time with their children, have a greater focus on developmental activities, and are more likely to encourage child exploration than their less educated peers (Brekke et al., 2023). A study conducted by Lee and Bowen (2006) indicated that parents who have accomplished higher college or 2-year degree represent significantly more presence in the meetings or activities organized by the educational establishment, their results highlight the correlation between higher education levels and increased engagement from which can be implied a stronger capacity to navigate the education system. Such parents have more communication with their children on topics like education, tend to dedicate more effort to increasing the academic success rates of their children, and are more likely to understand the educational processes and nomenclature involved in the implementation of special education (Blackman & Mahon, 2016; Lasater, 2016). Conversely, Wondim and colleagues (2021) found that rates of communication, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating were not significantly different based on years of parent education and parental involvement. Amatea and West, (2007) found that greater parental involvement has a higher impact on the academic performance of students than either socio-economic status or educational background. Taken together these findings suggest that higher levels of education equip a parent with the knowledge, confidence, and resources to actively engage with schools and foster strong relationships with educators and administrator.

Parents with limited educational attainment may tend to participate less actively in the educational process of their children. This may be due to a lack the self-confidence to communicate effectively with the school and educators (Lee & Bowen, 2006). Wondim and

colleagues (2021) argue, however, that a lack of confidence to communicate may stem from feelings of powerlessness rather than the level of educational attainment. Moreover, parents with limited education were less likely to understand such important aspects as the educational planning process and practices, children's developmental stages, and assessments (Blackman & Mahon, 2016; Lasater, 2016; Mapp, 2003). This lack of understanding may signal parents' tendency to feel overwhelmed by the documents describing the IEP process, their role and/or participation, and the corresponding rights prescribed in the legislation for both parents and their students. Often parents misunderstand or dismiss the jargon embedded in the information described in the procedural safeguard notice – the document outlining the procedurally prescribed rights of the educational planning for students with disabilities (Bacon & Causton-Theoharis, 2013; MacLeod et al., 2017). Without this understanding, parents may not realize their right to challenge an IEP team's decisions, offer input into their student's needs, or fully understand that they are an equal team member in the IEP process.

Family Demands, Financial Pressure, and Social Stigma. Researchers have found that the stress of family demands on the parents of children with disabilities is in part influenced by socioeconomic factors. While some may be specifically related to the child's disabling condition, others may be the result of social stigma, gaining access to needed supports and services, retention and maintenance of gainful employment or flexible workplace accommodations (Brekke et al., 2023, McDonnell et al., 2014), and the need to advocate for their child consistently and persistently in all areas of day-to-day life (Fishman & Nickerson, 2014).

Parents of students with disabilities from low socio-economic backgrounds, who were eligible for free or reduced-price lunches, attended IEP meetings less frequently, with an attendance rate of 56.2%. In contrast, parents of students not eligible for free or reduced lunch

had an attendance rate of 67.8% (Ponponi, 2009). Similarly, Ponponi's study found that students whose parents participated in IEP meetings had higher grades in English/language arts, mathematics, and overall grade point averages compared to those whose parents did not participate. This result highlights the significant impact of parental involvement on student outcomes.

Social support and access to services for families of children with disabilities carries significant impact on the family. For example, parents of children with disabilities may find it more difficult to locate qualified daycare which in turn may impact their ability to engage in either social or workplace activities (McConnell et al., 2014). Applying Bronfenbrenner's (1986) social-ecological theory, McConnell and colleagues (2014) conducted a three-year study to examine the relationship between child behavior problems, social-ecological resource-fit, and positive family adaptation. In line with their hypotheses, the researchers found that regardless of the severity of the child's disabilities, families with high social support and low financial difficulties faired far better than those families with low social support and high financial hardship. The data also highlighted the role of social support and integration in mitigating family stress. Specifically, the degree to which a family felt that they were part of the community and could rely on others for support, increased their ability to engage in the community in which they lived. These findings suggest that addressing socioeconomic barriers and nurturing strong support networks are critical for reducing family stress and promoting positive adaptation in families of children with disabilities, highlighting the import of integrated community support and accessible resources in improving parent engagement.

Societal views and stigma also play a role in family stress. Woolfson's (2004) theoretical study states that western medicine, and its approach to disabilities, shapes the societal view of

disabling conditions, specifically that disabling conditions are something that must be fixed or eradicated. Further, Woolfson argues that "the consequences of the impairment itself are distinct from the physical barriers of the built environment and the prejudices and negative attitudes of non-disabled people" (p.4). Within this quote, Woolfson raises an integral issue which can be applied to the context of the education system. Specifically, the education system may create a more challenging environment for students with disabilities due to stigma, misunderstanding and negative biases which could be impacted by school leadership.

School leadership sets the tone for the development of a school's community climate in which individuals have shared values or expectations (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Cranston, 2011). Education, as a field, operates as a series of communities within communities (e.g., parents, school staff, grades, etc.). The norms of these respective groups and how they interact comprise the internal climate, the degree to which is informed by the awareness and understanding of each communities' norms and expectations of the members and of one another (Cranston, 2011). The overall climate can significantly influence how experiences are perceived by its members, which is especially important in the context of parents of students with disabilities.

Educational setting are not the only community climates in which these families of students with disabilities are required to routinely engage. Parents of students with disabilities are often required to bridge support and therapeutic services between the healthcare community, the frequency of which is based on the disabling condition of their child, and the educational system. Based on the student's needs, healthcare services may be a requisite part of the education planning process as a need to identify, understand, and/or advocate for support services that crossover from the healthcare experience into the educational realm (Kayama, 2010).

Taken together, socio economic status, social support, and school climate impact parents of children with disabilities. These factors appear to play a role in the involvement of parents of students with disabilities in the educational planning process, family stress, family demands, and financial concerns. Examining these factors provides valuable insights into the complex interplay between socioeconomic status, social support, and school climate, noting their critical influence on the experiences of families of students with disabilities. These research findings highlight the importance of trust between principals and parents of student with disabilities during the educational planning process, as trust is the foundation for meaningful collaboration. By understanding these factors school leaders can consider them in creating inclusive environments that reduce family stress, increase parent knowledge, and enhance parental engagement.

School-related Factors

There are school-related factors such as a principal's personal attributes (which include elements of authenticity, reliability, honesty) and professional attributes (which include, respect, communication, and competency) which may impact the school environment. Bryk and Schneider (2003) highlight the principal's role in shaping an environment to create relational trust. For example, changes to hiring practices, policies, and coaching has shown to be essential fostering growth between principals and their staff. The researchers found that in schools with high relational trust, teachers were more likely to embrace reform, would "characterize their colleagues as committed and loyal" (p.43), and be able to respectfully disagree with one another. In instances where these areas were not addressed by the principal, investment in building relational trust was lacking. These findings are part of the larger body of literature that supports and highlights the role of the principal in building relational trust in the educational setting.

Further support for the role and importance of the principal is seen in the results of Tschannen-Moran and Hoy's (1998) empirical study examining dimensions of trust and the impact of climate and authenticity based on behavior of the principal in 86 middle schools. The study found that the authenticity of a principal's behavior—characterized by openness, honesty, and consistency—significantly influences teachers' trust in the principal. This trust is further associated with a positive and open school climate. These findings illustrate the significant role principals play in shaping school climate through behaviors within their control. By demonstrating authentic and supportive leadership, principals can build a climate of trust.

From these findings, it can be implied that a principal's authenticity, characterized by openness, honesty, and consistency, not only influences trust among teachers but also sets the tone for the broader school climate. An open and welcoming climate is likely to positively influence interactions with parents, enhancing their involvement in several ways: 1) it makes parents feel valued as partners in their child's education, increasing their willingness to engage with school staff and participate in decision-making; 2) it fosters trust in the school's intentions and efforts, encouraging parents to collaborate in meeting their child's needs; 3) it empowers parents to stay informed and actively involved; and 4) it helps reduce feelings of apprehension or intimidation that parents of students with disabilities may experience. In short, the principal's behavior and leadership are crucial in creating an environment that encourages active parental participation in their child's education.

Personal and Professional Attributes of the Principal. The principal must work to generate an environment in which their personal and professional attributes can be effective within the organization they shape. The impact of effective principal leadership on student development is akin to a gardener's care for their garden; the principal creates the necessary

climate (e.g., common language, shared value systems) to enable the collective contributing

factors to stimulate student learning and improve outcomes (Leithwood and Louis' 2012;

McLaughlin et al., 2009).

Within the literature, personal attributes include authenticity. Kernis and Goldman (2006)

describe authenticity as acting in a way that is congruent with one's values, preferences, and

needs, contrasting it with inauthenticity, which involves acting merely to please others or to

attain rewards or avoid punishment. Tschannen-Moran's (2014) framework, which includes

dimensions of benevolence, honesty, competence, and openness in relationships, incorporates the

element of authenticity into her frame by focusing more on the actions and willingness, of the

principal themselves as opposed to how they are received by others. Specifically, Tschannen-

Moran (2014b) defines openness and honesty as a principal's "willingness to accept

responsibility not just for the good things that happen but for the mistakes and negative outcomes

as well" (p. 28) highlighting the importance of transparency and accountability in authentic

leadership behaviors.

Within the context of the education system, Bryk and Schneider (2003) consider

authenticity as the genuine alignment between integrity and personal regard; specifically, those

behaviors and manners that were willingly offered and received as genuine, child-focused/for the

benefit of the child and/or their parents, and follow-through of their commitments (Bryk &

Schneider, 2003). While authenticity is tied to the factors of trust, researchers found that

principal authenticity did not always translate into action and/or follow-through on their

respective commitments (Shelden et al., 2010) highlighting the inner conflict that development

of authentic relationships alone is insufficient to yielding and/or predicting positive results.

Cultivating trust through consistent, child-focused actions, and acceptance of responsibility, principals can create a climate of collaboration and support. Bryk and Schneider's (2013) longitudinal study of 100 Chicago elementary schools highlighted the centrality of principal leadership in developing trust. Specifically, findings referenced a principal's ability to combine and utilize respect, vision, and consistency of action to form their personal integrity.

These researchers highlight the crucial role of both personal and professional attributes in effective principal leadership. Authenticity must be demonstrated through actions, including commitments and accountability. Differentiated trust—the vulnerability and experience of the trustor in relation to the trustee—further underscores the importance of authentic behavior in leadership practices (Das & Teng, 1998; Tschannen-Moran, 2014). In summary, these studies emphasize that principals who embrace authenticity, integrity, and accountability not only foster a climate of trust but also create opportunities for parents to actively engage in their child's education.

Authenticity may also be imbued or evidenced through communication. Models like Tschannen-Moran (2014) and Bryk and Schneider (2003) discuss the importance of authenticity of communication as a vehicle to demonstrate how words match actions. Additionally, research has also emphasized the importance of dialogical competence for educational leaders as a component of authenticity (Noonan et al., 2008). The principal's *dialogic competence*, their ability to engage in a discussion in which they can understand the speaker and incorporate the relative and previous context and experience, to the subject and conversation at hand as critical. This relates to the principal's professional attributes and includes accessibility, knowledge of disabilities/competence, and communication, are critical within the context of special education.

Principal Knowledge and Expertise. Expertise in disabilities is not required for principals; however, they must have some basic knowledge of disabilities to meet their assigned special education responsibilities (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003). Research has found that lack of knowledge of disabilities was not perceived as an inhibitor to trust unless the principal displayed an unwillingness to learn (Shelden et al., 2010, Abed, 2014), indicating that openness to learn may be a factor that influences trust in the relationship. There are specific actions that are associated with principals' professional attributes that have been associated with parental trust throughout the IEP process. Principal accessibility before and throughout the IEP planning process, regular principal attendance at IEP meetings, and encouragement of teacher involvement with parents have all been found to impact trust in the parent relationship (Shelden et. al., 2010). Research has also found that increased principal engagement and knowledge of students had a positive effect on parent trust and conversely lack of engagement/nonaction by principals was perceived negatively and as a factor inhibiting trust in the parental relationship (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Lasater, 2016). These findings have been replicated throughout the literature (Fish, 2008, Tschannen-Moran, 2014, Zagona et al., 2019) and highlight how the behavior of the principal is an integral factor that may impact trust in the relationship with parents of students with disabilities.

The School Climate as Influenced by the Principal. Creating a climate that encourages parental involvement with the general parent community is a challenge (Mapp, 2003). Regarding the implementation of special education, principals are called upon to balance the needs of the varied communities within the school while also fulfilling the mandate established by the IDEA (2004). Notable for this context, principals must assume a leadership role during the educational

planning process and ensure that the services agreed upon by the IEP team are provided as

indicated in the IEP (McLaughlin et al., 2009).

Establishing a climate with strong relational trust in school related relationships (e.g.,

teachers and principals) is needed to successfully navigate the varied partnerships and issues that

arise within the education system (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Bryk et.al., 2010; Tschannen-

Moran, 2014). One theme that emerged throughout the literature displayed that relational trust

within a school is often shaped by the principal, built upon social exchanges, and founded on

respect, personal regard, competence, and personal integrity (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Forsyth,

Adams, & Hoy, 2011; Schneider et al., 2014). Many researchers agree that trust resulting from

social exchanges occurs over time and is informed by previous experience (Das and Teng, 1998,

2004; Poulsen et al., 2021; Tschannen-Moran, 2014; Vangen & Huxon, 2003). The theories of

Tschannen-Moran (2014) and Das and Teng (2004) diverge with respect to the factors that

influence the likelihood or propensity to trust. Tschannen-Moran (2014) and Tschannen-Moran

et al., (2006) consider whether there is a pre-disposition to trust, values, and emotions. While

Das and Teng (1998) focus on demonstrated competencies, intention, and historical performance.

Whether trust is attitudinal or tangible, the research agrees that the basis and formation is rooted

in the school's circumstances, resources, and climate (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Forsyth, Adams,

& Hoy, 2011; Schneider et al., 2014).

Legislative Factors

The IDEA (2004) legislation serves as a civil rights function in that it ensures a free

appropriate public education for children with disabilities in the least restrictive environment

(Zirkel, 2020). In doing so, the legislation prescribes structures and requirements mandating a

relationship between the parent and school, and for the design of the individual student's IEP and

the plan itself. By doing so, the legislation simultaneously removes and creates barriers to effective parent involvement in their child's educational planning (Zirkel, 2017).

The decision-making roles within schools are affected by IDEA (2004), specifically the principal. The language of IDEA (2004) is written in permissible language that allows for interpretation to enable States the latitude to implement the requirements in a way that best suits their needs. As such, it is important to note that the role of the principal, with respect to authority in the IEP educational planning and implementation process, may change based on the rules and regulations of their State as well as the policy decisions of their district with respect to implementing special education.

As noted previously in the parent-related section, the literature implies sociopolitical factors such as educational attainment, family demands, financial pressure, and social stigma, may impact parents' ability to engage either through ability and/or level of comfort/confidence. In the context of education as an institution, the sociopolitical factors seem to refer the laws, regulations, mandates, policies, practices, traditions, values, and beliefs that exist (Cozart et al., 2016). This is particularly important because the principal is responsible for laying the groundwork, shaping policies, and modeling values and beliefs within their school (Tschannen-Moran, 2014). However, the principal may not always have the final say, as decisions can also be influenced by state, local, or district policies.

A brief and targeted explanation of an IDEA (2004) legislative requirement may provide insight as to why the authority of the principal, with respect to their organization and decision making during the IEP educational planning and implementation process, may be different based on a state's implementing regulations of IDEA (2004). The law represents the federal umbrella law under which FAPE is required for students with disabilities. That said, sub-chapter 1 §1407

of IDEA (2004) affords the State the right to develop rules, regulations, and policies relating to

this chapter but requires that they conform to the overarching umbrella legislation (IDEA, 20

U.S.C. § 1407, 2004). The intent behind this requirement is to support the State's right,

recognizing that the institutions and people closest to the student may be those most

knowledgeable to make decisions such as the structure, operations, leadership, and staffing (Yell,

2012).

To consider this process in implementation, let's use a hypothetical example of how these

steps would be applied in practice within the context of the special education system. In this

case, the Chief Superintendent of the Virginia Department of Education signs an assurance to the

Secretary of Education, U.S. Department of Education that they are implementing state

regulations and that their oversight conforms to the federal law (U.S. Department of Education,

Office of Special Education Programs). IDEA (2004) is an umbrella law under which the state is

allowed to regulate to a higher standard than that of the federal law but not less than. Further, a

state is to specifically identify any state requirement that may be a higher standard than the

federal law for review and approval (C. Kniseley, U.S. Department of Education, personal

communication, October 7, 2022; Yell, 2012). The State of Virginia develops and disseminates a

"Guidance Document for Developing Local Policies and Procedures Required for

Implementation of Special Education Regulations in Virginia's Public Schools" to the various

districts within the State. This approach to issuing district level guidance is common (C.

Kniseley, U.S. Department of Education, personal communication, October 7, 2022). Virginia's

guidance explains that in order to receive federal funding under IDEA (2004), schools must

follow specific rules to ensure that students with disabilities get a free and appropriate public

education (FAPE). Further, the explanation includes the required policies and procedures schools

need to have in place to meet federal and state laws under IDEA (2004). Lasty, the guidance

focuses only on the mandatory regulations, it does not cover optional procedures schools might

create, which don't usually need approval from the state or local school boards.

The language of the guidance referenced above is vague and leaves room for

interpretation in implementation (C. Kniseley, U.S. Department of Education, personal

communication, October 7, 2022). For example, IDEA (2004) requires that a person with

knowledge of available resources be included as a participant on the IEP team (IDEA, 20 U.S.C.

§ 1414, 2004) and allows for the designation of a local educational representative to fill this role.

The designated representative can be a central office staff member, a school-based staff member,

or the principal, depending on the district, school, and the specific needs of the student being

discussed during the IEP meeting. As a result, the principal's decision-making authority may

vary based on the context, particularly when it comes to committing school resources. For

instance, if there are concerns about the cost of a support service or if a decision might set a

precedent for the district, the principal may need to consult with district office leadership before

making a final decision (C. Kniseley, U.S. Department of Education, personal communication,

October 7, 2022). This type of situation, the parent not knowing or understanding that there are

internal district dynamics or decision-making requirements, may affect the principal's ability to

build trust with the parents of children with disabilities. Moreover, that district's may not be

transparent about these processes, the criteria, or the outcome could further compound the

problem (C. Kniseley, U.S. Department of Education, personal communication, October 7,

2022). This challenge highlights the role of principal motivation regarding authentic/inauthentic

actions (Kernis & Goldman, 2006) noted under principal attributes and the need for transparency

and accountability in creating positive school climate (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Tschannen-

Moran, 2014).

Also complicating the trust dynamic are the prescriptive decisional dispute resolution

processes within the IDEA (2004) legislation that encompass administrative and judicial

complaints that may be either taken to the state as a state complaint, mediated through formal

mediation processes, or brought to court through a due process hearing (Rose & Zirkel, 2015).

This process is established should there be a dispute between IEP team members during the

educational planning process. In both the administration complaint process and the judicial

hearing process, the adjudicator can award tuition reimbursement, compensatory education, or

supports/services retroactively. This adjudicative structure is unique to special education (Perry

Zirkel, CADRE webinar presentation, 2017), because it provides for specific legal protections

and dispute resolution mechanisms that are tailored to protect the needs of students with

disabilities and their families. Of the dispute resolution processes, complaints can be filed by

anyone or association whereas hearings can be brought by either the parent or the district. Both

processes include data either via an investigator in the complaint process or the submission of

evidence in the hearing, thus every engagement during the educational planning process can be

used as evidence. As such, the decision and actions of the principal, and their staff, are examined

with scrutiny. This in and of itself may impact trust.

The nature of the relationship between principals and parents of students with disabilities

is inherently different from that of other parent relationships given the principals prescribed

mandate and requirements established in the special education legislation IDEA (2004). There is

a significant body of literature which examines the impact of parent involvement. Despite the

varied defining factors that comprise parent involvement (at-school or at-home), parental

involvement has a positive impact on student academic outcomes, and these findings span across the literature of both typically developing students (Ates, 2021; Erdem & Kaya 2020) as well as students with disabilities (Tschannen-Moran (2014), Bryk & Schneider (2003), Hoy & Tschannen-Moran,1999). However, there is a gap in the literature when considering the trust between principals and parents of students with disabilities in the context of the special educational planning process required under IDEA (2004), which is an integral component within the context of special education.

While principals may have little control over the legislation and subsequent policies, they have options to invest in professional development to ensure understanding and comprehension of the legislation and policies, degree and type of communication with parents, and ability to create and sustain a collaborative climate for the parent-principal dyad. This will help the respective parties to make informed decisions and successfully negotiate during the educational planning process. There is existing research on several types of relational trust development and/or parental education with specific actionable items that could be applied and may help to improve the parent-principal dyad. The following chapter presents the elements of relational trust as considered within the educational setting of Tschannen-Moran's (2004, 2014) and Bryk and Schneider (2003) and trust through the lens of strategic alliance as modeled by Das and Teng's (2004). Together these elements inform the conceptual framework used for this study.

Das and Teng's 2004 model considers the factors that influence trust through business principles, strategic alliances, and effective negotiations. Their research is referenced throughout the educationally related trust-based studies and is germane to this study's context. This business lens is considered critically important as the educational

planning process is comparable to contract negotiations complete with legal ramifications.

Principals are called upon to allocate resources, create school climate, be a leader of teachers, and model principles (Johnson & Kruse, 2009). While principals and parents of children with disabilities generally seem to agree in their desire to improve outcomes for children with disabilities, there is a tension that exists between parent advocacy and an administrator's responsibility to the school. The respective views on appropriate student support may not align. Thus, trustworthy leadership may be the key factor to improving the educational experiences of children with disabilities (Billingsley et al, 2014) and impact the parent-principal dyad.

Summary

The ability of the principal to deliver trustworthy leadership is reflected in their staffs' internalization and application of trusting behaviors in their respective relationships, to respectfully engage, communicate, and participate in decision-making. Noonan and colleagues (2008) describe the principal as the moral agent in that "s/he judges and makes decisions and fosters a community of trust, not only in themselves and the 'institution of education' but between and among students, parents, community members, staff members…" (p.3). This highlights the essential role the principal plays in the parent-principal dyad, and it is integral to understand factors that may improve upon it to ensure the success of students with disabilities.

IDEA (2004) legislation may infuse many complexities into the educational planning process and as such, it was important to consider motivation/intent, vulnerability/predictability, and experience over time for the conceptual framework of this research. To address these factors the business-oriented frameworks of Das and Teng's (1998, 2004) strategic alliance, risk-based principles of experience, motivation, and probability of occurrence have been incorporated as a lens through which to view

legislative processes.

Strong trust within transparent relationships between principals and parents of students with disabilities has the potential to lead to greater parent involvement. However, the principal parent relationship in this context is full of challenges that need to be addressed to better support the development of that trust. The principal's understanding of and strategy in addressing the socio-economic, school, and legislative factors could inform the trust between these parties during the educational planning process. This improved collaboration may lead to improved academic and social-emotional outcomes for students with disabilities. The following chapter describes the conceptual framework and methodology for examining the practices in principal leadership with parents of students with disabilities during educational planning.

Chapter 3: Conceptual Framework and Methodology

This study considers the role of trust in the legally mandated special education individualized educational planning and implementation process between the school principal and the parents of students with disabilities. As outlined in the literature review, understanding the quality of trust centers on examining the connections and factors that influence those connections within interpersonal relationships (Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 1999). This study will specifically focus on the quality of trust in the relationship between the principal and the parent of a student with a disability. In any relationship, both the trustor and trustee are interdependent, with the level and degree of trust varying depending on the situation, the risks involved, and the parties involved (Das & Teng, 2004; Vangen & Huxham, 2003). The literature review presents the principal-parent dyad as a unique relationship, one whose complexity and interdependence are strongly shaped by legal requirements.

This chapter begins with an explanation of the conceptual framework that informed the research design and through which the data collected in support of this study will be analyzed and interpreted. The chapter then presents the research design including methods for data collection and analysis and potential limitations of the study. The research design was intended to explore the practices of principal leadership with parents of students with disabilities during the educational planning process.

Conceptual Framework

The proposed conceptual framework presented in this chapter (see figure 1) considered relational and strategic alliance trust frameworks to identify the essential leadership practices principals may employ when working with parents of students with disabilities during the educational planning. The elements considered are presented with respect to their impact on one

another, the educational planning process, and their influence on trust within the principal/parent dyad. The legal entanglement of this dyad adds additional complexity; thus, the strategic alliance and trust structure are also considered.

With a focus on relational trust in the educational setting and the legal dynamic of the educational planning process, the proposed combined two frameworks discussed in the literature review: relational trust and strategic alliances. Tschannen-Moran (2014) and Bryk and Schneider (2003), focus on the development of relational trust within the educational setting in which the factors of knowledge, climate, and communication are highlighted as powerful elements in the efforts to build trust. Das and Teng (1998, 2004) on the other hand, focus on those efforts designed to build trust within strategic alliances, with a critical look at behaviors that inform trust within the context of profit/loss, succeed/fail, and interdependence. While Tschannen-Moran (2014) and Byrk and Schneider (2003) characterize relational trust by its social exchanges amongst parties with mutual dependencies, Das and Teng characterize relational trust as the true intention of the trusted party when the commitment is made. Unpacking the proposed conceptual framework begins with understanding the nature and role of each of its respective components: Ability to Act, Knowledge, Climate, and Communication within the context of relational and strategic trust.

Ability to Act

Members of the IEP team are bound by differing, and possibly competing, constraints (e.g., personal beliefs, legislative requirements, budgets, competing priorities) (McLaughlin, 2004). As a result, any discussion related to trust during the IEP educational planning and implementation process must include an examination of the principal's ability to adapt and apply information, their motivation/intent, predictability in behavior, the likelihood of commitment

fulfillment, and the previous experience the parties have with one another (Cosner, 2010; Das & Teng, 2004).

The aspect of a trustees' *ability*, utilizing and adapting applicable knowledge, will, or otherwise, to fulfill a commitment is a concept absent from Tschannen-Moran's (2014) model, and key to Das and Teng (2004). For the purposes of this study, a trustee's ability to fulfill their commitment will be termed as their *ability to act,* defined by the probability that an action will occur, the motivation of the parties align, that the requisite knowledge can be applied to a varied constellation of factors, and the consequences to the respective parties exist if the stated the action occurs or not (Das & Teng, 2004).

In the context of this study, the working definition for the *ability to act* component of the proposed conceptual framework identifies three key non-technical leadership competencies: 1) willingness, demonstrable willingness reduces perceived risk and increases predictability (Das & Teng, 2004), 2) motivation, which increases integrity (Das & Teng, 2004) and 3) ability to apply knowledge to new and different contexts, which reduces performance risk (Das & Teng, 2004; Sulantara et al., 2020). This working definition provides a frame for observed actions and behaviors, which are subject to the interpretation of one's personal perspective, experience, and inform risks inferred from observable behavior (Das & Teng, 2004).

Trust is informed by one's own perception (the subjective experience) and the assessment of the risks in the trusted relationship e.g., probability of outcome based on historical experience (Das & Teng, 1998, 2004). When individuals consistently observe trustworthy behavior from others, it reinforces trust and increases the likelihood of others placing trust in their future actions. Conversely, if there is knowledge or experience of past breaches of trust, then trust may be diminished. Behaviors are an observable way to assess the trustee's commitment, thus the

behavior of one party, or another, in a trust-based relationship is influenced by one's perception

and the risk factors inferred from that observable behavior (Das & Teng, 2004). Knowledge

about someone's past performance, reliability, integrity, and adherence to commitments can

shape the level of perceived risk.

Demonstratable performance informs level of risk, experience of the trustor, and plays a

considerable role in the development of trust (Das & Teng, 1998, 2004). Performance risk refers

to the possibility that an individual or entity may not meet shared goals and expectations

(Colquitt et al., 2007; Das & Teng, 2004). This type of risk is particularly germane to the context

of this study as it is reasoned from the degree of skills, capabilities, resources, level of planning,

and elements beyond the control of the parties. In the context of this study consideration of risk

factors that could undermine performance during planning is essential to make informed

decisions and/or plan mitigating strategies to address those areas with higher performance risk

(Sitkin & Roth, 1998; Das & Teng, 1998, 2010).

Tschannen-Moran (2015) deem observable trust, in the relational trust framework, as a

precursor to a willingness to take risk, "the confidence one holds in the intentions and capacity of

the other person to fulfill one's expectations results in feeling a greater sense of ease in the

interdependence and a willingness to take risks" (p.257). Alternately, Das and Teng (2010)

intentionally contrast performance risk and relational trust. Performance risk being the objective

evaluation of an individual's or entity's performance and their track record in delivering results

with the concept of relational trust referring to intent or motive (Sitkin & Roth, 1998; Das &

Teng, 2004, 2010).

While strategic alliances rely on observable behavior and performance risk as tangible

and concrete e.g., did a particular commitment come to fruition, relational trust as considered by

Hoy and Tschannen-Moran (1998) stresses the subjective and interpersonal aspects of trust within a working relationship. The level of trust and confidence individuals have in the others' intentions, motivations, and character stem from factors such as openness, honesty, integrity, empathy, and the belief that the other party will act in a trustworthy manner (Tschannen-Moran, 2014). The belief that the other person will act in the best interest of the relationship is anchored in factors like effective communication, mutual understanding, and shared values.

The ability for a principal to act as part of the educational planning and implementation process for the IEP plays a pivotal role in the demonstration of fulfilled commitments. To minimize both perceived risk and performance risk, a principal should have the ability to think flexibly about the needs of the student, the available resources, and the interplay between what is needed and those elements that may be beyond the control of the principal. This ability to apply knowledge based on the respective factors or the situation may lead to reduced performance risk and improved planning for the student. Further, it provides an opportunity for the principal to overtly demonstrate willingness and intent to reduce perceived risk and build trust between the parties. Where ability to act addressed willingness, intent, and the ability to flexibly apply knowledge as needed by disparate fact patterns, the knowledge section considers the body of knowledge needed to effectively understand one's role, participate in the educational planning process, and instill confidence.

Knowledge

Knowledge, in this context, refers to substantive informational content, with respect to disabilities, school-based staff, district resources, implementation of special education laws, regulations, and local policies, development and implementation of IEPs, and budget allocation and priorities. When educators possess the necessary information to effectively understand the

requirements of their roles, it instills confidence and credibility. When parents of a student with a disability possess the requisite knowledge of their child's disability and the necessary supports, they can adequately plan and advocate for their child's development (Mapp, 2003). A gap in knowledge could increase performance risk and adversely impact relational trust, for example, breadth of knowledge on the various disabilities and the legislative requirements may affect the educational planning process. As previously noted, the present depth or lack of knowledge does not necessarily serve as a deterrent to trust, the deterrent was more so the lack of willingness to learn (Cosner, 2010).

The degree of knowledge held by a principal affects their ability to consistently provide appropriate guidance and support to parents, teachers, and service providers which could impact service delivery, quality, and accessibility of educational services for students with disabilities (Roberts & Guerra, 2017). The study by Roberts and Guerra (2017) used a mixed-method design to examine principal preparation programs in the context of special education. The researchers found a notable contradiction in the data. When analyzing responses to choice-oriented questions, 63% of principals admitted they felt they lacked the necessary knowledge to design appropriate curriculum for students with disabilities, which Roberts and Guerra identified as a crucial factor for student success. However, this issue of inadequate knowledge was not mentioned in the open-ended responses. Instead, principals who felt adequately prepared cited a need for greater training in special education law and requirements, suggesting that their primary concern was not curriculum design but legal knowledge and understanding of regulations. This discrepancy between the choice-based questions and open-ended responses highlights a contradiction in the data and points to potential areas for improvement in principal preparation programs. The contradiction noted by Roberts and Guerra (2017) has tangible consequences for

special education. As previously described, the educational planning process is a prescribed

process with specific rights afforded to all parties and legally binding dispute processes should

an agreement not be reached or if services are not effectively executed. The finding of Roberts

and Guerra (2017) could imply that principal focus is on the process rather than on the design of

the curriculum for the student with the disability.

To this point the relational trust and strategic alliances frameworks have been considered

and compared, to offer perspective on elements that may inform the trust with respect to one's

ability to act and their knowledge (Tschannen-Moran, 2014; Bryk et al., 2010; Bryk &

Schneider, 1996; Das and Teng, 2004). The following paragraphs unpack the importance of

effective communication and school climate on the development of trust in the principal-parent

dyad.

Communication

Communication within the context of educational planning is essential not only because it

is highlighted as a key indicator within the development of trust and school-based relationships

(Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 1999; Tschannen-Moran, 2014) but is also

high stakes. The IDEA (2004) legislation mandate includes specific timelines for the various

processes to ensure timely support and decision making for students with disabilities (IDEA, 20

U.S.C. §1414 et seq., 2004). These timelines are designed to maintain an effective and efficient

flow of communication and actions between schools and families. The legislation also provides

for mandated procedures designed to protect the rights of the students and their families known

as the Procedural Safeguards Notice. This notice is essentially a guide that lays out the steps the

school must follow to ensure that students with disabilities receive a free appropriate public

education (IDEA, 20 U.S.C. §1415 et seq., 2004). We will begin the discussion with informal

communication and its role in the educational planning and implementation process.

The day-to-day interpersonal engagements within the school environment are an informal

mode of communication (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 1999; Tschannen-

Moran, 2014). The quality and consistency of these informal day-to-day interactions plays an

important role in that they create a cycle of experience that influences the trust in either a

positive or negative manner (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 1999;

Tschannen-Moran, 2014). While much of the research considered focuses on the schools' parent

community at large and not specific to parents of students with disabilities, it is still relevant.

Illustrating this point, in situations where there have been successful engagements between

parents of students with disabilities and their schools, "parents often describe the presence of a

positive and strong communication with school personnel" (Kurth et. al., 2019, p. 122). Parents

of students with special needs are part of, and effected by, the larger school parent community

while also being subject to a mandate of prescribed communication.

The prescribed communication mandated by the special education legislation has been

challenging for many in the field of education (Yell, 2012). This prescribed course of action

dictates written communication that documents, but is not limited to, student records, results of

student testing and evaluations, identified student needs, expressed concerns, recommendations,

impact of disability, goals, placement, services identified to support the child's stated goal and

frequency of delivery, modality of informing progress agreements/disagreements around the

needs, etc. and prescribed timelines and content requirements for the various documents. An

example of this required communication is the *Prior Written Notice* which requires the school to

completely document the actions it either proposes or refuses to take toward serving the student's

needs. The intent of the notice is to ensure all parties understand the decisions made and the

supporting rationale (IDEA, 20 U.S.C. §1414-1415 et seq., 2004). The prior written notice is

often the substance of complaints and legal action (Katsiyannis et al, 2001). The official planning

document, the IEP, and its supporting documentation, establish a legally binding contract for

services between the school district and the parent(s) (Yell, 2012). The push and pull of informal

and formal communications may be strongly influenced by the climate in which they exist.

School Climate

There is a link between strong leadership and the cultivation of a climate that supports

positive cultural norms specifically, accountability, achievement, and the generation of trust

(Tschannen-Moran, 2014, Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015). A strong climate considers power

dynamics and previous experience as an influence in the on-going cycle of experiences (Das &

Teng, 1996; Das & Teng, 2004; Vangen & Huxam, 2003; and Poulsen et al., 2021). For

example, if communication breaks down, miscommunications occur, or there is insufficient

engagement between principals and parents, perception of risk may increase, and the trust may

decrease.

For the purposes of this discussion climate is defined as the norms, behaviors, and/or

expectations that are important to an organization and its members and are driven by the school's

leadership (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 1998). Demonstrable actions i.e., displays of respect,

willingness to listen and learn, and the pacing of meetings, that school staff exercise with parents

during the educational planning process plays a critical role in parents' perception and/or feeling

of acceptance (Soodak & Erwin, 2000). As Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (1998) note, "school

climate is a relatively enduring quality of the entire school that is experienced by members,

describes their collective perceptions of routine behavior, and affects their attitude and behavior

in the school" (p. 337). This enduring nature may unintentionally serve to influence members of a school's community before their first engagement with the school.

How members of the school community engage with one another, and the understanding that each person has of their role and responsibilities within an exchange (Bryk & Schneider, 2003) is a demonstration of the school climate. Tschannen-Moran (2014) cites Payne and Kaba's (2001) study by the Consortium on Chicago School Research which specifically, "call(s) out that the parent teacher relationship in the top 30 performing schools was stronger than those in the bottom 30 schools. They concluded that the quality of trust was key to improving schools" (p.206). The study focused on urban schools and considered race and social infrastructure which, given the unique relationship in this study's principal-parent dyad, could be informative when considering climate.

Demoralized school climates yield heightened sensitivities and suspicion (Payne & Kaba, 2001). The Chicago study implied competition between insufficient resources, new initiatives, and required mandates contributed to the demoralization of the school climate. The study's data revealed that increased interaction alone between parents and teachers "didn't change the deeply ingrained tendency of one group to interpret the behavior of the other group in the most negative way possible" (Payne & Kaba, 2001, p. 31) making the ability to communicate the most basic of information challenging. Payne and Kaba (2001) identified that a persistent lack of trust across multiple communities within the schools: leadership, teachers, and parents is predicative of the school climate and educational achievement.

The interplay of motivation/intent, competence, predictability as informed by experience, level of knowledge, communication, and climate within the trustor/trustee relationship is key (Cosner, 2010, Das and Teng, 2004). These factors have a direct relationship to the trust and the

expectations of future behavior (Bauer, 2015). The overarching thinking being that an

individual's perceptions of previous experience serve as that person's gauge when anticipating

future performance and in making agreements (Das & Teng, 2004).

Figure 1

Visual Representation of the Conceptual Framework for Influences on Trust During IEP

Planning and Implementation

Summary: Conceptual Framework

The preceding sections highlighted the influence of knowledge, communication, ability to act and school climate on the trust in the principal parent dyad during the educational planning process for students with disabilities. Identifying the specific leadership practices taken in these categories that influence the trust could lend insight into strategies principals could employ when working with parents of students with disabilities during the educational planning process.

Research Questions

As described in Chapter One, this study aimed to identify, classify, and analyze factors that may affect the quality of trust between principals and the parents of students with disabilities during the educational planning process. Specifically, this study considered the role of trust in the legally mandated special education individualized educational planning process between the school principal and the parents of students with disabilities. As described in Chapter Two, while there are many factors that influence the development and readiness of trust between the two parties of the dyad, only a limited number of them may be addressed through principal leadership. The research questions are as follows:

Research Questions:

1. In what ways, if any, do principals in three schools characterize trust as an element in promoting parental engagement in the educational planning process?

2. What factors do principals report as having the most significant effect on the quality and strength of trust between the parents of students with disabilities and the principals during the educational planning process?

    a. How does the legally mandated relationship that exists between principals and parents of students with disabilities affect the development of trust during the required educational planning process?

3. What principal leadership practices do principals report using to strengthen and build the quality of trust with parents of students with disabilities during the educational planning process?

    a. How do principals determine the efficacy of the practices employed to strengthen trust with parents of students with disabilities during the educational planning process?

The first question establishes the principal's characterization of trust as it relates to the educational planning process with parents of students with disabilities. The second question is designed to help understand the factors that principals report as having the most significant impact on the quality of trust with parents of students with disabilities with the sub-question, focusing in on principal perception of the legally mandated relationship they share with parents of students with disabilities during the educational planning process. Specifically, this question will highlight any competing pressures and or challenges that may influence leadership practices to build trust within the context of the educational planning process. How the principals respond may provide insight into the practices and strategies employed for communication, culture, capacity building, etc.

    The third research question allows for exploration of the leadership practices that principals report using during the educational planning process with the sub-question reflecting on what principals' report as the most effective practices in working within the principal parent dyad. The aim is to learn how principals refine or pivot in their leadership practices and/or

process when engaging with parents of students with disabilities during the educational planning and implementation process and the resulting impact.

Research Design

This study focused on the leadership practices of principals that influence the trust between themselves and parents of students with disabilities during the educational planning and implementation process. The development of trust is highly context dependent. Given the complexity and dynamics of the study and the significant role of context, I conducted a qualitative, explanatory case study. A case study methodology allowed for a focused look of one district, helping to highlight the nuances and complexities involved in trust development. This study focused on one district to limit the interference of external factors e.g., local autonomy in developing and implementing district policies around special education on the data collection. Further, this methodology allowed for the exploration into how principals understand the role of their leadership practices during the educational planning process and their impact on the trust within their planning process under the confines of their district policies and procedures.

The core of the research questions focused on the principal's practices, behaviors, and/or actions and the resulting impact on the parental trust during the education planning process. With this aim in mind, the explanatory method was selected as the type of case study to "determine how events occur, and which ones may include particular outcomes" (Hancock & Algozzine, 2021, p.37). The educational planning process specific to IEP educational planning and implementation was framed as the event within the case study and the principal practices and behavior as the influences that may affect the trust within the educational planning and implementation process (Hancock & Algozzine, 2021).

Site Selection

For this study I examined a positive deviant for practices, sites and participants that were noted as models of strong practice in parental engagement. Sites were chosen with the input from the National Center for Systemic Improvement to identify and focus on a district with high rates of special education students passing statewide assessments and a demonstrated commitment to improved special education programs and parental outreach. Once the district was selected, I identified schools within the district that were highlighted as models of best practice, and/or had been noted for having high levels of parent engagement. Also considered was information and data that was collected from the local U.S. Department of Education funded Parent Training Institute or Community Parent Resource Center. These federally funded centers serve as a resource for families of children with disabilities and are known to be well versed on the functioning of the school systems within their domain (C. Sanchez, U.S. Department of Education, personal communication, November 30, 2023).

More specifically, the study focused on three schools within a single district to mitigate any influence that may stem from cross State or district policies and procedures. Interview data was gathered from three principals, three special education teachers, and two general education teachers and focused on the leadership practices of the three principals and their interactions with the parents of students with disabilities during the IEP educational planning and implementation process. The choice to conduct a case study offered the opportunity to collect "multiple realities" (Hancock & Algozzine, 2021, p.78) through a detailed exploration of the principals' leadership practices. The aim being to identify practical insights into principal practice that may apply toward improved relationships with parents of students with disabilities and ultimately an improvement of outcomes for students with disabilities.

Data Collection Plan and Rationale

The data for this case study was collected through publicly available information and the interview process. That information was then analyzed to gain insight into the context and leadership practices applied in the principal-parent dyad. Once interviews were completed and transcribed, the data was coded and an analysis conducted that focused on the four influencing factors to identify any patterns that may have appeared in practice with respect to the trust. This material was used to identify practices or suggest further research that could be applied to efforts and initiatives targeting the development of trusting relationships between principals and parents of students with disabilities.

Study Participants and Interviews

Participant selection involved a deliberate focus on key individuals within the school system. First, the school principals for their role and essentiality in creating the school climate, accountable official for IEP implementation, and orchestrator for service provision (Vaughn & Swanson, 2015). Special education teachers were of second focus for their role as a connection between the school and the parents of students with disabilities, managing day-to-day progress and addressing questions (Dhillon, 2007). General education teachers were selected as they play a vital role in that they are often the first to notice when students deviate from developmental norms. And they engage with parents about challenges and communicate with internal school teams (Berkant & Atilgan, 2019). Finally, the district parent liaison was included because of their in-depth knowledge of school operations within their districts (C. Sanchez, U.S. Department of Education, personal communication, November 30, 2023).

Participants were selected based on their notability for successful engagements with parents of students with disabilities. The director of special education provided recommendations

for principals that have been in place for five years or more and had experience with all aspects of the special education planning processes and requirements e.g., eligibility determination, IEP development, dispute resolution, etc. For both special education and general education teachers, recommendations were solicited from the principals for teacher participants that had been recognized or were notable for their best practices or high levels of parental involvement within their respective schools.

Interviews were conducted with three principals, three special education teachers, two general education teachers, and the district's parent liaison (Table 2). Through research conducted during the development of the interview protocols for this study, I found previously gathered dissertation data that targeted the principal knowledge of special education which helped inform the interview probes (Schexnider, 2021). All interviews were focused on gathering information about the principal practices utilized to build trust with parents of students with disabilities during the educational planning process. Interviews took approximately 60 minutes and were recorded for transcription. An external transcription service was used for the initial transcript and the audio was reviewed to ensure clarity and accuracy. Transcripts were shared with interviewed participants for then to validate accuracy and increase validity of the data gathered (Mirriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Table 2

Study Participants

Participant Code	Role	Type of School	Years of Experience
Participant A	Principal	Elementary	8 Years General Education, 7 years Principal
Participant B	Special Education Teacher	Elementary	13 years as an aide, 3 years as a special education teacher

Participant Code	Role	Type of School	Years of Experience
Participant C	General Education Teacher	Elementary	10 years as a bilingual aide, 10 years as a general education teacher
Participant D	Principal	Middle School	7 years as a general education teacher 18 years as a principal
Participant E	Special Education Teacher	Middle School	14 years as a special education teacher
Participant F			
Participant G	Principal	Middle School	2 years as an instructional aide, 12 years as a general education teacher, 7 years as a principal
Participant H	Special Education Teacher	Middle School	5 years as a special education teacher
Participant I	General Education Teacher	Middle School	10 years as a general education teacher
Participant J	Parent Liaison	District	4 years as instructional aide, 10 years as a general education teacher, 3 years as a parent liaison.

The study relied on a semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix C) to gather information informing the proposed research questions (Table 3). The semi-structured interview approach ensured both structure and flexibility. This approach, coupled with open-ended questions, provided principals ample opportunity to describe their practices, their strategies, and their decision-making process while also affording the interviewer the ability to ask follow-up questions as needed (Hancock & Algozzine, 2021).

Based on the location of the district chosen for the study and interviewee availability, the interviews were conducted via zoom video calls. I provided all interview participants with the informed consent documents prior to the interview and all participant information is confidential.

Publicly Available Data

The information review entailed publicly available information from the websites of the

state, district, and federal departments of education. Data included, the district's special

education procedures, performance, and compliance, performance report card, and

demographics, number of complaints filed with the Office of Civil Rights. Information was also

collected for availability of special education providers and district staffing. The only publicly

available data was digital. The information was tracked by descriptors, content, and web address.

To align with the conceptual framework, the data targeted for the document review will be

analyzed for contextual factors that may influence principal choices in line with their knowledge,

ability to act, level of communication and/or environment. The data from this analysis was

documented via the review protocol in Appendix B (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). These results

were used to support, augment, and/or triangulate the data collected from the interview

questions. All data sources have been stored on a password protected laptop.

Table 3

Methods and Rationale for Proposed Research Questions

Research Question	Method	Rationale
Primary Research Question 1: In what ways, if any, do principals characterize trust as an element in promoting parental engagement in the educational planning process?	Semi-structured interviews	Semi-structured interviews will provide principals the opportunity to describe their understanding of the unique relationship that exists in the principal parent dyad as it pertains to IDEA (2004) and if that factor affects their leadership practices in developing trust with the parents of students with disabilities.
Primary Research Question 2:	Semi-structured interviews	Semi-structured interviews will provide principals the opportunity to

Research Question	Method	Rationale
What factors do principals report as having the most significant effect on the quality and strength of trust between the parents of students with disabilities and the principals during the educational planning process?		describe their understanding of the unique relationship that exists in the principal parent dyad as it pertains to IDEA (2004) and if that factor affects their leadership practices in developing trust with the parents of students with disabilities.
	Document analysis	Document analysis allows for examination of previous district performance, resources, and experiences that impact the strength of trust in the principal parent dyad.
Sub-question 2: How does the legally mandated relationship that exists between principals and parents of students with disabilities affect the development of trust during the required educational planning process?	Semi-structured interviews	Semi-structured interviews will be used to inquire about the current understanding of the principal's role during the educational planning process.
Primary Research Question 3 What principal leadership practices do principals report using to strengthen and build the quality of trust with parents of students with disabilities during the educational planning process?	Semi-structured interviews	Semi-structured interviews with all identified participants at 3 school sites to gain insight into the strategies principals apply in building the strength of trust during the educational planning process with parents of students with disabilities.
Sub-question 3: How do principals determine the efficacy of the practices they	Semi-structured interviews	Semi-structured interviews will be used to inquire about the current understanding of the principal's role

Research Question	Method	Rationale
employ to strengthen trust with parents of students with disabilities during the educational planning process?		during the educational planning process.

Data Analysis

The case study methodology afforded a deeper understanding of the data about the leadership practices. The initial step of this case study entailed a comprehensive review of publicly available and an analysis of the data gathered from semi-structured interviews.

The conceptual framework for this study was applied to the cycle of the IEP educational planning process as the ongoing cycle of experiences and the varied contributing factors that may inform the trust throughout the process. Table 4, Appendix A, shows the potential relationships between the factors influencing trust related to the relational trust and strategic alliance models discussed in the literature review. The chart depicts the four key factors identified in the conceptual framework, demonstrable actions by a principal, and the proposed impact of those factors (increase or decrease of risk and/or integrity) of trust. To that end, initial deductive codes (Appendix G) were derived directly from the conceptual framework and focused on the factors identified as influential to trust in the principal parent dyad during the educational planning process. These codes were then applied to identify overarching themes in the data.

The understanding of this data evolved as data were gathered. Further, the analysis of the data included inductive coding to search for discrepant evidence of unanticipated factors. Of critical importance was to ensure that the data code book and subsequent analysis were closely aligned with the research questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). As a result, it was necessary to adjust the analytic tools as the data was gathered and understood (Hancock & Algozzine, 2021).

During the analysis of the data, new codes were identified, analytic memos served as a primary tool to document new or changing code categories and were used to support updates to the code book as needed. Given the weight of context and its contributions to the development of trust, the analytic memos were also used to provide information on relevant contextual factors of the data collected.

For the document review, a strategic data approach was applied (Hayes et al., 2016) to identify any potential subtypes in publicly available information that was reviewed and their corresponding relevance to the data code book. The information reviewed for this case study had subtypes that aligned with district performance i.e., school report cards, resources and experiences i.e., complaints filed against the school that may have had an impact on the trust in the principal parent dyads within the district.

Methodological Limitations

The study used an explanatory case study approach and focused on a single school district. While necessary to limit the interference of external factors, this approach limits the generalizability of these findings (Maxwell, 2005). The specific dynamics and practices identified in the study may not be applicable to other schools or districts due to differences in policies, resources, and community characteristics.

The study included a limited number of roles that are fulfilled in a typical school. Interviewing principals, special education teachers, general education teachers, and the parent liaison provided a lens into principal practices, however it may not have captured the full range of experience and perspectives within the broader range of service providers and stakeholders that comprise the school's special education community. While the study includes a parent liaison, the focus is on principal practices, it does not include firsthand parent perspective which

limits the exploration of the parent experience. The exclusion of these other roles may limit understanding of the overall dynamics during the education planning and implementation process of special education.

Further, this study focused on a positive deviant which may also serve as a limitation. A potentially exceptional district may not be representative of the composition in a typical school district. Therefore, the efficacy of the practices identified may be greater or lesser based on the local constellation of factors i.e., parent-related factors, school-related factors, and legislatively related factors.

The literature review of the study acknowledged that trust is subjective based on the individual's previous experiences that form and shape one's propensity and likelihood of trust (Das & Teng, 2004). Given the subjective nature of trust coupled with the lack of a standardized definition, may hinder the ability to compare findings across research studies. Moreover, there are issues that stem from variations local contexts of policies, and interpretations of special education law, all of which can affect the implementation and effectiveness of principal leadership practices. District resources and district policies may also impact efficacy of principal practice. While the target district was part of a larger service consortium, other districts may not have that luxury, and these variations can lead to differences in resource allocation and conflict resolution. Strategies presented may need to be adapted to suit each district/schools' unique needs and communities served.

Future studies should consider expanding the study beyond the single district using a multiple case study approach, this could allow for a more comprehensive understanding of these practices. A broader study could also explore whether the dynamic and practices identified are

applicable to other schools or districts with different policies and resources. Additionally, future studies should include a wider range of perspectives by including other service providers, stakeholders, and parents of students with disabilities in order to gain a deeper understanding of the full dynamics of special education planning and implementation and potential barriers.

Role of the Researcher

As the principal investigator of this study, I maintained an "insider-outsider" status (Conner & Cavendish, 2018), meaning I have worked and lived in the field of special education as a provider, writer of policy and conductor of oversight, and as the parent of a child with a disability. This breadth of experience offered a unique perspective into the topic at hand, and the challenges embedded throughout the educational system for educators, parents, and children with disabilities. Given my experience, I employed strategies to ensure that I remain neutral throughout data collection and was mindful of interpreting data without influence of my own personal biases. I strongly believe that this research could advance principal leadership, awareness, and skills necessary to build trust in the principal-parent dyad and impact the educational planning process for children with disabilities.

The study design purposefully selected a district that was considered a model for strong parental engagement with parents of students with disabilities. By choosing a district with higher than state average graduation rates and a demonstrated commitment to improving its special education programs and parent engagement, the research highlights successful practices from which to learn and build future research. The selected principal participants were recommended by the districts Special Education Director for their high levels of parent engagement for parents of students with disabilities. The study's core research questions focused on principal practices,

behaviors, and/or actions, all factors within principal control, and their impact on building of trust with parents of students with disabilities.

Conclusion

This chapter outlined the methodological approach that was employed during this case study, providing insights into the procedures for document review, interview protocols, and data analysis. A comprehensive analysis of the data obtained from both document review and interviews, led to the identification of strategies and/or barriers experienced by principals when working to build trusting relationships with parents of students with disabilities during the IEP educational planning process.

Chapter 4: Research Findings

This section explores how principals in a "*positive deviant*" school district characterize trust when working with parents of students with disabilities during the educational planning process for students with disabilities. The district selected was noted for its commitment to improving special education programs and parental engagement through information gathered from the National Center for Systemic Improvement. To mitigate external factors resulting from varying interpretations of IDEA (2004) special education requirements at the state and local levels, this qualitative, explanatory case study was designed by limiting the study to a single district. This approach minimizes the impact of varied interpretations on policy and procedure.

Data were collected through interviews with principals, special education teachers, general education teachers, and a parent liaison. Additionally, publicly available information about the district was reviewed. The study aimed to gather data to identify successful leadership practices in building trust with parents of students with disabilities and to understand why the strategies employed by the principal participants were deemed as exemplar.

The data revealed that principals viewed trust as a foundational element built on open communication, accessibility, and collaborative partnerships. These elements, reflecting the concepts of honesty, benevolence, and reliability, create a setting in which parents feel secure in engaging with the school. For the principals in this study, trust is not an abstract concept but rather the basis for all effective interactions with parents, especially in the context of special education. It was asserted that without it, communication, planning, and implementing educational plans would become significantly more challenging.

The data presented have been anonymized to protect the identities of the state, district, and participants. This findings section begins with a description of the district as gleaned from publicly available information, followed by an analysis of how participants characterize trust (RQ1), the factors affecting trust (RQ2), and strategies used to build trust (RQ3).

Overview of Participants and the Target District

The study was conducted in three separate school sites within a single target district. Participants included three principals [A, D, G], three special education teachers [B, E, H], two general education teachers [C, I] and one district liaison [J]. Of the participants, two principals were from middle schools and one from an elementary school. Two special education teachers were from middle schools and one from an elementary school. One general education teacher was from a middle school and one from an elementary school. The parent liaison worked across district sites. Many participants had significant professional and personal experience working with students with disabilities.

The case study district is in a state that leverages special education consortia to ensure that districts work collaboratively to share resources to make available a full continuum of services and access to sufficient service providers. Many states use this strategy to mitigate against a district being too small to offer the required comprehensive programs and service provider supports. This consortia strategy is an effort to ensure that all school districts across the state have the necessary size and scope to effectively provide a full range of special education services to students with disabilities (State Website, 2019).

The state in which the target district is located supports data transparency for individual school districts. The state's public performance data website reports on how the case study school district's local educational agency promotes parental participation and builds partnerships

to improve student outcomes (State Performance Data, 2024). The website indicated that the parent and family engagement measure reflected principals and school leaders actively incorporating diverse voices, empowering families, and committing to community school initiatives. These efforts were demonstrated through principal-led training, family trainings, and ensuring special education student and parent voices are heard through an improved advisory committee representation and structured feedback loops.

The target district's performance data indicated that the English Language Arts and Math scores of students with disabilities were significantly below state standards, but graduation rates exceeded the state average. Specifically, the performance data indicated that the English Language Arts and Math scores of students with disabilities were significantly lower that the established state standard, 117.6 points below standard and 151.3 points below standard respectively. While graduation rates in the target district for student students with disabilities were 79.8% which exceeded the state average of 74.4% (State Performance Data, 2024)

In 2014, the target district had a complaint filed with the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights (OCR) (Office of Civil Rights, 2014(a)), which stated that the district failed to ensure the provision of special education services. The district resolved the complaint through a commitment to provide compensatory services, the installation of an audit system, and the development of a system to track and communicate with parents. This complaint was noted by one participant as the turning point in which the district recognized the need to assess and improve its special education programs.

Given limited studies focused on the association between trust, the principal-parent dyad, and the impact of the federally mandated requirements within the educational planning process,

this study addressed a unique gap in the literature. The development and implementation of the

IEP is a personalized and legally binding process where parents are equal team members, which

is distinct from the experience of parents of typically developing students. The interdependence

and vulnerability inherent in this relationship, along with the potential for legal and financial

consequences from disputes, underscore the importance of understanding and improving trust

between principals and parents of students with disabilities. The underlying problem of practice

contended that principals may be unaware of core factors that may impact principal trust with

parents of students with disabilities during this process.

To build the foundation on which to understand the participant input and understanding

of trust, the first research question aimed to establish a baseline for how principals and

participants characterized trust in promoting parental engagement during the educational

planning and implementation process. Study data revealed that participants characterization of

trust within this context broke out into three themes: open communication, value of the parent as

a climate norm, and engaging parents.

Research Question 1 - Characterization of Trust

As defined for this study, trust entails an interpersonal and organizational relationship,

based on interdependence inclusive of shared vulnerability (Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 1999;

Tschannen-Moran, 2015). Data from participants reflects this definition of trust. The overarching

themes highlighted by participants in defining trust aligned with Tschannen-Moran's (2014)

concepts of honesty, benevolence, and reliability, which enabled strong relationships amongst

principals, teachers, parents, and students. Similarly, the themes aligned with Das and Teng's

(2004) terms of honesty, integrity, and reliability which ensure reliable, predictable, ethical and

transparent engagements. All participants indicated that trust is the foundation for all

interactions, especially in special education. Without trust, communication, planning, and implementing educational plans become challenging. One special education teacher stated (Participant E), "Trust is... the foundation. If you don't have trust in your case carrier... that parent's not going to want to engage with you." Participant G, a general education teacher, simply stated that, "trust is everything in the IEP process." Participants in the study characterized trust as fundamentally built on open and transparent communication that occurs in a climate of collaboration, where parental engagement can be maximized through an accessible, response-oriented approach to problem-solving and partnership in which students are valued, and their individual needs are met.

Open and Transparent Communication

Open and transparent communication was highlighted as essential for building trust, the hallmarks of which were honesty and forthrightness when sharing information with parents. Transparent, in this context, describes the ongoing, regular communication with parents about their student's experiences. All participants emphasized the need to explain the rationale for student related decisions to parents. For example, one principal (Participant A) emphasized the need to explain to parents of students with disabilities the rationale for why particular actions were or were not taken as they pertained to their student. A special education teacher (Participant E) further highlighted the need for honesty even when it included having to admit to a mistake. Principal participant G indicated that a measure of trust was marked by a parent's knowledge that regardless of the situation, parents could expect transparency, say what actions she could take, and make decisions that are in the best interest of both the school and the students.

Being accessible and responsive to parents' concerns was highlighted as a significant aspect of open and transparent communication. All participants noted that parents need to feel

they can reach out and have their concerns addressed promptly. For example, one principal (Participant A) noted that trust included "returning their calls, answering their questions, being available to them." A special education teacher described the value of the principal in her school as readily available to parents ensuring quick response times, which indicates the priority and impact of predictability and reliability with regard to communication. Beyond open and transparent communication, responding to and resolving parents' concerns in an accountable and transparent way were highlighted as facets of transparency. These elements demonstrate a principal's commitment to the principal parent partnership, which is essential for collaborative decision-making.

This characterization and value of open and transparent communication was a common feature of trust across all three school sites. Further, not only were these elements reported by all principal participants, but also by their corresponding teacher participants, and the parent liaison. This is important to note as it illustrates the corresponding teachers' understanding and expectation of their respective principals. The parent liaison (Participant J) specifically discussed transparency as a "relief" that parents feel when they know they can rely on the information provided by the principal and their teachers noting, "they may not like what they're told but at least they have an answer." This perspective suggests that transparent communication carries value across the district and is not solely site specific.

Climate Norms

The three principal participants also expressed an understanding that the characterization of trust entailed more than just transparency, it required the establishment of a climate of partnership in which parents are regarded as integral members of the IEP team and the school community at large.

This climate norm, parents as integral to the process and school, signals the

understanding that principals and school must work with parents to successfully support students

with disabilities. Collaboration is essential in the IEP process because it ensures that parents,

educators, specialists, and the student work together to create a comprehensive, individualized

plan that addresses the student's unique needs and promotes meaningful educational progress.

The three principals, three special education teachers, and the parent liaison participants

(Participants B, D, E, A, C, H, G**)** spoke of trust as an essential part of the collaborative

partnership, in which parents and educators work together for the student's best interests. They

further explained that parents perceive that they are an integral part of the IEP team and that their

insights are considered, they will trust they are being heard and are more likely to be open to

hearing the input of the IEP team. Conversely, if parents perceive that their concerns are

dismissed or ignored, they are more likely to distrust the team and the principal. Furthermore,

two of the three principals emphasized the importance of working in partnership with the parents

(Participants D, G). With one special education teacher (Participant E) noting that trust is built

by allowing a "dialogue to be established instead of just… here, this is what the team thinks"

emphasizing the sense of partnership between the parent of the student with the disability and the

school service providers and representatives.

Parental Engagement and Investment in Students

In addition to embracing parents as integral members of the IEP team, participants noted that

the principal needs to be well versed in the needs of each individual student. All participants

indicated the tremendous value of benevolence and goodwill when working with parents of

students with disabilities. Demonstrations of genuine care and understanding of the student needs

were described as essential for building trust by all principals. Study participants, principals and

educators, reported taking the time to know the students as individuals not just as problems to be solved, demonstrating investment in the students' success. One principal (Participant D) said that parents need to know "that we care for their students... that we're here for them and for the success of their students". And that principal's corresponding special education teacher (Participant E) spoke of the importance of being sincere and showing parents that the school's intention is to provide the best and safest education to their student. Illustrating the general understanding of care, several of the teacher participants both special education and general education (Participants B, D, I) expressed the importance of showing humanity and compassion when building trust through sincerity and approachability. While some of the special and general education teacher participants (Participants B, C, I) alluded to transparent communications as challenging at times due to varying levels of comfort with uncomfortable conversations, the expressions of care and investment in the individual students illustrated a genuine passion for the work regardless of participant role or setting.

Research question one established a baseline of understanding from which to consider the remainder of this study's data. All study participants characterized trust as fundamentally built on honest, open, and transparent communication that occurs in a climate of collaboration. Where parental engagement can be maximized through an accessible, response-oriented approach to problem solving and partnership in which students are valued, and their individual needs are met. Further, the analysis of the climate and parental engagement data revealed an interesting blending of the two themes. The manifestation of benevolence through a consistent pattern of caring behavior that fosters trustworthiness (Tschannen-Moran, 2014) and goodwill through the reflection of mutual care and concern (Das & Teng, 2004) are good practice writ large; however,

this study's data elevates the importance of these elements in building a secure base on which to discuss the issues related to serving students with disabilities.

Research Question 2 – Significant Effect on Trust

The second research question explored factors that significantly affect or influence trust between principals and parents of students with disabilities. With the data from research question one elevating transparency, climate, and parental engagement as fundamental to securing a base for trust with parents of students with disabilities, data for research question two was analyzed to identify those factors most likely to have significant impact on trust and what, if any tie, they had to the characterization of trust. The data analysis revealed that the responses to research question two were intertwined with its subquestion, which focused on the influence of the legal requirements of special education. The results for question two and its subquestion are presented as one series of themes based on the totality of the data collected for research question two. Through data analysis, the following themes emerged: knowledge and application of the special education requirements, transparency, and commitment and fidelity of IEP implementation.

Knowledge and Application of the Special Education Legal Requirements

As discussed in the literature review, the IDEA (2004) requirements are considered complex due to the law's detailed provisions regarding the identification, evaluation, and decision-making of educational services for students with disabilities. The responsibility to ensure that students with disabilities receive a free appropriate public education, in the least restrictive environment, involves navigating a multitude of procedural and substantive requirements. However, when implemented effectively, IDEA (2004) is intended to ensure that students with disabilities receive the support and opportunities needed for successful educational outcomes (Yell et al., 2020). Principals who possess a solid understanding of special education

legislation are better equipped to foster inclusive practices, ensure legal compliance, support staff, and advocate for students' rights (Lake et al., 2021).

The three principal participants emphasized compliance and accountability as significant factors affecting the levels of trust they hold with parents. Participant D, a principal, stated that, "compliance is not merely procedural; it impacts the level of trust parents have in the school's ability to provide a free appropriate public education." That said, a free appropriate public education (FAPE) is not a paradigm, it is a legal standard of service provision (IDEA, 20 U.S.C. § 1412(d)(1), 2004). FAPE does not require the provision of optimal or best services, it does however require services that enable the student to benefit educationally from instruction in the least restrictive environment (LRE). LRE is also not a paradigm, but a legal standard, requiring the ability to justify a student's placement either inclusive or degree to which the student is removed from the general educational setting (IDEA, 20 U.S.C. § 1412(d)(5), 2004). These legal standards are complex and often litigated, the distinction and navigation of which can be difficult to understand let alone articulate in layman's terms, offer rationale for decisions made, or to proffer alternative solutions within the bounds of the legal requirements if a principal has not mastered the requirements (Lake et al., 2021). Principals must provide leadership and ensure that their school adheres to the legal mandates related to special education, such as those outlined in IEPs, and that those plans are implemented with fidelity.

The three principal participants and two special education teacher participants agreed that the principal's presence and engagement during the IEP process significantly affects the dynamic of the IEP team and the parent. Specifically, the principal can provide support to parents and teachers as they understand and work through the IEP process, including the legal aspects, parental rights, and negotiation of services (Participants A, D, G). Principals should be prepared

to walk parents through the language and procedures clearly and patiently. Both Participants J, the parent liaison and B, a special education teacher, emphasized that effective parent support should include the offer of parent training sessions to help parents of students with disabilities better understand their child's disability, as well as their rights and responsibilities under IDEA (2004).

The legal framework of special education involving specific terminology and processes can be confusing for parents. One middle school special education teacher (Participant E) stated that, "Sometimes, a parent's distrust seems to stem from a lack of understanding of the educational impact of a disability and how to support the student's needs." Participants from both the middle school setting (A, D, E), the elementary school settings (G I), and the parent liaison (J) agreed the use of plain language, avoiding technical jargon, is key to earning parent confidence and ultimately trust. The participant responses expanded beyond just plain language, participants specifically included the need to use of explanatory language to facilitate understanding of legal or educationally specific nomenclature (Participants A, D, E, G, J). The three principals and three special education teachers emphasized that the lack of understanding truly hampers parent ability to actively engage in the IEP discussion and/or advocate, as needed, for their student's educational supports and services.

A special education teacher, Participant E, explained that parents also struggle, and need assistance, understanding student evaluations, the significance of the evaluation results, and/or the identification of appropriate educational modifications or supports required to ensure improved outcomes for their student. Often parents will rely on the IEP team participants' knowledge to guide decision making but report feelings of being dismissed or unnecessary when their input is not considered in the decision making or if the parent feels that the decision has

already been made (Morris et al., 2021). Further, one principal within the study expressed that when parents do not understand their rights, they seem to be at a loss for direction and do not know how to proceed if they feel their students are not receiving the stated services or if their student is not making progress toward their identified goals (Participant D).

The value of knowing the IDEA (2004) requirements and the ability to apply this knowledge was highlighted by all participating principals and teachers working in the elementary and middle school settings. These participants shared that special education laws provide parents with dispute resolution procedures so they can advocate for their children and seek recourse when they believe the school is not meeting its obligations. According to the three principals and three special education teachers, if parents feel compelled to resort to legal means or outside advocacy, it is an indicator that trust has broken down (Participants A, B, D, H, J). If parents perceive that the school is not following the law, or if they don't understand their rights under the law, they, "will not want to engage with the school" (Participant B).

Analysis of the data gleaned for this research question revealed that the middle school principals amplified the role of legal noncompliance in their responses. It can be inferred that the middle school structure may play a role that heightens engagement with parents of students with disabilities. Both middle school principals addressed developing the master class schedule as a challenge that arises when working to ensure inclusive opportunities for students with disabilities. As explained by principal participant D, the complexities of meeting all student needs through the schedule of specialized supports and services, ensuring integration into the general education setting, and working to meet choice of desired electives is incredibly difficult. With principal A indicating that, "each transition during the school day creates an opportunity for a service to be missed for some reason or another."

Furthermore, the target school district begins post-secondary transition service planning at 14-years-old. The regulatory requirement indicates that transition planning begin by age 16 (or younger), and that the IEP must include a transition plan to prepare the student for postsecondary life (e.g., employment, further education, independent living) (Yell, 2012). This IDEA (2004) transition requirement is a good example of the impact that local legal interpretation and implementation of the legislation can have on a district. While this state's transition regulation is the same as the federal requirement, the target district, has implementing policy for transition beginning at 14-years-old which creates a requirement for transition planning to begin during middle school. These transition plans expand the requirements of the student IEP, requiring the transition plan be based on assessments of the student's strengths, interests, and needs and the require collaboration with external agencies. This expansion of the IEP occurring in middle school creates more opportunity and complexity regarding parental involvement and may inform the principals statement amplifying the impact of legal noncompliance.

Educator Awareness. Principal knowledge of the IDEA (2004) special education requirements is essential. However, respondents also highlighted the need for the educators, both special education and general education, to have a level of proficiency with the IDEA (2004) requirements and be conversant in how they apply to education students with disabilities. All participants indicated that they take part in professional development activities either via their academic preparation, their work environment, or through their own personal initiative. Principals A and D, special education teachers B and E, and the parent liaison (J), indicated that principals must ensure their staff are knowledgeable about special education law and best practices. Without exception, the special education teachers and the general education teachers

noted the value of staff training on how to read IEPs, how to implement them, and what how to

address issues pertaining to failed strategies. Special education teacher (B) stated, "professional

development is a key component to building trust, my principal not only supports the need for

professional development but tries to arrange for professional development topics that are either

requested or trending in their school." Of note, the two general education teachers said that

they're exposure to the IEPs was typically through their special education teacher counterparts or

assigned student case carrier because they lacked time to attend training on special education.

The two principals (A, D) discussed the challenges of meeting all the professional

development needs of staff but did highlight the partnerships across the schools within the

district to identify best practices. They leverage this partnership in a "train the trainer" (A)

approach by assigning high performing teachers to go observe the best practices or encourage

them to collaborate with cross district peers to share knowledge. Universally, the participants

stressed, if teachers are not knowledgeable about special education law, or if they make

statements that violate parental rights, the relationship with the parent is compromised.

Transparency

All participants agreed that a lack of transparency is a significant factor that can disrupt

trust overall, however emphasized that this is especially true during the context of the IEP

process (Participant D). Transparency within the context of the IEP development and

implementation process is more finely defined to keeping parents involved through the process

and ensuring they understand the information at each step of the process. While the term

transparent communication addressed in research question 1 describes the form and frequency of

communication with parents, the context of the IEP amplifies the importance of transparency as

it is a very specific and vulnerable situation with legal implications. A breech in transparency within this context could significantly impact the development of trust.

As noted above, legal requirements mandate that schools follow procedures for assessment, placement, and service delivery (IDEA, 20 U.S.C. §§1400-1480, 2004). Two special education teachers (Participants B and H), and one principal participant (Participant G) reiterated that when parents perceive educators are not being forthright, trust is eroded. They further explained that when educators are transparent about the IEP process and the student's progress, trust is strengthened stating "transparency is essential" (Participant G). This finding was not unexpected given the weight participants gave to transparency when characterizing trust. However, the data show that within the context of IEP planning and implementation, transparency gains greater significance as the topics of discussion become more sensitive and trust is more vulnerable.

The nature of the IEP is rife with opportunity for misunderstanding and conflict. Vulnerabilities to trust can stem from differing perceptions of educators and parents. Parents may feel that schools view their student through the lens of their deficits where educators may feel that parents have unrealistic expectations, leaving parties feeling misunderstood and/or taken advantage (Lake et al., 2021). The three principal participants discussed the criticality of being transparent throughout the IEP development and implementation processes, if the goal is to build trust. For example, one principal stated, "When a school sees the need to make changes to a student's placement, the team must be very clear about their reasoning not only for why the change is being proposed, but for the proposed change itself. Parents may struggle with this type of change." With another principal emphasizing that answering questions is paramount, "Parents

[may] not always love my answers, but they appreciate the time I take to listen to their thoughts and am transparent with them about my reasons."

The three principals and three special education teachers reported that trust is at its most vulnerable when the school recommends changes to a student's supports, services, placement, etc., necessitating a discussion about changes to the student's existing IEP. Morris et al. (2021) found that parents often report feeling marginalized during IEP meetings, describing feelings of disregard and powerlessness, with an overall sense of being excluded. The three principal and two special education teacher participants (A, D, E, H, I) explained that, when parents do not understand the rationale provided by the IEP team or if they feel their input is not valued, confidence in the principal can be jeopardized and the likelihood of trust is diminished.

A highlighted area of sensitivity for discussion with parents and a vulnerability to developing trust were around concerns of student behavior. It is important to note that the IDEA (2004) has an articulated requirement addressing behavioral incidents for students with disabilities. These provisions outline the procedures necessary for determining whether a student's behavior is a manifestation of their disability when facing disciplinary actions that change their educational placement (IDEA, 34 C.F.R. § 300.530(e), 2004). This is noted because this process is a time bound, formal engagement requiring decision making and documentation of complex content and serves as another opportunity in which trust can be at risk. One principal (Participants A) and one special education teacher (Participant B) identified student behavior as an especially sensitive topic that can derail a parent's confidence in their IEP partners. These participants went on to explain that when school staff approach these conversations with empathy, sensitivity, and a collaborative spirit, it can foster trust however, if during these discussions the parent perceives judgment or blame, it can cause the parent to become defensive,

leading the parent to question the interpretation and/or motive of the principal and/or team members, which compromises trust in the parent and educational partnership with the school.

Both principal G and special education teacher H are based in a middle school. Their responses were slightly more emphatic with respect to the nature of behavior being a sensitive IEP discussion. The participants based in the elementary school, who spoke of behavior as a sensitive topic, contextualized their examples as discussions of identifying options within the classroom to ameliorate the concern. The nature of the single based classroom of the elementary school may offer more options for addressing behaviors than the class changing dynamic of the middle school and that the changes between classes created more opportunities for challenges to occur (Participant D). This may contribute perceptions of these discussions being more sensitive within the context of the middle school.

An alternate explanation based on the responses of principal participants, D and G, and two special education teacher participants, B and E, highlighted that a parent's prior negative experiences with the school can cause a lack of trust. Parents of middle school special education students may have had more opportunity to have negative experiences during the IEP development and implementation process, given that they have been in the special education system longer increasing the likelihood of negative experience which could influence their level of trust.

Commitment and Fidelity of Implementation

The legal requirements under the IDEA (2004) mandate specific communication between the school and the parents of students with disabilities. Schools must formally notify parents of meetings, they are required to document communication and decisions made during IEP

meetings to provide a clear record of the team's efforts to support the student, and they must

document in the IEP the student's identified levels of performance, needs, goals, services,

placement, etc. (IDEA, 20 U.S.C. § 1414(d), 2004). Formal communication ensures that the IEP

process complies with the guiding legislation and ensures documentation of shared decisions

made by the IEP team to which the district is legally bound to implement. However, the IEP is

not a static document; it should change over time based on the student's progress toward goals,

or lack thereof, and changing needs (IDEA, 20 U.S.C. §1414(d)(4), 2004). Ensuring fidelity of

implementation may require ongoing communication between school providers and the parents

of the student to afford transparency and opportunity for adjustments to strategies,

accommodations, and/or goals, as needed, ensuring the plan remains applicable and effective.

Principal and teacher participants across both school settings (Participants B, D, E, G, I)

reported that parents need to have confidence that the services and supports outlined in the IEP

are being implemented as prescribed. When there is a difference between what is documented in

the IEP and what is implemented in the classroom, parents may question the school's

commitment to providing the agreed upon services (Participant D). General education teacher

(Participant I) stated that, "Parents need to trust that their child is receiving the services as

outlined in their IEP because when services are not provided as written in the IEP, parents start

to doubt everything."

The school's capacity to implement the agreed upon services as outlined in the IEP is key

to making or breaking trust with the parents of students with disabilities. All three principal

participants, two special education teacher participants, and the parent liaison (Participants A, B,

D, E, G, J) asserted that consistency and reliability regarding implementation of stated IEP goals

was elemental to building confidence and trust. Both a special education teacher and the parent

liaison (Participants H and J) noted that parents can perceive a break in trust if their student does not meet their stated IEP goals and that, "They feel as if they were blind-sided or that services had not been provided" (Participant J). Participant A, a principal, expanded on this point stating that, "School staff should address parent concerns promptly and with a willingness to find a resolution."

Securing sufficient service providers or educational supports to ensure implementation of the IEPs as written can be challenging. Participant A, a principal, discussed the fact that when parents see that the school is leveraging district resources, they are more likely to trust that the school is doing what they can to support their student. However, participants acknowledged that the legal process can also create tension, particularly when decisions come from the district office and not the school. For example, this same principal described a parent who was upset that their child wasn't receiving a one-to-one aide (a support professional who works directly with a single student to provide individualized assistance based on their unique needs, as specified in their IEP) however while the principal holds decision-making authority over many of the resources in their school, the decision to approve or disallow this level of support was issued from the district office. The participant indicated that this shift of authority for approval of that resource, "helped to preserve trust with the parents as that decision was beyond their [the principal's] control." This principal's example is another illustration of how local or district policy may impact the authority of the principal to issue decisions within their school and serves as a reinforcer to the import of knowledge and transparency in communicating either the need for the identified support and/or the rationale for denial and development of an alternative strategy for meeting the student need.

Communication was routinely reported as a means to demonstrate the need and/or

implementation of identified supports and services. The three special education teachers (B, E,

H) indicated that the best way to demonstrate consistent provision of service was through a

regular cadence of communication like weekly emails, phone calls, or messages through a

communication vehicle of the parents' choosing. This approach, however, was not shared by the

general education teachers who reported relying on the case carriers or special education teachers

to maintain contact with the parents. Participant B stated she "wants [parents] to feel free to

message her directly." While all participants felt strongly that principals and staff should make

themselves accessible to parents and respond promptly to their questions or concerns, the

responsibility for consistent contact was reported as the primary responsibility of the special

education teacher, highlighting the importance of principal as support to the teacher.

Moreover, all participants highlighted the importance of maintaining consistent contact

with parents about all aspects of the students' performance, not just communicating with parents

when there was a problem, but also to share progress and/or celebrate success helps to secure

parent confidence (Participants D, E). While this assertion was shared across roles and school

settings, only two of the three principals (one middle school and one elementary school) reported

as having an "open-door policy" (D, H) in which parents could communicate as needed and

openly spoke of personal accountability and ownership for when, if, there was a gap in services

to students. It is important to note that both of these principal participants reported a personal

connection to a student with a disability which may influence their principal practice. The

implications for this will be discussed at greater length later in the chapter.

In summary, research question two revealed that the legal requirements have a significant

impact on navigating trusting relationships with parents of students with disabilities during the

educational planning and implementation process. Specifically, study participants identified the need for principals to have mastery level knowledge of the IDEA (2004) requirements and the ability to translate and apply that knowledge with parents and IEP team members and stakeholders. Furthermore, participants noted that principals should be able to articulate rationale throughout the decision-making process in a transparent and digestible way. Finally, participants emphasized that principals should be accountable and committed to ensuring fidelity of IEP implementation, demonstrating willingness to ensure clear, consistent communication. These themes were identified as having significant impact on efforts to build trust with parents; the third research question solicits practices that principals employ.

Research Question 3 – Principal Leadership Practices

In research question one, participants characterized trust and highlighted those factors that principals and their corresponding teachers identified as having the most significant effect on building trust with parents of students with disabilities during the IEP planning and implementation process. Building trust with parents of students with disabilities requires principals to hold deep knowledge of the special education requirements, embrace transparent communication, and commit to ensuring implementation of the IEP as established. Research question three explores the principal practices participants reported toward the building of trust with parents; a related subquestion (3a) asked about principals' assessment of their practices. The themes that emerged through the analysis of the study data for both the questions and the subquestion included principal prioritization of active listening to parents' concerns and demonstrating empathy, principal's value on knowing the individual student and their needs, and the creation of a safe and welcoming climate where parents feel heard and supported.

Presence and Active Listening

Each of the three principals discussed at length the effort they make to be present in the

day-to-day activities of the school day. For example, both principals D and G described varied

efforts that illustrated their intentionality, such as lingering near the parent "drop-off" line in the

event that a parent wants to "catch them" for a quick question while greeting the buses in the

morning and waving good-bye in the afternoon. They further described that their visibility

enables them to address some issues as they arise. For example, principal A described a situation

where one of the special education students was dropped off at school and their mother was

concerned because the student had been having a bad morning and was overstimulated. As such,

the principal being readily available, was able to ensure that the student was able to take an

alternate route into the building and go directly to a quiet place to decompress prior to starting

their school day. The principal went on to say this incident provided the opportunity for them to

reach out to the parent later in the day with an update on the student's progress. This type of

personal attentiveness along with presence and engagement during IEP meetings are

demonstrable reinforcements of the principal's care and competence of the principal. Another

strategy highlighted was principals' attendance and participation during the IEP. While this has

been reported in previous responses, it was reiterated in this context, specifically, emphasizing

the principal's engagement during IEP meetings, and other important school events, a message to

parents that their student is a priority (Participants A, B, C, D, E, I, J).

All participants emphatically noted that the need for active listening and empathy was

essential for all educators working with parents throughout the educational planning and

implementation process however, highlighted that these behaviors were modeled and fostered by

the principal. The utilization of active listening can lead to more open communication, shared

goal development, and increased trust between educators and parents, resulting in a more

collaborative atmosphere during IEP meetings and co-creation of educational goals designed

to meet the students' unique needs (McNaughton & Vostal, 2010).

Creating a Safe Climate

A safe climate, in this context, ensures that parents feel respected and empowered to

make meaningful contribution to the decisions regarding their student's education and fosters

collaboration (Koutsouveli & Geraki, 2022). A theme that emerged in this data addressed access

to necessary information regarding assessments, goals, and decisions and clear explanations of

processes, rights, and responsibilities during the IEP meeting the importance of which have been

covered in previous sections under the heading of transparency. However, through the lens of

safe climate, this includes creating opportunities for parents to ask questions about their students'

disability and educational approaches and receive thorough, understandable answers. The

principal participants reported practices employed to create that climate as rooted in respectful

communication and emotional validation, and proactive preparation, which supports providing

demonstrable tangible opportunities for parents to engage.

Participant responses consistently returned to practices focused on respect and validation,

describing practices illustrating active solicitation and genuine interest in parent contributions.

While these participants acknowledge that this is crucial for the entire parent community of the

school, the need is more pressing for parents of students with disabilities as these parents "get

used to having to defend themselves and their students" (Participant D). Principal participant A

explained, "this means not just hearing parent's words but also understanding parent

perspectives, concerns, and experiences." The value of an empathy-oriented approach can be

operationalized by intentionally incorporating parent perspectives and insights into the decision-making process during the IEP and throughout implementation (Participants A, D).

The respondents were clear in the data provided for research question 2 that the special education requirements have a significant impact on trust when working with parents of students with disabilities to ensure educational outcomes specifically, indicating that feelings of judgement or blame could derail the development of trust. Principal participant D and general education teacher participant E reported creating "space" (Participant D) for discourse in which parents can express their feelings and opinions openly, without concern of recrimination or disregard. This same principal, and their corresponding special education teacher E, emphasized their strategy, all educational planning and/or change discussions begin by highlighting the student's strengths, abilities, and personal characteristics, rather than focusing solely on student deficits. Their expressed perspective indicated that this positive orientation to a student-centered discussion demonstrates staff's knowledge of all aspects of the student and helps parents constructively engage in the process knowing that their student's teachers view them in a positive light, and not only focusing on the student deficits.

Knowledge of the Student. All participants agreed that parents need to feel that school staff genuinely care about their child and are committed to helping them succeed. Two of the principals (A, D) and two of the three special education teachers (B, E) highlighted knowing students personally, learning their names, and celebrating their achievements so parents know that their child, "is seen and valued" (participant B) as a strong practice.

Principal participants (A, D) and special education teachers (B, E) also noted that having first-hand knowledge of each child's needs is important when discussing accommodations to meet student needs in the school setting. This theme makes sense given the weight given to

transparency of communication in both the characterization of trust and the significant impact

that lack of transparency can have on the development of trust. The analysis of the data across

research questions stresses the need for principal ability to be able to cogently articulate rationale

for decisions made, that reflect the needs specific to the student.

While the role and setting of the various participants showed no difference in participant

responses, the educators (3 special education teachers and 2 general education teachers) reported

that principals should model the behavior they expect to see in their staff by treating parents with

respect, empathy, and understanding. Further, a shared desire expressed by the educators,

indicated a need for professional development opportunities on how to effectively navigate

difficult conversations with students with disabilities and their families.

Proactive Preparation. Proactive preparation is essential when establishing a climate

that reduces stress, minimizes risk, maximizes efficiency, and enables principals to provide

confidence and predictability to parents from the start of the school year. Several participants

(principals D, H special education teacher B, and parent liaison J) reported the importance of

creating a welcoming and inclusive environment where all parents feel comfortable and

supported, this is in line with the theme of parental engagement and student investment

characterized in research question one. To that end, another theme for research question two re-

emerges. Principals D and H reiterated their operating an "open-door policy" as a means to help

parents feel they are available to them as needed. Further, the same two principals discussed the

importance of introducing new students with disabilities and their families to the school's special

education staff in advance of the start of the school year, which would allow additional time for

both the student and the parent to become acquainted with the new school setting/teacher, ask

questions, and/or express any concerns. Special education teacher E and general education I

reported that their schools offer private orientations and permit families to tour the campus and

meet teachers before the first day of school to lower student and family anxiety.

A distinctive difference in principal practice that was identified focused on the scheduling

of special education student classes. Principal D describe their strategy for creating the school's

master schedule, indicating that the base of their master schedule started with scheduling the

programming needs of the special education students. The principal went on to explain that by

establishing this core schedule first, they could maximize their special education resources while

increasing the likelihood of students being able to partake in electives of their preference.

Principal A, however, began by scheduling the general education students programming first and

worked the special education students into that structure. Principal A did acknowledge that this

approach made it difficult to ensure that students could participate in preferred electives and that

scheduling supports and services was more challenging. A key difference between these two

principals was their personal experience with students with disabilities. Principal D, informed by

personal experience, prioritized a holistic approach that went beyond simply meeting educational

requirements. This principal considered broader opportunities for student connection, learning,

and personal preferences, such as offering choices for electives to foster a sense of autonomy and

engagement. By contrast, Principal A primarily focused on fulfilling educational requirements

without as much emphasis on the student's broader needs or additional factors that could enhance

their success and engagement within the school community. This difference underscores that

Principal D, guided by personal experience, considered the "whole" student, not just the

academic requirements. This perspective likely stems from recognizing the value and

significance of factors beyond academics in a student's overall success.

The theme of ensuring a climate of collaboration emerged in response to this question and was discussed by all participants and was emphasized by the teacher participants. These teacher participants emphasized creating a sense of teamwork, noting that their principals worked aggressively to ensure time for planning periods and collaborative working sessions. Principal D demonstrated a commitment to this approach through the utilization of substitute teachers to afford both special education and general education teachers the needed time to do collaborative planning. Overall, the two general education teachers (C, I) stated that the collaboration sessions that they have with their special education counterparts is their most pragmatic professional development opportunity they encounter. On the other hand, special education teachers reported these opportunities are a way to maximize their "push-in" support time with the identified special education students while also having a spillover effect on other students in the room that may benefit from added instruction.

Study participants focused on implementing behavioral practices that consist of being present and actively engaged throughout the IEP development and implementation process and creating a safe environment for parents of disabilities. These behavioral practices offer both genuine care, a cornerstone of Tschannen-Moran (2014) and the reduction of risk and increased predictability of Das and Teng (2004). Next, the sub-bullet to research question three explores how principals determine the efficacy of their implementation of these practices.

Question 3 (a) - Determining Efficacy of Trust-Building Practices

As established in the literature, principals play a crucial role in fostering trust within their school communities, and assessing the effectiveness of their trust-building practices requires intentionality. The data for this question revealed the need for principals to understand the nuances of non-verbal cues and the importance of active parental engagement in all aspects of

school life. This section examines how these principal participants evaluate their practices, with

a particular focus on non-verbal cues—such as body language, tone, and facial expressions—that

convey openness and engaged or resistance and "shut-down" (Participant D). Additionally, it

explores the importance of parental active engagement, recognizing that trust is not only built

through school-led mandates and initiatives but also through collaborative partnerships with

parents who feel heard, valued, and involved in the educational process. By analyzing these

subtle yet impactful elements, principals can better gauge the success of their efforts to cultivate

a trusting and supportive school environment.

Non-verbal Cues

According to the American Federal of Teachers (2007), effective communication with

parents involves both verbal and non-verbal cues. While non-verbal cues are universally

relevant, the educational setting requires that principals create a balance between their principal

authority and the reported need for empathy in communication with parents of students with

disabilities. The three participating principals reported that they pay attention to both verbal and

non-verbal cues from parents during IEP meetings because that helps them to discern parent

response through the parents' body language and mannerisms. Examples provided included, but

were not limited to, relaxed and open demeanor suggesting trust, while rigid thinking, body

stiffness, and a guarded posture may indicate a lack of trust.

Moreover, principals D and G reported the value of soliciting feedback from the other

district-based stakeholders in the IEP meeting regarding their observations of parent behavioral

cues. Both principals described their staffs' level of observation picking up on some of the more

subtle cues or even "targeted cues" (D) i.e., eyerolling or facial grimaces surrounding particular

talking points or difficult decisions. Their explanation for seeking other participant observations

speaks to the principal's need to reduce biases and gain additional insight from others in the room. Principal G reported, it can be difficult to "see everything while also trying to make decisions." These principals reported this as an intentional practice as they know if parents don't feel heard and respected are far less likely to constructively engage and collaborate during the meetings and more likely to express concern or anger during the implementation. This highlights the importance of principal awareness of the circumstances and behaviors of parents during each incidence of engagement.

Active Engagement

Throughout the study principals, teachers, and the parent liaison (Participants A, C, D, E, G, J) emphasized the criticality of assessing parents' level of active participation during IEP meetings for example, information exchanges, asking questions, and engaging in discussions on educational approaches. They explained that high levels of participation suggest a comfortable relationship. Principal participant A and their corresponding special education teacher C discussed cited that parental confidence in being heard was demonstrated through direct communication with the principal and school staff, initiating questions and expressing concerns, and sharing student successes. More concrete illustrations of active engagement that all participants described as observable behaviors were parents' active collaboration in the setting IEP goals, with the parents being active contributors to the process and a parent's willingness to sign the IEP. Conversely, the parent's refusal to sign the IEP may suggest a breakdown in trust, requiring additional attention and efforts to understand parent concerns.

IEP meetings are only opportunity to assess or consider levels of parental engagement. Special education teachers B and H reported that their principals monitor how promptly and effectively staff respond to parent communications, such as emails, phone calls, and messages

through site-based information technology communication platforms. All participants, regardless of setting or role, highlighted principals' encouragement of the use of multiple communication platforms in addition to the school site-based platforms i.e., Google Voice or email so that parents can communicate in a way that is comfortable for them. As previously noted, solicitation of staffs' observations during IEP meetings was sought as a measure of insight, the same was reported for interactions with parents during both day-to-day engagements. These strategies are twofold, it enables principals to monitor the efficacy of the safe climate they've worked to create while also ensuring they have timely and relevant updates and the ability to pivot or be responsive to particular issues as they arise (Principal D).

The three principal participants and their corresponding special education teacher participants all noted that principals monitor how the disagreements during the IEP and/or disagreements or conflicts with regard to implementation of services and programming can also clarify a parent's level of comfort. Parents who feel engaged in the process generally have a desire to successfully resolve issues through open communication and problem-solving as compared to those parents who either "shut-down" (D), bring an advocate (G) or file a complaint (J). Given the legally consequential nature of special education for schools, it could be inferred that the strategy to monitor engagement and responsiveness to parent concerns also facilitates the schools' ability to demonstrate the fulfillment of their responsibility in providing services as directed and implementing the IEP as written.

General education teachers C and I and special education teacher E described other observable behaviors of parents who are highly involved in their child's education as volunteering in school activities and attending school events. They explained that this demonstrates an investment the parents have in the school community and that these same

parents will seek the school's support and help resolving challenges, as they pertain to the

student's behaviors and learning, at home.

Lived Experience with Students with Disabilities

An unexpected theme that emerged during data analysis was the differences in responses

of participants with personal experience with students with disabilities compared to those

without. The responses of the participants with personal experience as it relates to students with

disabilities e.g., the have a child with a disability tended to more unique insights and empathy in

their problem-solving practices.

Of the participants interviewed, one principal (D), one special educator (E), and one

general educator (C) reported having their own child with a disability. Further, special educators

B and H reported personal experience with students of disabilities outside of their professional

endeavors. These participants communicated a deeper understanding of challenges parents face

and of the manifestations of disabilities. Participants with personal experience, like Participant

D, who has a child with a disability, felt they had a unique understanding of the challenges faced

by families, stating, "I can relate having my own child with a disability, I understand some of the

hoops that we go through. So, I think behind the scenes, I have a little bit more knowledge than

your regular administrator or teacher out there." Some participants, such as Participant E, who

also has a son with a disability, reported bringing a wealth of first-hand knowledge, lived

experience of disability, and an appreciation for inclusion and support. This participant

commented that this experience afforded a perspective that other professionals may lack. Further,

the participants with personal experience indicated that principals with deep appreciation and

experience working with students with disabilities work to support flexibility in the IEP team in

an effort to adjust the IEP to meet the needs and concerns expressed by the parents.

These same participants discussed that having first-hand experience offered unique insights into the family dynamics of families with students with disabilities. An example of this in practice, was described by participant D who applied this knowledge when developing the school's master schedule, choosing to schedule special education classes first, using that schedule as the hub from which to schedule all other classes. This participant explained that this strategy enabled her to more efficiently use the allotted related service providers and afford students greater opportunity to integrate. Further all three special educator participants reflected that they may show a stronger sense of advocacy for students and their families, viewing their role as going beyond the required duties to ensure students' needs are met.

Principals A and G did not report having a personal experience with students with disabilities, they reported professional development and practical experience as a means of learning about special education, rather than through direct experience. They emphasized data-driven decision-making and the importance of district resources, in particular. While all participants expressed passion for their work and valued supporting students with disabilities, those with personal experience were more inclined to problem solve and often emphasized empathy and understanding of family perspectives, while those without personal experience highlighted a focus on the district procedures and resources for resolving issues. The participants with personal experience were also more likely to blend their personal and professional perspectives, while their counterparts' responses kept the personal and professional spheres separate with a maintained focus on systems.

Conclusion

All principal participants reported a strong commitment to making families feel welcome and oriented to not only the school environment but more specifically, to the general and special

education teaching staff. Principals aimed to create a culture of care, where knowing the names, needs, and individual successes of the students is valued. They made the effort to learn about not only student needs but also the needs of their families. They demonstrated a commitment to open communication via open door policies, multiple means for daily communication, and through the monitoring of teacher responsiveness to parents' communiques. The principal participants also reported a commitment to transparent communication through the provision of rationale for decisions, solicitation of feedback from their staff, and their advocacy for district resources to meet student needs. Lastly, principal participants reported their commitment to professional development activities with respect to serving students with special education needs as well as a commitment of time and resources to support participation in these activities. These behaviors highlight their dedication to creating and sustaining a knowledgeable and competent staff and supporting open and transparent communication with parents of students and disabilities, which in turn fosters a climate of trust within their school community.

Given the legalistic nature of the IDEA (2004) and the dynamic and diverse responsibilities of schools, principal adeptness regarding the ability to act is a keystone in the development of trust, particularly where the frameworks of relational trust in the context of education (Tschannen-Moran, 2014) and strategic alliance (Das & Teng, 2004) intersect as I discuss in Chapter Five. The juxtaposition of the good intention with presumed best intent and the legal obligation with potential legal consequence creates a context in which the two frameworks must work together. While educators may genuinely strive to do what they believe is best for a student, intent alone is not enough—their actions must also align with legal mandates to avoid consequences. As a result, both frameworks—ethical best practices and legal compliance—must function in tandem to support students effectively. This is not explicitly

addressed in the educational literature however, it is an important component when considering

the principal practices driving climate and its interplay with fulfillment of commitments,

responsive open transparent communication, and the need for genuine investment and care.

Chapter 5 will delve into the interpretation of these themes and expand on their broader

implications.

Chapter 5 Discussion and Implications

This study explored principal leadership practices and principals' understanding of the factors that impact the development of trust between principals and the parents of students with disabilities during the educational planning process. The aim of this study was to identify, classify, and analyze factors that may impact trust between principals and the parents of children with disabilities. This was done through interviews with principals, special education teachers, general education teachers, and a parent liaison. The study was conducted across three school sites within a single target district that was selected for its commitment to improving special education programs and parental engagement. This study recognized the unique challenges presented by the complex legal requirements of special education, district context, educational site setting, climate, and the potential impact of a principals' and staffs' personal experience with students with disabilities. Findings from this study emphasized the importance of trust as a dynamic engagement influenced by various factors and highlights the need for consistent and authentic engagement to achieve positive educational outcomes for students with disabilities.

Summary of Main Findings

The study's main findings revealed several themes related to trust, factors influencing trust, and the practices principals use to cultivate trust in the schools studied. These findings strongly aligned with the proposed conceptual framework, which combined relational trust in educational settings and strategic alliance frameworks to identify leadership practices that principals can use when working with parents of students with disabilities during IEP educational planning and implementation. The proposed conceptual framework emphasized the importance of knowledge, communication, climate, and the ability to act as factors influencing trust. The following will address the recurring themes that emerged: open and

transparent communication, establishing positive climate norms, promoting parental engagement, ensuring knowledge and application of special education requirements, demonstrating a commitment to and fidelity of IEP implementation, creating a safe climate, emphasizing proactive preparation, and leveraging lived experience. Although these themes were consistently reflected in the analysis of the data, they manifested differently than anticipated by the conceptual framework. The following is organized by research question and engages with relevant literature to highlight key differences.

Research Question 1- Characterizing Trust

The first research question explored how study participants characterized trust when promoting parental engagement during the educational planning and implementation process. Within the literature the definition of trust varies and is dependent on context (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 1998). For the purposes of this study, trust was defined as an interpersonal relationship between two people and/or in an organization and across those relationships there is a level of interdependence. The study's findings aligned with its defined framework, but participants' responses revealed a stronger emphasis on compassion and empathy in discussions about trust, school climate, and parental engagement than the researchers originally anticipated.

Characterizing Trust

Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2000) characterize trust as a multifaceted construct essential for effective relationships within educational settings. They define trust as "the willingness to be vulnerable based on one's confidence in another party's benevolence, reliability, competence, honesty, and openness" (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000, p. 556). Study participants characterized trust as a foundational element built on open and transparent communication, responsiveness to concerns, and collaborative partnerships. These elements reflect the honesty,

benevolence, and reliability of Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2000), creating an environment where parents feel secure in engaging with the school. Principals in the study viewed trust as the basis for effective interactions with parents, especially in special education, asserting that communication, planning, and implementing educational plans would be significantly more challenging without it. This characterization aligns with Tschannen-Moran's (2014) concepts of honesty, benevolence, and reliability for strong relationships, as well as Das and Teng's (2004) terms of honesty, integrity, and reliability for reliable, predictable, ethical, and transparent engagements.

The fundamental premise of the conceptual framework is rooted in the nexus between relational trust in the educational setting (Tschannen-Moran's, 2014) and the contractual nature of the IEP planning and implementation process (Das & Teng, 2004). Das and Teng contend that open, positive, and transparent communication is a cornerstone of trust in alliances. It reduces risk, prevents conflicts, and strengthens long-term collaboration. Without ongoing communication, even well-structured alliances risk breakdown due to misalignment, suspicion, or unaddressed concerns. While a consistent pattern of caring behavior fosters trustworthiness, and mutual care and concern is beneficial in all settings, not just educational, the highlighted aspects of open and transparent communication, the climate norm of collaboration, and prioritization of parental engagement and investment in students emphasizes that this is fundamentally essential within the context of special education.

The study participants' characterization of trust emphasized transparent communication, inclusive of explanations of rationale behind decisions to parents and responsiveness and availability so that parents feel they can reach out and have their concerns addressed promptly and with candor. These results align with Tschannen-Moran and Hoy's (1998) relational trust,

which specifically states openness and honesty as key dimensions within a trust relationship, and where consistent communication fosters mutual confidence. Additionally, such findings highlight transparent, accessible communication as a means to align expectations and reduce uncertainties, addressing concerns about a partner's commitment or ability to perform, which are in line with the Das & Teng (2004) model.

Within the IEP planning and implementation process, the role of transparency becomes more significant as discussion topics increase in sensitivity and trust becomes more vulnerable. Establishing an empathic, collaborative, and transparent climate signals an understanding that principals and schools must work with parents to successfully support students with disabilities. When parents perceive that they are integral to the IEP team and their insights are considered, they are more likely to feel heard, increase trust, and be more open to hearing the input of the IEP team. This may lead to a more dynamic dialogue in which root causes and/or more effective strategies are identified.

Das and Teng (2004) state that past experiences serve as a foundation for future trust, shaping risk perceptions, expectations, and the overall strength of a partnership. This emphasizes the need for established norms that value open transparent communication and parental contribution, fostering a foundation for trust within the context of special education. Trust between principals and parents of students with disabilities is predisposed to vulnerabilities due to the long-term nature of the relationship and the unpredictable variables (i.e., student developmental changes), and potentiality of negative experiences within this context may impact trust within the principal parent dyad (Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (1998) and Das and Teng (2004). However, positive actions are likely to strengthen the relationship, making consistent

effort, empathy, and collaboration essential in maintaining a trusting partnership, especially with in the context of special education and IEP implementation.

Trust is built on open and transparent communication within a collaborative environment (Bryk & Schneider, 2002, Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000). Parental engagement is most effective when it involves respectful, accessible problem-solving and compassionate partnership that values meeting the needs of students. Participants highlighted the importance of benevolence and mutual care in fostering trust, particularly in discussions about serving students with disabilities. With a baseline understanding of how participants characterized trust, the discussion turns to those factors found to have the most significant impact.

Importantly, the focus of this study was on trust within a defined relationship in the school setting. Bryk and Schneider's (1996, 2003) research broadly demonstrated that trust among school stakeholders is crucial for school reform and improvement. Meanwhile, Tschannen-Moran (2014), Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2015), Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (1998, 2000), identified benevolence, reliability, competence, and honesty as fundamental elements of trust that contribute to a positive school environment. However, this study narrowed its focus to the specific dynamics of trust between principals and parents of students with disabilities during the educational planning and implementation process, which is novel in the literature.

Research Question 2 – Significant Impact on Trust

The second research question examined factors that significantly influenced the development of trust between principals and parents of students with disabilities during the educational planning process. A secondary question explored whether the legally-mandated relationship between principals and parents impacts trust in this principal-parent dynamic. The

findings revealed that the legal mandate played a crucial role in shaping trust, which led me to

integrate the subquestion emphasis on legal implications into my report of findings for research

question two as a whole. Communication with parents emerged as a significant factor that

impacted the development of trust and was primarily viewed through the lens of IEP

implementation. Participants stressed the importance of principals having a deep understanding

of the IDEA (2004) requirements and the ability to apply and communicate this knowledge when

working with parents and IEP team members. Specifically, principals should be able to clearly

explain their reasoning and remain committed to ensuring IEPs are implemented with fidelity,

promoting transparent communication. The development of trust in this dyad is significantly

influenced by the legal requirements of IEP implementation, underscoring the importance of

clear explanatory communication, a deep understanding of IDEA (2004), and a commitment to

fidelity in the process.

Knowledge and Application of the Special Education Requirements

The IEP is a legally binding document under the IDEA (2004) that outlines the supports,

services, and educational goals tailored to meet the unique needs of a student with disabilities.

The legislation is procedurally prescriptive, and failure to appropriately develop and implement

the IEP can have costly and/or legal implications for the school, and developmental

consequences for the student. Ensuring compliant implementation of the IEP is crucial for legal,

educational, ethical, and student outcomes (Zirkel, 2017). Das and Teng (2004) signal

compliance with legal requirements as a contributing factor in their risk-based view of trust.

Legal compliance, under this model, is considered essential in building initial trust, and was

identified as a strong theme across participant respondents. Principals are responsible for

adhering to regulatory mandates related to special education and the study's principal

participants emphasized compliance and accountability as significant factors impacting the level of trust they hold with parents.

Broomhead (2013) demonstrated that parental involvement is influenced by parents' ability to understand and engage with the complex language and concepts of special education legislation and educational jargon (Broomhead, 2013). Participants in the study strongly believed that principals must use lay terms when presenting recommendations during IEP planning and implementation process. Absent this, parents' confidence and engagement were reported as significantly diminished, with one participant stating, "parents will just shut down."

While the IEP process is designed to empower parents by involving them in the decision-making process, the overwhelming amount of terminology and bureaucracy can create the opposite effect, making parents feel excluded or inadequate (Angell et al., 2009). Participants highlighted how the complex legal terminology and processes inherent to special education were barriers for parents. This led to distrust due to a lack of understanding regarding student and parent rights, the educational impact of a disability, and/or the necessary supports for the student. This challenge presents as an opportunity for principals to demonstrate their competence by developing a shared understanding of the requirements, fostering common goals, and mutually agreeing on plans for meeting the student's needs. Implementing these factors can then reduce the risk of unmet expectations or failure to provide services.

Zeitlin and Curcic (2013) found parent experience of IEPs was formal and impersonal with parents criticizing legalistic, lengthy, and deficit-oriented language, recommending the transformation of the IEP process by simplifying the language, fostering genuine collaboration. The participants of this study reported that a lack of understanding of the special education process and terminology diminishes confidence in the principal's knowledge and hampers their

ability to garner trust. This highlights that in order to foster trust with parents regarding IEPs,

principals should have a comprehensive understanding of legal terminology, the purpose of legal

mandates, policies, protocols, and resources. This knowledge is crucial for ensuring clear

communication with parents, which, in turn, helps to build a solid foundation of trust within the

IEP framework. Principals who can articulate the legal aspects and procedural details of IEPs

effectively empower parents and create a collaborative environment.

Educator Awareness

Findings from this study also illustrated a clear and common belief that the provision of

sufficient professional development is necessary to ensure principal and staff knowledge and

proficiency with the special education requirements. Roberts and Guerra (2017) underscore the

importance of principals being well-versed in special education laws and practices. While their

research reflected reports of a significant gap between principals' knowledge of curricula design

and the ability to tailor it to the needs of students with disabilities, principals ranked the need for

training on the special education requirements as most significant. This highlights that there may

be a lack of understanding or awareness that these are two separate issues – one being

substantive knowledge and the other being application of that knowledge.

Principal participants responses were in line with the literature. Principals reported the

need for professional development on not only the requirements of IDEA (2004) but also their

practical application. Teachers reported a need for pragmatic understanding of how to read the

IEP, its application in the classroom, and how to clearly communicate this information to

parents. Combined, these findings emphasized the importance of "applied training." This type of

training could utilize simulations, case studies, or problem-solving exercises to reinforce

theoretical knowledge and develop practical expertise. Further, establishing this as standard

practice to develop practical expertise within the context of working partnerships with parents of students with disabilities could ensure teachers are equipped to navigate the IEP development and implementation in real-time.

Parents' ability to grasp and act on the relevant knowledge about their student and their corresponding rights is a central aspect of the data reported in this case study. If the parent either does not have access to the necessary information, or is unable to understand the information when provided, the partnership in the principal parent dyad will be impacted. Participants reported that parents often struggle with understanding student evaluations, the importance of the results, and the appropriate educational modifications or supports needed to improve their child's outcomes. Study principals highlighted that a lack of understanding of parental rights may leave parents feeling lost and without direction. While compliance to the IEP is important (Das and Teng, 2004), trust between principal and parent is best sustained through ongoing, transparent communication, ethical behavior, and cooperation rather than strict legal enforcement alone. This highlights the unique role/balance that principals and staff need to display when working with parents within and throughout the IEP and implementation process.

Transparency

The research of Tschannen-Moran (2014) and Bryk and Schneider (1996, 2003) both report the need for open, honest, and transparent communication as essential for building trust. However, there are often circumstances in which principals may need omit or gloss over information. For example, many schools face tight budgets, which can result in inadequate funding for the specialized staff and services needed to support students with disabilities. Thus, principals may be reluctant to openly acknowledge these financial constraints, as they are concerned that it could undermine trust or lead to potential legal disputes with parents (Zagona et

al., 2019). All study participants emphasized the importance of transparent communication with respect to parents of students with disabilities, highlighting the need for rationale of decision-making, application of demonstrable knowledge of individual students' needs, and accountability for miscommunications or failures to follow through on committed resources. While financial constraints may create challenges for principals in openly addressing limitations, the importance of transparent communication remains crucial for building trust with parents of students with disabilities, requiring a balance between honesty, accountability, and the demonstration of commitment to meeting student needs.

When a parent does not know or understand that there are internal district dynamics or decision-making requirements, it may undermine the principal's ability to build trust, a point emphasized in the literature as well as in my exchange with a State Contact for Special Education in the Office of Special Education Programs, U.S. Department of Education (C. Kniseley, U.S. Department of Education, personal communication, October 7, 2022). This study's findings align with the literature (Zagona et al., 2019) that parents who reported positive experiences with the service planning and implementation for their students described positive school climates and strong communication where information was shared freely (Zagona et al., 2019). All participants repeatedly stated that providing clear rationale or response for decision making or when responding to concerns was essential, as even when parents may not have agreed with the response, they did not doubt the rationale provided. Further, integrity, a factor in Bryk et al., (2010) framework, is called into question when principals either cannot or chose not to answer questions or provide rationale. This type of non-responsiveness diminishes the integrity of the trusted party's intention and may damage existing trust (Das & Teng, 2004).

Commitment and Fidelity of Implementation

A principal's demonstration of competence, knowledge, and ability to deliver on their commitment is critical to building trust. The study data illustrated that district procedures supporting the implementation of IDEA (2004) requirements can at times overrule principal authority with respect to resource allocation. This may impact the ability of the principal adjust service resources and/or reduce willingness to advocate for resources leading to gaps between commitments in the IEP and what is practical to deliver. One principal respondent described a situation where district approval was necessary for a specific student resource, a one-to-one student aid, that was identified during the IEP planning. The principal viewed this shift in responsibility positively, as they felt that it had preserved the trust built with the parent, as they had not been the final arbiter of the decision. In this case, the district procedures shifted resource allocation authority away from the principal, particularly, as in this case, when the required resources were costly. Tensions between district-level directives and a principal's knowledge of their needs of their students may create a disconnect resulting in diminished trust and ineffective collaboration.

Das and Teng (2004) would describe the need for the district's approval as a 'performance risk,' the result of an external factor, rather than a 'relational risk,' the result of a disingenuous partner and therefore, less detrimental to the established trust. In the situation described, since the principal did not have the final decision-making authority in approving the needed support for the student, the principal was able to preserve the trust bond with the parents, since they were able to advocate for the students' needs and displayed their commitment to the student. This approach aligns with the Tschannen-Moran (2014) concept of relational trust being that the failure to provide the anticipated service is off-set by the authenticity of the effort and

commitment. The application of Das and Teng's (2004) framework can also be viewed here, as it highlights how external factors may interfere with the fulfillment of a commitment despite willingness. These findings highlight the need for parents to fully understand district procedures and decision-making processes separate and apart of that from the principal, acknowledging how principals strive to remain committed to the helping the students achieve/obtain/need their needs in line with their IEP goals.

The literature review framed the principal's ability to deliver on their IEP commitments as a component of one's ability to act and specifically identified the role and impact of district resources as an influencing factor. Participants in the study only referenced the district in terms of established procedures, monitoring or procedural compliance, and using the special education director as a resource regarding the navigating of the special education process. The fact that this school district is part of a special educational local plan area consortia to facilitate sufficient availability of supports, services, and continuum of placement may have influenced principal experience in this case study. The access and support of the consortia lends to the reduction of performance risk, as identified by Das and Teng (2004), and can contribute to the development of trust with parents of students with disabilities.

Findings from this study show the significant impact of legal requirements on the development and sustainability of trust with parents of students with disabilities during educational planning and implementation. This study explicitly considered the legally mandated context of the principal-parent relationship in special education, shaped by the IDEA (2004). This legal dimension, which includes specific requirements for communication, documentation, and parental involvement, plays a significant role in the development of trust between principals and parents. This study also incorporated a strategic alliance perspective to examine the

influence of the contractual nature of the educational process for students with disabilities. The framework of strategic trust, as outlined by Das and Teng (2004), was particularly relevant because it highlighted the role of risk in building trust, addressing not only participants' intentions but also the significant impact of external factors on performance or delivery on commitments.

Mastery of IDEA (2004) requirements and the ability to clearly communicate and apply this knowledge to parents, IEP team members, and stakeholders is essential in creating the common language and understanding needed to ensure mutual agreement and understanding of the IEP and stated expectations for implementation. Transparent rationale throughout the decision-making process and accountability and commitment to implementation IEPs with fidelity are significant trust-building influences with parents, warranting further examination of the targeted practices principals employ to effectuate trust and the strategies used to assess their efficacy.

Research Question 3 – Principal Practices and Determining Efficacy of Practice

Lasater (2016) asserts that actual principal practices sometimes contradict the ideals of relational and collaborative efforts. Further, Lasater (2016) posits that leaders might rely on formal authority or hierarchical decision-making even as they stress the importance of partnership and mutual respect. This contradiction can undermine efforts to foster genuine collaboration. Cultivating collaboration with parents of students with disabilities is crucial towards ensuring the best outcomes for students with disabilities. Key practices that foster this type of collaborative trust include clear and transparent communication, active parental involvement, and a commitment to shared decision-making and implementation. Research question three examined practices principals implement to establish strong partnerships between

educators and families, reinforcing mutual respect and confidence in the IEP process. A sub-question for three also examined how principals assess the effectiveness of their trust-building strategies. This factor was considered equally important, as it allowed principals to identify strengths in their practice and address gaps, enabling opportunity for continuous improvement to their approach to parent engagement. Key themes that emerged through the data for question focused on the creation of a safe climate that is inclusive of principals and educators who are present and available, solicitous of active engagement, and proactive in their preparation. Further, with respect to assessing efficacy, themes that followed were the use of non-verbal cues, active engagement, and the impact of personal lived experience on how principals responded to/acted upon/implemented their practices within the school context.

Creating a Safe Climate

Building and maintaining trust between parents of students with disabilities and school leadership is a process that is shaped by daily interactions, communication norms, and an established school climate. Relational trust, as described by Bryk and Schneider (2003), evolves through ongoing experiences and engagement. Participants in this study emphasized the importance of parents feeling like an integral part of the school community, with opportunities to visit classrooms and observe their children's learning environment. Such consistent and positive interactions foster trust over time. Research by Bryk and Schneider (2003) and Tschannen-Moran (2014) highlight that informal, day-to-day engagement with the school environment, including communication via accessible platforms like Google Voice and email, allows parents to maintain open lines of dialogue in ways that are most convenient for them. Not only does this open exchange allow for sharing pertinent information in a timely fashion (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000), but this level of positive interaction over time inculcating the principles of increased

predictability of engagement, confidence in one's standing, and an overall acceptance of the

parties' goodwill toward one another (Das & Teng, 2004). The persistent repetition of these

factors creates a school climate that is predisposed to positive collaboration and problem solving.

As central figures in shaping the school's culture, principals influence the overall tone,

values, and beliefs that guide teacher and staff interactions with families (Tschannen-Moran &

Gareis, 2015). How a principal creates and embodies that climate establishes expectations of

accountability and transparency for their teachers, parents, and community. Participants in this

study repeatedly described their schools as more than institutions—they were communities built

on inclusivity, warmth, and genuine care. The use of language such as "showing genuine care"

and "listening so that parents feel heard" underscores the importance of ensuring that parents feel

respected and valued. Research supports this perspective, with parents reporting that being

recognized as equal partners and having their concerns heard by educators, fosters trust

(McNaughton & Vostal, 2010).

Collaboration was consistently cited as a critical trust-building strategy. Study

participants emphasized that viewing parents as equal partners in the IEP process enhances

mutual trust. Cultivating a climate of collaboration facilitates parental input and increases the

likelihood of alignment between principal, school and parent goals, educators can strengthen

parents' confidence in the educational process (Zagona et al., 2019). This shared understanding

reduces perceived risk, allowing parents to feel more secure in the IEP team's decisions. These

findings align with the work of Das and Teng (2004), when principals demonstrate genuine

commitment and competence, they mitigate relational and performance risks, fostering greater

confidence among parents.

In the context of this study, a safe climate ensures that parents feel respected and empowered to make meaningful contribution to the decisions regarding their student's education and fosters collaboration with the principal and student educators. Study participants repeatedly highlighted the importance of accessibility to both the principal and school staff. Key themes such as open-door policies, transparent communication via formal and informal mechanisms, proactive sharing of information, and celebrating student successes all emerged as essential elements. These findings illustrate that trust is not simply a procedural byproduct but rather a fundamental value intentionally cultivated through leadership-driven priorities.

Additionally, responsiveness was another cornerstone of trust with interpersonal regard, integrity, and competence are interconnected elements that directly impact trust (Tschannen-Moran, 2014; Bryk & Schneider, 2010). Several participants highlighted responsiveness as a defining factor of regard and integrity, with one principal reporting the monitoring and tracking of staff responses to parental concerns as way to be aware of the latest development and make mid-course corrections as necessary. A timely response signals attentiveness, investment, and a commitment to problem-solving, whereas delayed or absent responses may be perceived as a lack of care. These findings align with Das and Teng's (2004) research, suggesting that trust is reinforced by predictability and reliability of responses— as past experiences shape parents' future expectations of reliability and engagement.

Lastly, the importance of school personnel truly knowing their students emerged as a recurring theme. As previously stated, many parents find IEP meetings overwhelming, one participant noted that starting discussions by highlighting the student's strengths helped ease parental anxiety, demonstrated the school's investment, and fostered greater buy-in to the process. Participants stressed that principals and educators must take time to understand students

on a personal level, including not only their names, but also, family backgrounds, specific needs, and achievements. Demonstrating such familiarity reinforces trust by conveying care, competence, and dedication to the students' success. Beyond improving decision-making, a deep understanding of students allows principals to anticipate needs, create opportunities for success, and personalize communication with parents.

Findings from this study highlight that the practices of open and transparent communication, active listening and empathy, valuing individual students, demonstrating knowledge and application of special education legal requirements, and ensuring commitment to and fidelity of IEP implementation all contribute to creating a safe and welcoming climate in the school. While Bryk and Schneider's (1996, 2003) research broadly demonstrated that trust among school stakeholders is crucial for school reform and improvement, Tschannen-Moran's work (1998, 2000, 2014, 2015), discussed the principal's role in establishing trust through integrity, authenticity, and a positive climate. This study offers a more granular view of these actions within the specific context of special education, and their direct effect on building parental trust with the principal throughout the educational planning and implementation of services for students with disabilities.

Assessing Efficacy

Research indicates that principals' active participation is a key predictor of success in implementing changes that improve services for students with disabilities. Through assessment of their practice, principals can gauge their effectiveness in promoting a school-wide commitment to inclusivity and trust-building with parents (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015, Inclusive School Network, n.d.). Study participants across all roles and school settings highlighted the use of active listening and empathy as essential components of open

communication. Noonan et al., (2008) describes dialogical competence as a fundamental skill for educational leaders, emphasizing the ability to engage in meaningful, back-and-forth dialogue. This involves not only speaking and listening, but also attentively processing the other party's perspective, emotions, and concerns with genuine understanding. All study respondents referenced various combinations of these factors when engaging with parents of students with disabilities, with principals reinforcing the importance of creating a space where parents feel comfortable sharing their thoughts without fear of judgment or dismissal.

The utilization of active listening may lead to more open communication, shared goal development, and increased trust between educators and parents, resulting in a more collaborative atmosphere during IEP meetings and co-creation of educational goals designed to meet the students' unique needs (McNaughton & Vostal, 2010). All participants emphatically noted the need for active listening and empathy throughout the educational planning and implementation process. Finding from Chatzinikola (2021) indicated that listening without interjecting, using non-verbal cues as acknowledgement of understanding, asking open-ended questions and reiterating main points aided in understanding key points of concern. In line with this work, study findings underscored the importance of active listening as a practice that creates a supportive climate where parents feel comfortable sharing.

Another key theme that emerged from the data was that principals observed parental behavior and used that as an indicator of engagement and trust. Physical cues such as an open posture, relaxed facial expressions, and active participation signaled comfort and confidence. While rigid body language, tense expressions, terse responses, or complete disengagement indicated possible distrust or discomfort. Additionally, all principal participants, along with several teaching staff members, reported that principals actively solicited feedback from

educators regarding their day-to-day interactions with parents of students with disabilities. This

feedback, particularly during mandated IEP meetings, provided valuable insight into parental

comfort levels and participation. By incorporating these observations, principals could refine

their approach, ensuring that parents felt genuinely included in the decision-making process and

fostering stronger, more trusting relationships over time.

Findings highlighted the importance of collaboration among principals, educators, and

parents of students with disabilities to improve the educational planning and implementation of

the IEP. Key practices stemmed from the creation of a safe climate that engenders empathy and

compassion as much as it does transparency and accountability. A safe and inclusive school

environment, where parents are valued and engaged, can be achieved through daily interactions,

responsiveness to concerns, and proactive communication. As principals are central in

establishing the school climate they should model and encourage open dialogue, integrity, and

competence, as well as timely communication and a commitment to student success. Assessing

efficacy of trust-building strategies in real time through active listening and observation is

necessary for continuous improvement. Additionally, soliciting educator perspectives builds

confidence and respect with IEP stakeholders, and enables schools to align goals with parent

expectations and sustain a supportive educational environment.

Personal, Lived Experience

An unexpected theme that emerged from the data revealed that participants with personal,

lived experience with students with disabilities reflected a deeper understanding of the

challenges parents of students with disabilities encounter and the different ways in which

disabilities present themselves. These findings were in line with the literature that found that

teachers with personal experience with a child with a disability tended to be more empathetic to

the student, attuned to the challenges of the situation, inclined toward more inclusive strategies, and more motivated to advocate for resources and services (Macfarland & Woolfson, 2013)).

Through data analysis, the findings of this study illustrated that principals and staff with personal experience related to disabilities—such as having a child with a disability—exhibited deeper empathy and often approached problem-solving in unique and insightful ways. This unexpected theme emerged from the participant responses, with participants noting that their personal experiences helped them better understand family dynamics and the manifestations of disabilities. This, in turn, influenced their practices. While the frameworks of Bryk and Schneider (1996, 2003) and Tschannen-Moran (2014) imply a connection between empathy and elements such as interpersonal regard and benevolence, the findings of this study uniquely highlight the tangible impact of direct personal experience with disability on building trust in this educational dyad.

The explicit recognition and analysis of lived experience as a significant factor in building trust within the principal-parent dyad is a departure from the foundational literature. The importance of consistent actions, integrity, and follow-through on commitments in building trust is emphasized in frameworks like those of Bryk and Schneider (1998, 2003), as well as Tschannen-Moran (2014). These models highlight the role of interpersonal regard, aligning actions with personal values, and fulfilling promises to foster trust. However, while these frameworks implicitly include empathy—a quality that can be enhanced by lived experience— they do not explicitly address how personal lived experiences with disabilities might influence the development of trust, particularly in the relationship between principals and parents of students with disabilities. The focus of those research frameworks tends to be more on general principles of social exchange and relational trust within the broader school community, without

delving into how specific lived experiences with disabilities can shape trust-building in the context of this principal-parent dyad.

Further, Tschannen-Moran's (2014) model of relational trust is based on five key elements: benevolence, honesty, openness, reliability, and competence. Benevolence, or acting in the best interest of others, could be strengthened by the empathy developed through personal experience with disabilities. Similarly, competence might also be informed by a deeper understanding of disabilities. Despite this, her framework does not specifically analyze how lived experiences with disabilities impact these facets of trust in the principal-parent relationship. Tschannen-Moran's (2014) work tends to focus on how principals' actions and attitudes are perceived by others, rather than examining the source or nature of their understanding. The work of Bryk and Schneider's (1998, 2003) and Tschannen-Moran (2014) are critical in understanding trust within leadership and dynamics, and findings from this study add nuance to their research by highlighting the distinct and potentially significant role of personal lived experience with disabilities in fostering these qualities and building trust in the context of special education.

Research has found that educators with personal connections to disabilities were more attuned to the manifestations of disabilities. They often exhibited more positive attitudes toward inclusion and employed more effective teaching methods for students with disabilities. However, these educators were also at risk of developing biases, either favoring or disadvantaging students with disabilities, which could impact their teaching practices (Alghamdi, 2021). Further, while teacher empathy is vital, findings have also acknowledged the potential challenges for educators with lived experience, stating they may have difficult balancing their empathy with the need to maintain discipline and managing the competing needs of a diversity of learners (Chinn & Hughes, 2012). Based on the literature, it is important for educators with this experience to be

aware of their potential biases and engage in strategies like self-reflection of their own beliefs to

mitigate or minimize the risk of bias.

All participants shared a passion and commitment to serving students with disabilities.

Participants without personal lived experience reported having attained their knowledge through

professional development, academic pursuits, or on the job exposure. The responses of these

participants were focused more on data-driven decision-making and the importance and role of

district procedures as compared to the more intuitive or experiential decision making and

problem solving described by their counterparts.

Summary of Principal Practices (Research Question 3)

While climate was anticipated as a driving force in the development of trust, as reflected

in the proposed conceptual framework, its essential nature manifested differently than expected.

The research of Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2015) and Tschannen-Moran (2014) highlights

the role of principals in shaping positive school climates. Viewing parents as equal partners in

the IEP process, being accessible, responsive to their concerns, and knowing the students

personally are key elements in building trust. Principals can assess the effectiveness of their

trust-building strategies through active listening, observing parental behavior, and soliciting

feedback from educators. This study suggests that climate extends beyond the individual

principal practices employed to the overall school climate a principal cultivates and maintains.

Conclusion

The findings of this study refine the understanding of relational trust in schools by

focusing specifically on the principal-parent relationship for students with disabilities. This study

builds upon the foundational work of Tschannen-Moran (2014), Tschannen-Moran and Gareis

(2015), Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (1998, 2000), and Bryk and Schneider (1996, 2003) on trust

in schools by applying their concepts to the specific and complex relationship between principals

and parents of students with disabilities, particularly within the legally mandated Individualized

Education Program (IEP) process. These researchers primarily focused their research on trust

among school stakeholders (teachers, administrators, students, and parents) as a key factor

enabling meaningful school reform and improvement. This study distinguishes itself from prior

research by incorporating the strategic alliance perspective of Das and Teng (2004), and

specifically identifying and examining principal leadership practices and the influence of lived

experience within this context. These findings offer new insights that expand upon the existing

literature, and future research should continue to examine these factors within the context of

special education.

Implications for the Conceptual Framework

The initial conceptual framework consisted of ability to act, knowledge, communication,

and climate as independent factors that impacted the development of trust between principals and

parents of students with disabilities during the IEP planning and implementation process.

However, findings from this study provided an alternative conceptualization, depicting a

bidirectional relationship amongst these factors and how they serve to bridge the relationship

between principals and parent trust (see revised framework Figure 2).

In the originally proposed framework, ability to act refers to a trustee's capacity to fulfill

commitments and apply knowledge. It includes a principal's ability to adapt and apply

information, their motivations, and their history in developing trust. The definition also includes

the willingness, motivation, and application of knowledge to different situations to reduce

perceived and performance risks. Although this was prevalent within this domain, given the

findings of this study the definition of ability to act must be expanded upon to also include the

commitment of the principal. The principal must be committed to developing mastery of special

education requirements and ensuring that all IEP stakeholders understand the knowledge that is

transferred. Commitment also extends to dedicating resources to foster collaboration through

creative planning and funding. Moreover, the principal's commitment extends to creating,

sustaining, and modeling a climate of care, transparency, and accountability to facilitate trust-

building with parents of students with disabilities. The principal's commitment to fostering a

supportive climate is the central driver for positive outcomes toward building trust with parents

of students with disabilities.

Within the context of this study, knowledge involves the informational content of special

education requirements, implementing policies, and district resources. Principals must effectively

articulate the legal and procedural aspects of IEPs to empower parents and create a collaborative

environment. This domain must also be expanded upon, to now include leveraging one's

knowledge to establish clarity for mutually agreed-upon goals and service plans to minimize

gaps in delivery, provide rationale for decisions, and advocate for student resources. The

principal's commitment to ensuring that educators, parents, and students have a deep

understanding of the IEP process, IDEA (2004) requirements, clear rational and engagement is

critical to maximize shared understanding and responsibility.

Communication as originally presented included both formal and informal day-to-day

interactions. It involves the mandated communication requirements of the IDEA (2004) and open

engagements of parents with school staff to create a positive cycle of interaction for building

trust. Accessible means of communication and timely responsiveness were also depicted as

invaluable to building trust. This domain was also broadened as to not only limit communication

to incidents or problems but should also include and highlight student successes. This would

serve to illustrate educator care and investment in student development, which may enhance

parent confidence in the principal and educators. The principal's commitment to transparent

honest communication, climate of care, and a focus on teamwork between the principal,

educators, and parents are essential to create an environment of increased confidence and care

that services are being delivered.

Lastly, within the proposed model, climate encompasses the norms, behaviors, and

expectations that are important to an organization and its members. Based on the results of this

study, care and compassion were found to be integral components of school climate. The

importance of creating community that holds values of care, respect, compassion, benefit, and

active listening instrumental, these elements form the foundation on which to build knowledge,

collaboration, and communication.

The principal's commitment to transparent honest communication, a climate of care, and

focus on teamwork between the principal, educators, and parents are essential for cultivating

trust. This involves building strong relationships and fostering a sense of shared responsibility

where all work collaboratively. Ultimately, an empathetic and respectful approach, which

prioritizes the student's well-being to create a safe and inclusive learning environment, are the

building blocks to foster trust with parents of students with disabilities.
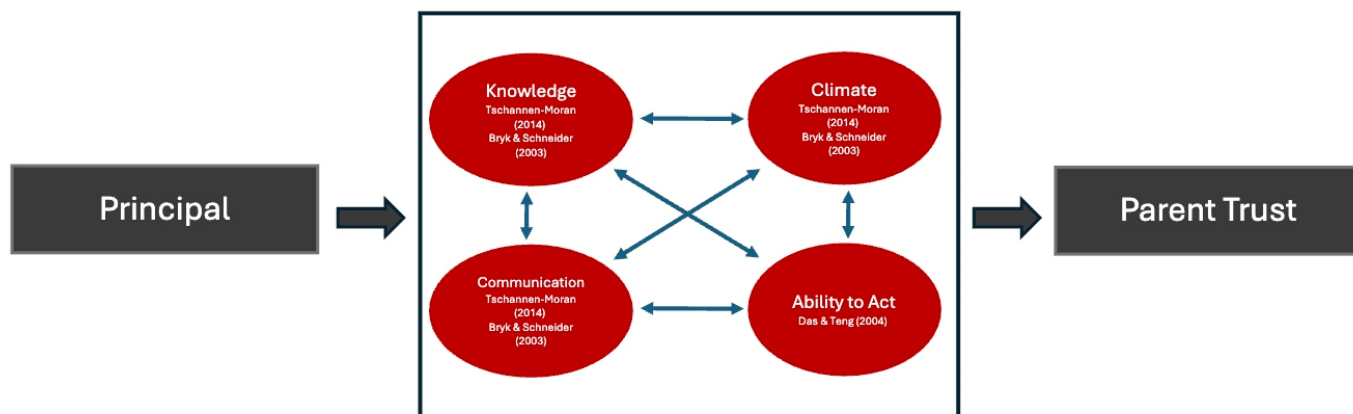
Figure 1.

Original Conceptual Framework

Figure 2.

Revised Conceptual Framework

Factors that Influence Trust During the IEP Development and Implementation Process

Future Research

This explanatory case study examined a single school district identified as a positive deviant, which indicates that it has demonstrated success in improving its special education programs and fostering parent engagement with parents of students with disabilities. The study aimed to identify specific principal practices that contribute to these positive outcomes. The primary driving theme that emerged from the analysis was the principal's commitment to empathetic leadership. By prioritizing relationship-building, transparent communication, and responsiveness to parental concerns, principals in this district have established climates of trust and collaboration, which are essential for development of trust with parents of students with disabilities during the IEP special education planning and implementation.

Given the significant role of the principal in shaping school climates intended to foster trust, future research should examine principals' values and how these values may influence their approach to special education leadership. For example, the values of individuals with lived experience may impact their perspectives on climate, resource allocation, and collaboration with educators and families. Additionally, given the unexpected theme of those with lived experience, further understanding how personal experiences with disability influence leadership styles could provide valuable insights into effective training strategies and the cultivation of empathetic, student-centered practices. Examining principals' knowledge and beliefs about child development could also offer insights into how their perceptions shape their investment in early learning and intervention strategies. For example, further understanding the extent to which principals prioritize knowledge of child development may reveal gaps in existing preparation models for school administrators. If principals do not hold the foundational knowledge of child

developmental stages, they may be less invested in curriculum components that emphasize

developmentally appropriate practices, social-emotional learning, and differentiated instruction.

Another potential area of study involves training and curriculum development for school

leaders. Future research should investigate the relationship between pre-service training,

emotional preparedness, and confidence levels among newly appointed principals working with

the special education population. A pre- and post-assessment model could evaluate how training

programs impact principal attitudes, knowledge acquisition, and overall preparedness to lead

inclusive schools. This research may also assist in refining professional development programs

to ensure that principals enter their roles with both the technical expertise and emotional

intelligence necessary to foster effective special education principal leadership.

By investigating these interconnected factors—values, training, emotional preparedness,

and beliefs about child development—researchers can contribute to a more robust framework for

school leadership in special education. Strengthening the preparation and support systems for

principals will ultimately lead to more effective special education programs, stronger parent-

school partnerships, and improved outcomes for students with disabilities.

Recommendations for Practice

Findings from this study provide valuable insights into the complex dynamics of trust

between principals and parents of students with disabilities during the educational planning and

implementation process. Results highlighted that trust is not a static concept, but a dynamic

engagement influenced by various factors, such as principal leadership, climate, knowledge and

commitment. These themes are essential for fostering a positive and productive educational

environment in which principals and parents of students with disabilities can effectively work on

educational planning for their students. Many of these factors were found to be interconnected

and inseparable, and all relate back to the principal highlighting the integral role their leadership

practice brings to bear on the trust-based relationship.

Principal leadership practices play a crucial role in fostering trust. Establishing a climate

of respect and partnership where parents are regarded as integral members of the IEP team and

the school community is the starting point of building trust within the parent-principal dyad.

Parental engagement is maximized through an accessible, response-oriented approach to

problem-solving and partnership in which parent contribution and students are valued. Moreover,

leadership must create a safe and welcoming climate within their school where parents are safe

to voice their position without fear of judgement or recrimination, feel heard, and engage in open

transparent communication on which decisions are collaboratively made.

The data revealed that the climate created should engage and reflect open, transparent,

and empathic communication. This includes utilizing active listening and being accessible and

responsive, where educators listen to concerns and contributions with empathy and honesty,

while also responding in a timely and meaningful way. Implementing these strategies can lead to

shared goal development, and increased confidence between educators and parents, resulting in a

more collaborative atmosphere during IEP meetings.

Investing in collaboration between special education and general education staff, as well

as with parents, is vital for creating a sense of teamwork and mutual respect and engagement. For

example, ensuring to actively seek parent input on proposed decisions and or changes to the IEP

or implementing strategies. Principal participants were found to invest resources ensuring staff

had sufficient time and bandwidth to do substantive collaboration. Principals also actively sought

out the perspectives and observations of their staff, which not only enhanced their insight into

serving students with disabilities in their individual constellation of factors, but also further

instilled trust with their staff. Lastly, the intentionality of the principal participants to assess the effectiveness of their trust-building practices by observing parent participation in IEP meetings, their level of all around engagement in all school events, and the mindfulness to note non-verbal cues from parents during meetings are consistent efforts to monitor parental levels of trust.

The need for principal mastery and application of the IDEA (2004) requirements was present throughout the research questions and was indicated across all roles and school settings. The data showed that principals should be fluent in the special education legislation to foster inclusive practices, ensure legal compliance, support staff, and advocate for students' rights. More importantly, related to transparency, principals should be able to explain the rationale for IEP decisions and service implementation to parents and use lay language to facilitate understanding of legal or educationally specific nomenclature. Parents need to have confidence that the services and supports outlined in the IEP are being implemented as prescribed.

An unexpected finding of the study was that participants with personal lived experience often demonstrated a deeper understanding of the challenges parents face. Educators with such experiences could serve as valuable resources for principals when navigating the complex dynamics between parents and students with disabilities in the educational setting. Principals may want to consider how to leverage their own experiences, or those of their staff members who have personal familiarity with students with disabilities, while remaining mindful of potential biases and striving for objectivity. These resources offer unique insights into the challenges families face and can help educators relate to and navigate conversations with parents. Additionally, they can provide feedback and creative solutions to challenges during implementation. Moreover, educators with personal experience can foster empathy for students

with disabilities and their families, guiding principals and teachers toward more supportive

approaches when working with parents.

As noted throughout, themes were found to be interconnected across all study

participants. Principals who demonstrate strong leadership practices are associated with creating

a positive climate in the school. A positive climate is rooted in effective communication with

empathy and active listening, which contributes to parental engagement. Mastery of the special

education requirements arm principals with the knowledge necessary to assist parents in

maneuvering complex materials, and clearly articulate decision-making rational. Clear decision

making and shared goals, amplifies collaboration, increasing the likelihood of fidelity during the

implementation of the IEP. Incorporating these leadership practices—emphasizing effective

communication, mastery of special education requirements, and shared decision-making—

enhances trust and collaboration, laying a solid foundation for successful IEP implementation

and fostering meaningful parental engagement.

Action Communications

To bridge the gap between this study and practice, the action for this capstone focuses on

a proposal for a professional development series (Appendix I). This series is designed to build

the skills necessary to strengthen trust between principals, educators, and parents of students

with disabilities—an essential factor in improving both academic and emotional outcomes for

students. The training focuses on relational and strategic trust, communication strategies, and

principal leadership, delivered through interactive discussions, case studies, and role-playing.

The goal is to equip principals and school personnel with the skills to build stronger relationships

with parents of students with disabilities, emphasizing open communication, empathy, and

respect. The training modules cover understanding trust, using communication to build trust,

principal leadership and school climate, assessing trust-building practices, emotional intelligence and competence, the impact of personal experience, and practical strategies for addressing trust issues.

A variety of innovative, experiential learning strategies that will be incorporated to create high quality, rigorous experiences for educational leaders. Strategies will leverage best practices for adult learning, including components supporting emotional competence and mindfulness. Participants will learn to apply the key concepts from the coursework to real-world scenarios and assess their effectiveness through feedback and observation. Specifically, in class activities will include role plays where participants will be provided narratives for the roles they will play, perspective taking exercises, use of empathy mapping, and reflective journaling and mindfulness tools. Ultimately, this professional development series aims to promote parental engagement, which is vital for the successful development and implementation of Individualized Education Programs (IEPs).

Conclusion

This study investigated the critical role of principal leadership in fostering trust with parents of students with disabilities during the educational planning process, particularly within the context of special education's unique legal requirements. The research emphasized that trust is foundational for effective communication and collaboration, necessitating open, honest, and responsive interactions. Principals need to demonstrate a comprehensive understanding of special education law, the IEP process, and available district resources to build confidence with parents. Clear communication, avoiding technical jargon, and active listening are essential, as is responsiveness to parental concerns. Of great importance is the study's illustration that the school climate, shaped by the principal's leadership, significantly impacts trust, and that

principals must be able to translate their knowledge and intention into tangible actions that

benefit students with disabilities and their families. Ultimately, a principal's ability to act,

including their motivation, willingness, and competence, is crucial for building and maintaining

trust with parents of students with disabilities.

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Appendix A: Factors that Influence Trust

Table 4**: Factors that Influence Trust between Principals and Parents of Students with Disabilities**

Contributing Factor	Leadership Practices	Practices that Influence Trust between Principals and Parents of students with disabilities during the educational planning	Factors that Influence the Trust
Ability to Act	Willingness	Principal commits resources with a high probability that they will be delivered, and that accountability and consequences exist if commitment is unfulfilled.	Reduced perceived risk. Increased predictability.
	Motivation		Increased Integrity.
	Ability to apply knowledge in a variety of contexts	Motivations of the IEP team align.	Reduced performance risk.
		The principal has sufficient skill and flexibility to apply requisite knowledge and decision making during the educational planning process	

Contributing Factor	Leadership Practices	Practices that Influence Trust between Principals and Parents of students with disabilities during the educational planning	Factors that Influence the Trust
Knowledge	Knowledge of disabilities	Principal participation and willingness to acquire new knowledge.	Reduced perceived risk. Reduced performance risk. Increased integrity.
	Knowledge of the legal requirements		
		The principal is knowledgeable about and applies the requirements of IDEA (2004) and its implementing regulations.	Decreased performance risk Increased integrity
	Knowledge of available district resources		
		Principal is well versed on the district's resources, availability, budgets, and equivalent options/funding mechanisms if needed services are unavailable.	
Communication	Day-to-day interactions	Principal ensures quality, consistency, and accuracy of day-to-day interactions.	Increased integrity. Decreased perceived risk.
		Alternate means of general communication distribution are considered and implemented as needed based on student's abilities.	

Contributing Factor	Leadership Practices	Practices that Influence Trust between Principals and Parents of students with disabilities during the educational planning	Factors that Influence the Trust
	Mandated communications	Principals ensure that mandate documents are accurate and delivered to the parent in a timely manner.	Reduced perceived risk. Increased integrity Reduced perceived risk. Reduced performance risk. Increased integrity.
	Transparency of resources	Principal works to ensure parent understanding of the educational planning process, assessment content, impact of student's disability on their learning. Principal ensures adequate communication and transparency on delivery and availability of services.	

Contributing Factor	Leadership Practices	Practices that Influence Trust between Principals and Parents of students with disabilities during the educational planning	Factors that Influence the Trust
School Climate	Establishing norms and expectations in their school. Engaging parents of students with disabilities in the collaborative process that is the educational planning process.	Principal establishes norms and expectations within their school that support the inclusion of students with disabilities, and their families, into the general school community. Principal ensures displays of respect by all personnel, pacing of planning meetings, demonstrable acts and efforts to listen and learn.	Reduced perceived risk. Increased integrity. Reduced perceived risk. Reduced performance risk. Increased integrity.
	Developing staff and increasing their awareness.	Principal creates opportunities under the intent of legislation, disabilities, communication, and emotional intelligence for school personnel attentiveness to and engagement with the student.	Reduced perceived risk. Reduced performance risk. Increased integrity

Appendix B: Document Review Protocol

Subject	Value	Source	Link
Total Enrollment			
Students with Disabilities (%)			
Students with Disabilities (Count)			
CAASPP Score Below Standard (Points)			
Graduation Rate (%)			
Dropout Rate (%)			
Compliance Status (IDEA, 2004)			

Subject	Value	Source	Link
Budget Allocation for Special Education ($M)			
State Special Education Policies and Procedures			
District Special Education Policies and Procedures			
Federal Special Education State Performance Plan			

Appendix C: Semi-Structured Principal Interview Protocol

Date of Interview:

Role of Interviewee:

Interviewed by: Ellen Safranek

Place:

Start Time:

End Time:

Duration:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the data collection for my doctoral study. I am doctoral student at the University of Virginia's School of Education and Human Development and am conducting a study on principal practices that build trust with parents of students with disabilities during the educational planning process.

Purpose of Study: The purpose of this study is to examine the factors affecting trust between the principals and the parents of students with disabilities during the educational planning process. Specifically, the role of trust in the legally mandated dynamic between the principal and the parents of the student with the disability. My goal is to look for patterns and best practices from schools that are demonstrating success.

Purpose of Interview: I have reviewed publicly available documents about the District's policies in implementing the federal requirements of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, District performance in serving students with disabilities, State level complaints the district has received with respect to its implementation of special education, and the districts communications with the parent community as large as well as with the parents of students with disabilities on its website. I would like to interview you to build a more complete understanding

of the leadership practices you as a school-based principal within your district have used to

initiate, build, and/or sustain the trust-based relationship with parents of students with disabilities

as you enter and progress through the educational planning process. My hope is that this

interview will give more context to the why behind your principal practices to support parental

involvement throughout the educational planning process.

Logistics of Interview: This is a semi-structured interview, you have the freedom to skip

questions, ask for clarification, and ask me questions at any point throughout the process. With

your permission, I will be recording our interview to ensure accurate representation for my data

collection and study. These recordings are only for my review. Also, I request your permission to

take notes during our interview not only to ensure accurate representation for my data collection

and study but also to provide me opportunity to indicate related context within my notes. Taking

notes will also assist with keeping me on track through the interview and help me to make sure I

ask all my questions.

Can I record the interview? Yes_____   No_____

Do I have your permission to take notes during the interview? Yes_____   No_____

Confidentiality: Please know that I will not identify you by name and/or title without your

permission, neither will this information appear in my study. Similarly, I will not directly quote

you in my study without first getting your permission. If you grant permission for a direct quote,

the quote will be attributed to a district principal and will not include any personally identifiable

information you may have shared.

Consent Reminder: Please note, you can withdraw your consent for this interview at any time and have the right to not answer any question I ask. Additionally, you can stop the interview at any time for any reason.

Primary Question: What are the essential practices principals are utilizing when working with parents of children with disabilities throughout the educational planning process?

Research Questions:

1) In what ways, if any, do principals characterize trust as an element in promoting parental engagement in the educational planning process?

2) What factors do principals report as having the most significant effect on the quality and strength of trust between the parents of students with disabilities and the principals during the educational planning process?

   a. How does the legally mandated relationship that exists between principals and parents of students with disabilities affect the development of trust during the required educational planning process?

3) What principal leadership practices do principals report using to strengthen and build the quality of trust with parents of students with disabilities during the educational planning process?

   a. How do principals determine the efficacy of the practices employed to strengthen trust with parents of students with disabilities during the educational planning process?

1) Before your role as a school administrator, what was your experience with students with disabilities? (background, establishing rapport)

2) Describe the ways in which you have developed special-education-related knowledge, skills, and requirements (R2 – Knowledge)

3) How confident do you feel about your special education-related knowledge and skills? (R2 - Knowledge)

4) How do you stay up to date on what resources are available to support students in special education programs? (R2 - Knowledge)

5) Describe the considerations taken when preparing for the school year to meet the needs of the special education population in your school and do they differ from that for the general education population? (R3 -Climate)

6) Please recall an experience during the educational planning and/or implementation process where you had to leverage district resources to meet the needs of a student as identified and outlined by the IEP team? (R2 – Ability to Act)

7) Can you describe any strategies that you use to create day-to-day, opportunities for integration of your general and special education communities? (R3 - Climate)

8) How are new families of students with disabilities onboarded, and how does this process differ from that of the general education community? (R3 - Climate)

9) What strategies do you use to communicate your expectations for parental engagement with parents of students with disabilities, with your staff? (R2 - Climate)

10) Please describe actions you've taken to establish a productive working relationship with parents of students with disabilities. (R2 – Ability to Act, R2 Climate)

11) What do you consider to be most important factor in establishing a productive working relationship with parents? (R2 - Trust)

- How would you define "trust" in your relationship with parents? (R1 - Trust)

- What role, if any, does trust play in the educational planning process from your perspective? (R1 - Trust)

- Is there a specific point during the educational planning and/or implementation process where the strength of trust is most vulnerable? (R2 - Trust)

12) Please describe indicators or actions that would suggest strengthened trust. (R3 – Ability to Act)

13) Please describe indicators that would suggest the weakened trust. (R3 – Ability to Act)

14) Please recall an experience during the educational planning and/or implementation process when the strength of trust was in jeopardy and the actions you took to resolve the diminishing trust? (R2 – Ability to Act) (R3 - Trust).

- What, if any, adaptations did you make to your practice to strengthen trust as a result of that experience? (R2 – Ability to Act) (R3 - Trust).

15) Is there anything I haven't asked that would allow me to better understand the leadership practices that you use to affect the strength of trust when working with parents of students with disabilities during the educational planning process?

Thank you for participating in this interview. I very much appreciate your time today and throughout the process of setting up this interview. If you would like, I will follow up with you to provide you with a copy of my notes from this interview as well as the final draft of my study. I

ask that if I misrepresent anything you've said in any way or include information that you feel

would personally identify you, you please let me know so that I can make corrections.

Appendix D: Semi-Structured Special Education Teacher Interview Protocol

Date of Interview:

Role of Interviewee:

Interviewed by: Ellen Safranek

Place:

Start Time:

End Time:

Duration:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the data collection for my doctoral study. I am doctoral student at the University of Virginia's School of Education and Human Development and am conducting a study on principal practices that build trust with parents of students with disabilities during the educational planning process.

Purpose of Study: The purpose of this study is to examine the factors affecting the strength of trust between the principals and the parents of students with disabilities during the educational planning process. Specifically, the role of trust in the legally mandated dynamic between the principal and the parents of the student with the disability. My goal is to look for patterns and best practices from schools that are demonstrating success.

Purpose of Interview: I have reviewed publicly available documents about the District's policies in implementing the federal requirements of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, District performance in serving students with disabilities, State level complaints the district has received with respect to its implementation of special education, and the districts communications with the parent community as large as well as with the parents of students with disabilities on its website. I would like to interview you to build a more complete understanding

of the leadership practices you as a school-based principal within your district have used to initiate, strengthen, and/or sustain the trust-based relationship with parents of students with disabilities as you enter and progress through the educational planning process. My hope is that this interview will give more context to the why behind your principal practices to support parental involvement throughout the educational planning process.

Logistics of Interview: This is a semi-structured interview, you have the freedom to skip questions, ask for clarification, and ask me questions at any point throughout the process. With your permission, I will be recording our interview to ensure accurate representation for my data collection and study. These recordings are only for my review. Also, I request your permission to take notes during our interview not only to ensure accurate representation for my data collection and study but also to provide me opportunity to indicate related context within my notes. Taking notes will also assist with keeping me on track through the interview and help me to make sure I ask all my questions.

Can I record the interview? Yes_____   No_____

Do I have your permission to take notes during the interview? Yes_____   No_____

Confidentiality: Please know that I will not identify you by name and/or title without your permission, neither will this information appear in my study. Similarly, I will not directly quote you in my study without first getting your permission. If you grant permission for a direct quote, the quote will be attributed to a district principal and will not include any personally identifiable information you may have shared.

Consent Reminder: Please note, you can withdraw your consent for this interview at any time and have the right to not answer any question I ask. Additionally, you can stop the interview at any time for any reason.

Primary Question: What are the essential practices principals are utilizing when working with parents of children with disabilities throughout the educational planning process?

Research Questions:

1) In what ways, if any, do principals characterize trust as an element in promoting parental engagement in the educational planning process?

2) What factors do principals report as having the most significant effect on the quality and strength of trust between the parents of students with disabilities and the principals during the educational planning process?

    b. How does the legally mandated relationship that exists between principals and parents of students with disabilities affect the development of trust during the required educational planning process?

3) What principal leadership practices do principals report using to strengthen and build the quality of trust with parents of students with disabilities during the educational planning process?

    b. How do principals determine the efficacy of the practices employed to strengthen trust with parents of students with disabilities during the educational planning process?

1) Before your role as a Special Education teacher, what was your experience with students with disabilities? (background, establishing rapport)

2) Describe the ways in which you have developed special-education-related knowledge, skills, and requirements. (R2 – Knowledge)

3) How confident do you feel about your principal's knowledge and skills related to special education? (R2 - Knowledge)

4) How does your principal ensure you stay up to date on what resources are available to support students in special education programs? (R2 - Knowledge)

5) Please recall an experience during the educational planning and/or implementation process where your principal had to leverage district resources to meet the needs of a student as identified and outlined by the IEP team? (R2 – Ability to Act)

6) Describe the considerations that your principal takes when preparing for the school year to meet the needs of the special education population and does it differ from that for the general education population? (R3 -Climate)

7) Can you describe any strategies that your principal uses to create day-to-day opportunities for integration of your general and special education populations? (R3 - Climate)

8) How does your principal onboard are new families of students with disabilities, and how does this process differ from that of the general education population? (R3 - Climate)

   - Has your principal communicated expectations surrounding engagement with parents of students with disabilities? (R3 – Climate)

9) Has your principal provided in-service training on what they considered most important when establishing a productive working relationship with parents? (R2 - Trust) (Communication)

10) Please describe actions your principal has taken to establish a productive working relationship with parents of students with disabilities. (R2 – Ability to Act, R2 Climate)

11) What do you consider to be most important in establishing a productive working relationship with parents? (R2 - Trust)

- How would you define "trust" in your relationship with parents? (R1 - Trust)

- What role, if any, does trust play in the educational planning process from your perspective? (R1 - Trust)

- Is there a specific point during the educational planning and/or implementation process where the strength of trust is most vulnerable? (R2 - Trust)

12) How does your principal model the development of trust with parents during the educational planning process? (R1 - Trust)

13) Please describe indicators or actions that would suggest strengthened trust. (R3 – Ability to Act)

14) Please describe indicators that would suggest the weakened trust. (R3 – Ability to Act)

15) Is there anything I haven't asked that would allow me to better understand the leadership practices that your principal has implemented to affect the strength of trust when working with parents of students with disabilities during the educational planning process?

Thank you for participating in this interview. I very much appreciate your time today and throughout the process of setting up this interview. If you would like, I will follow up with you to

provide you with a copy of my notes from this interview as well as the final draft of my study. I

ask that if I misrepresent anything you've said in any way or include information that you feel

would personally identify you, you please let me know so that I can make corrections.

Appendix E: Semi-Structured General Education Teacher Interview Protocol

Date of Interview:

Role of Interviewee:

Interviewed by: Ellen Safranek

Place:

Start Time:

End Time:

Duration:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the data collection for my doctoral study. I am doctoral student at the University of Virginia's School of Education and Human Development and am conducting a study on principal practices that build trust with parents of students with disabilities during the educational planning process.

Purpose of Study: The purpose of this study is to examine the factors affecting the strength of trust between the principals and the parents of students with disabilities during the educational planning process. Specifically, the role of trust in the legally mandated dynamic between the principal and the parents of the student with the disability. My goal is to look for patterns and best practices from schools that are demonstrating success.

Purpose of Interview: I have reviewed publicly available documents about the District's policies in implementing the federal requirements of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, District performance in serving students with disabilities, State level complaints the district has received with respect to its implementation of special education, and the districts communications with the parent community as large as well as with the parents of students with disabilities on its website. I would like to interview you to build a more complete understanding

of the leadership practices you as a school-based principal within your district have used to initiate, strengthen, and/or sustain the trust-based relationship with parents of students with disabilities as you enter and progress through the educational planning process. My hope is that this interview will give more context to the why behind your principal practices to support parental involvement throughout the educational planning process.

Logistics of Interview: This is a semi-structured interview, you have the freedom to skip questions, ask for clarification, and ask me questions at any point throughout the process. With your permission, I will be recording our interview to ensure accurate representation for my data collection and study. These recordings are only for my review. Also, I request your permission to take notes during our interview not only to ensure accurate representation for my data collection and study but also to provide me opportunity to indicate related context within my notes. Taking notes will also assist with keeping me on track through the interview and help me to make sure I ask all my questions.

Can I record the interview? Yes_____ No_____

Do I have your permission to take notes during the interview? Yes_____ No_____

Confidentiality: Please know that I will not identify you by name and/or title without your permission, neither will this information appear in my study. Similarly, I will not directly quote you in my study without first getting your permission. If you grant permission for a direct quote, the quote will be attributed to a district principal and will not include any personally identifiable information you may have shared.

Consent Reminder: Please note, you can withdraw your consent for this interview at any time and have the right to not answer any question I ask. Additionally, you can stop the interview at any time for any reason.

Primary Question: What are the essential practices principals are utilizing when working with parents of children with disabilities throughout the educational planning process?

Research Questions:

1) In what ways, if any, do principals characterize trust as an element in promoting parental engagement in the educational planning process?

2) What factors do principals report as having the most significant effect on the quality and strength of trust between the parents of students with disabilities and the principals during the educational planning process?

    c. How does the legally mandated relationship that exists between principals and parents of students with disabilities affect the development of trust during the required educational planning process?

3) What principal leadership practices do principals report using to strengthen and build the quality of trust with parents of students with disabilities during the educational planning process?

    c. How do principals determine the efficacy of the practices employed to strengthen trust with parents of students with disabilities during the educational planning process?

1) Before your role as a General Education teacher, what was your experience with students with disabilities? (background, establishing rapport)

2) Describe the ways in which you have developed special-education-related knowledge, skills, and requirements. (R2 – Knowledge)

3) How confident do you feel about your principal's knowledge and skills related to special education and their support of the general education teacher to serve these students? (R2 - Knowledge)

4) How does your principal ensure that you have the resources and knowledge needed to support the special education students in your classroom? (R2 - Knowledge)

5) Please recall an experience during the educational planning and/or implementation process where your principal had to leverage district resources to meet the needs of a student as identified and outlined by the IEP team? (R2 – Ability to Act)

6) Describe the considerations that your principal takes when preparing for the school year to meet the needs of the special education population and does it differ from that for the general education population? (R3 -Climate)

7) Can you describe any strategies that your principal uses to create day-to-day opportunities for integration of your general and special education communities? (R3 - Climate)

8) How does your principal onboard are new families of students with disabilities, and how does this process differ from that of the general education population? (R3 - Climate)

9) Has your principal communicated expectations surrounding engagement with parents of students with disabilities? (R3 – Climate)

- Has your principal provided in-service training on what they considered most important when establishing a productive working relationship with parents? (R2 - Trust)

10) Please describe actions your principal has taken to establish a productive working relationship with parents of students with disabilities. (R2 – Ability to Act, R2 Climate)

11) What do you consider to be most important in establishing a productive working relationship with parents? (R2 - Trust)

- How would you define "trust" in your relationship with parents? (R1 - Trust)

- What role, if any, does trust play in the educational planning process from your perspective? (R1 - Trust)

- Is there a specific point during the educational planning and/or implementation process where the strength of trust is most vulnerable? (R2 - Trust)

12) How does your principal model the development of trust with parents during the educational planning process? (R1 - Trust)

13) Please describe indicators or actions that would suggest strengthened trust. (R3 – Ability to Act)

14) Please describe indicators that would suggest the weakened trust. (R3 – Ability to Act)

15) Is there anything I haven't asked that would allow me to better understand the

leadership practices that your principal has implemented to affect the strength of trust

when working with parents of students with disabilities during the educational planning

process?

Appendix F: Semi-Structured Parent Liaison Interview Protocol

Date of Interview:

Role of Interviewee:

Interviewed by: Ellen Safranek

Place:

Start Time:

End Time:

Duration:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the data collection for my doctoral study. I am doctoral student at the University of Virginia's School of Education and Human Development and am conducting a study on principal practices that build trust with parents of students with disabilities during the educational planning process.

Purpose of Study: The purpose of this study is to examine the factors affecting the strength of trust between the principals and the parents of students with disabilities during the educational planning process. Specifically, the role of trust in the legally mandated dynamic between the principal and the parents of the student with the disability. My goal is to look for patterns and best practices from schools that are demonstrating success.

Purpose of Interview: I have reviewed publicly available documents about the District's policies in implementing the federal requirements of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, District performance in serving students with disabilities, State level complaints the district has received with respect to its implementation of special education, and the districts communications with the parent community as large as well as with the parents of students with disabilities on its website. I would like to interview you to build a more complete understanding

of the leadership practices you as a school-based principal within your district have used to initiate, strengthen, and/or sustain the trust-based relationship with parents of students with disabilities as you enter and progress through the educational planning process. My hope is that this interview will give more context to the why behind your principal practices to support parental involvement throughout the educational planning process.

Logistics of Interview: This is a semi-structured interview, you have the freedom to skip questions, ask for clarification, and ask me questions at any point throughout the process. With your permission, I will be recording our interview to ensure accurate representation for my data collection and study. These recordings are only for my review. Also, I request your permission to take notes during our interview not only to ensure accurate representation for my data collection and study but also to provide me opportunity to indicate related context within my notes. Taking notes will also assist with keeping me on track through the interview and help me to make sure I ask all my questions.

Can I record the interview? Yes_____   No_____

Do I have your permission to take notes during the interview? Yes_____   No_____

Confidentiality: Please know that I will not identify you by name and/or title without your permission, neither will this information appear in my study. Similarly, I will not directly quote you in my study without first getting your permission. If you grant permission for a direct quote, the quote will be attributed to a district principal and will not include any personally identifiable information you may have shared.

Consent Reminder: Please note, you can withdraw your consent for this interview at any time and have the right to not answer any question I ask. Additionally, you can stop the interview at any time for any reason.

Primary Question: What are the essential practices principals are utilizing when working with parents of children with disabilities throughout the educational planning process?

Research Questions:

1) In what ways, if any, do principals characterize trust as an element in promoting parental engagement in the educational planning process?

2) What factors do principals report as having the most significant effect on the quality and strength of trust between the parents of students with disabilities and the principals during the educational planning process?

    d. How does the legally mandated relationship that exists between principals and parents of students with disabilities affect the development of trust during the required educational planning process?

3) What principal leadership practices do principals report using to strengthen and build the quality of trust with parents of students with disabilities during the educational planning process?

    d. How do principals determine the efficacy of the practices employed to strengthen trust with parents of students with disabilities during the educational planning process?

1) Before your role in the parent training center, what was your experience with students with disabilities? (background, establishing rapport)

2) Describe the ways in which you have developed special-education-related knowledge, skills, and requirements. (R2 – Knowledge)

3) How confident do you feel in the knowledge and skills related to special education of the principal's you work with in the district? (R2 - Knowledge)

4) How do principals in the district work with you to identify ways in which they can ensure the needed resources and knowledge to effectively build productive parent relationships and provide supports to the students with disabilities in their school? (R2 - Knowledge)

5) For the principal's that you have worked with, describe the considerations that that they take when preparing for the school year to meet the needs of the special education population in their school and does it differ from that for the general education population? (R3 -Climate)

6) Can you describe any strategies that the principals you've worked with use to create day-to-day opportunities for integration of your general and special education communities? (R3 - Climate)

7) How do the principals you've worked with onboard new families of students with disabilities, and how does this process differ from that of the general education community? (R3 - Climate)

8) Please describe any principal provided in-service training conveying what they considered most important when establishing a productive working relationship with parents? (R2 - Trust)

9) How do the principals you work with communicate their expectations, for engagement with parents of students with disabilities, to their staff? (R3 – Climate)

10) What strategies do the principals you work with use to develop productive working relationships with the parents of students with disabilities?

11) What do you consider to be most important in establishing a productive working relationship with parents? (R2 - Trust)

- How would you define "trust" in your relationship with parents? (R1 - Trust)

- What role, if any, does trust play in the educational planning process from your perspective? (R1 - Trust)

- Is there a specific point during the educational planning and/or implementation process where the strength of trust is most vulnerable? (R2 - Trust)

12) Can you describe a time where a principal has consulted with you on how to improve the development of trust with parents during the educational planning process? (R3 – Ability to Act)

13) In your experience with parents, please recall an experience during the educational planning and/or implementation process where the strength of trust was in jeopardy and describe the actions taken by the principals you work with to resolve it. (R3 – Ability to Act)

14) Please describe indicators or actions that would suggest strengthened trust. (R3 – Ability to Act)

15) Please describe indicators that would suggest the weakened trust. (R3 – Ability to Act)

16) Is there anything I haven't asked that would allow me to better understand the leadership practices that your principal has implemented to affect the strength of trust when working with parents of students with disabilities during the educational planning process?

Thank you for participating in this interview. I very much appreciate your time today and throughout the process of setting up this interview. If you would like, I will follow up with you to provide you with a copy of my notes from this interview as well as the final draft of my study. I ask that if I misrepresent anything you've said in any way or include information that you feel would personally identify you, you please let me know so that I can make corrections.

Appendix G: Initial Code Book

Code Name	Code Abbreviation	Description
Ability to Act	ATA	Principal actions designed to take knowledge, pivot during the relationship, and apply it based on a variety of factors.
Ability to Act: Willingness	ATA: W	Principal practices that demonstrate commitment of resources and accountability and consequences for unfulfilled commitments.
Ability to Act: Motivation	ATA: M	Principal practices that align the IEP team
Knowledge: Disabilities	KN: D	Principal demonstrable and willing participation to acquire new knowledge.
Knowledge: Legal Requirements	KN: LR	Principal demonstrates knowledge about and applies the requirements of IDEA (2004) and its implementing regulations.
Knowledge: District Resources	KN: DR	Principal demonstrates knowledge of the district's available resources, budgets, and equivalent options/funding mechanisms if needed services are unavailable.

Communication: Day to Day	Com: D2D	Principal practices that ensure quality, consistency, and accuracy of day-to-day interactions
Communication Mandated	Com: M	Principal practices that ensure that mandated documents are accurate and delivered in a timely manner
Communication Mandated and Understood	Com: MU	Principal practices that demonstrate support of parent understanding of the educational planning process, assessment content, impact of the student's disability.
Communication Transparency	Com: T	Principal practices that ensure adequate communication and transparency on delivery and availability of services.
Climate: Norms	CL: N	Principal practices designed and structured to establish norms and expectations within their school that support the inclusion of students with disabilities, and their families, into the general school community.
Climate: Engaging Parents	CL: EP	Principal practices designed and structured to establish displays of respect by all personnel evidenced by demonstrable acts and efforts to listen and learn.
Climate: Increasing Staff Awareness	CL: SA	Principal practices designed and structured to develop staff abilities: legislation, communication, emotional intelligence, attentiveness to the student.

Demographics	D	Demographic information about interviewee or contextual information

Appendix H Data Coding

Data Code Categories	Sub-codes	Participants
Knowledge Special Education Legal Requirements		
	Knowledge of special education law and IEP process	**D, E, A, H**
	Effectively explaining the special education process and terminology	**A, G, J, D, E**
	Accurate knowledge	**D, E, A, H**
	Importance of Training and Professional Development	**B, D, E, A, C, H, G, J**
	Comprehension of the Legal Aspects of Special Education	**D, E, A, B, H, G**
	Collaborative Partnerships Between Special Education and General Education Staff	**B, D, E, A, C, H, G,**
	Integration of Students with Disabilities	**B, D, E, A, C, H, G, J**
	Data driven decisions	**D, E, A, B**
	Professional development opportunities	**B, D, E, A, C, H, G, J**
	Resolution of conflicts/Dispute resolution	**A, G, J, D, E**
	Present and engagement during IEP meetings.	**D, E, A, B, H, G**
Knowledge Disabilities		
	Reliance and confidence in teacher and resource knowledge and information provided	**D, E, A, H, J.**
Knowledge District Resources		
	District Support and Resources	**D, E, A, B, H, G**
	Utilization of resources for Substitutes to give time to teachers to plan	**D, E, A, B, H**
	Advocated for staff resources	**D, E, A, G**

Data Code Categories	Sub-codes	Participants
	Program specialists	A, G
Knowledge of the Student		
	Genuine commitment to student well-being	D, B, E, H, G
	Knowledge of student names, needs, and accomplishments	D, B, E, H, G
	Build knowledge of the families. Getting to know the families, their backgrounds, and their children's individual needs	B, D, E, A, C, H, G, J
Knowledge – Personal Experience		
	Experience - Family member with a disability	D, H, B, E, J
	Problem Solving based on experience	D, H, B, E, J
	Knowledge and empathy based on personal experience (family dynamics, disabilities)	D, H, B, E, J
Communication Open Transparent		
	Open and Transparent Communication	B, D, E, A, C, H, G, J
	Proactive information sharing	D, B, E, A, G
	Truthful and transparent decision making	D, E, A, G
	Responsive to concerns	B, D, E, A, C, H, G, J
Communication Listening		
	Active listening to parent concerns and perspectives	D, B, A, C, G.
Communication Mandated	Communication through transition meetings and IEP meetings	B, D, E, A, C, H, G, J
Communication Day-to-Day	Use of communication platforms	B, D, A, G, J
	Consistent and respectful communication	B, D, E, G, J
	Open communication using multiple methods	B, D, E, A, G, J
	Communicated positive news	B, E, G
Ability to Act Motivation	Fulfill commitments	D, E, H, G

Data Code Categories	Sub-codes	Participants
Ability to Act Willingness	Advocated for staff resources	**D, E, A, G**
	Effectively implement IEPs	**D, E, A, H, G**
	Present and engagement during IEP meetings.	**D, E, A, B, H, G**
	Behavior sets the tone for the relationship	**D, E, A, H**
	Fulfill commitments	**D, E, H, G**
	Consistent in actions	**E, H**
	Responsive to concerns	**B, D, E, A, C, H, G, J**
	Accountable	**D, E, H**
	Genuine commitment to student well-being	**D, B, E, H, G**
	Visible presence of principal	**A, G**
Ability to Act		
	Fulfill commitments	**D, E, H, G**
	Negative prior experience can cause a lack of trust	**A, D, E**
Climate Norms	Common understanding that trust is the necessary root for all interactions in special education.	**B, D, E, A, C, H, G, J**
	Genuine commitment to student well-being	**D, B, E, H, G**
	Professional development opportunities	**E, A, H.**
	Provision of a welcoming environment for families, invitations to school events, and creation of a sense of community.	**D, E, G, H, A, B, J**
	Build knowledge of the families. Getting to know the families, their backgrounds, and their children's individual needs	**B, D, E, A, C, H, G, J**
	Create a positive environment	**B, E, H**
	Collaboration between Special Education and General Education Staff is expected and supported	**B, D, E, A, C, H, G,**

Data Code Categories	*Sub-codes*	*Participants*
Climate Access		
	Principal and staff are available and responsive	**B, E, A, G**
	Principal and staff are accessible	**B, D, E, A, C, H, G, J**
	Use of communication platforms	**B, D, A, G, J**
	Open communication using multiple methods	**B, D, E, A, G, J**
	Visible presence of principal	**A, G**
Climate Staff Awareness		
	Professional development opportunities	**E, A, H.**
	Active support of teachers in communication and engagement	**D, E, A, H, J.**
Climate Engaging Parents		
	Consistent and respectful communication	**B, D, E, G, J**
	Creating an inviting environment	**H, B, D, E, G, J**
Assessing Trust Efforts		
	Moments when Trust is Vulnerable	Participants identify specific moments where trust is most vulnerable, especially during IEP meetings when recommendations are given.
		Discussions including disagreements about services, placement, or modifications to a plan
	The Import of First Meetings	Participants acknowledge that a parent's previous experiences with schools can affect their current trust in a school

Data Code Categories	Sub-codes	Participants
		A first meeting between a family and school is seen as a key moment that sets the tone for the relationship
	Indicators of Trust	Collaborative and supportive parents
		Active participation in IEP process
		Open and relaxed communication
		Parents see school as an advocate
	Indicators of Compromised Trust	Parents disagree with recommendations/modifications
		Parents don't attend meetings
		Stiff and guarded communication
		Parents use phrases like "I don't know why we're even having this meeting"
		Parents come with advocates

Appendix I Professional Development Series Proposal

Training Proposal: Professional Development Session Series: Principal Practices to Build Trust with Families of Students with Disabilities during the IEP Educational Planning and Implementation.

Prepared for: University of Virginia, Capstone Defense, Committee

Prepared by: Ellen Safranek, Doctoral Candidate

Date: March 25, 2025

Purpose of the Training:

This training proposal outlines a series of professional development training activities aimed to provide a practical, innovative, and experiential learning experiences for principals, educators and stakeholders. The professional development coursework will cover concepts, such as relational trust within the educational setting, strategic trust regarding business principles, communication, principal leadership, and the impact of personal experience. The activities are designed to encourage reflection and application of the learned material.

By focusing on the core elements of trust related factors and the way in which trust is built, these training sessions are designed to equip principals, teachers, staff, and stakeholders with pragmatic tools, practiced application, and personal insight to increase the likelihood of building stronger, more trusting relationships with parents of students with disabilities.

Target Audience: Principals, General Education Teachers, Special Education Teachers, school staff involved in the IEP process, and stakeholders.

Training Overview: These learning sessions are flexible and designed to be delivered in a variety of ways based on district/school need. The sessions could be scaled up or down, offered either as full-day professional development activities over the course of two-days, as monthly in-services, or as a complete course over a period of time based on the selection of sessions.

Sessions will explore the multidimensional nature of trust and its critical role in fostering successful partnerships between school leadership, educators, stakeholders, and families of students with disabilities. Participants will learn how to apply key concepts from relational and strategic trust frameworks to enhance their practices to improve communication, collaboration, and overall engagement with families. This training will draw from research, best practices, and practical real-world examples.

Background and Need for Professional Development

Research consistently demonstrates that parental involvement is crucial for improving academic achievement among students. In particular, for students with disabilities, parental involvement contributes not only to their emotional development, behavior, social skills, and overall well-being but to successful development and implementation of individualized education programs (IEP).

The relationship between principals, educators, providers, and parents of students with disabilities is uniquely different from that of typically developing students. The development and implementation of IEPs is a personalized, legally binding process where the parent is a designated IEP team member creating an interdependent relationship between parents and school personnel.

Research results have indicated a clear need for professional development targeting those factors key to building trust with parents of students with disabilities. The proposed training activities are designed to equip principals and school personnel with the knowledge and skills needed to build trust with parents of students with disabilities.

Professional Development Objectives: Upon completion, participants will be able to:

- Summarize the key components of relational and strategic trust and explain their importance in the context of special education and the special education individualized education program (IEP) process.
- Apply specific principal and educator practices, communication strategies, and problem-solving techniques to real-world scenarios to demonstrate how to build trust with families of students with disabilities.
- Understand the role of emotional intelligence, the impact of personal experience and perspective taking, and apply tools enhancing their own emotional competence.
- Assess the effectiveness of their own trust building practices by critiquing real-world examples and using feedback, observation, communication analysis, and IEP process indicators.

Training Methodology:

- Instructor-led Presentation: Each session will begin with a lecture on content relevant to that session's topic.
- Interactive Discussions: Facilitate discussions on various topics, encouraging participants to share their experiences and perspectives.
- Case Studies: Use of real-life case studies to illustrate the impact of trust and provide opportunities for participants to practice applying trust-building strategies.

- Role-Playing: Allow participants to practice effective communication techniques and strategies to address conflict and difficult conversations. Roleplay activities will include a narrative for the various roles to facilitate understanding and perspective taking.
- Journal and Reflection: Provide opportunities for participants to reflect on their own leadership practices, their understanding of key concepts, and as a tool to support growth in mindfulness and self-awareness.

Materials:

- Handouts summarizing key concepts and strategies.
- Case studies and role-playing scenarios.
- Checklists for self-reflection and goal setting.
- Copies of relevant articles on trust and special education.
- Flip charts, craft materials, computers, and blocks

Assessment:

- Pre- and post-training surveys to assess changes in knowledge and attitudes towards trust in special education.
- Observation of participants during activities, noting their participation and interaction.
- Post-training reflection papers where participants describe how they will apply what they have learned in their school settings.

Training Modules:

1) Understanding Trust (90 minutes)

Defining Trust: Present different definitions of trust (subjective, relational, and strategic; Das & Teng, 2004). Discuss the key components of each, such as competence, goodwill, vulnerability, respect, personal regard, and integrity (Tschannen-Moran, 2014; Bryk & Schneider, 2003).

Importance of Trust: Introduce various definitions of trust (subjective, behavioral, relational, and strategic) and their relevance to special education. Discuss the impact of trust on parent engagement and student outcomes. Explain how a lack of trust can lead to conflict, disengagement, and poorer outcomes.

Relational Trust Components: Define and discuss key components of relational trust: respect, competence, personal regard, and integrity.

Factors Influencing Trust: Discuss various factors that can influence trust in school-family relationships, such as parent experiences, cultural backgrounds, and previous interactions with the school system. Emphasize that a parent's previous experiences with schools can impact their current trust.

Vulnerability: Discuss moments when trust is most vulnerable, especially during IEP meetings.

Risk: Discuss the concepts of relational risk (opportunism) and performance risk (lack of capability) and their relative importance to the IEP planning and implementation process. Share real-world examples highlighting specific principal practices that demonstrate competence trust and goodwill trust, as well as strategies that reduce relational and performance risk. Highlight the importance of managing both relational and performance risk in building trust.

Legal and Ethical Dimensions: Explore the legal context of trust within special education and the requirements for parent involvement. Cover the elements of an IEP and the legal implications around successful implementation.

Climate: Create a dialogue as to how participants can create a welcoming and inclusive environment for parents, where they feel valued, respected, and heard.

Activity*:* Participants will use a fictional IEP case with dynamic challenges. In small groups, participants will identify factors from the case that they believe strengthened or hindered trust in the principal-parent relationship. Participants will reflect on how this meeting may have looked within their work environment and/or what they would have done differently. Participants will share examples of principal practices that demonstrate core components discussed in the lecture, such as consistent communication, responsiveness, and empathy, and how to create a welcoming and inclusive environment for parents, where they feel valued, respected, and heard.

Activity: Conduct a role-play where participants practice active listening and communication techniques in difficult scenarios. For example, create a scene where a parent is concerned about a recommendation from the IEP team, and have participants reflect and provide feedback on the role play demonstrating concepts discussed in this section.

2) Using Communication to Build Trust (60 minutes)

Facilitate a group discussion on the foundations and use of dialogic competence (Noonan, 2008).

Open Communication: Explore the role of open and transparent communication in fostering trust.

Clear Language: Examine how using clear, accessible language and multiple modes of communication can help parents feel more informed and engaged.

Active Listening and Non-Verbal Cues: Discuss, define, and identify the meaning and use of active listening. Highlight the importance of active listening and responding to parental concerns with empathy and respect.

Communication Strategies: Provide strategies for communicating complex information, such as IEP procedures and legal rights, in a parent-friendly manner.

Consistency: Discuss the importance of consistent communication, proactively sharing successes, changes in student performance, and not limiting calls to when problems arise.

Activity: The Lego Trust Bridge is an interactive exercise to help participants experience firsthand how transparency and communication directly impact trust in leadership. Divide

participants into teams of 3-5. Each team represents a "leadership group" responsible for guiding their school community through change (symbolized by building a bridge). There will be two roles per team with two rounds – one with limited transparency and poor communication, followed by a debrief, the second with transparent and open communication, followed by a final debrief comparing the two experiences, the applying the lessons learned to actual practice.

Secondary Small Group Activity: Using a professional document, such as the procedural rights notice, have participants discuss how it can be explained in parent-friendly language. Also, consider this application for non-native English speakers, parents with lower levels of education, or first-time parents new to special education. Present explanations to the group at large.

3) Principal Leadership and School Climate (60 minutes)

Facilitated a group discussion regarding the role of the principal in shaping and modeling school climate.

Principal Leadership: Discuss how principal leadership shapes school climate and contributes to trust. Emphasize the importance of authenticity, consistency, and accountability in principal practices.

Principal Practice Examples: Provide specific examples of principal practices that foster trust, such as proactive communication, accessibility, and responsiveness to parent concerns.

Culture of Trust: Discuss the importance of building a culture of trust that extends beyond the principal to the entire school community.

Culture of Community: Discuss the role of empathy as part of climate. How does this fit into the overall dynamic of the school and how and it be created?

Activity: Have participants reflect on their own leadership practices and identify one area for growth related to trust-building. Discuss these findings in a small group and share with the bigger group at large.

Activity - The IEP Puzzle: Participants will work through an interactive activity that demonstrates the importance of trust, transparency, and collaboration in special education leadership. Participants will attempt to complete a puzzle while withholding information, simulating the frustration of siloed communication in the IEP process. In the second round, open collaboration allows participants to successfully complete the puzzle, reinforcing how shared knowledge improves trust and outcomes.

4) Assessing the Efficacy of Trust-Building Practices (60 minutes)

Facilitate a discussion on the variety of ways in which leadership can assess and solicit trust building practices.

Assessment Methods: Discuss how principals can use observation, feedback, and communication analysis to evaluate their trust-building efforts.

Continuous Improvement: Highlight the need for continuous improvement and ongoing reflection in trust-building practices. Emphasize that parents appreciate opportunities to give feedback and help schools and educators improve their practice.

Small Group Activity*:* Discuss ways that participants currently assess their efforts in the school environment and with parents. Using flip chart/PowerPoint/Canva, create a visual display to share out to the group framing strategies and anticipated outcomes to effectively monitor parent engagement and participation. Identify and share strategies to respond to signs of distrust when they arise.

Activity: Participants will receive a real-world scenario challenging trust in during the educational planning and implementation of special education services and discuss what went wrong, how could the trust be repaired, and proactive strategies could have prevented this scenario.

5) <u>Emotional Intelligence and Competence</u> (60 minutes)

Facilitate a discussion framing the importance of self-awareness, the power of effective communication inclusive of the skill for knowledge transfer, and the connection between experience and unintended bias.

Emotional Intelligence and Competence: This discussion will emphasize the importance of self-awareness and understanding others' perspectives to build trust. The concept of empathy will be explored and defined, followed by an exercise to create an empathy map. Participants will consider how this tool can impact their personal practice.

Emotional Competence as a Leadership Tool: We will explore ways to recognize personal biases, stepping into the shoes of others, and tools for emotion regulation. The discussion will explore how emotional competence can help deescalate tense situations.

Bias and Perspective Formation: This discussion will focus on how past experiences can lead to assumptions or unintended biases. The discussion will focus on strategies for separating personal experiences from the goal of making equitable decisions.

Individual Activity: Participants will identify situations they encounter at the start of their day and reflect on how these may have impacted their presence in the workshop. Participants can share their thoughts as they feel comfortable. The facilitator will model the activity and provide an example in real-time.

Small Group Activity: Create an empathy map for assigned stakeholders in an IEP meeting identifying ways in which they may present at the meeting depending on their role. For each stakeholder, participants will identify:

- **What the stakeholder may say** (explicit statements)
- **What the stakeholder may think** (unspoken thoughts or concerns)
- **What the stakeholder may feel** (emotions they may be experiencing)
- **What the stakeholder may do** (actions or behaviors they display)

Afterward, the group will come together to discuss how each stakeholder might "show up" at the meeting, based on responses in the empathy map.

6) **Impact of Personal Experience** (60 minutes)

Facilitated a discussion highlighting the significant impact of personal experience on both one's ability to be trustworthy and their willingness to trust others. It can enhance empathy, adaptability, and resilience, but it can also become a limitation if it leads to bias or resistance to diverse perspectives.

Personal Experience and its Influence: We will discuss how each individuals' unique experiences shape their perceptions, decision-making, and overall approach to engaging with others and their work.

Personal Experience in Special Education: Facilitate a discussion that will explore how practitioners with personal experience with students with disabilities may approach their work differently. We will discuss how this experience can impact their practice and what can be learned or applied from it.

Leveraging Personal Experience: We will discuss strategies to maximize the value of staff experience, including creating both formal and informal opportunities for sharing and learning.

Small Group Activity: Role-playing an IEP Meeting Discussion: In this activity, participants will be assigned roles representing different stakeholders in an IEP meeting, complete with characteristics and challenges. They will role-play the services discussion and then debrief with the group, sharing their reflections on the experience.

7) **Practical Strategies and Addressing Trust Issues** (60 minutes)

Facilitate a discussion considering strategies toward the implementation of trust building strategies in practice. What is the return on investment and the cost of not building the skills.

Problem-Solving: Facilitate a discussion on practical strategies to address parent concerns and resolve conflicts in a way that preserves trust. Interactive activities where participants can practice communication skills and problem-solving scenarios related to trust issues during the IEP planning and implementation process

Case Studies: Discuss real-world case studies where trust was either built or hindered, and discuss the specific actions taken. Discuss the importance of transparency and communication in navigating these difficult situations. Discuss strategies to manage challenging conversations, address parent concerns, and resolve conflicts in a way that preserves trust.

Activity: Participants will work in small groups to develop individualized strategies for building trust with families, focusing on their specific roles within their educational context. Participants will be given examples of different types of family structures and apply how trust can be built in these specific situations. They will share the report with the group at large.

Secondary Small Group Activity: Participants will be divided into small groups, alternating engaging in role play activities, with two participants being active participants and one participant being an observer. Each participant will have an opportunity to rotate through each role. After each role-played, the three participants will discuss their experiences, receive feedback, and provide their thoughts.