High School Special Education Teachers’ Perceptions of SWPBIS on Their Students’ Academic Success

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# Chapter 1: Introduction

 High school administrators today are struggling with the challenges of student behavior and discipline, coupled with the demanding task of maintaining a conducive academic environment (Hawken & Bundock, 2015). Specific examples of disciplinary issues encountered by school administrators include, but are not limited to, referrals, suspensions, and expulsions which have reduced the instructional time spent by students in the classroom (McDaniel, Kim & Guyotte, 2017). Horner and Macaya (2018) described this type of misconduct in their research which includes being disruptive in class, engaging in school fights, bullying others, stealing, vandalism and truancy. Clawson (2017) held the view that behavioral and academic issues exhibited by high school students are a clear indicator of students dropping out of school without receiving a high school diploma.

Traditional school rules such as zero-tolerance have come under scrutiny because these rules have not had any positive influence on students’ behavior and disciplinary issues (McDaniel et al., 2017). As a result, most school administrators have shifted their attention to research-based programs such as the School-Wide Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (SWPBIS), to create a positive school climate (George, 2018; Shukla, Konold & Cornell, 2016). Tyre and Feuerborn (2018) described SWPBIS as an intervention that is multi-tiered, providing a revamped discipline system in lieu of the traditional punitive discipline system that has failed to support all students. Districts that have implemented SWPBIS continue to administer consequences for misconduct, however, their focus relies on teaching expectations for preventative measures (Reno, Friend & Smith, 2017). According to Pas, Johnson, and Debnam (2018) when a school implements SWPBIS program there are fewer reactive, punitive, and exclusionary disciplinary practices, higher levels of student satisfaction and perceptions of safety in school. Additionally, a high level of student satisfaction and perceptions of safety is witnessed in the school environment. Madigan and Cross (2016) and Van Eck, Johnson and Bettencourt (2017) supported these findings when they discovered that the SWPBIS program can lower the incidence of negative behavior and improve student academic outcomes.

School climate impacts student behaviors and academic success. Existing studies have provided varying definitions of school climate. For instance, James and Smallwood (2017) perceived school climate in terms of the attributes that contribute to the rules and regulations governing the structure of the school environment. On the other hand, Cornell and Huang (2016) viewed school climate as a bond that is developed between students and school staff. These contrasting views represent how behavioral and disciplinary cases are addressed by school administrators using the established rules and regulations.

Bear, Yang, Mantz, and Harris (2017) subdivided school climate into four main components which include safety, relationships, teaching and learning, and the external environment. Gordon and Fefer (2019) discovered that a healthy school climate inspires higher standardized test scores and higher graduation rates. Sheras and Bradshaw (2016) examined the importance of having a positive school climate where students can flourish personally and academically. Reno and Friend (2018) agree that building a robust framework that can provide a positive school environment requires establishing several procedures and practices, which can range from 3-5 school-wide appropriate student behaviors taught to all students and staff. Gordon and Fefer (2019) discovered that students are less likely to engage in misconduct in a positive school climate where they feel safe and connected to the school environment. Reno and Friend (2017) described how school culture is important for improving student academic achievement and how creating a positive school culture is constructing a beneficial learning environment for students.

In a west coast state, SWPBIS is being used in a large urban school district. Before the implementation of SWPBIS, punitive measures to correct problem behaviors resulted in students in the principal’s office with discipline referrals. The SWPBIS Program was enforced for three years starting with the 2015-16 school year. According to the Education Data Partnership (2019), the suspension rate decreased 1.6% from the 2016-17 school year to the 2017-18 school year, however those statistics are not inclusive of special education students.

## Statement of the Problem

The problem to be addressed in this study is that when School-Wide Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports is implemented in a high school it is supposed to work for the entire student population which includes special education students to improve student behavior and academic achievement (George, 2018). In a west coast state, in a large urban school district, students are placed in a house (student groups) according to their English Language Proficiency Assessment for California scores and their California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress scores and if they are a student with a disability (special education student). The professional learning community house systems have been in place since 2009 at the study site high school and consist of three main levels of houses--high, middle, and low houses. In this district the study site is the only high school where the freshman and sophomore students are place in the house system. Freshman and sophomore special education students are automatically placed in the lower house system. After their sophomore year, all students are mainstreamed together, but enrollment counselors tend to push class enrollment for students based on prior houses instead of student academic achievement, so special education students who show the potential to succeed are never enrolled in courses to boost their academic success. Although special education students have the academic ability to enroll in AP courses or Honor courses, they rarely take these courses during their four years in high school.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to document special education teachers’ experiences with SWPBIS and how it impacts special education students’ behavior and academic achievement through their four years of high school. The proposed study will be conducted by collecting data from a sample of 7-9 special education teachers in an urban high school in the west coast state. The use of a phenomenological study allows for a small sample of participants in the study (Pederson, 2016). When selecting the participants for the phenomenological study, the participants should have experienced a common phenomenon and be able to describe the lived experience (Pederson, 2016). The special education teachers will be contacted via email and invited to voluntarily participate in the study. Through the semi-structured interviews, the special education teachers’ members’ data will contribute to a better understanding of how SWPBIS impacts special education students’ behaviors and academic achievement through their four years of high school. The interviews will be digitally recorded and then transcribed. Analysis will be conducted using Moustakas’ (1994) modification of the Van Kaam method of phenomenological data analysis.

**Introduction to Conceptual Framework**

SWPBIS was developed based on the Positive Behavior Support Model, which is a multi-tiered approach that assists students to regulate their behavior (Tyre & Feuerborn, 2018). A number of methods have been devised that can be used to regulate students’ behavior limited to applied teaching methods, such as positive reinforcement instead of conventional reactive and punitive responses (Flannery & Kato, 2017). This practical approach emphasizes an improved quality of life for students using methods that encourage appropriate behaviors (Freeman & Simonsen, 2015). SWPBIS has widely been accepted as a behavioral system that increases the ability for schools to teach all students appropriate behaviors (George, Cox & Minch, 2018).

The SWPBIS was originally developed as a viable alternative to aversive approaches for students suffering from intellectually challenged disabilities (Kurth & Enyart, 2016). The guiding principles of SWPBIS emphasize the prevention of behavioral issues, constant behavioral support for all learners, systemic organizational change, real-life application in academic settings, and slow but dependable improvement (Freeman & Simonsen, 2015). SWPBIS has three behavioral tiers (figure 1).



*Figure 1.* Components of SWPBIS. Retrieved from https:// https://www.gadoe.org/curriculum-instruction-and-assessment/curriculum-and-instruction/pages/response-to-intervention.aspx.

The components of SWPBIS include organization and training of a support team based on the model, definition of behavioral expectations, teaching of these expectations, implementation of systems to support and encourage the expected behaviors, and collection of data to enhance decision-making and evaluate the effectiveness of the model (Yeung, Craven & Mooney, 2016). The three tiers of SWPBIS are based on prevention and intervention. In tier one, all students are being supported throughout the school (Noltemeyer, Palmer & James, 2019). When a student is not responding to tier one support, they are recommended for tier two support and then if the student is still not responding to the tier one and two supports, they are then recommended to a more intense individual support system in tier three (Noltemeyer et al., 2019).

From a historical perspective, SWPBIS has been considered as the reward of positive behavior instead of using conventional approaches to negative behavior, such as exclusion and punishment, which impede a healthy school climate and do not encourage the creation of teaching methods that promote positive behavior (Schaper & McIntosh, 2015). Reactive responses to discipline can jeopardize a student's academic success, disrupt the school setting, interrupt instruction time, and increase the vulnerability of at-risk learners (Yeung et al., 2016). Freeman and Simonsen (2015) indicated that reactive responses to discipline increase antisocial behavior and violence conduct, such as vandalism. Empirical evidence indicates that SWPBIS implemented in schools leads to a significant reduction of disciplinary issues (Hawken & Bundock, 2015). Flannery and Kato (2017) noted that leadership teams must make time to review data during the year as they are implementing SWPBIS. The importance of the data is critical in the decision-making process when implementing any new intervention of SWPBIS (Flannery & Kato, 2017).

## Nature of the Study

For this research study, the most appropriate research design is a qualitative phenomenological study. According to Simon and Goes (2011) the founder of phenomenology research, Moustakas defined the research as focusing on the lived experience of the individual. The sample will be 7-9 special education teachers from an urban high school in a west coast state. Face to face interviews will be conducted to collect data on the teachers ‘experiences with SWPBIS and how it impacts special education students’ behavior and academic achievement through their four years of high school. A phenomenological study design was chosen because the purpose of the research is to gather data on teachers’ experiences with SWPBIS and their special education students.

**Research Questions**

**RQ1.** What are special education teachers’ experiences with the implementation of SWPBIS for special education students on their behavior through their four years of high school?

**RQ1.** What are special education teachers’ experiences with the implementation of SWPBIS for special education students on academic achievement through their four years of high school?

**Significance of the Study**

Disruptive behavior problems impact the academic development of high school students. The onset of these behaviors, especially violence and aggression, is associated with a higher risk of academic achievement issues, drug and substance abuse, antisocial behaviors, truancy, placement in special programs in schools, and even dropping out of school (Freeman, et al., 2015). The proposed study is significant because it will examine special education teachers’ experiences with SWPBIS and how it impacts special education students’ behavior and academic achievement through their four years of high school. Findings may help administration to better tailor the SWPBIS program to special education students’ unique behavioral and academic needs.

## Definitions of Key Terms

**English language learners.** English language learners are students who are not yet fluent in oral, written and reading English (McDaniel & Sunyoung, 2017).

**Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act.** FERPA is theFederal law that protects the privacy of student educational records in schools that receive any funding from the U. S. Department of Education (USDOE, 2019).

**House.** A house is a student group that is part of a professional learning community where students share the same group of teachers and they are tracked academically (Dufoe, 2006).

**Professional learning communities.**  PBLs are best practice for teachers to collaborate as a team and discuss student data (Dufoe, 2006).

**School-wide positive behavior intervention and supports.**  SWPBIS is an approach whose goals are the reduction of behavioral problems in schools by altering how teachers respond to misconduct and creating systems that meet the behavioral needs of different learners (George, 2018).

**Standardized test.** A standardized test contains the same set of questions for all students and all students take the test in the same type of environment (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019).

**Students with disabilities.** Students who have learning differences, mental challenges, and physical or developmental disabilities are classified as students with disabilities (Kurth & Enyart, 2016).

**Summary**

The proposed study seeks to address special education teachers’ experiences with SWPBIS and how it impacts special education students’ behavior and academic achievement through their four years of high school. A positive school climate is important for maintaining a high-quality academic environment. School climate influences everyone in a school from custodial staff to the administration. Student misconduct can have a negative impact on a student’s academic achievement. Before the implementation of SWPBIS, punitive measures to correct problem behaviors were being used which was creating a problem with placing too many special education students in the principal’s office with discipline referrals. The SWPBIS has proven to be an effective approach to dealing with student misconduct without negatively impacting academic achievement, however special education students have unique needs.

The phenomenological study will be conducted in one of the high schools located in an urban high school in a west coast with a sample of 7-9 special education teachers. Data will be collected via semi-structured interviews. The findings of this study will contribute to the growing body of knowledge in determining which effective interventions can be implemented in their school to promote positive student behaviors and improve academic performance for special education students.

**Chapter 2: Literature Review**

This chapter presents a review of the literature related to how special education teachers’ experiences have been impacted by the School-wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS), which in turn, has impacted students’ behavior and academic performance from the context of the high school learning environment. An emphasis is placed on reviewing previous research which could inform the SWPBIS model and the outcome of the study. An overview of special education students, behaviors and their academic achievements is presented. Then educating special education students in U.S. public schools and an overview of SWPBIS, and special education teachers’ experiences with SWPBIS is addressed. Finally, school climate and its impact on special education students is discussed. The chapter relies on scholarly studies obtained from various academic databases such as Google scholar, ProQuest, Emerald, ResearchGate, ERIC, Education Full Text, and Education Research Complete among other databases. Search terms used were conceptual framework, special education students, special education students’ behaviors and academic achievements, educating special students in public schools, school-wide positive behavior intervention and supports, special education teachers’ experiences with school-wide positive behavior intervention and supports, and school climate and special education students.

## Conceptual Framework

The components of SWPBIS include organization and training of a support team based on the model, definition of behavioral expectations, teaching of these expectations, implementation of systems to support and encourage the expected behaviors, and collection of data to enhance decision-making and evaluate the effectiveness of the model (Yeung et al., 2016). The three tiers of SWPBIS are based on prevention and intervention.

In tier one, all students are being supported throughout the school (Noltemeyer et al., 2019). When a student is not responding to tier one support, they are recommended for tier two support which consists of group intervention with no more than 10 students per group (Crone, 2010). If the student is still not responding to the tier one and two supports, they are then recommended to a more intense individual support system in tier three (Noltemeyer et al., 2019). This individual support consists of individualized support where a Functional Behavioral Assessment may be part of the formal assessment, and Wraparound Services can be added if necessary (Crone, 2010).

From a historical perspective, SWPBIS has been considered as the reward of positive behavior instead of using conventional approaches to negative behavior, such as exclusion and punishment, which impede a healthy school climate and do not encourage the creation of teaching methods that promote positive behavior (Schaper & McIntosh, 2015). Reactive responses to discipline can jeopardize a student's academic success, disrupt the school setting, interrupt instruction time, and increase the vulnerability of at-risk learners (Yeung et al., 2016). Freeman and Simonsen (2015) indicated that reactive responses to discipline increase antisocial behavior and violence conduct, such as vandalism. Empirical evidence indicates that SWPBIS implemented in schools leads to a significant reduction of disciplinary issues (Hawken & Bundock, 2015). Flannery and Kato (2017) noted that leadership teams must make time to review data during the year as they are implementing SWPBIS. The importance of the data is critical in the decision-making process when implementing any new intervention such as SWPBIS (Flannery & Kato, 2017).

Horner et al. (2015) indicated that School Wide Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports has been implemented in more than 25,000 schools in the United States with a high percentage being elementary and middle high schools. This was in response to increased calls from different quarters to establish an efficient approach that can ensure discipline in schools that are less reactive and preventative (Flannery & McGrath Kato, 2017). The effectiveness of SWPBIS in either elementary or middle high schools has widely been established using control trials. This is contrary to the high school settings that has been associated with uncontrolled, dynamic factors such as the values and beliefs held by the teachers regarding the school learning environment, students’ expectations, the significant role assumed by teachers, and teachers’ assumption that students are grownups and know how they should behave (Madigan, Cross, Smolkowski & Strycker 2016). Flannery et al (2017) characterized the organizational structure adopted in high school settings as multifaceted and offered a limited number of opportunities for collaboration among teachers. Evidence has associated most high schools with a significant use of exclusionary practices such as suspensions, expulsion among others when dealing with student unrest and misconduct as compared to elementary or middle high schools. As a result, there are various contextual variables located within a high school setting that demonstrate the effect of SWPBIS in special education teachers’ experiences, students’ behavior and academic performance (Flannery, et al, 2017).

**Classroom Management**

 Novice teachers coming into the teaching profession come with the expectation that students will come to school ready to learn (Evertson, 2013). Classroom management is defined by Herman (2019) as a complicated set of regulating behaviors that the teacher wants to teach the students to create order in the classroom. Zakszeski (2020) states that it is necessary to maintain a safe classroom climate for the students to focus on the teaching standards. Brophy (2013) emphasizes the importance of creating a structured classroom on the first day of school that will set the stage for the rest of the school year. Zakszeski (2020) suggests that the teacher create a lesson that is familiar to the students and not just something that will keep them busy for forty-five minutes to an hour. Students need to know that the work they are doing on the first day is essential and important just like the rest of the work they will be doing the next day and for the rest of the year (Brophy, 2013).

 Kaya (2019) describes how teachers today are routinely placed in situations where they must limit their students’ behaviors in their class allowing teaching and learning to occur. When students are in a structured environment the teacher can engage the students effectively in the lesson maximizing their time together (Brophy, 2013). Understanding how to manage the classroom a teacher will understand the positive or negative impact they will have in the academic success of each of their students (Kaya, 2019).

 Classroom management is daunting to a new teacher walking into the classroom for the first time. The complexity of managing a classroom and 30 students with different personalities who may come with Learning Disabilities can create a strain on any teacher (Oliver, 2007). However, creating a safe classroom environment where students can be engaged in their learning is exactly what a new teacher is expected to do (Oliver, 2007). According to O’Ferrall (2015) what a teacher does in the classroom is much more important because of how they relate to their students when they discipline them will establish the tone for the remainder of the school year. O’Ferrall (2015) states that what a teacher does in the classroom is so important that it affects the students’ academic performance, how they behave outside of the classroom, their relationships with their peers, and all of this is due in part to how the teacher manages their classroom.

 Oliver (2007) found that when new teachers had good classroom management their first year of teaching they had less behavioral issues in their classroom. With less behavioral problems these teachers were able to focus on teaching, they were more satisfied with their career and they were less likely to leave the teaching profession (Oliver, 2007). If the new teacher was inadequately prepared for teaching in a low-socioeconomic setting with at-risk students their ability to succeed drops (Oliver, 2017). Oliver (2017) stresses the importance of staff development in the areas of classroom management to support new teachers who may seem to be struggling at the beginning of their career. Bolinger (2020) expresses that new teachers need to have knowledge not only about classroom management in general, but also have a broad understanding about the different learning disabilities in their classrooms and how to better diffuse any conflict.

**Barriers to Effective Classroom Management**

 As Yazdi (2019) found teachers do not get to choose their classrooms nor their students. Teachers have barriers that are placed in front of them which make it difficult to manage their classrooms effectively. A classroom is made up of students from diverse backgrounds who come into the classroom with a multitude of emotions (Yazdi, 2019). The teacher has now become the expert in the diverse backgrounds of the students and a counselor who is there to comfort the students during a mental breakdown (Zakszeski, 2020).

 Long (2019) has found that beginning teachers are not trained to deal with students with disabilities in their classrooms. Teachers are struggling with finding how to discipline behavior problem students who consistently disrupt their teaching (Long, 2019). Scherzinger (2019) states that one of the barriers to effective classroom management is having too many disruptions during the day. When there are too many administrative disruptions during the day they become the norm (Kaya, 2019). Kaya (2019) found that students become restless when they are not engaged in the lesson or activity being given by the teacher.

**Effective Teachers**

 Researchers at Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) have identified nine instructional strategies that are most likely to improve student achievement across all content areas and across all grade levels. These strategies are explained in the book*Classroom Instruction That Works* by Marzano et al (2001). Effective teachers employ several teaching strategies, one of these strategies is identifying similarities and differences. First, is the ability to break a concept into its similar and dissimilar characteristics allows students to understand (and often solve) complex problems by analyzing them in a more simple way. Teachers can either directly present similarities and differences, accompanied by deep discussion and inquiry, or simply ask students to identify similarities and differences on their own. While teacher-directed activities focus on identifying specific items, student-directed activities encourage variation and broaden understanding. Marzano et al, (2001) found that graphic forms are a good way to represent similarities and differences.

Second, is summarizing and note-taking. These two skills promote greater comprehension by asking students to analyze a subject to expose what is essential and then put it in their own words (Marzano et al, 2001). This skill requires substituting, deleting, and keeping some things and having an awareness of the basic structure of the information presented. Taking more notes is better than fewer notes, though verbatim note taking is ineffective because it does not allow time to process the information. Teachers should encourage and give time for review and revision of notes as notes can be the best study guides for tests (Marzano et al, 2001).

Effective teachers claimed Marzano et al (2001) reinforce the effort students make and provide recognition. These teachers assign homework which allows practice for what has been learned in class, and students are given nonlinguistic representations as examples. Cooperative learning groups, setting daily objectives and providing positive feedback are all part of an effective teachers repertoire (Marzano, 2001).

**Adolescent Development During High School**

Evidence suggests that some high school students desire independence from their guardians while relying more on their peers (Darling-Hammond et al., 2019). Enhanced desire for autonomy among high school students has resulted in the students assuming a significant part in decision making roles, especially when it affects them directly. Dumontheil (2015) indicated that brain development of high school students greatly impacts their psychological and cognitive development aspects.

Existing studies have argued that students in the development stages of adolescence have not often understood the implications of their actions, evaluating the risks and rewards associated with any decision quite differently from adults and allowing more peer influence to shape their decisions (Hartley & Somerville, 2015; Steinberg, 2014). On the contrary, older students might be acquainted with what is expected of them; however, they may decide to act beyond those expectations due to greater peer influence (Wu et al., 2015). As a result, it is important for high school teachers to understand this developmental stage and how it can contribute to enhance student outcome and behavior. Additionally, the institution needs to acknowledge the fact that the social culture of the institution is greatly influenced by the interactions among the students as opposed to the interaction between the teacher and student (Flannery & McGrath, 2017). The issues of adolescent development are further challenged when dealing with special education students with behavioral challenges, including ESL high school students (Flannery & McGrath, 2017)**.**

**Overview of Special Education Students**

Special education students, as defined by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) enacted in 1975, are students between the age of 3 and 21, identified with a form of disability that negatively affects their student success. As a result, students require special education that can meet their educational needs. Based on statistics presented by the National Center for Educational Statistics (2019), there was a significant increase in the number of students being served with special education from 6.4 million in 2011-12 to seven million students in 2017-18. The results further indicated that there was a slight increase in the number of students who had enrolled in public schools from 13% to 14%. The National Center for Educational Statistics (2019) has also provided a clear distribution of the different disability types as illustrated in Figure 2.

**Figure 2**

*Disabilities of Children Age 3-21. 2017–18. Sourced from National Center for Educational Statistics (2019, May).*



Some of the health impairment types affecting the students have been categorized as acute health problems such as autism, intellectual disability, emotional disturbance, and hearing impairment among others. Disorders have been categorized into five different types by the DSM IV namely clinical disorders (Axis I), personality and mental disorders (Axis II), general medical conditions (Axis III), psychological and ecologically related problems (Axis IV) and the general assessment functioning (Axis V) (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Most disability types affecting students who require special education are in the Axis III to V categories, while a few have been categorized as Axis I to II such as ADHD, Dyslexia, autism spectrum and behavioral disorders, and the educable mentally challenged.

Under the IDEA (2020) there are 13 disability categories from which students with one or more of these 13 disabilities are mainstreamed into the general education classroom. The student with learning disabilities once mainstreamed into the regular education curriculum is required to learn the same material as a non-disabled student. Understanding how students learn is most important for educators who work with students with special needs. Learning differences offer the special educator effective strategies which have been effective with students with learning disabilities (Barton, 2004). Through the development process of the IEP the entire stakeholders involved in supporting the student with learning disabilities can evaluate which learning strategies are most appropriate for each student and their needs (Ogundele, 2018).

***Law of Effect***

The behaviorist, Edward Thorndike (1874 – 1949), was a pioneer in the theory of a learner making associations or connections between a stimuli and a response (Mayer, 2003). This occurs through trial and error. A response, for example, can be rewarded thus strengthening the behavior expected. In a student with a learning disability the learning association can take the form of creating a positive reinforcement for a student who is habitually interrupting the teacher in the middle of instruction. The positive reinforcement for example can be a candy bar when the student interrupts fewer than three times during the day. Thorndike (2003) refers to this as the ‘law of effect’ which is a response to a certain situation followed by a reward which in effect will strengthen the certain expected habit. On the other hand if the student with learning disabilities lacks the practice necessary to strengthen the desired behavior then the desired behavior will have the opposite outcome, it will become weak (Chin et al, 2012).

***Social Development Theory***

Vygotsky’s (1896 – 1934) learning theory revolutionized the education field with the introduction of the social development theory and ZPD or ‘Zone of Proximal Development’ (Chin et al, 2012). According to Vygotstky (1996) students learn through social interaction with others. For example a preschool student will begin to learn to recognize some letters of the alphabet through social play. However, with the assistance of the teacher in kindergarten the student will begin to recognize the letter and the sound that goes with the letter. This is what Vygotsky (1996) calls ‘language play’ when a student is learning new information and skills with the help of their teacher and peers. Students with learning disabilities can benefit greatly through the use of these effective teaching strategies. For example, for a student who is struggling with short term memory, reading comprehension and mathematical reasoning, the teaching strategy of scaffolding can be effective (1996). Scaffolding is teaching in a systematic and direct method which allows the student to focus on the new concepts being taught. In *Alternatives to Suspensions: Rationale and Recommendations* (Chin, 2012) states that children learn by duplicating, and repeat from memory what they have seen their friends do in play situations.

***Theory of Multiple Intelligence****.*

One of the most influential learning theorists in education today is Howard Gardner. Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences (1996) claims that each human being has up to eight intelligences which can assist teachers in understanding what each student’s strength and weakness is. The eight intelligences are: visual/spatial, verbal/linguistic, logical/mathematical, bodily/kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalistic. Thorndike, Vygotsky, and Gardner all offer learning theories which have different teaching strategies for education specialists to design their instruction to fit the needs of each student in their classroom and create activities that will allow each student an opportunity to expand on their strengths. An effective teacher will take the opportunity to understand the needs of each individual student in their classroom and apply the appropriate learning theories that they believe would best benefit their special education student in their educational journey (1996).

**Special Education Students’ Behaviors and Academic Achievements**

Existing studies have argued that students with behavioral and psychological disorders have often been known to engage in behaviors that affect their ability to negotiate social relationships and perform better academically such as aggression, social skill acquisition and performance deficiencies (Ogundele, 2018). When students cannot negotiate their social demands they often find it difficult to achieve success in their academic performance. Lack of appropriate interventions that can address these behavioral challenges can cause students to be unsuccessful with early interventions (Lauren & [Campbell](https://www.americanprogress.org/about/staff/campbell-neil/bio/), 2017).

Al-Yagon (2012), and Adaugo (2019) found in their studies that students with behavioral and psychological disorders have often obtained poor academic outcomes as compared to the rest of the student population. For instance, Maxwell et al., (2019) discovered that students affected with behavioral and psychological disorders who received low grades in their respective subjects, were less probable to be promoted to the next class and were affected by a high rate of school dropout as compared to ordinary students who had disorders from Axis III to V. Despite enhanced attention to support the academic needs of the students affected with behavioral and psychological disorders, there was no significant improvement that was acknowledged in existing literature, and the poor academic performance does not seem to have been attributed to the school learning environment (Maxwell et al., 2019).

Al-Yagon (2012) investigated how adolescents with Learning Disabilities (LD) fared academically in relationship to specific close attachments. For the research sample the researcher took a sample of 369 Jewish youth who were enrolled in the 10th and 11th grade respectively. The research methodology used by the researcher in the study from the 369 sample participants representing similar demographic areas in Israel, 181 of these had been diagnosed with a learning disability. Of these 181, there were 100 girls, and 81 boys. The other 188 typical young adolescents 98 were girls and 90 boys (Al-Yagon, 2012).

 Al-Yagon (2012) found in the study that students with LD tend to have academic difficulties and socioemotional difficulties. For example, they struggle with socialization and they tend to be loners hiding their feelings (Yagon, 2012). These findings show the importance of young adults looking for that close relationship with a significant adult (i.e., mothers, fathers, and teachers). This study takes a look at the attachment of young adults with learning disabilities with those who are significant in students’ lives. For the most part those significant to them are, their mother, father, and teacher. These students were compared to those without a learning disability and how they adjusted to their significant others in their lives. As the results show the young adults with learning disabilities had a difficult time academically and socioemotionally.

Although there have been positive steps towards the implementation of School-wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS) in schools, there needs to be additional strategies to ensure that positive behavior intervention succeeds in every type of setting. For example, positive behavior interventions should not only be used in formal schools or for learners without disabilities but should be used across the board to ensure equity and equality in the implementation of such strategies in U.S. schools. Moreover, DeVries and Tkatchov (2017) established that positive behavior interventions had been proven to have positive outcomes among different learners. Therefore, through the implementation of strategies such as effective time management, peer mentoring, establishing routines, and putting reminders to the learners, school instructors may as well improve their learning outcomes through positive behavior interventions (Anderson-Saunders, 2016). Additionally, strategies such as non-verbal communication, proximity to the learners, task assessments, and positive phrasing can also go a long way to help improve positive behavior and learning outcomes among special education learners of different ages and levels.

***Effective Time Management***

Most special education learners in both elementary and high schools across the U.S. exhibit poor time management, which results in their dismal academic performance (Sieberer-Nagler, 2016). Therefore, to ensure that they improve academically and behaviorally, school instructors need to instill in them effective time management skills irrespective of their disabilities (Welsh, & Little, 2018). Welsh and Little (2018) have found that learners need to be taught how to effectively follow routines that will result in them doing the required tasks at the right time. For example, during lessons, the learners will be expected to be seated and attentive in class and to be out of the classroom for other activities when the time is appropriate. Additionally, effective time management skills will also help them to be disciplined and to follow the set guidelines and routines within the school environment (Sieberer-Nagler, 2016). One of the factors that has been established to contribute significantly to positive academic achievement among learners in different schools is their ability to manage their time effectively. Sieberer-Nagler (2016) indicates that this requires the learners to allocate their time for every activity that they intend to do and to ensure they complete such tasks within the stipulated period. Therefore, instructors can be instrumental in this process by playing a supervisory role by ensuring that while in the school environment, the learners obey the requirements of time and stick to it to ensure they become familiar with time management (Sieberer-Nagler, 2016). Additionally, through effective time management, learners also become familiar with the importance of discipline even outside the school environment, which improves their behavior positively (Welsh, & Little, 2018). Ultimately, a disciplined student will follow the required instructions that will lead them to positive behavior change and positive academic outcomes.

***Peer Mentoring***

Special education learners can also improve their behavior and learning outcomes through associating with the right group of friends and peers. Notably, positive support from peers and other concerned parties in the life of an individual can lead to significant changes in their behavior (Freeman et al., 2019). Therefore, for learners to have behavioral changes within the school environment, instructors need to identify their peers with positive behavioral characteristics and positive academic achievements and group them accordingly. This will lead to some peer influence that may help them transform positively with some guidance and supervision from the teachers (Freeman et al., 2019). Although this measure may have negative impacts, teachers’ supervision and leadership are required through the mentorship process to ensure that it is effective (Steinberg, 2014). Steinberg (2014) indicates that it may be easier for an individual, especially students, to listen to their peers and improve challenging behavior as opposed to being punished by their elders and teachers. The purpose of positive behavioral intervention is to help students improve challenging behavior and not a kind of punishment to make them change their ways (Freeman et al., 2019). Consequently, through the use of their peers and mentors of the same age groups, students are likely to adopt positive behaviors in the process. Freeman, et al (2019) claim that this will influence their academic performance, as they will seek to emulate the exemplary or good performances from their mentors and peers. Furthermore, high school students and youths may be at ease sharing their problems and weaknesses with their peers, which makes it easy for them to improve challenging behaviors through advice and direction from their peers who may be identified by the teachers to cultivate positive behavior among them.

***Establishment of Routines***

Establishing routines can help reinforce that the learners strictly follow the routines as another way of ensuring that teachers cultivate positive behavior and improved academic performances among special education students (Flannery et al., 2013). This could be in the form of making timetables for them to follow as a follow up to effective time management and peer mentorship. Routines will also ensure that the students adapt to their programs that promote positive behavior through the supervision of their teachers. For example, when effecting a positive behavior change to improve the academic achievements among different learners, teachers can prepare the daily routines that they are expected to follow to reach their intended targets. These routines could be in the form of timetables and other daily expectations that they are expected to deliver within the stipulated period. The routines will include different activities that enable the students to concentrate on their expectations. At the same time, be enjoyable to make them attractive for them to improve on their behavior and academic work as well. Further, routines are also necessary for the implementation of discipline that ensures the overall improvement of their academic performance. Therefore, through regular follow up of the established routines, teachers will help the special education learners in their behavioral interventions positively and ensure they support them through the school system to achieve their academic expectations (Flannery et al., 2013).

***Use of Reminders***

The establishment of routines can also be effective in the positive behavior interventions among learners in special education schools (Flannery et al., 2013). However, to ensure they adequately follow the routines and manage their time effectively, the teachers and instructors need to set reminders that will ensure that the students are kept informed about what is expected of them at given points in time. Reminders will also be useful in alerting them on the things they are expected to do and to deliver within specific timelines. Reminders can also be useful when giving positive corrections to students for negative or deviant behaviors. For example, when a student exhibits challenging behavior in a school environment, teachers may remind the student about the kind of behaviors that are expected from them and what they need to do to exhibit good behavioral characteristics (Flannery et al., 2013).

In their academic performances, students can be reminded about what they have learned and what they need to factor in to realize certain goals and objectives (Barton & Stepanek, 2009). Moreover, teachers can act as role models and as inspirations to students to act as models of what good behavior and positive academic achievements can result in. This could also be effective by inviting other people to demonstrate these positive behaviors such as their role models or successful people to mentor the students to serve as reminders to them about the advantages of good behavior and success in academics. Positive behavior intervention does not only aim at correcting challenging behavior in schools but also aims at improving the academic outcomes of the students. Therefore, through organized discussions, learners in special education will also try to imitate their successful mentors and every time they try to go off the expectations of the teachers, the successful mentors will be used as reminders about who they need to be and what they need to do in order to achieve their goal (Barton & Stepanek, 2009).

***Non-verbal communication.*** The use of non-verbal communication can also be effective in enhancing positive behavior and in the improvement of the academic performances of learners in special education schools (Barton, 2004)). Non-verbal communication emphasizes observable behavior rather than theoretical corrections. As a result, through non-verbal communication, teachers are encouraged to exhibit good behavioral characteristics and to expose their learners to environments that do not influence their behavior negatively. In academics, learners can be exposed to environments where people have succeeded in academics to influence their mindset. Eventually, this strategy works by informing the students that it is possible for one to exhibit good behavior and to succeed in academics (Barton, 2004). Non-verbal communication strategies can also work for students in behavioral analysis by exposing them to good behavioral practices during their lessons. Through this method, teachers can use psychological interventions to teach learners the advantages of good behavioral practices. According to Bambaeeroo and Shokrpour (2017), there is a solid correlation between the quality, quantity, and the way of using non-verbal communication by instructors while teaching. Accordingly, teachers that used verbal and non-verbal communication realized additional efficacy in their teaching, and the students’ academic progress improved. Moreover, under non-verbal communication, procedures such as emotions, teamwork, support, imagination, purpose, and composed communication using dialogue, body, and pictures all have been effective in students’ behavioral and academic success. Consequently, teachers are expected to use the non-verbal reactions to get the students’ attention considering the mood and the readiness of the students as a way of improving their behavior and academic performance in schools (Bambaeeroo & Shokrpour, 2017).

***Proximity to the Learners***

Proximity to learners is one way of ensuring that students follow instructions and comply with them as may be expected by the teachers (Sieberer-Nagler, 2016). In most cases, teachers are expected to set their expectations of their students, give guidelines, routines, and issue reminders. However, if they expect to realize positive changes in the students’ behaviors and academic performances, they need to be in close contact with them to ensure that they achieve these goals. Close proximity helps to positively correct behaviors by giving instant positive correctional measures when students go out of their teachers’ expectations. Using the Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA) technique of proximity, teachers can walk around the classroom and assist students when they need help academically. Through this support technique, teachers will be able to identify the academically weak students and assist them when necessary. Additionally, by moving around the classroom and getting closer to the students, teachers will be able to identify the students who are having challenging behavior issues and help them through positive correction mechanisms on a one-on-one basis. Additionally, proximity to students will entail that the teachers acknowledge the students' positive contributions while in the class and let them know that they are making progress in their academic and behavioral challenges. Overall, teachers are expected to build relationships with their students to promote a positive learning environment that also enhances their ability to manage the classroom effectively (Sieberer-Nagler, 2016). Effective classroom management thus helps in ensuring positive behavioral interventions and in supporting the students’ academic outcomes.

***Task assessments.*** To ensure the efficacy of positive behavior interventions in special education schools and improved academic performances, teachers can also give the students different tasks aimed at seeking to implement these interventions. Through task assessments, teachers will be able to monitor the progress of their students and give directions where necessary. Task assessments may also include the administration of lesson assignments to specific learners that may have been identified to be performing poorly in certain areas. Further, on the behavioral aspect, teachers can set their expectations of their students to ensure that they improve on the identified behavioral characteristics (Brandt et al., 2014). Kurth et al. (2017) also found that task assessments can also be used for students with different disabilities to help them improve academically and behaviorally. This may include the administration of behavioral assignments through the ABA techniques of speech and emotional expressions. Task assessments can also be effective when teachers give feedback to the learners. Notably, feedback is one way of helping students to know whether they are on the right track or need to change their direction in the performance of the assigned tasks. However, teachers can also ensure the assigned tasks are successful through continually monitoring the progress of the learners, clarifying their objectives, giving direct instructions, and having students rephrase the lesson to ensure they understand them, and giving them time for reflections (Zagona, 2017).

***Positive Phrasing***

Learners in special education schools can do better behaviorally and academically when the teachers decide to give them positive reinforcement. For example, teachers can insist on giving positive feedback as opposed to negative feedback as one way of ensuring that the learners are inspired to continue doing better. According to Madigan et al. (2016) assert that schoolwide positive behavioral interventions have been proven to support academic achievement among students. Positive phrasing also entails the acknowledgment of good behavior and rewarding such students through either appreciation or other measures to inspire others to do better. Academically, teachers can also reward performing students as a way of inspiring and motivating other students to perform better. On the other hand, through positive phrasing, teachers can also positively correct students who are having challenging behaviors or academics. Consequently, it is expected that through the administration of positive phrasing among learners, teachers can implement school wide positive behavioral interventions and supports in schools to ensure academic achievement and behavioral changes among their students (Madigan et al., 2016)..

**Educating Students with Special Needs in U.S. Public Schools**

In the United States all students are guaranteed access to high-quality education in public schools. In order to accommodate special education states and districts have developed education service centers, which are charged with the mandate of 1) pooling various expertise together, 2) distributing the costs associated with low-incidence disabilities, 3) seeking for resources; and 4) supporting district schools in educating learner with special needs (Lauren, Jessica, & Campbell, 2017). The state of Massachusetts has collaborated to create the special education collaborative, which gathers resources, assesses possible risks, and seeks technical expertise forspecial education programs(Lauren et al., 2017). On the same note, Colorado and Michigan have come up with the Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES; 2017) and intermediate school districts to assist supporting special education programs by gathering resources and expertise in special education.

Other strategies that have been proposed to improve the participation of special education students in U.S. public schools includes effective tutoring. DeVries and Tkatchov (2017) explored the common features of district and charter schools in Arizona that presented higher academic results among students with disabilities in a three-year qualitative study and discovered that there were six systemic trends that were found to enhance student academic performance. One particular trend that was noted was the interaction between the special education students and his/her family from the context of the classroom. This suggests that the ability of special education students to receive instruction was influenced by their interaction and feedback from their immediate family members. However, numerous strategies employed by the Federal government to enhance special education in high schools and other levels of education have not been able to achieve its intended goal (Darling-Hammond et al., 2019).

Toldson (2011) examined the data of 17, 587 Black, Hispanic, and White both male and female students. According to the study black boys are the most likely to end up being eligible for special education than any other minority. Being a black male increases the chance of the student being suspended or expelled from school. The author discussed the importance of allowing students the opportunity to develop their strengths when they do have a learning disability. Students from different ethnicities show an increase in learning disabilities, and this increases their odds of dropping out of school, or repeating a grade. At the same time these same students can have the opportunity to enroll in Honors classes when they develop their other abilities (Toldson, 2011).

Gallegos (2012), investigated how severe and risky an anxiety and depression condition would be for Mexican children with learning disabilities to deal with while attending school. The research sample consisted of 260 participants for the study. Research methodology used in the study was through a random selection of 260 students from which 130 had been diagnosed with a learning disability and 130 were without a learning disability. Final results of the study showed a significant difference among the children with learning disabilities who were found to be at higher risk for anxiety and depression than the students without a learning disability. Gallegos (2012) found that low achievement in school and school dropout has been linked to students with disabilities not having the coping skills to deal with the pressures of the everyday stress from school.

 The U.S. Department of Education is charged with five functions related to assessing special needs education (DOE, 2020). First, the DOE is charged with ensuring that all students including special needs students are able to receive free public education in a less restrictive learning environment as illustrated in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1990. This is despite the fact that most strategies that have been implemented have not provided significant results. Second, the U.S. Department of Education ensures that every learning institution is accountable for the academic outcome of every student irrespective of whether they are disabled or not as stipulated in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 2001. Third, the U.S. Department of Education ensures that teachers and guardians of special education students formulate an Individualized Education Program (IEP) to meet the child's needs after qualifying for special education. Lastly, the U.S. Department of Education ensures that all schools, colleges, universities, elementary, middle and high schools do not discriminate against any student based on disability (DOE, 2020).

Looking at special education and how it is provided in different states, there are six major differences distinguishing the federal law on special needs education from states’ laws (Rosen, 2020). These include who is eligible, free appropriate public education (FAPE), procedural safeguards, early intervention, age of eligibility, and age of [transition services](https://www.understood.org/en/school-learning/special-services/ieps/iep-transition-planning-preparing-for-young-adulthood). Most of these differences have been subject to interpretation from the different sets of legislations (Rosen, 2020). For example, the federal law indicates that students who have any of 13 disabilities are eligible for special education while the States insist on IDEA adherence such as specific learning disability, which can differ from state to state. Additionally, different states employ different models when determining if a student is eligible. In the case of FAPE, Rosen (2020) argues that federal law indicates that every special education is entitled to a free and appropriate education. On the other hand, the states agree that they must provide FAPE. However, they can choose on how the instructions can be provided to the special needs students. For instance, the state can select a specific program to be taught to special needs students. Based on these examples, state laws tend to be more suitable to address the specific educational needs of special needs students (Rosen, 2020).

**Overview of School-Wide Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports**

In an effort to improve students’ behaviors in schools, several attempts have been made to establish strategies that improve students’ attendance, enhance student outcomes and reduce various disciplinary cases using policy-based and program-based approaches (Welsh & Little, 2018). In most cases, these approaches have emphasized interventions which can enhance the school learning environment, provide skills that can regulate behavior and enhance academic performance (Welsh & Little, 2018). One particular program-based approach is the School-wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS), which is a framework that prompts that establishment of an institution-wide optimistic social culture along with a continuum of conduct that promotes a conducive learning environment for all learners (Brandt et al., 2014). Grounded in a three-tier approach, SWPBIS has focused on the learning environment by providing support to improve on students’ behaviors and academic outcomes (Flannery et al., 2013).

From a high school context, mixed results have been presented regarding the use of SWPBIS to improve students’ behaviors and academic performance. On one hand, a significant number of studies have associated SWPBIS with positive outcomes. For instance, Caldarella et al. (2011) examined the effects of SWPBIS on school learning environment and student performance and discovered that there was a significant reduction in students’ misbehaviors, unreported absenteeism, and disciplinary cases in relationship to the control group. Welsh and Little (2018) observed that institutions that had effectively implemented the SWPBIS had significantly reduced students’ misbehaviors while those institutions that did not showed increased cases of student unrest and misconduct. Freeman et al. (2019) also examined the association between SWPBIS and learners’ behaviors with a focus on their attendance and academic performance based on a sample of approximately 12,127 students drawn from fifteen high schools.showed an improvement in student’s academic performance as long as student misconduct was reduced.

While most studies have emphasized that improved student conduct can promote higher academic outcomes in relationship to SWPBIS, Gage et al., (2015) reviewed existing literature on implementation of SWPBS and its effects on academic performance, and found an association between the two. LaFrance (2011) discovered that there was a negative association between school conformity to the SWPBIS and students’ performances in English and Mathematics. This is contrary to the general assumption that reduced problem-related behavior and enhanced school learning environment is expected to enhance instruction time as well as academic performance (LaFrance, 2011).

The gap in the literature is that research has provided little information on how SWPBIS has impacted the student population receiving special education. Kurth et al., (2017) identified a suitable tool that can be used to examine the effect of SWPBIS on special education students with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Despite finding out that SET, TIC, and BoQ were appropriate tools for evaluating the effect of SWPBIS, the results indicated that SWPBIS did not have a positive impact on special education students in terms of their academic performance and behavior. As a result, it is important to conduct more studies which can examine the effect of SWPBIS on special education students’ academic performance and behavior who have different types of learning disabilities.

Response to Intervention or RTI is defined by Berkeley et al., (2009) as an assessment tool which is research-based and is centered around students to be able to diagnose and design a learning plan to assist the student’s deficiencies. Special education teachers have been trained in these interventions as part of the SWPBIS. Including classroom teachers are using the school-wide evaluation tools in order to assess students who may be at risk of failing or need extra support. Russell Gersten (2006) states that children who are at a low reading level are in jeopardy of having reading problems who need urgent assistance including more focused instruction.

Berkeley et al. (2009) describes two RTI models “the problem-solving model and the standard protocol.” With the problem-solving model a student’s needs are met by using research-based tools which are unique to the individual student. While in the standard protocol model the students who share similar needs are grouped together and are supported through research-based interventions. For each school who is implementing RTI there needs to be a plan of action for each student who is struggling to meet the school-wide benchmarks. The action plan should delineate who will be supporting the student, a list of the research-based interventions that will be used to support them, and the areas of deficiency.

RTI which was endorsed through the reauthorization of IDEA (2004) and has become part of the accountability requirements of NCLB (Barton & Stepanek, 2009). Schools have applied several core RTI elements. For example the classroom teachers have been using valid and reliable formative assessments to monitor their students’ progress throughout the year. The school has implemented adequate time for the core instruction and practice. They have also made it a priority so that the core instruction is a sacred time. The school can offer the classroom teachers professional development opportunities such as strategies for differentiated instruction, and strategies for small group instruction. Opportunities for professional development should also include tools for pre-referral interventions in which like Gersten (2006) suggests these trainings need to be a major part of the main reading program that is being taught in the classrooms. Providing teachers with training on how to adequately use the measures to monitor the student’s progress and to inform their instruction will guide their lessons to better meet all of their student’s needs in a school with SWPBIS.

## Special Education Teachers’ Experiences with SWPBIS

From a general perspective, the presence of special education students in a regular classroom is often a challenging task for teachers since these students (Bettini et al., 2019). Sieberer-Nagler (2016) argues that special education students often make classroom management difficult as a result of their disruptive behavior and consume a teacher’s considerable amount of time. Additionally, these students have been known to have problems associated with their academic performance and behavior (Bettini, et al, 2019). These challenges have been perceived as a difficult task by general teachers in a self-contained classroom where the teacher provides support for all students (Szumski et al., 2017).

 Anderson-Saunders (2016) discovered that teachers’ positive attitude towards SWPBIS as the teachers selectively considered beneficial in improving student behavior and social aspects with the implementation of SWPBIS. However, the results indicated that the outcome was largely dependent on teachers’ efforts and skills to use SWPBIS in improving learners’ behavior and academic performance**.**

In a study done in Los Angeles Unified School District with 700 K-12 schools struggling with discipline issues (Barnhart et al., 2008) Kotter’s 8-Step change model was used. In Kotter’s 8-Step Change Model, one of the first steps is to create a sense of urgency for change to happen. Creating a new discipline plan will require changes to its current plan which consists mostly of punitive methods. The second step in the change model is to form a powerful coalition. Kotter (2011) states that forming a powerful coalition concerns convincing people that change is necessary. In the case of school districts there has been a need to change. Step three consists of creating a vision for change. The administrators and teachers have been presented with data which demonstrates the suspension problems at each of their school sites. The data has been powerful in helping the school staff understand that the creation of a vision for change is a necessity. The fourth step in the change model is communicating the vision. It is not enough to just present the data to the school staff for the high suspension rates in order to create the changes necessary. Professional development needs to include a positive behavior support plan which can be implemented by the school staff. In the fifth step removing obstacles becomes the easy step to adopt since the school district is required to collaborate with parents and students in order to adopt and implement the positive behavior plan. Step six requires that the change create short term wins for the school district. Since the implementation of the positive behavioral plan there has been a significant decline in the suspension rates of students with disabilities and this has been maintained for the long haul. Step seven requires the school district to build on the change. Since there is a momentum going on with the school staff as they began to see a significant drop in the suspension rates, however ongoing support for some schools will be required to keep the momentum going. In step eight anchor the changes in corporate culture; the behavioral plan needs to become an integral part of each of the school sites. The administrators who have received professional development in the School Wide Positive Behavior Intervention

**School Climate and Special Education Students**

The organization structure or culture adopted in school forms a key factor that illustrates how an institution can function and exist (Wang & Degol, 2016). Evidence has indicated that there is a distinction between organizational structure adopted in high school and the ones adopted in elementary or middle schools. First, high school instructors concentrate on teaching a specific subject as compared to elementary or middle school where teachers can teach different academic content (Wang & Degol, 2016). This implies that emphasis is placed more on instruction in high school level of education. Additionally, high school teachers are less likely to teach either social or academic support conduct as part of their responsibility. This includes the learner’s belief and values they can learn and the behavior that exists between the student and teacher in a classroom setting (Altaf, 2015).

 As a result, the administration adopts the ‘push out’ approach, which provides a ground for students with heightened intelligence as opposed to students with a lower intelligence (Darling-Hammond, et al, 2019). Due to the large student population, many high schools will adopt a tougher rule that is applied to every student. This is based on the notion that students are grown-ups and should have some prior knowledge on how they should behave (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2019).

In most cases, high schools have larger structures than elementary and middle schools with a corresponding larger student population and teachers (Anderson-Saunders, 2016). In order to provide effective leadership, a high school setting will prefer the use of a team of administrative officers, who are assigned different roles and targets to achieve. This is in contrast to either elementary or middle schools that require a single administrator (Anderson-Saunders, 2016). Evidence has indicated that the size of the school tends to influence the student in a number of ways (Anderson-Saunders, 2016). For example, a high school with many feeder schools is anticipated to have a higher student population with a large peer network support. For instance, a large portion of high schools offer a wide-range of support (such as different levels of mathematical skills and electives); however, they rarely have enough time to coordinate these activities centrally leading possible redundancy (Hartley & Somerville, 2015).

There is sparse research on the association between school climate and special education students. It is important to begin by understanding what entails an appropriate school climate that is suitable for special education students. Wang and Degol (2016) depicted a school climate as a set of elements within the school’s boundary that influence the student outcome. This is inclusive of the teaching practices that are employed by teachers, association with the school administration, instructors, guardians, and learners, which form the tenants of a school climate.

Maxwell et al. (2017) considered school climate a key factor that could explain the association between student outcome and learning. The researchers examined the impact of the school climate on the teaching staff and students and discovered that students' perceptions of the learning environment greatly contributed to their achievement and ability to comprehend most of the subjects. Additionally, the results indicated that students’ mental state was strongly influenced by the school climate. From the teachers’ perspective, the results indicated that the school climate did not contribute to the students’ higher academic achievement (Maxwell et al., 2017).

Altaf (2015) examined school climate from the perspective of special education students using a sample of 325 sampled students drawn from six different special schools and two prisons. Results indicated that school climate was considered the highest contributor of poor academic performance among special education students as the schools had limited teacher support, absence of positive student affiliation, negative student association and an unstructured learning environment. As such, it is important for key stakeholders in the educational sector to improve the learning environment being used to teach special education students (Altaf, 2015).

There have been some positive results with the introduction of SWPBIS and its effects on special education teachers’ experiences with special education students. For instance, Caldarella et al. (2011) examined the effects of SWPBIS on school learning environment and student performance using an experimental research design in which approximately 3,000 teachers and 10,000 students in two different elementary schools provided their responses. After collecting the first set of data, the study relied on the teachers to introduce various interventions such as social skills, praising notes, emphasizing the school rules, actively screening students' behaviors and emotions. From the teachers’ experiences, it was observed that teachers’ rankings significantly improved in relation to the school learning environment while the control group relatively remained unchanged. On a similar note, Mitchell and Bradshaw (2013) concurred with Caldarella et al. (2011) when they discovered that there was an improved perception of the school learning environment due to SWPBIS.

**Summary**

 The effectiveness of SWPBIS in either elementary or middle high schools has widely been established using control trials. This is contrary to the high school settings that has been associated with uncontrolled, dynamic factors such as the values and beliefs held by the teachers regarding the school learning environment, students’ expectations, the significant role assumed by teachers, and teachers’ assumption that students are grownups and have learned how they should behave (Madigan et al., 2016). Kaya (2019) describes new teachers today who are routinely placed in situations where they must limit their students’ behaviors in their class allowing teaching and learning to occur. When students are in a structured environment the teacher can engage the students effectively in the lesson maximizing their time together (Brophy, 2013).

 As Yazdi (2019) has found teachers do not get to choose their classrooms nor their students. Teachers have barriers that are placed in front of them which make it difficult to manage their classrooms effectively. Long (2019) has found that beginning teachers are not trained to deal with students with disabilities in their classrooms. Teachers begin to struggle with finding how to discipline behavior problem students who consistently disrupt their teaching (Long, 2019). Researchers at Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) have identified nine instructional strategies that are most likely to improve student achievement across all content areas and across all grade levels. These strategies when implemented adequately can lower student disruptions in the classroom (McREL).

 Based on statistics presented by the National Center for Educational Statistics (2019), there was a significant increase in the number of students being served with special education needs from 6.4 million in 2011-12 to seven million students in 2017-18. Existing studies have argued that students with behavioral and psychological disorders have often been known to engage in behaviors that affect their ability to negotiate social relationships and perform better academically such as aggression, social skill acquisition and performance deficiencies (Ogundele, 2018). Anderson-Saunders (2016) discovered that teachers’ positive attitude towards SWPBIS as the teachers selectively considered beneficial in improving student behavior and social aspects with the implementation of SWPBIS. When all the stakeholders involved take part in the planning stages of SWPBIS as suggested by Anderson-Saunders (2016) the success of the implementation is higher.

# Chapter 3: Research Method

The problem to be addressed in this study is that when School-Wide Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports is implemented in a high school it is supposed to work for the entire student population which includes special education students to improve student behavior and academic achievement (George, 2018). In a west coast state, in a large urban school district, students are placed in a house (student groups) according to their English Language Proficiency Assessment for California scores and their California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress scores and if they are a student with a disability (special education student). The purpose of this phenomenological study is to document special education teachers’ experiences with School-Wide Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports and how it impacts special education students’ behaviors and academic achievement through their four years of high school. This chapter will address the research methodology and design, population and sample, materials or instrumentation, study procedures, and data analysis. Assumptions, Limitations, Delimitations and Ethical Assurances will also be addressed, and also included is a chapter summary.

## Research Methodology and Design

The research method for this study is qualitative, from a research perspective, the research methodology refers to a group of agreements and beliefs common to researchers concerning how they should understand problems and address them (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). In this study, understanding perceptions and standpoints about an intervention requires a qualitative design. Hence, this study is using a phenomenological design in exploring the perception of high school special education teachers regarding the implementation of the School Wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports framework on special education student’s academic performance.

Knowledge is constructed socially and that reality is understood from the position or perspective of the participant’s understanding of a lived experience and not external that of the researcher's perspective or understanding (Ryan, 2018). Hence, the design or approach is about understanding participants’ perspectives, beliefs, and norms, therefore allowing the participant to describe using their own arguments allowing them to give a thorough discernment of the event (Ryan, 2018). Therefore, the paradigm used in this study will be the qualitative perspective of understanding reality, specifically from the teacher’s perspective and viewpoint (Pham, 2018).

Quantitative research is used to collect quantifiable information and statistical data which is then analyzed by the researcher (Pham, 2018; Capps, 2019). Consequently, a quantitative research methodology or design would not apply for this case because the emphasis will be on subjective beliefs, behaviors, and opinions and these are not possible to be measured using standardized instruments (Wrench, 2017).

Another methodology is the mixed-method study where the blending of the two previous methods allows for the data to be considered from different views (Pham, 2018). One of the possible study design considerations for the subsequent study could have been a mixed-method design. This methodology is reflected as the best because of the triangulation of results, as the phenomenon under study is explored both from practical and natural approaches (Kaur, 2016). However, a mixed-method methodology would have involved using a numerical technique that does not align with the set questions and aims of the present research as it seeks to understand views and attitudes, not quantitative data (Ramlo, 2016).

The phenomenological design was chosen as the most effective design because, despite the small sample size, there will be enough time spent with the participants to gather rich and concrete information. A qualitative methodology permits greater affordances for participants to express their unbiased views candidly, through open-ended questions (Quinlan et al., 2019).

**Population and Sample**

The population for the study is all special education teachers in high schools in the U.S whose high schools use SWPBIS in their schools to create a positive school climate. The number of U.S. public school students being taught by special education teachers increased from 6.4 million in 2011-12 to seven million students in 2017-18 (NCES, 2019). The sampling pool is all special education teachers in a large urban high school in a west coast state. The sample will be nine Special Education teachers. The inclusion criterion is that teachers will have a minimum of two or more years of teaching experience. The Special Education teachers will be sent a study email invitation to ask them if they would like to be in the study.

**Materials or Instrumentation**

In order to address the research questions and assure the appropriate data is obtained for this study, the main method of data collection will be through the use of semi-structured, open-ended questions. The interview questions will be written by me, based on the literature and my experience as a special education teacher. The questions will focus on asking special education teachers their experiences with the implementation of SWPBIS for special education students on the students’ behaviors and academic achievement through their four years of high school. Semi-structured interviews will be used because of the inherent advantage for the interviewee to explore and discuss their opinions broadly which reduces researcher-influence bias, a common problem with structured interviews (Roulston & Choi, 2018). A field test will be conducted on the interview guide. Two special education teachers in another high school who will not be part of the study will review the questions to see that the questions ask what they are supposed to ask and that they align with the research questions. Edits will then be made to the questions as applicable.

**Study Procedures**

Data collection and recruitment will not be collected until the study receives NCU and school district IRB approvals. Upon approval of the IRB, the potential participants will be emailed a study invitation, describing the nature of the study and asking them if they would like to voluntarily participate. A consent form will be attached to the email. This email will be sent to all full-time Special Education teachers in the urban high school. All teachers who respond to the email will be scheduled for a 30-minute interview and a number/letter designation assigned to the teacher, P1, P2, etc., to protect anonymity. Another consideration will be in the interview place, which will happen at the school site, which will be a quiet, private, comfortable place to ensure that the participants will be at ease and can easily answer the questions (Pathak & Intratat, 2016). A folder will be created to file all of the documents pertaining to the data for the study. Any paper documentation will be kept in a file cabinet under lock and key in my office. All electronic data documents will be password protected.

**Data Analysis**

 The interviews of each study participant will be recorded and then transcribed. Once the interviews are transcribed they will be returned to the participant of the study for review and revision as needed. Each participant will be given a lapse of one week to make changes to the transcript if they deem it necessary. There will be a timeline set up for transcribing, analyzing, and then coding of each interview. Setting up a timeline will assure that the most accurate responses and data are being collected for the study. The data from the study will be analyzed for patterns of major topics or insights and themes and sub-themes (Roulston & Choi, 2018).

According to Moustakas (1994), the data collected is based on the first-person records of the lived experiences of the study participants. In accordance with Moustakas (1994), the Modified Van Kaam method of analyses will be used to analyze the data. Once all the interviews have been transcribed, I will use the computer qualitative analysis software program, NVivo to look for major topics, or insights, themes, and sub-themes from the data. NVivo has been chosen as the software program because this program analyzes the data resulting with greater reliability. Each participant's information will be uploaded to NVivo. The responses of each of the participants will have to be combined, but the questions will be separated so that the responses are filed by question number.

However, prior to using NVivo, I will manually code possible major topics, or insights, themes, and sub-themes as part of my note-taking during the interview process. Manually coding is the process of an individual categorizing data (Lienemann et al., 2017). Afterward, when the first participant study interview has been completed, I will make a list of major topics, or insights, themes, and sub-themes and have the list with me at the rest of the interviews. By writing down this list it will help me to improve the accuracy of the study (Lienemann et al., 2017). I will make a running record of any major topics, or insights, themes, and sub-themes if mentioned by other study participants and make reference to this information when I analyze the data in NVivo to double check the electronic major topics, insights, themes, and sub-themes that emerge.

**Assumptions**

## In research, assumptions imply that the statements taken are true and believed to be true and correct (Seaman & Verhonick, 1982). For this study, it is assumed that the Special Education teachers participating in the study will answer the questions honestly and objectively. It is also assumed that the participants will meet all the criteria to fully participate in the study. It is my assumption that I have the knowledge to analyze the problem being studied. It is also assumed that this qualitative phenomenological study is good for this population to understand the lived experiences of Special Education teachers (Pathak & Intratat, 2016).

## Limitations

##  There are limitations to this study. This study is limited to one sample of special education teachers at one urban high school in a west coast state. The study is limited by how the Special Education teachers respond to the semi-structured interviews. The study is also limited in that the participants will only be interviewed one time.

## Delimitations

##  Delimitations include that the sampling and data analysis is the most useful and appropriate for the study. Another delimitation is that the interviews will be held after school hours on the school site to make it convenient for the teachers to be in the study. Also, the interviews will be held in a quiet, private, room, so there will be no distractions. Also, cell phones will be turned off and participants will be encouraged to ask any questions before the study begins.

## Ethical Assurances

##  For this study, I will seek the approval of NCU and the school district IRBs. According to the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services (HSS), there are regulations related to the rights and well-being of human subjects when it comes to participating in research. It is of utmost importance that all research studies abide by the three ethical principles of beneficence, respecting the subject (person), and justice (Schonfeld et al., 2011).

## The first primary ethical assurance that needs to be addressed is autonomy, this means being respectful of each study participant and assuring their autonomy. According to Pasztor (2015), autonomy can be defined as an individual subject who has the right to choose to participate or not to participate in a specific study. An individual has the right to quit from participating in a study at any time without having negative consequences (Pollock, 2012). It is necessary to ensure that an individual has autonomy, therefore the concept of the informed consent needs to be explained to the participants ensuring their understanding of the risks and benefits of participating in the study (Gordon et al., 2016).

 Next there is the principle of beneficence. According to Barrow (2020) beneficence is defined as the duty of the researcher to apply specific protections from undue harm and extortion to the individual. This study has been devised to have minimal risk for the individuals,, this means that the participant’s life will not be jolted in any shape or form (Belmont Report, 1979). The decision to participate or not participate in the study will be strictly voluntary, and will rest on the decision of the Special Education Teacher. It will be made clear to any participating Special Education Teacher that I am a doctoral candidate and am ethically conducting research to obtain the most complete data that adheres to all Northcentral University Research with Human Subject Guidelines. I will not attempt to persuade any special education teachers to participate. In order to safeguard the participants’ anonymity, all individuals will be identified by an assigned letter and number (Zimmerman & Ybarra, 2016). This is to protect their identity and keep their anonymity confidential. The third principal is justice. According to Pasztor (2015) justice can be defined as selecting the participants without any bias. All of the individuals participating in the study will be doing so willingly, thus assuring that I have not purposefully selected any of the individuals in the study.

**Summary**

 The purpose of this phenomenological study is to investigate and to report on the lived experiences of special education teachers’experiences with School-Wide Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports as it impacts special education students’ behavior and academic achievement through their four years of high school. Qualitative phenomenological research design has been chosen for this study because it is the appropriate methodology to collect the data for the questions that this study is seeking to answer (Moustakas, 1994). The population is all special education teachers in the U.S. The sample is nine full-time Special Education teachers at an urban high schoolin a west coast state. To **c**ollect the data, I will use semi-structured interviews**.** Data analysis will be conducted using Moustakas’ (1994) modification of the Van Kaam method of phenomenological data analysis.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

**Demographics:**

Gender:

Race/ethnicity:

**Interview Questions:**

1. Tell me about your experiences with special education students and their classroom behavior after SWPBIS was implemented?
2. Tell me about your experiences with the implementation of SWPBIS for special education students and reviewing the behavior data through collaborative teams?
3. In your experiences with special education students and the implementation of SWPBIS, how do you establish challenging yet achievable expectations for all students?
4. Tell me about your experiences with special education students and SWPBIS as a tool to assist in improving academic achievement?
5. In your experiences with the implementation of SWPBIS for special education students’ what were your academic expectations for the students?
6. In your experiences with special education students and SWPBIS implementation are you satisfied with their academic outcomes thus far and why or why not?
7. Before we end the interview, if there are any other comments you’d like to make about SWPBIS and special education students, please do so now.

Thank you so much for participating in this research study.