FACTORS AFFECTING HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION RATES FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN MICHIGAN

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ABSTRACT

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Graduation rates for high school students across the country have long been a focus for educators and policy makers. More specifically, graduating students with disabilities has consistently been a greater challenge for school districts. School leadership is complex and special education presents school leaders with an even greater challenge in an era of comprehensive school reform. Research suggests that the principal's role is crucial in the special education process leading to positive outcomes for students with disabilities. Over the last twenty years, the relationship between school leadership and special education has not receive much focus. Until recently, the school principal's job was narrowly defined as a manager and school disciplinarian. With increased attention to school performance, the school principal is being asked to pay attention and impact the instructional outcomes within their schools. Effective leaders committed to success of all students could engage other members of the school team and could advance outcomes for all students, particularly students with disabilities. Skilled school leaders that invest the time necessary to create policies and procedures that are well defined and understood throughout the building help to facilitate greater opportunities among students. In sum, principals that can foster both clear communication and collaboration help to ensure that the school team is well equipped to handle the many challenges associated with graduating students with disabilities on time.

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KEY TO ABBREVIATIONS

AP Assistant Principal

AD Athletic Director

AP Advanced Placement

ASD Autism Spectrum Disorder

CA60 Cumulative Academic File

CI Cognitive Impairment

DL Distributive Leadership

EDP Educational Development Plan

ELA English Language Arts

FTE Full Time Equivalent

GPA Grade Point Average

IEP Individualized Education Plan

ISD Intermediate School District

MDE Michigan Department of Education

MDR Manifestation Determination Review

MMC Michigan Merit Core Curriculum

MRS Michigan Rehabilitation Services

MTSS Multi-Tier System of Supports

PBIS Positive Behavioral Intervention Supports

PC Personal Curriculum

PLC Professional Learning Community

RtI Response to Intervention

SE Special Education

US United States

WRAP Work Readiness Assessment Program

CHAPTER 1: SCHOOL REFORM EFFORTS AND GRADUATION RATES

Introduction to the Problem

At a time when there is increased need for students coming out of high school to become competitive global thinkers, the United States graduation rates are troubling. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, over half million students have left high school before graduation during each year over the past decade (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). Leaving high school without a diploma has enormous ramifications for students (Orfield, 2004). Not graduating from high school increases the likelihood of unemployment, lower wages and greater rates of incarceration (The Education Trust, 2005). Moreover, the United States graduation crisis disproportionately affects the nation's most vulnerable students (Swanson, 2004). Central to the study proposed here, students with disabilities (SWD) are disproportionately at greater risk of dropping out and continuously perform below their peer subgroups (Pyle & Wexler, 2012). Schools locally and nationally need resources to implement best practices targeted at academic success and school completion for all students, including students with disabilities.

It is widely believed that a fundamental obligation of our school system is to prepare students to lead productive adult lives, enabling them to thrive beyond their K-12 experience (Greene and Winters, 2005). Only 17 states reached the 90% school completion rate specified in the National Education Goals of 1990 (NCES, 2003). A review of national and state statistics established concern related to the education outcomes of students with SWD as well. According to the Monrad (2007), only 51% of SWD graduate with a standard diploma. Students with disabilities drop out of school at an estimated rate that is two to three times the national average (Rumberger, 1995; Thurlow, Sinclair & Johnson, 2002). According to a portion of the National Longitudinal Transition Study (NLTS) 2012, a report on SWD sponsored by the U.S.

Department of Education, SWD lag their peers in planning and taking steps to obtain postsecondary education and jobs. Considering the low graduation rates for SWD, even those that graduate face significant challenges. Students with an IEP are enrolling in some type of postsecondary education or training at 76 percent versus 94 percent as non-disabled peers (NLTS, 2012). These findings suggest that SWD are at a much greater risk for not completing high school, but students are faced with challenges even when graduating supporting a need to review and revise the student experience at the secondary level to best prepare students.

Local Michigan Reform

Numerous national, state, and local policies have been written to address this national concern. In Michigan specifically, SWD graduate at a much lower rate than their nondisabled peers, paralleling the national trend (MiSchool Data, 2017). To improve outcomes for students and increase rigor in the classroom, the state introduced the Michigan Merit Curriculum (MMC) in 2006. The Michigan Department of Education defines the MMC as stated below:

> The Michigan Merit Curriculum (MMC) is crafted around the philosophical belief that all students will need postsecondary learning opportunities beyond high school. It is not a curriculum in the traditional sense in that it doesn't describe instructional materials and approaches. Instead it specifies that all students who earn a diploma, at a minimum, have demonstrated proficiency with the content outlined by the state academic standards or guidelines. Since districts are responsible for awarding diplomas, so too are they responsible for providing all students the opportunity to learn the content outlined by the standards. As the learning skills for college and the workplace have merged, the MMC, if properly implemented, will prepare students with the skills and knowledge needed to be successful in our global economy and workplace. It supports the need for personalization,

acceleration, and innovation in an atmosphere of high expectations and high support for students (MDE, 2011).

The MMC established core graduation requirements in Michigan beginning with the graduating class of 2010. The MMC requires students to receive 16 credits in specific academic areas, substantially increasing local district course credit requirements. These requirements aim to prepare graduates in Michigan for post-secondary education and to position graduates for a 21st century economy. Additionally, the MMC required students entering 3rd grade to complete two additional credits of foreign language, requiring a total of 18 mandatory credits for the graduating class of 2015.

Under the MMC legislation (MCL 380.1278a, MCL 380.1278b), local school districts retain responsibility to issue diplomas, align curriculum, determine what constitutes a credit, establish a credit award system, identify assessments, set school calendars, and select and purchase textbooks. Local school boards and districts have the responsibility to determine how to implement the graduation requirements outlined by the MMC and to grant academic credits. The MMC grants districts the flexibility to develop scheduling systems, curriculum, and courses to meet the individual needs and desires of each district.

In Michigan, the four-year cohort high school graduation rate for all students with Individualized Education Plans (IEP's) has fluctuated somewhat, but overall relatively stagnant (see Table 1). This is the case, even with the new set of standards and an emphasis on building 21st century learning skills with the inception of MMC in 2006. As noted in Table 1, 4-year cohort graduation rates for students with disabilities remain stationary across the state of Michigan, well below the rate of their non-disabled peers.

Table 1: Graduation Rates for Michigan Students

Year	Graduation Rate (SWD)	Graduation Rate (All)
2010	57.44%	75.95%
2011	51.94%	74.33%
2012	53.52%	76.24%
2013	53.63%	76.96%
2014	55.07%	78.58%
2015	57.12%	79.97%
2016	55.35%	79.65%
2017	56.67%	80.18%

Failing to meet standards. A 2018 report from the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services released state determinations on the implementation of Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) for Part B and Part C for fiscal year 2016. Each State develops a State Performance Plan (SPP) and Annual Performance Report (APR) to evaluate the overall state's effort to implement the requirements of IDEA. The IDEA Part B serves SWD, ages 3 through 21. Michigan is the only state in the nation that failed to meet federal special education requirements for Part B and are marked as "needs intervention." Michigan's low rating came from its high drop-out rate and low graduation rate for students with disabilities.

Dropping Out: A Process

Students not completing school is the outcome of a long process of disengagement and alienation, preceded by less severe types of withdrawal such as truancy and course failures (Finn, 1989, 1993). Reasons are multifaceted and go beyond the curriculum, test scores, or provided interventions.

Research identifies a dependable set of variables related to the tendency for students to drop out of school. The work of Christenson, Sinclair, Lehr & Hurley (2000) provides an example of 'status' and 'alterable' variables that establish a framework for this study. This framework illustrates the range of educational factors that influence graduation outcomes,

including SWD. The variables move beyond simply system factors. Status variables are static and out of the control of educators; however, educators have influence over alterable variables. Finn (1989) clarifies status variables, such as socio-economic status, as variables educators have little to no control to change. He goes on to say that alterable variables (i.e., out of school suspension or course failures) are more easily influenced by educators. Variables are organized by classes of variables dependent on whom the student might interact with as well as the kinds of situations or contexts for interaction (see Table 2).

Table 2: Examples of Status and Alterable Variables

Class of Variables	Status Variables	Alterable Variables
Student	Disability (e.g., LD, EI)	Attendance, Academics, Behavior
Family	Structure (e.g., single parent family	Participation in school related activities (Does the school emphasize extracurricular connections? How does the schools connect with families to support?)
Peers	Intelligence (e.g., low IQ)	Identification with school (What is the structure used within the school to support students with disabilities?)
School	Socioeconomic Status (e.g., living in poverty)	Monitoring of Student Progress (How does the school monitor progress of students?)
Community	Geographic Features (e.g. urban)	Support Services, Relationships (What types of community connections does the school build for students?)

Problem Statement

The 4-year cohort graduation rates for students with disabilities in Michigan remain largely unchanged between 2010 and 2017 in comparison to gradual increases for all students. The purpose of the current study is to critically examine leadership practices in three Michigan high schools and the potential impact on graduation rates for SWD. Moreover, the study aims to

describe the leadership practice for SWD in each school, to identify the specific role the school principal plays, to identify other school members who take leadership for SWD, and to identify specific routines and tools that organize schools' response to SWD. Additionally, the study aims to identify external factors affecting the graduation rate for SWD and discern whether and in school leaders work to mediate those factors.

The following research questions will be addressed to collect information about what formal and informal leaders in the schools do to increase graduation rates for SWD. By layering the internal and external factors that affect graduation rates on top of what is legislatively available to support SWD, the study seeks to make recommendations to future school leaders on how to promote increased graduation rates for SWD. The data collection and analysis will be guided by the following three research questions.

Research Questions

1. Who are the primary education leaders (principals, teachers, counselors and others) who have responsibilities for SWD?
2. In what ways do leaders create structures, routines, and tools to organize their work aimed at increasing graduation outcomes for SWD?

RQ 3: Which external factors seem most consequential for enhancing or constraining the efforts of the school and graduation outcomes for SWD and how do school leaders mediate these conditions?

Purpose of the Study

This project intends to tell stories of three different high schools, each with varying graduation rates for SWD. Each school has access to the same legislation and available programs to improve educational outcomes for SWD. By looking beyond the statistical data and

documenting the stories within these schools, the study attempts to identify specific key factors that may contribute to improved educational outcomes for SWD. What follows next is a brief historical review of national policy implemented to help support SWD and improve graduation rates, a brief review of Michigan policy, and a review of research identifying key factors contributing to the likelihood of high school completion for SWD.

For the purposes of this study, SWD are defined as any student with an Individualized Education Program (IEP) on track to receive a high school diploma in four years. The outcomes of on-track graduation for this subgroup of students can be tracked using readily available public data sources (i.e. MiSchoolData).

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Factors Associated with Drop Out

The following chapter outlines research on the reasons students drop out as well as overall factors that impact the educational landscape for SWD. It is well documented that students drop out of school for a variety of reasons. A focus on the fact that students are either pushed, pulled, or fall out of school helps frame the initial conversation as to some reasons why students drop out. (Jordan et al., 1994; Watt & Roessingh, 1994). Also, school structure (i.e. school size) plays an integral role in either helping or hindering students dropping out of school. The educational landscape for SWD has and continues to be a challenge for all schools in the United States as accountability increase for schools to show results. It is this accountable that has drawn attention to how schools are responding to students, more specifically, SWD. National policy (ESEA, IDEA, NCLB, ESSA) are national efforts to ensure that SWD are supported and schools are held accountable for their educational outcomes. The study narrows its focus from the national perspective to Michigan specifically. Michigan, under the oversight and direction of national policy, is not unlike other states in terms of its need to improve educational outcomes for SWD. Michigan has responded by adopting a set of rigorous academic standards (i.e. Michigan Merit Core Curriculum) and set other policies (i.e. Personal Curriculum) in place to address challenges faced by SWD. Also, Michigan systematically adopted a multi-tiered system of supports across all grade levels to support students academically. Research is helping to establish sets of practices that schools can use to enhance what goes on in schools for SWD. The research landscape is helping schools make decisions about what types of support are offered to students for maximum success which ultimately includes SWD graduating on time in Michigan schools. Considering all of this, literature focused on leadership of the school is becoming more

available to help both administrators and teachers understand their roles and responsibilities for serving SWD.

Why Students Drop-Out

The fact that students show early signs of dropping out highlights Finn's (1993) findings that dropping out is not an instantaneous event. Dropping out of school is a series of events throughout the school experience. Over time, students who dropout become disenfranchised, leading to signs of withdrawal (e.g., poor attendance coupled with poor academic progress and behavioral issues (Rumberger, 1995). Retrospective studies (Barrington & Hendricks, 1989) support the fact that elementary years offer insight into potential signs for future dropouts. To improve the learning opportunities for students with disabilities, educators must have knowledge and training on all aspects of students' success including knowledge of disabilities, varied instructional techniques, and effective monitoring of student progress (O'Shaughnessy, Lane, Gresham, & Beebe-Frankenberger, 2003).

Pushed, pulled or fall out of school. Two groups of authors provide a frame work for reasons why students drop out of school. Students are either pushed, pulled, or fall out of school (Jordan et al., 1994; Watt & Roessingh, 1994). Situations within the school environment that end in school consequences can *push* students out of school. These might include school polices around attendance, grades and behavior. Similarly, students can be *pulled out* when internal factors that a student deals with result in a decision to drop out. These factors might include medical issues, family situations, family changes or financial needs. *Falling out* involves a series of events and experiences that culminate in a decision to drop out. These factors typically include long periods of disengagement and school struggle.

Role of school structure and dropouts. Noted above, most studies focus on dropout from the lens of individual students' social situations, academic behaviors or personal characteristics of students. These studies focus primarily on what the students does or decides during their school experience that leads to dropping out. Lee & Burkman (2003) focused on foundational elements of school organizations: 1) structure (school size); 2) academic organization; 3) social organization (focusing on relationships between students and teachers).

The importance of school size, particularly in secondary schools, has supported making high schools smaller to best serve students (Lee & Loeb, 2000; Lee & Smith, 1997). These studies focus on the fact that students have a greater likelihood of dropping out of larger high schools. School organization and structure have impact on overall student success.

Education Landscape for Students with Disabilities

Special education, overall, is a major challenge facing schools in an era of comprehensive school reform. The following section provides and overview of the national policy landscape. Almost all states have adopted comprehensive academic standards. In addition, most states are implementing corresponding measures that hold students and educators accountable for higher performance (Giacobbe, Livers, Thayer-Smith, & Walther-Thomas, 2001). Federal legislation (i.e. IDEA, NCLB, ESEA) provides a driving force to schools to meet the needs of students, particularly SWD.

National Policy Landscape.

Special education has evolved dramatically over the past several years in terms of how best to serve students and policy enacted at the national level. For several years, schools have been challenged to meet both the intent and the spirit of federal laws regarding education of SWD (Turnbull & Cilley, 1999). One major shift in serving SWD is a shift away from a place

students go and more of an integrated approach to educating students in general education classrooms with their non-disabled peers (U.S. Department of Education [USDOE], 2001). Schools are held to a higher standard placing a great deal of pressure on both educators and administrators to get results. As both expectations and pressures intensify, principal leadership specifically, has become increasingly important (National Association of Elementary School Principals, 2001). Federal legislation (i.e. IDEA, NCLB, ESEA) recognizes the need to safeguard the educational rights of all students and the school principal is positioned to interpret and implement the legislation across the building.

Elementary and secondary education act. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was signed into law in 1965 by President Lyndon Baines Johnson. ESEA provided grants to districts serving low-income students and funding for special education centers along with general funding to state educational agencies to improve the quality of elementary and secondary education. With ESEA, the US established a commitment for access to education for students with disabilities.

ESEA encompassed policy built through the activism of family associations working collaboratively with the federal government for many years to develop and validate education practices for students with disabilities. The US Congress enacted the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA) in 1975 to fund these initiatives. This law supported states and localities in meeting the specific needs of individuals with disabilities and their families, with four purposes:

- to assure that all children with disabilities have available to them… a free appropriate public education which emphasizes special education and related services designed to meet their unique needs,

- to assure that the rights of children with disabilities and their parents… are protected,
- to assist States and localities to provide for the education of all children with disabilities,
- to assess and assure the effectiveness of efforts to educate all children with disabilities" (Adams, 1980)

Before this, the fate of individuals with disabilities was likely dimmed, with many students with significant disabilities living in state institutions. In 1970, US schools educated only "one in five students with disabilities, and many states had laws excluding certain students from school, including children who were deaf, blind, emotionally disturbed, or mentally retarded" (US Department of Education, 2002, p. 3). Most parents did not have the opportunity to make educational decisions for their children. Further, resources were often not available for children to live at home and access education at a neighboring facility (U.S. Department of Education [USDOE], 2010). By 1975, the US had legislation in place to direct and fund aspects of general education with ESEA and a companion law to direct and fund special education. Each law underwent subsequent reauthorization with changes due to shifting priorities and new research.

Individuals with disabilities education act. The goal of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), previously known as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA) from 1975-1990, is to provide students with disabilities the same opportunity to be educated as those students without disability. IDEA is comprised of six main elements: Individualized Education Program (IEP), Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE), Least Restrictive Environment (LRE), Appropriate Evaluation, Parent and Teacher Participation, and

Procedurals Safeguards. Additionally, IDEA provided investments for instructional curricula and programs for teaching core competencies to SWD such as progress monitoring, multi-tier school wide interventions, universally designed instruction, and assessment accommodations. IDEA further invested in a research practice model helping to support improvements in both special education and general education (US Department of Education, 2016).

Federal targets are specifically outlined in IDEA 2004 for inclusion in State Performance Plans (SPP). Along with the SPP, IDEA requires states to submit the Annual Performance Plan (APR) that evaluates each state's efforts to implement special education policies. States are required to report on early intervention programs and services. The federal government set some targets and others are set by the state with input from parents, stakeholders, and educators. This information is intended to provide accountability of local district performance to see what programs are working and what programs need improvement.

The SPP required by IDEA includes 20 indicators for Part B (special education) and 14 indicators for Part C (*Early On*). The U.S. Department of Education (US DoE) and Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) provide oversight. Indicators 1 and 2; respectfully graduation and dropout rates, will be referenced within the study. For example, Michigan's accountability system includes a target graduation rate (80%) for students who earn regular diplomas within four years of entering high school. Calculating graduation rates this way aligns with guidelines provided by the National Governors Association's (NGA), Graduation Counts Compact, and the United States Department of Education guidelines for calculation of such rates. To calculate four-year cohort graduation rates, based on the NGA recommended methodology, all students are placed within four categories: on-track graduated, other completer, off-track, and dropout noted in Table 3.

Table 3: Four-year Cohort Graduation Criteria

On-track graduated	Completed high school with a regular diploma in four years or less
Other completer	Earned a General Educational Development certificate, other certificate, or reached the special education maximum age.
Off-track (graduated & continuing)	Completed high school with a regular diploma in more than four years or did not complete high school in four years and are continuing in school.
Dropout	Left high school permanently at any time during the four-year period, or whose whereabouts are unknown

The four-year cohort graduation rate accounts for students who transfer in and out of the district, those who leave school permanently, those who leave school during one school year and return in another, and those students retained in a grade but stay in school and graduate later.

Michigan's low ranking in preparing students for post-secondary life (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2004) prompted lawmakers to take a close look at high school curriculum and how Michigan was preparing students for life beyond high school. As changes in high school curriculum were initiated, there was potential impact on students with disabilities.

No child left behind. The No Child Left Behind Act 2001 (NCLB), and the reauthorization of ESEA, put measures in place intended to illuminate achievement gaps among traditionally underserved students and encouraged a national conversation about education improvement. NCLB focused attention on testing requirements in reading, math and science and increased accountability for the percentages of students obtaining a high school diploma. While some students could participate in alternative tracks leading to graduation (Katsiyannis, Zhang, Ryan, & Jones, 2007), they were still held to the NCLB graduation requirement for a maximum of four years.

NCLB required states to define graduation rates in a rigorous and standardized manner and incorporate rates into accountability systems for secondary schools and school districts (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). NCLB did not allow for alternative graduation certificates, such as the General Education Development (GED) program, formerly counted as equivalent to graduating from high school. NCLB required graduation rates to be reported annually to the United States Department of Education. Requirements of NCLB stated that rates must increase steadily towards a proficient level by the spring of 2014. Graduation rate was defined by NCLB as the percentage of students, beginning in ninth grade, who successfully graduated with a regular diploma in the standard number of years (Joftus & Maddox-Dolan, 2003).

NCLB also directed federal corrective action by those who fail to make adequate yearly progress. Attention in these areas represents the evolution of standards-based reform at the federal level that began with financial assistance to states for the development of content and performance standards, improved teacher quality, and increase school accountability. States report their goals and results to the federal government in state performance plans (SPP). Increasingly, states could compete for additional resources or could seek greater flexibility from specific requirements of NCLB through comprehensive state plans.

Every student succeeds act. Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), signed into law on December 10, 2015, is the federal legislation that governs elementary and secondary education across the United States. ESSA reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and replaced No Child Left Behind (NCLB). ESSA increased flexibility to states and school districts which is a major shift from the increased federal authority of NCLB. The law included new accountability systems based on multiple measures that include factors other than tests scores.

Students with Disabilities in Michigan

Schools in Michigan are faced with similar challenges that all schools in the United States face. The following section provides specific policy and adherence to federal legislation efforts put forth by Michigan schools in recent years. Much of Michigan's attention to dealing with SWD overlaps with other states across the country. This section provides an overview of Michigan's attempt to set high academic standards for all students with the introduction of the Michigan Merit Core Curriculum (MMC), as well as other policies (i.e. Personal Curriculum) to address the need to balance rigor while finding ways to improve outcomes for students, SWD specifically. Moreover, Michigan's commitment to utilize researched based practice through Multi-tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) is an indication of Michigan's commitment to serving all students. These efforts are in alignment with research on supporting SWD and dropout prevention strategies, also addressed in the following section.

Michigan schools in relationship to US schools. As noted earlier, the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services released state determinations on the implementation of Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) for Part B and Part C for fiscal year 2016. Each State develops a State Performance Plan (SPP) and Annual Performance Report (APR) to evaluate the overall state's effort to implement the requirements of IDEA. The IDEA Part B serves students with disabilities, ages 3 through 21. Michigan is the only state in the nation that failed to meet federal special education requirements for Part B and are marked as "needs intervention." In comparison, 22 other states met requirements For Part C, which focuses on infants and toddlers birth through age 2, Michigan "meets requirements" along with thirty other states. In comparison to other states. IDEA identifies specific technical assistance or actions against schools that the Michigan Department

of Education must take under specific circumstances for not being determined as "meeting requirements." If Michigan remains as "needs intervention" for three consecutive years, enforcement actions occur, including among others, requiring a corrective action place or compliance agreement, or withholding further payments to Michigan.

Michigan's response. The reform efforts in Michigan symbolized the national, state and local efforts to reform high school outcomes. The change in high school a secondary curriculum in Michigan was a significant adjustment from current practice. In 2006, high schools in Michigan shifted from having one state-level mandated graduation requirement to having some of the most rigorous standards in the United States, all in hopes to increase graduation rates.

Michigan merit core curriculum. As previously stated, Michigan established its own set of graduation standards on April 20, 2006, signed by Michigan governor Jennifer Granholm. The Michigan Merit Core Curriculum (MMC) established some of the most ambitious core graduation requirements in the nation. The curriculum requires all students, including student with disabilities, graduating in the class of 2011 and beyond to obtain sixteen credits in specific academic areas except for the graduating class of 2015 that requires an additional 2 credits of foreign language. MMC requirements were designed to position the graduates for college-level courses and better prepare students for the necessary 21st century skills. Concerns emerged as to how the new standards might impact graduation rates in Michigan. A 2012 report released by the Michigan Consortium for Educational Research brought attention to the graduating class of 2011 – the first group of students impacted by the MMC for their entire high school experience. The consortium is a partnership between Michigan State University and University of Michigan. The report noted that graduation rates reduced slightly for students who entered high school with weak academic skills. For students entering with strong academic skills, no effect of the MMC

occurred on high school completion rates (Michigan Consortium for Educational Research, 2012).

At the time of MMC's inception, Michigan had one state-level mandated graduation requirement, one course in civics. The MMC requirements for students, beginning with students entering grade eight in 2006 include:

- at least 4 credits in English language arts;
- at least 4 credits in mathematics, including completion of at least 2 algebra courses, 1 geometry course, and an additional course beyond algebra 1 and geometry;
- at least 3 credits in science including completion of at least 1 biology course, 1 chemistry or physics course, and 1 additional science credit;
- at least 0.5 credits in civics, 0.5 credits in economics, 1 credit in United States history and geography, and 1 credit in world history and geography;
- at least 1 credit in health and physical education; and
- at least 1 credit in fine arts or music from among courses approved by the department and;
- 2 credits of foreign language beginning with the graduating class of 2015 (Michigan Legislature, 2016b).

With the introduction of the Michigan Merit Curriculum, greater pressure was placed on school districts to offer creative ways to meet the demands. While the MMC was designed to increase rigor, the graduation rate for students with disabilities struggled to improve. At the time, several studies pointing toward a rigorous course of study in high school as a key predictor of whether students would graduate from college to push adoption of the MMC.

With the increased academic rigor, school leaders across the state expressed concern on potential impacts to elective programs, specifically career and technical education (CTE) courses. The Michigan Department of Education responded to this concern in 2008 by offering suggestions as to how students could gain academic credit in CTE programs. CTE courses can help students earn necessary credits in a variety of required classes. For example, a district may allow a student to receive credit for algebra or geometry in building trades course if the district determines that a building trades programs covers the required high school content expectations for these subjects (Michigan Department of Education, 2010). With increased academic rigor, concern for SWDs and how to ensure completion of required academic credits continued to surface.

Personal curriculum. Running parallel to the adoption of MMC was the opportunity for districts to modify the requirements for SWD by writing a Personal Curriculum (PC). The intent of the legislation was to individualize and make the overall educational experience more relevant for students. A PC is an option that modifies certain MMC requirements that allows a school district to award a diploma for students who successfully complete their personal curriculum. The state requirement for PC's requires districts to have a process for requesting PC's; however, it is a local district decision to approve or deny PC requests. Overall, the PC is created to meet the individual learning needs of the student to meet the MMC requirements aligned with the student's career goals.

Several years later, in 2016-2017, little has been done to introduce new measures of school performance to impact a broader array of outcomes. Given the changes reflected in MMC, how students with disabilities can meet the academic rigor and successfully meet graduation

requirements continues to be a statewide issue. The use of PCs is wide and varied and can be one influencing factor.

Multi-tiered systems of support in Michigan. Multi-tiered Systems of Supports (MTSS) is a comprehensive framework comprised of a collection of research-based strategies designed to meet the individual needs of students. The connection MTSS makes between education, health, and human service systems supports both students and those tasked with supporting the student. MTSS is an integral part of Michigan's Top 10 in 10 strategic plan. Michigan's Top 10 in 10 is a plan developed between the Michigan Department of Education and the State Board of Education to become a top 10 performing state in 10 years. MTSS has five essential components:

1. Team-Based Leadership
2. Tiered Delivery System
3. Selection and Implementation of Instruction, Interventions and Supports
4. Comprehensive Screening and Assessment System
5. Continuous Data-Based Decision Making

Research on Students with Disabilities

As noted earlier, research supported by IDEA funding has helped establish a knowledge base of a range of processes and interventions that can enhance educational experiences of students with disabilities. IDEA mandates that SWD have access to a free, appropriate public education. Research, beginning more than two decades ago, has found that many students with an IEP struggled during and after high school, although the extent and nature of their challenges varied (Newman, Wagner, Cameto, Knokey, & Shaver, 2010). More recently, important changes to the educational landscape place greater demands and accountability for schools to help

students progress academically, and greater attention is being paid to school climate as a factor (Dee, Jacob, & Schwartz (2013). Additional research emerged from broader reform efforts such as Comprehensive School Reform (CSR). Below is a summary of key research that informs best school practice to reduce dropout and increase persistence to graduation. Researchers acknowledge that there are many factors that can influence dropping out. Some are status variables, including individual personality traits, home environment, and the economic context within which students live (Thurlow, Sinclair & Johnson, 2002).

National longitudinal transition survey. Policymakers and educators alike have a longstanding history of prioritizing how best to prepare SWD for success. As part of the National Longitudinal Transition Study (NLTS) program, the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2) is a longitudinal survey providing a national overview of the experiences and achievements of SWD during high school as well as their transition beyond high school. Students selected for the study were receiving special education services between the ages of 13-16. The study began in 2000 and these students were followed until 2010. The data collection included parents, teachers, principals and a review of school recorded using telephone interviews, school surveys and individual student assessments. NLTS, 2012 provides key findings for policy makers and educators seeking to improve opportunities for SWD. Noted below are some key findings applicable to this study.

Expectations for success. NLTS, 2012 compared SWD and their non-disabled peers and found SWD are more socioeconomically disadvantages and less likely to have experiences and expectations that are associated with success after high school. The findings suggest that SWD have a higher rate of living in low-income households and with parents receiving federal food benefits.

School supports. A second key finding from NLTS, 2012 suggests that between 2003 and 2012 there has been greater engagement and use of supports in school among SWD. Unfortunately, one noticeable area largely unaddressed is SWD are less likely than in the past to participate in some key transition activities. IDEA 2004 and its corresponding regulations highlighted the need to provide supports for SWD and make progress in school, as well as providing equal opportunities to participate in schools' activities combined with strategies to encourage successful transitions beyond high school.

Engagement. Although NLTS, 2012 found that students with and without and IEP feel positive overall about school, SWD are less engaged in the overall school experience. Student engagement can be one component that connects students to their overall personal and academic development (Juvonen, Espinoza, & Knifsend, 2012). As of 2004, IDEA provided a requirement for schools to support students access to and participation in extracurricular sports and clubs, and more importantly, apply discipline policies to students on a case-by-case basis. Both of which have an impact on overall engagement in school for SWD

Academic support. SWD struggle more academically than their peers. Also, SWD are less likely to receive help from school staff outside regular school hour. It is widely believed that schools play an important role in helping SWD succeed academically. IDEA has supported academic proficiency for all students and have access to special education and related services designed to meet the unique learning needs. IDEA further encourages schools to engage parents in discussions about their child's education and during the IEP process to support students both in school and out of school.

Other Research on SWD Dropout and Interventions

When reviewing literature about what help students not to drop out of high school the findings are equally important to both SWD and general education students. In other words, research on drop-out prevention is helpful for all students in a school. Areas such as mentoring, targeted interventions, early identification and early warning systems are broad areas addressed by research as areas to pay attention to for practitioners and policy makers.

Mentoring. Forms of mentoring can play an important part in helping students to stay connected and engaged in school. Alvarez (2008) provides an example of programs that include weekly meetings for mentoring, counseling, tutoring, and participating in social/cultural activities. Further, in a study by Lever (2004), students attended small classes with a focus on staff-student relationships. Advocates and mentors were used to provide students with individual support and remained with students throughout their enrollment and monitored their attendance, provided life-skills training, character development, career preparation activities, and incentives for positive achievement. Nowicki et. al. (2004) discuss how an Effective Learning Programs (ELP) focused on students being taught in small classes in which teachers specifically aimed to build a family atmosphere and have close relationships with students.

Targeted intervention. Several studies also support the need for schools to develop programs specifically target interventions based on individual student needs. Two specific studies (Attwood, Croll, & Hamilton, 2005; White, Martin, Jeffes, 2010) looked at programs that focused on academics and vocational training. In both studies, schools focused on students that had poor attendance and had completed very little coursework. Overall, the above studies, in addition to others, provide direction for schools to develop specific and targeted interventions and programs to meet the needs of all students, not just SWD.

Early warning systems. There are numerous early warning systems available to schools. Some states have adopted specific screening tools and early warning system to address students dropping out of school. Two such examples represent both a national effort and state led effort. The National High School Center developed Early Warning Intervention Monitoring System (EWIMS) Implementation Guide is one example. The screening tools used in the EWIMS system focus on three main components of information: student attendance (10% or more of instruction missed), course performance (number of failed core courses and grade point average), and behavior including disciplinary referrals and in or out of school suspension (Therriault, O'Cummings, Heppen, Yerhot, & Scala, 2013). Indicators highlighted in EWIMS, such as grades, attendance, behavior, and overall course performance have an 80% accuracy rate of predicting risk of dropout, and a 90% accuracy rate of predicting graduation rates within four years (Barrington & Hendricks, 1989). In Michigan, the then State Superintendent of Instruction introduced the "Superintendent's Drop-out Challenge" in 2009. This effort was intended to challenge schools in Michigan to act and reduce the number of students dropping out of high school (Michigan Department of Education, 2011). The challenge required schools to register for the challenge, review the previous year's data regarding attendance, grades, discipline, credit, retention, and test scores, identified 10-15 students with multiple warning signs using the above referenced tool created by the National High School Center, implement a research-based intervention to support students, monitor student academic, social and emotional progress and engage families and community. This is one example of how Michigan specifically encouraged schools to act as demonstrated by lower drop-out rates (Michigan Department of Education, 2011).

Interventions for Learning

Policy and research highlight the dismal graduation rates of SWD. As previously stated, the literature suggests key components as to why students may or may not drop out of school. Many policies require school leaders to adopt the research guidance in the literature to have a positive impact on school completion. If school leaders are engaging with the key factors that contribute to school completion and adopting the flexible policies that are available to support SWD, graduation rates, in theory, could be higher, though the statistics indicate this is not the case. A front-line condition for SWD is placement into appropriate learning environments.

Placement of students and individual education plans. Special education students have the right to the least restrictive educational environment (IDEA, 2004; Ryndak et. al., 2014). Planning to ensure this condition for SWD requires the maximum opportunity to participate with non-disabled peers and is formalized in the student's individual education plan, or IEP. The IEP is decided consultatively with the student's parents, teachers, counselors, and administrators. The IEP has much to say about a student's placement as it relates to instruction. Both experience and recent research suggest that placement makes a difference to students' academic success and eventual chances of graduating from high school.

Inclusive instructional opportunities. For at least the past two decades, educators have disagreed about the optimum teaching and learning environments for SWD (Rea, McLauglin & Walther-Thomas, 2002; Walker, 2013). Writ large, camps divide into proponents of special education who believe students need environments that pay special attention to their needs, while opponents of this approach argue that all students, including SWD, require rich and challenging learning opportunities that cannot possible be offered except in more generalized learning arrangements. Critics of special education "pull-out" classes subject SWD to lower expectations

and uninspiring or restricted curricula (Rea, McLaughlin & Walther-Thomas, 2002). IDEA requires a continuum of learning arrangements matched to the type and severity of student disability, but many criticize the existing continuums and want to include special education students in general education classrooms with appropriate accommodations specified by Individualized Education Plans, known typically as *inclusion.*

Walker (2013) indicates the inclusion debate continues to outline the barriers that impede the ability to address equality among SWD. In fact, educational leaders have gone so far as to state that "exclusion from the classroom for children living with disabilities often marks the beginning of a lifetime of exclusion from mainstream society" (p. 13). The primary barrier is choice of educational setting, general education or special education, but even this does not ensure the student learns valuable information. Specific training and implementation of the student's IEP requires the teacher and educational leaders to have an understanding of the diverse needs of the learner (Hastings & Oxford, 2003; Hornby, 2015). All too often, teachers and leaders are presented with students for whom they feel ill-equipped to teach.

This condition often establishes an "us versus them" mentality (Van Reusen, Shoho, & Barker, 2001). General education teachers often perceive working with disabled students as a special education issue and special education teachers often feel like they are the ones best prepared to meet students' needs (O'Rourke & Houghton, 2009). Educational leaders are charged to create a collaborative culture to elevate this negative ideal (Szcesiul, 2014). For this reason, the reduction of barriers to inclusion

includes innovative educational processes that require a fundamental change in the school's organizational structure (Urton, Wilbert, & Hennemann, 2014), such as co-teaching, described in the next section.

Co-teaching. The specific roles and responsibilities of teachers within the school plays a critical role in how instruction for SWDs is provided. Students at each academic level may benefit from alternative assignments and greater teacher attention in small-group activities where two teachers working together in a co-teaching model makes it possible for more intense and individualized instruction in the general education setting. This increases access to the general education curriculum while decreasing stigma for students SWD. Co-teaching is also considered a vehicle through which legislative expectations can be met by SWD at the same time they receive other supports to which they are entitled (Friend, et al., 2010).

Co-teaching involves two or more certified professionals who work to share instructional responsibility for a single group of students. This is primarily done in a single classroom or workspace for specific academic content or objectives with shared ownership, pooled resources and joint accountability. SWD have a greater opportunity for continuity of instruction as the teachers benefit from the professional support and exchange of teaching practices as they work collaboratively (Friend & Cook, 2016). Friend and associates (2010) identify six models for co-teaching, depending on how responsibilities are divided for core instruction or for support and on how students are divided into one large or several small groups. Instruction by both teachers can be simultaneous or can alternate. Overall, these researchers emphasize the fluidity of organization depending on needs of students.

Student outcomes are better, generally, in co-taught classes, though the research is not robust at the time of this writing. Student achievement on high stakes tests for SWD is not

affected by co-teaching (Idol, 2006). However, SWD generally perform better on measures such as report card grades and attendance for co-taught classes than for single-teacher classes (Rea, McLaughlin, and Walther-Thomas, 2002). Looking at whether different learning environments (separate resource classes, co-taught classes, and general education classes without co-teaching, influence achievement for SWD, Murawski (2006) found no significant differences in achievement across settings. She suggested that the failure to find any difference might be the result of lack of training which resulted in uneven implementation.

Students seem to prefer co-teaching arrangements. Based on surveys of both SWD and typical learners, Wilson and Michaels (2006) found that students reported they would participate in another co-taught class and that they received higher grades in co-taught classes. They believed they received more help, benefitted from different teaching styles and teacher perspectives, and developed more skills. No matter the arrangement, co-teaching results in better teacher/student ratios, specifically two teachers for a classroom of 25 students, rather than 1 teacher for 25 students.

Scruggs and colleagues (2007) synthesized qualitative research on co-teaching, focusing on teachers' relationships and perceptions. They found that co-teachers generally believed their practices were beneficial to students, but the educators indicated that co-teaching should only be voluntary, not an assignment forced on those who do not want to participate. They reported that successful co-teaching teams shared expertise during teaching and found ways to motivate their students. Teaching teams that struggled demonstrated less collaboration, with differences in teaching styles leading to conflict instead of compromise. Showing the realities of how hard this type of collaboration can be, in fact, Kohler-Evans (2006) found that special educators often took the role of classroom assistant rather than teaching partner.

Logistics play a large role in whether co-teaching is a success. Kohler-Evans (2006) surveyed teachers in 15 school districts regarding their co-teaching experiences. The issue they most frequently name as affecting their relationship with their co-teaching partner was common planning time. Research by Murray (2004), in urban high schools, supports this finding, emphasizing that common planning time should be at least twice per month, but preferably weekly. Idol (2006) pointed to practical scheduling dilemmas in that general education teachers prefer having a special education teacher present when SWD are included in general education classes, but the number of special education teachers available to meet this request is inadequate.

Organizational Interventions

The school community practices and cultures are manifestations of the greater organization (Schein, 1990, Angelides & Ainscow, 2000). These practices and cultures symbolize the values held within a school organization. Some blame for the predictable failure of educational reform can be traced to existing power relationships among administrators and teachers, parents and school staff, students, and teachers (Sarason,1991). The challenge is knowing how to reverse the tide within the existing structure. This requires a focus on variables that can be altered within the school. Various studies embrace the notion of alterable variables, but these studies organize around an overarching topic, such as dropout prevention or student engagement, 9th grade transition, personalization, and instructional strategies.

Dropout prevention. The Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) funded three separate projects to implement interventions in schools to influence outcomes for students with disabilities (Zigmond, Jenkins, Fuchs, et.al, 1995). Keeping in mind the research on dropout statistics, within the projects, there were five intervention strategies used to help prevent dropouts (Sinclair, Christenson, Hurley, & Evelo 1998), noted in Table 4. These strategies are

amenable to action within schools and communities.

Table 4: Dropout Prevention Strategies

Persistence, Continuity, and Consistency	These were always done in tandem, to show students that there was someone who was not going to give up on them or allow them to be distracted from school, that there was someone who know the students and was available to them throughout the school year, the summer, and into the next school year, and that there was a common message about the need to stay in school.
Monitoring	The occurrence of risk behaviors (e.g., skipped classes, tardiness, absenteeism, behavioral referrals, suspensions, poor academic performance) was consistently tracked, as were the effects of interventions in response to risk behaviors.
Relationships	A caring relationship between an adult connected to the school and the student was established.
Family	A trusting relationship between school and home is sought, with concern for the student at the center.
Affiliation	A sense of belonging to school was encouraged through participation in school-related activities.
Problem-Solving Skills	Skills students need for solving a variety of problems were taught and supported so students were able to survive in challenging school, home, and community environments.

Source: Sinclair, Christenson, Hurley, & Evelo 1998

Fashola and Slavin (1998) reviewed six dropout prevention programs for students placed at risk. The review found that there was increased success when schools connect students to an attainable future and providing some form of academic assistance to help students perform well in their coursework. McPartland (1994) reviewed dropout prevention programs and interview data from students who dropped out. Findings revealed the importance of communicating the relevance of education connected to future accomplishments.

Student engagement. Student engagement emerges as one of the most important variables in many of the studies focused on improving graduation rate and student dropout (Fall and Roberts, 2012). Arguably, student engagement in the learning process is vital for school completion. Finn (1993) notes that students must actively participate in school coupled with a feeling of identity for them to remain in school. Christenson et.al. (2012) addresses student

engagement from a multi-dimensional construct. Within this description, Christenson et. al. (2002) breaks engagement into four types with associated indicators that are influenced by home, school, and peers.

- academic engagement (i.e., time on task, academic engaged time, or credit accrual)
- behavioral engagement (i.e., attendance, suspension, and class participation)
- cognitive engagement (i.e., internal indicators including processing academic information or becoming a self-regulated learner); and
- psychological engagement (i.e., identification with school and sense of belonging)

Ninth-grade transition. The ninth-grade transition to high school offers critical, yet neglected, opportunities for interventions (Lan & Lanthier, 2003). A report from the Alliance for Excellent Education (2011) reports that over a million students who enter ninth grade each fall fail to graduate with their peers in four years. Though nearly one-third of all high school students leave the public-school system before graduating (Swanson, 2004), students with disabilities are at a greater risk of dropout (Greene & Winters, 2005; U.S. Department of Education, 2006). The most powerful predictor for successful completion of high school is course performance and attendance during the first year of high school (Allensworth & Easton, 2005). More specifically, the first 30-days of attendance is the biggest risk factor for failing ninth grade putting on-time graduation at risk (Neild & Balfanz, 2006).

The National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) examined 15 specific interventions based on recommendations and strategies offered by a report entitled *Breaking Ranks II.* This 2004 report challenged high schools to consider specific ninth-grade interventions. Breaking Ranks research points to significant effects of transition program interventions on

graduation rates, particularly for interventions connected to core academic achievement, attendance, and discipline issues. Research suggests that students' freshman year progress in high school is a crucial time. Herlighy (2007) reports that more students fail ninth grade than any other grade in high school. In addition, students who are retained in ninth grade are disproportionately at-risk of drop out. Thus, the ninth-grade experience heavily contributes to whether a student will successfully complete high school.

School organization factors that can help retain at-risk ninth graders include decreasing alienation of high school by breaking down the school into small-school units to increase personalized instruction, expanding the roles of homeroom teacher to include a mentor and guide, creating clusters of students who remain together for several classes, alternative and mini-schools, creating alternatives to retention prior to ninth grade, and providing smoother transition to high school using adult advocacy (Ascher, 1987).

Personalization. Hammond et.al. (2007) found the lack of personalization in high schools to be a key factor in dropout rates. High schools are challenged to offer options for students that are appealing and engaging. The traditional school and traditional teaching do not meet the needs of all students (Zemelman, Daniels, & Hyde, 1998). Advocates have argued that high schools must be student-centered, intellectually rigorous, and have a personalized program and support services for each student (Harvey & Housman, 2004). High quality, personalized instruction is crucial for all students at any grade level. Academic support to remediate students in areas of need is an essential component for any high school working towards decreasing dropout rates (Fontenot, 2015). Instructional tasks that actively engage students by matching curriculum and instruction to instructional levels, student interests coupled with scaffolding, explicit, and strategic instruction increases students' potential for learning (Bost & Riccomini,

2006). High schools tend to be large and bureaucratic, which leads to depersonalization and lack of a sense of community (Lee & Smith, 2001). Providing a caring school environment, relationship building, and personalization as interventions will likely show a positive impact on student academic performance (Klem & Connell, 2004). An overall lack of adult support is another factor influencing high school outcomes for students. The rewards for students to remain in school are elusive and largely undetectable. For the most part, a small group of students receive recognition in high school that leads to a sense of invisibility others. This increases isolation with few opportunities for students to engage in the larger school community. Participation in school related activities provide students a key sense of belonging in school (Finn & Rock, 1997). Not only does increased participation positively impact a sense of belonging, but also important friendship networks grow the connection to school and affects motivation to attend school (Goodenow & Grady, 1993).

Student mentors. Another way to add personalization is to incorporate mentors as part of the school experience. Students with disabilities have an increased likelihood of graduating when they have mentors in school (Thurlow, Christenson, Sinclair, Evelo, & Thornton, 1995.) Moreover, informal relationships connecting students with a caring adult can increase the potential that students with disabilities will graduate from high school (Ahrens, DuBois, Lozano, & Richardson, 2010). Mentors can impact students socially and emotionally by connecting with them on a personal level, on a consistent basis. In addition, mentors can monitor students' attendance to ensure students attend regularly. Schools that provide and train adult advocates to at-risk students have proven to be an effective mechanism to decrease drop out when combined with other school-wide efforts (Dynarski et. al., 1998). These adult advocates, through a

deepening relationship with students, can implement personalized interventions both within school and at home as well.

Summary of Interventions

A long and broad history of school wide reform efforts aimed at improving graduation rates exists. Evidence-based components of dropout prevention points to schools' ability to prevent or minimize students leaving school by providing adult advocates. More specifically, leadership at the school level matters. School leaders, both formal and informal, can implement academic and behavioral support within a school that promotes personalized and relevant instruction. It is possible for schools to identify, monitor, and intervene based on students' risk indicators to positively influence outcomes with appropriate structures. Utilizing a combination of proven school wide reforms with interventions that focus on attendance, behavior and extra help for students, graduation rates can be improved considerably (Balfanz, Herzog, and MacIver, 2007).

Many researchers who study drop out, recommend that multiple components of intervention are almost always required if high schools are to prevent drop out (Dynarski, et. al., 1998). Dynarski et al. (1998), provides three categories of recommendations, (a) diagnostic processes for identifying student-level and school wide dropout problems, (b) targeted interventions for a subset of middle and high school students who are identified as at risk of dropping out and, (c) school wide interventions designed to enhance engagement for all students and prevent dropout more generally. These categories are expanded to six recommendations including:

1. Utilize data systems that support a realistic diagnosis of the number of students who dropout and that help identify individual students at high risk of dropping out.
2. Assign adult advocates to students at risk of dropping out
3. Provide academic support and enrichment to improve academic performance
4. Implement programs to improve students' classroom behavior and social skills
5. Personalize the learning environment and instructional process
6. Provide rigorous and relevant instruction to better engage students in learning and provide the skills needed to graduate and to serve them after they leave school.

Of the recommendations, the areas addressed in the literature review fall into one of the recommended areas noted above. For example, assigning adult mentors to students at-risk of dropping out can be addressed in the literature when looking at school culture and community and personalization. Also, addressing 9th grade transition, paying attention to early warning signs, using a structured model like RtI and providing student mentors addresses all the above expanded recommendations in some way.

The literature review, in sum, points to many ways of enacting alterable variables related to student, family, peers, school, and community. No matter how researchers categorize schools' strategies for improving graduation rates, there is a great deal of overlap in the findings. Considering the overlap of strategies schools might utilize to improve graduation rates, school leadership emerges on the single factor most important to the success and implementation of these strategies.

Leadership of the School

NCLB and ESSA establish principals' responsibility for the success of schools, largely understood as positive student outcomes, including achievement, attendance, and completion. IDEA (2004) clearly establishes that the principal is accountable for the appropriate education of SWD. Research on the principalship in recent years, however, has moved beyond the principal as the heroic leader of everyone and everything in the school to a more expansive understanding of what leadership is, who provides leadership, and what leaders are responsible for. This section reviews principal leadership, specifically understandings of instructional leadership, and expands responsibility to other stakeholders through the model of distributed leadership. The section then takes up specifically the principal's role as relates to SWD. The section, and the chapter, end with a discussion of the conceptual framework for this dissertation.

Principal instructional leadership. The leadership of the school principal is an extremely powerful influence in the education of students (Cooner et al., 2005). From building manager and school disciplinarian to instructional leader, the role of school principal has evolved drastically within the past thirty years (DiPaola and Thomas, 2003). The roles of principal are now very complex including instructional leadership, teacher evaluation, allocating resources, and building school climate. Leadership and advocacy can be defined as supporting, maintaining, and defending moral, legal, and thoughtful educational principles and practices for children and youth (Matthews & Crow, 2003).

Elmore (2000) argues that expertise, knowledge and skills needed for improving instruction in a school context are those that indirectly or directly lead to instructional improvement and student accomplishment. Most research on student learning confirms that the leadership impact on learning is indirect, meaning that principals influence teachers and the

learning process, thus making a difference for student outcomes (Leithwood, Louis, et al., 2004). This is a process by which leaders seek to improve schools' capacities broadly by leveraging the human capital of others in a way that improves school success (Marks & Printy, 2003). Many studies have shown that the quality of instruction and the levels of achievement, along with other positive outcomes for students, is better in schools where norms exist and processes for sharing leadership by principals and teachers (Heck & Hallinger, 2009; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008; Marks & Printy, 2003).

One of the most important qualities of principal leadership is that principals lead the way and communicate the type of school they want to see (Heck & Hallinger, 2009; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2012). Without deliberate action by the principal to establish direction, be it a new vision for the future or specific goals for the short term, teachers, counselors and other adults in the school are left to their own devices to decide what is most important or they will, by default, continue to do what has always been done (Printy, Marks, & Bowers, 2009). When it comes to special education leadership, principals can advance a vision of inclusion or education or can reinforce the norm that special education students are best served in "special" learning environments. How principals establish expectations makes a real difference for student experience (Printy & Williams, 2015).

Distributed leadership. Recent research shows that schools where teachers are involved in organizational decision making have more effective teaching and higher student learning (Ingersoll, Sirinides, & Dougherty, 2018). Rather than limit my inquiry to the leadership actions of the school administrator(s), I take a more expansive view of leadership, adopting the distributed leadership (DL) theory advanced by Spillane et. al. (2001). Given that the review of literature establishes a broad range of strategies and interventions for reducing dropout or

enhancing graduation, this study needs to explore in detail the ways in which multiple adults share leadership for SWD within this context of graduation rates. The DL perspective recognizes that there are multiple leaders in a school system (Spillane et al., 2004). Moreover, the activities that leaders undertake are widely shared both within and between the organization (Harris, 2007).

Leadership practice is framed by the interactions of school leaders, followers, and the aspects of their situation stretched across time (Spillane, 2006a; Spillane et al., 2001). DL characterizes a form of collective leadership in which teachers develop expertise by working collaboratively (Spillane et al., 2001). Successful school leaders are connected to highly productive and inclusive schools in which nearly all students reach ambitious targets of performance and students with disabilities are a meaningful part of these improvement efforts (Billingsley, McLeskey, & Crockett, 2014).

The DL perspective moves beyond the Superman and Wonder Woman view of school leadership (Spillane, 2005) in which a single leader is solely responsible for all leadership aspects. Leadership practice is shaped by the follower's reaction to the leader's practice, which in turn shapes the practice of leadership" (Spillane, 2006a; Spillane et al., 2001). Change is ongoing through the design/redesign process (Spillane, 2006a). In addition to interacting with followers, leaders also interact with aspects of the situation including tools, routines, small tasks, and structures (Spillane, 2005b; Spillane et al., 2001). The focus on tasks, who accomplishes the tasks, and the tools and processes used to accomplish the tasks is central to the Distributed Leadership perspective. This focus on tasks or school routines will help me illustrate what leaders in the sample schools do to support SWDs or what is lacking.

A good body of work on distributed leadership examines patterns describing how

leadership is shared, delineated by what prompts interaction, whether there is guidance for interaction, and whether interaction is supported by organizational arrangements. Another key point is whether individuals with influence, that is, leaders, all pull in the same direction or work to assert their own power while undermining others. Gronn's (2002) conceptualization of DL in of "concertive action" (p. 4), which implies that a group of people pool expertise and skill (additive) in collaboratively and interactively (holistic) leading the organization. For Gronn (2002), DL is a "unit of analysis" and he brings forward three main patterns of concertive action define as *spontaneous collaboration*, *intuitive working relations* and *institutionalized practice* (p. 4-5). This typology considers both the degree of planning and the degree of formal guidance and structure framing the distribution of leadership.

Similarly, Leithwood and his colleagues (2007) investigated how DL can be aligned depending on two essential components: whether there is institutional structure for distribution and whether there is planning for collective leading. Based on the degree of intentionality and coordination, this typology includes four types: *planful alignment, anarchic misalignment, spontaneous alignment* and *spontaneous misalignment*.

The research of Spillane and Diamond (2007) notes the interaction and interdependence among individuals who provide leadership. Leadership (or co-leading) takes shape in the interaction of all the individuals taking leadership responsibility within situations, though participation can vary by time and responsibility. Different types of co-leading include *collaborated* (multiple leaders at one time), *collective* (interdependent but synergistic work occurring at different times) and *coordinated* (sequential contributions to one task) patterns.

Leadership for students with disability. The current accountability practices that focus on students, faculty, and schools, place school principals in a precarious position of trying to

balance the needs of all students. Research on secondary principals indicates that school principals are "torn between the use of equitable inclusive instructional policies [and practices] that meet the differentiated learning needs of all students and the more restrictive, administrative directives that limit discretion, judgment, and moral satisfaction" (Frick & Faircloth & Little, 2013). Less attention by school administrators has historically been paid to special education programs and students as opposed to those in general education classrooms (VanHorn, Burrello, and Declue, 1992).

Recently, the increased growth in inclusive programming for students with disabilities has resulted in an increase of students with Individual Education Plans (IEPs) who are educated in the general curriculum (Jimenez, Graf, and Rose, 2007). Boundaries between general education and special education are more permeable and resource allocations are less prescribed in some cases. The result -- school principals often feel unprepared for their roles in the administration of special programs (Goor & Schwenn, 1995).

Praisner (2003) found school principal attitudes could result in either increased opportunities for students to be served with their general education peers or in limited efforts to reduce segregated opportunities for students to be served in the general education setting. Moreover, Praisner (2003) found that principals with positive attitudes toward students with disabilities were more likely to recommend educational placements that were inclusive as opposed to those principals with negative attitudes toward students with disabilities.

Considering this, the school principal's belief system about students, particularly students with disabilities, becomes critical, particularly when these beliefs become manifest to other stakeholders through the principal's vision for the school. The principal's philosophical belief system about students with disabilities and their educational experiences comes from one's

individual experiences and beliefs about disabilities (Anderson, 2003). Without direct and positive experience with SWD, the general unpreparedness causes many school administrators to have negative perceptions of special education (Webb, Bessette, Smith, & Tubbs, 2009).

When they have a positive orientation to SWD, principals play a critical role as the implementers of inclusive practices by developing a collaborative vision with committed leaders, a collaborative culture, reflective teachers, and responsive and relevant curricula (Blanford, 2017). Urton, Wilbert, and Hennemann, (2014) revealed that inclusive practices should be built on the premise that all students are valued for their unique abilities and included as essential members of a school community. For principals and other school leaders, additional responsibilities include the assurance that inclusive practices are expanded and preserved (Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013).

When inclusive programs are established as norms, collaboration must necessarily follow; thus, leaders must encourage teacher participation and teaching practices that develops shared responsibilities such that students can gain the full benefit of instruction (Caputo & Langher, 2015). These responsibilities include: educational goal setting, decision making for all students, classroom instruction, and assessment of student progress, problem solving, and classroom management (Samuels, 2015). Additionally, Hudgins (2012) recognized the importance of campus leaders (including teachers and counselors as well as administrators) to evaluate the culture, how that culture is created, and how it is implemented.

Conceptual Leadership Framework for Study

High schools where students experience success are led by effective principals, whether attending students have or do not have learning disabilities. Principals most often influence student level outcomes indirectly through their actions in shaping the direction of the school,

establishing a vision of a better future, encouraging leadership by other educational professionals, organizing collaborative school processes and structures, and influencing, broadly, aspects of school culture.

To promote success for SWD, including enhancing graduation rates for these students, principals establish an inclusive environment where all students are embraced. Such principals mobilize others to share in leadership that works toward student-centered decisions, and that promotes collaboration where members of a school community work together effectively and are guided by common purpose. Principals establish policies oriented toward improvement and develop structures and processes that transform school culture from one where the "isolated teacher" is the norm to an interdependent, collaborative culture where leadership influence is shared and where all work in concert in support of students.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Overview of Research Design

Robert Yin (2003) offers an approach that helps guide case study methodology, and comparative case study research. The case study method and design are particularly appropriate for this study because of its ability to adequately answer the research questions. Yin's (2003) approach to case study allows for an examination of contemporary events, even when relevant behaviors cannot be manipulated. Additionally, Yin (2003, p. 8) identifies the strengths in the case study approach as its ability to examine a "full variety of evidence – documents, artifacts, and interviews." Each of these areas will be used during the study as evidence to examine the research questions.

Yin's (2003) definition of a case study is:

> "...an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident...{It also} copes with the technically distinctive situation in which there will be many more variables of interest than data points, and as one result relies on multiple courses of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion, and as another result benefits from the prior development of theoretical proposition to guide data collection and analysis" (pp. 13-14).

Three central points are critical. First, the case study focuses on a system of action rather than an individual or group of individuals. As shown in the literature review, there are many in school factors that can be brought into focus to help improve graduation rates. Second, the case study must have boundaries in that they are selective, focusing on one or two issues that are fundamental to the system being examined. In the present study, the focus is on what school

leaders, both formal and informal, can do to improve outcomes, by highlighting a set of alterable variables as orientation for the study. Third, that a coherent framework of theoretical references and a corresponding logic of inquiry are required, such that generalizations are made back to the theory and not to populations (Yin, 2003). The focus on DL is used as the theoretical lens for this study and seeks to understand the inter-relationships among leaders and followers to increase the graduation rate of SWDs. In comparing three school sites, the intention is to analyze the findings that will help to inform school leaders' understanding of how leadership styles may influence graduation rates for students with disabilities.

Methodology

Case studies as a research method seeks a close or otherwise in-depth understanding of a single or small number of "cases" set in their real-world contexts (Bromley, 1986). This method of research allowed me to examine three high schools to gain new learning about how leadership, both informal and formal, works to influence outcomes for SWDs. The case study method also allowed me to the context of their decisions and any other complex conditions that might surface during a gathering of artifacts and interviews. This method allowed me to go beyond isolated variables through a full examination of multiple sources of evidence.

Study Preparation

This section details steps followed to plan and organize the conduct of this dissertation study. There is a focus on the school settings used for the study followed by detailed descriptions of each.

Settings. The study sites include three high schools in Mid-Michigan. The three high schools selected for the study have four-year cohort graduation rates for students with disabilities that have, at times trended both above and below the state average since the 2010-2011 school

year. The rationale using graduation rates since the 2010-2011 school year was based on the fact that this was the year the new Michigan Merit Core Curriculum standards were introduced. Also, the schools are located within a similar geographic location, with similar demographics and the same relative school size.

High school a. High School A serves approximately 3500 students in grades kindergarten through twelve. The school district consists of four elementary buildings, one middle school and one high school. The school district is located just outside of a major Michigan city and includes approximately 12,000 residents. This high school has a 4-year cohort graduation rate for the entire student population of 97.26% and 58.33% for students with disabilities during the 2015-2016 school year. The district recently underwent significant staffing restructuring due to budget constraints. The school leadership remains relatively steady throughout the restructuring process except for a new assistant high school principal. The district experienced significant student growth over the past five years. The growth has led to new building construction, most recently adding an addition onto the high school. The superintendent served in this capacity for 9 years with previous roles in the district as high school principal and classroom teacher.

High school b. High School B, the smallest school district in the county, serving approximately 2900 students K12, is in the western portion of a rural county, one of the fastest growing counties in the state. Even so, the residential growth slowed significantly within the district boundaries over the past few years. The area remains attractive to commercial and industrial development considering the ease of access to major highways and central location to three major cities. The school district covers 116 square miles with a population of 15,000. The district includes two elementary buildings, one middle school and one high school. This high

school has a 4-year cohort graduation rate for the entire student population of 90.50% and 70% for students with disabilities in the 2015-2016 school year. The economically disadvantaged population is 22.1%, and the free and reduced lunch participation is 65.3%. The district recently closed a junior high building and restructured consolidating students into four buildings. Declining enrollment has been a challenge faced by the district for several years since the state introduced schools of choice. The district's superintendent has been with the district for 11 years serving first as the high school principal.

High school c. High School C is one of the largest districts in the county. The district includes approximately 144 square miles and serves approximately 3,100 K12 students within three elementary buildings, one middle school and one high school. After several decades the district consolidated and closed one elementary building. The district serves more than 25,000 residents. The 4-year cohort graduation rate for the entire student population is 93.51% and 59.26% for students with disabilities during the 2015-2016 school year. The economically disadvantaged population is 43.5%, and the free and reduced participation by eligible student is 62.7%. The district's superintendent in completing his 4th year. The district is experiencing increased enrollment largely from a large urban school district bordering its southern boundary line.

Table 5: 2014/2015 Graduation Rate of Study Participants

School	Population	Grad Rate (all)	Grad Rate (SWD)
High School A	3,500	97.26%	58.33%
High School B	2,905	90.50%	70%
High School C	3,080	93.51%	59.26%

Source: MiSchool Data, 2014/2015 school year

The high schools were selected because of their proximity, similarities in demographics and their 4-year graduation cohort trend data for students with disabilities. Overall, when reviewing the cohort trends, each school appears to have varying graduation outcomes over time, and in some years, relatively dramatic changes.

Table 6: Four-Year Graduation Cohort Data: Students with Disabilities

School	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16
High School A	30.77%	41.67%	55%	50%	58.33%	58.33%
High School B	68.97%	61.11%	61.29%	75%	68.18%	70%
High School C	63.64%	35.71%	45.45%	63.64%	62.07%	59.26%
State Average	51.94%	53.52%	53.63%	55.07%	57.12%	55.35%

Source: MiSchool Data

Sample. Participants were self-selected by the high school principal based on who they believed impacted outcomes for students with disabilities. Principals were asked to select members of their team that fit these criteria at the close of the initial interview.

High school a. There were five staff members from High School A participating in the study. Brad is the Principal at high school A. He has been the high school principal for 9 years. And prior to the principalship, he was a teacher within the district. Jerry is the Assistant Principal at high school A. He has been the high school assistant principal for 2 years. Prior to this role, Jerry was an interim middle school assistant principal at the district's only middle school. He spent several years as a classroom teacher within the district before moving into administration. Tony is a veteran math teacher at the high school, with experience teaching Geometry and AP Statistics. Sarah is the high school guidance counselor, a position she has held for the past 14 years. She previously taught English for three years in a neighboring school district. Wendy is a special education teacher with 29 years of experience all within this school.

High school b. High School B included a diverse set of members at the high school (six team members). Keith is the high school principal. He has been in this position for eight years. Keith previously served in one other school district as a high school mathematics teacher and then assistant principal. Tony is the assistant principal and is in his first year at the high school. He previously served as a principal in another district high school. Erin is the high school counselor. She has worked at high school B for three years. She previously served as a student and family specialist for another district in the county focusing on substance abuse, prevention, and intervention. Candace is the Director of Special Education for the entire district. She has been in this position for four years. Prior to this position she served as a special education supervisor for another district in the same county as high school B. Prior to this role Candace served as a school psychologist. Bree is a high school mathematics teacher at high school B. She has served in this role for four years after completing her student teaching in the same school. Prior to this role she was the high school mathematics tutor. Tanya is a special education teacher at high school B. She has served as a teacher in the district for 25 years. Throughout her career she also taught kindergarten for six years, and a teacher consultant at the Jr. High School.

High school c. The participants in High School C included a diverse set of members from the high school. Tom has been the high school principal for the past nine years. Before this position, he served as assistant principal in the same high school for six years. Before becoming an administrator, Tom was a special education in a nearby school district for seven years. Mary is the Dean of Students and has been in the position for two years. Prior to this role, Mary served at the same high school as a mathematics teacher for 10 years. Tori is an English teacher at the high school and was a graduate of the same high school. IN addition, Tori is the school improvement chair and a peer to peer coach for students with disabilities. Cathy is a Teacher

Consultant hired by the intermediate school district and assigned to high school C. She has served in this role for 17 years. She oversees the entire special education department at the high school. Lori is a special education teacher at high school C that teaches entirely pull-out special education classes in science specific courses.

Research site interactions and relationships. Research sites were carefully established by thoroughly reviewing high school graduation data in Michigan. By pairing that information similar demographic information, I was able to select several potential cases that had similarities. Once established, I sent potential participants a letter seeking their willingness to participate. Once narrowed, I engaged in a brief phone conversation with the principal to address any outstanding questions before beginning the study and as a way to build rapport.

Data Collection

The following section describes the data collection procedures used in the conduct of this dissertation study.

Sources of data. Data collected began with artifacts from each school and followed with interviews with all study participants identified above.

School artifacts. To begin the description of the schooling system, artifacts were collected prior to the initial interviews and then categorized into five categories of alterable variables noted below in Table 8 (Christenson, Sinclair, Lehr & Hurley, 2000). Interviews alone do not always enable the researcher to answer questions in a deep and meaningful way. Prior to interviewing participants for the study, artifacts were collected from publicly available sources (i.e. school websites). Artifact are symbols of customs, preferences, styles, special occasions of the culture in which it was created. These helped to understand the belief, values, and behaviors of the organization. The artifacts collected were varied and provided an opportunity to foster

greater understanding of the individual organizations. Artifacts collected included meeting minutes, written procedures, internal manuals, flow charts and policy documents. Focus on the collected artifacts included how and by whom the artifacts were created by, content supporting the research questions and how the document was used. The overall collection was analyzed in tandem with other data collected during the study to add deeper meaning and understanding to the research. Collecting and analyzing the artifacts helped craft clearer research questions. By carefully analyzing the artifacts, in conjunction with the interview responses, a more expansive view of the organization emerged allowing increased depth to interview responses. General demographic and historical data were obtained to help describe each school community. This range of artifacts and information provided a way to paint a picture of the school(s) influence on the alterable variables and to provide a foundational knowledge base about each school. The artifacts provided both an initial description and a lens in which to interpret data gathered from interview responses.

Artifacts gathered prior to the interview focused on and be categorized into the alterable variable categories noted:

a) Attendance, Academic and Behavioral policies;

b) School related activities for families;

c) Student identification within the school;

d) Progress monitoring systems;

e) Staff information (special education structure); and

f) Community services offered to support students.

The reviews of artifacts, both before and after the interview process, helped to either support or refute interviewee responses about the organization. The initial artifact collection helped to

evoke an initial story of the organization, when followed by e, helped create a view into the larger picture of the participating school's world.

Interviews with participants. The purpose of the interviews was to discern the belief system of the administrators about SWD and special education in general and to more fully understand the policies, processes, and programs in place in the school that support SWD specifically. During the initial interview with the principal, a list of other key school members that the principals believe to play a key role in the school's response to the needs and desires of SWD was elicited. School members could be teachers, counselors, or social support personnel, for example. Inquiry about specific ways in which each school addressed each class of variable and explicit examples of these efforts was categorized into alterable variables. Finally, probes for information about administrators' ideas about supports or barriers they encounter in supporting SWDs was asked. Interview notes and response results were categorized into five interrelated alterable variable categories shown below in Table 8 to describe the system of activity in place and similarly to the artifact collection done prior to interviews (Christenson, Sinclair, Lehr & Hurley, 2000).

The researcher also sought to understand the range of perceptions held by informal leaders (such as teachers, counselors, and others) regarding graduating students with disabilities. The inquiry during the second interview was focused on individual professional belief systems, and on the ways each contributed to the "forward progress" of SWD as they approached graduation. Decisions made by school members are influenced by demeanor, personality, philosophical beliefs and experiences. Thus, beliefs, shaped by a broad set of background factors, can impact the attitude of the principal and teachers toward serving students with disabilities (Protz, 2005).

Stance

After spending the past fifteen years in education as a teacher and administrator at both the elementary and secondary levels, I am deeply interested in the tools and processes already available to educators to improve graduation rates for students with disabilities (SWD) in Michigan. More specifically, I am interested in how leadership optimizes the already available tools and resources to influence outcomes for students with disabilities, particularly the principal. My interest is largely influenced considering my previous role as an assistant principal of a large comprehensive high school in Michigan, in which my responsibilities included overseeing the high school special education department.

In line with statewide trends, the high school in which I worked struggled to graduate students with disabilities. I recognize that several factors are at play impacting outcomes for students with disabilities. Considering my background in the K12 settings, and because of my work specifically with SWD, I bring a strong bias that school leadership is well positioned to influence the system and thus, influence outcomes for all students. Most particularly, I believe leadership's influence on other actors in the system provides opportunity for student success, most importantly finding ways to help students with disabilities graduate from high school. The perspectives based on experience in the field and values I bring as a researcher, the questions I ask, and methodologies I sought to utilize are informed by my prior knowledge and experience as an administrator working directly with students with disabilities.

I made efforts to monitor and contain my beliefs and experiences to seek objective accounts of how school leaders, along with other actors, utilize the school system resources to improve graduation rate. Since I am unable to separate myself from myself as a researcher, I attempted to control the bias to avoid interfering with the data. Toward that end, I:

a) avoided interjecting my personal beliefs during any engagement with the research participants;

b) ensured that the questions were worded in a way that elicit respondents' perceptions not my perceptions;

c) engaged a critical friend to review my data and my interpretations so that he/she could help me see places where my biases might be interfering with the study's validity (Norris, 1997).

Data Analysis

Through various stages of analysis, I sought to develop a view on the extent to which the ways the distributed leadership lens is relevant within and between the schools to measure leadership activity for SWDs (internal validity), as well as enable explanation of how effective these processes are in leading to successful graduation for SWDs. This analysis and explanation will consider the extent to which school leaders are able to mediate the larger political and social processes in which schooling occurs (external validity). A general scheme for attending to the policy and practice system for education SWDs is shown in Table 7.

Table 7: Policy Impacts on Students with Disabilities

National Policies ESSA, IDEA	State Policies MMC Requirements, Teacher Certification, Funding, State Testing	Local Policies Staffing, Support System, Graduation Requirements, Funding, Staffing, Perceptions/Attitudes
High School A, B, & C		
Students with Disabilities		
Graduate -Graduates successfully in 4 years	What's going on locally that makes the difference since 2010? In what ways do school leaders "alter" the classes of variables related to outcomes for SWD in that school?	Non-graduate -Stays through grade 12 but does not graduate

Distributed Leadership theory has an intense focus on the tasks that need to be accomplished by a range of individuals within a given situation. Leadership is "stretched over" leaders, followers, variables, and situations. For example, all school leaders may engage with attendance variables and attendance records would be evidence of student attendance, but not every leader may monitor student progress through deeper, more critical, data analysis. These roles are stretched over multiple school leaders and are often stretched over multiple situations. Not one leader addresses every variable. Table 8 depicts the variables and potential evidence for how the leadership team may address these variables.

Table 8: Class of Alterable Variables

Class of Variables	Alterable Variables	Evidence
Student	Attendance, Academics, Behavior	Attendance Academic Behavior
Family	Participation in school related activities	Activities
Peers	Identification within school	School structure
School	Monitoring of Student Progress	Progress monitoring system
Community	Support Services, Relationships	Services Community

I undertook a deeper coding analysis which revealed the ways in which responsibility for tasks is distributed and whether the completion of tasks is coordinated, or not, in the completion. The coding and analysis of these routines helps to illuminate the routines in a way to draw out understanding of what process the school undertakes in each area.

To further understand the school's response to SWD I conducted a final analysis by coding the routines noted during the interview into "micro" tasks to further illuminate what role the leaders and followers engage with, including the tools utilized during the routines. "Micro" tasks are tasks performed to support the school's overall larger goals of building a school vision, promoting professional development, improving test scores, and so forth (Spillane & Scherer, 2004). An example that could pertain to the current study of a micro task would be coordination of class schedule for students with disabilities.

I developed cases for each school as part of the analysis, but the focus of discussion will be on what is learned through cross-case analysis. In discussing the cross-case analysis, my emphasis is about the importance of recognizing (diagnosis) whether and how distributed leadership is contributing to the valued outcome of graduation for SWD. Just completing the study and cross-case analysis is insufficient to justify this approach; my intent is to provide an

illustration of the various ways schools serve SWDs and to demonstrate why and how distributed leadership, when purposefully developed, can improve graduation outcomes.

Trustworthiness

To ensure this study measures what is intended I paid special attention to specific areas to establish credibility of the findings. Prior to the interview of participants, I developed familiarity with the participating organizations by first collecting artifacts from publicly available sources. Participants were self-selected by the principal and had opportunity to refuse to participate in the project. This also helped to ensure that the data collection sessions involved only those who were genuinely willing to participate. After a careful review of artifacts, I engaged each school's principal in an initial conversation to build rapport and address any outstanding questions about the artifacts collected. The artifact collection was intended to gain an initial understanding of what the schools used to communicate their values and areas of focus.

To further ensure credibility of the findings, triangulation of data sources was utilized to compensate for any limitations that may surface from using a single data source. Triangulating artifacts collected, interviews responses, and frequent debriefing sessions with my dissertation chair provided opportunity to analyze responses in a thorough way eliminating any potential bias.

CHAPTER 4: ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Summary of Artifacts

The artifacts were collected from publicly available sources (i.e., school websites) categorized into the five alterable variables (student, family, peers, school, community) as seen in Table 9 below. Artifacts gathered were structured around policies (attendance, academic, behavior), school related activities for family, family involvement in school, student identification within the school, systems for progress monitoring, special education structures, and community services offered to support students.

Table 9: High School A Artifacts

Variable(s)	Summary of Artifacts
Student, School	Student/parent handbook: Document detailing rules, regulations and policies governing student life
Student	Curriculum guide: Document detailing curricular course offerings
School	Process to determine SLD: Document detailing process for determining specific learning disabilities
School, Student	RtI overview/process: Document providing Response to Intervention process and detailed supports within each tier

Table 10: High School B Artifacts

Variable(s)	Summary of Artifacts
Student, Family	Parent engagement toolkit: Document detailing process for parental engagement
Student, School	Student/parent handbook: Document detailing rules, regulations and policies governing student life
Student, Family, School	Parent involvement plan: Document detailing process for parental engagement
School	Process to determine SLD: Document detailing process for determining specific learning disabilities
Student, School, Peer	Academic support handbook: Document detailing academic supports and available resources
Community	Link to Early Childhood Center: Community resources for early childhood support and resources

Table 11: High School C Artifacts

Variable(s)	Summary of Artifacts
Family, Community, Peer	List of community resources/agencies: Document providing list of community supports and resources to support both students and families
Student, School	Curriculum guide: Document detailing curricular course offerings
Student, Family	Student/parent handbook: Document detailing rules, regulations and policies governing student life
Student, School	Academic support afterschool program: Document detailing afterschool programs and resources to support students

First Round of Interviews

The first phase of interviews was conducted with the principal/building leader of each school. The building principal's beliefs and attitudes towards students with disabilities are critical (Anderson, 2003). Each interview was conducted in the building principal's school office. Questions were structured around what the research literature points to as alterable variables impacting students with disabilities and graduation rates (i.e., peer supports, transition processes, early warning systems, school leadership, and school culture). Questions targeting the principal's beliefs about students with disabilities were also included, as well as questions to elicit how principals engage their school leadership teams to optimize state and federal systems already in place to support students with disabilities. Additionally, each principal was asked to identify other key personnel that also played a critical role in supporting students with disabilities. A summary of interview responses has been included in Appendix D.

Principal Beliefs

Table 12 below provides an overview of principal's beliefs and themes that are consistent with what research suggests being crucial predictors and indicators that impact graduation rate for SWD followed by a deeper discussion based on interview responses.

Table 12: Principal's Beliefs and Themes

School	Core Beliefs and Themes
School A	Beliefs: • Culture of trust is most important • Prepare all students for success • No more elitists in the classroom Key Themes: • Begin with relationships to build trust • Reorganize Instructional Infrastructure
School B	Beliefs: • Making a difference for students and staff is most important • Building a sense of community for teachers Key Themes: • Listening and responding to teachers to build a sense of community • Creates scheduled time for teachers to collaborate
School C	Beliefs: • Leadership's ability to influence planning is important for both students and staff • Trusting teachers builds a sense of community • Limits interfering with teachers to maximize growth Key Themes: • Positive behavior supports • Providing unique educational learning opportunities for students outside of traditional coursework • Strong community advocate for increasing learning opportunities for all students

By taking a deeper dive into how the principal core beliefs influence instructional infrastructure within each school, one can get better sense of what the principal values or priorities regarding learning opportunities. Instruction is an alterable variable, and the core beliefs of the principal highlight core instructional components. Resources, staffing, course content, teaching and learning all stem from what the principal values. What follows below is an alignment between principal core beliefs and the instructional infrastructure of each school. This is yet another piece of the story when looking at graduation rates for students with disabilities and

how core principal beliefs and instructional infrastructure have the potential to impact graduation rates for SWD.

Principal beliefs school a. Principal A has been in education for 16 years and in the current role of principal for nine years. When asked what the best thing about being a principal was, rather than answering verbally, Principal A went to a white board and immediately started drawing and writing about the overall structure of the high school. The theme that emerged was centered on change; change in programs, change in teaching, and change in instructional practices to support all students. Change was initiated from administration and rolled out through staff. Principal A used words such as 'proud', highlighting the strengths of an increase in Advanced Placement (AP) enrollment by 500 students in a four-year span. Additional strengths noted revolved around pride of online learning (extended learning opportunities for students beyond the walls of the classroom) and passion for redesign of co-teaching structure to decrease number of students in the class. Special education teachers were assigned to content strength areas and this was viewed as strength of supports for students with disabilities. Principal A stated, "They were trying to figure out how to educate these kids and get them help. Um we had zero interventions built in. Um, it was essentially we teach it – if you don't learn it, tough. And on top of that, nobody was using any sort of common assessment. Everybody kind of did their own thing." There was passion in reducing the ratio of students with disabilities to special education teachers, multiple resources for students with disabilities to have access to varied supports for homework completion, both in and out of the classroom. When Principal A started, "...special education was 15-20 kids stuck in a room doing six, ah, five different subjects." Principal A was able to provide multiple examples of how the school climate supported students with disabilities and was energetic in descriptions of programs and staff supports. There was a strong emphasis on the

importance of supporting all types of learners, and not facilitating movement to alternative education settings. For example, Principal A refused to create an alternative education program, when asked by district leadership, for students who traditionally might benefit from one. Instead, schedule re-design and staff supports were implemented to keep all students in the school building, not just students with disabilities. As noted in Table 13 below, Principal A described the reorganization of instructional infrastructure that was done to support all learners.

Table 13: Instructional Infrastructure: School A

Tiered Instruction	Types of Instruction	Description
Core Instruction (Tier 1) **Advanced, Proficient*	• Core courses • Advanced Placement (AP) courses • Dual Credit	Core courses and AP courses provide the foundation to support most learners in the school. Dual credit is provided to some students through partnerships with community colleges.
Pre-teach or Re-teach (Tier 2) **Emerging*	Small group direct instruction in two of three core classes (math, ELA, science)	Students with an IEP are provided a course prior to a core course for re-teaching or pre-teaching.
Deep Intervention (Tier 3) **Struggling (Won't and Can't)*	Small group direct instruction Blended Learning: online/direct instruction	SE teachers meet with 5 or fewer students in core areas to provide direct instruction to support core class (*Can't)*. Online learning opportunities provide opportunity for *(Won't)* students blended with direct support from core teachers.

*Italics indicate direct terms used by the principal to describe groups of students

Principal A's introduction reflects his passion, "At (High School A), if you are a high flyer, we've got you covered. You hate school, we've got you covered. You're willing to do school, but you're struggling, we've got you covered." Moreover, Principal A, "...realized that we

had essentially five different type of academic learner. And so, we created names for them. And we...so we called it the advanced, proficient, emerging and struggling. That's four. Okay, I said there were five." Principal A then discussed how they split the "struggling" group into two categories called the "cant's" and "wont's." As noted by Principal A, "...there are different reasons for struggling. And treating the disease is different. Treating cant's is way different than treating wont's. And what's happened for years in schools is those two groups have been together. They're not successful – let's stick them together. And, you...and anybody who's ever been in that situation knows that that is not a good scenario." Principal A further explained that, "...research shows that tracking can be negative." This was about the fact that the high school, "stopped tracking low...every area had a low-level class." More specifically, Principal A pointed out that, "Geometry has a slow, Algebra had an Algebra support, Social Studies had the low level..."

Principal A acknowledged that these were co-teaching situations and which, "I think the idea is good but what we found is these cant's and wont's were intermixed with the kids who were doing okay but just needed a little push, and our data was going in the wrong direction." This is when Principal A decided to "...flip the script a little bit" by acknowledging that there were several opportunities for students to advance which caused the makeup of classrooms to be separated by students doing well academically and those that weren't. This change in philosophy and structure, in the words of Principal A, shifted to, "No more elitist. Um, the teachers didn't get to decide who they wanted and who they didn't." Principal recognized the fact that too great of a focus in any one direction creates challenges.

> Going further, Principal A stated, ...I think that structure of what's happening in the culture of the school is just as important as what we're doing with the...with the struggling learners. So, if we only focus on the struggling, your inertia starts to bring the top into mediocrity, and I wanted to make sure that the top gets pushed as hard as they want to push – to a point where, at first, we thought that our success rates were going to drop. And our success rates actually went from 68% with 121 all the way to 75% (referring to pass rates of students taking AP classes).

Principal beliefs school b. Principal B has been in education for 16 years and in the current role for five. When asked what the best thing about was being a principal, Principal B responded with, helping to make a difference on a larger scale for students and staff. Principal B indicated a strong focus on working with students who are at risk. There was energy around looking at ways to tracking students at risks, including students with disabilities. There was a strong emphasis on initiatives that were in discussion or initial phases of implementation, including an advisory hour, increased social emotional support, and peer-to-peer supports. Instructionally, Principal B indicated that opportunities were available for all types of learners. As noted in Table 14 below, Principal B described the school's instructional infrastructure to support all learners in addition to artifacts describing the school's instructional structure.

Table 14: Instructional Infrastructure: School B

Tiered Instruction	Types of Instruction	Description
Core Instruction (Tier 1)	• Core courses • Advanced Placement (AP) courses • Dual Credit • Career Technical Training	Core courses and AP courses provide the foundation to support most learners in the school. Dual credit is provided to some students through partnerships with community colleges. Juniors and Seniors are provided opportunity for career technical training through a partnership with the local intermediate school district in a variety of trade related fields
Pre-teach or Re-teach (Tier 2)	• Small group direct instruction in two of three core classes (math, ELA) • Co-teaching	Students with an IEP are provided a course prior to a core course for re-teaching or pre-teaching. Co-teaching occurs in all core subject areas
Deep Intervention (Tier 3)	• Alternative education setting (Online Learning Academy)	An alternative school setting is provided for students deficient in credits and/or with significant behavioral needs

Identified area of challenge included moving initiatives beyond discussion phases and limited guidance from administration on initiatives. For example, Principal B referenced teachers taking it upon themselves to engage in a PLC regarding a freshman focus, meaning these teachers are passionate about the freshman transition, but that administration did not have a hand in identifying specific professional development for the staff (this specific school allows teachers to structure their own professional development).

Regarding students with disabilities, Principal B acknowledged that all supports are in place on the first day that students start school so that everything "just rolls". There was pride in a summer initiative that special education teachers take on the responsibility of reaching out to students on their caseloads to introduce themselves. This allows students with disabilities to be more comfortable transitioning to high school as they have a familiar face in the building. Again, there was an emphasis/theme that initiatives were teacher driven and not administrative driven. Principal B described energy around the first few days of the school year where the school leadership team has more presence in the hallways, and that the principal does a welcome presentation to the entire freshman class. Staff relationships was a source of pride; Principal B referenced the encouragement and support of staff (i.e. teachers) "bouncing ideas off of us [administration]" to support all students.

Principal beliefs schools c. Principal C has been in education 22 for years and in the current role for nine. When asked what the best thing about being a principal, Principal C referenced the ability to be a part of the planning process of school functions to influence student outcomes by creating a strong instructional infrastructure. Additionally, Principal C emphasized strong student/teacher relationships, "I have the philosophy that rules plus relationships is response, rules without relationship is rebellion." Instructionally, Principal C indicated that opportunities were available for all learners based on attention paid to the creation of the master schedule. As noted in Table 15 below, Principal C described the school's instructional infrastructure to support all learners. In addition, information was gleaned from artifacts from the school's website.

Table 15: Instructional Infrastructure: School C

Tiered Instruction	Types of Instruction	Description
Core Instruction (Tier 1)	• Core courses • Advanced Placement (AP) courses • Dual Credit • Career Technical Training	Core courses and AP courses provide the foundation to support most learners in the school. Dual credit is provided to some students through partnerships with community colleges. All high school students are provided opportunity for career technical training through a partnership with the local intermediate school district in a variety of trade related fields
Pre-teach or Re-teach (Tier 2)	• Small group direct instruction in two of all core classes (Direct Studies) • Co-teaching	Students with an IEP are provided a course prior to a core course for re-teaching or pre-teaching. Co-teaching occurs in math, ELA and science deepening on student need
Deep Intervention (Tier 3)	• Alternative education setting	An alternative school setting is provided for students deficient in credits and/or with significant behavioral needs

Throughout the interview, Principal C was articulated in identifying factors that impact student outcomes and energy around how to influence these factors. For example, Principal C spoke about advocating for moving away from punitive grading practices and being passionate about reducing suspensions and expulsions and identifying why students are being suspended and expelled. Peer supports and team building activities were highlighted to support the 8th to 9th grade transition process for all students. Principal C articulated passion about supporting teachers

to take the viewpoint from a student perspective and that relationships are crucial. A common re-occurring theme that Principal C referenced was the importance of student relationships. Staff were encouraged to track absenteeism and make phone calls to students and families; student schedules were built around student need and interest; finding what works for kids; and advocating for keeping kids in school.

Principal C did not specifically reference students with disabilities but expressed passion for keeping all kids in school and building relationships with kids to understand the root cause of behavior. "…without that relationship the content means nothing. If I have teachers that can truly build that content, make a kid feel comfortable, and get in there on time, the daily side effect is they [the student] will learn more content".

Second Round Interviews

In phase two of interviews, each principal self-identified who they considered to have an influence on students with disabilities. The context of the situation in the present study is looking at graduation rates for students with disabilities and the relationship to the leadership style in the building. To look at the connection between school leadership and graduation rates for students with disabilities, the lens of distributed leadership provides a foundation that there are multiple leaders in a school system (Spillane et al., 2004). The purpose of these interviews was to dive deeper into the concept of distributed leadership and the influence key identified personnel had on the tasks or routines that principals identified as being in place to support students with disabilities. In addition to interacting with followers, leaders also interact with aspects of the routines or small tasks, and structures (Spillane, 2005b; Spillane et al., 2001), and thus are a part of the routines and tasks. Successful school leaders who are connected to teachers, tasks, and students with disabilities are a meaningful part of these improvement efforts (Billingsley,

McLeskey, & Crockett, 2014), as well as the school culture. By focusing on tasks or school routines situated within the scope of alterable variables (student, family, peer, school, community), and whether the principal is present within the task or routine and how these tasks are carried out by followers, one can begin to unravel how present distributed leadership is within the sample schools.

Organizational Routines for Alterable Variables

What follows are five tables that capture the tools and routines and presence of Distributed Leadership categorized by the primary alterable variables. Alterable variables cross over into one another, which makes it difficult to reference a single variable in isolation as many of the tools impact more than one variable. For example, in Table 16, for the transition process both family and student alterable variables are impacted. Primary alterable variable was identified based on the routine identified.

Table 16: Organizational Routines for Alterable Variables

Primary Alterable Variable Category: Family Secondary Variable Category: Student Routine: Transition Process Function: Support Transition from Middle School to High School			
School	Tools	Leaders/Followers	DL Presence
School A	• HS teachers go to 8th grade to meet students • move up day during 8th grade • letter to families • summer meeting • 2nd meeting right before school starts • Schedule separate class for students who struggle	primarily planned and implemented by teachers; principal attends orientation meeting	Each participant that the principal identified as having an impact on graduation rates for SWD spoke to a shared understanding of the transition process that was in alignment with what the principal said except for the math teacher.

Table 16: (cont'd)

School B	• SWD have an open house during the summer • Letter sent to families • Freshman Focus class to help beyond the initial transition	Principal has limited role in process. Allows SE teachers to develop and implement all transition processes and practices	Each participant identified by the principal as having an impact on graduation rates for SWD, including the principal, indicated that nothing formal occurs. Only the SE teacher and core teacher spoke of processes to address transition.
School C	• Upperclassmen are partnered with incoming freshman • Advisory period two days a week for freshman dedicated to team building activities • Student study team focuses on student's grades, attendance and behavior during the school year.	Dean of Students leads all activities related to transition	Each participant identified as having an impact on graduation rates for SWD by the principal, including the principal, spoke to a shared understanding of the transition process except for the SE teacher who indicated no formal process was in place except for the actual transition IEP.

School transition. The ninth-grade transition to high school offers critical opportunities for interventions (Lan & Lanthier, 2003). School A utilizes a variety of tools to support the transition of students to the high school. Initially, teachers from School A meet with incoming 9th grade students to discuss current progress and future plans. The high school conducts a move up day in the spring for students during the school day, followed by a letter to parents inviting them to a summer meeting to discuss the high school experience. An additional meeting occurs at the start of the school year for both student and parents to familiarize them to the school's organizational structure and answer any outstanding questions. Each event is planned and implemented by teachers. Once student schedules are established, the teachers provide a plan to

the principal who then builds each student's schedule to ensure the master schedule supports the needs of individual students.

School B utilizes a variety of tools to support the transition of students to the high school. Initially, SWD and their families are invited to an open house during the summer to provide an overview of the high school experience and to answer questions that students and parents pose. Prior to the open house families receive a letter inviting them and information about the purpose of the meeting. To provide support throughout the year, beyond the first few days of school, School B builds in a Freshman Focus class dedicated to organization and academics. Each event is scheduled and planned by the special education teachers. Once the scheduling needs are complete the special education teachers provide student schedule to the principal who inputs them into the master schedule.

School C utilizes a variety of tools to support the transition of students to the high school. Initially, School C partners incoming SWD with upperclassmen to establish a relationship and offer opportunities for peers to answer student questions. An advisory period is carved out throughout the year, dedicated to team building activities to strengthen and maintain deep relationships. The teaching staff meets on a weekly basis to identify students with academic, behavioral or attendance needs to monitor progress. The Dean of Students, counseling staff and teacher consultant are responsible for the planning and implementation of all activities.

Table 17: Organizational Routines for Alterable Variables

Alterable Variable Category: School Secondary Variable Category: Student Routine: School and Student Schedule Function: Provide appropriate academic support			
School	Tools	Leaders/Followers	DL Presence
School A	• Scheduled developed during transition IEP at the end of 8th grade • SE teacher reviews schedule prior to the start of the school year • Standardized tests • IEP	Counselor and teachers create student schedules; principal takes recommendation and inputs schedule; principal creates outline of schedule used by counselor/teacher to develop schedule	Each participant that the principal identified as having an impact on graduation rates for SWD, including the principal, spoke to a shared understanding of who was responsible for developing the master schedule except for math teacher who indicated that he was unaware of the persons responsible.
School B	• Schedule developed during IEP process in the spring of 8th grade • List of student needs is created to help principal create framework for master schedule • 8th grade teacher provides additional input based on experience with student • IEP	Counselor and SE teachers created schedules; principal enters schedule into the scheduling system	Each participant that the principal identified as having an impact on graduation rates for SWD, including the principal, spoke to a shared understanding of how and who is responsible for creating the master schedule.

Table 17: (cont'd)

School C	• Teacher consultant works directly with special education teachers to develop student schedules • Teacher Consultant develops framework for schedule in consultation with the principal • Teacher Consultant meets with middle school to develop initial schedule for individual students • IEP	Teacher Consultant leads all aspects of scheduling SWD	Each participant that the principal identified as having an impact on graduation rates for SWD spoke to a shared understanding of how the master schedule is created. The principal indicated that he played a major role in the process while the participants indicated the teacher consultant and counselor were primarily responsible.

Student schedules. Developing and supporting student needs through the master scheduling process helps to provide necessary academic support. School A develops individual student schedules during the 8th grade transition IEP in middle school. During this meeting a group of teachers from both the middle and high school work with the student and family to craft a 9th grade schedule. Special education teachers at the high school review the schedules prior to the start of the school year to ensure the plan matches with the IEP team decision. Counselors and teachers are responsible for the entire scheduling process, while the principal ensures the overall master schedule provides for each student's needs.

School B develops student's schedules during the transition IEP process in middle school. After the process is complete for all incoming SWD's, the teachers create a list to help the principal create an overall master schedule framework. Once both processes are complete,

the 8th grade teachers provide feedback based on decisions made at the high school built on their experiences with the students. Counselors and teachers are responsible for the entire process, while the principal ensures the overall master schedule allows support for each student's needs.

School C's teacher consultant works with middle school teachers to develop a schedule during the transition IEP in the spring of the student's 8th grade year. After each IEP is complete, the teacher consultant, in collaboration with the counselor, develops a framework for the master schedule that is delivered to the high school principal. The teacher consultant and counselor are fully responsible for the master schedule, except for input into the scheduling system, which is the responsibility of the principal.

Table 18: Organizational Routines for Alterable Variables

Alterable Variable Category: Student Secondary Variable Category: School Routine: Attendance, Academic and Behavior Function: Academic, behavioral and attendance policies			
School	Tools	Leaders/Followers	DL Presence
School A	General attendance, academic and behavioral policies in student handbook	Assistant principal responsible for discipline; support staff make phone calls for attendance issues	Each participant that the principal identified as having an impact on graduation rates for SWD had a shared understanding of the attendance, academic and behavioral policies and who is responsible for implementing policies.

Table 18: (cont'd)

School B	General attendance and behavioral policies in student handbook Generate attendance letters to send home requiring a meeting General attendance and behavioral polices in handbook ISS Room	SE teachers, support staff and administration	Each participant that the principal identified as having an impact on graduation rates for SWD had a shared understanding of the attendance, academic and behavioral policies and who is responsible for implementing policies.
School C	• ABC Room (Academics, Behavior Classroom) to avoid out of school suspension • Behavioral rubric system • General attendance and behavioral policies in handbook	Support staff oversees the ABC room; administration makes disciplinary decisions	Each participant that the principal identified as having an impact on graduation rates for SWD had a shared understanding of the attendance, academic and behavioral policies and who is responsible for implementing policies.

Attendance, academics, and behavior. The most powerful predictor for successful completion of high school is course performance and attendance during the first year of high school (Allensworth & Easton, 2005). School A addresses overall student attendance, academics, and behavior through the school handbook. The handbook establishes processes and expectations for student attendance. The assistant principal is responsible for any student issues related to attendance and behavior. Teachers are responsible for academic issues.

School B addresses overall student attendance, academics, and behavior through the school handbook. Students with attendance issues have a letter generated to families requiring a family meeting. The school has an In-School Suspension room as a resource to avoid out of school suspensions for behavioral and attendance issues. Special education teachers, support staff, and school administration are jointly responsible for all three areas.

School C addresses overall student attendance, academics, and behavior through the school handbook. The school provides an ABC room (Academics Behavior Classroom) to avoid out of school suspensions for students struggling behaviorally and academically. Supports staff leads all aspects of the ABC room in support with administration, while the assistant principal leads all major disciplinary issues.

Table 19: Organizational Routines for Alterable Variables

Alterable Variable Category: Peers Secondary Variable Category: Student Routine: School structure Function: School structure to serve SWD			
School	Tools	Leaders/Followers	DL Presence
School A	• Co-teaching model • Support classes	Co-teaching model, resource room support with an emphasis on inclusion	Each participant that the principal identified as having impact on graduation rates for SWD had a shared understanding of the school structure to support SWD.
School B	• Co-teaching model • Support classes	Co-teaching and resource room support	Each participant that the principal identified as having an impact on graduation rates for SWD had a shared understanding of the school structure utilized to support SWD.
School C	• Co-teaching model • Support classes	Co-teaching and resource room support	Each participant that the principal identified as having an impact on graduation rates for SWD had a shared understanding of the school structure utilized to support SWD.

School structure. School A identifies co-teaching as one instructional model utilized to support SWD. Co-teaching occurs in science classes, while support for English and mathematics occurs in Learning Strategies classes supported directly by special education teachers as a supplement for a core class. The SE teacher leading a Learning Strategies course is based on grade levels and typically no more than 8-10 students per class. The classes are labeled as core classes (i.e. English 9) to avoid singling students out. The courses are in English and mathematics for 30 minutes per day in addition to core instruction. This course is designed to pre-teach and remediate based on what the student needs.

School B provides a co-teaching model. This is a shift in the past two years from a resource room model. In addition, Focus Classes are supplemental English and mathematics courses in 9th and 10th with an 11th grade. Focus Class, which is more of a "general" class, not specifically identified with a core subject, is aligned with the core with a maximum of eight students. This course is designed to pre-teach or re-teach content for a core English or mathematics course. The Focus teacher is typically the case coordinator as well for the students.

School C provides a co-teaching model in English, mathematics and social studies. The principal decides upon the co-teaching assignments. In addition, there is resource room support for students called Upward Bound. Upward Bound is a program dedicated to helping students prepare for their post high school experience. The program serves students from low income families and/or parents from families in which both parents do not hold a bachelor's degree.

Table 20: Organizational Routines for Alterable Variables

Alterable Variable Category: Community Routine: Support Services and Relationships with community Function: Use of resources throughout community to support students			
School	Tools	Leaders/Followers	DL Presence
School A	• List of community resources available on website • Michigan Rehabilitation Service (MRS)	Counselor and special education staff coordinate with MRS	No participants that the principal identified as having an impact on graduation rates for SWD had a shared understanding of community connections except for the SE teacher.
School B	• List of community resources available on website Michigan Rehabilitation Services (MRS) Work Readiness Assessment Program	Counselor and special education staff coordinate with MRS	No participants that the principal identified as having an impact on graduation rates for SWD had a shared understanding of community connections except for the SE teacher and teacher consultant.
School C	• List of community resources available on website	Counselor and special education staff coordinate with MRS	No participants that the principal identified as having an impact on graduation rates for SWD had a shared understanding of community connections except for the SE teacher and teacher consultant.

Support services and relationship with community. Strong community partnerships are important for students with disabilities as they transition forward and eventually graduate from high school. By establishing connections to the community for students – post graduation options become more attainable. In Michigan, students with IEP's begin transition planning at age 16. As part of that transition plan, schools are required to invite community agencies (i.e. MRS) to the IEP during the student's senior year. Although this is a requirement for each school district, the special education teachers and teacher consultant are the only interviewees aware of this requirement.

Summary of Leadership Tables

The tables below summarize the level of alignment to the principal's beliefs about what supports are offered within their given building and the alignment responses of informal leaders within the school building. Each principal interviewed identified in some way during the interview process each area noted below. While the principals addressed the topics in varying depth and detail – responses from the informal leaders provided an opportunity to makes sense of how the principal responded with how other members view the school's response to key areas that increase graduation outcomes for students.

Table 21: School A: Alignment for Key Graduation Predictors

Graduation Predictor	Principal	Informal Leaders
What does research point to as key graduation predictors?	Did the principal point to or discuss the graduation predictor within their building?	Did the informal leaders align with the principal's claim?
Early Warning Signs (i.e. behavior, grades, attendance)	Yes	Participant 1: yes Participant 2: yes Participant 3: yes Participant 4: yes
9th Grade Transition Process	Yes	Participant 1: yes Participant 2: yes Participant 3: yes Participant 4: no
School Culture and Community	Yes	Participant 1: yes Participant 2: yes Participant 3: yes Participant 4: no
Principal Attitude and Beliefs Toward SWD	Yes	Participant 1: yes Participant 2: yes Participant 3: yes Participant 4: no

Table 22: School B: Alignment for Key Graduation Predictors

Graduation Predictor	Principal	Informal Leaders
What does research point to as key graduation predictors?	Did the principal point to or discuss the graduation predictor within their building?	Did the informal leaders align with the principal's claim?
Early Warning Signs (i.e. behavior, grades, attendance)	Yes	Participant 1: yes Participant 2: yes Participant 3: yes Participant 4: no Participant 5: no
9th Grade Transition Process	Yes	Participant 1: yes Participant 2: yes Participant 3: no Participant 4: no Participant 5: no
School Culture and Community	Yes	Participant 1: yes Participant 2: yes Participant 3: yes Participant 4: yes Participant 5: no
Principal Attitude and Beliefs Toward SWD	Yes	Participant 1: yes Participant 2: yes Participant 3: yes Participant 4: yes Participant 5: no

Table 23: School C: Alignment for Key Graduation Predictors

Graduation Predictor	Principal	Informal Leaders
What does research point to as key graduation predictors?	Did the principal point to or discuss the graduation predictor within their building?	Did the informal leaders align with the principal's claim?
Early Warning Signs (i.e. behavior, grades, attendance)	Yes	Participant 1: yes Participant 2: yes Participant 3: no Participant 4: no Participant 5: no
9th Grade Transition Process	Yes	Participant 1: yes Participant 2: yes Participant 3: no Participant 4: no Participant 5: no

Table 23: (cont'd)

School Culture and Community	Yes	Participant 1: yes Participant 2: yes Participant 3: yes Participant 4: yes Participant 5: no
Principal Attitude and Beliefs Toward SWD	Yes	Participant 1: yes Participant 2: yes Participant 3: yes Participant 4: yes Participant 5: yes

Summary of Chapter 4

Leadership practice is framed by the interactions of school leaders, followers, and the aspects of their situation stretched across time and over two or more people (Spillane, 2006a; Spillane et al., 2001). Specifically, distributed leadership characterizes a form of collective leadership in which teachers develop expertise by working collaboratively (Spillane et al., 2001). In addition to interacting with followers, leaders also interact with aspects of the situation including tools, organizational routines, small tasks, and structures (Spillane, 2005b; Spillane et al., 2001). Each of the three participating schools provided opportunities to analyze how the principal interacts with the other informal leaders of the building. More importantly, the interviews allowed the researcher to use distributed leadership as a framework to identify the distributive nature of school leadership and the overall management practices. The alignment graphics identified above were divided into categories (school leadership, school culture and community, 9th grade transition, and early warning signs) rooted in literature as having positive influence on graduation rates for students with disabilities.

Ironically, when summarizing alignment, each school had thirteen leadership responses that aligned with the principal core values and beliefs. To analyze alignment at a deeper level, cross analysis of the data was conducted to provide more thorough responses to the research

questions. Layering the analysis of the interview questions and artifacts with the data on graduation rates for students with disabilities within the three participating schools, responses to the research questions are provided in the next chapter.

Special education presents unique challenges for school principals. Schools are tasked with providing SWD access to general curriculum and high-quality instructional supports. Principals play an important role within the school in either helping or hindering graduation outcomes for students with disabilities. The above graphics and tables attempt to illustrate the alignment of certain key graduation indicators with alignment within the school system between the principal and other members of the school team that have influence to carry out certain expectations.

Research into the influence principals have implementing inclusive education points to the understanding that it is their beliefs, values and commitment that are the foundation of inclusive schools (Theoharis & Causton-Theoharis, 2008). Considering this, coupled with the findings of this study, it becomes imperative that principals not only have certain attitude and beliefs about serving students with disabilities but equally important a coordinated to structure the school setting in a way to be most effective. School principals that are engaged and can structure initiatives that permeate throughout the building in an understandable way have a greater likelihood of impacting school outcomes, especially graduation outcomes. The data from this study parallel the research that has demonstrated that principals who focus on instructional issues, demonstrate administrative support for special education, and provide high-quality professional development for teachers produce enhanced outcomes for students with disabilities and for other students as well (Benz, Lindstrom, & Yovanoff, 2000). Finding qualified special education teachers is a challenge for all schools across the United States (USDOE, 2001).

Principals administrative support affects the extent to which teachers implement high quality instructional supports to enhance opportunities to improve student outcomes (Embich, 2001).

In summary, school principals have impact outcomes for students, especially SWD. Skilled principals must be able to develop cohesive procedures that support classroom performance and devise policies that members of the school team understand and implement with fidelity. Further, fostering collaboration and classroom communication will enhance the possibilities of producing positive outcomes leading to increased graduation rate for both SWD and the entire school population.

CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Conclusions and Implications of the Study

To explore the relationship between leadership distribution and outcomes for SWD and to answer my research questions, I conducted multiple cross-case analysis using data collected through interviews and layering artifact reviews on top of the interview responses. In presenting evidence from the study, I identified the ways in which leadership responsibilities for SWD are distributed to impact the school routines, tasks, and tools. Utilizing the Distributed Leadership theory, a deeper analysis into attitudes, perceptions, belief, and institutional knowledge was also found to contribute to external factors that have an impact for enhancing or constraining the efforts of the school and graduation outcomes for SWD. In Chapter 5, I answer the research questions clearly and succinctly, summarize key findings, draw conclusions from my research, and discuss implications for educational policy and practice and future research.

Before getting to the substance of this chapter, I revisit the rationale for selection of the three participating high schools. The three high schools selected for the study have 4-year cohort graduation rates for students with disabilities that have, at times, trended both above and below the state average since the 2010-2011 school year. During the 2010-2011 school year the new Michigan Merit Core Curriculum standards were introduced to all Michigan high schools, providing a consistent starting point when focusing on graduation rate trends. Also, the schools are located within a similar geographic location, with similar demographics, and the same relative school size.

Research Question 1

Who are the primary educators (principals, teachers, counselors, and others) who have responsibilities for SWD?

Primary Educators Responsible for Students with Disabilities

Praisner (2003) found that a school principal's attitude and central beliefs could result in either increased or decreased opportunities for SWD to be served alongside their general education peers. As a main actor in the school, the principal needs institutional knowledge of programs and services within the school building and must lead in creating a school climate that promotes inclusivity for all students. I explored this proposition in my research.

School principals hold the highest level of formal leadership in the school building and could significantly influence outcomes for all students, including SWD. Initial interview questions probed the extent to which this is true within the participating schools by focusing on alterable variables identified in the literature as having an impact on graduation rates for SWD (Christenson et.al, 2000). Alterable variable categories include: attendance, behavior, academic intervention, school engagement (extra-curricular), school supports for SWD (including supports as students transition between buildings/grades), progress monitoring, and community connections for SWD.

When comparing graduation rates for SWD across the three schools, School A had the lowest graduation rate for the 2015-2016 academic year. Principal A demonstrated knowledge in policies and supports for SWD, spoke of hand scheduling classes for SWD (school support), co-develops student schedules, and matches co-teachers based on knowledge of who historically works best together. While Principal A did not identify RtI/MTSS processes, or universal positive behavior supports, he did respond in such a way that indicates he fully understands

tiered supports. Principal B spoke to what was lacking regarding transition processes, had ambiguous responses regarding supports for SWD, did not talk specifically about connections with SWD, is not involved with scheduling specific students aside from inputting the student schedule. He also matches co-teachers based on continuity of subjects. Principal B demonstrated knowledge of policies and identified the lack of PBIS, as well as a lack of structured RTI/MTSS process. Principal C was not reported to be involved in the transition process, co-teaching assignments, or student scheduling. This was primarily accomplished by the teacher consultant as identified by the principal. Principal C had some knowledge of policies, referenced PBIS, but indicated a lack of a formal RTI/MTSS process in the building but planning was in place for the coming years to implement.

None of the principals self-identified connections to the community as a critical component or variable impacting student outcomes. School B and C indicated a lack of RtI/MTSS process based on principal responses. As mentioned above, Principal A talked about the school structure in a way that provides evidence that he understands tiered intervention supports. A review of artifacts found limited information about ways students and families could connect to community resources.

Across all three case studies, the building principals identified a variety of leaders that had a role in educating students with disabilities. Each case identified an assistant principal as playing a significant role in educating SWD, as well as a special education teacher and/or teacher consultant, a general education teacher, and a school counselor. The leadership of the school principal is an extremely powerful influence in the education of students, both general and special education students (Cooner et al., 2005). Considering this, the school principal's belief system about students, particularly students with disabilities, becomes critical. The principal's

philosophical belief system about students with disabilities and their educational experiences comes from one's understanding and beliefs about disabilities (Anderson, 2003). Yet more and more principal indicate a general unpreparedness when it comes to special education – which may lead to many school administrators having negative perceptions of special education (Webb, Bessette, Smith, & Tubbs, 2009). Thus, the leadership team as a whole could have institutional and background knowledge to support SWDs.

Stemming from the DL, if there is a strong alignment between principals and key identified leaders within the school, the potential for increased graduation rates increases because of organizational coherence. There are additional factors that could be considered (i.e., alternative education settings), but these will be addressed within the Limitations section of the paper. Each principal was asked to identify key school personnel that had influence on SWD. As the researcher, I chose to leave this open ended and individualized to each school. Each principal identified similar staff as having an impact on outcomes for SWD. The key variable in analyzing the connection between graduate rates for SWD and key identified staff is the alignment each identified person had with the core beliefs and values the principal identified and how these core beliefs transcend instructional infrastructure, policy, and school culture. For a leadership team to function at peak performance, ideally, DL is stretched over leaders, followers, variables, and situations. By allowing the principal to identify key members of the school who have influence over SWD and thus graduation rates – a connection between what the formal school leader identified as key factors and the alignment of interview responses from other members helps to identify whether there was presence of DL.

Distributed Leadership Presence and Alignment

When studying leadership practice, it is helpful to pay attention to the interplay between leaders, followers, and situations. Leadership practice is framed by the interactions of school leaders, followers, and the aspects of their situation stretched across time (Spillane, 2006a; Spillane et al., 2001). In using the distributed leadership framework to view leadership shifts the focus of analysis from leaders to leadership activity shifts (Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond 2004). Use of this framework allows one to see that leadership is more than who leaders are, including the characteristics embodied by those leaders. Distributed leadership characterizes a form of collective leadership in which teachers develop expertise by working collaboratively (Spillane et al., 2001). The following section works to unravel the leadership structure within schools participating in the study, by identifying alignment of principal's attitudes and beliefs with informal leaders participating in the study.

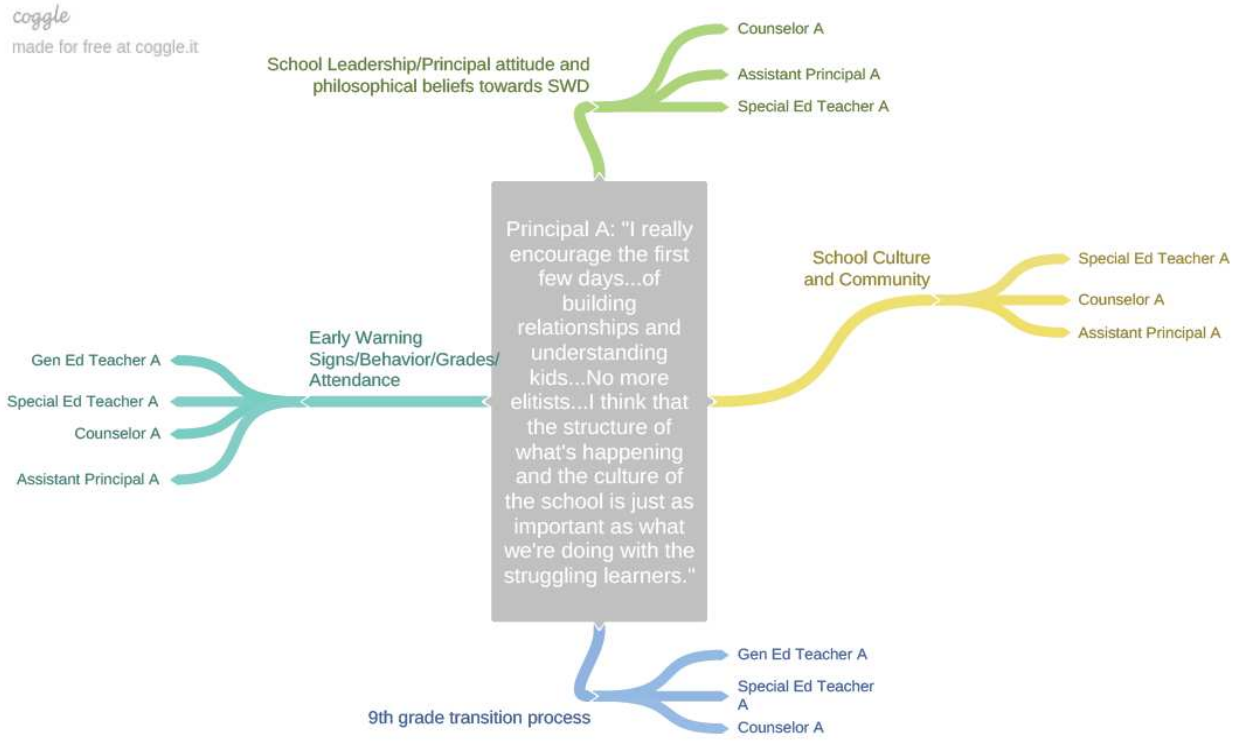
Figures 1, 2 and 3 below depict the alignment between principal beliefs and statements from key identified school members that were identified have an impact on graduation rates for SWD. At the center of each graphic is a representative quote of the principal's attitude toward SWD, school leadership and culture, early warning signs, and the transition process. Branching out from the center are the alignment beliefs of each key identified school leader. Presence of an alignment with the principal's belief is indicated within the graphic. If the school member interviewed is not listed – this is indicative to a lack of alignment with the principal thus impacting the efficacy of distributed leadership.

School a. Principal A identified the following as having an influence on students with disabilities: assistant principal, general education teacher (math), special education teacher (LD and EI endorsements), and a counselor. In phase one of interviews, Principal A identified several

routines or structures (see Appendix C) to support students with disabilities. When coding these structures within the alterable variable categorization, identifying the routine, the function, and the tools, as well as who the leaders and followers are, one can see the presence or non-presence of distributed leadership.

Figure 1 provides an overview of how the identified staff align with the principal's beliefs and vision and highlights interactions between formal and informal leaders.

Figure 1: Principal A



When looking at the interview responses from the rest of the key identified personnel (see Appendix C), the common theme that presented itself was a leader with passion and enthusiasm for systems change and innovative ideas, yet limited involvement on the implementation of the routine or consistent presence within the task.

When taking a deeper dive into instructional practice for SWD and how SWD are supported generally, School A identifies co-teaching as one instructional model utilized to support SWD. Co-teaching occurs in science classes, while support for English and mathematics occurs in Learning Strategies classes supported directly by special education teachers as a supplement for a core class. The SE teacher leading a Learning Strategies course is based on grade levels and typically no more than 8-10 students per class. The classes are labeled as core classes (i.e. English 9) to avoid singling students out. The courses are in English and mathematics for 30 minutes per day in addition to core instruction. The course is designed to pre-teach and remediation based on what the student needs. The assistant principal describes this class by stating, "If teachers know...it's a really difficult concept coming up. They'll pre-teach before they get into that classroom and make sure that they have some of the foundational and basic skills they need to then participate in the gen ed curriculum, or re-teaching it afterwards if they've determined that, um, that they weren't successful in learning that material." The special education teacher describes the model as, "I don't know that I would say she's really co-teaching. She's just in there to make sure those kids are passing...I don't think it's true co-teaching."

In creating a master schedule to support SWD, School A's principal indicated that he works closely with the counselor to craft a master schedule based on individual student needs. The counselor mentioned that she meets with the head of the special education department, "...and we hand schedule every student that is on all of those special ed teachers' caseloads." There was a lack of consistency in response to this interview question as some participants thought the counselor and principal were the sole participants in creating the master schedule for SWD; however, others indicated the special education teacher hand scheduled every student. Furthermore, the general education teacher stated "I think, ah, the counseling department does, in

coordination with the resource room teachers, and, case workers for those students. The principal from School A discussed the Student Life and Leadership class as a peer to peer support. This class is provided to all students to build community throughout the building. The principal stated, "this class has done a ton of cultural work on understanding each other – everything from sending out a video and an email once a week about our differences and each one having a different focus."

Principal A was quick to identify various programs and supports within the school in terms of peer to peer for SWD. Although he gave descriptive information about these programs there was little connection to the programs being connected to SWD. Principal A pointed to a Student Life and Leadership class is a group of 60+ students dedicated to peer mentoring. Students are provided guidance and support about how to be a positive mentor and then teamed up with a group of students. This group of students works with incoming 8th grade students transitioning to the high school. This group also does a great deal of cultural work on helping students understand the differences with one other. A sub group of this class is dedicated to "lunch patrol" making sure students are supported in the cafeteria during lunch. This group of students actively seeks out students they do not know to build relationship during the lunch period. One other peer-to-peer support noted is a Pride Pack club. This is a group of 100-150 students with the goal of supporting at least one extra-curricular activity per semester.

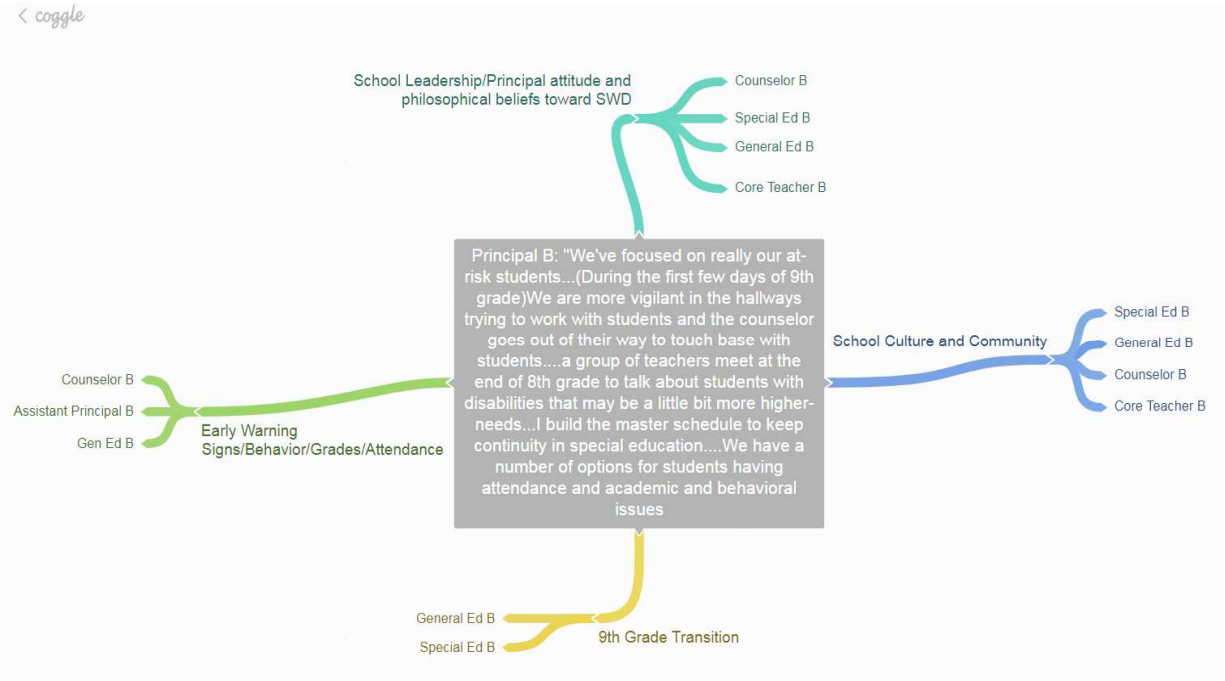
In subsequent interviews, none of the participants identified the same peer-to-peer supports. The participants aside from the principal identified a peer-to-peer program but were unable to provide thorough details as to how the program was implemented. The general education teacher stated, "I know there is a nice LINKS program where students are matched up with SWD and either one hour a day are meeting together helping with certain tasks." Although

the principal identified peer-to-peer programs to support SWD, he was also quick to speak to the importance of teacher and student relationships. The principal stated, "Students with disabilities, the special ed teachers really take...their arm around them, you know, and really help them out, um, with, um, kind of, that same thing, um, and are with them just about every hour, you know, helping them get to class, sitting in that class with them often."

School b. Principal B identified the following as having an influence on students with disabilities: assistant principal, counselor, general education teacher (math), special education teacher (LD endorsements), and special education director. In phase one of interviews, Principal B identified several routines or structures (see Appendix D) to support students with disabilities.

Figure 2 provides an overview of how the identified staff align with the principal's beliefs and vision and highlights interactions between formal and informal leaders.

Figure 2: Principal B



When looking at the interview responses from the rest of the key identified personnel (see Appendix C), the common theme that presented itself was a leader who was involved in multiple structures or tasks but did not have a heavy hand in the involvement. The Principal had confidence in staff knowing what to do and did not feel the need to make multiple systems changes that originated from the central office. Rather, systems changes were brought to central office and were staff driven.

When taking a deeper dive into instructional practice for SWD, School B provides a co-teaching model. This is a shift in the past two years from a resource room model. The special education director for School B stated, "...two years ago we changed the service delivery model from all replacement classes to a co-teaching model." The principal identifies co-teaching assignments with an emphasis on consistency, which has been honored during the first two years. Classes co-taught are English, math and Science. The special education teachers stated, "...two teachers, one can be the lead instructor at that time and one could be, you know, infiltrating into the crowd...I noticed that, you know, you're not taking notes..." The general education teacher stated, "So to me that's the biggest benefit of having a co-teacher is it's someone who can really help with the accommodations."

In addition, Focus Classes are supplemental English and mathematics courses in 9th and 10th with an 11th grade. Focus Class, which is more of a "general" class, not specifically identified with a core subject is aligned with the core with a maximum of 8 students. This course is designed to pre-teach or re-teach content for the core English or mathematics course. The Focus teacher is typically the case coordinator as well for the students.

In the master schedule, School B develops the master schedule for SWD based on the IEPs. The principal drives the creation and seeks input from the counselor and teachers. The

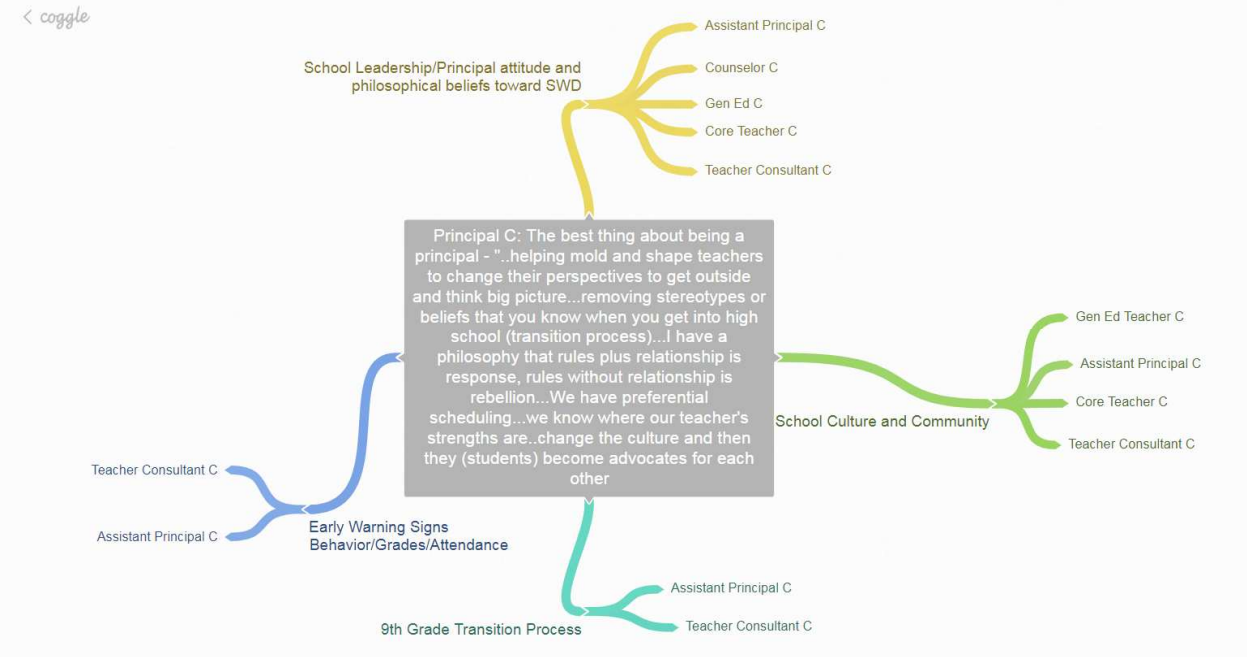
counselor stated, “Our principal takes that on. But we help just fine tune different things...” It is a collaborative effort where the leadership is heavily involved and invested on scheduling SWD and even seeks input from the middle school special education teachers. Principal B stated, “So, when I'm building the master schedule I try to keep that continuity as much as possible” and one way to ensure this continuity is by gathering input from staff.

When asked about peer-to-peer support, the principal from School B stated, “That’s an area where we are lacking a little bit. We’ve started the discussion on that, but I guess you’d say nothing.” The counselor further supported the principal by stating, “…nothing that comes to mind that would be formal.” The counselor did state that the school encourages students to engage in extra-curricular activities to build peer support and “kind of meet the people that share the similar interests.”

School c. Principal C identified the following as having an influence on students with disabilities: assistant principal, general education teacher (English), special education teacher (LD endorsement), a teacher consultant, and a counselor. In phase one of interviews, Principal C identified several routines or structures (see Appendix D) to support students with disabilities.

Figure 3 provides an overview of how the identified staff align with the principal’s beliefs and vision and highlights interactions between formal and informal leaders.

Figure 3: Principal C



When coding these structures within the alterable variable categorization, identifying the routine, the function, and tools, as well as who the leaders and following are, one can see the presence or non-presence of distributed leadership.

When looking at the interview responses from the rest of the key identified personnel (see Appendix D), the common theme that presented itself was a leader who trusted staff to do what needed to be done yet had a lack of involvement with any identified structure or tasks to support SWD. The teacher consultant was consistently identified as being a key role within structures and tasks that the principal identified as being critical to supporting SWD.

When taking a deeper dive into instructional practice for SWD, School C provides a co-teaching model in English, mathematics and social studies. The principal decides upon the co-teaching assignments. In addition, there is resource room support for students called Upward Bound.

In School C, varied responses for who creates the master schedule were provided. Several participants could not identify who created master schedules for SWD; the TC stated she works with the TC at the middle school to schedule for incoming freshman and that she seeks guidance from the principal for grades 10-12. The principal stated, "I work really, really close with our TC in the schedule building, ah, has a lot of input...she's a huge advocate for our special ed kids and our teachers and the special education program. So, we really work on where we feel those kids are going to benefit from those teacher strengths." The assistant principal indicated, "...I do not play a huge role in the scheduling process...our TC works very closely with our junior or our senior counselor who is responsible for scheduling and will literally sit down and manually manipulate the schedule so that they do AP and special education first." When discussing the special education schedule with the special education teacher she indicated, "I don't have any hand in that whatsoever for scheduling students with disabilities. The teacher consultant does all of the scheduling." Furthermore, when questioned, the teacher consultant indicated, "...I schedule all the students with disabilities, um, we, I mean we and I say I do, I literally do." Given the level of pallid responses, one can see in participant answers that there is a lack of cohesion when it comes to the master schedule for SWD.

Peer to peer in School C includes students with cognitive impairment paired with a general education student throughout the year. This program is called LINKS. The school selects general education students and provides training at the start of the school year. Each participant could identify the peer-to-peer program and expand on the function. The general education teacher stated, "LINKS is the backbone of peer relationships in this building."

Summary of Leadership Graphics

Tight alignment between leaders, both formal and informal, provides greater opportunity to see how school efforts that a positive impact on student achievement have come to fruition. The above graphics illustrate how the participating high school leader beliefs align with principal beliefs in variables that are rooted in research as having a positive impact on graduation rates for students with disabilities. Each graphic provides a synopsis of principal quotes captured during interviews to highlight individual core beliefs and vision. Furthermore, through analysis of leadership interview responses and comparison to the school principal responses, conclusions were made based on the depth of alignment in core beliefs and values. These conclusions provide a qualitative review of the importance of leadership alignment as it relates to graduation rates for students with disabilities. Noted in Table 21 below are the graduation rates for SWD in comparison to all students associated with the school.

Table 24: Graduation Rate of Study Participants 2014-2015

School	Population	Grad Rate (all)	Grad Rate (SWD)
High School (A)	3,500	97.26%	58.33%
High School (B)	2,905	90.50%	70%
High School (C)	3,080	93.51%	59.26%

When reviewing graduation rates for SWD for each school and overlapping the alignment between interview responses from principals and key identified school leaders, School A had tight alignment and understanding of early warning signs and knowledge in behavioral, academic, and attendance policies to support students. These more policy-oriented procedures were present and discussed across all interviews of key identified staff. Although there was lower alignment around the attitude, beliefs, and culture, the special education teacher,

counselor, and assistant principal were still aligned with the principal core values and beliefs. It was the general education teacher who was not in alignment.

In School B, there was higher alignment in interview responses regarding attitude, school culture, and philosophical beliefs regarding SWD. Yet lower alignment was noted regarding policy and procedures (9th grade transition and behavior and academic policies). School B had the highest graduation rate for SWD of the three schools interviewed.

In School C, the strongest alignment was around philosophical beliefs regarding SWD. Lower alignment was noted in the areas of policy and procedures (9th grade transition and behavior and academic policies). School C's graduation rate for SWD was slightly higher than School A.

Simply looking at graduation rates and the influence and alignment of key identified staff and principal beliefs as they relate to school culture, policies, and procedures is one part of the overall story. Not discussed in detail during interviews was the presence of an alternative school setting. This is important to note considering some students in a cohort may be placed in another setting during high school for various reasons, taking them out of the overall percentages for graduation rate. Of the schools interviewed, School B and C both have alternative settings in which SWD may attend, thus pulling them out of the data for graduation rates for the individual high school. The data presented for each school represents the students enrolled in the traditional high school and does not consider the graduation rates for schools with an alternative program. This will be discussed in further detail in the Future Recommendations section.

Research indicates the certain variables that have the potential to positively influence outcomes for students. When all school leaders, both formal and informal, are knowledgeable in and aligned around core beliefs and values, there is potential for graduation rates to increase.

Given the small scale of this study, it is difficult to discern what has greater impact – school culture and philosophical beliefs regarding SWD or policies and procedures. Between the three participants, when comparing graduation rates for SWD and alignment between school leaders, the philosophical beliefs and attitudes towards SWD appeared to have an impact on graduation rates for SWD. Policy and procedures, although may have individual differences between schools, are all structural supports that could be in place to support all students. Individual school leaders core beliefs and values will vary based on experience and knowledge. How a principal leads a school will be largely dependent on these core beliefs – which may cause variations in school philosophical attitudes and beliefs towards SWD. Thus, impacting graduation rates.

Research Question 2

In what ways do leaders create structures, routines, and tools to organize their work aimed at increasing graduation outcomes for SWD?

Distributed Leadership Presence and Alignment

Leadership practice is framed by the interactions of school leaders, followers, and the aspects of their situation stretched across time (Spillane, 2006a; Spillane et al., 2001). Distributed leadership characterizes a form of collective leadership in which teachers develop expertise by working collaboratively (Spillane et al., 2001). Successful school leaders are connected to highly productive and inclusive schools in which nearly all students reach ambitious targets of performance and students with disabilities are a meaningful part of these improvement efforts (Billingsley, McLeskey, & Crockett, 2014). The distributed leadership perspective moves beyond the Superman and Wonder Woman view of school leadership (Spillane, 2005) in which a single leader is solely responsible for all leadership aspects. Leadership practice is shaped by the follower's reaction to the leader's practice, which in turn

shapes the practice of leadership" (Spillane, 2006a; Spillane et al., 2001). The situation defines the interactions and is defined through them. Change is ongoing through the design/redesign process (Spillane, 2006a). In addition to interacting with followers, leaders also interact with aspects of the situation including tools, routines, small tasks, and structures (Spillane, 2005b; Spillane et al., 2001). The focus on tasks, who accomplishes the tasks, and the tools and processes used to accomplish the tasks, is central to the Distributed Leadership perspective. This focus on activity systems helps me illustrate what leaders in the sample schools do to support SWDs or what gaps might be present in the school structure.

Policy and research have long addressed the dismal graduation rates of SWD across the country. As previously stated, the literature suggests key components as to why students may or may not drop out of school. Many policies require school leaders to adopt the research guidance in the literature to have a positive impact on school completion. For example, the use of a PC requires school leaders to personalize, to engage, to mentor, and to identify early warning signs. If school leaders are engaging with the key factors that contribute to school completion, and adopting positive philosophical beliefs that support SWD, graduation rates, in theory, could be higher. Yet the statistics indicate this is not the case.

Drawing from the research on dropout prevention and graduation, early warning signs (policies for academic/behavior/attendance), early identification (RTI, progress monitoring), student engagement/extracurricular/personalization (9th grade transition to increase engagement, school mentor/connection, creation of schedules), and positive school culture are all strong factors in influencing graduation rates for students with disabilities. In all three school examples, school leaders could identify multiple examples of structures; routines and tools were noted to be in place. Yet overall participants described high inconsistency in implementation of routines,

foundational knowledge of structures, and use of tools specifically addressing SWD. Much of responses from participants spoke to traditional policies and practices; little was noted on policies and practices specific to serving SWD.

School a. In School A, as a group, school leaders identified policies in place for attendance and each leader could describe the policy in detail. When asked about behavior policies, answers ranged from not knowing to detailed descriptions of policy that only addressed 'high performing' students (special incentives for students who follow policy). Positive behavior support systems were not recognized in general; however, overall the responses indicate a focus on creating a positive school environment. Structures to increase SWDs participation in school through peer to peer programs was in place. In School A, all leaders identified positive transition routines for entry into 9th grade as well as post-secondary transition supports. Student engagement is critical to keeping students in school (Fall & Roberts, 2012). School A provided support for students moving from 8th to 9th grade. Principal A provided a comprehensive overview of the structural processes in place after students enter 9th grade to ensure maximum support and follow through beyond the first few days of schools.

School b. The leaders in School B were all able to accurately describe policies in place for attendance, except for one. Large variance in what was described as transition supports was noted; each school leader stated little was formally in place to support the 9th grade transition as well as post-secondary supports. Peer to peer supports were not in place. School leaders worked together to create schedules with high principal involvement. No positive behavior support systems were noted.

School c. The leaders in School C were not consistent in responses in overall attendance policies. Most responded that no formal policy was in place. No positive behavior support

systems were noted and but there was mention of peer-to-peer supports and 9th grade transition processes. There were comments from the assistant principal that the school was working on a PBIS plan for the following school year. Specifically mentioned was the presence of a LINKS program. This evidence-based support pairs at risk (including SWD) students with struggling students to increase school engagement. School leaders supported and identified this practice. A large variance of knowledge was noted on post-secondary transition supports, as well as how SWDs class schedules were created.

Overall, little attention was given by any of the schools to support SWDs extracurricular involvement or family engagement. Notably, a lack of consistent understanding and common definition/understanding of supports that could be in place was evident. Many routines and structures were in place, but without a unified understanding and awareness, fidelity of these evidenced based tools to support SWDs become engaged in school was lacking.

Common across all buildings were traditional attendance policies, but no one had modifications for nontraditional students or SWD. The policies each referenced a threshold of missed days. The policies did not appear to be understanding of the nature of absenteeism but more reflective of the number of absent days. Student engagement and positive relationships at school are critical for increasing attendance. This is a lost opportunity for each school to increase attendance for SWD. Further lost opportunities include the absence of school wide positive behavior support system across all three schools. Additional lost opportunity identified was the lack of ongoing, throughout the year, support for students within the 9th grade year. Research consistently speaks to the importance of the 9th grade year on school engagement. Each school spoke to 'bookend' practices. For example, greeting students on the first day of school and then a wrap up at the end of the year. Without practices in place for ongoing structural supports to

support attendance, behavior, and academic concerns, school leaders are missing an opportunity to increase student engagement for a positive impact on graduation rates.

Research Question 3

Which external factors seem most consequential for enhancing or constraining the efforts of the school and graduation outcomes for SWD and how do school leaders mediate these conditions?

Consequential External Factors

As referenced previously in Table 7, Policy Impact on Students with Disabilities, National and State policies are implemented with consistency across all three schools. Schools have control or flexibility to make certain modifications locally. Areas like staffing, support system, graduation requirements, funding, and staff perceptions and attitudes may vary. For example, Schools A and B require a student to have 22 graduation credits where School C requires 19 (the state minimum is 18). Yet Schools B and C employ the use of Personal Curriculums (state allowed policy that local schools can choose to implement) to individualize graduation requirements based on student need and both schools utilize PCs for special and general education students.

Regarding early warning or identification, all three schools indicated there is no formal RtI/MTSS process. As noted earlier, School A's principal spoke comprehensively to different tiers of students and supporting students who struggle without using formal RtI terminology. Although no specific RTI/MTSS policy was in place, the responses suggest that School A is aware of tiered support and structures the school this way. Further, schools B and C identified an alternative education program for students who are behind on credits whereas School A does not have an alternative education program. More specifically, Principal A was asked to create an

alternative school when starting the position but opted not to create this option because of his belief that all students could be served within the traditional high school. With no option for an alternative education program School A, specific procedures are in place for counselors to meet with students who are at risk for dropping out, as well as after school and in school support classes. School B identified an alternative education program in response to seeking information on policy to prevent dropout. Presence of an alternative education program is another key piece to the story. Students enrolled in alternative education programs are not counted in overall school graduation rates for each high school. This means there is potential for SWD to be enrolled in an alternative education setting, thus impacting the overall graduation rate as well as the rate for SWD. School C identified counselor support and monthly data meetings to identify students who may be at risk.

In summary, school leaders have adopted various local policies to support SWDs to help serve students. The presence of an alternative education program is a key factor in this study that could be considered when looking at overall graduation rates for SWDs, leadership perception and attitudes towards SWDs. At times schools provide an alternative setting when students fall behind academically or have behavioral issues. An individual's beliefs about what an appropriate setting for students can have an impact on the school's overall culture. It may be the case that SWD are encouraged to enroll in alternative programs. One could consider the school's overall graduation rate since students placed in an alternative setting do not count in the overall graduation rate for high schools in Michigan.

Research challenges organizational arrangements that place at risk students in alternative settings, apart from general school communities. As noted, a student's decision to drop out of school is affected by a range of complex factors and is often rooted in a long process

of disengagement from school. Students with disabilities are particularly at risk of dropping out of school (Thurlow, Sinclair & Johnson, 2002). The power of relevant, engaging instruction as a deterrent to anti-social behavior has been repeatedly established. Alternative settings that focus solely on improving students' social-emotional, and behavioral functioning are doing students a huge disservice that will have lifelong negative ramifications (Hughes and Adera, 2006).

One way school leaders work to mediate these conditions revolves around attitudes and beliefs, which then inform the overall school culture. The school culture stems from the leadership beliefs and values and how these are carried out and implemented across the school environment. Through a micro-task analysis of all three schools, a deeper look into school-based routines was conducted to determine the presence of the school leader in smaller activities that help to support the overall culture of supporting SWD. The overarching alterable variable categories of student, family, peer, school, community (Christianson, et. al, 2000) that impact graduation outcomes were used to help define specific school-based routines and policies that were in place to support SWD. Each routine was assigned a corresponding variable, the function of the routine was described, the tools that were used to perform the microtasks were identified, and each routine was assigned to a school leader and potential followers. A third level of analysis was done on whether the principal was active in these routines that were implemented to support SWDs. The leadership of the school principal is an extremely powerful influence in the education of students (Cooner et al., 2005).

Across the three schools, routines identified from the literature were highlighted that had the potential to positively impact SWD graduation rates. Routines included: transition processes, attendance/behavior policies, social supports, academic scheduling (for student engagement), and early warning/identification systems. In School A, the principal was present for three routines:

transition processes, scheduling of courses for SWD, and for matching co-teachers to teach SWDs. School B, the principal was present for creation of course schedules for SWDs and for matching co-teachers to teach SWDs). In School C, the principal was not present for any of the routines identified to support SWDs.

The attitudes and beliefs of the principal shape the culture of the school, as well as how schools mediate the constraints from local policy. If school leaders embrace the opportunities to be present and to implement the use of available supports (i.e. PCs), there is a potential to have a positive impact on graduation rates for SWDs.

Discussion

Based on literature that suggests multiple variables that can be altered to improve graduation rates for SWDs, and layering school leadership into these variables, one would expect to see improvement in graduation rates for student. Overall, the numbers do not tell the story in entirety.

Research would tell us that implementation of early warning signs (policies for academic/behavior/attendance), early identification (RTI, progress monitoring), student engagement/extracurricular/personalization (9th grade transition to increase engagement, school mentor/connection, creation of schedules), paired with distributed leadership practices that support altering the variables that impact graduation rates for SWDs could be driving forces for increasing graduation rates for SWDs. Between the three schools, School A had the lowest graduation rate for SWDs. School B had the highest. Purely looking at the numbers do not tell the whole story. Through deeper analysis, School A does not have an alternative education program, School B and School C do, which could be considered when looking at overall graduation rates for SWD. When adding these numbers back into the overall graduation rates for

a more consistent comparison, the gap between the three schools significantly shrinks and School C is nearly identical to School A (see Table 22).

Table 25: Graduation Rates of Study Participants 2014/2015 (including alternative school)

School	Grad Rate (all)	Grad Rate (SWD)	Grad Rate (Alternative School)
High School A	97.26%	58.33%	n/a
High School B	90.50%	70%	41.67%
High School C	93.51%	59.26%	28%

Through the deeper analysis and interview process, both B and C schools indicated the alternative education programs are an option for students who were struggle. This became a larger part of the story. When factored in, School B dropped 7.5%, School C dropped 2.5%, which altered the rankings. With the alternative education programs factored in, School C became the lowest graduation rate (56.7%) compared to School A (58.3%).

School A also had the strongest principal presence in school routines that directly impacted SWD. Across all three schools, there was a high variance of responses consistent with how the school principal responded to questions regarding the alterable variables that influence graduation rates for SWDs. Overall, School B, when factoring out the presence of alternative education programs, had the highest rate of graduation for SWDs, utilized modifications to the curriculum to support use of PCs, and had the lowest variance of responses aligning with the principal's responses. Yet, School B school had limited structures in place to support the alterable variables (no peer to peer support, limited PBIS systems, and no formal transition processes).

Interviews alone do not always enable the researcher to answer questions in a deep and meaningful way. Prior to interviewing participants for the study, artifacts were collected from

publicly available sources (i.e. school websites). Artifact are symbols of customs, preferences, styles, special occasions of the culture in which it was created. These helped a layer of understanding of the beliefs, values, and behaviors of the organization. The artifacts collected were varied and provided an opportunity to foster greater understanding of the individual organizations. Artifacts collected included meeting minutes, written procedures, internal manuals, flow charts and policy documents. Analysis of the collected artifacts included how and by whom the artifacts were created, how the artifact content supported the research questions, and how the documents were used. Collecting and analyzing the artifacts helped craft clearer research questions. Additionally, by carefully analyzing the artifacts, in conjunction with the interview responses, a more expansive view of the organization emerged allowing increased depth to interview responses.

The reviews of artifacts, both before and after the interview process, helped to either support and refute interviewee responses about their organization. The initial artifact collection helped to evoke an initial story of the organization followed by interview questions that helped developed into a larger picture of the participating school's world.

When reflecting on the alterable variables (student, family, peer, school, community), the gathering of artifacts outside the interview process added another layer of analysis. Artifact collection on the student variable indicated that all three schools had policy in place for attendance, academic, and behavior. When focusing on the family as a variable as it relates to participation in school related activities, each school had information for parents on the special education process. School B was the only school with a parent involvement plan. Regarding peer supports, School A and C had established peer-to-peer programs (with process documented) in place while School B did not. Artifact gathering on the school variable (progress monitoring and

early warning systems) indicated each school had documented and established systems in place. School A had specific artifacts on MTSS and RTI. As it related to the community variable, School C had documented community resources that were easy to access. Schools A and B did not have specific community artifacts. From a broad overview, School C had the strongest artifact representation as it related to alterable variables that have the potential to impact graduation rate for SWDs. Overall; there is not a strong representation of artifacts as it relates to family and community variables.

Conclusion

Based on the class of variables, the artifacts and interviews provided evidence that all three schools had a routine or process in place for the areas of student, peer and school variables. Limited evidence suggests that family and community routines had been established. School B had more evidence of consistent interview responses between the principal and the school leaders, as well as an established parent involvement plan, and utilized options to support SWD in graduating (PCs). This correlates to the highest percentage of SWDs graduating among the three schools. School B was also the only school that had additional courses to support SWDs. The evidence would suggest that presence of a parental involvement plan, additional courses to support SWDs, strong cohesive understanding of routines and processes within the class of alterable variables, and principal support for modifying local policies to promote SWDs graduating (i.e. PCs) all positively impact graduation rates for SWDs. Future studies could consider alterable variables as a strong leverage component for impacting graduation rates for SWDs.

Further, for School B, although principal presence in creating the master schedule was noted, was more of the special education teachers working collaboratively to create student

schedules. Although School A had a strong principal presence in creation of the schedule, there was little input from staff. This could potentially influence student academic engagement if the person creating the schedule does not know the students' individual needs. This links to the peer alterable variable (identification within the school and with peers). As previously stated, School C had no principal involvement in the creation of SWDs schedules and local policy modifications (use of PC) was not implemented for SWDs. The suggestion here is that to mediate local policy constraints, the building leader could be involved at some level in student academic coursework to support the use of modified graduation requirements (i.e. use of PC).

The only school which identified other courses provided to support SWDs was School B. This school was also the only school, which spoke to encouraging SWDs to participate in extra-curricular activities.

Drawing from research, alterable variables and distributed leadership are correlated to graduation rates for SWDs. Distributed leadership does not necessarily equate to a principal having to know every aspect of each alterable variable. The interview with the principal from School B, from a qualitative perspective, felt disconnected. Yet this administrator was able to identify the appropriate leadership staff who engage with SWDs. And the responses among staff were consistent with the principal responses.

Recommendations

The research described in this dissertation was motivated by an interest in understanding leadership practice and its' impact on graduation outcomes for SWD. More specifically, I investigated school leadership practice through the lens of three high schools using a distributed leadership perspective to frame my study of leadership. Leadership is a lever for changing graduation rates for SWDs. There are variables within schools that can be altered toward student

success. School leaders could create and implement process and policies for serving SWD at every level of organization to increase student engagement.

Policy. While policy recommendations suggest broad strokes rather than specific implementation ideas, policy makers could continue to endorse varied avenues to support an increase in high school graduation rates for SWD. Two specific ideas are considered in this dissertation. The first policy relates to the personal curriculum provision in the Michigan curriculum standards. Not much mention of the PC was made by the informants in my study and what mention there was concerned the general student population rather than SWD. Current policy provides an avenue for flexible responses by educators to craft appropriate solutions to problems encountered by students who could make better progress toward graduation with customized learning opportunities. This flexibility is important and could remain an option.

The second policy was not central to the research design of this dissertation but emerged in more informal discussion with one principal participant: alternative high schools. Michigan policy allows for schools to create alternative settings. These alternative settings are considered individual entities which allows for both entities to report graduation rates. Since the students enrolled in the alternative setting are originally from the district's high school(s), reporting can be a bit misleading when looking at cohort graduation rates. State policy makers could consider more transparency in reporting graduation rates. As noted earlier, looking at a school's graduation rate tells a portion of the overall impact the school is having on graduating students.. Within the current situation, there is a lack of transparency as some districts may transfer low performing students, including SWD, to alternative settings. When students are transferred they no longer count in the district's graduation rate.

Practice. Distributed leadership theory advanced by Spillane and his colleagues, the theory adopted for this dissertation, contextualizes this study. At its' root, distributed leadership is only as good as the leader; the leader sparks motivation in other school leaders. When all leaders are in sync, the effectiveness of distributed leadership is exemplified. When analyzing the interview responses from each school, it was difficult to determine how coordinated leaders truly were to highlight an effective distributed leadership model. The structure of the interview questions segmented responses according the alterable variables. Given that each individual leader also had individual passions as it related to SWD, when coupled with the informal interview structure, many leader responses highlighted areas of focus, rather than looking at SWD from a holistic perspective. Several responses led the researcher to believe that in specific instances (i.e. attendance policies), leaders were pulling in the same direction and modeling a true distributed leadership model. What came to light through the interview responses was that often, when leaders were all coordinated, it was specific to policies that were very black or white, that had specific and concrete language, and that was easy to understand. For example, many of the artifacts were referenced by school leaders, yet the artifacts had concrete representation versus varying schoolwide practices that might have differed across leaders dependent on their specific role within the building (i.e. understanding of how master schedules were created for SWD). At times, specific roles may warrant a leader to demonstrate more power or control (i.e. regarding student discipline), which can diminish the quality of distributed leadership.

One critical way that leaders can support a distributed leadership model is through common language and shared understanding. When analyzing interview responses, although leaders may have referenced similar topics or items, often the language utilized differed from

leader to leader. This may cause confusion overall if leaders are not using a shared language to get to a common understanding of the alterable variables that have the potential to influence graduation rates for SWD.

None of the interview responses led the researcher to believe that any of the participants had long standing power or control associated with their role. Further, there was no indication of a leader intentionally trying to direct situations or avoiding responsibility. This may be a warning sign for leaders who wish to engage with a distributed leadership model. Keeping the model forefront, where tasks and tools are distributed and shared amongst leaders is a critical component to highly effective implementation of the distributed leadership model. School leaders could distribute key leadership decisions throughout the building to spread ownership of outcomes for students.

School leaders could leverage existing policies to influence outcomes for SWD. (i.e., PC). Yet caution could also be taken that not one leader controls or maintains ownership for leveraging existing policies and all leaders could have a shared language for a common understanding of best practices to support SWD. The responsibility should not be given to one single leader.

Future research. The research in this dissertation is primarily descriptive in nature. Given the nature of this qualitative study, in the broad scope of variables that impact SWD, it can be difficult to isolate how one specific variable (i.e. student, family, peer, school, community) quantifies impact on graduation rates for SWD. Given the scope of the current study, when looking at a small sample size, not knowing if distributed leadership was a model the leadership utilized makes it difficult to understand DL's overall impact. Future studies might consider looking at larger samples sizes of participants that identify whether they engage with the

distributed leadership theory. Taking a deeper dive into school-wide policy and practice to identify any potential connection that the use of distributed leadership might have on graduation rates for SWD. It would be impossible to claim that one school utilized distributed leadership in a way that clearly led to better outcomes for its students. That said, there are situations in the study that call for rigorous research relative to graduation outcomes for SWD and for all high school students.

Given the multitude of variables that research identifies as having the potential to influence graduation rates for SWD, future research could also look at the fidelity of implementation of individual schools regarding these variables. Interview questions and artifact gathering alone may not be enough to determine the fidelity of implementation to see the potential impact on graduation rates for SWD.

Research might consider a more detailed analysis of schools with alternative schooling options. Taking a close look at how, why, and who makes decisions about alterative school programs that take students out of the traditional high school might offer interesting connections to overall graduation rates.

Limitations

The findings of this study have certain limitations. One limitation could be the sample size. The sample included three Michigan high schools with a small percentage of the school staff participating. The results could have been enhanced by increasing the number of schools and the number of participants within the schools participating.

Another limitation is the position or roles held by participants in each school. The choice for who participated was left to the principal. The rationale for this decision was to provide principals with the opportunity to identify who they thought had impact on outcomes for SWD

Giving less autonomy to the principal about selection of participants may have provided them an opportunity to steer interviews toward more special education staff in the building considering the focus on SWD. As a result, the greater proportion of participants were SE staff, and as such, I gained greater insight into the overall structure and focus of the special education department. On the other hand, I might have missed many contributions made by staff outside of SE.

Summary

Many studies have shown that the quality of instruction and the levels of achievement, along with other positive outcomes for students, is better in schools where there exists norms and processes for sharing leadership by principals and teachers (Heck & Hallinger, 2009; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008; Marks & Printy, 2003). The distributed leadership perspective recognizes that there are multiple leaders in a school system (Spillane et al., 2004). Moreover, the activities that leaders undertake are widely shared both within and between the organization (Harris, 2007). Considering the interview responses conducted during this study, each of the three schools participating emerged distinctly different in terms of the overall leadership approach.

The principal in School A emerged as a leader that was able to articulate a clear vision for the entire school. During the principal's response specific examples were used to highlight the fact that all students were considered during decision making. The principal was able to categorize groups of students and point to processes in place to ensure that students were supported whether they were thriving or struggling in school. More importantly, even more evidence emerged during interviews with other members of the school that the principal's vison was being carried out and well understood by others. The collection of artifacts completed for the school also provided evidence that vision was connected to practice.

The principal in School B, unlike in School A, was not as able to articulate a clearly defined mission for the school regarding how to best serve students. Principal B openly talked about how he trusted the other members in the building to support students in various ways. Principal B would be considered a hands-off principal using the term "trust" when asked about what specifically was going on throughout the building, specifically areas supporting SWD. During the interview with Principal B, not only did a theme of trust emerge but also a sense that other members in the building would do the right things for students. While not as coordinated as school A, school B did have interview responses and artifacts that indicated an effort to improve outcomes for students.

The principal from School C was uniquely different based on interview responses than school A or school B's principals. The responses from principal C indicated that there was a more outward look at the organization than an internal analysis. In other words, Principal C would often refer to programs outside of the school that were effective in supporting students. Further, Principal C on several occasions during the interview talk about processes and interventions on the horizon just not fully fleshed out yet. It was this type of response, coupled by the interviews with other members of the school, that really illuminated a disconnect from what the principal said and what was happening in the building on a day to day basis. The disconnect was even more evident after a review of artifacts and thorough review of interview responses.

Conclusion

School leadership is complex and multifaceted. Although effective distributive leadership models have been linked to school improvement, few if any studies link distributive leadership to graduation rates. The theory proposed by this study, and in response to the research questions,

was that if distributed leadership was present across alterable variables that research indicate have an impact, one could see a change in graduation rates for SWD. Yet, given the wide scope of alterable variables it is challenging to decipher whether distributive leadership is truly present across all variables and within each individual variable. The interview questions were broken down to be specific to the alterable variables to frame whether there was a high presence of distributed leadership. One would infer that if all leaders responded in a similar fashion, there would be a strong likelihood that distributed leadership was present. Given the complexity of schools and multiple roles leaders, at times it was difficult to draw a concrete alignment between responses. The schools in the study did not have presence of a strong distributed leadership model, therefore it is difficult to draw a direct correlation between distributed leadership and impact on graduation rates.

When developing the study, I had hoped to look at how the three graduation rates differed when compared to school leadership. Through responding to the three research questions and analyzing the interview responses through the lens of alignment with the school principal, it became clear that each of the three participating schools were not implementing distributed leadership to a high degree of fidelity. Several components or characteristics were evident and are noted within the findings, yet it was difficult to draw a correlation between leadership and graduation rates. Overall, several limitations in this study highlight the lack of presence of distributed leadership, making it difficult to draw conclusions on how distributed leadership has the potential to influence graduation rates for SWD within this current data. The data obtained within the present study sheds light on how difficult it can be to employ the use of distributed leadership across a multifaceted school environment.

At the end of my study, three key areas emerge about the principal's role in serving SWD. Establishing a vision for the school matters. A principal that can articulate a clear vision for the school and carry that vision out has a greater likelihood of impacting outcomes for all students and especially SWD. School members that understand the vison have a greater likelihood of moving in a singular direction and maximizing supports for students. All too often schools are disconnected from a singular vision and uncoordinated in their efforts. A principal that can coordinate the many moving parts of the system may maximize the school's success and outcomes for students.

Creating trust among all school members throughout the building matters. A principal plays an integral role in developing and sustain trust throughout the building. The process of building a trusting environment takes time and effort. It may be that through a trusting environment that school members become more aligned with practices and efforts directed at improving outcomes for students. If a principal can extend trust to their staff to make decisions a greater sense of support emerges over time leading to a greater likelihood of staying in coordination with one another.

Having clear processes and not being distracted by outside influences matters. There are many internal and external demands placed on schools. A principal is tasked daily with making decisions about what he/she believes is best for their school and ultimately their students. A principal's ability to be discerning and not distracted in terms of what they allow to influence the decisions in the building may have an impact on overall outcomes for students. The demands for school leaders are ever increasing in addition to the pressure to perform. How a principal handles the wide array of internal and external factors may contribute to the overall outcomes for students.

APPENDICIES

Appendix A: Interview Phase 1 (Principal)

1. How long have you been in your current role as school principal?

2. How would you describe your leadership style?
    a. In what ways do you believe the principal has an influence on outcomes for students with disabilities?

3. What is your role at the school working with students with disabilities?

4. What factors do you believe most positively impact graduation rates for students with disabilities in your school?
    a. Based on identified factors, what or how does the school have great influence on these factors?

5. What specific role(s) do you play at the school impacting graduation rates for students with disabilities?
    a. Can you speak specifically to the area of academics?
    b. Can you speak specifically to the area of behavior?
    c. Can you speak specifically to the area of attendance?
    d. What are the influences outside of school that you believe influence graduation outcomes for students with disabilities?

6. What factors do you believe are barriers impacting graduation rates for students with disabilities in your school?
    a. Based on identified factors, how do members of the school influence on these factors?

7. (Student) What are you school policies/practices in the following areas related to SWD:
    a. Attendance policies/practices
    b. Academic policies/practices/programming
    c. Behavioral policies/practices
        i. Can you provide an agenda of the policies, practices, protocols or meeting minutes?

8. (Family) In what ways does your school connect and communicate with the families of students with disabilities?
    a. What are some specific examples where your school makes these connections or communications with families?
        i. Can you provide information provided to families of SWD?

9. (Peers) How do you help student peer to peer interactions in your building as a support network?
    a. How are students with disabilities identified within your school?
    b. How do you determine and create schedules for students with disabilities?

10. (School) How does the school monitor progress (i.e. academic, social, behavioral) for students with disabilities?
    a. What additional supports are offered outside the traditional school if students are not making progress academically or behaviorally or have attendance issues?

11. (Community) In what ways does your school offer additional opportunities to supports students with disabilities within the larger community beyond the traditional school day? (i.e. support services, community relationships)

12. Can you identify one other person in the building that you believe provides leadership for SWDs?

13. Do you have any remaining thoughts or comments about who or what influences graduation outcomes for students with disabilities in your school?

Appendix B: Interview Phase 2 (Other Actors)

1. How long have you been in your current role?

2. How would you describe your leadership style?
    a. In what ways do you believe school members, aside from the principal, have influence on outcomes for students with disabilities?

3. What is your role at the school working with students with disabilities?

4. What factors do you believe most positively impact graduation rates for students with disabilities in your school?
    a. Based on identified factors, do you believe the school has great influence on these factors?

5. What specific role(s) do you play at the school impacting graduation rates for students with disabilities?
    a. Can you speak specifically to the area of academics?
    b. Can you speak specifically to the area of behavior?
    c. Can you speak specifically to the area of attendance?
    d. Are there influences outside of school that you believe influence graduation outcomes for students with disabilities?

6. What factors do you believe are barriers to positively impacting graduation rates for students with disabilities in your school?
    a. Based on identified factors, do you believe the school has great influence on these factors?

7. (Student) In what ways does your school address students, specifically students with disabilities in terms of policies and practices:
    a. Attendance policies/practices
    b. Academic policies/practices
    c. Behavioral policies/practices
        i. If so, can you provide an agenda of the policies, practices, protocols or meeting minutes?

8. (Family) In what ways does your school make connection/communication with the families of students with disabilities?
    a. If so, what are some specific examples of your school connecting/communicating with families?
        i. If so, can you provide information provided to families?

9. (Peers) How would you describe the support structure within your building specific to supporting students with disabilities?
    a. How are students with disabilities identified within your school?

    b. How do you determine schedules for students with disabilities?

10. (School) How does the school monitor progress (i.e. academic, social, behavioral) for students with disabilities?
    a. Does your school offer additional supports before, during or after school if students are not making progress academically or behaviorally?

11. (Community) Does your school offer additional opportunities to supports students with disabilities within the larger community? (i.e. support services, community relationships)

12. Do you have any remaining thoughts or comments about who or what influences graduation outcomes for students with disabilities in your school?

Appendix C: Collection of Artifacts and Information (pre-interview)

Table 26: Artifacts and Information

Class of Variables	Artifact or Information
Student	*Attendance Policies* *Academic Policies* *Behavior Policies* What policies does the school have in place to address the three areas?
Family	*Participation in school related activities* What school related family activities does the school coordinated to engage families?
Peers	*Identification with school* How is the school structured in terms of how they deliver services and instruction to SWD?
School	*Monitoring of Student Progress* What process does the school have in place as a formal process to monitor student progress?
Community	*Support Services, Relationships* What community services are offered beyond the school to support students?

Source: Adapted from Christenson, Sinclair, Lehr & Hurley, 2000

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