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Exceptional Teachers Teaching Exceptional Children

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Special Education Legal Alert

Perry A. Zirkel

October 2026

This month's update identifies two recent decisions that illustrate issues that are both current and recurrent under the IDEA and Section 504, respectively. For related publications and special supplements, see perryzirkel.com

On September 8, 2026, a federal district court in Tennessee issued an officially published decision in *N.H. v. Memphis-Shelby County Schools*, addressing the child find and FAPE claims of parents of a child with dyslexia. During kindergarten, the school district evaluated the child under the Tennessee law that is one of the few state laws that provide IEPs for giftedness. The evaluation, which included a composite IQ of 129 (nonverbal 143 and verbal 109) and a basic reading achievement score of 79, determined that he qualified for an IEP solely as intellectually gifted. In first grade, the district also provided him with response to intervention (RTI) services of 1:1 reading support. During second grade, he performed at or above grade level in teacher diagnostic tests in English Language Arts, I-Ready/Fastbridge screeners, and the state's proficiency assessments. At the parents' request in April of that year, the district administered a screener that found he had characteristics of dyslexia. Early in the third grade, at the parents' insistence, the district conducted an eligibility evaluation to determine whether he qualified for special education under the classification of specific learning disability (SLD). Although the school psychologist, who had training in dyslexia, recommended that he did not qualify as SLD in the absence of (a) sufficiently severe characteristics of dyslexia and (b) sufficiently indicative RTI services under the state's required approach for SLD, the IEP team ultimately concluded that he was eligible for special education services as SLD. On November 1, the team's proposed IEP included small-group, research-based specially designed instruction in reading but not specifically Orton-Gillingham (O-G) methodology, which the parents had requested. On December 1, after providing the requisite notice to the district, the parents unilaterally placed the student in a private school specializing in O-G. They subsequently filed for a due process hearing, seeking tuition reimbursement, but the hearing officer ultimately ruled in favor of the district. The parents filed an appeal in federal court.

First, the parents claimed that the district violated its child find obligation by not evaluating their son sooner in light of his persistent struggles in reading as evidenced, for example, by RTI services in 1st grade and the dyslexia screener results in 2nd grade.

Based on testimony of not only the district's school psychologist and speech therapist but also the private school's director, the court rejected the parents' claim based on the difficulty of identifying dyslexia and SLD early in light of the masking effect that accounted for the child's grade level progress in reading.

Second, the parents claimed that the IEP was not substantively appropriate because it lacked dyslexia-specific methodology.	Citing <i>Endrew F.</i> and lower court case law concerning methodology, the court concluded that the IEP was substantively appropriate.
Third, the parents' alleged that the IEP lacked sufficient specificity as to the specially designed instruction, thus violating the IDEA's procedural requirements for FAPE.	The court also rejected this claim, concluding that even if this was a violation, the parents' immediate unilateral placement obviated the requisite resulting loss in either student benefit or parent participation.
In short, this case illustrates the complexities of not only dual exceptionality but also dyslexia identification/interventions.	

On September 2, 2026, a federal district court in Illinois issued an unofficially published decision in *Markel v. Galva CUSD Board of Education*, addressing various issues for a 504-only student. In eighth grade, the student sustained two separate concussions, cumulatively resulting in long term symptoms, including severe anxiety, poor ocular mobility, and reduced binocular vision. The school provided her with a 504 plan based on diagnoses of visual-vestibular integration dysfunction, visual processing impairments, chronic migraines, and sleep disturbances that collectively limited reading and concentration to a substantial extent. The 504 plan included extra testing time, reduced classroom assignments, enlarged reading materials, limited videos/films, offered breaks in each class, and an individual tutor. Although the student graduated with a 4.0 GPA as co-valedictorian, her parents filed a disability discrimination lawsuit in federal court under Section 504 and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Their discrimination claims included repeated shortfalls in implementing her 504 plan, including classroom teachers' negative reactions rather than affirmative adherence and the failure to select her for the National Honor Society (based on the leadership criterion). They sought compensatory damages for (a) emotional distress resulting in panic symptoms, fatigue, nausea, depression, and self-harm and (b) educational losses, such as having to drop an agriculture course because the teacher continuously played loud music in class, and reduced ability to pursue other educational and extracurricular activities due to the extra time and energy caused by the shortfalls in the implementation of her 504 plan. The defendants moved for summary judgment, which is after pretrial discovery proceedings, such as depositions.

The plaintiff-parents identified the superintendent and high school principal as defendants in addition to the school district.	The court eliminated them as defendants because Section 504 and the ADA only apply to the institutional entity, not its individual personnel.
The first substantive § 504/ADA claim that the court identified was failure to accommodate based primarily on shortfalls in the implementation of the 504 plan.	Citing the prevailing standard in its jurisdiction, the court ruled that the evidence was sufficient for a jury to determine whether the shortfalls effectively denied the plaintiff the benefit of a public education.

The second substantive claim that the court identified was disparate treatment based on several separate incidents, such as her rejection for membership in the National Honor Society.	The court granted summary judgment to the district for this claim, ruling that no reasonable jury could conclude that the student's disability caused any of these actions.
The third substantive claim that the court identified was retaliation against the student for her self-advocacy.	The court also ruled in favor of the district on this claim ultimately due to lack of causal connection to her protected activity.
The final substantive § 504/ADA claim that the court identified was hostile learning environment.	Denying the district motion, the court found sufficient evidence of the elements of a hostile environment claim for a jury determination.
The defendant-district's ultimate argument in support of summary judgment was that the relief sought was not available under § 504 and the ADA.	In partial rejection, the court reasoned that although § 504/ADA do not provide compensatory damages for emotional distress, they do for at least one category of requested relief—loss of educational opportunity.
This decision illustrates the various theories of liability for money damages under § 504/ADA for students with disabilities, which include those with IEPs as well as those with 504 plans. Here, the parents are likely to receive limited compensatory damages (and attorneys' fees) via a settlement, although if this case goes to trial, the outcome could go either way on the surviving two claims of (a) accommodation/implementation and (b) hostile learning environment.	

Update from the U.S. Department of Education

<https://www.ed.gov/>

Birth to Grade 12 Education-Resources

<https://www.ed.gov/birth-to-grade-12-education>

Available Grants

<https://www.ed.gov/grants-and-programs/apply-grant/available-grants>

U.S. Department of Education Joins “Get Active” Campaign to Get America’s Students Moving

October 1, 2026

The “Get Active” initiative will bring events promoting physical fitness and student success to schools across the country.

U.S. Department of Education Calls on Schools to Strengthen Education on the History and Dangers of Communism and Socialism

September 30, 2026

In observance of the 10th U.S. National Day for the Victims of Communism on November 7, U.S. Secretary of Education Linda McMahon today issued a Dear Colleague Letter to education leaders and teachers across the country.

U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Department of the Treasury Launch New Defaulted Loans Support Center

September 30, 2026

New Online Portal Provides Streamlined Options for Millions of Borrowers to Address Defaulted Loans and Return to Repayment.

U.S. Department of Education Extends Enrollment Period for Student Loan Interest Rate Reduction

September 29, 2026

Today, the U.S. Department of Education (the Department) extended the enrollment period for the 1 percent interest rate reduction benefit by an additional three months.

U.S. Department of Education Approves Workforce Pell Grant Programs in Florida

September 28, 2026

Today, the U.S. Department of Education (the Department) approved four Workforce Pell Grant programs in Florida, marking the sixth state in the nation to receive program approvals.

U.S. Department of Education Formally Rescinds the Biden Administration’s Illegal Title IX Rewrite, Reinstating the 2020 Regulation

September 28, 2026

Today, the U.S. Department of Education (the Department) formally rescinded the Biden Administration’s illegal regulation implementing Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 (Title IX).

U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Department of Justice Issue Guidance on ‘Swatting’ Threats

September 25, 2026

As students begin a new school year, the U.S. Department of Education (ED) and the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) issued joint guidance to all educational institutions on how to prepare for and respond to swatting incidents on campus.

U.S. Department of Education Approves Workforce Pell Grant Programs in North Carolina

September 25, 2026

Today, the U.S. Department of Education (the Department) approved six new Workforce Pell Grant programs in North Carolina, marking it the fifth state in the nation to receive program approvals.

U.S. Department of Education Approves Mississippi’s Returning Education to the States Waiver

September 24, 2026

Today, the U.S. Department of Education (the Department) announced another victory in empowering states with greater education autonomy with the approval of Mississippi’s Returning Education to the States (RES) Waiver.

U.S. Department of Education Announces Earliest FAFSA Launch in Program History for the Second Consecutive Year

September 23, 2026

Today, the U.S. Department of Education (the Department) announced that the 2027-2028 Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA®) form is online and available to the public, marking the earliest launch in the program's history.

U.S. Department of Education Approves Workforce Pell Grant Programs in Texas

September 22, 2026

Today, the U.S. Department of Education (the Department) approved six new Workforce Pell Grant programs in Texas, making it the fourth state in the nation to receive program approvals.

U.S. Department of Education Makes Significant Investment in America's Historically Black Colleges and Universities

September 22, 2026

Today, the U.S. Department of Education (the Department) announced a significant, one-time investment of more than \$174 million in additional funding to strengthen America's Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs).

U.S. Secretary of Education Linda McMahon Visits West Virginia on Returning Education to the States Tour

September 17, 2026

Today, U.S. Secretary of Education Linda McMahon visited West Virginia as part of her Returning Education to the States Tour.

U.S. Department of Education Secures Resolution Agreement with Virginia Beach City Public Schools to Restore Protections Against Sexual Misconduct

September 17, 2026

Today, the U.S. Department of Education's (the Department's) Office for Civil Rights (OCR) announced that Virginia Beach City Public Schools (the District) has entered into a resolution agreement to restore protections.

Trump Administration Investigates Massachusetts School District for Allegedly "Transitioning" Student Without Parents' Knowledge

September 17, 2026

Today, the U.S. Department of Education's (the Department's) Student Privacy Policy Office (SPPO) launched an investigation into The Public Schools of Northborough and Southborough in Massachusetts.

U.S. Secretary of Education Linda McMahon Visits Missouri on Returning Education to the States Tour

September 16, 2026

ST. LOUIS, MO – Today, U.S. Secretary of Education Linda McMahon visited Missouri on her Returning Education to the States Tour.

U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Department of State Open Foreign Funding Investigations into Duke University and the University of North Dakota

September 16, 2026

Yesterday, the U.S. Department of Education (ED) and the U.S. Department of State (State) opened foreign funding investigations.

U.S. Department of Education Honors Constitution Day, Calls on Schools to Strengthen Civic Literacy and Invite Routine Recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance

September 16, 2026

In observance of Constitution Day on September 17th and following America’s historic 250th anniversary of independence, U.S. Secretary of Education Linda McMahon today issued a Dear Colleague Letter to all education leaders and teachers.

U.S. Secretary of Education Linda McMahon Joins Cleveland Browns for “Stay in the Game!” Attendance Celebration

September 15, 2026

Today, U.S. Secretary of Education Linda McMahon visited Cleveland, Ohio for a celebration event with the NFL team, the Cleveland Browns, on their premier youth outreach initiative, the Stay in the Game! program.

U.S. Department of Education Approves Workforce Pell Grant Programs in Nebraska

September 14, 2026

Today, the U.S. Department of Education (the Department) approved three Workforce Pell Grant programs in Nebraska, marking it the third state in the nation to receive program approvals.

Secretary of Education Linda McMahon Issues a Nationwide Call to Commemorate the 25th Anniversary of the 9/11 Terrorist Attacks with America’s Students

September 10, 2026

Today, U.S. Secretary of Education Linda McMahon issued a nationwide call to action, urging K-12 educators across the country to set aside time tomorrow to honor the victims and heroes of the September 11th terrorist attacks on its 25th anniversary.

Building Strong Readers: How the Trump Administration is Supercharging Evidence-Based Literacy to Combat Reading Crisis

September 9, 2026

America is facing a literacy emergency that is reshaping the trajectory of an entire generation.

What They Are Saying: Pilot States Highlight Early Successes with the Learning Agenda Playbook

September 9, 2026

Following the Learning Agenda Playbook (the Playbook) release this morning, state leaders from the eight pilot states praised the framework as a resource to improve state education policies, programs, and student outcomes.

U.S. Department of Education Launches Learning Agenda Playbook to Support State Education Leaders and Improve Student Outcomes

September 9, 2026

As the Trump Administration works to return education to the states, the U.S. Department of Education (the Department) today unveiled the Learning Agenda Playbook (the Playbook).

ICYMI: DOJ- Justice Department Sues Kansas City, Kansas Public Schools to Stop Secret Gender Transitions

September 1, 2026

Today, the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division, joined by the U.S. Attorney for the District of Kansas, filed a first-of-its-kind lawsuit against Kansas City, Kansas Public Schools.

Enhancing Teacher Preparation for Special Education: Challenges, Gaps, and Effective Supports

By Jessica Aveiga, Ingrid Calderon, Myleen Fernandez, Junia Fleurantin, Sarai Perez

Introduction

The previous Secretary of Education- Secretary Miguel Cardona- once said, "It's not only our responsibility but our commitment at the Department of Education to encourage, invest in, and lift up teachers across America. The future of our country and our children's futures depend on it." (US Department of Education, 2022). It is worth noting because over the past few years, the teaching profession has faced numerous challenges at both the national and state levels. Most recently, Special Education has faced significant challenges due to proposed federal cuts that have led to systemic neglect and staffing shortages. This has been a disservice to the students with disabilities because they need access to excellent teachers.

Excellent teachers employ High Leverage Practices (HLPs) organized into four main areas: Collaboration, Data-Driven Planning, Instruction in Behavior and Academics, and Intensify and Intervene as Needed. These HLPs enable educators to provide explicit instruction, offer high-quality feedback, foster respectful relationships, and employ active engagement strategies with students (Taylor et al., 2025). Prospective special education teachers should attend preparation programs that equip them with the specialized training required to effectively meet the needs of students with disabilities. These practices are critical to improving students' progress in the classroom. Therefore, a review of the literature was conducted to investigate the factors of teachers' preparation programs and identify solutions..

Literature Review

Pre-service Training

Preparation for new teachers has become a major concern in special education. Students with disabilities need high-quality instruction, and teachers must be well-prepared to deliver it. They need strong training to implement evidence-based practices (EBPs) with confidence and effectiveness. Pre-service programs should offer explicit training, hands-on practice, and consistent feedback, especially since many new teachers may already struggle in other areas. These concerns have driven research showing the need to strengthen preparation programs, leading to a push for more coaching, embedded practice, and co-teaching models.

Coaching and performance feedback in pre-service programs have been identified as major strengths in research. Rakap (2017) found that coaching improves teachers' ability to plan, deliver, and monitor instruction in inclusive preschool classrooms. Additional research shows that coaching paired with performance feedback has even stronger effects on both teacher performance and student learning gains (Rakap & Balikci, 2023). The results posit that coaching is a necessary component of teacher preparation programs.

Another at-risk area is co-teaching and how pre-service programs prepare teachers to collaborate. Shin et al. (2016) compared the pre-service experiences of special and general education teachers and found uneven results; many special educators reported unclear expectations and limited guidance or modeling, which creates challenges for new teachers trying to collaborate and co-teach. Pre-service programs should provide enough practice to build a

strong co-teaching foundation, helping teachers transition more smoothly and with less stress in their first year.

Teachers also face limited exposure to EBPs (Hsiao and Petersen, 2019). Many special education teachers feel they are not sufficiently prepared to implement practices and strategies effectively, such as ABA-based strategies, using visual supports, or data-driven instruction. They lack sufficient practice and feedback, and often feel that they are working on a trial-and-error basis, which is not beneficial for learners with disabilities. What teachers learn in the university does not always match actual classroom experiences. This gap creates a disconnect, leaving teachers unsure of how to implement EBPs in real settings. As a result, their ability to generalize their skills is weakened.

High-leverage Practices

High-Leverage Practices (HLPs) have emerged as a crucial framework for enhancing special education teacher effectiveness, particularly during the critical early years of teaching. Billingsley et al. (2019) emphasize that novice special education teachers often enter the profession facing substantial ambiguity regarding their instructional roles, collaboration expectations, and responsibilities across multiple service-delivery models. These conditions place new special educators at increased risk for burnout, attrition, and inconsistent instructional quality. These are issues that contribute to inequitable learning opportunities for students with disabilities. Because of these systemic challenges, the authors argue that HLPs serve as a unifying and stabilizing framework that can improve coherence across teacher preparation, induction, and ongoing professional learning.

In their analysis, Billingsley et al. (2019) contend that the power of HLPs lies not merely in the practices themselves but in their ability to organize the complex instructional and

professional demands placed on special educators. They propose that HLPs offer a shared language and set of expectations that teachers, mentors, administrators, and preparation programs can all use consistently. This is particularly valuable given that novice special educators frequently receive mixed messages about appropriate instructional priorities, acceptable teaching approaches, and expectations for collaboration with general educators and related service providers. When systems rely on different or competing frameworks, new teachers may struggle to understand what constitutes effective practice. Positioning HLPs as a common anchor helps reduce this confusion by aligning preservice training, induction activities, and school-based evaluation systems toward the same evidence-based competencies.

A key strength of the authors' argument is their attention to the *conditions* that enable teachers to enact HLPs with fidelity. They assert that even when teachers possess strong pedagogical knowledge, the ability to implement HLPs depends on adequate instructional time, access to materials, opportunities for collaboration, manageable caseloads, and focused professional development (Billingsley et al., 2019). This emphasis on working conditions broadens the conversation beyond individual teacher skill and highlights the systemic nature of effective special education practice. The article, therefore, shifts HLPs from being perceived as a set of isolated strategies to a comprehensive framework that requires structural support for successful implementation.

Billingsley et al. (2019) illustrate that HLPs can play a transformative role in improving the quality and consistency of special education teacher practice. By positioning HLPs as the backbone of teacher learning systems, spanning preparation, induction, and ongoing development, the authors highlight a powerful mechanism for reducing the at-risk conditions

facing novice teachers and therefore improving educational outcomes for students with disabilities.

Generalization

Tasked with addressing a wide spectrum of learning needs while maintaining high academic expectations for all students, ESE teachers must design instruction and provide targeted support to ensure students with disabilities can access and engage with grade-level content. Educators accomplish this by consistently applying HLPs and EBPs across various settings and over time. This is known as generalization.. When used together, HLPs and EBPs can become powerful tools for improving student outcomes. However, according to Markelz et al. (2017), there is a discrepancy in the teachers' preparation curriculum, as the teachers do not generalize teaching skills from university to K-12 classrooms. After reviewing numerous course curricula, the authors concluded that generalization is absent in teacher preparation programs, leading to a disconnect between coursework, clinical experiences, and the realities of the classroom. As a result, it appears that teacher preparation programs are failing to demonstrate the impact of their newly graduated teachers on students' achievement in the classroom. It can be concluded, as the authors suggest, that the new educators may struggle to sustain and generalize their newly acquired skills.

Consequently, the authors suggest using embedded generalized teaching skills from pre-service coursework in classrooms as a necessary component of the teacher preparation curriculum. This will better enable teachers to apply the skills they have learned in controlled settings to actual classroom settings. To test their theory of the positive effects of generalization, the authors conducted two experiments- Experiment 1 and Experiment 2. In Experiment 1, it was shown that when generalization is not effectively taught, the specific skills that pre-service

teachers learn tend to fade. In Experiment 2, it was demonstrated that when generalization is integrated into the skills taught to pre-service teachers during their education, those specific skills are successfully applied in their own classrooms at a higher rate. These experiments demonstrated that systematic programming for generalization is crucial for maintaining HLPs and EBPs over time and across various classroom settings.

Conclusion

ESE teachers need to be equipped to meet the diverse learning needs of students while upholding high academic standards. While new special education teachers start their career with strong commitment and passion, the literature clearly demonstrates that they often do so without adequate preparation needed to meet the pivotal demands of their role over time and across various classroom settings. Novice educators are more likely to experience burnout, reduced instructional fidelity, and overwhelming workloads when there are gaps in generalization from classwork to classroom environments, as well as a lack of exposure to evidence-based practices and limited opportunities to effectively develop collaboration and co-teaching skills. Ultimately, students with disabilities are most affected when teachers do not receive sufficient preparation and support.

High-Leverage Practices provide a crucial solution to these challenges. Educators employ HLPs, EBPs, and individualized instructional approaches to ensure that students with disabilities have access to meaningful learning opportunities. However, this level of proficiency must be intentionally developed through preparation programs that offer explicit instruction, hands-on practice, continuous coaching, and meaningful feedback. HLP's connect preparation programs, induction systems, and professional development to provide an effective instructional framework. When preparation programs intentionally align coursework, coaching, clinical

practice, and feedback with HLPs, new teachers can access a clear path for instructional decision-making. This alignment strengthens their confidence, improves instructional consistency, and increases the likelihood that students with disabilities experience high-quality, research-based instruction across settings.

Ultimately, improving special education teacher training is a necessary educational need rather than a choice. Students with disabilities deserve well-prepared teachers who know how to implement effective practices, reflect on their instruction, collaborate with colleagues, and adjust supports when needed. By prioritizing strong preparation programs built on High-Leverage Practices, evidence-based practices, and supported by structured performance feedback, schools can better ensure that new teachers are ready to meet the diverse needs of their students from day one. Doing so not only improves teacher effectiveness and retention but also moves us closer to a more equitable and inclusive educational system where every student has the opportunity to learn and thrive.

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Integrating Inclusive Pedagogy: Structured Training for Effective Classroom Management Across Disabilities

By Dr. Deborah Boldt

Abstract

This article presents an integrated theoretical approach to inclusive classroom management for students with severe and profound intellectual disabilities, grounded in behaviorist, constructivist, developmental, and social learning theories. Emphasis is placed on structured routines, clear expectations, scaffolded instruction, and modeling to support academic, behavioral, and social development. Inclusive pedagogical practices, including differentiation, universal design, and culturally responsive teaching, are highlighted as essential for ensuring equitable access and meaningful participation for all learners. Findings underscore the importance of understanding student needs holistically, viewing behavior as communication, and fostering strong relationships to create supportive learning environments. Additionally, the role of ongoing professional development, collaboration, and reflective practices is emphasized in strengthening staff capacity and sustaining effective classroom management. Overall, the integration of theory, structured supports, and data-informed decision-making contributes to improved student outcomes and a more inclusive, responsive educational environment.

Keywords: Inclusive classroom management, inclusive pedagogy, severe and profound disabilities, behavior as communication, structured environments, professional development, data-informed decision making

Introduction

Effective classroom management across disabilities begins with structured training in inclusive pedagogy that supports both educators and diverse learners. Emphasis is placed on proactive strategies, consistent routines, collaborative practices, and instructional supports that promote engagement, reduce behavioral barriers, and foster positive classroom climates. By exploring theory-to-practice training approaches in a special school setting, this work demonstrates how intentional preparation equips educators to support diverse learners while maintaining inclusive and well-managed classrooms. Inclusive classrooms are increasingly diverse, requiring educators to manage a wide range of academic, behavioral, and social-emotional needs across disabilities. Effective classroom management in these settings extends beyond traditional strategies and calls for intentional, inclusive pedagogy supported by structured professional training. When administration, educators, and paraeducators are equipped with practical tools grounded in inclusive practices, they are better prepared to create learning environments that are responsive, predictable, and supportive for all students.

An Integrated Theoretical Approach to Inclusive Classroom Management

Effective classroom management for students with severe and profound intellectual needs is grounded in established learning and behavioral theories that directly inform inclusive pedagogical practice. Behaviorist principles emphasize consistent routines, clear expectations, reinforcement, and immediate feedback, which translate into structured schedules and task analyses that reduce challenging behaviors and support skill acquisition. Constructivist and developmental theories highlight the importance of hands-on learning, repetition, and scaffolded support, allowing students to build understanding at an individualized pace within meaningful contexts. Social learning theory further underscores the role of modeling, prompting, and guided practice in teaching functional behaviors and classroom expectations. Together, these theoretical foundations guide pedagogical strategies that integrate structure, visual supports, explicit instruction, and proactive behavioral approaches, fostering well-managed classrooms that meet the complex learning, communication, and behavioral needs of students with severe and profound intellectual disabilities.

Inclusive pedagogical strategies were defined as teaching methods intentionally designed to recognize and respond to the varied backgrounds, learning needs, and abilities of all students to ensure equitable access and participation. These strategies included universal design principles, differentiated instruction, culturally responsive content, and multiple modes of engagement, all aimed at valuing diverse learner experiences and reducing barriers to success in the classroom (Bouchey et al., 2021; Cornell Center for Teaching Innovation, n.d.; Sanger, 2020). Moreover, such strategies were linked to inclusion by fostering learning environments in which students felt respected, supported, and capable of achieving academic outcomes; instructors proactively designed content and activities that acknowledged social identities and reduced marginalization, thereby creating spaces where students could engage meaningfully and belong academically and socially (UCLA Teaching & Learning Center, 2025; Cambridge University Press & Assessment, 2024).

Behaviorist principles emphasized that observable student behaviors could be shaped through systematic reinforcement and structured environments, which directly supported inclusion and success for all learners. For example, positive reinforcement and clear behavioral expectations increased desired classroom engagement and participation, helping students with diverse needs access instruction and build skills (Skinner, as discussed in behaviorist classroom strategies; *Fiveable*, 2025). By reinforcing appropriate responses and reducing barriers through consistent, measurable contingencies, educators created predictable, supportive learning conditions that encouraged participation, reduced disruptive behavior, and fostered a more inclusive classroom climate (*Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports [PBIS]; Positive reinforcement in education*).

Constructivist theories emphasized that learners actively *construct* knowledge through experience, social interaction, and reflection, and research showed that such approaches supported inclusive classrooms by promoting engagement, collaboration, and meaningful participation for students with diverse academic and behavioral needs (Frontiers Research Team, 2025; Matthews, 2024). In inclusive settings, constructivist practices, such as connecting

learning to students' personal experiences, encouraging dialogue, and facilitating peer negotiation were linked to more supportive classroom cultures and improved socio-emotional skills, illustrating how constructivist pedagogy fostered environments where all students could access and contribute to learning (Frontiers Research Team, 2025).

Developmental theories, grounded in the work of Piaget and Vygotsky, provided a complementary foundation by helping educators tailor instruction to students' cognitive readiness and support learning through scaffolded interaction; Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development highlighted how guided support enabled learners to achieve beyond their independent capabilities, a principle that aligned with inclusive practices aimed at maximizing each student's potential (International Journal of Education and Humanities, 2025; International Journal of Special Education, 2014). By integrating constructivist and developmental perspectives recognizing both individual cognitive stages and the social context of learning, teachers were better positioned to design instruction and support that promoted academic success and inclusion for students with a range of needs (Frontiers Research Team, 2025; International Journal of Special Education, 2014).

Social learning theory is grounded in the idea that learners acquire behaviors, skills, and social norms by observing and imitating models in their environment, making it a foundational framework for understanding how students with and without disabilities interact and learn in inclusive classrooms (Bandura, 1977; Social Learning Theory, 2024). In practice, teachers who demonstrated positive academic engagement, social skills, and prosocial behaviors provided observable models that students could internalize, while structured opportunities for peer interaction and reinforcement of appropriate behaviors helped students with learning disabilities develop both academic and interpersonal competencies within the general education setting (*Social learning theory*, 2024; Qi et al., 2017).

Furthermore, research showed that social learning principles, such as attention to models, retention of observed behavior, and motivation through positive reinforcement were particularly effective in inclusive environments where students learned not only from instructors but also from peers, contributing to a classroom climate that supported behavioral regulation, cooperative learning, and social participation for diverse learners (*Social learning theory*, 2024; Qi et al., 2017). By applying these principles through strategies like live or video modeling, educators helped students with learning disabilities observe and practice desired behaviors in academic and social contexts, thereby increasing inclusion and success for students across ability levels (Boon et al., 2020).

Environment Shapes Learning

This section explored the students and staff in a special school setting and the approaches for increasing structured training in inclusive pedagogy as a foundation for effective classroom management across disabilities. Effective classroom management in special school settings is grounded in understanding students' academic, communicative, emotional, and cultural backgrounds, including the impact of trauma, basic needs, and diverse norms. Instruction and support are most effective when individualized, strength-based, and structured through consistent

routines, visual schedules, and respectful use of breaks to promote independence and regulation. Educators must interpret behavior as communication, distinguishing unmet needs from perceived manipulation, while responding with empathy and proactive strategies. Building positive relationships among students and staff requires attention to student perspectives, effective verbal and nonverbal communication, and intentional opportunities for student connection. By offering ongoing professional development with onsite training that fosters a growth mindset, supports staff wellness, and emphasizes crisis-cycle awareness, reflective debriefing, and collaborative problem-solving, it further strengthens inclusive pedagogy and sustains well-managed classrooms across disabilities.

Understanding Students' Needs and Perspectives

Effective classroom management in diverse learning environments requires an inclusive, student-centered approach grounded in understanding individual needs, strengths, and experiences. Students with disabilities bring varied academic abilities, communication profiles, cultural backgrounds, and social-emotional needs into the classroom, all of which influence learning and behavior. Inclusive pedagogy emphasizes responding to these factors through intentional structure, individualized supports, and relationship-based practices that foster engagement and independence (Emerson et al., 2019). This section outlines key components of inclusive classroom management that support student success while maintaining safe, predictable, and supportive learning environments.

Understanding where students come from academically, communicatively, and emotionally is foundational to effective instruction and behavioral support. Students may communicate verbally, nonverbally, or through AAC systems, requiring educators to tailor expectations and responses accordingly. Additionally, Maslow's hierarchy of needs highlights the importance of addressing basic physiological and emotional needs before meaningful learning can occur (Maslow, 1943). Trauma, cultural identity, and community norms further shape student behavior and engagement, underscoring the need for culturally responsive and trauma-informed practices that prioritize safety and belonging.

Once student needs are understood, fostering independence becomes a central instructional goal. Structure, consistency, and predictable schedules support students in understanding expectations and navigating their environments with confidence. Visual supports, routines, and clear transitions reduce anxiety and increase student autonomy, particularly for learners who benefit from concrete cues. Respecting students' need for breaks and regulation further supports engagement and prevents escalation, reinforcing independence rather than compliance-driven behavior.

Challenging behavior is often misinterpreted as manipulation when it more accurately reflects unmet needs or communication barriers. Research consistently supports the understanding of behavior as a form of communication, especially for students with limited expressive language (Carr et al., 2002). Many students communicate needs such as frustration, confusion, fatigue, sensory overload, or a desire for attention through their actions rather than words. When these signals are misunderstood, responses may unintentionally escalate the

situation, reinforcing negative patterns instead of resolving the root concern. Viewing behavior as communication encourages educators to pause, observe patterns, and consider what the student may be attempting to express.

A shift in perspective allows educators to move from reacting to behavior toward investigating its function. Functional thinking or by examining what happens before, during, and after a behavior, helps identify triggers and outcomes that maintain the behavior. For example, a student who avoids tasks may be communicating that the work is too difficult or unclear, while a student who seeks attention through disruptions may be expressing a need for connection. By identifying these underlying purposes, educators can implement targeted supports such as visual schedules, choice-making opportunities, communication tools, or adjusted task demands. These proactive strategies not only address the cause of the behavior but also teach more appropriate and effective ways for students to communicate their needs.

Adopting this approach also strengthens relationships and improves classroom climate. Students are more likely to feel understood and supported when their behaviors are met with curiosity and empathy rather than punishment. In turn, this reduces power struggles and builds trust between students and educators. Over time, consistent use of proactive and responsive strategies leads to increased student independence, improved emotional regulation, and more positive interactions within the classroom. Ultimately, understanding behavior as communication promotes a more compassionate, effective, and inclusive approach to classroom management, aligning with research that emphasizes prevention, skill-building, and supportive learning environments (Carr et al., 2002).

Effective inclusive pedagogy requires instruction and behavioral support to be individualized based on students' strengths, needs, and areas of growth. Recognizing both abilities and challenges allows educators to design meaningful learning experiences that are accessible and motivating. Incorporating student interests into instruction creates inviting and engaging environments that increase participation and persistence. Individualization ensures that supports are not only effective but also respectful of student identity and capability. Strong relationships between students and staff are essential to successful classroom management. Intentional time spent building trust and understanding enhances student engagement and emotional safety. Students with disabilities, differences in perception and interpretation of situations may shape their understanding of reality, requiring educators to respond with clarity, empathy, and consistency. When adults acknowledge student perspectives, they strengthen communication, reduce misunderstandings, and support positive behavioral outcomes.

In summary, inclusive classroom management is rooted in understanding students holistically and responding with intentional, individualized, and relationship-based practices. By recognizing the impact of academic functioning, communication methods, trauma, culture, and perception, educators can design environments that foster independence, engagement, and emotional safety. Structured routines, respectful interpretation of behavior, and meaningful connections between students and staff create classrooms where diverse learners can thrive.

Inclusive pedagogy, when thoughtfully applied, supports not only effective management but also equitable and responsive educational experiences for all students.

Staffing Supports Inclusion

Staff practices and classroom climate are defined by how educators interact with students, manage stress, and engage in continuous professional growth, benefiting staff by strengthening consistency, reducing burnout, and increasing confidence in supporting diverse learner needs. To support this process, intentional training will emphasize positive interactions, reflective practices, and proactive support, while reinforcing a shared understanding of student behavior as a meaningful form of communication. Additionally, the effective use of paralinguistics will be emphasized as a foundational instructional strategy, recognizing that tone, pitch, volume, and nonverbal cues convey meaning beyond spoken words. Through this focus, staff will develop greater awareness of how their communication influences student perception and emotional regulation, particularly for students who rely on nonverbal communication or AAC systems, leading to more positive interactions and reduced behavioral escalation (Hattie, 2012). As a result, staff will be better equipped to interpret challenging behaviors, respond with consistency, and maintain emotionally supportive environments. Moreover, by integrating these strategies across inclusive and special education settings, educators will strengthen collaboration and coherence in practice, fostering a climate that supports academic learning and social-emotional development for all students (Dweck, 2006; McDonnell et al., 2015).

The effective use of paralinguistics can serve as a foundational instructional strategy for promoting positive classroom interactions, as tone, pitch, volume, and nonverbal cues convey meaning beyond spoken words. Training highlighted how respectful verbal exchanges, calm tones, and intentional nonverbal behaviors such as facial expressions, body positioning, and proximity influenced student perception and emotional regulation. Consequently, staff will develop greater awareness of how their communication impacted students, particularly those who relied on nonverbal communication or AAC systems. Over time, the intentional use of paralinguistics contributed to reduced behavioral escalation, improved staff confidence, and stronger, more trusting relationships between educators and students (Hattie, 2012).

Furthermore, a growth mindset, the belief that abilities and skills can be developed through effort and learning, served as a foundational principle guiding professional development. Growth mindset aligned training supported staff in identifying individual strengths and areas for growth while ensuring that learning opportunities were closely aligned with classroom needs. Through differentiated professional development, educators engaged in reflection, collaboration, and targeted skill building. Staff who embrace a growth mindset demonstrated increased adaptability, resilience, and effectiveness when responding to diverse academic and behavioral needs, viewing challenges as opportunities for learning rather than obstacles. Encouraging this mindset supported reflective practice, reduced fear of mistakes, and promoted collaboration, thereby reinforcing a culture of continuous improvement and professional confidence (Dweck, 2006).

At the same time, if staff are encouraged to approach challenging situations with grace and a proactive, solution-focused mindset, training can incorporate stress management through the ESS model (Stress, Distress, Duress, Wellness, and Eustress). If educators develop greater awareness of these emotional states in themselves and others, they are more likely to respond intentionally rather than reactively. Additionally, if conflict between staff and students is addressed through de-escalation strategies and collaborative problem-solving that prioritizes understanding, emotional safety, and relationship repair, burnout is reduced, and classroom stability is strengthened (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Following challenging incidents, a structured three-part debrief model is often implemented, focusing on how situations are handled, when reflection occurs, and what is discussed. Importantly, debriefs are facilitated in a supportive and non-punitive manner, with learning emphasized over blame. Through this reflective process, communication across teams is strengthened, growth mindset practices are reinforced, and shared responsibility for improvement is fostered. Over time, debriefing has been recognized as a valuable tool for enhancing trust, collaboration, and professional confidence among staff (Schön, 1983).

Similarly, training in the RADAR framework supported consistent identification of situations requiring increased awareness and coordinated responses. RADAR is a structured framework that helps staff Recognize early signs of escalation, Assess the situation, Decide on an appropriate response, Act using supportive and proactive strategies, and Review the outcome to inform future practice. Instruction also focused on understanding the crisis cycle of student behavior, including triggers, escalation, peak behavior, and recovery. By framing anger and aggression as forms of communication, staff shifted toward preventative and responsive interventions rather than punitive reactions. This shared framework increased staff clarity, reduced uncertainty during high-stress situations, and supported more predictable and effective responses across settings (McDonnell et al., 2015).

Incorporating humor as a strategy can enhance classroom culture and student engagement. Humor serves as a purposeful and effective tool in both classroom interactions and professional development, fostering a positive and inclusive school environment. When applied thoughtfully, it reduces tension, strengthens teacher and student relationships, and supports students' emotional regulation without diminishing their experiences. For example, humor can be woven into lessons or meetings through relevant anecdotes, light-hearted examples, or gentle humor during challenging moments, helping to redirect attention and ease stress. By intentionally using humor, educators can create a more engaging and supportive learning atmosphere for all students.

Careful identification and reflection are essential for effective implementation. Recognizing appropriate humor requires attention to students' and colleagues' responses to ensure that it remains respectful and inclusive. Moreover, reflecting on its impact allows educators to adjust timing, tone, and content, maximizing engagement and reinforcing a positive classroom climate. This deliberate approach ensures that humor supports both learning and

social-emotional development while maintaining a safe and welcoming environment for everyone.

Research indicates that humor benefits both students and staff in meaningful ways. The intentional use of humor has been shown to increase student engagement, promote social-emotional well-being, and contribute to classroom environments that support inclusive practices (Erdoğan & Çakıroğlu, 2021; Şahin, 2025). Similarly, humor has been linked to improved staff well-being through reduced stress, enhanced collegial relationships, and the fostering of a more cohesive and collaborative workplace (Integrative Review Team, 2022; Şahin, 2025). Thus, humor not only facilitates students' growth but also strengthens professional relationships and enhances overall school climate.

When incorporated intentionally, humor functions as a practical, evidence-based strategy that advances both teaching effectiveness and professional development. Rather than serving merely as a light hearted addition to instruction or training, humor actively supports student learning, fosters positive interpersonal interactions, and contributes to a resilient, collaborative, and supportive school culture. By employing humor strategically and reflecting on its impact, educators can improve student outcomes and staff well-being, demonstrating its value as an essential component of effective, inclusive educational practices.

Intentional staff practices that emphasized positive communication, reflective growth, proactive stress management, and a shared understanding of student behavior contributed to a strengthened classroom climate. Structured, theory aligned professional development supported consistency, collaboration, and compassionate responses across both inclusive and special education settings. Ultimately, grounding staff practice in communication, empathy, and continuous learning enabled schools to sustain supportive and responsive learning environments that benefited both educators and students equally.

Data Collection Methods and Overview of Findings

Data were collected through structured interviews with leadership, teachers, and paraeducators to inform strategies that promote a positive school climate and support inclusive practices. The interview process was designed to gather perspectives across roles, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of staff experiences and systems within the school. Questions were intentionally aligned to key areas, including professional development planning, communication and paralinguage, growth mindset and reflective practices, stress management, behavior supports, and overall school culture. This approach allowed for consistent data collection while providing flexibility for participants to share insights based on their roles and experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Additionally, the data collection process emphasized the importance of examining how professional practices are supported and implemented across different levels of the organization. Interview questions were structured to explore how training is developed, how communication strategies are reinforced, and how staff are supported in meeting the diverse academic and behavioral needs of students. This method ensured that multiple perspectives were captured, highlighting the interconnected nature of leadership decisions, classroom practices, and support

staff roles. Furthermore, the inclusion of varied stakeholder groups strengthened the depth and credibility of the data by allowing for cross-role comparisons and a more holistic view of school systems (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022).

Moreover, the process prioritized understanding the systems and structures that influence staff collaboration, well-being, and consistency in practice. Questions were designed to examine how communication, behavior frameworks, and reflective practices are supported within the school environment, as well as how teams engage in collaboration and problem-solving. By focusing on these areas, the data collection process provided a foundation for analyzing how aligned systems contribute to effective practice and a positive school climate. This comprehensive approach supports the use of data-informed decision-making to guide continuous improvement efforts and strengthen inclusive practices across the school setting (Schildkamp et al., 2020; Voogt et al., 2021).

Statement of Compliance

The data collection, analysis, and structural evaluations presented in this study were initiated and conducted strictly as an internal Quality Improvement (QI) initiative and Program Evaluation aimed at identifying operational deficits, enhancing local staff professional development systems, and optimizing student supports within the participating special education school setting (pp. 8, 11). The primary intent of this project was focused on localized institutional advancement and specific operational quality assurance rather than the generation of universally applicable, generalizable scientific knowledge, the project did not meet the regulatory definition of human subjects research. Consequently, formal Institutional Review Board (IRB) review and approval were neither required nor sought prior to execution. To maintain strict ethical standards and preserve the privacy of all participating stakeholders, several precautionary measures were enforced throughout the study:

- Voluntary Participation: All structured interviews involving leadership, teachers, and paraeducators were entirely voluntary, non-punitive, and conducted through standard organizational feedback channels (p. 8).
- Rigorous De-identification: To safeguard institutional and individual privacy, all descriptive data, specific geographic indicators, and identity markers have been completely de-identified in this report, classifying participants solely by their functional organizational roles (pp. 8-9).
- Administrative Consent: Formal institutional authorization and documentation certifying the non-human subjects research status of this operational evaluation were secured from the executive school administration prior to manuscript submission.

Findings: Leadership, Teachers, and Paraeducators

Based on data collected from leadership, teachers, and paraeducators, several consistent patterns emerged regarding professional practices, support systems, and overall school culture. Analysis of the responses revealed three key themes: Intentional Professional Development and Continuous Growth, Supportive Systems for Communication, Behavior, and Well-Being, and Collaborative Culture, Accountability, and Reflective Practice. These themes reflected both

strengths and areas for growth across roles, highlighting the importance of alignment, consistency, and shared responsibility. Collectively, the data illustrated how systems and structures influenced staff effectiveness and student outcomes, while also emphasizing the need for ongoing reflection and refinement to support an inclusive and positive learning environment.

Intentional Professional Development and Continuous Growth. Across leadership, teachers, and paraeducators, professional development was consistently viewed as an essential and ongoing process that supports both staff effectiveness and student outcomes. At the administrative level, professional learning needs were identified through the use of data, feedback loops, and collaboration with leadership teams, ensuring that training remained aligned with building goals and priorities. This structured approach allowed for intentional planning while remaining responsive to emerging needs within classrooms and across programs. Attention to alignment between professional development and student outcomes reinforced a shared vision of continuous improvement and accountability across all roles.

Teachers emphasized that continuous learning is essential to adapt to evolving instructional practices, meet changing student needs, and remain aligned with legal requirements. Educators often adapted professional development to fit the unique demands of their classrooms, emphasizing the importance of flexibility and practical application. To support this process, teachers were provided with structured professional development opportunities as well as a mentor for their first two years, following state and district guidelines. This mentorship model offered guidance, feedback, and support as teachers developed their instructional and classroom management practices, helping to build confidence and consistency early in their careers.

Paraeducators similarly recognized the value of professional development in strengthening their ability to support both students and teachers. Structured onboarding processes were in place, with paraeducators hired at the beginning of the year receiving three days of training and mid-year hires receiving two days. In addition, lead assistants played a critical role in supporting new staff by providing training on essential skills and policy guidelines. These lead assistants were internally selected, typically requiring five years of experience, and served two-year terms with the opportunity to reapply and interview for continued service. Selection for these roles was based on qualities such as flexibility, adaptability, leadership potential, and demonstrated experience working through student situations, as well as ongoing observations throughout the year. Although there were four lead assistants in total, their varying years of service contributed to differences in experience and approach.

Despite the presence of foundational training programs such as Mandt and Ukeru, stakeholders noted variability in the depth, clarity, and follow-up of professional development experiences across roles. Ukeru is a trauma-informed crisis prevention and intervention approach that focuses on reducing restraint and seclusion through proactive strategies, emotional regulation, and supportive, nonviolent responses to behavior (Ukeru Systems, 2023). Mandt, formally known as The Mandt System, is a training program that emphasizes the development of healthy relationships, early intervention, de-escalation techniques, and the use of least-restrictive, person-centered strategies to safely and respectfully support individuals in crisis (The Mandt

System, n.d.). In some cases, staff relied on self-direction to apply learned strategies, indicating a need for more consistent coaching, structured onboarding, and opportunities to revisit key concepts over time. These findings suggest that while a strong foundation for professional learning exists, its overall impact is maximized when training is sustained, clearly communicated, and supported through ongoing guidance and collaboration.

Supportive Systems for Communication, Behavior, and Well-Being. A comprehensive system of support was described across all roles to promote effective communication, behavior management, and emotional regulation. Administration established frameworks such as Zones of Regulation, RADAR, and the crisis cycle to create consistency in practice, while also modeling the importance of self-regulation and staff well-being. Teachers implemented these strategies through structured classroom systems, defined roles, and intentional modeling of communication, often tailoring approaches to meet individual student needs. Paraeducators reinforced these practices by utilizing positive tone, body language, visual supports, and consistent routines to maintain a calm and supportive environment. In addition, collaboration among staff and access to training helped deepen understanding of behavior as communication, encouraging preventative and responsive strategies. However, experiences with support varied; while some staff described strong team-based systems and accessible resources, others noted gaps in coaching, follow-up, and stress management support. Consequently, the effectiveness of these systems depended on both the consistency of implementation and the level of ongoing support provided across the building.

Collaborative Culture, Accountability, and Reflective Practice. A collaborative culture refers to a shared environment in which educators work collectively through open communication, mutual respect, and shared responsibility to improve teaching and learning outcomes. Within this culture, accountability is understood as a collective commitment to uphold professional expectations, follow through on responsibilities, and contribute to continuous improvement. Reflective practice is the intentional process of examining one's actions, decisions, and outcomes to inform future practice and enhance effectiveness. Together, these components create a system in which staff learn from one another, engage in problem-solving, and align their efforts toward common goals.

Research supports that schools with strong collaborative cultures demonstrate higher levels of teacher effectiveness and student achievement because educators engage in ongoing dialogue, shared decision-making, and collective responsibility for outcomes (Vangrieken et al., 2017; updated synthesis supported in recent reviews such as Liu et al., 2022). Reflective practice further strengthens this process by encouraging educators to analyze instructional strategies, behavioral responses, and student outcomes, leading to more informed and intentional practices (Voogt et al., 2021). Structured debriefing, when consistently implemented, serves as a formalized reflective practice that allows teams to review events, identify successes and challenges, and develop actionable next steps. However, research indicates that without consistency, protected time, and clear protocols, reflective practices such as debriefing can become inconsistent and less effective across settings (Admiraal et al., 2021).

Additionally, accountability within collaborative systems is most effective when it is collective rather than individual, emphasizing shared goals, mutual support, and professional trust. Studies show that when educators feel psychologically safe and supported, they are more likely to engage in honest reflection, take instructional risks, and contribute meaningfully to team improvement efforts (Schildkamp et al., 2020). Conversely, inconsistencies in collaboration time, unclear expectations, and uneven participation can limit the effectiveness of these systems and reduce overall cohesion.

Ultimately, a cohesive and inclusive school culture is sustained when collaboration, accountability, and reflective practice are intentionally structured, consistently implemented, and supported across all roles. When all stakeholders actively engage in reflection, utilize available support, and maintain a shared commitment to growth, schools are better positioned to improve both staff practice and student outcomes.

Recommendations

This section conveys recommendations that will help support. Based on the analysis of data collected from leadership, teachers, and paraeducators, several key opportunities for growth were identified within the areas of professional development, support systems, and collaborative practices. While existing structures demonstrated a strong foundation, variations in implementation, consistency, and access to supports highlighted the need for refinement. The following recommendations were developed to build upon current strengths while addressing identified gaps across the three themes: Intentional Professional Development and Continuous Growth, Supportive Systems for Communication, Behavior, and Well-Being, and Collaborative Culture, Accountability, and Reflective Practice. Together, these recommendations aim to strengthen staff capacity, improve alignment across roles, and promote a more consistent and supportive learning environment.

Strengthen Coherent and Sustained Professional Development Systems. Strengthen Coherent and Sustained Professional Development Systems. To enhance the impact of professional development, systems should be strengthened to ensure consistency, depth, and ongoing support across all staff roles. While training was provided, variability in follow-up and application suggested the need for more structured coaching cycles, clear onboarding processes, and opportunities to revisit key concepts over time. Research has shown that sustained and well-designed professional development significantly improves educator self-efficacy and instructional practice, particularly when it includes continuous feedback and practical application (Zhou et al., 2023). Furthermore, aligning professional learning with school climate and collaborative goals increases both engagement and effectiveness. Therefore, embedding coaching, reflection checkpoints, and differentiated supports would ensure that professional development moves beyond exposure to meaningful implementation.

Expanding upon this, effective professional development systems are those that are ongoing, job-embedded, and directly connected to daily instructional practice rather than isolated training events. Research indicates that professional learning is most impactful when educators engage in continuous cycles of learning, application, feedback, and reflection, allowing new

strategies to be refined over time (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022). Additionally, coaching models that include observation, modeling, and targeted feedback have been shown to significantly improve instructional quality and increase the likelihood that new practices are implemented with fidelity (Kraft et al., 2021).

Moreover, differentiated professional development that accounts for varying levels of experience, content knowledge, and role-specific responsibilities further strengthens outcomes by meeting educators where they are in their professional growth. Studies emphasize that when professional learning is personalized and aligned with teacher needs, engagement and transfer to practice increase (Sancar et al., 2021). Structured reflection checkpoints, such as Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) or guided debriefing sessions, also promote collective efficacy by encouraging collaboration, shared problem-solving, and accountability for implementation (Admiraal et al., 2021).

In addition, sustained professional development contributes to improved school culture by fostering consistency in instructional approaches and behavioral support across classrooms. When all staff members receive aligned training with ongoing support, schools are better able to implement cohesive systems that benefit both educators and students. Ultimately, strengthening professional development through intentional design, continuous support, and embedded reflection ensures that learning translates into practice, leading to improved instructional effectiveness and more consistent student outcomes.

Expand Systems for Communication, Behavior Support, and Staff Well-Being.

Building upon existing frameworks, schools should expand and standardize systems that support communication, behavior response, and staff well-being. Although strategies such as modeling, structured routines, and behavior frameworks were in place, inconsistencies in coaching and stress support indicated a need for more intentional and equitable implementation. Research has emphasized that positive school climate and strong support systems directly influence teacher well-being, effectiveness, and student outcomes (Qu, 2024; Yang & Eugenio-Villanueva, 2024). Additionally, when educators feel supported in managing stress and behavior, they are more likely to maintain effective classroom environments. As a result, schools should formalize access to coaching, strengthen mental health supports, and ensure all staff are equipped with consistent tools for communication and de-escalation.

Across roles, the need for both shared and differentiated supports becomes increasingly evident. Leadership teams must be equipped with systems that allow for monitoring implementation, providing targeted feedback, and modeling effective practices to ensure alignment across the building. In contrast, teachers benefit most from instructional coaching, classroom-based application, and opportunities to refine strategies within their daily instruction. Paraeducators, however, often require explicit modeling, guided practice, and consistent reinforcement of expectations to implement strategies effectively. Despite these differences, common needs remain, including clear communication, access to resources, and structured collaboration. Research supports that when systems are aligned across roles, consistency improves and student outcomes are positively impacted (Schildkamp et al., 2020).

Equally important, varying levels of experience require intentional differentiation in support. New staff members frequently need structured onboarding, clear expectations, and frequent feedback to build both competence and confidence. Mentorship and modeling serve as critical components in helping early-career educators navigate classroom demands and reduce initial stress. By comparison, veteran staff often benefit from opportunities to deepen their expertise, engage in leadership roles, and contribute to school-wide improvement efforts. Providing pathways such as peer mentoring or coaching roles allows experienced educators to extend their impact while supporting others. Evidence suggests that differentiated professional supports improve both retention and effectiveness when aligned with individual experience levels (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011).

In addition to role and experience-based supports, attention to staff well-being remains essential. Leadership plays a significant role in establishing a culture that prioritizes balance, models stress management, and ensures access to mental health resources. Opportunities for debriefing, reflection, and collaborative problem-solving further support teachers and paraeducators in managing the emotional demands of their roles. When such systems are consistently implemented, educators are more likely to respond proactively and maintain stable classroom environments. Studies indicate that psychologically supportive environments foster stronger professional relationships, increased engagement, and improved instructional practices (Schildkamp et al., 2020).

Ultimately, strengthening and standardizing these systems requires a comprehensive and intentional approach. Alignment across leadership, teachers, and paraeducators ensures that expectations are clear and practices are consistent. Differentiating supports based on experience levels further enhances effectiveness and sustainability. When coaching, communication, and well-being supports are accessible to all staff, schools are better positioned to create a cohesive, responsive, and inclusive learning environment that benefits both educators and students.

Increase Structured Collaboration and Reflective Practices. To promote continuous improvement, structured opportunities for collaboration and reflection should be expanded across all roles. While informal collaboration and team-based problem-solving were evident, inconsistent access to time and structured processes limited the overall impact. Research has demonstrated that distributed leadership and intentional collaboration significantly enhance teacher capacity, innovation, and instructional quality (Ma & Marion, 2024). Moreover, collaborative reflection practices have been shown to strengthen shared accountability and improve implementation of new strategies. Therefore, dedicating protected time for team reflection, guided debriefing, and cross-role collaboration would foster a more cohesive and growth-oriented professional culture.

Expanding on this, one proven strategy is the implementation of structured Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), where educators engage in ongoing cycles of inquiry focused on student learning, instructional practices, and data analysis. Research indicates that PLCs are most effective when guided by clear protocols, focused goals, and regular meeting times, leading to improved instructional consistency and student outcomes (Admiraal et al., 2021; Stoll et al.,

2022). Establishing protected time within the school schedule ensures that collaboration is not left to chance but becomes an embedded and expected part of professional practice.

Another effective approach involves the use of structured reflective protocols, such as data-driven dialogue or lesson study, where educators collaboratively analyze student work, observe instruction, and reflect on outcomes. These practices promote deeper professional learning by moving beyond surface-level discussion to intentional analysis and application. Research supports that structured reflection improves instructional decision-making and increases the likelihood that new strategies are implemented effectively (Voogt et al., 2021). Additionally, guided debriefing following instructional or behavioral incidents using consistent frameworks helps teams identify patterns, refine responses, and build shared understanding across roles.

Instructional coaching and peer observation further strengthen collaboration and reflection by providing opportunities for modeling, feedback, and shared learning. Studies have shown that when educators engage in peer observation with structured feedback, instructional practices improve and professional trust is strengthened (Kraft et al., 2021). Embedding cross-role collaboration, including teachers, paraeducators, and leadership, ensures alignment of expectations and consistency in implementation, particularly in inclusive and behavior-support settings.

Furthermore, fostering psychological safety within teams is essential for effective collaboration. Educators are more likely to engage in honest reflection, share challenges, and take instructional risks when they feel supported and valued. Research highlights that environments characterized by trust and shared responsibility lead to stronger collective efficacy and improved school outcomes (Schildkamp et al., 2020). Establishing norms for collaboration, including respectful communication, active participation, and solution-oriented dialogue, further strengthens these practices. In summary, expanding structured collaboration and reflective practices requires intentional systems, including protected time, guided protocols, coaching supports, and inclusive team structures. When consistently implemented, these strategies promote deeper professional learning, strengthen accountability, and support continuous improvement across all roles.

Reinforce a Unified Culture of Accountability and Growth Mindset. Strengthening a unified culture of accountability alongside a growth mindset across leadership, teachers, and paraeducators is essential for sustaining long-term success in inclusive school settings. Although staff across roles demonstrated a shared commitment to collaboration and continuous improvement, inconsistencies in engagement, role clarity, and follow-through indicated the need for stronger alignment and clearly defined expectations. A cohesive system of accountability ensures that all stakeholders understand their responsibilities while working collectively toward common goals, ultimately improving both staff effectiveness and student outcomes.

Accountability, while a shared concept, is enacted differently across roles. Leadership accountability is often centered on establishing vision, ensuring implementation fidelity, and creating systems that support staff performance and student success. School leaders are

responsible for modeling expectations, monitoring progress, and providing feedback and resources that enable continuous improvement (Hallinger & Heck, 2010). In contrast, teachers' accountability is primarily focused on instructional practice, classroom management, and student learning outcomes. Teachers are expected to implement curriculum effectively, differentiate instruction, and use data to inform decision-making. Paraeducators, while sometimes less formally evaluated, are accountable for implementing instructional and behavioral supports with consistency, reinforcing teacher-led strategies, and maintaining positive student interactions (Giangreco et al., 2013).

Despite these role-specific differences, important similarities exist. Across all roles, accountability is strengthened when it is collective rather than isolated, emphasizing shared responsibility, collaboration, and mutual support. Research indicates that collective efficacy, staff belief in their shared ability to positively impact students is strongly associated with improved student achievement and professional practice (Donohoo, 2017; Luo et al., 2024). Furthermore, psychologically safe environments encourage all staff members to engage in honest reflection, take professional risks, and contribute meaningfully to improvement efforts (Schildkamp et al., 2020). When accountability is framed as supportive and restorative rather than punitive, it promotes engagement, ownership, and sustained growth.

However, differences in training, authority, and access to professional development can create inconsistencies in how accountability is experienced. Leadership often has greater access to data systems and decision-making authority, while teachers typically receive more structured professional development than paraeducators. Paraeducators may experience ambiguity in expectations or limited access to feedback and coaching, which can hinder their ability to fully engage in accountability systems (Giangreco et al., 2013). These discrepancies highlight the importance of designing inclusive systems that ensure all roles are equally supported and clearly aligned.

To address these gaps and strengthen a unified culture, several research-based solutions can be implemented. First, establishing clear, role-specific expectations aligned to shared school goals is critical. When expectations are transparent and consistent, staff across roles are better able to understand how their contributions support overall outcomes (Li, 2024). Second, implementing structured reflection and feedback systems, such as coaching cycles, professional learning communities (PLCs), and guided debriefing protocols, promotes continuous improvement and shared accountability (Voogt et al., 2021). These systems should intentionally include paraeducators to ensure alignment and consistency in practice. Third, fostering a growth mindset culture across all roles supports accountability by reframing challenges as opportunities for learning. A growth mindset encourages educators to view effort, feedback, and reflection as essential components of professional growth rather than indicators of deficiency (Dweck, 2006). Embedding growth mindset principles into professional development, evaluation processes, and team discussions reinforces resilience, adaptability, and a commitment to continuous improvement.

Additionally, providing differentiated professional support based on role and experience level enhances effectiveness. Leadership benefits from training in instructional leadership and systems thinking, which strengthens their ability to align vision, monitor implementation, and support continuous improvement across the organization (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022; Fullan, 2014). Teachers benefit from sustained, job-embedded instructional coaching, collaborative data analysis, and professional learning communities (PLCs) that focus on student outcomes; these approaches have been shown to improve instructional practice and student achievement when they are ongoing, content-specific, and tied to classroom application (Desimone & Garet, 2015; Kraft et al., 2018). Paraeducators benefit from explicit modeling, guided practice, and performance-based feedback, particularly when training is scaffolded and aligned with clearly defined roles and expectations; research indicates that structured support and supervision improve both fidelity of implementation and student outcomes (Giangreco et al., 2010; Fisher & Pleasants, 2012). Across all roles, effective professional learning incorporates active learning, opportunities for reflection, coaching, and follow-up support rather than one-time workshops (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Ensuring equitable access to professional learning opportunities including time, resources, and differentiated supports strengthens consistency, builds collective efficacy, and empowers all staff to meet expectations with confidence and competence.

Finally, cultivating a culture of collaborative accountability is essential. This includes establishing norms for teamwork, promoting shared problem-solving, and embedding regular opportunities for cross-role collaboration. When leadership, teachers, and paraeducators work together within structured systems, accountability becomes a collective endeavor rather than an individual burden. Research supports that such collaborative cultures improve both instructional quality and school climate (Vangrieken et al., 2017; Liu et al., 2022). Thus reinforcing a unified culture of accountability and growth mindset requires intentional alignment across roles, equitable access to support, and systems that promote reflection, collaboration, and continuous learning. By clearly defining expectations, embedding structured supports, and fostering a shared commitment to growth, schools can create an environment in which all staff members are empowered to take ownership of their practice. This unified approach not only strengthens professional effectiveness but also contributes to more consistent, inclusive, and positive outcomes for students.

In conclusion, the recommended actions focused on enhancing existing systems to ensure greater consistency, accessibility, and impact across the school community. By prioritizing sustained professional development, strengthening support structures, increasing opportunities for collaboration, and reinforcing a shared culture of accountability, the school would be better positioned to meet the diverse needs of both staff and students. Ultimately, successful implementation would require a collective commitment from all stakeholders, supported by clear expectations and ongoing reflection. Through these efforts, the school could continue to foster a positive, inclusive, and growth-oriented environment for all.

Summary

Overall, findings and recommendations emphasize the importance of structured training in inclusive pedagogy as a foundation for effective classroom management across disabilities. Effective practice is built through the integration of research-based theories, structured supports, and strong relationships among students and staff. An approach grounded in behaviorist, constructivist, developmental, and social learning theories promotes learning environments that are responsive, inclusive, and supportive of diverse needs. Consistent implementation, paired with ongoing support and reflection, strengthens both instruction and classroom climate. Additionally, findings from leadership, teachers, and paraeducators highlight the need for alignment, consistency, and access to support systems. Evidence from the data demonstrates that professional development, communication, and collaboration directly impact staff effectiveness and student outcomes. Research supports that data-informed decision-making improves instructional quality and promotes equitable learning when evidence guides practice (Datnow & Park, 2022; Hamilton et al., 2021).

Looking ahead, a clear understanding of these findings supports educators in making informed, intentional decisions. Engagement with data strengthens reflection, professional judgment, and responsiveness to diverse needs. Continued analysis encourages refinement of instruction, classroom management, and collaboration. Ultimately, a commitment to using data fosters a consistent, inclusive, and growth-oriented environment where both students and educators can succeed.

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Interview Outline

Leadership:

Purpose: Collecting data to inform strategies that promote a positive climate and culture for all staff, thereby supporting inclusive practices.

1. Professional Development Planning
 - How does administration determine which areas of staff practice and classroom climate require ongoing professional development?
 - What processes are in place to ensure training aligns with both inclusive and special education classroom needs?
2. Supporting Positive Interactions and Paralanguage
 - How does administration ensure staff are trained in effective paralanguage, nonverbal cues, and respectful communication to support student emotional regulation?
 - Are there follow-up support or coaching opportunities for staff to refine their communication and relationship-building skills?
3. Growth Mindset and Reflective Practice
 - How are growth mindset principles integrated into professional development plans and performance feedback for staff?
 - In what ways does administration encourage reflection and collaboration among staff to foster continual skill development?
4. Stress Management and Emotional Support
 - What systems are in place to support staff in recognizing and managing stress, duress, or burnout while maintaining a positive classroom climate?
 - As the administration, how is modeling or reinforcing proactive stress management strategies across teams important?
5. Behavior and Crisis Management
 - How are frameworks like RADAR and the crisis cycle integrated into professional development to ensure consistent and effective responses to student behaviors?
 - What training or support does administration provide to help staff view challenging behaviors as communication and respond preventatively?
6. School Culture and Team Cohesion
 - How does administration support the use of humor, rapport-building, and positive staff interactions to strengthen school culture and reduce tension?
 - What strategies are in place to ensure debriefing, team reflection, and communication after challenging incidents are consistently implemented?

Interview Outline

Teachers:

Purpose: Collecting data to inform strategies that promote a positive climate and culture for all staff, thereby supporting inclusive practices.

1. Professional Development Planning

- How can I understand which areas of my practice or classroom climate require ongoing professional development?
- How can I be sure that the training I receive meets the needs of both inclusive and special education classrooms?

2. Supporting Positive Interactions and Paralanguage

- How am I supported in using effective paralanguage, nonverbal cues, and respectful communication to help students regulate their emotions?
- Are there follow-up opportunities, coaching, or mentoring available to help me improve my communication and relationship-building skills?

3. Growth Mindset and Reflective Practice

- How are growth mindset principles applied to my professional development and performance feedback?
- In what ways am I encouraged to reflect, collaborate, and continuously grow my skills with colleagues?

4. Stress Management and Emotional Support

- What support systems are in place to help me recognize and manage stress, burnout, or challenging situations while maintaining a positive classroom climate?
- How does the administration model or reinforce proactive stress management strategies that I can use in my own practice?

5. Behavior and Crisis Management

- How do professional development and training help me consistently respond to student behaviors using frameworks like RADAR and the crisis cycle?
- What support is available to help me understand challenging behaviors as communication and respond preventatively?

6. School Culture and Team Cohesion

- How am I supported in building positive relationships, rapport, and humor with colleagues to strengthen school culture and reduce tension?
- What structures exist for debriefing, team reflection, and communication after challenging incidents to help me and my team improve?

Interview Outline

Paraeducators

Purpose: Collecting data to inform strategies that promote a positive climate and culture for all staff, thereby supporting inclusive practices.

- Professional Development
 - Which areas of my role need more training or support?
 - Does training help me support all students effectively?
- Positive Interactions & Communication
 - How can I use tone, body language, and cues to help students stay calm and engaged?
 - Are there opportunities to improve my communication and relationships with students?
- Growth & Reflection
 - How does training help me improve my skills over time?
 - How am I encouraged to reflect and collaborate with the team?
- Stress & Emotional Support
 - What support helps me manage stress while working with students?
 - How can I apply strategies modeled by staff or administration?
- Behavior & Crisis Response
 - How does training guide me in responding safely and consistently to student behaviors?
 - What support helps me understand behavior as communication?
- Teamwork & School Culture
 - How am I supported in building positive relationships with students and staff?
 - Are there chances to debrief and reflect with the team after challenging incidents?

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