Spring 5-3-2024

Barriers to Inclusive IEP Practices: a Comparison Case Analysis of Special Education Structures in Two Northern New England States

Melissa Lyons-Vitalone
University of Maine, melissa.lyons@maine.edu

BARRIERS TO INCLUSIVE IEP PRACTICES: A COMPARISON CASE ANALYSIS OF SPECIAL EDUCATION STRUCTURES IN TWO NORTHERN NEW ENGLAND STATES

By

Melissa Lyons-Vitalone

B.S. University of Maine at Augusta, 2012

M.Ed. University of Maine, 2015

Ed.S. University of Maine, 2017

A DISSERTATION

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

(in Educational Leadership)

The Graduate School

The University of Maine

May 2024

Advisory Committee:

Maria Frankland, Lecturer of Educational Leadership, Advisor

Catharine Biddle, Associate Professor of Educational Leadership

Esther A. Enright, Assistant Professor of Educational Leadership

UNIVERSITY OF MAINE GRADUATE SCHOOL LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The University of Maine recognizes that it is located on Marsh Island in the homeland of Penobscot people, where issues of water and territorial rights, and encroachment upon sacred sites, are ongoing. Penobscot homeland is connected to the other Wabanaki Tribal Nations— the Passamaquoddy, Maliseet, and Micmac—through kinship, alliances, and diplomacy. The University also recognizes that the Penobscot Nation and the other Wabanaki Tribal Nations are distinct, sovereign, legal and political entities with their own powers of self-governance and self-determination.

A COMPARISON CASE ANALYSIS OF SPECIAL EDUCATION STRUCTURES IN TWO NORTHERN NEW ENGLAND STATES: BARRIERS TO INCLUSIVE PRACTICES

By Melissa Lyons-Vitalone

Dissertation Advisor: Dr. Maria Frankland

An Abstract of the Dissertation Presented
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Doctor of Education
(in Educational Leadership)
May 2024

This comparative case study examines special education structures in two Northern New England states through the lens of special education directors using semi-structured interviews. The study explores special education leaders' beliefs surrounding the concept of the LRE, how IEP team dynamics can affect educational outcomes for students with disabilities as well as perceived barriers to inclusion. The investigation touches on the ways in which special education leaders interpret the concept of the LRE, shedding light on the challenges of balancing educational needs with systemic school barriers. Key findings reveal the how the perceived status of some team members can impact meeting outcomes, emphasizing the importance of minimizing the impact of expert dominance and ensuring diverse perspectives, especially from parents and students, are given equal credence. Educator attitude towards students with disabilities was found to be an area requiring attention to foster more inclusive education practices. Throughout this study, a greater understanding of how leaders' beliefs, the skills of meeting facilitators, and the availability of resources shape special education practices, offering insights for enhancing inclusivity and educational outcomes for students with disabilities.

Keywords IEP facilitation, least restrictive environment, special education leadership, inclusion

DEDICATION

This manuscript is dedicated to those students whose voices are not represented in educational programming. May the insights and recommendations within these pages contribute to a future where every student's voice is heard, valued, and acted upon, ensuring that no child is left on the periphery of their own education. To those students, you are the inspiration for change and the heart of our collective pursuit for a more inclusive and equitable educational landscape.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to extend a heartfelt thank you to my family, who has generously tolerated my countless hours absorbed in research, sacrificing our time together for the pursuit of this academic endeavor.

To Dr. Ian Mette, whose early classes were crucial for honing my skills of analysis, you didn't just teach; you ignited a curiosity that led me to see connections where none seemed apparent. Your method of encouraging me to metaphorically compare theories to relatable situations provided the fuel for my process. This unique analytical perspective was instrumental in identifying a pressing problem of practice, analyzing its status, and designing a study through an unconventional lens. Your encouragement to trust my instincts was pivotal, instilling the confidence needed to continue my journey under new mentorship.

Thank you, Dr. Maria Frankland, for your kindness, compassion, unwavering support and the time you invested in helping me stick with the process despite numerous setbacks. In moments of doubt, your steadfast belief in my capabilities helped me find the drive to press on. Your guidance was a beacon through the fog of uncertainty. Dr. Catharine Biddle, your creative flow has allowed me to think outside of the box and consider different notions. Dr. Esther Enright, your take on my findings allowed me to refine my ideas and make them clearer to the audience. And thank you to my cohort members who have collectively been a sounding board for my ideas from the beginning to the end of this journey.

This manuscript is more than a piece of academic achievement; it is a testament to the collective wisdom, support, and belief of those mentioned above. To all of you, I extend my deepest gratitude.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), a federal law reauthorized in 2004, serves as a guiding beacon for educational programming for students with disabilities. The IDEA defines a disability as being a naturally occurring phenomenon that should not limit a person's ability to exist in and contribute to society ("About IDEA," n.d.). Students who receive special education services due to a disability, rely on their Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) team to ensure they receive services that allow them to have access to a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). The minimum required members of the IEP team include: the parents, the student (when appropriate), a regular education teacher, a special education teacher, someone who can interpret evaluations, and a representative of the district who is authorized to commit resources ("About IDEA," n.d.). Some team members may fill more than one of these roles.

Typically, one of these team members serves as the IEP facilitator. This is the person chairing the flow of communications during the meeting. Often the special education teacher (sometimes referred to as a case manager) fulfills this role. Some other roles that commonly fill the IEP facilitator role are IEP coordinator, special education director/assistant director, and principal/assistant principal. Due to caseload sizes, directors cannot usually attend every IEP meeting in their district, so they must ensure one or more IEP team members can facilitate the meeting to develop appropriate programming for students. All these people operate under the umbrella of the director of special education certification, so it is important they understand the ramifications of the impact on outcomes for the student in the school setting.

In addition to the procedurally required annual team planning and decision meetings that serve as a vehicle to calculate necessary services and accommodations for students to receive a

FAPE, team members work together throughout the school year in many ways to meet the unique needs of students with disabilities (Hartmann, 2016). While the IDEA offers guidelines for IEP teams that include the basic tenets of collaboration, Cook & Friend (2010) suggest there needs to be more guidance to train teams on *how* to effectively engage in collaboration to help them function optimally. This could help prevent certain extraneous variables from taking the team off course as they work together to meet student needs. As such, IEP facilitators carry an enormous weight when it comes to negotiating team dynamics, yet there is currently limited research to provide insight into how IEP teams function, especially from the IEP facilitator point of view (Beck & DeSutter, 2019; Mueller & Vick 2019).

Background

In 1975, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (PL 94-142) was established to level the playing field for students with disabilities by desegregating education. PL 94-142, most recently reauthorized as the IDEA in 2004, set the expectation that disabled students will be educated in the LRE alongside their non-disabled counterparts. It mandated schools provide students with disabilities with less restrictive programs and more inclusive educational opportunities than was previously made available. Despite the almost 50-year time span since its original inception, and with minimal change to how the LRE is interpreted (O'Laughlin & Lindle, 2015), there remains a need for continued professional development among school staff to make inclusion a reality for all students with disabilities.

Disparities in LRE data between states (US DOE, 2021) may indicate inconsistencies in the way IEP teams apply the principles of LRE from state to state when making placement decisions. A standard set by a court can help administrators operationalize a definition lacking in clarity as it serves as a precedent for courts within the jurisdiction to follow (Yell et al., 2020). In the First Circuit Court of Appeals, which holds authority over New England states, a

judicial LRE standard does not exist to help schools navigate potential rulings should they end up in due process over an LRE dispute with a family (Yell et al., 2020). Rooney (2018) suggests a national standard would help eliminate some of the confusion over LRE in the field.

The 2020-2021 LRE Child Count and Educational Environment data (https://sites.ed.gov/idea/data/) shows Maine educating many fewer of their students with disabilities in the general education classrooms when compared to all other New England states despite many geographic and demographic similarities between states. In Maine, 54.13% of students with disabilities were educated in the regular classroom for more than 80% of their school day (Table 1). By way of contrast, in neighboring Northern New England States, New Hampshire and Vermont, were on the opposite end of the spectrum with inclusion rates of 73.75% and 80.22% respectively (US DOE, 2021). These data sets are referred to as LRE outcomes throughout this study. The LRE outcomes are measured through child count and related educational environment data. Districts compile the data annually to send to the state department, and from there it is reported to the United States Department of Education (US DOE).

Table 1

Northern New England States' Special Education Environment Data

	ME	**NH**	**VT**
Regular Class >80%	54.13%	73.75%	80.22%
Regular Class 40-79.99%	31.21%	14.63%	7.98%
Regular Class <40%	10.85%	8.95%	4.96%
Other Placement	3.81%	2.67%	6.84%

Source: "IDEA Part B Child Count and Educational Environments Collection," by the U.S. Department of Education, 2021.

The IEP Meeting

An average IEP meeting lasts approximately 31 minutes (Martin et al., 2006), leaving little room to discuss matters not pertinent to student needs and outcomes. Unless there is an issue of conflict, or new matters to discuss, teams usually meet face-to-face as a whole group only once or twice per year (Hartmann, 2016). Due to the time constraint on whole group interactions to plan and prepare an educational program for a student, it is imperative meeting facilitators have a solid understanding of the basic tenets of special education law (Markelz et al., 2022). Persons well-trained in communication strategies and meeting facilitation techniques are needed to lead IEP teams. A neutral, seasoned facilitator can help prevent power imbalances and transition a team towards the critical conversations that need to occur to make better educational program decisions for students with disabilities (Kang & O'Neil, 2018; Mueller, 2004).

Team Dynamics

Beck & DeSutter (2019) highlight the necessity for researchers studying the intricate dynamics of IEP teams to incorporate theories from various disciplines to fully grasp the challenges a facilitator faces. Such teams, which are tasked with decision-making to generate outcomes, often encounter specific group dynamic factors that influence their functioning. One significant factor is the real or perceived disparity in the status of team members, as noted by Ruppar & Gaffney (2011) and Thomas-Hunt et al. (2005). This inequality can skew the flow of information and affect the overall group collaboration.

Another critical element affecting group dynamics is the presence of unshared or "hidden" information. This occurs when team members withhold pertinent information under the assumption that it is already known to others, a phenomenon discussed by Stasser & Titus (1987)

and Gigone & Hastie (1993). Such withholding of information can lead to incomplete understanding of the whole picture and ultimately impacts team decision-making.

These factors — status disparities and unshared information — play a crucial role in determining the nature of information exchange among team members (Thomas-Hunt et al., 2003; Wittenbaum et al., 2004). These dynamics not only impact the immediate decision-making process, but they can also have long-term effects on the team's effectiveness and the quality of outcomes they produce. Understanding and addressing these dynamics is essential for the successful functioning of IEP teams, ensuring that all members contribute effectively and that decisions are made based on comprehensive and shared knowledge (Thomas- Hunt et al., 2003).

Facilitated IEP Practices

In schools, some of these team dynamics factors could be mitigated if IEP teams used Facilitated IEP (FIEP) meeting practices. FIEP practices include pre-meetings with families, an agenda, norms, a space to table off topic discussions for later, and visual graphics to illustrate the specific options under consideration (Mueller & Vick, 2019). With proper training and support, facilitators of IEP meetings can set the stage for collaboration to occur while ensuring each stakeholder is afforded equal status on the team (Ruppar & Gaffney, 2011). They can use their position of implied power as chair of the meeting to help chart a course for the team that unites the members in their mission to provide students with programs that are driven by student needs rather than by differing belief structures, or group members' personal or political agendas.

Proper facilitation techniques may minimize the effects of team member individual biases and/or member status inequalities on decision-making outcomes during the team meeting. Beck and DeSutter (2019) posit, "the success of the IEP teams may depend on the skill of the facilitator to run effective meetings" (p.128). IEP Facilitators need to be able to listen effectively

to each of the team member's contributions without inadvertently elevating the perceived status of one team member's expertise above the others (Loyd et al., 2010) as they all have valuable insight into the functioning strengths and curricular needs of the student at the center of the IEP (Beck & Desutter, 2019). While listening, facilitators need to be able to synthesize what they are hearing so they can move the team towards problem-solving solutions that take into consideration each of the members' perspectives.

The practice of individual team member goal setting with a facilitator prior to an IEP meeting is an effective strategy that can help all members feel heard and validated (Mueller, 2009). Led by facilitators trained in using effective strategies to manage common IEP group dynamics, teams are more likely to be united in vision and mission. United, they will be able to design outcomes that provide a continuum of educational services and accommodations that enables each student to engage in inclusive learning opportunities that meet their unique needs (Yell et al., 2020).

Professional Standards

Key organizations in special education, such as the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) and the Council of Administrators of Special Education (CASE), do not provide an explicit framework to describe how an IEP team should operate to effectively serve students with disabilities. Hartmann (2016) attributes the absence of a singular, ideal structure or set of standards for IEP teams to the distinct needs of each team, which are tailored to individual students. Despite the lack of a unified framework, recurring themes from these organizations emphasize aspects such as effective communication, collaborative efforts, and decision making based on available data.

These core principles could be integrated with specific guidelines for IEP facilitators, forming a comprehensive framework to aid them in managing the intricate dynamics of team planning. This framework could be adaptable, considering the different facilitation styles suitable for various situations. For instance, Beck and Desutter (2021) reference studies suggesting there is a need for a more informal approach in rural settings.

This comparative case study investigated how special education leaders in two Northern New England states perceive the challenges associated with designing the most inclusive outcomes while still offering a FAPE. The short duration and critical nature of IEP meetings, requires the immediate focus of the team to concentrate on achieving inclusive outcomes for students with disabilities. The main goal of this study is to better understand the barriers that special education leaders face when trying to design, outfit, and implement inclusive opportunities for students with disabilities, while giving them the individualized services they need to benefit from their regular education program (IDEA, 2004).

Problem Statement

Facilitating a high-quality experience for students with disabilities involves creating a collaborative culture where all staff members share the responsibility for teaching and supporting these students (CCSSO and CEEDAR, 2017). This approach emphasizes the collective effort of the entire educational staff, rather than placing the responsibility on a few individuals. It fosters an inclusive environment where the needs of students with disabilities are met through joint efforts, shared knowledge, and a supportive community (DeMatthews et al, 2021).

The collaborative culture enhances the learning experience for students with disabilities and enriches the educational environment for all members of the school community. In Maine, Chapter 101: Maine Unified Special Education Regulation (MUSER) mandates regular education intervention protocols for pre-referral activities (MUSER, 2017), making it imperative

that general educators and special educators work together to identify needs and determine how they will meet those needs. If they do not collaborate effectively, this can lead to conflict and inadequate pre-referral, eligibility and/or intervention programming practices.

In most districts, special education teachers, or other persons such as 'IEP coordinators', facilitate IEP team meetings even though they typically do not have adequate legal knowledge (Markelz et al., 2022). They may also be bogged down by various other tasks, such as cumbersome instructional and procedural duties (Beck & DeSutter, 2021). They typically oversee multiple grade levels and will have a higher likelihood of having pre-established relationships with families and regular educator IEP team members, possibly benefiting the team dynamics. On the flip side, this could be a negative factor if the relationships are already damaged by faulty communication practices, or if they value certain team members input over others (Lewin Loy, et al., 2010).

Targeted informal communications that occurred in the design phase of this study with a variety of districts and building level administrators in Maine, revealed many special education leaders are not able to attend all IEP meetings. Special education leaders are usually more fluent in navigating special education legal frameworks than other school staff, but in larger districts, the only attend the meetings where conflict is anticipated. The capacity of special education leaders to attend most of the IEP meetings might be correlated with caseload size and related scheduling conflicts and is likely coupled with the rigors of the position and general rise in needs.

While major conflict should be avoided, it is in the best interest of students for IEP teams to engage in critical conversations to prevent conflict from engulfing the narrative and to allow different perspectives to be aired. Generally, teams composed of members with diverse expertise

develop the best outcomes (Gigone & Hastie, 1993). To ensure adherence with the intent behind the IDEA (2004) for all students to receive instruction in the LRE, persons charged with leading IEP meetings should receive high quality training and experiences in IEP facilitation to account for common group process dynamics that could throw a meeting off course from providing FAPE in the LRE (Mueller & Vick, 2019). A successful approach to educating students with disabilities involves creating a collaborative culture among all school staff, emphasizing joint responsibility and shared knowledge (Gigone & Hastie, 1993; Stasser & Titus, 1987). This is essential to guide effective IEP teams and minimize conflict resolution during educational decision-making processes. Problems arise when teams are not able to use best practices for collaboration and when there is a mismatch of beliefs about what constitutes the least restrictive environment.

Problem of Practice Vignette

To illustrate this problem of practice, let us consider a fictitious, but relatively common example of faulty group dynamics in the context of an IEP team meeting. Imagine, an IEP team meeting to plan an educational program for Marcus. Marcus is a student found newly eligible for special education services due to a diagnosis of autism. Team members, including the special education leader, special education teacher, regular education teacher, the school psychologist, and Marcus' mother, Sarah, are currently considering whether Marcus needs specially designed instruction (SDI), the hallmark of an IEP, to benefit from his general education curriculum, or if he can access the curriculum directly given accommodations and modifications in the general education setting (IDEA, 2004). The psychological evaluator, Amy, explains to the team that Marcus has below average reading ability according to his recent individual achievement testing results. The special educator explains she observed Marcus in his regular education classroom as

he listened, followed along with tasks during instruction, and both asked and answered questions throughout the lesson on par with his peers. His answers were somewhat logical and rigid, but appropriate to the context being discussed. He was observed to be rocking in his chair throughout the duration of the 45-minute observation.

The team moves forward, discussing and weighing factors related to determine if there is an adverse effect in the classroom due Marcus' disability. The special education leader reminds the team of the purpose of the IEP and if there is not an adverse effect, he will not receive an IEP. The regular education teacher, Martha, who has not had a chance to speak yet, assertively requests the team look at the disruptiveness of the rocking to other students. She says she continuously has to provide prompting to help him demonstrate greater flexibility in his thinking skills which takes her time away from other students. Martha says he is always behind the other students in assignment completion and is very disorganized. She believes he needs a smaller setting and research-based reading interventions geared for students with autism for him to make adequate progress.

Sarah says she does not want Marcus removed from the general education classroom for fear he will be picked on, but she is afraid to speak out about this after hearing the teacher and the evaluator explain how poorly he performed on some reading comprehension tasks during standardized testing activities. The parents have read that research shows it would be best for Marcus to learn how to read and improve his comprehension in the social context of the general education setting, but they do not want to appear as though they are telling the educators how to do their job. As such, she stays silent while the regular educator pushes the benefits of the special education service, without highlighting the risks or the benefits of inclusion.

After a brief discussion among school staff, the general educator weighs in on how they would highly recommend the student be placed in the special education classroom for reading because Marcus would most benefit from a smaller group size and a focus on activities related to teaching comprehension specifically to students with autism. The special educator and evaluator quickly agreed that it would likely benefit Marcus. The administrator in attendance also nods in agreement. The special educators feel Marcus would be better served in a setting that is inclusive of diverse learning styles. The parents feel the experts must know best, so they again stay silent, nodding their heads in agreement. They all make the mistake of putting Marcus' placement before his program needs, a common phenomenon when determining LRE (Kurth et al., 2019).

As an aside, just prior to the meeting, Martha voiced to the principal (who reported it to the special education leader) that she does not feel adequately prepared to offer strategies in the classroom. The principal thought it would be best he be moved to the resource room for reading because she didn't have the capacity to conduct training with Martha at the moment. This information is effectively hidden from the whole team and as such, not brought to the attention of the parent or the special education teacher. Due in part to this information not surfacing at the team meeting, the parents are convinced that the responsibility to educate Marcus due to his unique needs falls on special education, and that implementing strategies within the regular education classroom is not really a viable option. The newly hired special education teacher does not dare speak out about how she could help Martha consider inclusion strategies as a potential option in the meeting. The special educator also considered a political alignment between the principal and the general education teacher and worried that initiating conflict might lead to repercussions.

In this situation, many team members did not feel they were able to fully express their concerns. They did not believe they had equal status with others on the team, or they worried their status would be diminished if they shared certain information. The information that was shared at the meeting leads the team to an "agreement" that the best course of action is to pull Marcus from the regular education classroom to learn reading in the special education classroom, effectively undermining the hidden information, the parent preference for her child to learn in the same setting as his peers. If the meeting facilitator had shared this information at the meeting's onset, they could have driven the discussion towards a more inclusive outcome for Marcus.

When IEP teams do not have structures in place to guide their mission, they can easily stray from a student-centered approach and fall prey to confounds that might lead the team away from programming more inclusive options. Situations like this can happen if team members only share certain information (Gigone & Hastie, 1993) or if the team inadvertently overweighs information presented by a person with perceived expertise that is valued over other members' contributions (Loyd et al., 2010; Thomas-Hunt et al., 2003). This is a problem because when IEP teams lack structured guidance, they are risking selective information sharing and overvaluing contributions from perceived experts, potentially leading to less inclusive planning outcomes for students with disabilities.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this comparison case study of special education structures of two Northern New England states from special education directors' perspectives, was to examine how and in what ways special education leadership beliefs about the LRE, and how barriers they encountered, interplayed with the team decision-making around less restrictive outcomes for students. Outcomes, operationally defined by the subsequent program offerings resulting from

IEP team decision-making meetings, were measured using publicly available special education environment (LRE) data.

Research Questions

Facilitators of IEP meetings need to use strategies to ensure that team dynamics and disproportionate member influence do not inappropriately sway a team into assigning a more restrictive environment than is necessary for a student. School districts also need to understand what barriers exist to teams providing more inclusive outcomes for students with disabilities to provide appropriate resources to realize this goal. By exploring IEP facilitators' recounted experiences of leading IEP team meetings and examining their belief structures, this comparative case study seeks to compare different approaches to IEP facilitation structures in two Northern New England states; one with a high percentage and one with a low percentage of students educated in the general education setting 80% or more of the school day. This study sought to answer the following questions:

1. How do special education leaders perceive the concept of the least restrictive environment?
2. How do special education leaders perceive the impact of IEP team dynamics on determining the least restrictive environment?
3. What barriers do special education leaders report when programming for inclusive outcomes?

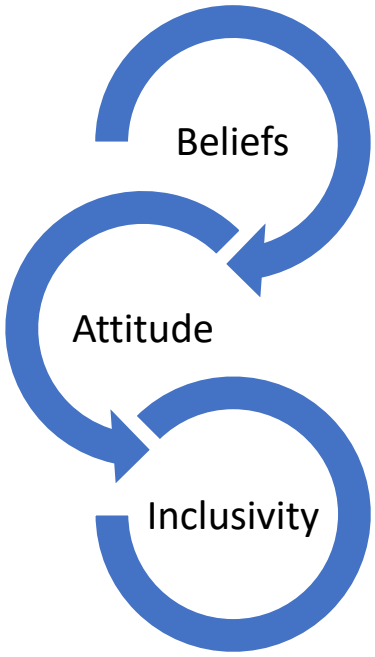
Conceptual Framework

Wittenbaum et al.'s (2004) alternative framework for understanding motivated information sharing in decision-making groups was used to think about how belief systems (input) influence LRE decisions (output) and how the process of information sharing can be influenced by factors such as power imbalances, attitude, and other barriers. My conceptual framework was developed to show how the ways in which IEP team members conceptualize the LRE mandate, influences their attitude, and ultimately the inclusivity of student programming

outcomes (Figure 1). The middle section of the diagram can be used substitute other barriers to outcomes for students such as lack of resources and limited professional development opportunities for staff.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework Diagram



Nature of the Study

The study is a comparative case analysis focusing on the special education structures in two Northern New England states, as seen through the lens of special education leaders. The core objective was to explore the beliefs of special education leaders around the concept of the LRE, uncovering IEP team dynamic issues, and understanding barriers to inclusive programming. The

outcomes use publicly available special education LRE data. Comparisons are made by connecting that data collected to the outcomes that result from IEP team meetings.

When exploring how special education leaders view team dynamic issues, I looked at how they articulated disproportionate member status as this could lead to unnecessarily restrictive environments for students as some team members' information will be minimized or stay hidden as a result. I also uncovered other barriers that prevented teams from achieving more inclusive outcomes for students with disabilities by examining the experiences, belief structures, and perceptions of special education leaders when leading special education initiatives. I conducted a comparative analysis of IEP facilitation approaches in two distinct states: New Hampshire, who has a high percentage, and Maine, a low percentage of students educated in general education settings for 80% or more of the school day.

The conceptual framework for this study takes the liberty of modifying an existing group process framework (Wittenbaum,et al., 2004) to better align with the context of IEP team dynamics. The Wittenbaum et al. (2004) framework was based on the foundational work of Stasser and Titus' (1987) study of small group decision-making. While the original studies in laboratory settings assumed unrealistic group behaviors, such as the absence of bias in information sharing, the adapted framework in this study acknowledges the realistic nature of group members being motivated to share certain information to achieve personal goals, thus influencing task outcomes. My framework provides a lens to analyze IEP team dynamics and helps focus in on how these dynamics, influenced by team members' alignment with the LRE mandate, interplay to lead to more inclusive outcomes.

Assumptions, Transferability & Limitations

To conduct this study, I had to make several assumptions based on my knowledge, experience, and a review of the literature. From those assumptions, limitations, including cautions around transferability naturally arose.

Legal Context

Assumptions. To study the problem of disparities in the application of the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) principle for students with disabilities, I assumed that the legislative intent of PL 94-142 and IDEA is inconsistently interpreted across different states. This assumption underpins the expectation that, despite variations in implementation, the core objective of inclusive education should remain the same. It also suggests judicial standards, or the lack thereof, may have a significant impact on the operationalization of LRE within school districts. This extends to the belief that a clear judicial precedent could guide administrators and IEP teams more effectively.

Limitations. If the legislative intent of PL 94-142 and IDEA is inconsistently interpreted and/or applied among states, then comparing states may not yield accurate insights into the effectiveness of these laws. Also, judicial standards or the lack thereof can vary significantly, which could lead to discrepancies in the study's findings if these variations are not adequately accounted for.

Setting

Assumptions and Transferability. My study design assumes that, despite geographical and demographic differences, the states can be compared with each other regarding their LRE outcomes. This assumes that states with similar profiles should have comparable LRE statistics, barring unique local factors. There is also an assumption that the data provided by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Program (OSEP) accurately reflect the

reality of LRE implementation in different states. This is crucial for the transferability factors in relation to the study's findings.

Limitations. Geographical and demographic differences between states could lead to variations in LRE implementation that are not attributable to the legislative framework or educational policies alone. Reliance on OSEP data assumes that the data collection and reporting methods are uniform and accurate across all states, which may not account for local reporting variances or data integrity issues.

Organizational Attitude

Assumptions. The study assumes that all stakeholders, including policymakers, administrators, and educators, are committed to the goals of IDEA and the LRE mandate, even if their actions may not always align with this commitment due to different variables. The study assumes that IEP teams generally aim to act in the best interest of the student despite their personal interpretation and belief system of the LRE when making placement decisions. However, the assumption also includes the acknowledgment that there may be systemic or procedural inconsistencies impacting these decisions from state to state and district to district. There is also an underlying assumption that ongoing professional development is necessary and can positively impact the implementation of and attitude towards inclusive practices. It presumes that training and experience can change educators' practices and beliefs about inclusion.

Limitations. The assumption that all stakeholders are committed to the goals of IDEA and the LRE may not reflect the reality of varying levels of commitment and resource allocation, which could affect the study's findings. Similarly, assuming that IEP teams always act in the best interest of the student does not account for individual biases or lack of training, which can significantly affect placement decisions. And, while professional development is assumed to be a

positive influence on inclusive practices, the study may not account for the quality or effectiveness of such training programs.

By making these assumptions, I set a foundation for exploring the complex factors influencing the implementation of LRE to identify ways to address the disparities in educational outcomes for students with disabilities. Transferability factors are examined on a case-by-case basis as it would depend on a variety of indicators related to the proposed comparison. The limitations suggest that while the study is set up to explore the some factors influencing LRE implementation, it must also consider the variability and potential inaccuracies that these assumptions could introduce. The study includes methods for identifying and mitigating these limitations by considering the qualitative data from special education leaders, acknowledging the potential for bias and variance in their leadership beliefs.

Significance

This study critically assesses the effectiveness of major legislative acts, such as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act and its reauthorization as the IDEA, in achieving their intended goal of integrating students with disabilities into regular educational environments. Many significant factors will be discussed, including implications for law and policy and practical applications for the field.

Legal and Policy

The findings from this study informs policymakers, educators, and administrators about the effectiveness of current practices and policies. It provides insights into what changes or improvements are needed to ensure that students with disabilities receive an equitable and inclusive education. Given the current laws having been in place for nearly half a century with a very slow pace of change, my research seeks to understand why the implementation and outcomes vary among states with similar a makeup. The absence of a judicial LRE standard in

the 1st Circuit Court of Appeals' may influence a gap in the operational framework between states. This gap, coupled with the ongoing need for professional development among school staff, points to systemic issues in actualizing the inclusion of students with disabilities.

Setting Factors

By utilizing child count and educational environment data, my study offers a data-driven approach to understanding LRE outcomes. This quantitative aspect provides concrete evidence of the current state of inclusive education. I highlight the disparities in the application of the LRE principle across the states, focusing on the similarities and differences between Maine and New Hampshire. Evidence of this suggests the way IEP teams interpret and implement LRE vary, some even misapply the concept (Giangreco, 2020) which could have significant implications for the educational experiences and outcomes of students with disabilities.

Summary

This comparison case study establishes a foundational context for a new means of investigating IEP team dynamics related to a universally collected data point. It does so by outlining the theoretical framework, research questions, and the overall significance of the investigation. The study examines IEP team dynamics from the perspectives of special education leaders. The examination is conducted through interviews capturing insights from persons in this role. The interviews were carried out with special education leaders in Maine and New Hampshire, two Northern New England states, chosen for their significant variability in their LRE data despite requirements to adhere to the same federal mandates. The comparison will highlight differences in relation to LRE dynamics. The analysis is driven by a conceptual framework developed to serve as a lens for filtering the results. In the next chapter, I will delve into a comprehensive review of the literature, highlighting the gaps my research intends to fill

and setting the stage for a deeper exploration of IEP facilitation and the barriers to inclusive programming.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review stands as a pivotal element of my dissertation, serving to deepen the discourse initiated in the first chapter. It will examine the academic and theoretical evolution within the sphere of inclusive education. My objective is to construct a substantial theoretical base that supports my research while emphasizing the insights my study uncovers between beliefs about the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) and its influence on inclusion, while also identifying additional obstacles to the integration of students with disabilities into regular education classrooms.

My inquiry began with an exploration of federal and state statutes, policies, and statistics pertinent to the LRE concept. Notably, a pronounced discrepancy in LRE practices between Maine and its northern New England counterparts emerged, prompting an investigation into potential underlying causes, such as differing belief systems and systemic barriers. Subsequent literature searches revealed differing interpretations regarding the LRE, each potentially influencing IEP team decision-making differently. This led to an exploration of studies centered around IEP facilitation, which suggested that the application of established group process theories might help understand IEP team dynamics better. Additionally, a survey of the literature on inclusion barriers was conducted, rounding out the literature review with a comprehensive perspective on underexplored challenges.

Conceptual Framework

While heavily adapted, my conceptual framework was born from research on group process. The conceptual framework for this study was adapted from Wittenbaum, Hollingshead, and Botero's (2004) existing model of group processes. It illustrates how IEP team members, who align the LRE mandate with their designated roles, positively influence the team's decisions towards greater inclusivity (Figure 1). This framework is an evolution of the Wittenbaum et al.

(2004) model, which itself is grounded in the foundational principles from Stasser and Titus' (1985) landmark research on decision-making in small groups, particularly involving tasks with hidden profiles. The original Stasser and Titus study, conducted in controlled laboratory environments, operated under certain idealized assumptions about group behavior, such as the notion that group members remain unbiased in their information sharing.

My modified framework addresses the more realistic scenario where group members are motivated to share specific information to achieve personal interests, consequently affecting the outcome of the task. This new framework is designed to more accurately capture these dynamics in relation to IEP team dynamics and will be applied to analyze the interactions within IEP teams across two different states from the special education leader's point of view. The analysis will be guided by the principles of this revised group process theory, with outcomes determined based on LRE data extracted from IEP decisions.

IEP Team Dynamics

Students with disabilities continue to face inequities regarding inclusion in general education programs despite federal and state mandates requiring schools to educate them in the LRE. If deemed eligible for special education services, students can receive services and support through an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) if they are not able to make progress in the general education classroom given accommodations and modifications. IEPs are developed and written by teams composed of various individuals including educational professionals, the family, and the student. IEP team dynamics have not been well studied, but there is a wealth of literature on general group functioning and group dynamics in relation to decision-making tasks.

Infusing Social Science Research

Due to the complexities of group processes and the short duration and relative infrequency of team meetings, IEP teams may never get past the forming phase of group

development (Tuckman, 1965) before they find themselves adjourning. However, the use of proper facilitation techniques by meeting facilitators (Mueller, 2009) could help teams make it to the performing phase, where collaborative processes can help generate more inclusive outcomes. As special education director caseloads prohibit the time needed to attend all IEP meetings, principals and special education teachers are often on the frontlines of overseeing and leading staff towards identifying students with disabilities and developing disability-related curriculum in schools. They typically lead the individual IEP team meetings (O'Laughlin & Lindle, 2015 or 2015?) where decisions about placement for students are made. Yet many lack even basic knowledge of the policy and procedural complexities involved in the administration of special education programs (DeMatthews et al., 2022).

IEP Team Leaders

Sun and Xin's (2020)research revealed that a significant number of principals, who often sit in on or facilitate IEP meetings, had not participated in any special education courses during their training. Maine's certification requirements mandate all principals complete a course in special education law, and all educators are required to undertake training in teaching students with exceptionalities. Similarly, New Hampshire enforces specific educational requirements for educator certification. Despite these educational prerequisites, many teachers, including special educators with extensive additional coursework, often struggle to effectively implement the LRE principle, a key element of inclusive education as outlined in IDEA.

Special education teachers, often at the helm of meeting processes, may not all possess the requisite skills to effectively navigate complex team dynamics. High attrition rates in the field, surpassing those of many other teaching disciplines, force districts to sometimes recruit staff who may not fully meet the qualifications (Billingsly & Bettini, 2019). These new educators

in special education confront significant challenges early in their careers, including mastering effective teaching methods and managing classroom behavior.

Certification Requirements

Maine. According to the Maine Department of Education (n.d.), the certification process for special educators offers different paths to credentialing. One of these includes the option of obtaining a conditional certification, which requires the completion of nine semester hours in special education coursework. This pathway is designed for educators who hold at least a bachelor's degree and provides an entry point into special education with a limited initial training requirement.

For those seeking more comprehensive training, Maine also offers a master's program in Special Education, which is available online. The University of Southern Maine's Special Education Certification Program (n.d.), is designed to provide certification for teaching students with mild-to-moderate disabilities in grades K-8 or 7-12. It requires 39 credit hours, which includes coursework and field experiences, such as observation, tutoring, and a two-semester student teaching internship. This program aims to prepare educators comprehensively for their role in special education, covering evidence-based instruction and assessment practices for a range of needs and disabilities.

Additionally, Maine has implemented the Alternative Certification and Mentoring Program (MACM) for Special Educators (n.d.). This program is housed at the University of Maine and supports conditionally certified special educators in their first years of teaching by providing intensive, focused support and mentoring. MACM participants must complete a one-semester online graduate course designed for the program, focusing on the application of the IDEA through the IEP process. The program ensures that new educators are mentored by

experienced special education teachers, enhancing their practical skills, and understanding of special education processes. These certification pathways in Maine reflect an approach that balances the need for immediate educators in the field with the importance of comprehensive training and support for special educators, particularly those who are just beginning their careers.

New Hampshire. In New Hampshire, the certification process for special education teachers involves several key requirements (New Hampshire Teacher Certification and Licensing Guide, n.d.). All candidates must hold a bachelor's degree and complete a state-approved teacher preparation program. Additionally, they are required to pass content and subject area examinations. The traditional pathway to certification in New Hampshire involves completing a professional teacher preparation program as part of the bachelor's degree curriculum, known as the Alternative 1 pathway. For those who have a bachelor's degree but did not complete a teacher preparation program, there are alternative routes to certification available.

To obtain a New Hampshire teaching license, prospective educators must complete an approved teacher preparation program, which can be found through the New Hampshire Department of Education (New Hampshire Teacher Certification and Licensing Guide, n.d.). It's important to ensure that the chosen educational program is accredited by a recognized agency. Additionally, candidates for initial teaching certification in New Hampshire must pass the Praxis Core Academic Skills for Educators exam, demonstrating basic skills in reading, writing, and mathematics. For specific subject areas, including special education, candidates must take the Praxis Subject Assessments.

Furthermore, the state requires all teachers, including those in special education, to undergo a state and federal background check, typically completed through the teacher preparation program prior to student teaching. Once all requirements are met, candidates can

apply for a teaching license through New Hampshire's Bureau of Credentialing. In terms of licensure types, the New Hampshire Department of Education's Bureau of Credentialing issues educator licenses based on various alternatives for certification, catering to different educational backgrounds and experiences.

Summary and Implications of Staff Qualification Issues

The disparity in certification requirements between these two states highlights a significant issue. Teams led by underqualified staff, such as those who have only completed minimal coursework as can be seen in Maine, may lack sufficient understanding of performance expectations and adherence to special education processes. This gap in training and expertise can lead to less optimal outcomes for students. Specifically, it might result in teams defaulting to more restrictive educational settings than necessary, as they may not be fully equipped to explore and implement the full range of available options and accommodations that align with the LRE mandate. This concern is highlighted in existing literature that emphasizes the importance of comprehensive training and qualifications for special educators to ensure the delivery of appropriate and effective educational outcomes for students with disabilities (Mueller et al., 2019).

Because individual student programmatic outcomes are generated by IEP teams, it is important to consider these team membership characteristics as they will play a role in decision making processes. Teams typically consist of revolving group membership over the years as students move up in grade levels, have new teachers, and transition to different schools (Kurth et al., 2019). Other factors that cannot be controlled for, such as staff attrition or changing family dynamics also impact the stability of team membership (Hartmann, 2016). In general, the complexities involved in high stakes group decision-making, especially when many group members are new to each other and hold different belief structures, can lead to inadequate and/or

inconsistent pre-referral, eligibility and/or general programming practices for students with disabilities (McCabe et al., 2020).

Guiding Beliefs around LRE Mandate

While the IDEA mandates education in the LRE for students with disabilities, it lacks a clear definition of what constitutes the LRE, leaving interpretation mainly to the courts through case law such as the Ronker Standard (1983), the Daniel Standard (1989) or the Rachel H. Standard (1994). Yell et al. (2020), note that Maine and New Hampshire do not have similar court precedents to guide their thinking about the LRE. Marx et al. (2014) highlights two schools of thought regarding common belief structures that frame planning for what the LRE looks like for students. One indicates the general education setting is always the LRE, while the other suggests the LRE is wherever the student's needs can best be met.

The first appears to demand inclusivity, where the other suggests inclusive practices are up for discussion and dependent on team members' perceptions of where the needs can best be met. Giangrego (2020) asserts that, despite the LRE mandate issued by the IDEA, schools continue to misinterpret and misapply the concept when determining placement for students. Additionally, Marx et al. (2014) posits the impact of varying beliefs about appropriate placement and the continuum of LRE offerings can differ depending on available resources at a particular school. As such, one student might find themselves in a completely different placement setting after transferring from one school to another, e.g., a self-contained setting versus a resource room.

Hoge (2013) found organizational and individual belief structures of various team members to be a primary guiding force that drives the processes that result in individual IEP team LRE outcome decisions in their dissertation work. Hoge also noted team member preference for qualitative over quantitative data when determining placement for students, such

as behavior logs and other anecdotal data. The use of this qualitative data then helped members justify their personal belief ideologies. Given the influence of belief structures over team decisions, this is likely a factor contributing to the widespread disparity in LRE data among states. Ultimately, the leading beliefs of the IEP meeting facilitator and other team members, including dynamics arising from group member relations (Thomas-Hunt et al., 2003), drives the processes for which information is shared, how it is shared, and with whom it is shared, both during and outside of the team meeting (Wittenbaum & Hollingshead, 2004; Stasser & Titus, 1987).

Facilitation Skills

In many districts, special education case managers, or other persons such as IEP coordinators, facilitate IEP team meetings even though they may not be as well-versed in the special education procedural guidelines as special education leaders are (Mueller et al., 2019). Beck and DeSutter (2021) point out that in rural districts, the principal or the special education director will often facilitate and/or attend a meeting in the event there is known to be a litigious parent or other potential conflict. As special education directors typically fulfill district leadership roles (Diggs, 2016), they rely on a shared vision and collaboration with building level leaders to ensure the best outcomes for students with disabilities.

Beck and DeSutter (2019) articulate the importance of establishing training for facilitators to understand and apply techniques to improve the ability of team members to communicate and navigate complex procedural guidelines. A trained facilitator is often only used when a team member requests a Facilitated IEP (FIEP) meeting due to a conflict (Mueller, 2009). According to Mueller et al. (2019), using IEP facilitation skills has been shown to help overcome barriers related to team conflict. FIEP protocols offer ways for teams to minimize such conflict.

Negotiating Influence

The individual who consistently remains part of a student's IEP team throughout their academic journey is usually the parent or guardian. Their ongoing involvement positions them as key holders of extensive information, providing valuable historical insight into the student's programming. This aspect significantly enhances the diversity of expertise within the team, which, according to Van Der Vegt & Bunderson (2005), is crucial for fostering innovative outcomes. However, the contributions of parents are often overlooked or not taken seriously by educational professionals (Kurth et al., 2019), implying that parents are regarded as having a lower status within the IEP team. Loyd et al. (2010) describes low-status team members as those whose expertise is not acknowledged. Consequently, when such members attempt to contribute to decision-making, their input may be undervalued, affecting the team's performance and the quality of outcomes in the context of the IEP team. Ruppar & Gaffney (2011) emphasize that the lack of full participation by any team member can compromise the legitimacy of the team's decisions.

The influence of unshared information on team outcomes is also significant because it means that potentially important information is not considered if it isn't shared with all team members before they undertake decision-making tasks (Gigone & Hastie, 1993). To mitigate this negative effect, it is crucial for facilitators to be trained in setting up norms and procedures that give every member equal status (Ruppar & Gaffney, 2011). This approach aligns the team with the core principles of IDEA, ensuring a mission that prioritizes student needs over individual agendas. This approach reassures families of students with disabilities that the program is driven by student needs. When the team operates in this way, they can effectively create educational plans that offer a range of services and accommodations, allowing every student the opportunity to participate in learning in the most inclusive way possible.

Barriers to Inclusive Programming

In a comprehensive literature review of inclusion studies, Kart and Kart (2021) cite several key factors preventing schools from being able to improve inclusive student outcomes. These factors include a lack of professional development, lack of leadership support for resources to plan and prepare instruction, and lack of cooperation with collaborative efforts among school staff. Cook & Friend (2010) define collaboration as "the style professionals select to employ based on mutual goals; parity; shared responsibility for key decisions; shared accountability for outcomes; shared resources; and the development of trust, respect, and a sense of community" (p. 3). General education teachers indicate a desire for more professional development and collaboration to feel more capable of having the skills needed to effectively include students with disabilities in the general education classroom setting (Idol, 2006).

Teacher Attitude

Teacher education programs play an important part in shaping teacher attitudes and practices towards a more inclusive and holistic understanding of student potential and identity (Smith et. al, 2022). We can extend our understanding of the challenges and opportunities in teacher education, particularly concerning inclusion, by understanding teacher attitude towards instructing students with learning challenges. Smith et al. (2022) noted two critical attitude concerns for students from marginalized groups in education: the risk of being perceived as having limited academic potential and being defined solely by their academic success.

Ismailos et. al, (2022) examined the beliefs and attitudes towards inclusion among pre-service and in-service teachers. They concluded pre-service teachers have beliefs and attitudes that are malleable as they are not yet shaped by practical experiences with students with disabilities in either an inclusive or segregated setting. In contrast, in-service teachers, particularly those who have taught in segregated settings, have beliefs and attitudes that are

deeply influenced by their experiences. Hauerwas and Mahon (2018) assert that teachers further into their career, are more impacted by a deficit attitude towards students with disabilities; and students feel it (Pivik, et al., 2002). Seeing students as more than their academic output and recognizing their potential for growth regardless of their background resonates with the idea of positive attitudes towards inclusion.

The more professional development an educator received in strategies, the more they used the strategies (deBettencourt, 1999). Effective teaching practices can help alleviate attitude concerns by facilitating inclusive spaces for teaching and learning. This means recognizing the potential for academic growth in all students (inclusive expectations) and valuing students as whole individuals beyond just their academic achievements (broad regard). Teacher reflection on their missions as educators coupled with dedication to continuous professional development, could prove a powerful tool to help teachers welcome more inclusive approaches. Combining these research perspectives provides a comprehensive view of how teacher education and professional development can evolve to better meet the needs of diverse student populations.

Summary and Conclusions

Unfortunately, the basic structures for educational systems tend to continue to separate regular and special education which encourages them to operate in silos rather than unite in purpose to engage in a collaborative effort to educate students with disabilities. Boveda and Aronson (2019) provide a framework for understanding intersectional competence in the field of education which can help us look at how educators' diverse identities shape their expectations for learning and in their interactions with students in the classroom. As regular educators and special educators come together to face the challenges of minimizing exclusive practices for students with disabilities, they will be called upon to practice intersectional diversity as they work together to afford all students inclusive opportunities.

In the next chapter, I will discuss how my research method integrates the principles of intersectional competence into the study of educational systems. This methodological approach is designed to examine the complex dynamics between regular and special education, and how these distinct spheres can be unified for the benefit of students with disabilities. I will outline the specific research tools and techniques used to capture the nuances of special education leaders' interactions, their perceptions, and their practices within this context. Emphasis will be placed on semi-structured interviews to gain deep insights into the experiences of both educators and students. The main goal is to uncover the barriers to inclusive practices and identify strategies that can foster more collaborative and integrated approaches in education. Overcoming the barriers will contribute to more equitable and inclusive practices for students with disabilities.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHOD

This qualitative comparison case study design examined the similarities and differences between special education organizational and support structures for IEP teams in Maine and New Hampshire using semi-structured interviews of special education directors. A case study approach is best used when a researcher is trying to explain a social phenomenon and has a clear methodological path (Yin, 2018). The comparison approach of data analysis between the two states allowed for comparisons to be made using a conceptual framework to visualize the themes and trends uncovered. Triangulation between the analysis of the case study, interview data, and LRE data helped determine connections to provide recommendations for future research.

Because both Maine and New Hampshire abide by the same federal IDEA mandate and both lack a First Circuit Court standard (Yell et al., 2020), there may be more similarities than differences in the structures. Yet, the data delineates differences during the 2020-2021 school year. In Maine, 54.13% of students with disabilities were educated in the regular classroom more than 80% of the time while in New Hampshire, 73.75% of students with disabilities remained in the general education setting more than 80% of the time (US DOE, 2021). Despite the anticipated structural similarities, the data points to a gap between the special education environment outcome data from the two states. The discrepancy may be related to a misalignment between policy, procedures, and actual IEP practices in Maine.

Research Questions

This study was guided by three research questions:

RQ1. How do special education leaders perceive the concept of the least restrictive environment?

RQ2. How do special education leaders perceive the impact of IEP team dynamics on determining the least restrictive environment?

RQ3. What barriers do special education leaders report when programming for inclusive outcomes?

Research Design and Rationale

The primary methods of data collection for this study were semi-structured interviews (Glesne, 2013) and analysis of state and federal special education data (ME DOE, n.d.; NH DOE, n.d.; US DOE, n.d.). Data examined included federal, state and district monitoring reports, IDEA Part B state performance plans and annual reports, and IDEA Part B annual data as reported to the US DOE and Maine and New Hampshire state departments. Other local documents, such as district IEP agenda templates, and other matrix documents were collected for review of practices from interviewees who volunteered that information.

The semi-structured interviews of seven special education leaders from each state enabled me to examine their accounts of the duties they undertake when facilitating alignment of each student's IEP outcome to the LRE mandate. The data helped me explore trends in IEP facilitator beliefs about the LRE through discussion of how they structure and facilitate IEP meetings. Special education leaders were able to shed more light on the frequent barriers encountered by IEP teams when planning for students to have more inclusive programs.

Similar interviews were conducted with four IEP facilitators from Maine and one IEP facilitator from New Hampshire. These interviews were ultimately excluded from the data as there proved too many barriers to enlisting IEP facilitator participants for each director via

snowball sampling. The interviews being used to frame this study will help us understand how special education leaders design and navigate the complex nature of leading teams through high stakes decision-making processes to reach inclusive outcomes.

The case study approach (Yin, 2018), with a focus on understanding dynamics involved in IEP facilitation, allowed me to begin to understand how the teams are functioning in relation to their ability to remain goal-oriented on providing students with an education in the LRE, despite many other variables examined that impact team dynamics and overall functioning. Investigating the resources that define the support structures at the federal, state, and local level and semi-structured interviews of local leaders and their respective IEP facilitators, revealed information that could lead to recommendations for enacting new training and support structures for IEP facilitation practices in the field.

Data collection

Document Review

A document analysis was conducted of available data and information presented on the United States Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), the Maine Office of Special Services and Inclusive Education (OSSIE), and the New Hampshire Bureau of Special Education Support. This helped me determine coding criteria for alignment to IDEA's main concepts. Obtaining definitive themes at the time of the LRE data points was difficult to pinpoint as the website contents evolved over time, even during the short timeframe of this study. Other artifacts, such as IEP agendas, and other process documents provided by special education leaders, were coded for analysis of different meeting practices used in the field.

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven special education directors from each state represented in the study. Directors were asked to recommend an IEP facilitator serving

under them for a follow-up interview but barriers such as non-response and scheduling of interviews for employees trying to meet multiple job demands impacted the number of final participants in this area which led me to expand the number of special education leaders interviewed to seven from each state. The semi-structured interview approach was used to allow me to probe further into responses as necessary to obtain more in-depth information based on the responses. Interviews of special education leaders were obtained by casting a wide net to all directors in each state. The final sampling of districts included special education environment data (>80%) that fell within ½ standard deviation of the state average to ensure a representative sample was obtained.

Semi-structured interview protocols were modified from existing FIEP research protocols and included questions aimed at answering the research questions. Follow-up questions allowed me to probe for clarification or to further explore concepts presented by each participant. While not directly engaging in FIEP research, some of the principles of FIEP are likely to be already developed in districts whose IEP teams are routinely producing inclusive outcomes for students with disabilities and it also allowed me to modify already tested protocols.

Interview questions (Appendix A) were piloted with a practicing special education leader to allow for refinement of the interview questions before the study commenced. Due to access barriers to observe IEP teams in action is a difficult undertaking due to confidentiality issues, gathering perceptions of persons in the field allowed insight into internal processes. The semi-structured interviews of special education leaders allowed me to explore the nature of how IEP meetings are designed to revolve around LRE principles by exploring study participants perspectives of IEP meeting facilitation techniques as well as how staff are trained to facilitate

meetings. As shown in Table 2, alignment of the interview protocol as compared to the research questions was considered.

Table 2

Relationship of Interview Protocol to Research Questions

Research Questions	Interview Questions
RQ1 How do special education leaders perceive the concept of the least restrictive environment?	1. How do you view your role as an IEP facilitator? 2. How do you view the roles of the other team members? ***3. How do you define the Least Restrictive Environment?***
RQ2 How do special education leaders perceive the impact of IEP team dynamics on determining the least restrictive environment?	4. What kind of training have you received specific to IEP facilitation? 5. Can you describe how you prepare for a typical IEP meeting? 6. How do your beliefs about the LRE impact your facilitation style? 7. What strategies do you use to solicit student and/or parent input? ***8. How do you weigh input from the various team members?***
RQ3 What barriers do special education leaders report when programming for inclusive outcomes?	9. What are common sources of conflict at IEP team meetings? ***10. What barriers do IEP teams face in planning for inclusive (LRE) outcomes?*** 11. Do you have any stories to highlight your experience facilitating IEPs?

Note. Interview questions in bold italics are considered central to the purpose of the study.

Sampling

A directory of special education directors from each school administrative districts in Maine and New Hampshire was obtained from the website of each state's Department of Education. All special education directors were emailed and invited to participate in the study. The first seven directors from each state were selected for interviews. The sample for each state included school districts from cities, towns, and rural areas (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024) to examine factors related to rurality and availability of resources on teams programming for inclusive student outcomes.

To account for a link between current outcome level data and IEP practices in the school districts, the preferred criteria for participant selection of special education directors were: (a) five years of experience as a director and (b) three years of experience in the current school administrative unit (SAU). Subsequent semi-structured interviews (Appendix A) of IEP facilitators from some of the districts were conducted to gain insight into their understanding of special education legal frameworks and facilitation techniques as they actively practice leading IEP teams in creating high-stakes decisions for students under their respective leaders. The IEP facilitator selection was based on snowball sampling through recommendations of experienced IEP facilitators by the special education directors interviewed. However, due to lack of consistent participation from each SAU selected from this perspective, the data collected is not presented for analysis, but it is discussed in recommendations for future research.

Data Analysis Procedures

Analysis of documents and website content focused on coding keywords, ideas, and themes consistent with approaches that prioritize inclusive programming and facilitation techniques. Interview data and documents were coded using both inductive and deductive coding

methods (Saldana, 2015). I coded responses in relation to each specific research question, first using deductive reasoning through a set of predetermined a priori codes. Then, I looked at the information that did not fit cleanly into one of the pre-designed buckets. I used intentional Artificial Intelligence (AI) coding software (Atlas.ti), similar to the open coding feature in NVivo software, to help bring new themes to the front uncovering the phenomena being described by special education leaders. I examined the data gathered from both processes simultaneously to highlight new findings.

The deductive codebook for RQ 1 consisted of two codes, Needs and Mainstream. The next question, RQ 2, was analyzed using intentional AI after a validity issue with LRE outcome data was described by a New Hampshire participant. The codes were developed based on existing theories from prior educational research, social science disciplines and my conceptual framework, which was derived from group process theories. One hundred and thirteen codes were captured and sorted into six categories. For RQ 3, responses were manually sorted into three categories: willingness to collaborate, resources, and professional development. Intentional AI coding was also used to generate inductive codes, which helped expand on themes already identified in the deductive process, and further described a finding that was not initially categorized.

Validity and Limitations

The validity of a qualitative study examining special education leaders is complex, especially in scenarios where districts do not adhere to a uniform process structure. The diversity in district management styles, such as directors leading meetings themselves, or delegating the task to IEP coordinators or case managers, introduces multiple factors affecting the study's validity. The distinct process structures in different districts lead to varied experiences and perspectives among special education directors. This diversity can enrich the study with a wide

array of insights but may also complicate the ability to generalize findings. Because of this, it was vital to ensure a representative sample of directors from a variety of districts. Overrepresentation of directors from districts with similar structures could skew the results, failing to capture the full spectrum of practices.

The diversity of IEP process structures across districts could limit how the findings are applicable to other contexts. Different process structures can influence how directors perceive and experience their roles. However, detailed descriptions of each district's structure could aid in understanding how these findings might be relevant elsewhere. The consistency and transparency of data collection and analysis methods will help with data credibility. With varied district processes, formulating a methodology that accurately reflects each unique situation while maintaining overall coherence of the study is crucial.

While the variability in process structures provides challenges to the study's validity, it also provides a unique opportunity to gain a deeper, more holistic understanding of special education directorship. Such diversity can unveil how varying structures affect leadership styles, decision-making processes, and outcomes, contributing to the overall quality of data collected. In conclusion, while the differences in process structures among districts pose challenges, they also offer a chance to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the field. Effective methodological planning, representative sampling, and a thoughtful approach to analysis are essential in enhancing the study's validity and practical significance.

Ethical Issues

Ethical considerations are paramount in a qualitative study focusing on special education directors, particularly in a context of varied district process structures. As such, ensuring the confidentiality of participants is crucial. Special education leaders might share sensitive information about their practices, decisions, or interactions within their districts. It's important to

protect their identities and any identifying information about the districts to prevent potential repercussions or stigma. Adhering to these ethical principles is essential to conduct a study that is not only methodologically sound but also respectful and considerate of the rights and well-being of all participants involved.

Approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) was obtained before the study commenced to ensure compliance with relevant legal and regulatory standards, including those related to research with human subjects and data protection laws. Participants were fully informed about the study's purpose, methods, potential risks, and benefits. They were informed of their rights to withdraw at any time without any negative consequences. The potential impact of the study on the participants and their district was considered in the results so that findings did not inadvertently lead to negative perceptions or judgments about certain districts or practices.

Researcher Role

As a special education administrator in a small, rural community, my journey towards understanding the impact of IEP facilitation practices on educational outcomes for students with disabilities is deeply personal and professionally significant. My background, primarily as a special educator in a special purpose private school and in a small rural school district, is closely tied to the unique challenges and experiences of small districts. This context has sparked my curiosity to investigate whether the issues we face in our district are unique due to our rural setting, or if they resonate more broadly across similar districts. My goal is to contribute to the shaping of policies and leadership strategies that enhance the professionalization of facilitation practices. This endeavor is not just for the benefit of students with disabilities, but also for the educators responsible for their learning, and the families who support them. Such a shift in practice could significantly influence educational outcomes in a positive way, setting a precedent for small, rural districts everywhere.

In conducting my research, I have been acutely aware of the need for objectivity, particularly in how I engage with participants and their perspectives. It is crucial that my preconceived theories do not bias the data collection process. To understand the current state of IEP facilitation practices, it is essential to gather candid accounts from various stakeholders, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the situation. This approach is vital as it appears that Maine lags behind other states in inclusive practices. However, it's important to recognize that quantitative data from state and federal reports does not provide the complete picture of practices across a states, or even the district. Therefore, my research includes gathering qualitative data for a more nuanced understanding, comparing it with existing quantitative data. This comprehensive approach is aimed at uncovering the underlying reasons behind the current educational landscape for students with disabilities in rural settings like Maine.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

In this comparative case study, I investigated the perspectives of special education leaders in two Northern New England states regarding the structures of special education in their SAUs. The primary aim was to explore the interplay between their leadership beliefs concerning the LRE and the outcomes produced for students by the teams they led, as defined by the subsequent program offerings decided at IEP team meetings (LRE data). I also delved into district resources' influence on common barriers encountered in pursuit of more inclusive practices.

Through this research, I aimed to shed light on the strategies employed to manage complex team dynamics and prevent undue influence on decisions leading to more restrictive environments for students. I used a comparative case study to examine the approaches to IEP facilitation structures in two Northern New England states, one with a high percentage and one with a low percentage of students educated in the general education setting for 80% or more of the school day. This chapter contains the findings of the comparison case study used to answer the following research questions:

RQ1. How do special education leaders perceive the concept of the least restrictive environment?

RQ2. How do special education leaders perceive the impact of IEP team dynamics on determining the least restrictive environment?

RQ3. What barriers do special education leaders report when programming for inclusive outcomes?

I begin this chapter by introducing the study's setting by presenting a demographic information in both narrative and visual formats, using tables to complement the summary. The demographics will help the reader understand more about each individual participant and the

demographics of their associated SAUs. Collective participant sample demographics about the composition of factors in each state being compared will be explored. Multiple vantagepoints allow the reader to understand the data and how it relates to the similarities and differences within and across cases in chapter five. The processes used to collect and analyze the data from the transcripts of the fourteen interviewees is also briefly reviewed in this chapter.

Setting

Demographics

Maine and New Hampshire, two Northern New England states with similar geography, particularly in their rural features, each serve as a case for this comparison analysis. Fourteen participants were interviewed for this study, seven from each state. A directory of special education directors was obtained from the Department of Education for each state. Each director was subsequently emailed (Appendix A) to solicit participation. Participants were able schedule interviews using Zoom scheduling software which eliminated the need for back-and-forth messaging which might have prevented people from dropping out after their initial indication of willingness to participate.

Disparities in environmental data are shown to exist among states. The data I collected from Maine for the 2021-2022 school year indicated 54.45% of students with disabilities were educated in the general education setting for 80% or more of their school day. By contrast, in New Hampshire, 73.75% of special education students were educated under those circumstances. When I looked at the US data during this time frame, the data I found showed 67% of students were in general education classrooms for 80% or more of the school day. These differences may highlight difference in practices, or it could indicate a lack of uniformity in how data is collected across states.

Six (85.71%) of the Maine special education directors interviewed were female (Table 3). Five (71.42%) have six or more years of experience in special education leadership, and all earned graduate degrees in special education, social work and/or educational leadership. Rural locations represent five (71.42%) of the participating SAUs (NCES, n.d.).

Table 3

Maine Special Education Leader and School Administrative District Demographics

ME Special Education Leaders (Gender)	Experience	Facilitation	Locale Code	Student Population	Percentage of Students with IEPs
ME1 (F)	6-10 years	Conflict	41	1686	15.80%
ME2 (F)	6-10 years	Conflict, Eligibility, Out-of-Unit Placements	42	1915	18.60%
ME3 (F)	0-5 years	All	43	340	22.70%
ME4 (F)	0-5 years	Conflict, Triennials	42	1064	22.60%
ME5 (M)	11+ years	Conflict, Eligibility, Out-of-Unit Placements	22	2875	15.30%
ME6 (F)	11+ years	Conflict, Eligibility, Out-of-Unit Placements	23	1275	26.00%
ME7 (F)	11+ years	Conflict, Out-of-Unit placement	42	1728	27.40%

Note. Out-of-unit Placement could indicate day or residential treatment, a correctional facility, or some other placement outside of the SAU.

Collectively, the Maine sample of SAU participants educates 51.03% of students with disabilities in the general education setting for 80% or more of the school day, which is slightly lower than the Maine average of 56.11%. (ME DOE, n.d.) Despite this gap, the Maine population sample still indicates it can serve as a reasonable frame of reference for Maine practices which allows for general comparisons to be made. Among Maine special education leaders, five (71.42%) participants led the special education efforts in rural SAUs.

Similarly, Table 4 shows the demographic characteristics of New Hampshire participants and their SAUs, to include locale codes (NCES, n.d.) and disability rates (NH DOE, n.d.). In New Hampshire, sample participant districts educate 75% of students with disabilities in the

general education setting 80% or more of the time, which is consistent with the overall New Hampshire average of 73.75%. Five (71.42%) of the New Hampshire special education leaders I interviewed were female, and five also have six or more years of experience in their role. All participants have advanced degrees as is mandated by the New Hampshire certification requirements for the position (New Hampshire Teacher Certification and Licensing Guide, n.d.). Similarly to Maine, five (71.42%) of the participating SAUs special education leaders represent rural locations.

Table 4

New Hampshire Director and School Administrative District Demographics

NH Special Education Leaders (Gender)	Experience	Facilitation	Locale Code	Student Population	Percentage of Students with IEPs
NH1 (F)	11+ years	Conflict	41	1606.00	18.12%
NH2 (M)	0-5 years	All	42	198.00	17.68%
NH3 (F)	11+ years	Conflict, High School	41	482.00	23.65%
NH4 (F)	11+ years	Conflict, Eligibility	31	2206.00	24.39%
NH5 (M)	6-10 years	Conflict	21	1416.00	23.73%
NH6 (F)	0-5 years	Conflict, Eligibility	42	1180.00	15%
NH7 (F)	11+ years	Conflict, Out-of-unit placement	42	1016.00	21.75%

Note. Out-of-unit Placement could indicate day or residential treatment, a correctional facility, or some other placement outside of the SAU.

These factors, combined with the average LRE data being closely aligned with state data points, lend viability to findings from each sample as being generalizable to other directors' lived experiences across states studied. The overall disability rate for New Hampshire's is 18% compared to Maine's 20% (US DOE, n.d.) of students. I found Maine to be one of the highest in the nation for percentage of students with disabilities, and New Hampshire was not far behind.

Rates this high should lead policymakers and educational leaders to call into question the inherent structures of IEP team decision-making practices.

Data Collection

The primary methods of data collection I used for this study included semi-structured interviews, special education data, and the voluntary collection of local artifact documents related to special education processes in some districts. Special education data was collected from federal and state archives found on the department of education websites (US DOE, n.d., NH DOE, n.d., ME DOE, n.d.). I reviewed local artifact documents, including district IEP agenda templates and matrix documents that some special education leaders used for team decision-making. The documents were voluntarily provided by interviewees and I reviewed them for inclusive programming strategies.

The semi-structured interviews I conducted with the special education leaders from each state allowed me to gain insight into their philosophies of how student IEP outcomes might be derived based on their operating definition of the LRE mandate. I conducted similar interviews with some IEP facilitators from Maine and New Hampshire but had difficulties with lack of response rates from participants through snowball sampling. I did not include that data in this study as three IEP facilitators were able to be interviewed from Maine, and only one from New Hampshire. While I conducted the interviews, I excluded the data from my results due to lack of uniformity across states with participant participation. As a result of this limitation, I expanded the initial sample population of directors from six to seven. Through analysis of the interviews, I sought to gain an understanding of how special education leaders understand the complex processes involved in leading teams during high-stakes decision-making.

The interviews were conducted through Zoom, a virtual platform, to maximize efficiency around time as it eliminated the need for travel. The interviews were all conducted after the first

attempt at scheduling without conflict using Zoom scheduling which provided calendar reminders to participants of the prearranged interview time. Email reminders were also sent out the day prior to the interviews. The interview script (Appendix A) was used for consistency of the application of interview protocols. Interviews were initially uploaded into the software Sonix for transcription. Then, I watched the videos, and corrected any inaccuracies that existed in the transcripts to further refine them while taking care to rewatch any areas where I was questioning interpretation of a participant's words.

Data Analysis

Participant views were examined through a back-and-forth conversation using a set of predetermined questions (Appendix A) and spontaneous follow-up questions. Alignment between what I refer to as central interview questions, and the research questions is outlined in Table 5. Each central interview question is aimed at directly answering a research question.

Table 5

Research Question Alignment to Interview Question

Research Question	Central Interview Question
RQ1 How do special education leaders perceive the concept of the least restrictive environment?	1. How do you define the LRE?
RQ2 How do special education leaders perceive the impact of IEP team dynamics on determining the least restrictive environment?	2. How do you weigh input from the various team members?
RQ3 What barriers do special education leaders report when programming for inclusive outcomes?	3. What barriers do IEP teams face in planning for inclusive LRE outcomes?

Other questions were asked to follow-up on important points, but other question data was not consistently solicited across participants, or reported in the table as the interviews were semi-structured by design.

The interview data for RQ1 and RQ2 was manually coded using a codebook of deductive codes developed from the literature review. The results were viewed in various combinations alongside demographic data and the results recorded in an excel spreadsheet for ease of analysis. Then, transcript data for RQ2 was uploaded into Atlas.ti software. I used 'Intentional AI coding', a Beta feature of Atlas.ti to generate inductive codes for that dataset. From there, the codes generated were manually sorted into categories to further refine them. This approach allowed me to quickly uncover new themes not initially seen in my review of the literature. For comparison, this inductive approach using software is like the use of open coding in the NVivo software. It added a layer of awareness and bracketing of personal biases to my analysis of the results.

Findings are presented by research question themes to show the differential process of analysis for each question, and to focus on themes uncovered for each question. The presentation of data will help the reader visualize what will be discussed in the next chapter when I explain my findings. The results of each research question will be presented within case (Maine or New Hampshire) and/or across cases (comparison of Maine and New Hampshire), depending on type of data collected and the resulting analysis of that data.

Guiding Beliefs of Directors Regarding LRE

For the first research question, I examined the operating definition of the LRE for each special education leader interviewed. I developed two codes to categorize the data based only on their responses to the first interview question (Table 5). The code 'Mainstream' was applied if the participant clearly articulated they felt the LRE is the general education or mainstream

classroom. The other responses, which infused some sort of implication that the LRE was more of a subjective experience and dependent on a variety of needs were coded ‘Needs’.

State Data Limitation

One of the New Hampshire directors reported they felt their state’s inclusion numbers were inflated due to an initiative to conduct specially designed instruction inside of the regular education setting rather than pulling out students out into a resource room setting to provide the service. They indicated the placement data would not identify the special education service using LRE data because it was being viewed as mainstreaming even if the student was working on different material than their general education counterparts.

> We are doing specialized instruction in the back of a classroom and that is going to fudge the data. It's happening in a regular education setting, so that's how I have to click it. And I can tell you, I have three kids right now at the elementary level in grade K that are prime examples. Twenty percent of the day, they're actually getting what I would call specialized instruction, even though it's located in a [regular education] classroom. (NH5)

This factor created a limitation with how I can compare the data between Maine and New Hampshire as no other participant indicated to what extent, if any, they are providing special education services *in* the general education classroom and counting it as the LRE.

Mainstream Approach

I perceived the nature of the mainstream perspective to be straightforward as seen in the descriptions of the mainstream approach. According to Yell et al. (2020), the mainstream approach will lend itself to more inclusive outcomes as leaders are considering it as the first starting place for decision-making around student programming. I noted during the interviews

that special education leaders operating under this definition of the LRE used clear, concise, and objective language to describe it. Excerpts illustrating the Mainstream participant belief system by state are outlined in Table 6.

Table 6

Participant Utterances Demonstrating Mainstream Approach by State

Maine	New Hampshire
"It really the ability to spend as much time as possible in that general setting with typical developing peers." (ME6)	"I define the least restrictive environment as the inclusive setting." (NH2)
"I think the more time you can be in general education, the better, even with significant disabilities." (ME7)	"When we think about least restrictive, we always start with the [general education] classroom." (NH3)
	"For me, it would definitely be that this child is in the general ed setting the whole time." (NH6)
	"The regular education classroom." (NH7)

I used samples of participant quotes to illustrate how they described prevailing beliefs associated with the LRE. All mainstream special education leaders favored an approach where the LRE *is* the general education setting. Even though associations cannot be made to the LRE data due to the limitation already noted, mainstream leaders believe students with disabilities should be contemplated for participation in the general education setting before more restrictive placements are considered.

Needs-Based Approach

Five (71%) of the Maine special education directors I interviewed indicated a needs-based operational definition compared to three (43%) of the New Hampshire directors. Table 7 shows in part the quotes from the needs-based perspective.

Table 7

Participant Utterances Demonstrating Needs-based Approach by State

Maine	New Hampshire
"That is a setting where a child's needs are met, instruction is delivered in an appropriate manner, and they have access to typically developing peers." (ME1)	"It depends on the student. It depends sometimes on the teacher, and unfortunately, it sometimes depends on the school." (NH1)
"What the students are strong in and what their needs are develops what the placement will be." (ME2)	"What is the actual need of the student and what is the least impeding away from regular ed that there is that will also allow them to grow?" (NH4)
"There are those students who General Ed setting is just not necessarily appropriate for them." (ME3)	"The [setting is] one in which the goals can be achieved collectively." (NH5)
"The most inclusive environment that a student can be successful in and access their education in." (ME4)	
"I guess it really depends on the needs of the student, right? The strengths and weaknesses of the student." (ME5)	

Most participants falling into the needs-based category provided lengthy explanations compared to those who were defining a mainstream approach. They all alluded to the LRE being wherever the team felt the student's needs could best be met versus the mainstream approach, which uses a more literal definition of the LRE. This approach is more likely to consider a range of placement options, not necessarily starting with the most inclusive options. In the end, I determined there was no evidence to support one approach as providing more inclusive programming over the other due to inconsistencies in the way New Hampshire and Maine Departments of Education collect environment data.

Group Dynamics Impact on IEP Team Processes

This question examined how special education leaders perceive the impact of certain team decision making dynamics as outlined in social science research. The IEP team dynamics ultimately influence team decisions, which will impact the LRE outcomes. Analysis of the findings was done using a lens of understanding there are limitations to data comparisons given potential inconsistencies with LRE data collection among different states. The aim of my analysis was to focus on how directors perceive the influence of high status team members and how they factor the information received from them.

Unequal Team Member Status

The interview data reveals insights into how team member status and input from different team members are perceived and valued in educational settings. Special education leaders from both states particularly emphasized these factors in relation to eligibility meetings as well as those in which conflict was anticipated. Most of them are not able to attend all IEP meetings, but in looking at how they prioritize which meetings they do attend, all cited they attend any meeting where conflict was anticipated. Seven of the 14 special education attend all meetings where eligibility is being discussed. This included both initial eligibility and triennial meetings where evaluations are being used to make determinations. Some of the factors that were found indicate special education leaders weigh one team member's input over other members' input at times during the IEP meetings they attend.

Personality Influences in Meetings. Personality types can affect team dynamics (Prewett et al., 2016) For instance, a more assertive teacher might push their viewpoint more strongly. This does not necessarily mean their input is valued more, but it suggests a need for balance in considering opinions, regardless of the assertiveness of the team member.

> Speaking candidly, that's sometimes about personality type. You know, you may have a firecracker spitfire of a teacher who really wants their point of view heard. That doesn't mean that I take it to mean more than anyone else. But, you know, sometimes that can happen in a meeting for me. It depends on what services a kiddo needs to address their area of disability. So, for instance, if a kiddo has an SLD in math, I want to hear about it [the impact] from the math teacher. (NH2)

If other team members might be impacted by the forward nature of communications received so strongly from assertive teachers, they may feel like their voice does not matter leading them to stay silent.

Special Education leaders also perceived that teachers who are well-prepared with thorough assessment and behavioral data to present, are trusted more than those without. Their dedication to understanding and supporting the child's needs made their input more valuable and likely to encourage collaborative efforts between administrators and teachers.

> When the teacher is putting in the time and the effort, they've got their assessment and behavioral data and they know their kid, you do tend to trust their input a lot more. And I would be more likely to collaborate with them than when I get those teachers who show up and say, "He's fine in my gym class, can I go now?" (NH5)

While teachers who are well prepared demonstrate a sense of dedication to special education best practices, this factor should not minimize the input from other team members, including teachers who may not outwardly seem prepared.

Perceived Specialist Status. In eligibility meetings, the professional overseeing a specific discipline, such as speech issues, is generally regarded as the authority by special

education leaders. Their judgment on whether a child meets eligibility criteria is given significant weight, reflecting the importance of specialized expertise in decision-making.

> When you're in an eligibility meeting, it's really that professional that oversees that discipline. So, if it's a speech issue that people are concerned about, I'm looking to that professional as the authority on whether that child meets the eligibility criteria. (NH3)

Special education leaders from both states had similar viewpoints, especially regarding behavior issues.

BCBAs and School Psychologists. In more complicated situations where intensive behaviors are an issue, there is a greater reliance on the input of school psychologists and Board-Certified Behavior Analysts (BCBAs). Their direct involvement and specialized knowledge make their perspectives particularly important to special education leaders. One special education leader said, “In cases where they're complicated, I do rely more on the school psychologists and the BCBA that I have who have been directly involved [with the student]” (ME7). While it is important to consider specialists input, teams make final determination together, and need to remember that there are other perspectives to consider.

For example, let’s consider a general education teacher who is insisting a student be removed from their classroom for behavior issues. Let’s presume this student was tested by the school psychologist and found to be performing average on all areas of cognitive and academic achievement testing. Let’s also presume the BCBA is recommending in class accommodations and a behavior improvement plan. The teacher informs the team they do not have the resources to provide these supports. The parent is hesitant to place a label on their child and have them assigned to a special education classroom, and the student does not want to leave their friends.

Each of these perspectives needs to be considered and openly discussed rather than weighing input of the specialists more than the other members' input.

Special Education Teacher Role. The special education teacher, being actively involved with the child's progress and adherence to the IEP, is perceived by special education leaders to have more heavily weighted input into programming decisions. Their data and observations are considered crucial in assessing the child's needs and progress.

> A special education teacher is the one who is working with that child and measuring progress. If they have good data and they are following the IEP the way they are meant to be, I think their input matters a lot too. (ME4)

While special education teachers do have a unique perspective on student, they may also have attitudes that hinder progress (Cook, 2001).

> Teacher attitudes, mostly general education teacher, and I used to always only say general education teachers, but quite frankly, some of our special education teachers have really interesting attitudes about kids with disabilities. For instance, you can't close the gap because after all, they're kids with disabilities. (NH1)

This should caution special education leaders and IEP facilitators to balance the input of special educators with other perspectives, taking care not to weigh special education teacher input more heavily because they have ascribed a perceived higher status on them (Thomas-Hunt et al, 2003).

Context Dependent Elevated Status. The weight given to a team member's input varies depending on the issue discussed. For example, a speech pathologist's input is more valued when discussing speech delays, whereas a teacher's input is more heavily weighted when discussing the impact in the classroom. Impact statements tend to be given by those who observe the child

most closely, whether in school or at home, depending on the issue being discussed. One director highlighted this phenomenon during their interview.

> *If I'm talking about a kid with a speech delay or a speech concern, the speech pathologist's input holds more weight than my own, and more weight than the classroom teachers as far as when we're talking about that disability and how it influences the limitations of the child. If we're talking about the impact of it in the classroom, the teacher's input is more heavily weighted...So, impact statements are usually the people who are working with that kid who gets to see the impact the most.* (NH5)

In situations such as this, if the facilitator does not balance input, this discussion might inadvertently silence other team members who are consequently made to feel that their voice does not matter (Ruppar & Gaffney, 2011).

Overall, the data highlights the value of the IEP team member's input is often determined by extraneous variables such as personality traits, their specific roles on the team, and their perceived expertise. These factors are weighted by special education leaders in relation to the context of the issue being discussed. To achieve equal team member status, persons who facilitate IEP meetings, should be able to recognize members perceived to have lower status, such as parents and students, as they may have unique insights that could influence inclusive programming opportunities. Without these variables being controlled for by best practices in the facilitation of IEP meetings, there may remain hidden information (Gigone & Hastie, 1993) from some team members who feel less valued. If this information were uncovered by using effective facilitation skills, that information could impact an outcome towards one that is more inclusive.

Barriers to Inclusion

The final research question examines perceived barriers in Maine and New Hampshire to highlight similarities and differences between the two states. Results are based on interview data stemming from central interview questions (Table 5). The first round of coding for this research question used a deductive approach using three codes: willingness to collaborate, professional development, and resources stemming from the Kart (2021) study.

I filtered all responses about barriers through these three 'buckets'. Attitude came to the forefront when looking at the data, and did not cleanly fit into a pre-existing bucket, so I moved willingness to collaborate under the umbrella of the attitude barrier. I did this because the term willingness implies that there is an attitude component, and only one of the 14 special education leaders interviewed annotated collaboration issues as being a barrier in this study. Barriers perceived by special education leaders is broken down by state in Table 8.

Table 8

Perceptions of Barriers by State

	Maine	**New Hampshire**
Professional Development	Inclusion Differentiation Intervention strategies Behavior	Inclusion Differentiation Intervention strategies Universal Design for Learning (UDL) Coaching New teacher preparation
Resources	Staff Time	Staff Time Schedules Consultants
Negative Attitude	Philosophical beliefs Need one-to-one support Teachers feel unprepared	Philosophical beliefs Need one-to-one support Teachers feel unprepared Unwilling to collaborate Deficit-oriented approach Want to keep things status quo

New Hampshire special education leaders highlighted many of the same barriers as Maine leaders did, but they articulated some barriers that Maine participants did not discuss. For example, UDL was a frequently occurring theme among New Hampshire special education leaders, yet it was not brought to the forefront in Maine. Both states cited staff perceive the need for one-to-one support to make inclusion work for students, especially those with behavior challenges.

Attitude

According to special education leaders in both states, a traditional attitude is slowing the advancement of realizing inclusion for students with disabilities, especially for those students presenting with behavioral challenges. Many teachers do not feel adequately prepared to educate students with disabilities, despite being required to take courses in this area in for certification (ME DOE, n.d.; New Hampshire Teacher Certification and Licensing Guide, n.d.). In total, 11 of the 14 (78.57%) interview participants indicated attitude issues as being a barrier to inclusion. In Maine, six special education leaders cited general education teacher negative attitudes towards meeting the needs of students with disabilities in their classrooms compared to four (57.14%) of New Hampshire special education leaders. Perceived barriers by state can be seen in Table 8.

One Maine participant highlights a situation that illustrates an attitude barrier which seems to occur due to the lack of observed successful experiences in managing students with behavior challenges in the classroom.

> *I feel like it is our job to figure out why people might be resistant* [to inclusion]. *I do not want to sound 'Pollyannaish', but I think most of the teachers I work with do not want to exclude kids with disabilities from their classrooms. They just cannot picture in their mind how it is really going to work. And they have seen it not work. So, they have that*

> *sort of very concrete experience of having, let us say, a kid wh has got behavior regulation issues in their class and it has been disruptive and exhausting.* (Participant ME5)

Several other participants pointedly made note of their frustration with how much time has elapsed since IDEA was developed in relation to the slow pace of change in moving the pendulum towards inclusion as a reality. One New Hampshire leader notes attitudes of both general and special educators as being a barrier to inclusion.

> It drives me nuts because it has been a long time since 1975, but teacher attitudes, mostly general education teachers, and I used to only say general education teachers, but quite frankly, some of our special education teachers have interesting attitudes about kids with disabilities. For instance, you cannot close the gap because after all, they are kids with disabilities. They would not have a disability if they could close the gap. It is like, wait a minute, should we not have high expectations? Should we not expect that they are going to close the gap? And that would give us a better attitude, you know what I mean? (Participant NH1)

Special education leaders say some teachers have philosophical beliefs that students with disabilities who are not performing on grade level should be sent into the special education setting to receive specially designed instruction. They also report many teachers do not feel adequately trained, nor do they feel they have adequate resources to meet the needs of some students with disabilities. Often, special education leaders cited general education teachers as reporting the need for a one-to-one support for students, which is a costly and dwindling resource due to staffing shortages.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of a study's findings is an essential aspect of its overall validity and impact (Maxwell, 2013). In this study, the SAU alignment towards the state average LRE data contributed to the study's representativeness and external validity, suggesting that the findings may be generalizable beyond the specific samples chosen (Smith & Firth, 2011). Additionally, the integration of AI technologies like Sonix and ATLAS.ti, not only enhances the accuracy of the coding process but also introduces a systematic approach to handling voluminous data that might be challenging for human coders to manage effectively (Friese, 2019). This dual-phase coding strategy, where manual coding is complemented by AI-assisted analysis, ensured a more comprehensive exploration of data, reducing the likelihood of overlooking subtle yet significant themes.

Document analysis, when examining web pages that are subject to change over time, presented its own set of challenges and as such, was unable to be used in the findings. Establishing a structured process to capture the static state of information at the time of data collection is critical (Smith & Firth, 2011). For future studies, implementing a method to capture contents would help control for this variable at the onset to ensure that the context in which the outcome data was collected is accurately reflected (Maxwell, 2013). By addressing these aspects from the beginning of the research design, the study could present a more compelling argument for the trustworthiness of its findings.

Summary

Chapter 4 of the study presents results from a comparative case study exploring the perspectives of special education leaders in two Northern New England states regarding their perceptions of the special education structures in their SAUs. The chapter delves into how the leaders' beliefs about the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) shape IEP team decisions and

influence the inclusiveness of program offerings for students with disabilities. Key points from Chapter 4 include the following findings:

RQ 1: Most Maine directors had a needs-based view, while a near-equal split, with mainstream favored, was found in New Hampshire. Maine data shows student programming to be less inclusive than New Hampshire's.

RQ2: Variables, such as unequal team member status, influences the outcomes as the information presented by individuals with perceived higher status as it was weighted more heavily. Evidence of this phenomenon was found in both states.

RQ3: Barriers to inclusion were identified, with teacher attitude emerging from the as a nearly universal barrier by special education leaders across states.

Many directors noted general education teacher resistance towards inclusion as having stemmed from previous unsuccessful experiences, a lack of preparedness, or generally negative attitudes towards the capability of some students with disabilities to be successful in the general education environment. This chapter concludes by asserting that the data gathered provides insights that are likely generalizable to other rural special education directors' experiences in the northeast. It also prepares the reader for Chapter 5, which will interpret the findings in relation to the research questions.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

In Chapter 4, the results of the data were presented in the context of findings from information gathered from the interview questions used to frame this study. In this chapter, I examine how those findings loop back to the guiding research questions and the literature review. In this discussion, I incorporate talking points to explore the different interpretations of the LRE mandate under IDEA with connections to inclusion rates. I also offer a nuanced look at how educational leaders perceive information received at special education team meetings.

Interpretation of the Findings

Differences in the interpretation of the LRE concept contribute to disparities in the practical approach used when providing students with disabilities an appropriate education. "Appropriateness" is currently left to interpretation due to the fuzzy language in the IDEA leading to different results, depending on the school of thought being applied to team decisions. Since the LRE is referred to as a continuum of services moving from least restrictive to most restrictive, teams should begin their placement conversations around how they can apply the least restrictive setting rather than how to maintain status quo given current school structures.

For example, many students who need math services, end up being removed from the math classroom for the duration of the block, because that is what is easiest for school systems. Instead, having teams ask themselves, "How can we make this work?", would lead them towards more innovative solutions that are focused on meeting the needs of the student, rather than meeting the needs of scheduling and other system issues that influences decisions. This approach towards team leadership would be greatly influenced by improving the skills of the meeting facilitators.

Beliefs about the LRE

The disparity in beliefs about the LRE between New Hampshire and Maine directors highlights regional differences in the approach to inclusion and perhaps stresses the broader debate within special education on the best settings for students with disabilities. The LRE mandate's dual interpretations as either primarily the general education classroom or a more flexible consideration of the child's needs highlights a fundamental tension between special education and regular education. It influences the approaches towards the goal of inclusion combined with the necessity of individualized education for students with IEPs. This tension reflects a larger philosophical and practical debate about how to provide the most effective education for students with disabilities. The IDEA's lack of a clear-cut definition of LRE leaves room for interpretation, which can lead to significant variability in how districts implement policies and make placement decisions (Rooney, 2018).

The belief that the LRE is primarily the general education classroom significantly influences directors' approaches to inclusion, leading to higher rates of inclusion in settings where this belief is prevalent. The IDEA (2004) mandates students with disabilities should be educated in the LRE but leaves the definition of LRE open to interpretation. Directors' interpretations of this mandate deeply influence how they approach the inclusion of students with disabilities (Yell et al, 2020). Little is known about how special education leaders came to their operating belief system, but there is evidence that suggests a ‘mainstream first’ approach lends itself to inclusion better than the needs-based approach.

The mainstream approach is linked to the belief that the general education setting *is* the LRE, treating it as the default or starting point for placement decisions. This is compelling as it leads to speculation that the underlying beliefs of educational leaders about the nature of the LRE

could influence the practical outcomes of students' educational experiences. The data I provided shows a clear disparity between New Hampshire and Maine directors in terms of their beliefs about the LRE. Most New Hampshire special education leaders (57.14%) believe the LRE is the general education classroom, compared to a much smaller percentage (28.57%) of Maine leaders. This difference in belief systems can be linked to the observed higher rates of inclusion in New Hampshire, providing some supporting evidence that belief in the general education classroom as the LRE correlates with increased inclusion rates.

The belief that the general education classroom is the LRE influences the starting point for making placement decisions and the range of supports and accommodations provided to facilitate inclusion. This belief system encourages a proactive approach to inclusion, where the default approach is to adapt the general education setting to meet the needs of students with disabilities, rather than moving the student to a more restrictive setting based on systemic structures. This feeds the ongoing debate within special education regarding how to balance individual educational needs with the goal of inclusion and availability of resources. It also calls attention to the importance of directors' guiding beliefs. Directors who prioritize the general education classroom as the LRE are navigating this balance by leaning towards inclusion (Yell et al., 2020), assuming it provides an appropriate education and social benefits to students with disabilities.

Impact of Team Member Status on Outcomes

The belief structures and perceived status of IEP facilitators and other team members was shown to significantly influence the dynamics and outcomes of IEP meetings, often leading to a hierarchical flow of information that may not fully represent the student's needs or incorporate diverse perspectives effectively. The role of IEP facilitators was pivotal in shaping the direction

and outcomes of meetings. Their inherent biases and the design of the meeting affects how input from various team members are valued and integrated. This dynamic aligns with research suggesting that facilitators, as high-status members, can dictate the flow and focus of information exchange (Thomas-Hunt et al., 2003), potentially sidelining valuable insights from those with lower perceived status. The status of IEP team members significantly impacts the process of evaluating information, with inputs from perceived experts or high-status members like evaluators and administrators being given more weight. This trend reflects a broader pattern where unshared information from high-status individuals is more likely to be prioritized, potentially at the expense of comprehensive and balanced decision-making.

Common Knowledge Effect. The tendency of team members to focus on shared information, as suggested in the special education leader interviews, reflects the common knowledge effect observed in Gigone & Hastie's (1993) research. The tendency for IEP teams to focus on shared information limits the exploration of unique insights that could inform more effective student plans. This phenomenon can lead to underrepresentation of input from lower-status members, who may possess critical but less commonly shared knowledge about the student's needs, thereby hindering the development of a holistic and tailored educational approach.

Expert Dominance. The dominance of experts in discussions, often exacerbated by specialized jargon, can alienate other team members, and prevent a balanced exchange of ideas (Hollingshead, 1996; Lewin Loyd et al, 2010). This prioritizes the need for trained IEP meeting facilitators to manage meeting dynamics carefully to ensure that all perspectives, especially those of non-experts, are adequately heard and considered. Special education leaders' tendency to value information based on the presenter's perceived status (Thomas-Hunt et al, 2005) creates a

hierarchical approach to team member input valuation. This not only marginalizes the contributions of some teachers, parents, and students but also reflects a potential oversight of the student's holistic needs, as the perspectives of those closest to the student's daily experiences and challenges are undervalued. The lack of emphasis on uncovering the student's perspective in IEP meetings, as indicated by the lack of focus on this aspect among special education leaders, points to a significant gap in the process. Filling this gap would ensure that student voices are actively included and valued as it is crucial for developing plans that truly reflect their needs and aspirations.

To address these issues, it is essential to foster an IEP meeting environment that promotes equity and inclusivity. This could involve training for facilitators to recognize and counteract biases, strategies to ensure a balanced representation of all perspectives, and explicit efforts to elevate the student's voice in the planning process. By acknowledging and addressing the impact of belief structures and status perceptions, the IEP process can become more responsive to the diverse needs of students with disabilities, leading to outcomes that better support their educational and personal development.

Intentionally focusing the meeting around the LRE during IEP team meetings may ensure outcomes are derived from a more global understanding of the child's needs and how schools might be able to think out of the box to meet those needs in the LRE. A way to do this might be found in the limitation posed by one New Hampshire director. The interview data reveals insights into how team member status and input are perceived and valued in educational settings, particularly in relation to eligibility meetings and meetings where conflict is anticipated. This extra weight given to specialist input, elevates their status on the IEP team, potentially minimizing input from other team members (Thomas-Hunt et al, 2005).

Teacher Attitude is a Barrier to Inclusion

Teacher attitude is a significant barrier to the implementation and success of inclusive programming, overshadowing other logistical and resource-based challenges, and necessitating targeted interventions to foster a more inclusive educational culture. The research findings indicate that a significant majority of directors (79%) identified educator attitude as a key barrier to inclusive programming. This suggests that despite advancements in policy and availability of resources, the personal attitudes, beliefs, and willingness of educators to embrace inclusion remain critical challenges.

The nearly universal identification of attitude as a barrier highlights its central role in hindering the effective integration of inclusive practices within educational settings. The finding that attitude issues are prevalent indicates a gap in understanding how to overcome this barrier. The lack of variance across two states in the northeast region indicates that the issue of educator attitude is not isolated but rather a widespread challenge that crosses geographic and administrative boundaries. This consistency suggests that strategies for addressing attitude barriers need to be adaptable and scalable to be effective across different educational contexts.

Collaboration. A specific aspect of attitude that impeded inclusion and was covered in the literature is a lack of willingness to engage in collaborative efforts. Collaboration is essential for successful inclusive education, requiring teachers to work together with special educators, parents, and students to design and implement effective learning strategies. However, if educators are resistant to collaboration, this can create a significant obstacle to the development of inclusive environments where diverse needs are met through shared responsibility and expertise.

Conflict. Conflict is not avoidable when conducting IEP business. The fact that all directors interviewed prefer to facilitate meetings where conflict is anticipated due to liability

concerns indicates that attitude issues extend beyond the classroom and into the broader administrative and policy-making arenas. The management of conflict, often arising from differing beliefs about inclusion and the best approaches to education for students with disabilities, suggests the need for a shift in attitude at all levels of the educational system.

Professional Development. While Kart & Kart (2021) highlight professional development and resources for high-quality instruction as inclusion barriers, the emphasis by directors on attitude suggests that addressing attitudes and beliefs should be a primary focus of professional development efforts. Training that challenges existing perceptions and encourages open-mindedness, flexibility, and a genuine commitment to collaboration can be more effective in overcoming attitude barriers than resources aimed solely at improving instructional techniques or curriculum design (Orr, 2009).

Addressing the barrier of educator attitude requires a multifaceted approach that includes professional development focused on changing attitudes and beliefs (Coviello & DeMatthews, 2021), fostering a culture of collaboration, and creating administrative policies that support and incentivize inclusive practices. The near-universal acknowledgment of attitude as a barrier by directors interviewed suggests that transformative change in inclusive programming will be contingent on the ability to shift educator perspectives and attitudes towards a more inclusive and collaborative educational paradigm.

Structural Implications

The indistinct definition of LRE within IDEA (2004) supports the notion where educational equity is a target marked by moving boundaries. The boundaries seem dependent on the vision of an SAU towards educating students with disabilities coupled with the availability of resources based on that vision. Factors such as funding disparities, scheduling, teacher

preparation, and the range of inclusive practices being implemented in schools further differentiates this picture, making a uniform approach to policy implementation challenging.

In the microcosm of Maine and New Hampshire's approach to LRE data collection, we need to reflect on the broader experience across the United States. New Hampshire's inclusion of special education services within general classrooms might be representative of a more integrated educational philosophy, whereas Maine's reported absence of this practice suggests a difference in strategy and/or resource allocation. The consequence is data that hampers direct comparability but also sparks a potential debate on best practices.

Many schools use co-teaching models and provide accommodations in the general education classroom, but what came to light in New Hampshire was a bit different. New Hampshire has some students receiving special education services within the general education classrooms, even when students are working on different material. In Maine, this approach should be explored for some students as an alternative to providing services outside of the general education setting. It could be a bridge towards improving inclusive opportunities and help general education teachers feel more supported in the process because special educators would be located in the classroom to assist in meeting the needs of students who require modified instruction.

In the end, this is not about numbers and percentages; it’s about what’s happening in the halls and classrooms. If New Hampshire is on to something that helps make inclusion a reality, other states should begin to explore what this could look like for them. Should it be a promising practice, researching the implications and identifying barriers early on will help school leaders prepare to make the transition smoother for all involved. Conversely, if Maine's practices yield

positive outcomes within their context, they might offer an alternative design for student engagement in other regions facing similar constraints.

IEP Process Implications

The overarching implication of this study is that moving towards more inclusive educational practices requires a multifaceted approach that includes changes at the individual educator level, systemic policy revisions, and ongoing research to guide these efforts. Shifting attitudes away from deficit-minded orientations (Ashby & Rood, 2019) will be a key to helping achieve equity both in the classrooms, and at IEP tables. Attitude influences the willingness of people to adopt inclusive practices and to collaborate with each other effectively.

Further exploration is needed to understand what skills meeting facilitators need to help steer IEP team members towards collaboration as they approach IEP decision-making tasks. This information will help organizations develop universal meeting norms to help mitigate some of the factors that contribute to current inequities. To begin this work, more information should be gathered about how we prepare parents and other team members to meaningfully participate in IEP meetings. Having said that, almost all directors interviewed mentioned they themselves had no formal training, so it is unlikely we will find that parents receive formal preparations to help them understand the processes.

Understanding the impact of educator attitudes and how meeting facilitators navigate conversations will be instrumental in guiding leaders to offer special education services that prioritize inclusion and equity. It will also aid in the development of policies that truly support the needs of all students. This holistic approach not only benefits students with disabilities but enhances the educational experience for all students by fostering an environment that values diversity, inclusivity, and continuous learning.

Limitations

The study's shift away from focusing on the LRE data towards exploring qualitative data presented by participants, including descriptions of the impact of beliefs on facilitation practices, provides rich insights but also introduces challenges in making broad generalizations. Qualitative data are inherently subjective and context-specific, limiting the ability to apply findings universally. Additionally, special education leaders' self-reported descriptions of their beliefs and practices may be influenced by social desirability bias or personal reflections that do not fully capture the complexity of their decision-making processes. This can affect the accuracy of the connections drawn between LRE beliefs and special education processes.

Despite this limitation, the study's exploration of qualitative data sheds light on the complex dynamics that drive special education processes in SAUs. It highlights the importance of understanding the perspectives and practices of directors in managing IEP team interactions and their influence on the implementation of the LRE. This approach provides valuable insights into the subjective and contextual factors that shape special education in two states with a comparable geographic landscape, offering a foundation for further research and the development of strategies to support more effective and inclusive practices.

Recommendations

My recommendations aim to overcome barriers to inclusive programming by focusing on certification, collaboration, professional development, transparency in data collection, stakeholder engagement, and educator practices. These suggestions are designed to address both the systemic and individual-level changes needed to foster a more inclusive educational environment. Additionally, the section on future research possibilities highlights areas where

further investigation could contribute to our understanding of effective inclusion strategies beyond the scope of academics.

Professional Development

Provide consideration to integrating additional basic special education training into existing teacher certification programs or as on-the-job professional development to provide all teachers with foundational knowledge in special education. On-the-job and continued professional development will provide staff with ongoing training in special education strategies, inclusive teaching practices, leveraging workshops, seminars, and online resources making practices more likely to stick. Offering incentives such as bonuses or tuition reimbursement for teachers who engage in inclusion and attitude development or to pursue dual certification will encourage specialization without mandating it. This effort would help educators feel better prepared to address the needs of diverse learning profiles within their classrooms.

In order to help parents have an equal voice at IEP meetings, they will also need access to a professional development of sorts. The rights of parents are complicated and require at least a conversation outside of the IEP meeting for parents to feel they know their rights going into the meeting. They also need to have a basic understanding of the meeting process itself as it can feel very formal, making it intimidating to speak up, especially if the team is focused on the reasons their child cannot be educated with their peers. If parents know their rights, and what to expect during the formal meeting, it should help them feel like they have support, and more importantly a voice. Regularly reviewing the effectiveness of implemented professional development through feedback from teachers, students, and parents, will help leaders adjust practices to make them more effective.

Future Research Directions

The desire of students to be in the mainstream setting is not well explored. Often, special education services are presented to them after decision have been made by the IEP team, without investigating their preferences or discussing the social emotional impact. Educators inherently prioritize academic learning over the emotional toll on students who deal with the ramifications of being singled out to leave the room for services. It is possible that student preference is to stay in the classroom with their friends, even if it means they are working on different material at times, would be less detrimental to their emotional well-being. Research in this area would help education leaders understand the full picture of the benefits of the New Hampshire practices.

Another area of research targeting how special education leaders and IEP facilitators come to develop belief systems of the LRE as well as the impact of locale on beliefs. It would be interesting to conduct study across different Courts of Appeals as this has been noted by researchers as a factor in how states approach the concept. Most special education leaders I interviewed noted that the question around exploring beliefs, combined with how those beliefs impact their facilitation practices, was interesting. They put time into formulating their responses as though they had never given the matter conscious thought. Exploring this further using a wider scale approach, could glean important insights for policy makers and teacher preparation programs. By addressing the multifaceted challenges to inclusion through targeted actions and research, educators and policymakers can work towards creating educational environments that are truly inclusive and supportive of all students' needs.

Conclusion

The insights gleaned from special education leaders through their interviews illuminate a critical juncture in the realm of education. Since the enactment of the IDEA, the landscape of special education has undergone considerable change, yet the foundational structures and

attitudes regarding its implementation lag conspicuously behind. The rising numbers in special education, coupled with the fiscal challenges presented, emphasizes an urgent need for systemic transformation. This situation is exacerbated by the dwindling numbers of individuals entering the education profession, which threatens the sustainability of current practices.

The call to move away from traditional organizational structures that segregate special education from general education is not merely an administrative shift but a fundamental reevaluation of our educational attitudes. Embracing intersectional diversity in education (Boveda & Aronson, 2019) as a framework that integrates diverse learning and behavioral needs within the fabric of regular education is paramount. This approach necessitates a cultural shift towards inclusivity, where differences are not merely accommodated but are seen as integral to the richness of the educational experiences provided to students.

The transition to a model where inclusion is the norm requires a collaborative effort that transcends current practices. It involves pooling resources, knowledge, and expertise to create an educational environment that is adaptable, equitable, and capable of meeting the diverse needs of all students. This shift is not just about logistical or financial recalibration but about fostering a community that values every student's potential to contribute and learn in a supportive setting.

Return to Vignette

In Chapter 1, I described a fictitious case where an IEP team meeting, intended to support a student named Marcus with special education needs, was compromised by a lack of inclusive practices and transparent communication. To turn this scenario into a realistic representation of inclusive educational practices, we need to reimagine the meeting dynamics and outcomes, ensuring that all voices are heard, all options are considered, and the best interests of Marcus are

kept at the forefront. Here is an outline of how the meeting could be conducted to embody these principles using Facilitated IEP practices (Mueller & Vick, 2019).

Pre-Meeting Preparation:

1. The meeting facilitator sends out an agenda in advance, which includes a section for each team member to share insights and concerns.
2. All members are encouraged to prepare any data or observations they have about Marcus in advance.

Establishing Ground Rules:

1. At the start of the meeting, the facilitator sets ground rules for open communication, equal participation, and respect for all viewpoints.
2. Everyone commits to a student-centered approach, where decisions are made in the best interest of Marcus's educational and social development.

Comprehensive Information Sharing:

1. Each team member presents their observations and data. This includes sharing concerns like Martha's about feeling unprepared, which could be addressed with support rather than by moving Marcus to a different setting.

Discussion of Options:

1. The team discusses a range of options, from accommodations within the general education classroom to specialized interventions.
2. They explore how Marcus can benefit from general education settings and what support structures can be put in place to facilitate his learning and social integration.

Parental Involvement:

1. Marcus's mother, Katie, is actively encouraged to share her insights and preferences, with the team showing respect and consideration for her perspective.
2. The facilitator ensures that Katie understands all options, including their benefits and potential risks.

Collaborative Decision Making:

1. Decisions are made collaboratively, with the facilitator ensuring that each team member's opinion is considered.
2. If consensus cannot be reached, the facilitator guides the team through a structured decision-making process that considers the impact on Marcus's educational experience.

Focus on Inclusive Practices:

1. Inclusion is prioritized, and the team discusses how to implement strategies within the regular education classroom while providing Marcus with the support he needs.
2. Strategies might include co-teaching, differentiated instruction, or the use of technology to support Marcus's learning.

Professional Development:

1. The team addresses Martha's need for professional development to better support Marcus in the classroom, planning for training on inclusive practices and autism-specific strategies.

Creating a Plan for Monitoring and Adjustment:

1. A plan is established to regularly monitor Marcus's progress and the effectiveness of the chosen strategies.
2. The team agrees to reconvene to adjust the plan as necessary based on Marcus's needs and progress.

By ensuring transparency, shared decision-making, and a commitment to inclusion, the IEP team can create a supportive and effective educational program for Marcus.

In closing, the challenges to inclusion are significant, with resources stretched thin and the demand for specialized education increasing. However, the path forward is clear. By integrating special education more fully into the broader educational system, and shifting attitudes towards inclusion, we can begin to address these challenges. This requires a commitment to professional development, policy reform, and a reimagining of what it means to educate in a way that truly reflects the diversity of student needs.

As society continues to evolve, so too must our educational systems. The imperative to shift towards inclusive practices is not just a matter of legislative or fiscal necessity but a moral one. By embracing all learning styles and abilities in the field of education and fostering a culture of inclusivity, we can ensure that our educational practices are sustainable, equitable, and reflective of the diverse society we serve. Only through such transformation can we hope to provide all students with the opportunities they deserve to learn, grow, and thrive in an ever-changing world.

REFERENCES

About IDEA. (n.d.). *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act*. Retrieved November 21, 2022, from https://sites.ed.gov/idea/about-idea/

Ashby, C., & Rood, C. E. (2019). Narrating behavior in secondary school: Exploring approaches to behavioral support described by mentor and resident special educators. The High School Journal, 102(4), 297–318.

Beck, S. J., & DeSutter, K. (2019). An Examination of Group Facilitator Challenges and Problem-Solving Techniques During IEP Team Meetings. *Teacher Education and Special Education*, *43*(2), 127–143. https://doi.org/10.1177/0888406419839766

Beck, S. J., & DeSutter, K. (2021). Special Education Meetings: The Role of the Facilitator in Districts Serving Rural Communities. *Rural Special Education Quarterly*, *40*(1), 33. https://doi.org/10.1177/8756870520972660

Billingsley, B., & Bettini, E. (2019). Special Education Teacher Attrition and Retention: A Review of the Literature. *Review of Educational Research*, *89*(5), 697–744. https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654319862495

Boveda, M., & Aronson, B. A. (2019). Special Education Preservice Teachers, Intersectional Diversity, and the Privileging of Emerging Professional Identities. *Remedial and Special Education*, *40*(4), 248–260. https://doi.org/10.1177/0741932519838621

Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and Collaboration for Effective Educator Development Accountability and Reform Center (CEEDAR) (2017), "PSEL 2015 and promoting principal leadership for the success of students with disabilities", available at: https://www.ccsso.org/sites/default/files/2017-10/PSELforSWDs01252017_0.pdf.

Cook, B. G. (2001). A Comparison of Teachers' Attitudes Toward Their Included Students with Mild and Severe Disabilities. *The Journal of Special Education*, *34*(4), 203–213. https://doi.org/10.1177/002246690103400403

Cook, L., & Friend, M. (2010). The State of the Art of Collaboration on Behalf of Students with Disabilities. *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation*, *20*(1), 1–8. https://doi.org/10.1080/10474410903535398

Coviello, J., & DeMatthews, D. E. (2021). Failure is not final: Principals' perspectives on creating inclusive schools for students with disabilities. Journal of Educational Administration, 59(4), 514–531.

deBettencourt, L. U. (1999). General educators' attitudes toward students with mild disabilities and their use of instructional strategies: Implications for training. *Remedial and Special Education, 20*(1), 27–35. https://doi.org/10.1177/074193259902000104

DeMatthews, D. E., & Mueller, C. (2022). Principal Leadership for Inclusion: Supporting Positive Student Identity Development for Students with Disabilities. *Journal of Research on Leadership Education*, *17*(4), 315–332. https://doi.org/10.1177/19427751211015420

DeMatthews, D. E., Serafini, A., & Watson, T. N. (2021). Leading Inclusive Schools: Principal Perceptions, Practices, and Challenges to Meaningful Change. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, *57*(1), 3–48. https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X20913897

Diggs, T. R. (2016). Exceptional leadership in exceptional times: Perspectives and ideologies of special education directors in Southern California [Ed.D., Pepperdine University]. In *ProQuest Dissertations and Theses*. https://www.proquest.com/docview/1803938168/abstract/F35DE22D14D142FFPQ/1

Education of All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, 20 U.S.C. § 1401.

Friese, S. (2019). Qualitative data analysis with ATLAS.ti (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications Ltd.

Giangreco, M. F. (2020). "How Can a Student with Severe Disabilities Be in a Fifth-Grade Class When He Can't Do Fifth-Grade Level Work?" Misapplying the Least Restrictive Environment. *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*, *45*(1), 23–27. https://doi.org/10.1177/1540796919892733

Gigone, D., & Hastie, R. (1993). The Common Knowledge Effect: Information Sharing and Group Judgment. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *65*(5), 959–974. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.65.5.959

Glesne, C. (2013). Becoming Qualitative Researchers: An Introduction (4th ed.). Boston: Pearson/Allyn & Bacon.

Hartmann, E. S. (2016). Understanding the Everyday Practice of Individualized Education Program Team Members. *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation*, *26*(1), 1–24. https://doi.org/10.1080/10474412.2015.1042975

Hauerwas, L.B. & Mahon, J. (2018) Secondary teachers' experiences with students with disabilities: examining the global landscape, International Journal of Inclusive Education, 22:3, 306-322, DOI: 10.1080/13603116.2017.1364793

Hoge, M. (2013). Factors Considered in Determining Educational Setting for Students with Emotional Disturbance [ProQuest LLC]. In *ProQuest LLC*. https://go.exlibris.link/Yc6rBbDL

Idol, L. (2006). Toward Inclusion of Special Education Students in General Education: A Program Evaluation of Eight Schools. *Remedial and Special Education*, *27*(2), 77–94. https://doi.org/10.1177/07419325060270020601

Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) of 2004, Pub. L. No. 108-446,

U.S.C § 1400 *et seq*. (2004).

Ismailos, L., Gallagher, T., Bennett, S., & Li, X. (2022). Pre-service and in-service teachers' attitudes and self-efficacy beliefs with regards to inclusive education. International Journal of Inclusive Education, 26(2), 175–191.

Kang, H.-K., & O'Neill, P. (2018). Teaching Note-Constructing Critical Conversations: A Model for Facilitating Classroom Dialogue for Critical Learning. *Journal of Social Work Education*, *54*(1), 187–193. https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.2017.1341857

Kart, A., & Kart, M. (2021). Academic and Social Effects of Inclusion on Students without Disabilities: A Review of the Literature. *Education Sciences*, *11*(1), 16. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci11010016

Kurth, J. A., McQueston, J. A., Ruppar, A. L., Toews, S. G., Johnston, R., & McCabe, K. M. (2019). A Description of Parent Input in IEP Development through Analysis IEP Documents. *Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities*, *57*(6), 485–498. https://doi.org/10.1352/1934-9556-57.6.485

Kurth, J. A., Ruppar, A. L., Toews, S. G., McCabe, K. M., McQueston, J. A., & Johnston, R. (2019). Considerations in Placement Decisions for Students with Extensive Support Needs: An Analysis of LRE Statements. *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*, *44*(1), 3–19. https://doi.org/10.1177/1540796918825479

Lewin Loyd, D., Phillips, K. W., Whitson, J., & Thomas-Hunt, M. C. (2010). Expertise in your midst: How congruence between status and speech style affects reactions to unique knowledge. *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, *13*(3), 379–395. https://doi.org/10.1177/1368430209350317

Maine Department of Education. (n.d.). Retrieved from https://www.maine.gov/doe/

Maine Unified Special Education Regulations (2017). 05 ME Code Rules § 071-101-VI

Maine's Alternative Certification and Mentoring Program for Special Educators (MACM). (n.d.). Retrieved from https://www.maine.gov/doe/learning/specialed/initiatives/altcert

Markelz, A. M., Nagro, S. A., Szocik, K., Monnin, K., Gerry, M., Macedonia, A., & Mason, A. (2022). The Nature and Extent of Special Education Law in Teacher Preparation. *Teacher Education and Special Education*, *45*(3), 185–203. https://doi.org/10.1177/08884064211046248

Martin, J. E., Van Dycke, J. L., Greene, B. A., Gardner, J. E., Christensen, W. R., Woods, L. L., & Lovett, D. L. (2006). Direct Observation of Teacher-Directed IEP Meetings: Establishing the Need for Student IEP Meeting Instruction. *Exceptional Children*, *72*(2), 187–200. https://doi.org/10.1177/001440290607200204

Marx, T. A., Hart, J. L., Nelson, L., Love, J., Baxter, C. M., Gartin, B., & Schaefer Whitby, P. J.

(2014). Guiding IEP Teams on Meeting the Least Restrictive Environment Mandate. *Intervention in School and Clinic*, *50*(1), 45–50. https://doi.org/10.1177/1053451214532345

Maxwell, J. A. (2013). Qualitative research design: An interactive approach (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications, Inc.

Mccabe, K. M., Ruppar, A., Kurth, J. A., Mcqueston, J. A., Johnston, R., & Toews, S. G. (2020). Cracks in the Continuum: A Critical Analysis of Least Restrictive Environment for Students with Significant Support Needs. *Teachers College Record (1970)*, *122*(5), 1–28. https://doi.org/10.1177/016146812012200511

Mueller, T. G. (2009). IEP Facilitation: A Promising Approach to Resolving Conflicts between Families and Schools. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, *41*(3), 60–67. https://doi.org/10.1177/004005990904100307

Mueller, T. G., & Vick, A. M. (2019). An Investigation of Facilitated Individualized Education Program Meeting Practice: Promising Procedures That Foster Family–Professional Collaboration. *Teacher Education and Special Education*, *42*(1), 67–81. https://doi.org/10.1177/0888406417739677

New Hampshire Department of Education (n.d.). Retrieved from https://www.education.nh.gov/who-we-are/division-of-educator-and-analytic-resources/bureau-of-education-statistics

New Hampshire Teacher Certification and Licensing Guide (n.d.). Retrieved from https://www.teachercertificationdegrees.com/certification/new-hampshire/

O'Laughlin, L., & Lindle, J. C. (2015). Principals as Political Agents in The Implementation of IDEA's Least Restrictive Environment Mandate. *Educational Policy (Los Altos, Calif.)*, *29*(1), 140–161. https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904814563207

Orr, A. C. (2009). New Special Educators Reflect about Inclusion: Preparation and K-12 Current Practice. Journal of Ethnographic and Qualitative Research, 3(4), 228.

Prewett, M. S., Brown, M. I., Goswami, A., & Christiansen, N. D. (2018). Effects of Team Personality Composition on Member Performance: A Multilevel Perspective. Group & Organization Management, 43(2), 316–348.

Rooney, E. J. (2018). Considering the costs: Adopting a judicial test for the least restrictive environment mandate of the individuals with disabilities education act. *Journal of Legislation, 45*(2), 298.

Ruppar, A. L., & Gaffney, J. S. (2011). Individualized Education Program Team Decisions: A Preliminary Study of Conversations, Negotiations, and Power. *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*, *36*(1–2), 11–22. https://doi.org/10.2511/rpsd.36.1-2.11

Saldana, J. M. (2015). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.

Smith, J. A., & Firth, J. (2011). Qualitative data analysis: the framework approach. Nurse Researcher, 18(2), 52-62.

Smith, E. N., Yeager, D. S., Dweck, C. S., & Walton, G. M. (2022). An Organizing Framework for Teaching Practices that Can "Expand" the Self and Address Social Identity Concerns. Educational Psychology Review, 34(4), 2197–2219

Stasser, G., & Titus, W. (1987). Effects of Information Load and Percentage of Shared Information on the Dissemination of Unshared Information During Group Discussion. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *53*(1), 81–93. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.53.1.81

Sun, A. Q., & Xin, J. F. (2020). School principals' opinions about special education services. *Preventing School Failure*, *64*(2), 106–115. https://doi.org/10.1080/1045988X.2019.1681354

Thomas-Hunt, M. C., Ogden, T. Y., & Neale, M. A. (2003). Who's Really Sharing? Effects of Social and Expert Status on Knowledge Exchange Within Groups. *Management Science*, *49*(4), 464–477. https://doi.org/10.1287/mnsc.49.4.464.14425

Thomas-Hunt, M. C., Wageman, R., Mannix, E. A., & Neale, M. A. (2005). *Status and Groups*. Emerald Publishing Limited. https://go.exlibris.link/CpLxp7vy

Tuckman, B. W. (1965). Developmental sequence in small groups. *Psychological Bulletin*, *63*(6), 384–399. https://doi.org/10.1037/h0022100

U.S. Department of Education, ED*Facts* Data Warehouse. "IDEA Part B Child Count and Educational Environments Collection," 2020-21. Data extracted as of July 7, 2021 from file specifications 002 and 089.

U.S. Department of Education (2024) Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES). Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/.

University of Southern Maine. (n.d.). Special Education Certification Program. Retrieved from https://usm.maine.edu/

Van der Vegt, G. S., & Bunderson, J. S. (2005). Learning and Performance in Multidisciplinary Teams: The Importance of Collective Team Identification. *Academy of Management Journal*, *48*(3), 532–547. https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2005.17407918

Wittenbaum, G. M., Hollingshead, A. B., & Botero, I. C. (2004). From cooperative to motivated information sharing in groups: Moving beyond the hidden profile paradigm. *Communication Monographs*, *71*(3), 286–310. https://doi.org/10.1080/0363452042000299894

Yell, M. L., Katsiyannis, A., Ennis, R. P., Losinski, M., & Bateman, D. (2020). Making Legally

Sound Placement Decisions. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, *52*(5), 291–303. https://doi.org/10.1177/0040059920906537

Yin, R. K. (2018). Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods (6th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Appendix

Semi-structured interview protocol for IEP facilitators (Adapted from FIEP Study)

Demographic information

1. What is your current position?
2. How long have you worked in your position?
3. What is the total number of years you have worked in your capacity?
4. Prior to your current position as an IEP facilitator/administrator of special education, what was your position? For how many years?
5. What is the highest degree of education you have obtained?
6. Who typically facilitates IEPs in your district?

Experience with IEP meeting facilitation

(Central interview questions in bold, italics)

7. How do you view your role as an IEP facilitator?
8. How do you view the roles of the other team members?
9. ***How do you define the Least Restrictive Environment?***
10. What kind of training have you received specific to IEP facilitation?
11. Can you describe how you prepare for a typical IEP meeting?
12. How do your beliefs about the LRE impact your facilitation style?
13. What strategies do you use to solicit student and/or parent input?
14. ***How do you weigh input from the various team members?***
15. What are common sources of conflict at IEP team meetings?
16. ***What barriers do IEP teams face in planning for inclusive (LRE) outcomes?***
17. Do you have any stories to highlight your experience facilitating IEPs?

BIOGRAPHY

Melissa Lyons-Vitalone is a special education leader for a rural school district where she oversees the operations of both special education and ESEA. She holds a Bachelor of Science in Mental Health and Human Services from the University of Maine at Augusta, an M.Ed and Ed.S in Special Education from the University of Maine in Orono, and an Ed.D in Administrative Leadership at the same institution. Her professional affiliations include the Maine Administrators of Services for Children with Disabilities (MADSEC), and she holds several certifications in special education and administration.