

PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP OF SPECIAL EDUCATION PROGRAMS:
AN EXPLORATION OF THE PRACTICES AND APPROACHES
OF 'EFFECTIVE' SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL LEADERS

by

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study was fourfold: 1) to determine if discrepancies in perceptions exist between study principals and special education teachers as to what makes for ‘effective special education leadership’ by a principal; 2) If so, what might these discrepancies be?; 3) If not, what are the common themes/perceptions?; 4) to provide a description of what effective leadership among principals leading special education programs might look like.

The review of literature within this topic yielded several related themes including the role of the principal as instructional leader, preparation of principals to lead special education programs, current special education legislation, and principal leadership in special education in the school. The research topic and the related research questions called for a qualitative, grounded theory research design. Four major themes emerging from the study, representing effective principal leadership of special education programs are: “classroom support”, “visible involvement”, “collaborative faculty relationships”, and “current professional development”. One theme emerging from the teacher group was “parent relationships”. One theme emerging from the principal group was: “goal of student success”.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my family who have helped to make this a reality. My husband, Brian, who encouraged me every step of the way and spent much of his time caring for and entertaining our children while Mom was writing. My children, Tucker and Aiden, for being a source of inspiration for me throughout this process. My parents, for always believing in me and supporting me. Much love and gratitude to you all and I am very blessed to have you in my life.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Subject of study

The topic of dissertation research presented is an exploration of how principals engage in the process of leading special education programs in their schools. Specifically, the researcher sought to identify specific practices that appear to be related to effective principal leadership of special education programs. The researcher is interested in how each of these practices enhance special education programs and the students in those programs.

Knowledge gap addressed

The topic addresses a gap in the literature about what, specifically, it is that makes a principal successful at leading special education programs in the school. While the current research addresses a lack of special education training for principals, as well as, a lack of confidence among principals to be a leader of special education, there is little literature on what is currently being done by principals who are successful at leading special education programs in their schools. There are some principals who are quite effective in being successful instructional leaders, even among special education students. It is the intention that this study has helped to provide information on how principals lead special education, as a part of what makes them a successful instructional leader.

What is needed, currently, is a conceptual framework to assist in understanding principal practices and perceptions of special education that have been effective in leading special

education programs. If we can grasp what it is that is being successful, this knowledge can be incorporated into professional development for current principals, as well as, become an important part of principal preparation programs. This study can also shed light on the topic for the literature base in educational leadership.

Contemporary context for study

In order to provide a contemporary context for the study, a review of the literature in the areas of special education and educational leadership is presented. The following topics are explored within the literature review:

- The principal role as instructional leader
- Preparation of principals for leading special education programs
- Self-perceived confidence of administrators to lead collaborative-based programs
- Principals' attitudes towards inclusion
- Current Special Education Legislation
- Current Special Education Leadership in Schools
- Effective Professional Development Programs for Principals Leading Special Education Programs in their Schools

A review of the literature on the principal role as instructional leader serves to set the stage for the importance of the current research. Including literature on topics, such as, the preparation of principals, confidence to lead special education programs, and principal attitudes, all help to provide an in-depth discussion of the complexities of the principal's role as instructional leader. This literature points to some of the reasons why 1) the research study is important and timely and 2) principals engage in the process of leading special education

programs the way they do. The literature reviewed directly relates to the research questions, specifically addressing the practices and perceptions of principals towards special education.

A review of the literature on current special education legislation provides an overview of the knowledge and skills necessary to provide appropriate services to students with special needs. The literature informs the topic on, not only the laws of special education, but the diversity of exceptionalities which require a diverse set of skills and strategies with which students need to learn and be successful in school. This literature relates directly to the research questions by providing a standard with which to measure how principals' practices and perceptions lead, or do not lead, to the overall success of special education programs in their schools and, ultimately, success of the students with special needs.

A comprehensive review of the literature on the current leadership structure of special education in schools provides a look into how principals are currently handling special education within their own schools. This literature provides the setting within which the study emerges. This final section of literature will address all of the research questions by providing examples of principals leading special education programs successfully and also looking at the leadership style of principals who are effective. This literature provided a springboard from which the research was launched, as it has taken the current research a little further.

Rationale and Justification for Study

Contemporary issues

Historically, principals have engaged in more managerial tasks, as opposed to the more instructional tasks required of principals, in the accountability-age today (Rousmaniere, 2007). Osgood (2008) speaks to the changes in special education, historically and the interactions between students, teachers, principals, and parents during various eras of special education.

Traditionally, a principal has been responsible for the maintenance of the school building, charged with keeping an orderly educational environment, and making sure qualified teachers were doing their job (Pazey & Yates, 2012). This is no longer all that is required of a school principal. Today principals are held accountable for the teaching and learning that takes place within the school. Principals have to be knowledgeable and skilled in effective instructional practices to be able to lead a school to academic success (Honig, 2012). In fact, a principal's career is often dependent on the achievement of students. However, traditionally, principals have not been instructional leaders in the area of special education.

As a result of inadequate special education leadership among principals, teachers of special education have long felt somewhat isolated from the rest of the school because of the population of students they teach and the misinformation or lack of knowledge about special education that exists among school faculty and administration (Cook, Semmel, & Gerber, 1999). Teachers of special education students are often considered to be well-skilled in their area of expertise and, as a result, their classrooms often become a dumping ground for students that are considered to be too difficult for the general education teacher to handle. This is a very common scenario in schools today and improvement is needed in the way principals provide leadership to special education and to the students in those programs.

The idea that principals are now instructional leaders entails a complex new set of duties in which today's principal must be prepared to take on, confidently. While it is equally important for principals to be prepared for managing school operations, finances, and personnel, they must also have the ability to lead the instructional practices and programs within the school. Alongside the shift from management to instructional leadership is the special education legislation that has required more from schools in addressing their students with special needs and the rapid increase

of students in this population. The legal mandate that all students should have access to a 'free and appropriate education' involves more than just allowing students with special needs to be in our schools. Having an appropriate education means that students are receiving the services and resources needed to learn, grow, and excel in school, to their highest potential. Students with special needs have access to the general education curriculum, classroom accommodations, and testing and assessment accommodations. The topic of principals leading special education programs is a contemporary issue. From the many special education lawsuits filed everyday to the poor academic achievement of students with special needs, this topic is one in which practitioners and scholars should direct their attention and attempt to improve.

Importance of topic

Special education teachers have often had to take on leadership for special education services because they were the only ones knowledgeable about special needs and the services these students needed (McLaughlin & Nolet, 2009). While teachers do have expertise in the field, they are limited on the amount of power they have to obtain and secure the resources they need for their students. This often leads to frustration among teachers and parents of students with special needs. Furthermore, administrators, who are ultimately responsible for what goes on in the school, are often vulnerable to legal consequences if they do not handle special education issues in a professional and informed way. Principals need to understand the needs of their students and have the discretion to allocate resources appropriately for their most needy and fragile population of students.

Ultimately, principals must be the decision-makers when it comes to matters of funding and allocation of resources. Therefore, it is important that principals understand what is needed for students in this population and how important it is to protect these resources. On the other

hand, most principals come from a general education background with very little formal coursework related to special education instructional methods or special education law (Crockett, 2012). While this does not mean that every principal should be equipped with a degree in special education, it does imply that principals need more training of some form in special education. The implications these historical shifts are currently having is the need for principals to be able to effectively lead the special education programs for their students with special needs. Many school systems rely on one director of special education to lead all of the special education programs in all schools for the entire system. This is not only a daunting task for one individual, but is impossible to be sure all student needs are being met in the most appropriate and effective way. In addition, the way in which funds are allocated for students with special needs is not always fair or appropriate (Pazey & Cole, 2012). Many school systems are often too financially strapped to provide all of the services and resources needed for these students. Therefore, principals need to be well-equipped to take on leadership of programs for students with special needs.

This topic is important to the field of special education because it seeks to improve the leadership for the programs that enable students with special needs. Although many evidence-based practices and models exist for these students, without strong leadership at the school level, they cannot be implemented effectively. The success of these students depends upon the leadership of their programs. This topic is also important to the field of educational leadership because it provides another domain of leadership within schools that has not been adequately developed. Minimal research exists within educational leadership regarding special education issues. It is important that leadership of special education be included in the discourse of

educational leadership as it is vital, not only to students with special needs, but also to the school as a whole.

The current study is important because it addresses a missing component of instructional leadership, as it relates to special education. Because the current literature on principal leadership of special education is limited and also exposes a lack of confidence among principals in their special education knowledge, an investigation of the practices that make principals successful is needed. This is also important because as instructional leaders, principals often influence how teacher perceptions are formed, their behaviors and practices, and also how accepting the faculty is of special education teachers and students.

Rationale for topic

For principals to be instructional leaders in their schools includes being able to lead all programs including gifted, general education, and special education. Traditionally, principals have been more comfortable operating within the general education population because it is what they are most familiar with and because it is the largest population of students in the school. However, serious repercussions are inevitable if a principal is not educated about the needs of students receiving special education services and what the law requires of them. Litigation has become increasingly common with special education issues which makes an even bigger case for principals to be knowledgeable about special education (Louis & Robinson, 2012).

Currently, research in the field of educational leadership reveals a lack of preparation of principals to take on matters of special education, not to mention being able to lead their programs. While there is little formal coursework related to special education in principal preparation programs, there is also little professional development being taken by principals on the subject of special education (McHatton, Boyer, Shaunessy, & Terry, 2012). This should be

an issue to be addressed by both superintendents and directors of professional development to ensure principals have the knowledge they need. The current study addresses this issue by identifying important, effective practices for leading special education programs for principals to follow.

Often new principals are overwhelmed with demands placed on them from issues in special education. Special education teachers need principals who not only support their student population, but are knowledgeable enough about the needs of these students that they will advocate for the resources needed on the teachers' behalf. The field of educational leadership should be informed on the need for special education training for principals to be successful in today's schools. The current study adds to the current literature in education leadership by identifying practices which can help principals be successful leaders of special education programs in their schools.

The researcher's personal interest in the topic of principals leading special education programs stems from her experience as a special education teacher and her interest in educational leadership. Having worked with diverse populations of students and under diverse leadership styles, the researcher is well aware of the needs of students with special needs and how those needs have been met or not been met, depending upon the leadership of the principal. The researcher also has a sense of obligation to the student population she works with to advocate for their rights and needs. It has been the researcher's personal opinion that schools do not always meet the needs of their students because the principal does not fully understand the needs and the importance of meeting those needs, not only for the student, but for the school as a whole. As a special education teacher and aspiring school administrator, this study helps the researcher to better understand how to be an effective instructional leader.

The audience for the study is current school administrators, university professors, and researchers in the field of educational leadership. Current school administrators who are seeking ways to improve their own leadership skills may find the results of this study helpful in labeling particular practices that can help them be successful. University professors interested in improving the preparation of school leaders may find the results of this study helpful in that it brings to light potential deficiencies in the current preparation programs for principals that can become a new area of focus. Researchers in the field of educational leadership may find the research of particular interest for those who study diverse populations of students and their quality of education. Also, superintendents of education, as well as, directors of professional development in school systems may find the study interesting and useful as they seek to improve the quality of school administrators, as instructional leaders, in their system. The researcher would like for the current research to begin a dialogue among educational leaders, on all levels, to address the need for special education leadership in our schools.

Formal Statement and Description of Study

Purpose statement

The purpose of the study was fourfold: 1) to determine if discrepancies in perceptions exist between study principals and special education teachers as to what makes for ‘effective special education leadership’ by a principal; 2) If so, what might these discrepancies be?; 3) If not, what are the common themes/perceptions?; 4) to provide a description of what effective leadership among principals leading special education programs might look like.

It is my intention that this research will be accessible and helpful to administrators seeking to be better, stronger instructional leaders for all of their students. Secondary, it is the

intention that the research will ultimately improve the quality of education for students with special needs, by strengthening the leadership behind their programs.

Statement of research questions

The researcher explored the practices of principals who are perceived by school staff as being effective in leading special education programs in their school by addressing the following questions:

1. What are the leadership practices and approaches of principals who are recognized by their peers and teachers as being strong in leading special education programs in their school?
2. To what degree are effective principals involved in special education decisions, activities, and instruction?
3. How much time does the effective principal spend on special education matters?
4. How proactive are effective principals in setting up appropriate special education programs for their students?

The researcher understands that the leadership style of the principal and the initiative taken in leading the special education programs are important criteria considered during the study. Also decisions that are made by the principal pertaining to students with special needs, or the special education department as a whole, are considered.

Description of research design and methods

The research topic of exploring the way in which principals engage in leading special education programs in their schools and the related research questions called for a qualitative research design. Qualitative research is appropriate because the researcher explored the, above, stated topic, using an inductive process, without any particular theory base yet found in the

literature. Because the researcher sought to use the data collected to construct a conceptual framework for effective practices for principals leading special education programs, a grounded theory approach was appropriate. Grounded theory requires a continual review of the data that are collected so that a theory, or theoretical framework, can be constructed which is grounded in the data. This type of design fits well with the overall purpose of the research. Data were collected through the use of semi-structured interviews with principals and special education teachers.

Interviews were conducted with principals and special education teachers of elementary schools. A semi-structured interview schedule of questions was used as a guide, however, participants were encouraged to elaborate and share related information outside of the structured questions. Examples of interview questions included the following: 1.) To what extent do you believe students with special needs receive the instruction and support they need in your school? 2.) What current special education programs exist in your school? 3.) How much time is spent discussing instructional issues with special education teachers? Demographic questions were also included in the interview. It was beneficial to conduct individual interviews, which was more likely to produce honest and open responses. During the interview process, it was important for the researcher to pay particular attention to the verbal language and body language used by the principals and teachers as it also is a reflection of their attitudes towards special education.

Key variables.

Key variables in the study were behaviors and practices of principals which relate to the effective leadership of special education programs, furthermore, leading to improved achievement of students with special needs.

Unit of analysis.

The unit of analysis for the study was each principal interviewed as they relate to the leadership of special education programs. The data were actually found in the way principals and special education teachers articulate (in dialogue) about the principals' current practices in special education, as well as, their behaviors and interactions with special education issues.

Study sample.

The sample for the dissertation research came from elementary school principals and special education teachers, within 2 school systems in the southeast region of the United States. The sample consisted of diverse demographics including principal and teacher gender, race, experience, certification, and student population of each participant's school. The elementary schools of the participants were led by a principal and at least one assistant principal. In one school, there were 2 assistant principals. There was the exception of 2 schools, which were only led by the principal. All of the schools employed 2-3 special education teachers who split duties across grade levels. The city school system serves approximately 3,150 students in 7 schools and the county school system serves students in 13 schools across the county.

Sampling strategy.

The sampling strategy used was both purposeful and convenience sampling. The pool of possible participants consisted of 20 principals and special education teachers. The study was specific to school principals, so current school principals to participate in the study were sought. The sample ultimately consisted of at seven principals who agreed to participate in the study. The targeted school systems from which the sample was drawn were used because they were in a convenient location to the researcher and the researcher is employed in one of the systems. Also,

rapport has been built and maintained by the researcher within the employed school system which is an important element in any qualitative research study.

Data analysis.

The data were analyzed continually throughout the research process, as is typical of qualitative studies, but also by using the coding process to identify themes which resonate with current practices of principals. The grounded theory process, as outlined by Charmaz (2006), indicates that after an initial data coding of the data collected, initial memos give rise to tentative themes or categories. Further memo-writing and concepts are refined even more until concepts can begin to be diagrammed into a theoretical framework.

Another important aspect of data analysis was to validate the findings with the use of member-checking to verify the accuracy of the researcher's interpretations with the actual participants. The continual process of analyzing and refining data helps not only to narrow the focus, but also to further validate the claims to be made within the theoretical framework. Through the data analysis, themes emerged that reflect effective practices in leading special education programs and, furthermore, these themes lead to a conceptual framework for understanding how a principal can be successful.

Rationale for research design.

The rationale for a qualitative research design was the exploratory nature of the study. The research topic sought to explore how principals lead special education programs in their schools. Furthermore, the identification of effective practices required the researcher to engage in dialogue with the participants. The data are qualitative in nature and was collected with the intention of improving the quality of education for students with special needs.

Definition of Key Study Terms

Within the scope of the current study, the researcher used terms which are defined by the specific context of the study. An explanation of terms used follows:

1. *Principal leadership*-the initiative taken by the principal to 1) know the needs of the population of students with special needs within the school, 2) provide the oversight to ensure students receive the appropriate services, and 3) be proactive and collaboratively involved in developing appropriate special education programs for students within the school
2. *Special education programs*- all of the services provided to students with special needs within a school. IDEA (2004) defines this as “specially designed instruction, at no cost to the parents, to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability” (para. 1).
3. *Services*- the delivery methods of instruction, educational placements, individualized support, appropriate academic and behavioral resources, and/ or student access to school and extracurricular activities
4. *Practices*-behaviors and actions taken; strategies used in an effort to lead special education programs
5. *Instructional leadership*-providing teachers with leadership, guidance, and support necessary to meet the instructional needs of all students
6. *Inclusion*-collaborative-based programs in which students with special needs are included within the general education classroom and curriculum; According to IDEA, school districts are required to provide a least restrictive environment (LRE) for students with special needs. This means, “to the maximum extent appropriate, school

districts must educate students with disabilities in the regular classroom with appropriate aids and supports” (Wright’s Law, para. 5).

It is important to understand what the researcher means by the aforementioned terms in order to make sense of the study. By identifying the practices of a principal, insight into what makes a principal a good leader of special education programs were gathered and identified for the purpose of improving educational leadership in our schools.

Organization of Study

The research study is organized within a collection of five chapters in the following sequence: Introduction, Literature Review, Methodology, Data Analyses, and Discussion and Conclusions. The study is organized in this way in order to provide a logical sequence in which to understand what makes principals effective leaders of special education programs. Chapter one, the introduction, provides the audience with the important elements of the study, such as: identification of the study topic, the contemporary context for the study, the rationale and justification for the study, a formal statement and description of the study, a statement of the research questions, a description of the research design and methods for the study, the definitions of key terms in the study, and an overview for the organization of the study.

Chapter two, the review of related literature, summarizes all that is known and unknown about principals leading special education programs, prior to the study. It informs the topic of the study and explains how the study emerged out of the current literature on special education and educational leadership. The literature review also provides a context within which the study fits, fills the knowledge gap, and advances the literature in both special education and educational leadership. Chapter three, the methodology, details the qualitative research design and methods

for the study. It is also the purpose of this chapter to explain how the research design and methods address the research questions:

1. What are the leadership practices and approaches of principals who are recognized by their peers and teachers as being strong in leading special education programs in their school?
2. To what degree are effective principals involved in special education decisions, activities, and instruction?
3. How much time does the effective principal spend on special education matters?
4. How proactive are effective principals in setting up appropriate special education programs for their students?

Within this chapter are detailed descriptions of the qualitative methods used for a grounded theory approach. Chapter four, the data analyses of the study, provides details of the themes which emerged during data collection, as well as, an analysis of those findings and what they mean to the research topic and question. Chapter five, the discussion and conclusions, gives the researcher's perceptions on the findings from the study, provides implications for current practice, and offers recommendations for future research on the topic.

The rationale for the organization of the study is that it provides a logical sequence for presenting the study to the audience. The reader is able to grasp the concept of the study and is presented with the context and case for the study in the beginning. The reader can then connect the purpose of the study to the research methods used to collect data. Ultimately, the audience should be able to gain an understanding of how specific principal practices are effective in leading special education programs and be able to draw conclusions and make implications for the field of educational leadership and special education.

CHAPTER II
LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

With the intention of informing the topic of how principals engage in the process of leading special education programs in their schools, a thorough, in-depth review of the current literature surrounding this topic is presented. A comprehensive review of the literature is situated within both the historical and current issues in the areas of special education and educational leadership. The current literature provides the rationale for principals emerging into leaders of special education programs, assesses principal confidence in their preparedness to lead all instructional programs, identifies the legislation surrounding the responsibility of principals to special education, and describes the current state of principals leading special education programs in their schools.

The organization of the literature review is deliberate as it begins with a comprehensive background of the role of the principal as an instructional leader, including historical influences on the administration of special education and the current role of the principal in special education. By investigating the current roles, expectations, and requirements of school principals, a clearer understanding of the needs of today's principal can be gathered which serves as the foundation for the current study. Following a review of the current roles of principals as instructional leaders is a look at how principal preparation programs are actually preparing principals in the area of special education. Principals' assuming more of the responsibility for

special education in their schools implies a need to be prepared to meet these demands. Therefore, an investigation into principal preparation is included.

The literature review continues with a look at the self-perceived confidence of administrators to lead instructional programs. This review includes literature on how principals perceive themselves to lead instructional programs in general and also in leading special education programs. Administrative support for instructional programs is investigated as a subtopic and includes perceptions of both principals and teachers. Also, shared decision-making with parents of students with special needs is included within this review as an indicator of how principals perceive themselves as competent in special education matters. How principals feel about their ability to be instructional leaders both in general and in special education programs, has an impact on how effective the instructional programs are in the school. This area of research is important as it reveals the context within which principals are operating. Literature on the attitudes of principals towards inclusion is included as a related factor to the way in which principals attempt to lead special education programs in their schools.

An important element of the literature review is on the current special education legislation which drives the way in which special education is approached and handled by principals. Included within this section of the review is important special education knowledge for principals and the implications for principals who lack adequate knowledge of special education law. This is a natural area of literature to include because of the legal implications surrounding special education.

A look at what is currently available in the area of special education leadership in schools is included, along with, successful principal leadership in special education programs and principal leadership style and its effectiveness in implementing special education programs. A

review of these subtopics help to identify what has been established in the literature for the current dissertation topic and what remains to be explored. The final literature reviewed is a look at effective professional development for principals leading special education programs. This provides a basis for determining what remains to be needed in the area of professional development to prepare principals to be successful instructional leaders as they lead special education programs for their schools. A summary of the literature reviewed follows at the end.

In beginning a review of the literature on the topic of principals leading special education programs, databases such as Academic Search Premier and ERIC were accessed to locate related peer-reviewed articles. Articles retrieved through this search included those within the professional literature, as well as, empirical and theoretical research. A general internet search using Google was also utilized to locate publications such as newspaper and website articles related to the topic. The literature review began with a general search of “leadership and special education”, which included topics such as administration, special education directors and teacher leaders in special education. Because the intended focus was to be on principals, the search was then narrowed to “principals and special education”. This search yielded a variety of results, some unexpected, such as, the implications for principals without a working knowledge of special education law, something that seems necessary for an administrator to know. It was important during the literature search that articles from the fields of special education and educational leadership be explored. “Given that special education has been a legislated reality of public schools for more than 35 years, scant attention has been paid to the subject within leadership discourse.” (Pazey & Cole, 2012, p. 5). Therefore, the emphasis in the proposed research is on principals, with the intent to add to the body of knowledge within the field of educational leadership.

These are all important topics to consider in today's schools where principals take on many different challenges, including that of being an instructional leader for the special education programs that exist in their schools. The structure of the literature review reflects the purpose of the current study on informing the topic of identifying what makes principals successful as instructional leaders in the area of special education. It is necessary to have a working knowledge of the historical and current changes in the expectations of principals and legislation in education in order to understand the rationale for the current research study. The progression of the literature reviewed is a logical method for providing a case for the current study.

Literature Review

The principal role as instructional leader

The role of principal as instructional leader represents the new age of principalship in which one must be both knowledgeable about and effective in the instruction of students. For this reason, requirements of what principals must know and do, in all instructional areas, must be refined to meet these demands. Honig (2012) refers to the role of instructional leadership as what principals do to "improve classroom instruction." (p. 734). It is the specific instructional support practices that principals incorporate into their everyday activities that reflect that of instructional leadership (p. 737).

Principals engage in many forms of instructional leadership, however, some appear to be more effective than others. Nidus and Sadler (2011) emphasize one important practice of instructional leadership which is "formative coaching, an approach that uses student work as the foundation for mentoring and professional development". They assert that it is the principal, who must be at the center of continuous school improvement. During this process, principals examine

student work with teachers to help inform future instruction. The practice of formative coaching has its roots in the tasks of teaching and learning to ultimately improve student achievement (p. 31). Principals who engage in formative coaching, specifically having conversations about teaching and learning, can provide the school with the opportunities necessary to improve these core tasks (p. 33). This particular form of instructional leadership requires direct intervention with instructional tasks of the school, which is an important element of leadership needed of principals.

Another dimension in which to consider instructional leadership is through the four different types presented by Reitzug, West, and Angel (2008). Reitzug et al. (2008) describe four types of instructional leadership as relational, linear, organic, and prophetic. A principal who practices relational instructional leadership makes an effort to build a relationship with school faculty and students in an effort to encourage them to improve instruction and learning (p. 697). A linear instructional leadership approach designs the structure of programs so that one action has a chain reaction leading to subsequent positive outcomes (p. 699). An organic instructional leader situates herself in the school with the understanding that the instructional component is only a part of the whole (p. 702). “Prophetic instructional leadership is essentially about leading a school to a higher ‘calling’ rather than simply working toward achieving politically expedient outcomes.” (p. 706). Each of these types of instructional leadership has a place in an instructional leader, although one or more particular types may be more strongly present in some than others. A principal must reflect on these different types of instructional leadership, letting each of them inform her leadership practices.

Frost and Thomas (2011) quote that “a central role of the principal is providing instructional leadership to ensure that the rights of students with disabilities are protected and

that these students receive an appropriate education (Heumann & Hehir, 1998, as cited in Frost and Thomas, 2011, p. 3). The authors highlight the importance of the school principal's role as instructional leader among both general education and special education teachers. Principals are not always prepared to take on instructional leadership duties to special education, as research suggests, however, "in the wake of legislation and school reform, it is critical that they assume this responsibility to ensure effectiveness and student achievement." (p. 6). Findings of the study by Frost and Thomas (2008) reveal what some principals consider as their responsibilities as instructional leaders:

"My primary responsibilities include hiring, evaluating, and supporting special educators. I ensure that lines of communication between special educators and classroom teachers stay open and mutually respectful. I help them with their school-home communications and sit in on difficult meetings with parents. I attend the weekly special education meetings that cover discussions about students at all parts of the special education testing continuum." (p. 15).

These responsibilities assumed by principals encompass important aspects of instructional leadership which should be considered. Instructional leadership requires leadership in all aspects of instruction within the school, including, gifted education, general education, and special education.

Historical influences on administration of special education.

Principals must assume the position of instructional leader for the school. However, how far must this leadership extend? As previously noted, instructional leadership entails leadership of all instructional areas. One of those areas in which principals extend instructional leadership is within special education. A concern for leadership of special education, in the United States, can

be traced back to the 1940's when Berry (1941) revealed how administrators struggled to structure learning programs in their schools to accommodate children with disabilities (as cited in, Pazez & Yates, 2012, p. 17). During this time it became necessary for administration of schools to create a separate entity of administration that specifically addressed the special education of students with disabilities. These special education administrators were well-skilled in the areas of mental wellness, vocational training, and being able to connect students with community agencies to provide support for their disabilities (p. 22). During the 1960's, textbooks used in the preparation of school administrators began to address the responsibility of administrators for serving students with disabilities. It was during this time it became apparent that administrators would need to be knowledgeable and possess the capability necessary to manage the special education needs of students with disabilities (p. 23). The General-Special Education Administration Consortium (GSEAC) of 1970 sought to address both the need for principals to be prepared to manage special education students and programs and for special education administrators to be prepared to be leaders in their field (p. 28). This was the beginning of a movement towards integration of students with disabilities into the general education environment. While principals were not yet in a position to lead special education programs in their schools, it was assumed that they be able to handle and supervise these programs.

It wasn't until legislation, known as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA), was established in 1975 that public schools were required to not only accommodate students with special needs, but to provide appropriate services necessary for their education (Pazez & Yates, 2012, p. 17). This brought about a new age of special education in which there was a focus on the ability of students with special needs to access the curriculum through

instructional accommodations or modifications. This is still the focus for children receiving special education, however, the role of leadership for special programs has somewhat shifted from being primarily the responsibility of district-level and school-level special education staff to now building principals holding the responsibility for the instruction and services their students receive. Sage and Burrello (1994, as cited in, Pazey & Yates, 2012, p. 31), claim that it is the principal who is responsible for leading, creating, and implementing educational programs in the school. This must also include the special education programs in the school.

Current role of principals in special education.

As can be seen, historically, principals have not always had the responsibility of leading special education programs in their schools. This responsibility has come about as a result of legislation requiring schools to provide appropriate services to students with special needs. Also, a factor in this new responsibility is the increase of students with special needs in public schools. Sergiovanni, Kelleher, McCarthy, and Fowler (2009) claim that the special education student population has had a 29 % increase between the 1990-1991 school year until 2003-2004. An additional change in the student population is the broadening of the range of disabilities of students (p. 155). Schools have to be responsive to the changing population and principals must be well-informed on how to address these changes.

It is the monumental No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation in 2001 and the reauthorized Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004 that sets the stage for principals today (Pazey & Yates, 2012, p. 31). A significant number of demands are now placed on principals dealing with students receiving special education. Principals are now operating in an educational environment which demands direct involvement with special education teachers, students, and parents. In fact, some claim that the need for a special education director, or

administrator, is slowly passing away, and the need for general education administrators, principals, are to take on this responsibility at the school-level (p. 32). While this is yet to be the case in many school districts who still employ a director of special education services to oversee all special education programs for the system, it can be observed that more and more responsibility of special education is being delegated to school principals, especially in districts where the special education population is growing and strict funding does not allow for additional district-level staff to oversee them.

Thurlow, Quenemoen, and Lazarus (2012) discuss the challenges that have been placed on principals, in light of the accountability legislation such as NCLB. Principals now have a priority to increase student achievement among all groups of students, including those with special needs (p. 3). This is taken from the leadership standards set forth by the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) which includes, as Standard 2, “Developing a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth;” (Boscardin & Lashley, 2012, p. 44). Crockett (2012) indicates that as the roles of general and special education administrators merge, school principals now hold more of the responsibility “to assume leadership for providing effective instruction to all students” (p. 57). The way in which leadership for special education programs functions is also evolving from a “compliance-driven model to an instructional model focused on equitable educational attainment.” (p. 62). Principals not only have to shift into a role of instructional leader for their school, but their instructional leadership must also include the special education programs in the school.

In a qualitative study by Bays (2001), it was found that both principals and special education administrators play a leading role in the supervision and management of special education. She investigates, via observations and interviews with both special and general

education teachers, principals, and directors of special education, how the supervision of special education in elementary schools occurs in an attempt to develop a theory about the observed phenomena. The researcher indicates that leaders of special education should hold the following abilities: have a comprehensive knowledge of specific disabilities, effective supervisory skills, and collaborative leadership. The components of the researcher's grounded theory include: supervisor's role as assigned, the principal works between competing tasks and variable circumstances, and, ultimately there is the delegation of responsibility among principal, teacher, and director of special education.

A study by Cruzeiro and Morgan (2006) investigates the role principals have in special education leadership. Surveys were completed by principals of rural schools in which they responded to questions about their role in the leadership of special education in their schools. The results of the survey indicated that 79% of a principal's time at school was spent on general education tasks, leaving only 21% of a principal's time left to spend on special education responsibilities. The principals reported that some of the barriers to leading special education in their schools were: constraints of administrative tasks, preparation of teachers, resource and funding allocation, being in opposition to change, economic challenges, and geographic and logistical challenges for rural schools. Those principals found to be successfully implementing special education leadership in their buildings accomplish this by openly communicating the mission of the school, managing the curriculum and instruction given to all students, supervising both regular and special education teaching, monitoring all student progress, and initiating a positive instructional climate for teachers and students. Also, successful principals make it possible for general and special educators to collaboratively plan and problem solve among themselves and with parents.

DiPaola and Waither-Thomas (2003) reveal key leadership issues related to effective special education. Using the six standards for school leaders set forth by the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium, the authors emphasize the importance of leaders in placing effective student learning as the primary focus for improvement efforts. It is recommended that university preparation programs, professional organizations, education researchers, state agencies, and local communities find ways to collaborate in order to develop school leaders who are capable of advocating justly for the educational rights of learners with diverse needs. The authors highlight the responsibility of principals to address instructional issues within the school. This requires instructional leadership of the principal within all instructional programs. However, principals may not be prepared for this role.

Preparation of Principals for Leading Special Education Programs

Principals take on the role of instructional leader in their schools. As noted earlier, this entails all instructional areas, including special education. Are principals prepared to lead special education programs in their schools? While statistics reveal a vast increase in the special education student population from 8.3% in 1976 to 13.1% in 2010 (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics 2012), it should be the case that principals are now being prepared to make sound decisions in light of the diverse special education population and the legislation that protects them. It is important to understand if and how preparation programs are addressing this change. Principals in the 21st century are being prepared under a new set of standards of educational leadership. Research reveals an on-going desire to improve the preparation of administrators to have “a sharper focus on equitable and high quality special education instruction.” (Crockett, 2012, p. 55).

Lynch (2012) notes seven components of the current principal's role: managers of personnel, managers of students, connection between school and community, manager of external development, manager of finances, promote school's vision, and manager of instruction and academic performance. With the increasing demand for principals to take on responsibilities of special education in their schools, leaders must plan, implement, support, advocate, communicate, and monitor the special education programs. The author also cites research indicating a need for states to include special education competencies in their requirements for principal certification. Another troubling find in the research is that principals are not knowledgeable of instructional strategies to be used with students with special needs. It is imperative that principals extend their instructional leadership responsibilities to special education as the accountability for all students' performance is on the increase.

A paper produced by the Foundation for Child Development (2011) emphasizes the lack of strong principal instructional leadership that exists in schools today and offers recommendations for creating high quality school experiences for young children. The preparation programs for principals appear to be one area of needed improvement to better prepare them for being instructional leaders. An example of improving principal quality, noted, is in the state of Illinois, in which higher education institutions were required to work more closely with school districts in the development of school leaders. A strong emphasis is placed upon having a strong foundation of high-quality instruction for early childhood and elementary grades to increase student achievement, rather than a focus on remediation later on. A principal who is an instructional leader will: create an instructional culture, drive effective teaching, create structures and conditions in the school that support quality instruction, build relationships

with community partners, eliminate barriers to exercising instructional leadership, foster strategies that develop effective leaders, and get the incentives right.

After an assessment of principal preparation programs, it has been found that such programs are weak and need to be refined to meet the real demands of today's schools. Some of the weaknesses found included: "(a) low admission standards; (b) outmoded curricula that inadequately reflects the needs of schools, districts and increasingly diverse students, including students with disabilities; (c) weak links between theory and practice; (d) few faculty with field experience as leaders; and (e) poorly designed internships" (Murphy et al., 2008, as cited in, Crockett, 2012, p. 61). Not only is the initial preparation of principals important in developing special education instructional programs, it is equally important that on-going professional development is conducted with principals, as well (p. 59). This differs from traditional educational leadership development in which the focus has been on administrative skills, such as, managing budgets and observing compliance with the minimum requirements to meet the needs of diverse learners (p. 60). Aspiring principals should be trained in providing appropriate leadership for students with special needs and all students. This training should be of high quality with the intent to remain current on the needs and issues of special education (Burdette, 2010, as cited in, Crockett, 2012, p. 63). In today's education environment, it is no longer a question of whether or not special education should be included in curricula for principal preparation programs, programs must now find a way to best incorporate important, comprehensive, and meaningful special education subject matter into the training curriculum (p. 64). Professional leadership standards which are centered around the learning of all students, even those with special needs, should be the ones which states, districts, and the universities place their standards and requirements, as well (Murphy et al., 2008, as cited in Crockett, 2012, p. 63).

Angelle and Bilton (2009) set out to investigate the level of readiness a principal holds in dealing with special education issues after completing their preparation program. The differences between principal preparation program graduates with and without an internship are also investigated as to their preparedness with special education issues, as well as, looking at recent graduates' preparedness compared to long time graduates. An online survey was given to a group of practicing principals. Results indicate that there is no difference in special education preparedness among those who did and did not complete an internship in their preparation program. The principals' level of comfort in dealing with special education issues did not change based on whether they were a recent graduate or long time graduate. There was a statistically significant difference in the level of comfort dealing with issues of special education based on the number of special education courses in their preparation programs. The article concludes by emphasizing the importance that even one special education course has in helping school administrators more successfully lead and deal with special education issues in their schools. Bateman and Bateman (2006, as cited in, Pazey & Cole, 2012) also identify special education knowledge, including knowledge of special education law, as critical in the preparation of school principals (p. 6).

Davis (2001) conducted a study which looks into the formal special education training and the perceived need for this training for both elementary and secondary principals. A questionnaire was used which indicates principals have very little special education training, although they believe this to be important. Furthermore, the results of the study indicate an increase in the time spent with special education issues due to current legislation, which gives way to the importance of special education training for administrators.

Some principal preparation programs have undergone changes to address these identified needs such as a study in which Brown-Ferrigno (2011) explores collaborations between universities and school districts within the state of Kentucky, specifically focusing on principal preparation programs. This study is a part of the WestEd and Stanford Educational Leadership Institute study in which components of innovative leadership preparation are identified. Under an appointed task force for redesigning Kentucky's principal preparation programs, it was mandated, though unfunded, in 2008, that colleges and universities were to submit a proposal to the board by December 2012 in order to continue their programs, ultimately calling for stricter requirements for the programs. In this study, professors in Kentucky colleges completed an online survey to determine their perspectives on the new redesign mandate. Concerns over the mandate being unfunded, the redesign process, and the politics behind the mandate were made clear by the professors surveyed. The author concludes that the Kentucky mandate is not considerate of the nature of institutional partnerships, nor understands successful policy implementation. This study suggests that though preparation programs for principals may need to be changed, it must be done in a collaborative manner.

The state of Illinois has changed their principal preparation programs to focus on student learning and school improvement. The characteristics of an effective principal should include being able to create and be a living representation of the school's mission, vision, and values, being a leader and manager of school change, reflecting more deeply on the processes of teaching and learning, foster collaborative relationships, and, holding the school accountable to its students. Principals must possess a proficient knowledge of general school and special education law. Most importantly, principals must be capable of designing and implementing appropriate instructional interventions for all students, including students with special needs.

Aspiring principals in the state of Illinois will be required to heed the new demands and standards, while current principals will only be required to maintain a current administrative endorsement. The new program requirements bring with it a strong, and much needed, emphasis on instruction for all students and school improvement as a whole (Illinois State Board of Education, 2009). “It makes sense that administrator preparation programs should provide developing leaders with opportunities to develop the necessary knowledge and expertise with regard to special education.” (Pazey & Cole, 2012, p. 3).

McHatton, Boyer, Shaunessy, and Terry (2012) investigate principal preparation programs’ effectiveness in preparing principals to meet the demands of students with special needs. A survey was completed by principals to indicate their responsibility in the oversight of their special education programs, what types of models of special education programs are being practiced in the schools, the level of principal preparation in special education content, perception of self-efficacy to meet the needs of students with special needs, and their knowledge or perception of effective teachers who teach students with special needs. Results indicate very little coursework in special education was a part of their preparation program for administration of schools. In this particular study, professional development was used to provide training for principals on legal issues surrounding special education, as well as, the accommodations and modifications used for students with special needs. Surprisingly, the principals participating felt that additional professional development was not needed. Both legal issues and issues in funding special education were perceived by principals to be an area in which were lacking. This study concludes that a disconnect exists between current special education practice and issues dealt by principals and the degree to which they are emphasized in principal preparation programs.

Power (2007) conducted a dissertation study of principals' knowledge of special education in Virginia. An online survey was completed by principals within the state which asked questions based on the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). A principals' knowledge of the instructional programs in the school, the handling of procedures related to special education, and the ability of the principal to be sure procedural safeguards which are mandated for students with special needs, are all assessed. The author notes that the research indicates a deficient knowledge of special education practices among principals. Unfortunately, principals are not prepared to lead special education programs in their schools nor protect themselves and the rest of the school from problematic issues involving special education.

Crockett (2012) reveals new alternative routes to obtaining school administration and leadership credentials beyond university preparatory programs. Critics do not support alternative routes to administrative certification because it allows for candidates from a variety of non-education backgrounds, such as, business majors. Supporters of alternative routes claim that training as an entrepreneur in educational administration yields a more valid and practical set of leadership skills necessary to lead a school (p. 57-58). However, it is "thoughtful preparation, thorough induction, and ongoing professional learning" that are necessary to fully prepare leaders to be effective with students with diverse needs (Burdette, 2010, as cited in Crockett, 2012, p. 59). The Task Force on the Principalship from the Institute for Educational Leadership (2000) addressed the inadequacies of principal preparation. The purpose of this initiative is to raise public awareness of the problems facing educational leadership by including all stakeholders both within education, as well as, the community. Specifically, this publication addresses principal leadership's problems in being prepared to lead today's schools and how to address them. Principals must now take on the role of both building manager and a leader for

student learning. Unfortunately, the problem lies with the fact that principals are not prepared to take on the latter role. As schools and society continues to progress, principals will need to serve in instructional, community, and visionary leadership roles. New models of leadership should revolve around leadership for student learning. The task force offers the following recommendations for preparing principals for new roles: fill the pipeline with effective school leaders, support the profession, and guarantee quality and results.

Cusson (2010, as cited in, Pazey & Cole, 2012, p. 7) lists twelve elements of special education that are believed to be essential for school principals to be skilled in: relationship and communication, leadership and vision, budget and capital, special education laws and policies, curriculum and instruction, personnel, evaluation of data, programs, students, and teachers, collaboration and consultation, special education programming, organization, professional development, and advocacy. In preparing principals to lead special education programs, courses which provide a survey of both how special education programs should be implemented and the requirements set forth by special education law would provide them with the knowledge necessary to lead successful special education programs in their schools (Pazey & Cole, 2012, p. 8).

Self-perceived Confidence of Administrators to Lead Instructional Programs

As aspiring principals complete their preparation programs, research suggests a deficiency in special education leadership. Furthermore, as principals enter into their careers, special education is one area within the school which requires a lot of attention. In light of their lack of preparedness to lead special education programs, do principals feel confident in handling special education issues and leading programs? The following section of the literature review

portrays the confidence of principals to lead general instructional programs in their schools, as well as, specifically, special education programs.

In general.

Principals as instructional leaders have many challenging tasks before them. Aside from general administrative duties, principals must be able to lead the school towards improved instruction and student achievement. The preparation of principals may have a strong bearing on the way principals lead, but another related factor worth examining is the self-perceived confidence of administrators to lead instructional programs. A principal cannot be a successful instructional leader if she does not feel confident in her abilities to do so.

Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2004) discuss three research studies which attempt to identify an accurate measure of principals' self-efficacy (p. 573). The researchers describe this sense of efficacy using Bandura's (1997) definition: "a judgment of his or her capabilities to structure a particular course of action in order to produce desired outcomes in the school he or she leads" (as cited in, Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2004, p. 573). The studies show that a principal's sense of efficacy may vary depending on the context and the tasks at hand (p. 574). The findings also reveal the way in which many principals evaluate their own competence level. These included characteristics such as "skills, knowledge, strategies, or personality traits balanced against personal weaknesses or liabilities in this particular school setting." (p. 574). Furthermore, the studies indicate that a principals' sense of efficacy can be used as a strong predictor of behavior in their jobs. A strong sense of efficacy is often linked with persistence in reaching goals and the flexibility to apply different strategies to situations depending on the context. On the other hand a low sense of efficacy often causes principals to feel a lack of control

in situations and an inability to adapt well to different contexts (p. 574). A principal's sense of efficacy is important to develop in today's educational environment of accountability (p. 582).

Schechter and Asher (2012) look, specifically, at the impact a principal's lack of self-confidence has on the level of success of organizational learning mechanisms (OLMs) in schools (p. 138). Principals can actually empower themselves, minimizing their uncertainty, through information, new knowledge, and collaboration with staff (p. 142). As could be predicted, results of the study show that principals with higher levels of uncertainty often result in lower levels of organizational learning mechanisms (p. 148). One finding of particular interest was that a principal's length of service was often paired with higher confidence levels, which ultimately resulted in extensive organizational learning mechanisms throughout the school (p. 148). Oplatka (2010) supports this finding in a study which found that principals late in their career often report higher levels of professional competence and higher self-efficacy compared to earlier in their careers (p. 802). Principals interviewed in this study reported having "deeper insights, more professional knowledge, better reflective ability, and a better understanding of the school's needs." (p. 803).

Blase and Blase (1999) describe the routine instructional leadership practices of principals and the influence they have on teachers (p. 349). Teachers interviewed during the study described specific strategies principals used in providing instructional leadership to them. These include listening to them, sharing their own previous experiences, modeling and providing examples of instructional practices, providing teachers with choices, challenging harmful or outdated policies, encouraging teachers to take risks, keeping abreast of current professional literature and sharing with teachers, acknowledge teacher strengths, and ultimately keeping the focus of the school on improving instruction (p. 360). This study revealed an effective

instructional leader is one who spends time in the classrooms, giving feedback in a way that provides opportunity for discussions between the principal and teacher about how to improve instruction (p. 360). The teachers in this study listed several effective strategies that principals use in to help develop teachers' instructional skills. These include: highlighting the importance of teaching and learning, facilitate collaboration among faculty, using instructional coaching, supporting new ideas and the redesigning of programs, adequate staff development, and engaging in action research to assist in making instructional decisions (p. 362). One assumption made by this study is that student achievement increases as a result of the principal's involvement with and influence they have on teachers' instructional practices (p. 368). The data from the study suggests "that principals who are effective instructional leaders use a broad-based approach; they integrate reflection and growth to build a school culture of individual and shared critical examination for improvement." (p. 370).

Supovitz, Sirinides, & May (2010) examine how the leadership of the principal, as well as, the influence of peers have an effect on the instructional practice of teachers and, ultimately, on student achievement (p. 31). The study provides empirical evidence that supports the idea that the leadership of the principal has an indirect effect on student achievement through the instructional practices of teachers (p. 45). In fact, the authors concur that it is the principal who appears to have the most influential impact on student achievement, especially when there is an environment of instructional collaboration among faculty (p. 46). Ultimately, the study finds that student achievement and the instructional practice of teachers is a result of the leadership of the principal and how she works through others within the school to make improvements (p. 53).

In leading special education programs in the school.

The self-perceptions of principals in their ability to lead instructional programs, in general, varies based on factors, such as, knowledge of instructional strategies or the level of collaboration they support within their schools. Similarly, the self-perceived confidence of principals to lead special education programs in the school depends on the same factors, but there is also the pressure of legislation in special education that causes a degree of anxiety for some principals. In special education there are students with diverse disabilities which require a variety of unique interventions, strategies, accommodations, and modifications to their educational environment. With these students comes the responsibility of administration to be knowledgeable and supportive of their exceptionalities. While principals may not have a special education background, it is important that they spend time with special education teachers and staff in order to gain more knowledge about the special education population within their schools. In a study by Crockett (2012), principals who were found to have effective special education programs reported having regular meetings with their special education staff. This enables them to have a better understanding of all the disabilities in their school and instructional strategies that are successful with these students (p. 60-61).

Principals of elementary schools in New York are studied by Loiacono and Palumbo (2011) to assess their pedagogical preparation and confidence level of serving children with Autism. Based on data collected from surveys, principals feel better prepared to serve children with Autism in their schools if they have an understanding of even the basic principles of an effective intervention strategy known as Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA). Although principals report being the main evaluator of special education teachers, their lack of knowledge and experience of ABA resulted in less confidence in doing so. Many principals in the study

reported having some coursework in special education, however, little exposure to special education strategies and principles such as ABA. In fact, the principals participating in the study recommend including specific training in ABA, Positive Behavior Support (PBS), and special education law within principal preparation programs. The researchers suggest it is the principal, as the school's instructional leader, who should be responsible for the implementation of evidence-based strategies, practices, and instruction for all students within the school, including those with special needs.

A study by Foley and Lewis (1999) looked at secondary principals across the nation and the competence, to lead collaborative-based programs, they perceived of themselves. A survey was completed by the principals participating to assess self-perceived competence, as well as, collect information on the principals' professional experiences. The study found three predictors of self-perceived competence in the principals involved in the study: number of hours in relevant workshops, academic degree, and years of teaching experience in general education. The authors suggest future research to look at developing a collection of leadership behaviors and activities found to be effective by principals interested in facilitating collaborative-based programs in their schools. Also, an examination of both general education and special education teachers' perceptions of the ability of principals to guide collaborative-based programs and identification of essential leadership skills in establishing partnerships with outside community agencies were suggested.

A web-based survey administered in a study by Rinehart (2011) assesses the perceived confidence of principals to engage in special education practices. Specifically, the researcher investigates how confident principals feel in providing students with special needs access to the general education curriculum, the instructional supports needed to access the curriculum,

monitoring student progress, and allowing students with special needs to participate in assessments within their least restrictive environment. A focus on improving the instruction of students with special needs is a result of the reauthorizations of both NCLB and IDEA, which has somewhat changed the principal's role. Some institutions in higher education, such as the University of Colorado, have taken this change in the principal's role as an opportunity to improve their principal preparation programs to better meet the needs and demands of today's principal. Preparation programs are investigating how well they are preparing principals with the necessary special education content, knowledge, and skills that are needed to lead inclusive programs in schools. Results from this study indicate that variables such as a principal's role before becoming an administrator, relevant special education coursework taken, extent of professional development in special education, years served as an administrator, and the principal's highest earned degree all influence a principal's perceived confidence in handling special education issues. The researcher encourages future research to determine the most effective means of keeping principals informed on current special education law and issues.

A study by Oyinlade and Gellhaus (2005) looks at teacher perceptions of the effectiveness of principals' and superintendents' leadership in schools for students with disabilities, specifically, visual impairments. Teachers were asked to describe the effectiveness of their principal, as well as, those practices and dispositions which they feel are characteristic of effective leadership. The results of this study revealed a discrepancy between what teachers perceive as effective leadership compared to principals' perceptions. Teachers suggest the need for improvement in principal leadership; however, principals in the study rated themselves as being better leaders than was indicated by teachers.

Another aspect of instructional leadership in special education is the ability to recruit and retain qualified teachers in the field. In fact, a qualitative study, by Prather-Jones (2011), reveals the impact that administrators' support has on special education teachers of students with behavior disorders remaining in the field. During interviews and focus groups with special education teachers, having at least seven years experience, three themes emerged revealing what teachers feel are important of effective leadership. The themes include: involving the teacher in making decisions about the consequences for student misconduct and enforcement of those consequences by administration, respect and appreciation shown to teachers by administration, and administration facilitating collaborative relationships between general and special education teachers. Ultimately, teachers revealed that the most important reason they have remained in the field is because of the strong administrative support they have experienced. This was found to be especially important in the initial years of teaching. The authors of the study conclude by emphasizing the need for administrators to be knowledgeable and competent in the area of special education to be able to support teachers of children with special needs.

The attitudes of both teachers and principals towards the administrator's ability to implement inclusion within the school are examined by Valeo (2008), showing a contrast in the two perceptions. A qualitative pilot study is implemented using interviews of elementary school teachers and principals of Canadian schools. Differing perceptions exist between teachers and principals, specifically, of the support teachers felt they received and the support principals felt they were providing. Teachers indicate a need for the administrator to be instrumental and supportive in providing time resources to make inclusion successful. Principals indicate a perceived confidence in the ability to implement inclusion in their schools. However, within this study, principals were unaware of the reality of what teachers need to make inclusion a success.

Brotherson, Sheriff, Milburn, and Schertz (2001) used a participatory action research model to explore what principals perceive as the practices, needs, challenges, and visions for successful inclusive programs. Principals participated in focus groups, surveys, and more focus groups to further investigate specific themes emerging during the study. The primary research questions being analyzed in this study asked what principals perceive as their needs for implementing inclusion and what principals perceive as challenges to inclusive early childhood programs. Perceptions of principals' needs to effectively implement inclusion in the school could be categorized into four major themes: time for teacher and staff development, carrying out the principal's role in helping teachers recognize when there is a need to improve and change, understanding the need to support parents from the beginning, and the realization that to lead a successful inclusive program, there needs to be collaboration with community agencies. The researchers feel that an examination of principals who have been successful at implementing inclusive programs would be valuable to the current body of research.

Principals may often disregard their responsibility to special education, leaving it to others with more special education training and experience (Lashley, 2007, as cited in, Pazez & Cole, 2012, p. 6). This may be because principals do not receive adequate training in their preparation programs, although they are aware of the need for special education training (Pazez & Cole, 2012, p. 9). On the other hand principals often feel more comfortable with special education when they have received adequate training or have had experience, as was found in a study by Pazez and Cole (2012). The study found a statistically significant difference in the comfort level of principals within their first year depending upon their previous exposure to special education program implementation and law (p. 9).

Frick, Faircloth, and Little (2012) examine the ways in which principals perceive leadership decision-making from their own experiences. Specifically, the researchers focused on how principals engage in ethical decision-making for students with special needs as they attempt to seek all students' best interests (p. 1). Principals in the study took ownership of making sure that all students were academically successful. The way in which the principals regularly engaged in collaborative instructional decision-making and problem-solving with teachers testifies to this principal ownership for student success. The principals considered themselves as a leader of leaders and took the responsibility of enabling faculty to be aware of and skilled in meeting diverse student needs (p. 16). Participants in the study also brought out the point that special education law has the intent of tailoring a child's education to meet their individual needs in a way that brings about the best interests of the child (p. 18). The researchers emphasize the importance of principals to be capable of making ethical decisions and balancing both the necessity of meeting the best interests of all students in the school, but also meeting the best interests of those students with special needs, especially in the diverse educational system we find ourselves today (p. 21).

Shared decision-making with Parents of Children with Special Needs

Another aspect of principal confidence is in the way they collaborate with parents of students with special needs. Because principals are often ill-prepared for special education duties, conflict can sometimes come about in their dealings with parents. A lack of confidence because of a lack of training in special education can negatively impact the ability to effectively collaborate between the school and parents on behalf of the student.

A qualitative study of the varying perspectives among principals and parent advocates on special education was conducted by Zaretsky (2004) via a series of interviews and focus groups.

Six principals and seven parent advocates of student with disabilities were interviewed. The study revealed an apparent conflict of interests and differing perspectives between parent advocates for students with special needs and principals. While, both groups of participants had a tendency to agree on general special education issues, where they differed was on specific requests for services, such as placing a special education assistant with an individual student. Issues such as this often bring tensions between the two groups because of a difference in opinion. The researcher discusses different philosophical ways in which special education may be approached including, the scientific/medical model and the social/holistic model, emphasizing the need for principals to be receptive to the complexity of special education. Ultimately, for the interest of achieving an appropriate and equal education for all students, Zaretsky (2004) recommends that principals and parent advocates must deal with those uncomfortable situations and keep an open mind, being receptive to new ideas. However, in a subsequent, similar study, the researcher investigated the perceptions of interactions between parent advocates of students with special needs and principals. Topics discussed in the study included perceptions of disabilities and the issues involved in special education and also what kind of influence those perceptions have on special education processes. Zaretsky (2004) found that principals dismissed the input of parent advocates, leaving the parent advocates feeling devalued and unheard in making important decisions. The reason principals gave for dismissing parent advocates was their perception that parent advocates had the intention of pushing personal agendas within the school. Furthermore, the principals felt that they were capable of handling important issues with parents and students because of their training in conflict resolution. Despite the findings from the study, both parent advocates and principals voiced a desire to utilize a pro-active, interactive,

problem-solving process to help resolve special education issues. Also, communicating in a way to clarify the responsibilities and limitations of each party involved was found to be important.

Principals' Attitudes Towards Inclusion

Bailey and du Plessis (1997) conducted a study of school principals' attitudes towards inclusion. Insight into principals' philosophy and inclusive practices is also targeted (p. 432). The study took a grounded theory approach, including interviews with principals and a questionnaire. Principals participating in the study believed that inclusion was a result of a socio-cultural movement to allow more participation of people with special needs in common settings. This movement sort of prompted schools to portray this cultural diversity within educational settings, as well (p. 433). As with most special education cases, inclusion of a student with special needs would need to be dependent upon the individual student's needs. This would include consideration of the academic needs, as well as, the social and personal needs of the student (p. 433). In support for the inclusion of students with special needs, principals emphasize the benefit of the student as the strongest argument for inclusive practices. The experience of inclusion was reported to be helpful and favorable for students with special needs (p. 434). Some of the concerns about inclusion noted by principals in the study had to do with inadequate resources and a lack of support for teachers. A few principals actually voiced concern about the possibility of negative repercussions that inclusion may have on students without special needs. Also, additional stress and a larger workload may be experienced by regular classroom teachers (p. 435). The researcher concludes that principals in the study approached the practice of inclusion responsibly because they recognize the importance of adequate resources and support to be able to implement inclusion effectively (p. 437).

The research of this study by Taylor (2005) looks at how private schools provide special education services to students. An important element of the study investigated principals' role in school change and developing inclusion within one's school. A qualitative design was implemented to determine what the school portrayed as their purpose of inclusion and the perceived culture they worked to cultivate in the school in the way they provide inclusive special education services. Also, a quantitative design was implemented in the form of a questionnaire to determine the nature and extent of special education services that are being offered and to determine whether a difference in services was found depending on the type of private school. Results of the study indicate that it is an interplay between the school's interaction with special education and the principal's leadership style that influence the type of special education services are put into practice.

Two groups of educators were sampled, administrators and special education teachers, to complete a questionnaire inquiring about their personal opinions about inclusion of students with mild disabilities. The study by Cook, Semmel, and Gerber (1999) resulted in significant differences among principals' view of inclusion and special educators' opinions. Specifically, the two groups differed on the benefit of inclusion for the students with special needs. In most cases, principals were of the opinion that the students did receive greater educational benefit from an inclusive setting, whereas, special education teachers did not feel inclusion was always the most beneficial for the student. Principals and special education teachers also disagreed on the degree to which resources should be allocated and protected for students with special needs. Special education teachers felt resources for students with special needs should be protected, whereas, principals did not agree. The authors recommend giving special educators more voice in the implementation of inclusion for it to be effective. Likewise, principals should heed more to the

opinions and suggestions of significant school personnel directly involved in implementing inclusion. The researchers recommend study beyond assessing attitudes towards inclusion and focusing on observed practices of principals leading special education programs.

This article by Crawford and Tindal (2006) addresses the debate of including students with disabilities in statewide testing, specifically in the state of Oregon. A mail-out survey, addressing both the policy and practice of statewide testing with students with special needs, was distributed to both administrators and special education teachers. Both groups demonstrated a proficient knowledge of the policies in effect for testing students with special needs.

Administrators, however, were less familiar with actually how to go about and what is involved in testing these students. As could be expected, teachers who were surveyed were more familiar with options for students, such as, alternative assessment, than principals. Principals felt more strongly that test results served as a useful means of measuring school accountability, than teachers. It is a recommendation of the authors that there be better alignment of instruction and tests. However, it is of the authors' opinion that principals' positive view of statewide testing as a means of school accountability may positively influence teachers to embrace the idea of testing for students with special needs.

This study by Praisner (2003) investigates the attitudes of principals towards inclusion of students with special needs in general education classes. A survey was completed by elementary principals specifically targeting the training, experience, personal characteristics, attitudes, and perceptions of appropriate placements for students with special needs, held by principals. Results indicate that most principals generally agree with inclusion, however, did not favor particular aspects or mandated practices of inclusion. The amount of formal training or in-service training on special education correlated with a more positive attitude towards inclusion among principals.

Most of the principals felt that a general education setting with supports for students with special needs was the most appropriate placement. However, an exception to this claim is that students with emotional disturbance or autism should most often not be in an inclusive setting. The most significant correlation to the success of inclusion for students with special needs was the positive attitudes from principals. The researcher recommends that principals be mentored in the development of or improving inclusive practices in their school. Also, preparation programs should be providing adequate coursework in special education.

This study by Sansosti, Noltemeyer, and Goss (2010) looks at perceptions of high school principals regarding Response To Intervention (RTI) implementation. A sample of principals across the United States was randomly selected and completed an online survey to assess the importance and availability of RTI-related practices and beliefs. Results indicate principals had an average knowledge of RTI, but thought it difficult to implement, more so in secondary schools than in elementary schools, mostly because of scheduling and structural factors. There is a discrepancy between the principals' perception of the importance of RTI in their schools and the actual implementation of it. Future research may look at secondary schools who are successfully implementing RTI or other evidence-based practices as a guide for other schools.

A portion of a larger research project is discussed by Schmidt and Venet (2012) in which principals' views on inclusion of schools containing grades 5 and 6 are explored. The study looks at how attitudes are related to practice. Observation of classes, questionnaires, and interviews were conducted over a six-month span. This study indicates that inclusion thrives under leadership which is "reculturing", changing the school's culture, and "transformational", in which the principal assumes a leading role in all aspects of inclusion. Future research is recommended to look at the reciprocal interaction between principals and their schools.

This book entry by Smith (2008) describes a school in which the principal has created a successful inclusive environment for students with special needs. In fact, it is noted that when one visits any classroom, you may not be able to pick out the students with special needs. The particular principal highlighted in this chapter had an advantage by having many years of special education teaching experience. Her attitude towards children with special needs was that of challenging all of them to their highest potential and not labeling them only to highlight what they could not do. The author emphasizes that for any special education program to be successful there must be a shift in attitudes and beliefs, as well as, in-classroom support. In addition, there must also be an on-going dialogue about the latest research in the form of professional development.

Zaretsky (2005) argues for the need to understand the theoretical basis behind inclusive practices in schools, particularly for administrators to understand how their understanding of special education informs why they make the placement decisions they do for children with special needs. A multi-perspective approach to special education allows the schools to more adequately meet the diverse needs of students. Special education has historically been theorized within a functionalist paradigm, or behaviorist model, as can be seen through the policy and practice of special education. It is within this paradigm, or a way of thinking, that decisions are typically made for special education students. Recently, more scholars are adopting a conceptual framework of critical theory in understanding and making decisions about special education. Proponents of more traditional views of special education claim that critical theorists expect full inclusion for all students. Traditionalists view this as only superficial access to regular education and believe it does not serve the true academic needs of the students. The author attempts to override this way of thinking by explaining the intentions of constructivists, or critical theorists,

as trying to change the way in which we have socially constructed students with special needs as limited in their degree of advancement and bound to the normal assumptions associated with having a disability. The researcher conducted a qualitative study of the issues which arise from this theoretical debate, between behavioral and constructivist. Parents of secondary students with disabilities who were in fully inclusive settings, a regular and special education teacher, principals at both the elementary and secondary level, and a special education coordinator were all included to participate in focus groups, individual conversations, and monthly committee meetings to discuss the experience of inclusion in their schools. The dialogue among the individuals highlighted the thinking, perceptions, attitudes, evaluative judgments, and practices of inclusive education. Findings of the study, particularly related to principals, indicate that an attitude shift, using a relational role to distribute resources in special education, and possessing the knowledge and skills necessary to encourage positive processes in special education were all vital to the success of inclusion. There was some resistance, however, among some administrators to embrace a change in current inclusive practices when it came to include more of the parents' voice and their recommendations for students with special needs. The author hopes that more dialogue surrounding the conflicting theoretical bases might help broaden the traditional boundaries within which we consider special education.

Current special education legislation

A review of the literature on current special education legislation provides an overview of the knowledge and skills necessary to provide appropriate services to students with special needs. The literature informs the topic on not only the laws of special education, but the diversity of exceptionalities which require a diverse set of skills and strategies with which students need to learn and be successful in school. This literature relates directly to the proposed research by

providing a standard with which to measure how principals' practices lead, or do not lead, to the overall success of special education programs in schools and, ultimately, success of the students with special needs. Current special education legislation sets the expectation of services, instruction, and leadership required for students with special needs.

Woolfolk-Hoy and Hoy (2009) discuss the laws surrounding special education and the services that are to be provided in the school for children with special needs. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) outlines specific requirements for schools to comply, with the most basic need for a free, appropriate education for all students with special needs. Specifically, schools are to place students in the least restrictive placement within the school for learning, uphold and secure the rights of both students with special needs and their parents, and tailor an individualized education program (IEP) for every child who qualifies for special education services. As an instructional leader, principals must take on the responsibility for ensuring that children with special needs are learning to their best potential through effective teaching strategies and competent teachers who engage in good teaching practices and are sensitive to student needs.

The importance of preparing principals to be leaders for students with special needs lies with the federal mandates which make special education required for eligible students. As stated by McLaughlin, Smith, and Wilkinson (2012), students identified as having a disability are protected under the legal requirement that they have the opportunity to learn and access to the same subject matter as students without disabilities (p. 365). Pazey and Cole (2012) make the point that although the federal law, the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) of 2004, requires schools to provide a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) for students with special needs, it has been persistently underfunded. This has been problematic due to a rapid

increase in students with special needs in public schools, as well as, the complexity of accommodations and modifications that these students might need (p. 2).

Another important piece of legislation affecting special education is the No Child Left Behind Act in which students with special needs are now required to meet achievement targets, just as their peers (McLaughlin, Smith, & Wilkinson, 2012, p. 364). Furthermore IDEA 2004 also requires schools to report on the students with special needs participating in the state assessment, the accommodations utilized during the assessment, and also report on the students participating in the state's alternate assessment (p. 365).

Louis and Robinson (2012), using a mixed-methods research approach, investigate how local school administrators interpret external state and district mandates and policies and how they allow them to affect their work. The authors make the assumption that it is an interplay of administrators' interpretation of mandates and policies, the contexts within which the mandates and policies are positioned, and also personal beliefs and leadership practices. The researchers gather survey data from principals and teachers in an effort to explore how interpretations of external mandates and policies are correlated to instructional leadership behaviors. The findings of the study indicate that when policies support a principal's personal values, external mandates and policies can positively impact instructional leadership practices. This is especially found in instances in which district leaders support accountability initiatives that are school-driven. The administrators in the study indicated they internalize external mandates and policies and in turn make them fit the needs of the school. On the other hand, negative attitudes of administrators towards external mandates are correlated with less effective instructional leadership.

Yell, Thomas, and Katsiyannis (2012) speak to school administrators interested in the development and implementation of special education programs. The authors emphasize the

provision of educationally appropriate programs which are legally sound and which attempt to avoid legal mistakes (p. 69). Requirements of an administrator seeking to implement and supervise special education programs include that the school administrator possess both a working knowledge of special education law and also be able to implement special education programs within the parameters of the laws (p. 69). There are various components of special education law which include federal laws, state laws, regulations, and litigation. Litigation includes hearings, state level rulings, and court cases. In addition to these sources of special education law, there are policies set forth by the United States Department of Education that guide special education (p. 69). In 1990, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in 1990 (IDEA), offered to provide states with federal funding with the condition that states provide appropriate special education services specific to the identified categories of disabilities and requiring that states remain in compliance with EAHCA. All special education programs in public schools are under the authority and requirements of these federal and state laws (p. 70). Specific to the IDEA, parents and students with disabilities are protected by certain procedural safeguards which must be kept by the school district. Under these procedural safeguards, parents can request a due process hearing in the case where there is not agreement among the parents and school district regarding a student's special education services or placement. Ultimately, due process as a procedural safeguard allows a third party hearing officer, impartial to either side, to consider the conflict, the law which applies to the situation, and determine a ruling on the issue (p. 72).

Yell et al. (2012) also list six principles specific to the legislation of IDEA. These include: “zero reject, protection in evaluation, free appropriate public education, least restrictive environment, procedural safeguards, and parental participation.” (p. 73). Also under IDEA,

students have a right to a free and appropriate public education (FAPE). A student's FAPE includes not only special education, but any related services needed to support instruction. Specific guidelines for providing a FAPE include providing these services at public expense and supervision, providing education at the preschool, elementary, and secondary level, and that services provided conform to the requirements of IDEA in the form of an individualized education program (IEP) (p. 73-74). Parental participation is ensured by the procedural safeguards set in place by IDEA throughout the special education process (p. 74). IDEA was revised in 1997 and in 2004 with the purpose of improving the effectiveness of special education. These revisions required schools to demonstrate improvement in the achievement of students with special needs (p. 77). The authors conclude that for an administrator to develop, implement, and supervise special education programs they must thoroughly understand the complexities of special education law and the various types of law and policy and how to apply them (p. 92). Of utmost importance, principals and members of the students' IEP team must understand the responsibilities and requirements of IDEA. The authors offer a final recommendation to remain current on changes in special education law and policy. This can be done by the school district providing appropriate and meaningful professional development for administrators (p. 93).

Important special education knowledge.

First and foremost, in the implementation of any special education program or services, school administrators should be knowledgeable of both the rights of students and parents and also the responsibilities school personnel have in serving students with special needs. By having a working knowledge of these responsibilities, administrators can more accurately provide students and parents with information they need to be an advocate for the student's special education needs (Pazey & Cole, 2012, p. 3).

As a special education teacher, frustration often is a result of having a lack of resources to meet the needs of students. However, a school administrator who is knowledgeable of special education law and the educational needs of these students is more inclined to support the need for special education resources. Administrators with a thorough knowledge of special education also gives way to stronger participation in making decisions regarding special education programs and services (Crockett, 2012, p. 61).

Murtadha-Watts and Stoughton (2004) address a disconnect between an administrator's role as instructional leader, and their, often, limited knowledge of learning theories and strategies effectively used with children with special needs. A discussion of cultural difference, on a wide scope, and the implications for principals' responsiveness, or lack of, to difference precedes other ideas discussed. The authors stress the importance of the principal in taking out cultural biases and leading the school to become a culturally supportive community. Critical Cultural Mirroring is a term used by the authors to reflect the ability of a school leader to speak and act across difference and bring to the faculty's attention possible biases or prejudice among them. The key point of this discussion is the implications for students who are mislabeled as having "special needs", when in fact it is a difference in cultural or learning style that has not been addressed appropriately. School leaders must take on these issues in order to provide an appropriate education for all children, including those with special needs or those from diverse backgrounds.

McLaughlin, Smith, and Wilkinson (2012) argue that one of the first important challenges of leaders in special education today is communicating with both parents and practitioners. Administrators must be able to communicate the value in the inclusion of students with special needs in standards, assessment and accountability measures, balanced with the

development of individualized decision making for determining how to best meet the needs of students. It is the responsibility of administrators to help guide practitioners in balancing the FAPE required for students under the IDEA and also meeting the requirement of holding students accountable for common standards. The authors also make the point that administrators should have the knowledge necessary to communicate to parents and practitioners the differences between the technical and the core substantive components of the student's IEP (p. 372).

Zepeda and Langenback (1999) give an overview of special programs that are under the principal's responsibility. Special education is considered one of those important programs, vital to a school and to students with special needs. The author implies the need for principals to thoroughly understand these programs in light of "their rationale, the goals and standards by which they are judged, and the contemporary issues that surround them." (p. ix). The chapter specific to special education highlights the history, current status, and contemporary issues of special education. Because of the large population of students with special needs, it is often considered a daunting task to manage and lead quality special education programs. "Responsive instructional leaders should be capable of supporting the application of appropriate interventions and making data-based decisions to promote quality and effectiveness related to identified outcomes." (Snyder, Crow, & Crow, 2012, p. 316). Another important point made by the authors is the need for administrators to be informed in the area of early learning and the education and care needed for young children with special needs and their families. Important to early intervention programs is the need for instructional services to include all disciplines and agencies necessary for serving these students (p. 317).

Implications for principals who lack knowledge in special education law.

This article, written by Boccella (2012) highlights a principal who provoked students with disabilities by calling them names and joking, unprofessionally, to colleagues about them. While ultimately the principal resigned because of negative publicity, it was only after being suspended by the school board for a few months that he lost his job. Parents and the community were irate at the lack of appropriate action taken by the school board, as the advocates strongly felt that the principal should be fired immediately. The principal's troubles began because he was caught texting derogatory messages to another administrator during a student's IEP meeting with parents and a special needs advocate. When the advocate reported the misconduct, other communications regarding other students with special needs were revealed. There were parents on both sides of the controversy, but the parents of the children with special needs were relieved that action had been taken against the principal.

Powell (2012) reports on a special education teacher in New York who lost his job immediately after trying to inform his principal that the school was in violation to the law regarding students with special needs. The principal of the school had been employing unqualified teachers and substitute teachers to lead special education classes. However, the principal placed blame on district-level administration, stating that special education funds had been cut and that the district supported the decision to staff the classes with unqualified teachers. The New York Department of Education completed a thorough investigation into the state of special education in their school systems, finding that, in fact, students with special needs were not being served according to the individualized education plan (IEP) created for them. An important implication of this story is to reflect on the reality of schools and school principals who do not adhere to the law and responsibilities to students with special needs. Without a

thorough understanding of special education, principals can not only risk their own careers, but they are failing the most vulnerable population in our schools.

There is much to be said for staying abreast of current special education legislation. Pazez and Cole (2012) state that “significant liability exists for administrators and instructional personnel who fall short of performing their duties and responsibilities with respect to students with disabilities.” (p. 2). Because of the legal liability forced upon school administrators and school districts, there exists an obvious need for administrators to keep informed on special education matters (p. 3). The authors also assert that the daily practice of socially just leadership takes care of many threats of litigation as school administrators have a heightened awareness of the rights of students and their personal responsibility to ensure appropriate provision and services for all students (p. 3). As a result of various amendments made fairly recently to special education law, an increase in parent and student complaints, appeals, and court decisions regarding students with special needs have increased (p. 7).

Current Special Education Leadership in Schools

Successful principal leadership in special education programs.

The current study seeks to identify what makes principals successful in leading special education programs in their schools. Naturally, an investigation into this specific question is warranted, though there is much, yet, to be studied. However, this aspect of the review of the literature yielded some findings of interest.

Thurlow, Quenemoen, and Lazarus (2012) report on the success that some schools, such as in the “Donohue Institute study”, have had in student achievement gains among students with special needs. The leaders of these schools make sure all students have access to challenging standards and they receive instruction with the use of effective learning strategies. An

expectation throughout all successful schools is the belief that all students be expected to learn course content (p. 11).

Wakeman et al. (2006, as cited in, Crockett, 2012) found that school administrators who possess a greater knowledge about special education, in general, are found to practice leadership behaviors such as, purposeful reflection on experiences, continuing education on the needs of specific disabilities, securing resources for effective instruction, and a greater participation in making decisions regarding special education programs and services (p. 60).

In a study by Schneider and Burton (2005), a list of perceived essential characteristics of school principals was developed by two groups of aspiring principals. One group consisted of retired military officers and the second group consisted of experienced teachers (p. 6). The characteristics provided by the two groups were categorized into three major themes: leadership, management, and pedagogic. Leadership characteristics included: creativity, “delegation and teamwork, personnel management and the ability to motivate, charisma, communicative-honest and persuasive, networking, flexibility, exemplar”. Characteristics of management included: “organizational skills, marketing skills, systems management, educational law, budgeting skills, responsive”. Pedagogic characteristics listed included: “professional credibility, educational goal setting, curriculum planning and development” (p. 7). In an analysis of the responses from each group, the researchers found little difference in their perceptions of essential skills and qualities of an effective principal. In fact, the responses were very similar. The authors make the implication that this finding is an indicator of an emergent common perception of the role of the school principal. This new perception of today’s school principal is one which values leadership over management and includes pedagogical capabilities. The researchers argue that it is

important to clearly define the principal role as it will better focus training needs of aspiring principals and help in developing appropriate training programs (p. 9).

Crum, Sherman, and Myran (2010) designed an inductive exploratory study in an attempt to gain insight into the ways school principals successfully facilitate high student achievement. In this study, data were collected as principals engaged in dialogue about actual leadership practices in which they engaged. Categories of themes which emerged through principal interviews were as follows: “leadership with data; honesty and relationships; fostering ownership and collaboration; recognizing and developing leadership and instructional awareness and involvement.” (p. 48). The identification of fundamental practices of successful principals represent how principals are attaining high levels of students achievement, in spite of, the high stakes accountability era we find ourselves in today.

Guzman (1997) describes and analyzes the management and leadership behaviors six elementary school principals who have established successful programs, including students with special needs in the general education classroom (p. 439). Roach (1994, as cited in Guzman, 1997) claims that it is the concept of site-based management which facilitates the opportunity for the creation of inclusive programs. Successful inclusive programs begin with adequate planning, and, they are maintained by encouraging strong, clear communication throughout the process. The author also notes that it is the school principal who is the key to creating successful inclusive programs (p. 439). The principal’s attitude towards students with special needs and special education has a strong influence on how the rest of the school perceives them (p. 440). The results of Guzman’s (1997) study identified several common factors among the principals analyzed. First of all, the principals were sure to establish a coordination of communication in which school faculty could share opinions about current policy and practice of special education

and were allowed to offer recommendations for improvement or change. Another important factor found among the principals was the active involvement they played in the development of IEP's for students. The principals took initiative to be personally engaged with parents of students with special needs. Principals in the study also made it a collaborative effort to build the school's philosophy of inclusion and to establish policies which addressed discipline of students with special needs. Professional development topics related to inclusion were a top priority for these principals, personally. Each of the six principals was skilled in different forms of collecting data and the interpretation of the data. They were also skilled in each step of the process of problem solving (p. 446-447). It is recommended that the information gained from successful principals' implementation of inclusive programs be used to guide those principals who have been less successful at implementing inclusive programs. The author also recommends further inquiry among both the areas of special education and educational leadership on the topic of inclusive schools (p. 448).

Ingram (1997) addresses principals of schools with moderately and severely disabled students and contrasts the degree to which they exhibit transformational versus transactional leadership behavior (p. 411). It is the leadership of the principal that has a strong influence on motivating teachers of inclusive classrooms to succeed (p. 411). Principals who operate within a transactional leadership style use a variety of extrinsic rewards for motivating subordinates. Yukl (1989, as cited in Ingram, 1997) describes transformational leadership as "the process of influencing major changes in the attitudes and assumptions of organizational members and building commitment for the organization's mission, objectives, and strategies" (p. 413). Ingram (1997) argues that within schools with successful inclusive programs of students with moderate and severe special needs, principals operate as more of a transformational leader than

transactional (p. 420). The degree to which a school can change to meet the challenge of providing equal educational opportunities to all students depends on leadership of the principal and how effective she is in motivating teachers to accept inclusive programs. The author makes the assumption that transformational leadership behaviors bring about more successful results than transactional leadership (p. 423). The author concludes, stating that schools which take on inclusive programs need a principal with the ability to “identify and articulate a philosophy, a vision, that reflects the belief that all children can learn, that all children have the right to be educated with their peers in age-appropriate regular education classrooms” (p. 423). It is also important that principals communicate to the faculty the importance of taking responsibility for meeting the needs of all students in the school (p. 423).

Snyder, Crowe, and Crow (2012) investigate responsive instructional leadership within the realm of early intervention. The researchers describe responsive instructional leadership as the behaviors which improve the quality and effectiveness of instruction and, also, a mechanism for determining the achievement of outcomes for students in early intervention and those within an early childhood special education program (p. 315). Being informed about the specific aspects of early intervention, early learning, and the education and care for students and families within these programs is essential for any school leader in which early childhood special education programs exist (p. 317). Models of instructional leadership have, traditionally, kept a focus on curriculum and instruction as the principal’s lead role (p. 318). However, a transformational leadership model focuses on “fostering capacity development and higher levels of personal commitment to organizational goals on the part of leaders’ colleagues” (Leithwood, 2005, as cited in Snyder et al., 2012, p. 318). The researchers distinguish between instructional leadership and transformational leadership, in that, instructional leadership is focused on professional

development, whereas, transformational leadership addresses school improvement efforts using a bottom-up approach (p. 320).

Sugai, O’Keefe, Horner, and Lewis (2012) describe school-wide positive behavior support (SWPBS) as a “framework or approach for enhancing the adoption and implementation of the organizational infrastructure that enables durable and accurate implementation of effective behavior and classroom management practices.” (p. 304). While the leadership team is utilized in structuring a SWPBS program, the school principal is key to maintaining a successful program. Principals must be active in the school program, models of the program, and be effective school managers as a whole (p. 306). Instructional school leaders should have a thorough understanding of influences on student achievement, including: effective instruction, strong academic engagement, and a provision for safety and respect within classrooms and across the school culture. A school principal may use indicators, such as, student performance to measure the effectiveness of the SWPBS program. Principals should also be proactive and build upon successes when addressing potential problems when implementing the program. Finally, the researchers recommend that principals should make an effort to recognize effective teachers and student benefits when implementing a SWPBS program (p. 312).

Leadership style and its effectiveness in implementing special education programs.

Boscardin (2004) argues that both changing legislation to include the principals’ role in school reform and addressing issues of leadership and special education are necessary in the implementation of special education programs in schools. She states the essential mission of school principals is improving learning outcomes for all students and to support teachers in the improvement of instruction. The author asserts that it is by the connection of actual school practice to educational research this mission can be accomplished. This requires appropriate

training and professional development in special education practices and issues. There is a recommendation for principals to employ more of a responsive leadership model, as opposed to the common managerial leadership. In this way, principals are well-informed on special education issues, as well as, instructional practices, and can provide school faculty with the information needed to implement appropriate special education practices.

A publication by the B.C. School Superintendents' Association (2002) addresses the big idea that a principal's leadership and commitment are essential to the successful implementation of quality educational programs for students with special needs. The authors hold the view that principals must facilitate the practice of inclusion in the school. This includes leadership from the principal, such as, creating a system of support for students with special needs in an environment in which they are accepted by faculty and students. Principals should also assist parents in understanding the specific special needs of their child. The authors base these leadership practices on what they believe are five essential factors of effective leadership. These include: shared vision, modeling the way, facilitating others' action, meet challenges, and encouragement. Principals must be skilled in using appropriate strategies for the support of the faculty and staff, and, to wisely allocate resources for students with special needs. Finally, the authors emphasize it is the responsibility of the principal to create a positive environment for students with special needs, as well as, the teachers and staff who serve them.

The article by Bakken and Smith (2011) addresses the need for school administrators to be prepared to work with diverse students. Specifically, this entails displaying a socially competent attitude towards diversity in the school. Because principals, as the school leaders, establish a vision and set the tone for school climate, it is important they understand and respond to student needs, as well as, the needs of their parents. The authors recommend leaders follow

seven practices in order to facilitate a learning environment for all students. These include: establishing a school vision, implementing the vision through a school improvement plan, be consciously selective in the recruitment and evaluation of teachers who are culturally responsive in their teaching practices, develop and provide appropriate curriculum, strategies, and resources for parents and students with special needs, keep a positive line of communication with parents and the community, be supportive of professional learning communities and initiate the creation of them in the school, and be proactive in setting up culturally responsive systems for students with special needs. The authors recommend the need for school administrators and directors of special education to change the way they lead in response to the growing changes in our school populations.

This study by Cookson and Smith (2011) investigates principals who have implemented special education programs in private Christian schools, grades preschool through twelfth. A qualitative design using interviews was carried out. The principals in the study indicated taking ownership and having a working philosophy of special education were essential to implementing a program. They also felt it important to involve teachers from the beginning of implementation so they might also have ownership and accept the special education program. Ultimately, concerns of all stakeholders, including teachers, parents, students, and the community were heard in order to make the program successful. These principals also felt it was their Christian duty to include children with special needs in their schools and provide appropriate services for them. While there was some opposition from teachers and students, the principals' willingness to see the program through and be the leader made the programs successful.

DiPaola, Tschannen-Moran, and Walther-Thomas (2004) hold the belief that administrative leadership is the driving force behind positive, cooperative attitudes among

teachers implementing inclusion. They discuss five key elements of effective leadership of principals. These include promoting an inclusive culture within the school, providing instructional leadership for the school, modeling a collaborative leadership style, managing and administering organizational processes effectively, and building and maintaining positive relationships with teachers, families, and those in the community. The article also addresses the poor preparedness of principals in leading special education programs in their schools. This stems from a lack of special education coursework, inadequate knowledge, and few skills to work with children with special needs. However, the authors make the point that those principals newer to the profession may have more of an advantage because of previous teaching experience and advanced preparation in light of the current No Child Left Behind, and similar legislation. In fact, there has been a concerted effort to change principal preparation programs to place a much higher emphasis on special education and even recruit former special education teachers for these administrative roles. Further research is suggested to explore the nature of the principal's role, improve the preparation programs or process, and also explore alternative school leadership models.

The role of the administrator in implementing successful inclusion within one's school, in Canada, is explored in this study by Irvine, Lupart, Loreman, and McGhie-Richmond (2010). Mixed methods were used, incorporating quantitative survey data, looking at how inclusion occurs in the schools studied, as well as, a qualitative insight into principals' experience with inclusion by way of interviews, using a constructivist paradigm. The principals in this study had positive experiences. Emerging themes positively relating to effective inclusive practices include: giving support and motivating leadership to the school in which the administrator takes both ownership and responsibility; embracing collaboration and considering the school as a

team; valuing the diversity of all students; and, regular parental involvement and open communication. Future research may look at other school systems' success of inclusion as a point of comparison with the current study.

The article by Johnson and Uline (2005) examines the six standards of school administrators set forth by the Interstate School Leadership Licensure Consortium: vision of learning; culture of teaching and learning; management of learning; relationships with the broader community; integrity, fairness, and ethics in learning; and political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context for learning, narrowing in on the specific knowledge, dispositions, and performances of leaders in schools which consistently are closing achievement gaps. The researchers found that the school leaders participating in the study were successful at closing the achievement gap when they engaged in several specific practices. These include disputing the perceived limitations of students with special needs, daily instructional leadership practices with school faculty, enhancing instructional capacity school-wide, maintaining an environment that welcomes parents and the community involvement in the school, constantly seeking best interest of all students, and being diligent in attaining educational equity and excellence for all students in the school.

Kozleski and Huber (2012) make a case for systemic, culturally responsive leadership, which empowers schools to respond to the evolving needs of students. A principal who can envision the school as a complex system of diverse relationships is best apt to change and respond as needed. According to the authors' research, leaders are often relying on the individual expertise of teachers to handle special education in their schools, rather than taking responsibility for handling the issues, allocating resources, and providing professional development for their staff.

This study by May and Supovitz (2010) looks at instructional leadership practices among principals. As an indicator of instructional leadership, the study explores the efforts of principals to improve instruction. It takes the current research on simply the need for instructional leadership further to examine what it actually looks like. The researchers studied principal web logs of daily instructional leadership activities and teacher surveys were used to measure how a principal targets improved instruction as part of their instructional leadership. Research questions addressed were focused on finding the amount of time principals spent on efforts to improve instruction, the breadth and frequency of principals' interactions with teachers' instructional practices, and the extent to which the amount of time spent on instructional leadership behaviors is related to change in instructional practices of teachers. Results of the study indicate an average of 3-5 hours per week was spent, by principals, on instructional leadership activities and it was concluded that time spent by principals predicts an increase in instructional changes among teachers. The authors conclude that principals must be able to balance the broad and targeted instructional leadership activities in order to have a meaningful impact on improving instructional practices in their schools.

Precey (2011) defines leadership as a strategic effort, with a sense of moral purpose and values, and having a long-term vision of what the school aspires to be in the future. The author goes further to describe inclusive leadership as a form of both transformational and transformative leadership. Within this type of leadership, a principal considers the collective talent among faculty to maximize the efforts within the school. Precey (2011) illustrates principal leadership qualities in the form of a pyramid, in which knowledge, values, and skills are intertwined with competencies, or behaviors, which come from one's values related to inclusive practices. The author also identifies three behaviors which are important for inclusive leaders.

These include: model inclusive behavior, monitor teaching and learning within inclusive settings, and engage in dialogue about strategies used in teaching and learning.

This study by Rafoth and Foriska (2006) takes a look at the impact administrators have on school-based problem-solving teams and proposes a model for future investigation. The researchers define administrative support as that which includes scheduling time for instructional teams to meet, facilitating inservice training, compensation for after school hours spent on school projects, providing credit which satisfies district service requirements, and enabling adequate clerical support for tasks, such as, scheduling and record-keeping. A model of Administrator Impact of Collaborative Problem-solving Teams is proposed by the researchers in which the function of instructional teams and student outcomes are impacted by the leadership characteristics of the principal along with the administrative support and school characteristics. The study yielded a need for future inquiry into administrator characteristics and level of participation. Also, the importance of administrator support, shared instructional leadership, and identification of variables leading to an interactive model of influence between principals and teachers are also recommended for future investigation.

This study by Steinke (2010) seeks to discover the beliefs and effective practices of school leaders when serving students with disabilities in their schools. The researchers look at the relationship between prior education, teaching and leadership experience and the school leader's special education practices. The researcher uses a qualitative grounded theory approach, interviewing a group of current school leaders. Results of the study indicate that effective school leaders leading special education programs have a student-focused philosophy, use their own teaching or leadership experience as their most valuable source of knowledge, seek out school staff who set high expectations for students with special needs and rely on specialized personnel

as a valued resource for those students. Because of the growing need for instructional leaders in today's schools and the growth of the population of students with special needs, it is imperative that school leaders are prepared to take on this challenge. It is recommended that research be conducted to look at teachers' beliefs and perceptions regarding school leader practices in special education, interviewing principals new to school administration, and doing a comparison of the revised CEC professional standards for administrators with the observed effectiveness of school principals.

Effective Professional Development Programs for Principals Leading Special Education Programs in their Schools

A framework was created by Capper, Theoharis, and Sebastian (2006) for conceptualizing the preparation of school leaders for social justice, based upon common themes in the current literature. The framework can be used as a guide for those interested in developing a course or program which prepares school leaders to lead their schools in a socially just way, including students with special needs. The framework consists of both a horizontal dimension, which includes what school leaders must believe, know, and do to lead socially just schools (critical consciousness, knowledge, and skills) and a vertical dimension, which includes three components of a preparation program necessary to teach students about critical consciousness, knowledge, and skills related to social justice (curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment). Within the framework the horizontal and vertical dimensions all intersect with each other. The authors recommend using the framework for the purpose of assessing current principal preparation programs, as well as, for leaders to assess how they measure up to providing a sense of emotional safety for their students. Future research is suggested to assess how current leadership

preparation programs, including the content, delivery, and outcomes, are aimed toward social justice for all students.

Corcoran, Schwartz, and Weinstein (2009) examine the effectiveness of a school system's attempt to develop its own school leaders via the creation of the New York City Leadership Academy in response to a shortage of principals in the system. There are three components to the Leadership Academy for pre-service principal training, including: a summer intensive work on simulated school projects, the residency or 10-month apprenticeship with an experienced principals, and the planning summer which is a transition into a new school leadership position. A comparison of Leadership Academy graduates' student outcomes with traditionally prepared principals' student outcomes is reported in this study. Outcomes reflect a steady growth, or stabilization in student performance for program graduate administrators. Although there were not significant differences in student performance between the comparison groups, it is noted that the reason may be that the program graduate administrators served schools in which there was already low, declining student achievement. Further investigation into types of particular student groups served best under program graduate administration, as well as, a follow-up with the research participants in this study are recommended.

Crockett (2002) discusses the intersection of special education and leadership. There is a lack of special education training required in principal preparation programs, although they are ultimately responsible for the education of all students. A conceptual framework for special education leadership is presented in which addressing issues of ethics, individuality, equity, effectiveness, and partnerships, is linked to standards for educational leadership, known as the Star Model. In the development of this model, the author led focus groups of school administrators which focused on the tasks related to special education in which they were

responsible. Legal imperatives was the most cited by administrators as their responsibility, followed by programmatic management, communicating with parents and professionals about special education issues, and individual consideration of students. The author concludes that the Star Model is effective in organizing a curriculum for aspiring school administrators who will be leading special education programs in their schools. Future research is suggested by using the Star Model leadership framework to guide the interface of special education and educational leadership.

Garrison-Wade, Sobel, and Fulmer (2007) survey students from both a special education preparation program and administration preparation program to determine improvement and training needs for preparing administrators to lead special education programs in their schools. Focus groups were also conducted to determine how well graduates feel they are prepared to lead inclusive school practices and what they feel are the most crucial skills administrators need to have for inclusive leadership. Important results indicate a lack of understanding of special education legal issues, ability to provide constructive feedback to special education teachers, and an ability to provide options or solutions in resource management for special educators. Special educators indicated that administrators should know special education law and disabilities, be skilled in creating inclusive environments, and display sincere appreciation and support for the task of special educators. Administrators indicated a need for knowledge of special education law, strategies for organizing general and special educators, concrete strategies and resources for diverse learners, and managing discipline with special education students.

Four components of a comprehensive training program to enable principals to lead special education in their buildings are proposed and discussed by Goor and Schwenn (1997). The components include essential beliefs, knowledge, skills, and reflective behaviors. Essential

beliefs include adopting more accepting and inclusive paradigms in which one views all students. Knowledge of special education and knowing where to find personnel or resources for special education issues is crucial. The principal must cultivate reflective practices to be effective in leading special education. This includes thoughtfully reviewing decisions made, acknowledging better solutions, changing decisions, and incorporating new ways of responding when needed. Training for principals must be considerate to both preservice and inservice principal needs and be activity oriented and case based.

This article by LaPointe, Meyerson, and Darling-Hammond (2006) presents some of the initial results of a study of effective school leadership programs. A sampling of reputable pre- and in-service leader preparation programs were selected for the study to represent a variety of approaches to program design, policy context, and nature of collaboration between the university and school district. Surveys were completed by program graduates, principals, and teachers of principals who were program graduates. Interviews were also conducted with program graduates, faculty and staff of the programs, and school district staff who supervise the principals. Also, observations of the programs and schools led by principals who are program graduates were used in the study. When looking at the principals' prior teaching experience, principals studied were more likely to have been former special education teachers. Characteristics of the exemplary preparation programs include collaborative relationships with institutions for a comprehensive, integrated preparation, robust internships related to coursework, using cohorts as a means for developing teamwork and distributed leadership, and an intense focus on instructional leadership. Further investigation should look into whether principals are being prepared to be both instructional leaders and building managers. Also, it may be of interest to look into the

preparation of assistant principals as they most often must deal with discipline issues from the get go.

This study by O’Gorman (2010) proposes a 4-ply model for professional learning on the topic of inclusion in which principals give input into what they perceive to be the most beneficial in enhancing teachers’ expertise on inclusion. System supports, tertiary level input, school development, and teacher self-enhancement are all layers comprising the model. Research is reported from a larger-scale study and specifically focuses on how best to organize professional learning programs on inclusion for those already in their career, post-graduate. A mixed-methods approach, including a survey, focus groups, and interviews provided information from teachers and principals indicating a preference for networking with other teachers, collegial discussions found in a college or university program, and practical experience with special education support services.

A module is presented by Price, Carr-Lambert, Harsh, and Chapman (2010) to critique the preparation programs for school leaders in rural communities. Rural school superintendents and secondary school leaders are interviewed and provide insight into current practice. The school leaders indicate frustrations with the way in which legislation is forced and has a negative impact on students with special needs, as well as, the school as a whole, in terms of adequate yearly progress. The authors go on to cite Milstein (1993) and the main concepts for building meaningful, field-based preparation programs for administrators, including: individuals and groups becoming actively involved, open discussions for changing all aspects of existing programs, and providing students with a substantial amount of time for the real work experience. Problem-based Learning is a strategy suggested to be included in preparation programs for administrators in which they have opportunities to apply collaborative decision-making skills

necessary for distributive leadership. Rural leadership focuses on student and school success within a community and culture.

Honig (2012) “central offices move away from occasional professional development for principals to prioritizing ongoing, intensive, job-embedded support to school principals to help them improve classroom instruction-roles for principals sometimes called ‘instructional leadership.’” (p. 734). “Research on educational leadership has underscored the importance of principals operating as instructional leaders, the value of intensive job-embedded professional development to help them build their capacity for such work, and support from central offices as integral to the process.” (Honig, 2012, p. 735).

Conclusion

A comprehensive review of the literature on the current leadership structure of special education in schools provides a look into how principals are currently handling special education within their own schools. This literature provides the context within which the study takes place. The review of literature within this topic yielded several related themes including:

- The Role of Principal as Instructional Leader
- Historical Influences on Administration of Special Education
- Current Role of Principals in Special Education
- Preparation of Principals for Leading Special Education Programs
- Self-perceived Confidence of Administrators to Lead Instructional Programs Both in General and in Leading Special Education Programs
- Principal Attitudes Towards Inclusion
- Current Special Education Legislation
- Important Special Education Knowledge

- Implications for Principals who Lack Knowledge in Special Education Law
- Current Special Education Leadership in Schools
- Successful Principal Leadership in Special Education Programs
- Leadership Style and its Effectiveness in Implementing Special Education Programs

Much of the literature found within the scope of principals leading special education programs has a focus on topics, such as, the role of the principal, pre service preparation programs, and leadership styles effective in leading special education. Specifically relating to the role of the principal, researchers have found a shift in the responsibilities of principals from, merely, being building managers to actively engaging in instructional leadership in their school. Another aspect of principals' roles in special education is how they negotiate their leadership with special education teachers and directors of special education. The literature suggests a call for more site-based leadership in special education by the principal.

The literature has also shed light on pre-service principal preparation programs and the lack of special education training within them. In the research, there has been a concerted effort to assess the level of special education knowledge among administrators. The push for this emphasis on special education leadership comes with the new responsibilities on principals to be instructional leaders in their schools for all students. Many preparation programs are being revamped in higher education nationwide; however, for current principals there is a need to bring them up on current issues of special education.

The leadership style of principals has also been researched to a large extent, revealing specific qualities in principals who are successful at leading special education programs in schools. A common thread found among effective qualities of principals is the ability to model a

positive attitude towards special education and children with special needs, which spreads throughout the school. The ability for a principal to take charge of the special education program is often associated with prior experience with special education, however, the leadership style of the principal is the key factor in determining the success of the program.

A review of the literature reveals a need for further research into a theoretical or conceptual framework for developing an effective professional development program for the purpose of educating and training practicing principals to lead special education programs within their schools. Specifically, what content, elements, and delivery methods are needed in meeting the current needs of principals. There is a theoretical split in the literature in the way in which one approaches special education: a behavioral model versus critical theory. The way in which special education is approached is important, as the administrator portrays his or her own attitudes onto the school, setting the tone towards special education. A behavioralist will tend to favor more exclusion of students with special needs, focusing on the disabilities, rather than the abilities of these students. A critical theorist will hold a more positive view of students, including them in the general population and build upon their strengths, rather than let the disability take precedence. Therefore, it is important for one to be theoretically grounded in the knowledge of special education from a perspective which seeks to enhance the learning and instruction of students with special needs.

Furthermore, there is a need for possibly doing a case study on principals who are successfully leading special education programs, to be able to extract the characteristics that make them successful. Another related topic of interest not addressed adequately in the literature is the capacity for principals to conduct observations of special education teachers with the ability to provide quality feedback for the improvement of their instruction with children of

special needs. While it is often the responsibility of the principal to evaluate teachers, including, special education teachers regularly, the ability of principals to effectively do this has not been investigated. This is suggested also by Wakeman, Browder, Flowers, and Ahlgrim-Dezell (2006, as cited in, Crockett, 2012): “more research is needed to demonstrate the effect of principals who use research-based leadership practices and who encourage teachers to use evidence-based instructional practices, on the achievement of special education students.” (p. 62).

Research suggests a lack of preparedness of principals to take on special education programs and issues in their schools, which has many negative instructional, as well as, legal implications. While there is a focus on restructuring higher education programs to incorporate special education within the principal preparation curriculum, the research also reveals a need for professional development on special education with current principals. The rationale for a stronger knowledge of special education among administrators is the fairly recent accountability legislation which is forcing principals to now be instructional leaders in their schools, rather than simply building managers.

The topic identified for the current study is “how principals engage in the process of leading special education programs in their schools”. Specifically, the research questions ask:

1. What are the leadership practices and approaches of principals who are recognized by their peers and teachers as being strong in leading special education programs in their school?
2. To what degree are effective principals involved in special education decisions, activities, and instruction?
3. How much time does the effective principal spend on special education matters?

4. How proactive are effective principals in setting up appropriate special education programs for their students?

The literature review provides the need within the areas of special education and educational leadership to address this inquiry. A review of the literature on the principal role as instructional leader serves to set the stage for the importance of the current research. Including literature on the preparation of principals, confidence to lead special education programs, and principal attitudes, all help to provide an in-depth discussion of the complexities of the principal's role as instructional leader. This literature points to some of the reasons why 1) the research study is important and timely and 2) principals engage in the process of leading special education programs the way they do. The current research builds upon the research reviewed on what makes principals effective at leading special education programs and reconciles the findings currently in the literature with findings from the research study to develop a comprehensive conceptual framework to inform leadership practices.

CHAPTER III
METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Purpose of Study

The purpose of the study was fourfold: 1) to determine if discrepancies in perceptions exist between study principals and special education teachers as to what makes for ‘effective special education leadership’ by a principal; 2) If so, what might these discrepancies be?; 3) If not, what are the common themes/perceptions?; 4) to provide a description of what effective leadership among principals leading special education programs might look like.

The researcher’s intention is that this research be accessible and helpful to administrators seeking to be better, stronger instructional leaders for all of their students. Secondary, it is the intention that the research will ultimately improve the quality of education for students with special needs, by strengthening the leadership behind their programs. The researcher fulfilled the research purpose of this study by addressing the specific research questions:

1. What are the leadership practices and approaches of principals who are recognized by their peers and teachers as being strong in leading special education programs in their school?
2. To what degree are effective principals involved in special education decisions, activities, and instruction?
3. How much time does the effective principal spend on special education matters?

4. How proactive are effective principals in setting up appropriate special education programs for their students?

The research describes a qualitative study of the leadership practices of elementary school principals, who have developed successful special education programs, within schools in the southeast. The overall aim in the study was to explore successful leadership practices contributing to the development of school-based programs for students with special needs.

Purpose of Chapter

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a detailed description of the research design and research methods that have been chosen to address the specific purpose of the study. In addition, a rationale for and description of how the chosen design and research methods addresses the research question is explained. This chapter is a logical extension of the first two chapters of the dissertation, as it specifies how the researcher addressed the problem found in the current literature regarding principals leading special education programs.

Rationale for Research Methods and Strategy Choices

The study lent itself to a qualitative methodology. The research topic of exploring the way in which principals engage in leading special education programs in their schools and the related research questions called for a qualitative research design. Qualitative research was appropriate because the researcher explored the, above, stated topic, using an inductive process, without any particular theory base yet found in the literature. Morse (1991, as cited in, Creswell, 2003) outlines the need for qualitative methods in instances where concepts or phenomena have been inadequately researched, but need to be understood. Also, when it is a new topic or there does not yet exist a theory to explain or describe phenomena, qualitative methods are appropriate (p. 22).

Creswell (2003) states that qualitative research often uses constructivist perspectives when making knowledge claims. This allows socially-constructed meanings of experiences to inform the development of theory or themes. Qualitative strategies for research include ethnographies, narratives, case studies, phenomenologies, and grounded theory studies. The nature of qualitative research is open-ended and emergent, as themes are developed from data (p. 18). Rossman and Rallis (1998, as cited in Creswell, 2003) further describe the emergent characteristic of qualitative research by emphasizing how research questions may evolve during the data collection process and how the actual process of data collection may change all together as the study progresses. The research occurs in a natural setting where the researcher can be involved and interact with the participants. Another description of the nature of qualitative research is that it is interpretive. The researcher must interpret the data both personally and theoretically (p. 181).

Furthermore, qualitative research seeks to “explore, interpret, or understand the social context”. Because qualitative research is context-specific, participants are, typically, purposefully selected depending on the degree to which the participants are able to address the research questions for the study. Data are collected, in a qualitative study, by such means as observation, interviewing, and document analysis. Once data collection is underway, the researcher can begin to form hypotheses which are modified as on-going data collection and analysis takes place. The data and findings, or conclusions, are then reported in a narrative form. (Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtler, 2006, p. 264).

Because the ultimate purpose of the study was to determine if discrepancies in perceptions exist between study principals and special education teachers as to what makes for ‘effective special education leadership’ by a principal, to identify discrepancies, common

themes/perceptions, and, to provide a description of what effective leadership among principals leading special education programs might look like, it required an exploratory method. The researcher sought to understand how principals lead special education programs, successfully. Furthermore, because there has been little previous research on the topic and there has not been a theory or conceptual framework developed within the research, an inductive process for gathering data is warranted. Qualitative methodology fits the purpose and intent of the research study.

Qualitative Research Design Used in Study

The research topic of exploring the way in which principals engage in leading special education programs in their schools and the related research questions call for a qualitative research design. Qualitative research is appropriate because I am exploring the, above, stated topic, using an inductive process, without any particular theory base yet found in the literature. Because I am seeking to use the data collected to construct a conceptual framework for effective practices for principals leading special education programs, a grounded theory approach is appropriate. Grounded theory requires a continual review of the data that are collected so that a theory, or theoretical framework, can be constructed which is grounded in the data. This type of design fits well with the overall purpose of my research. Data were collected through the use of semi-structured interviews with elementary principals and special education teachers.

Grounded theory is described by Charmaz (2010) as having a focus on the creation of conceptual frameworks through means of inductive analysis of data. Conceptual categories emerge out of the data collected, making evident they are grounded in the data. Grounded theory encompasses qualities, such as, analysis, emergent categories, and focused and sequential collection of data. Grounded theory is unique in that it the researcher is engaged in data analysis

at the same time as data are collected, so that it informs future data collection (p. 187-188). To specify, grounded theory results in a general theory to explain a process, phenomenon, or interaction which is grounded in data from the study participants (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998, as cited in, Creswell, 2003, p. 14).

Glesne (2011) describes grounded theory as a way to develop theory grounded in data. Making connections between conceptual categories is the purpose of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2002, as cited in, Glesne, 2011). Procedures for grounded theory data collection and analysis include a continual sampling of data, coding the data, categorizing the coded data, and comparing the data. Engaging in these procedures allows the researcher to develop theory or concepts about particular phenomena. Creswell (2003) also notes a key feature of grounded theory, which is constant comparison of the data (p. 14). “In very simplified terms, the grounded theorist collects data (through interviews and observations) on a topic, analyzes that data for conceptual categories, links the categories into a tentative theory, and then collects more data to see how the theory fits.” (Glesne, 2011, p. 21).

The point of grounded theory research is to develop a theory, or conceptual framework, about a particular phenomenon. This theory is developed inductively as data are collected and reviewed, continually, over a period of time. Ultimately, the theory is “grounded in the data”. The use of such theories is for specific, practical purposes within the field of study (Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtler, 2006, p. 271). Charmaz (2006) refers to the theory resulting from a grounded theory study as an interpretive theory. Rather than the theory explaining a phenomenon, an interpretive theory provides an understanding. Interpretive theory “assumes emergent, multiple realities; indeterminacy; facts and values as linked; truth as provisional; and social life as processual.” (p. 126).

Data Collection and Analysis

Data Collection

Data were collected by conducting semi-structured principal interviews, as well as, interviews with special education teachers. Interviews serve as an important method of data collection in a qualitative study. Verbal, or qualitative, data were used in the study as the researcher sought to understand ways in which principals lead special education programs.

Glesne (2011) defines an interview, within the context of research, as being between two or more people, in which the researcher questions the respondent within a particular context relevant to the researcher's study purpose. There are three different types of interviews used for the purpose of research, structured, semi-structured, and unstructured, or conversational, interviews. Structured interviews require a list of questions to be established prior to conducting the interview and do not change throughout the interview. Semi-structured interviews employ a pre-established list of questions; however, there is flexibility in being able to ask new questions that may emerge during the interview and changing questions during the interview. An unstructured interview does not have a pre-determined set of questions, but the researcher uses the research focus to facilitate dialogue about the topic, from which questions may emerge (p. 102). Qualitative interviewing is an important element of grounded theory methods in that it embraces the "open-ended yet directed, shaped yet emergent, and paced yet unrestricted" characteristics (Charmaz, 2006, p. 28).

The current study embraced a semi-structured interview approach in which the researcher asked questions developed within an interview protocol, but was also able to allow for other questions to arise from the interviewee responses. Interview questions were developed based upon the research question and topic of which the study inquired. Consideration was also given

to the depth in which the interview questions allowed for the interviewee to be reflective and bring forth rich data (Charmaz, 2006, p. 33).

Glesne (2011) further describes semi-structured interviewing as being more of an orderly process that can be directed based on the researcher's intentions (p. 103). As recommended by Glesne (2011), a recording device, such as an audio-tape recorder will be used to document the interview, so that attention may be focused on listening and responding to the interviewee (p. 115). It was important to keep a file for each individual interview, with notes documenting the questions discussed, which questions to address further, identifying information on the interviewee, as well as, any unique circumstances that may have played a factor in the interview (p. 117).

Interviews were conducted with seven school principals of elementary schools and 4 special education teachers. A semi-structured interview schedule of questions was used as a guide, however, participants were also encouraged to elaborate and share related information outside of the structured questions. The interview questions included were related to the overall research question, how principals lead special education programs. The interview protocol was comprised of questions intended to gain a better understanding of the research topic. Just as research questions guide the study, the interview protocol should serve as a guide for the interview (Maxwell, 1996, as cited in, Glesne, 2011, p. 104). Creswell (2003) recommends using an interview protocol which structurally includes: “ a heading, instructions to the interviewer (opening statements), the key research questions, probes to follow key questions, transition messages for the interviewer, space for recording the interviewer's comments, and the space in which the researcher records reflective notes.” (p. 190). In addition, Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtle (2006) recommend including a brief script to explain the study purpose, as well as, a

record of the interviewee's background information (p. 121). In a grounded theory study, developing open-ended questions should comprise the initial interview protocol, allowing room to refine and focus questions throughout the interview. Charmaz (2006) is of the opinion that beginning with open-ended questions will give way for unanticipated responses and dialogue (p. 26). Examples of interview questions might include the following:

1. To what extent do students with special needs receive the instruction and support they need in your school?
2. What current special education programs exist in your school?
3. How do you provide leadership for the special education students in your school?

Demographic questions were also included in the interview. Prior to conducting interviews for the study, two pilot interviews were conducted, as well as, discussions with principals not participating in the study. The pilot interviews served to help provide validity to the interview protocol, as well as, provide an opportunity to practice conducting an interview. It was important for the researcher to conduct individual interviews, as opposed to group. By conducting individual interviews, it was more likely to produce honest and open responses. During the interview process, it was important for the researcher to pay particular attention to the verbal language and body language used by the principals as it also is a reflection of their attitudes towards special education.

The reliability and validity of the interview questions were also considered. Kvale and Brinkman (2009) refers to reliability as consistency (p. 245). Also, they refer to validity in interviewing as the quality of interviewing which includes "careful questioning to the meaning of what is said and a continual checking of the information obtained as a validation" (p. 249).

Prior to data analysis, data were collected by audio recording interviews with principals. The data were preserved prior to analysis by organizing it by participant and keeping each set of participant data in its own secure file. Glesne (2011) encourages researchers to heed to the anonymity and confidentiality that participants are expecting. Confidentiality of participant responses was ensured throughout the research process and after.

Data Analysis

Analysis, according to Creswell (2003) “is an ongoing process involving continual reflection about the data, asking analytic questions, and writing memos through the study” (p. 190). The unit of analysis for the current study was school principals. The justification for using school principals as the unit of analysis is because of the research topic and questions specified. The study sought to find what principals do to make special education programs successful in their schools. In grounded theory studies, analyzing data consists of “constant comparison” where each bit of datum is compared with other data and similarities and differences can be identified (Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtler, 2006, p. 272).

The data were analyzed continually throughout the research process, as is typical of qualitative studies, but also by using the coding process to identify themes which resonate with current practices of principals. The grounded theory process, as outlined by Charmaz (2006), indicates that after an initial data coding of the data collected, initial memos give rise to tentative themes or categories. The continual process of analyzing and refining data helps not only to narrow the focus, but also to further validate the claims to be made within the theoretical framework. Glesne (2011) cautions to also be aware of that which was not explicitly communicated within the interview. The researcher considered this during the research process.

Data were analyzed throughout the study, as is the nature of a qualitative grounded theory study. “Data analysis involves organizing what you have seen, heard, and read so that you can figure out what you have learned and made sense of what you have experienced.” (Glesne, 2011, p. 184). It is important to organize the data and prepare it for analysis. This begins with actually reading through the data as a whole. In the case of the current research, preparing the data included transcribing the interviews and note-taking. The type of data analysis employed for the study was thematic analysis. This entailed using techniques to focus the analysis as the data were searched for common themes. Included in this process was coding (Creswell, 2003).

Introduced by Glaser and Strauss in 1967, coding is an important process within a grounded theory study. Originally, coding consisted of “breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, as cited in, Kvale & Brinkman, 2009, p. 202). In more modern terms, coding is “how you define what the data you are analyzing are about” (Gibbs, 2007, as cited in, Glesne, 2011, p. 194). It consists of going back and forth between sorting data and defining data, centering around the research purpose (p. 194). Rossman and Rallis (1998, as cited in, Creswell, 2003) define coding a bit differently as categorizing the data into “chunks” (p. 192). In the current research study, coding took place as interview transcriptions were analyzed. Creswell (2003) states that the researcher codes the data by labeling text with one or more keywords (p. 191). As the data are coded it involves an “inductive process of data analysis that involves examining many small pieces of information and abstracting a connection between them.” (Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtler, 2006, p. 305). As Charmaz (2006) explains, coding the data “generates the bones of your analysis. Theoretical integration will assemble these bones into a working skeleton...it shapes the analytic frame from which you build the analysis.” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 45).

Charmaz (2006) describes two phases of coding: initial coding and focused coding. In initial coding, the researcher is open to any theoretical direction the research may take, based on the data. Focused coding comes after initial coding where the researcher narrows in on the most relevant coded categories (p. 46). As Glesne (2011) explains, data categories will continue to divide and subdivide (p. 192). Codes developed, or emerged, out of the interview responses. Types of codes developed were directly related to effective practices of principals leading special education programs. Ultimately, the goal of coding was to identify and develop the categories that most reflect the data. Kvale and Brinkman (2009) also describe the constant comparison of data and focused coding. They further assert that it is at this point in which analysis moves beyond a descriptive level to a more theoretical level. The researchers refer to this as “saturation”, or no new emergent interpretations of the data, as a result of coding. Data-driven coding will be utilized in this study in which no codes will pre-exist, but will be developed while analyzing the data (p. 202). Charmaz (2006) explains that theoretical codes integrate categories out of focused codes previously developed and move the data analysis towards a theoretical conception (p. 63).

At this point in the analysis, as theoretical codes emerge, a process called theoretical sampling takes place. Theoretical sampling “means seeking pertinent data to develop your emerging theory.” The purpose is to refine the mature categories which will eventually make up the ultimate theory or conceptual framework (Charmaz, 2006, p. 96). In order to focus the theoretical categories, the researcher had to look more closely at the initial codes and consider how they were interrelated. This can provide the researcher with a sense of confidence in the way the data are interpreted. It is through this process the researcher can claim that the categories and interpretation is “really grounded in the data.” (p. 98).

An organizational framework began to emerge once the researcher categorized, or coded, the data. At the end of the data analysis, the researcher was able to make meaning of the data, interpret it. Creswell (2003) states that the researcher's interpretation make take the form of a personal interpretation or an interpretation based on comparing the study findings with findings in the related literature.

As codes were developed and the time came to fit them into a conceptual framework "the data should be displayed as an organized assembly of information that permits conclusion drawing and action taking."(Miles & Huberman, 1994, as cited in, Glesne, 2011, p. 199). Creswell (2003) notes that qualitative researchers may choose to use some sort of visual display, such as, a table to illustrate the conceptual framework, in addition to the researcher's explanation and discussion. The researcher of the current study presented a description of the themes which emerged, in the form of tables and a figure.

Another important aspect of data analysis was to validate the findings. As Glesne (2011) states, "multiple means of data development can contribute to research trustworthiness and verisimilitude, or sense of authenticity." (p. 48). Creswell (2003) recommends the following eight strategies for validity, which determines "whether the findings are accurate from the standpoint of the researcher, the participant, or the readers of an account" (p. 196). The following eight strategies are recommended:

- "Triangulate different data sources of information by examining evidence from the sources and using it to build a coherent justification for themes.
- Use member-checking to determine the accuracy of the qualitative findings through taking the final report or specific descriptions or themes back to participants and determining whether these participants felt that they are accurate.

- Use rich, thick description to convey the findings. This may transport readers to the setting and give the discussion an element of shared experiences.
- Clarify the bias the researcher brings to the study. This self-reflection creates an open and honest narrative that will resonate well with readers.
- Also present negative or discrepant information that runs counter to the themes. Because real life is composed of different perspectives that do not always coalesce, discussing contrary information adds to the credibility of an account for a reader.
- Spend prolonged time in the field. In this way, the researcher develops an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under study and can convey detail about the site and the people that lends credibility to the narrative account.
- Use peer debriefing to enhance the accuracy of the account. This process involves locating a person (a peer debriefer) who reviews and asks questions about the qualitative study so that the account will resonate with people other than the researcher.
- Use an external auditor to review the entire project. As distinct from a peer debriefer, this auditor is new to the researcher and the project and can provide an assessment of the project throughout the process of research or at the conclusion of the study.” (p. 197)
- “Triangulate different data sources of information by examining evidence from the sources and using it to build a coherent justification for themes.” (Creswell, 2003, p. 196).

The literature in qualitative research further recommends using the following strategies:

- “The information provided by these different sources should be compared through triangulation to corroborate the researcher’s conclusions.” (Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtler, 2006, p. 274).

- “In a limited way, qualitative researchers can use reliability to check for consistent patterns of theme development among several investigators on a team.” (Creswell, 2003, p. 195).
- Validity “is seen as a strength of qualitative research, but it is used to suggest determining whether the findings are accurate from the standpoint of the researcher, the participant, or the readers of an account (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Terms about in the qualitative literature that speak to this idea, terms such as ‘trustworthiness,’ ‘authenticity,’ and ‘credibility’ (Creswell & Miller, 2000, as cited in, Creswell, 2003, p. 196).
- “Credibility refers to whether the participants’ perceptions of the setting or events match up with the researcher’s portrayal of them in the research report”. One can “discuss how the researcher engaged in repeated, prolonged, and substantial involvement in the field...how the researcher established relationships with the participants...checking on whether the researcher’s interpretation of the processes and interactions in the setting is valid” (Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtler, 2006, p. 273-274).
- “Dependability is a criterion for qualitative research that parallels reliability, although it is not assessed through statistical procedures”. It “refers to whether one can track the procedures and processes used to collect and interpret the data.” (Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtler, 2006, p. 275).
- “Use member-checking to determine the accuracy of the qualitative findings through taking the final report or specific descriptions or themes back to participants and determining whether these participants feel that they are accurate.” (Creswell, 2003, p. 196).

- “To ensure that the researcher’s own biases do not influence how the perspectives are portrayed, many researchers use member checks in which the transcribed interviews or summaries of the researcher’s conclusions are sent to participants for review.” (Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtle, 2006, p. 274).
- “Use rich, thick description to convey the findings. This may transport the readers to the setting and give the discussion an element of shared experiences” (Creswell, 2003, p. 196).

In the current research study, the analysis of the data in relation to the research questions required member-checking, interview transcribing, and coding.

Sampling Strategy and Logic

The current research explored, specifically, how principals engage in leading special education programs in their schools. Therefore, the sample of participants for this study was purposeful sampling. According to Lodico, Spaulding, and Voegtle (2006), participants in a qualitative study are selected as they possess specific characteristics or knowledge related to the questions under investigation. Therefore, it is common for qualitative researchers to use purposeful sampling as it is often not the intent to generalize the research findings beyond the topic being researched. To ensure reliable cooperation from my study subjects, trust needed to be established between the participants and the researcher. Glesne (2011) goes further to include the importance of building rapport with the participants before trust can actually be established. This occurs before the researcher can gain access to the participants.

Study sample.

The sample for the dissertation research came from elementary school principals and special education teachers within 2 school systems in the southeast. The sample consisted of

diverse demographics including gender, race, experience, and certification. The demographic information for each participant was gathered at the beginning of each interview and used to describe each participant in the data analysis. The study is specific to school principals, so current school principals were sought to participate in the study. The sample ultimately consisted of the principals who agree to participate in the study. The targeted school systems from which the sample was drawn were used because they are in a convenient location to the researcher. Also, rapport has been built and maintained by the researcher within the school system in which she is employed, which is an important element in any qualitative research study.

Sampling strategy.

The sampling strategy used was purposeful sampling. The pool of possible participants consisted of 20 principals and special education teachers. Seven principals and four special education teachers participated. The targeted school systems from which the sample was drawn were Athens City Schools and Limestone County Schools. Also, rapport has been built and maintained by the researcher within the employed school system which is an important element in any qualitative research study. Patton (2002, as cited in, Glesne, 2011) states that a strength of purposeful sampling is that it can lead to “information-rich cases” which can be studied in depth and speak to the central issues and purpose of the research (p. 44). An important aspect of the sample used in the study was to engage in the process of gaining access to the information needed for the amount of time necessary. One of the first steps taken in order to gain access to a participant is to contact the “gatekeepers”, in this case, the superintendent of each school system, so that permission to interview principals may be obtained (p. 58). The researcher contacted the superintendent of each school system, was granted access, then proceeded to contact principals and teachers to participate in the study.

Duration of Study

The duration of the study included sufficient time to collect data, analyze the data, and address any gaps in the data. The proposed time to take collecting data and analyzing data was originally 3-4 months, in which the researcher was able to accomplish. Glesne (2011) offers a bit of advice regarding the use of a schedule and timetable for collecting data. She notes that the institutional structures, or schools, in which I will be entering to conduct interviews with principals will directly affect planning a schedule. As the researcher attempted to schedule interviews with principals, she became aware of each school's daily schedule, especially the beginning and ending times, so interviews can be scheduled around these important times of the day. The researcher was also aware of how long she would have for each interview and planned accordingly. Glesne (2011) points out the usefulness of a timetable, however, it is important to remember to be flexible, as plans may change unexpectedly (p. 52). The researcher did not experience any scheduling issues during data collection.

Limitations of Study

The qualitative study used a grounded theory approach. As stated earlier, data were derived from semi-structured interviews. Creswell (2003) speaks to the limitations of using interviews for research. Interviews are most always based on the interviewee's viewpoint and people articulate ideas and opinions in different ways. In addition, simply the presence of the interviewer may prompt a bias, or inaccurate response. There are also limitations to purposeful, convenience and purposeful, network sampling, which were used for the current study. Convenience sampling may not provide a comprehensive description of the phenomena under investigation. Also, with network sampling, the researcher has to depend on others to recommend potential participants.

Another limitation is that some of the principals chosen to interview for the study were known by the researcher. However, only principals with whom there is a professional, and not personal, relationship were used for the study. It was important for the researcher to conduct interviews in an unbiased way so as not to skew the data towards a particular perception or opinion. Additionally, it is noted that principal and teacher matched pairs were not used, in all instances. In fact, there was only one principal and teacher pair from the same school, interviewed for the study.

Because the current literature on special education leadership among principals is lacking in breadth and depth to the degree needed to understand how principals can be effective in this area, the current research was needed. Furthermore, in spite of the limitations noted above, it is expected that the current research will contribute in a positive way to the field of research for the benefit of both researchers and practitioners.

Situation of Self as Researcher

The researcher's personal interest in the topic of principals leading special education programs stems from her experience as a special education teacher and interest in educational leadership. Having worked with diverse populations of students and under diverse leadership styles, she is well aware of the needs of students with special needs and how those needs have been met or not been met, depending upon the leadership of the principal. Professionally, the researcher also has a sense of obligation to the student population she works with to advocate for their rights and needs. It has been the researcher's personal opinion that schools do not always meet the needs of their students because the principal and staff do not fully understand the needs and the importance of meeting those needs. Ensuring student needs are met not only benefits the student, but also the school as a whole. As a special education teacher and aspiring school

administrator, this study has helped the researcher to better understand how to be an effective instructional leader.

As a current special education teacher, it was important for the researcher to acknowledge that researcher bias may exist in this study. In her position as teacher looking at administrator, she had to constantly maintain a self-consciousness of both her verbal and non-verbal behavior. To help her do this, a constant reminder of the purpose of this research as an exploratory study before, during, and after data collection took place. Glesne (2011) describes two roles of the researcher in a qualitative study: the role as researcher and the role as learner. As a learner, the researcher's ability to listen, rather than interject her own opinion, should be more important. Another important practice for researchers is to engage in reflexivity. This "is an awareness of the self in the situation of action and of the role of the self in constructing that situation." (Bloor and Wood, 2006, as cited in, Glesne, 2006, p. 150). Reflexivity can help to validate the research by acknowledging how the researcher's own biases may influence the study (Glesne, 2011, p. 151).

Beyond her experience as a special education teacher, the researcher has spent the last four years in a doctoral program in Instructional Leadership. This program has provided her with a strong theoretical basis in the area of instructional leadership, including courses in education research methods. The most recent research course taken was in qualitative methods. The researcher feels, because this course was very hands-on, she gained a basic, practical knowledge of qualitative methods. Specifically, during the course, the researcher was able to develop an interview protocol, conduct a research interview, transcribe an interview, and conduct preliminary coding on the data. In addition, one of the texts for the course specifically focused on grounded theory studies, such as the one undertaken here. Overall, the researcher feels her

experience, training, and strengths lie within conducting a qualitative study, and, furthermore, it is in line with the purpose of the current study which warranted a grounded theory approach.

While experience as a special education teacher has provided the researcher with much insight into the leadership needs of programs within schools, this also presents a potential bias on her part. Simply the fact that she is coming from the perspective of special education teacher, may cause her to perceive interview data inaccurately or even pushed the interviewer to respond in a particular way. As a special education teacher, she has worked under strong leadership, as well as, weak leadership. The researcher has personal opinions about special education leadership among principals, based on her own experience. In fact, it is her experience which has moved her to conduct this study. However, it is important for her to get the most accurate data possible so that it is meaningful to the field of education. It is not the researcher's intent to use data to support her own opinions, but rather to get a true sense of special education leadership among principals who are currently in schools. The researcher also understands that effective, or ineffective leadership, can look different depending upon the context of the school, beyond her own school experiences.

In order to guard against researcher bias and insert her own experience and knowledge base into the study, the researcher had to situate herself as the researcher seeking to listen and gain new knowledge. The researcher accomplished this by only interviewing principals who, either she did not know at all, or with whom she has only a professional relationship. The researcher also conducted member checking with the participants to be sure her perceptions of their interview responses were accurate. By member checking, the researcher was able to verify that her initial perceptions of them coincided with what they intended to communicate during the

interview. In addition, triangulation of different codes was used to compare initial codes which were then categorized into themes.

CHAPTER IV
DATA ANALYSES

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to present the data generated and analyzed in the study of principal leadership of special education programs. The analysis of data is guided by the overall purpose of the study: 1) to determine if discrepancies in perceptions exist between study principals and special education teachers as to what makes for ‘effective special education leadership’ by a principal; 2) If so, what might these discrepancies be?; 3) If not, what are the common themes/perceptions?; 4) to provide a description of what effective leadership among principals leading special education programs might look like.

The data are representative of both the principal and special education teacher perspective to provide a more comprehensive investigation of effective principal leadership in the area of special education. Responses to interview questions were examined, gaining insight into the practices and approaches of principals, as well as, comparing principal responses to those of special education teachers.

The research questions for the study were addressed using a qualitative, grounded theory method (Charmaz, 2010). The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with elementary special education teachers and elementary school principals. The interviews took place at each participant’s home school and were audio-recorded for later transcription and analysis. The

interview protocols for both teachers and principals were drawn from the following research questions:

1. What are the leadership practices and approaches of principals who are recognized by their peers and teachers as being strong in leading special education programs in their school?
2. To what degree are effective principals involved in special education decisions, activities, and instruction?
3. How much time does the effective principal spend on special education matters?
4. How proactive are effective principals in setting up appropriate special education programs for their students?

The chapter is organized into six sections, including: 1) introduction, 2) data on study sample, 3) reflections on data collection and analysis process, 4) emergent codes, logic, and schemes, 5) research questions presentation, and a 6) summary of study findings. Descriptive data of the study sample is provided in both narrative and table form. The analysis of interview data is presented for each question from both the principal and teacher interview protocol, and it is linked to the research questions of the study.

Data on Study Sample

The researcher used purposeful sampling to select a sample of principals and special education teachers for the study. Participants were drawn from nine elementary schools within two school systems, both a county (System A) and city (System B) system in the southeast. Access to each school system was granted by contacting the superintendent of each system. Ten principals were contacted, by email, to participate in the study. Seven principals responded and participated. Four special education teachers were contacted, by email, to participate in the study

and all four agreed to participate. Informed Consent was explained to each potential participant and signed Informed Consent forms were collected from all of the participants, prior to interviewing. Face-to-face interviews took place with a total of 11 participants, across nine different schools. In order to protect confidentiality, participants were given pseudonyms for the purpose of explaining the data.

Four elementary special education teachers were interviewed, two from System A and two from System B. The first question of the teacher interview protocol addressed the number of years spent teaching, as reflected in Table 1. Teacher 1 has been teaching 25 years. Teacher 2 has been teaching five years. Teacher 3 has been teaching two and a half years. Teacher 4 has been teaching 10 years.

Table 1

Demographics on Special Education Teacher Participants Interviewed

Teacher #	Number of Years Teaching	School System
1	25	A
2	5	B
3	2.5	A
4	10	B

Note. Teachers interviewed had an average of 10.6 years teaching experience, for the group.

A total of 7 elementary principals were interviewed, 4 from System A and 3 from System B. The first two questions of the principal interview protocol addressed the number of years in administration, as well as, teaching experience, as indicated in Table 2. Principal 1 has been in administration for nine years and taught all core academic subjects in an elementary setting for 13 years. Principal 2 has been in administration for eight years and taught physical education and

science for 10 years. Principal 3 has been in administration for 8 years and taught social studies, science, and math for nine years. Principal 4 has been in administration for 13 years and taught physical education, special education, and history for 12 years. Principal 5 has been in administration for 11 years and taught special education for 20 years. Principal 6 has been in administration for five years and taught social studies. The number of years taught for Principal 6 was not gathered during the interview process. Principal 7 has been in administration for seven years and taught all core academic subjects in an elementary setting for six years.

Table 2

Demographics on Elementary Principal Participants Interviewed

Principal #	Number of Years in Administration	Number of Years Taught	Content Area Taught
1	9	13	All (elementary)
2	8	10	Physical Education/ Science
3	8	9	Social Studies/ Science/ Math
4	13	12	Physical Education/ Special Education/ History
5	11	20	Special Education
6	5	-	Social Studies
7	7	6	All (elementary)

Note. Principals interviewed have an average of 8.7 years in administration and 11.7 years teaching experience.

Reflections on Data Collection and Analysis Process

Upon being granted IRB approval for the research study, the researcher contacted potential participants by email and was able to get the number of responses needed for the study within a three-week period. The next step was to schedule the interview with each participant. In

order to avoid potential interruptions during the school day, the interviews were scheduled after the school day had ended. The researcher was able to schedule and complete all of the interviews within a two-month period. The analysis process began as the interviews took place, as is characteristic of a qualitative, grounded theory study (Creswell, 2003). The researcher took notes during each interview to document body language and discrepancies, as well as, after each interview. These notes were later added to the interview transcriptions to provide a more complete picture of what was being communicated by each participant. The notes turned out to be valuable later in the analysis process, as well as, assisting in the interpretation of responses being coded. For example, nonverbal behavior was noted as participants responded to the interview questions. Facial expressions sometimes led to a different interpretation of what was being said, than what one might gather from only listening to the audio recording. In a couple of teacher interviews, eyes would grow larger when asked questions about time spent talking with the principal. The interviewer took this as an indication that not much time was spent meeting or talking with the principal about special education matters. One particular principal, as well, did not give a clear answer regarding time spent talking with special education teachers. She shook her head, put up her hands, and said “I don’t know maybe 20%?”. While she stated a specific percentage of time, her body language did not indicate to the researcher this was accurate. Notes were also useful during the actual interviews as they helped bring up additional questions with the participant. The researcher referred to these notes at the end of the interview and asked follow-up questions accordingly.

Participants were encouraged to be open and honest with their responses to interview questions. Most of the participants in the study were overwhelmingly positive and complimentary of their school and district throughout the interview process. The researcher felt

this occurred for different reasons. In some cases, participants spoke with a, seemingly, genuine, positive tone. It, typically, came out in the interview that they were in a school with a lower number of students with special needs, and with less severe student cases. For example, Principal 1 stated, “My current school, right now, with the situation we have, teacher ratios are phenomenal. So, they really have the ideal.” Principal 3, when asked about the population of students with special needs, commented, “Here, not as bad at [school]. Most of our students are in the regular classroom, and do with inclusion. However, in other cases, it seemed as if the participant wanted to create a positive perception to the “outsider”, or interviewer, coming into the school that may, or may not, be true. For example, when asked to what extent students with special needs received the instruction and support they need, Principal 2 responded, “We do a really great job with providing everything. Of course we follow every IEP, what is written in those IEP’s, making sure it is what the student needs...I feel like we go above and beyond.” The researcher felt as if responses, such as these, were vague and did not get to the heart of the question being asked. Overall, the researcher felt most of the positive comments from participants were an indication of their belief and dedication to their schools.

Out of the 11 interviews, there was only one, teacher, interview that was questionable in regards to an honest response. This particular teacher had the least amount of teaching experience. This was also the teacher’s first year teaching in that particular school, and, therefore, may not have felt comfortable being forthcoming on the audio recording. The teacher used gestures, such as, shaking her head “no” when answering a question to indicate it was not an honest response to the question being asked. Interestingly, the teacher’s principal was also interviewed, and, while the principal communicated a positive perception of the special education programs in the school, the vagueness with which the interview questions were

answered indicated to the researcher a potential discrepancy in the response and the reality of special education in the school.

In both the teacher and principal interview protocol, the researcher concluded with an open question in which they could share any other information they felt might be helpful with regards to special education leadership. The responses were eye-opening in that they all had something meaningful and different to add to the data, which was not anticipated. Some even ended the interview by stating this process has caused the realization that they are not doing enough in the area of special education as they should. This is a meaningful response to the researcher as it speaks to the importance of having dialogue to bring about change in the area of special education leadership.

In order to establish validity for the study, member-checking (Creswell, 2003) was done by follow-up questioning with each participant to ensure accurate interpretation of responses. This took place following the interviews. This process provided the participants the opportunity to clarify their thoughts and helped the researcher better understand what the participant intended to communicate. Through member-checking, the researcher was able to establish an accurate account of each interview, providing this study with a strong measure of validity. Additionally, having some of the same questions in both the principal and teacher interview protocol, allowed for a type of checks and balance between both groups.

A rich, thick description of data (Creswell, 2003) is also provided to give the most accurate account of the interviews. Direct quotations from interview participants are used to support codes and themes which emerged from the data. The researcher provides, in detail, descriptions of both the verbal and non-verbal language communicated during the interviews.

Providing as much detail as possible in the descriptions of interviews supports the validity of the study.

Finally, the researcher seeks to clarify any potential bias (Creswell, 2003) brought to the study by indicating her role as both special education teacher and researcher. Careful precaution was taken to ensure assumptions were not made during the interviews and while analyzing the interviews, based on her experiences as a special education teacher. When possible, efforts were made to keep the role as special education teacher and aspiring administrator anonymous to study participants. However, this was not always possible as some of the participants worked in the same school system as the researcher. The researcher approached the data objectively and was open to discovering ideas and concepts that emerged from the data.

Emergent Codes, Logic, and Schemes

A careful analysis of the interview data resulted in specific codes and, ultimately, major themes from the study of effective principal leadership of special education programs. Because the researcher interviewed special education teachers and principals, it was important, first, to code the data within the teacher participant group and within the principal participant group separately. As the researcher read and re-read the interview transcriptions, patterns of responses were highlighted and condensed to a label, or code, to describe the data. The researcher chose to use specific codes for data that represented how the participant described particular aspects of principal leadership of special education. A list was created of all codes found within the data. Once initial codes were developed for each group, codes were linked together to develop major themes for each group. The researcher linked the codes together by finding commonalities among the codes which seemed to have a natural relationship. This was done by reading carefully through the list of codes and highlighting the categories which seemed to stand out as

major themes. Once these potential themes were highlighted and given a number one through six, each code was categorized into one of the six original themes. The themes were a broader description of principal leadership of special education, which emerged from the data. Once themes from both the teacher and principal groups emerged, they were compared across participant groups to create the four overarching themes from the study. One additional theme emerged from the teacher group and one theme emerged from the principal group that was not evident across both groups.

An analysis of the teacher interviews resulted in the following initial codes: collaborative relationship, open door policy, build relationships with students, teacher dependent, positive, understanding, supportive, knows parents, good instruction, very active, visible, participative, open communication with all, present for IEP meetings, interested, ample instructional opportunities, secure resources, always there, checks in on students, and remains current.

A “collaborative relationship” was representative of the responses which described working relationships and communication among faculty within the school. Teacher 1 stated that within her school, there is a “good working relationship with the regular classroom teachers and special ed. support staff”. An “open door policy” represented responses indicating that the principal welcomes teachers to talk with them about issues. Teacher 2 stated that administrators in the school “are very open to letting me come.” “Build relationships with students” emerged from the data, as Teacher 1 said, “He makes an effort to get to know them and talk to them and you know give them high fives and build a relationship with them.” Being “teacher dependent” represented the need for principals to rely on special education teachers for their expertise. As indicated by Teacher 1, “I educate him often about best practices”.

Principals being “positive” emerged from the interview data from teachers who felt the principal maintained a “positive attitude”. Teachers described principals as being “understanding”, Teacher 1 stated, regarding her principal that he is “understanding that not all children are going to perform at the same level”. Principals were also described as “supportive”, referring to the “support of the students and the teachers, the regular classroom teachers”. A principal that “knows parents” was also brought out in the interviews, indicating a knowledge of the surrounding community and a relationship with that community and families.

“Good instruction” emerged in the teacher interviews. Teacher 2 stated, “with the amount of teachers we are allowed to have, they do get good instruction.” The researcher interpreted this to be a result of principal effort to foster the capacity for a well-staffed school of competent teachers. Principals who were “very active” was indicated by Teacher 2, “They come by, they check in, they check-in on those students. They are very active.” She also described the administration in the school as being “visible”, “I usually see all three [principals] everyday.” Principals who are “participative” was also found in the interviews. Teacher 2 described principal participation in professional development related to special education topics. “Any training we do, one of them always goes too. That’s been a big thing. If it’s a small group training, restraint training, Autism training, there’s always one [principal] that goes to it. A lot of times two of them will go to it because they are very interested.”

“Open communication with all” emerged as a category, referring to principals who communicate well with, not only teachers, but students and parents, as well. Teacher 2 stated, “whether its good or bad, it’s a very open communication.” Being “present for IEP meetings” and being “interested” were both shared by Teacher 3: “He does sit in on IEP meetings and is trying to know everything and what the students need, and what their disabilities are and how to

help them”. Teacher 4 indicated that her principal provides “ample instructional opportunities” for students in the school. “We actually, since we’re a tier 3, we triple, double-dip, quadruple-dip these kids, these children. So, anytime we find extra time, we’re here to help them.” The principal’s ability to “secure resources” was also found to be important to teachers. Teacher 4 said, “[Principal 7] has done a remarkable job, with the leadership and trying to help us out and trying to get what we need.” Teacher 1 said of her principal, “If I let him know something we need for best practices, he will try to get it.”

The code “always there” was indicative of the principal, as Teacher 4 stated, who is “always there and ready to be there for IEP meetings, or a parent who has a concern. He’s always there trying to explain that this is the way it goes.” Principals who “remain current” refers to the extent of their knowledge of current issues in special education. Teacher 4 stated, “I feel like he stays current, on a daily basis, for the simple fact of, not only does he deal with it here, but he also has a wife in special education. So, he’s in the special ed. world.” One final code which emerged from the interview data was “checks in on students”. Teacher 4 reported “he does come in and check in on the students. Especially if I am having an issue with one of them, I’ll say ‘can you just stick in your head and see’”. A total of 20 codes emerged from teacher interview data.

An analysis of the principal interviews resulted in the following initial codes: much classroom support, self-initiated professional development, life experiences, collaborative efforts with teachers, professionalism among teachers, great student-teacher ratios, serve as LEA, great at providing everything, follow every IEP, teacher dependent, awareness of students, sitting in on IEP meetings, special education teachers’ professional development, strong teachers, special education director support, building an atmosphere for collaboration, good teacher relationships, visibility, unstructured conversations, open communication, goal of student success, students not

stigmatized, involved, student needs met, prepare for transition, secure resources, talking with special education teachers, ample instructional opportunities, great resources, district professional development, and an open door.

During principal interviews, “much classroom support” was indicated as a strength in providing both programming and staff support for students with special needs. Principal 1 stated,

Our students receive a great deal of support. They actually have the chance to have inclusion and a pull-out time based on their needs. And, we also have a special ed. aide that helps out with two students who need sensory breaks, and then he also assists with inclusion time.

Another code emerged, “self-initiated professional development”. Several principals indicated that they take it upon themselves to be involved in professional development related to special education topics. This was through a variety of modes. Principal 7 shared that “On the internet, I receive professional journals each month that have a special ed. piece to it.” Principal 6 also stated that “I normally keep up to date through email.” Principal 5 indicated it is:

pretty much just a lot of literature and a lot of research, just to stay abreast of recent cases. I’m very conscientious of doing the right things and being aware of what’s happening around and I can pass that on to my staff.

Principal 2 shared:

When I first got in to administration, I knew that special education was an area I needed to be more aware about and what the processes were. So, I kinda took it upon myself, those first couple of years as an assistant principal, and a little bit before, during internship, just learning as much about the special ed. process as I can.

“Life experiences” of principals during their time teaching in the classroom and in administration, as well as, “collaborative efforts”, with teachers, also emerged as a way of learning for principals. Principal 1 stated, “Just life experiences and collaborative efforts with the teachers. I’ve learned, I’ve probably learned the most from the people I surround myself with.”

Principal 3 said about his school,

If there's some kind of issue coming up in special ed., special education teachers will work with the regular ed. faculty and try to solve those types of problems that may be coming up. They're a close-knit bunch and they work together.

Principals also revealed that "professionalism" was important to the success of special education in the school, specifically referring to the interactions among faculty and staff.

Principal 1 described this as,

Their [the teachers'] professionalism with each other. So, they respect their professional views and they know that if I'm gonna have little Johnny in my class, I know that I'm gonna have [teacher] or [teacher] to support me with that and it's not gonna be hard.

Another contributing factor to student success, revealed by principals was "great student-teacher ratios". This referred, to both the number of special education students assigned to one particular special education teacher, as well as, the number of special education students in the general education classroom. Principal 1 expressed her liking of the "phenomenal" student teacher ratios in her school, but also reflected on her prior position in which the situation was not ideal, supporting the case for low student-teacher ratios.

I have been in systems in the past to where that would be something that we would have to work to address, as the school year progresses and you add additional students to your special ed. roll, it makes it difficult because you may be understaffed.

Another code emerging from principal interview data was the need to "serve as LEA", the Local Education Agency representative. Principal 2 reported that "I served as an LEA for most of the special ed. meetings. And, currently, in my current position I serve as LEA for about all meetings." Principal 7 said, "we have a number of IEP meetings here at [school] because of the Pre-K program. So, I'd say we have two or three, maybe four meetings a week. And, I sit in on those as the LEA." This particular role is required by special education legislation in all IEP meetings for special education students. "Great at providing everything", though vague, emerged as a code. Principal 2 described this, not only in the support provided students through the IEP, but also "we have the SOAR program that our kids participate in, as well. That's where we take

our kids and do a lot of community outreach projects. Then, we have a Pre-K program, which is kind of unique.” Along the same lines, “following every IEP” involves knowing and providing for all of the academic and non-academic needs of students with special needs. Principal 7 stated, “It’s very important that special ed. students are accommodated for and teachers are following that IEP and making sure that those students are working towards those goals.”

Being “teacher dependent” emerged as a code among principals, as well. Principal 2 described this as, “our collaborative teacher, she does a good job with making sure the teachers know what her role is, making sure we are covering the needs of the IEP.” Principal 3 also spoke to this, saying “I think that, as far as, success goes, is to have, and this may sound bad but to have very knowledgeable special education [teachers], who is knowledgeable on the instructional skills that these kids need, the best way to approach them.” Having an “awareness of students” and what their needs are, as Principal 2 stated, “just being aware of all the kids...just knowing what kids are coming through, what kids are being tested to know if they qualify for special ed.” Principal 2 highlighted that part of the job of a principal is “sitting in on IEP meetings”. These meetings take place at least annually, if not more often for each student with and IEP and are team meetings consisting of an administrator, general education teacher, special education teacher, the parent, the student (depending on age), and any other person relevant to the student’s educational program. The need for “special education teachers’ professional development” was also revealed in the interview with Principal 2. He stated,

You know, we do a great job with PD with our gen. ed. population teachers. But, if we really want to push those special ed. kids, as well, especially our collaborative teachers, I feel like they need to be involved in those PD sessions as well...as far as, teaching those strategies.

“Strong teachers” emerged from the interviews, as well, in the sense that teachers take care of their responsibilities and students’ needs. Principal 3 complimented that “I’m very pleased here

at our school. We have two special education teachers that are top notch...It takes teachers at the local level to implement those programs. So, you just got to surround yourself with good staff.”

Principal 4 stated, “I think I have a great staff that really, they do take care of things they need to.

Principal 5 also said, “we’ve got great teachers here...and they’re very, very caring people here.

They go out of their way to help any kid.” She also stated, “It’s always gonna come back to the teachers. That’s the most important thing in the classroom, is having a good teacher.”

Many principals indicated that they often depend on the school system’s special education director to keep them informed on special education compliance issues. Principal 6 stated “[special education director] does an excellent job.” Speaking of the special education director, Principal 5 reported, “We talk often on the phone...She is very good about sending us updated information.” Principal 3 stated, “Through our director, we also have monthly principal meetings. If she has issues, things coming up in special ed.” Principal 2 stated that

“conversations with our director, anytime she has updates, she’ll let us know about those.”

“Building an atmosphere for collaboration” among teachers in the school was another concept which emerged. Principal 3 felt this was a successful practice, stating, “Building the atmosphere that they can all work together.” Speaking to building relationships with teachers, Principal 4 stated, “We’ve had to build that over time, just so they would know that, if they need anything at any time that I am here to support them.”

Having “good teacher relationships” was indicated as a contributor of success. Principal 4 stated, “I think the balance of good relationship with resource teachers and classroom teachers is probably key.” Principal 6, speaking of a previous school placement, “I had a good working relationship with the middle school and high school teachers, special ed. teachers...We had a really good working relationship.” He also stated that currently, “Being a smaller school, we’re

able to really work well together and keep up with each other's students and use our resources together." Another concept, "visibility", specifically being out in the school daily to see students and teachers, emerged from the interviews. Principal 4 stated, "I'm very visible in our halls and classrooms. They seem to be more comfortable if they know you're coming around regularly." Principal 2 said, "I try to walk through our Pre-K and self-contained class daily, not as much just to see what's going on, but to be that appearance, and to see the kids and say 'hi'."

Principals reported that having "unstructured conversations" with teachers was valuable to the success of special education. Principal 4 stated,

More so than the structured, is just kinda being in that room and saying 'hey, how are things going?'. You know, they just seem to be a little bit more relaxed when you do it that way. So more non-structured time you can spend with somebody is probably more meaningful than a structured.

Principal 5 reported on speaking with one of her special education teachers, "One in particular I think of, she drives the bus and she'll come back sometime and we'll talk about stuff and different strategies." Principal 1 said, "With me it's just having a sit down conversation with them. 'What are your fears? Please tell me what you're thinking about that.'" Another concept, "open communication" between principals and teachers emerged. Principal 4 stated,

Whether it's the principal or assistant principal talking about things going on within the special education department; whether it's a student or having problems with staff or the general ed. class is not helping, you know, things, you need, that there's an openness with communication. I think as long as you have communication you're probably good."

One principal, Principal 4, brought out a concept, not found in other principal interviews. The "goal of student success" seemed to have an important role. Though left unspoken in the other interviews, the concept was found in the overall attitude and concern over special

education matters. Principal 4 stated, “Our end goal is student success and that’s what’s important.” Principal 5 brought out another concept specific to students, “students not stigmatized”. She claimed,

I don’t see that the special ed. are treated any differently. Nobody says ‘hey, you’re going into the special dummy room or that type stuff. The way we have it set up and the way kids are in and out. One of our special ed. teachers is a soccer coach. One last year was a baseball coach, and it always helps, you know, everybody is going in and out of that classroom, you know, your athletes and things of that. And, our elementary teacher, she does Scholar’s bowl, and so regular kids are in and out of there, so it’s, it doesn’t have that stigmatism. So, we do everything we can to prevent that.

Principals also felt that being “involved” contributed to special education success. When asked about practices that contribute to this, Principal 7 stated, “Knowing and being involved, collaboration, making sure I’m involving my special education teacher in any type of professional development I have with the staff.” Principal 4, when asked about what contributes to the success of special education in his school, stated, “I think probably just having that constant, constant time with our teachers.”

Principals felt that making sure “student needs are met” was also important. Principal 5 said of her school, “We do a lot of creative things to help special ed. kids, but all of our students [too].” Principal 6 stated,

We have students who start out in our Pre-K program as a special needs student and we go ahead and provide them with the help and interventions they need. And, we already know ahead of time that as they enter kindergarten, what they need.

He also stated, “We want to make sure that we have a good handle on each student’s disability. We know exactly what their needs are, their strengths and weaknesses.” Principal 3 spoke of a program implemented in his school to help meet the needs of students. “We also have, that we’ve created ourselves, we have a sensory room. We have a few students who just need to be just pulled out to go and to calm down, those sorts of things.” While speaking of the types of special

education programs in the school, Principal 2 stated, “We do a little bit of pull-out, as well as, push-in, depending on the situation, because every kid is different. It depends on what the kid is needing.” Principal 1 stated that the programs they provide are:

Based on each individual student’s need. So, we do have to have their [student] schedules throughout the day to include two sensory breaks, and we do have a classroom set up for that, specific, has all the materials those students might need.

Principal 7 said, “It’s very important that special ed. students are accommodated for and teachers are following that IEP and making sure that those students are working towards those goals.”

Principal 6 felt that “preparation for student transition” was important for both the student and faculty. He stated,

When a student moves from an elementary school to a middle school, that is a big transition for the children and the special ed. teachers need to know exactly what the strengths and weaknesses of that child are. That way, they can come up with their gameplan. When you have to spend the first semester trying to figure that out yourself, you’re losing valuable time. Unfortunately, as we all know, there is a higher percentage of special ed. students that tend to drop out of school because they become frustrated, not getting the help that they need or it just the curriculum is too difficult for them. So, if we can have that support system in place as soon as they arrive at the middle school and continue that, they can have a greater chance of completing high school.

Another code emerging from the data was “secure resources”. Principal 6 stated that part of their success comes from “Making sure that they have the materials they need. We try to make a special effort to make sure [special education teacher] has the resources she needs to work with her students.” Principal 4 said that part of his job is “working with resource teachers and listening to their needs and what they need for the students.” Principals also shared that “talking with special education teachers” led to successful special education programs. Principal 1 stated, when speaking about how often she speaks with teachers about instructional issues,

An hour a week for sure, but that doesn’t include the passing in the hall kinda conversations we have. But, we do have weekly departmental meetings. So, we do have some discussion then as to what’s going on in different areas.

Principal 3 shared,

They do have, sort of like a common planning time, that I'll go in and if there's an issue we need to discuss, maybe a parent is not happy of something like that. If they want to try something new, because we're trying a lot of new things this time with some of our kids, and we'll sit down and discuss the best way to do that.

The idea of having "ample instructional opportunities" emerged, also, from principal interviews. Principal 6 stated,

Something else we do, and I think is helpful, with our RTI program, the first 30 minutes of the day, we have a block of time for 35 minutes, where we have tier 2 and tier 3 interventions. The classroom, regular classroom provides tier 2 for their students and tier 3 students are pulled out and work with specific teachers, including our speech-language pathologist and our reading coach. And, if room permits, and so far it has, we also group our special ed. students with tier 3, so they get an extra dose of instruction during RTI time.

Principal 1 shared that, "The special education teacher goes into the classroom in the morning for reading and then she'll pull-out in the afternoons for support also for a tier 3 type of instruction."

"Great resources" also emerged from principal interviews. Principal 6 stated,

We are fortunate, we have resources that some others may not have. We have a full-time special education teacher and we have one full-time special education assistant, but we also have a full-time speech-language pathologist here on staff. . . Several of our Pre-K teachers have backgrounds in special education. Of course, they target instruction for their students, but with those resources, we all work together as a Pre-K through fifth grade school. Not all schools have those same resources.

Principals shared that "district professional development" was one way they stay informed on current special education issues. Principal 4 said, "We have PD from time to time, as well, that I attend with special ed. just to stay abreast of those." Principal 5 stated, "We have professional development as principals. We have principals' meetings." Principal 6 shared, "[school district] does a really good job keeping principals informed." One final code emerging from the principal interviews was an "open door", as a way of communicating with teachers.

Principal 5 shared, “my door is open,” as she spoke about speaking often with one particular teacher each morning.

It was interesting to find similar codes across both principal and teacher responses. The four major themes which emerged from the study, representing effective principal leadership of special education programs are: “classroom support”, “visible involvement”, “collaborative faculty relationships”, and “current professional development”. One theme emerging from the teacher group was “parent relationships”, as indicated in Table 3. The researcher found it surprising that the concept of “parent relationships” was not found in the principal interview data. However, teachers felt this was an important quality, to build positive relationships with parents. Teacher 1 said of her principal, “he knows families”, indicating that this facilitated a positive relationship with the students and their families, which led to a more positive educational experience for the student. One theme emerging from the principal group was: “goal of student success”, as indicated in Table 4. Codes leading to this theme include: “student needs met” and “students not stigmatized”. Principal 4 said,

Our end goal is student success and that’s what’s important. That’s why we’re here and if we’re not here for that then why are we here? So, the ultimate goal is student success and we preach that a lot.

This theme was not present within the teacher interview data. One possible reason is the difference in perspectives of principals and teachers. A teacher’s focus is on the individual students and the dynamics of the teachers-student relationship in the classroom. A principal is tasked with the constant growth of student achievement and success, as a school. Therefore, principal has, or should have, the “goal of student success” at the forefront of the decisions that are made.

The study theme “Collaborative Faculty Relationships” emerged from codes of both teacher and principal interview data. Codes leading to this theme include: “open door policy”, “student relationships”, “teacher dependent”, “open communication”, “good teacher relationships”, “open communication”, “unstructured conversations”, “professionalism among teachers”, “collaborative efforts”, “strong teachers”, “building a collaborative atmosphere”, and “talking with special education teachers”. The concept of collaborative faculty relationships encompasses all of the ways principals and teachers work together, or collaboratively, for the benefit of the student. Principals rely on special education teachers in many ways, including staying current on special education issues and providing for the instructional and behavioral needs of the student. This requires faculty to work together to plan, troubleshoot, and support one another in these efforts. For example Principal 1 made the statement, “The success of the student really is based on the collaborative efforts between the special ed. teacher and the gen. ed. teacher. So, that’s really the major contributing factor for success.” Likewise, Teacher 1 stated, “We have a good working relationship with the regular classroom teachers and special ed. support staff and everybody tries to help the child.”

The study theme “Classroom Support” emerged from codes of both teacher and principal interview data. Codes leading to this theme include: “secure resources”, “good instruction”, “ample instructional opportunities”, and “good student-teacher ratios”. The concept of classroom support entails both human and material resources provided for students. For example, Principal 1 said, “Our students receive a great deal of support. They have, they actually have the chance to have inclusion and a pull-out time based on their needs.” Likewise, Teacher 4 stated, “[Principal] has done a remarkable job with the leadership and trying to help us out and trying to get what we need.”

The study theme “Visible Involvement” emerged from codes of both teacher and principal interview data. Codes leading to this theme include: “participative”, “supportive”, “active”, “positive”, “checks on students”, “serve as LEA”, “attend IEP meetings”, “involved”, and “visibility”. The concept of visible involvement includes ways in which principals are interactive and proactive with special education in the school. For example, Principal 7 stated, “I do walk-throughs with my special ed. teacher to make sure that goals are attempting to be met. Likewise, Teacher 2 stated that her principals participate in trainings for special education teachers, and, “They come by, they check in, they check-in on those students. They are very active.”

The study theme “Current Professional Development” emerged from codes of both teacher and principal interview data. Codes leading to this theme include: “remains current”, “self-initiated PD”, “life experiences”, “support of special education director”, and “district PD”. The concept of current professional development includes all of the ways principals remain current in their knowledge of special education policies, issues, and best practices. For example, Principal 3 stated, “She [special education director] has special education leader chairs. So, she meets with them and any kinda training she offers them or anything, they bring it back to the local school.” Likewise, Teacher 2 stated, “Any training we do, one of them [principals] always goes too. That’s been a big thing.”

Table 3

Teacher Perceptions of Effective Principal Leadership of Special Education Programs

Collaborative Faculty Relationships	Classroom Support	Visible Involvement	Professional Development	Parent Relationships
Open door policy	Secure resources	Participative	Remains current	Knows parents
Student relationships	Good instruction	Supportive		
Teacher dependent	Ample instructional opportunities	Active		
Open communication		Positive		
		Checks on students		

Note. Codes and themes based on special education teacher interview data.

Table 4

Principal Perceptions of Effective Principal Leadership of Special Education Programs

Collaborative Faculty Relationships	Classroom Support	Visible Involvement	Professional Development	Goal of Student Success
Good teacher relationships	Good student/teacher ratios	Serve as LEA	Self-initiated PD	Student needs met
Open door	Provide resources	Attend IEP meetings	Life experiences	Students not stigmatized
Open communication	Ample instructional opportunities	Involved	Support of special education director	Prepare for transition
Unstructured conversations		Visibility	District PD	Awareness of students
Teacher dependent				
Professionalism among teachers				
Collaborative efforts				
Strong teachers				
Building collaborative atmosphere				
Talking with special education teachers				

Note. Codes and themes based on principal interview data.

Research Questions Presentation

Interviews with both principals and special education teachers provided data related to each of the four research questions, which follows. The researcher organized the presentation of data by presenting both teacher and principal interview responses to each research question. Presenting the data in this way allows the reader to understand the data within the context of each of the research questions driving the study. Furthermore, codes and themes that emerged from the data are also described for each research question.

Research Question 1

What are the leadership practices and approaches of principals who are recognized by their peers and teachers as being strong in leading special education programs in their school?

During interviews with principals, the researcher attempted to understand the context within which each principal carries out, or approaches, his or her leadership role and how the perceived importance of this role has been shaped. For example, Principal 1 stated,

It's just furthering my own professional development through workshops, either provided by my local system or the state department. And then, just life experiences and collaborative efforts with the teachers. I've learned, I've probably learned the most from the people I surround myself with.

Principal responses, included: self-initiated professional development, life experiences, collaborative efforts with teachers, teacher dependent, special education director support, and talking with special education teachers. These initial codes were then categorized into larger themes: "collaborative faculty relationships", and "current professional development". It was interesting to note that most of the principals initially responded that they did not feel their graduate program in administration prepared them for understanding special education in the way they need to on the job. Principal 7 stated, "In my opinion, graduate courses did not prepare me...It's an overwhelming area and there's always something to learn." Principal 3 stated, "The

thing that probably worries me the most about special ed. is whether I'm breaking the law. I sometimes, a lot, feel inadequate as to whether I know the law or not." This further validates current research which suggests inadequate special education coursework in principal preparation programs, as well as, principals recognizing their knowledge in the area of special education was lacking (McHatton, Boyer, Shaunessy, & Terry, 2012).

Further questioning with principals sought to get directly to the heart of the research question being asked, from the principal's perspective. Practices in which principals engage were reported as: collaborative efforts, awareness of students, sitting in on IEP meetings, visibility, unstructured conversations, secure resources, and communication. These codes were linked to larger themes: "collaborative faculty relationships", "classroom support", and "visible involvement". Many of the principals' responses emphasized collaboration. Principal 6 stated the importance of, "Communicating with your teachers and letting them know what's going on."

Teachers were also asked the same question about their principals. The purpose of asking teachers the same question was to further validate principal responses and bring out new data, not mentioned by a principal. Special education teachers indicated that principals contribute to the success of special education programs by: being supportive, understanding, positive, being participative, attending meetings, checking in on students, and knowing parents. These codes were linked to larger themes: "visible involvement", "parent relationships" and "classroom support". Teacher 1 recalled one incident with a parent in which the principal intervened.

I've had some difficulty in the past with a parent that was a man that had issues himself, mental health issues. And, (the principal) was just fabulous with him. He could calm him down. He knew him, knew his family, and he was very wise in how he handled him.

A question regarding the overall perception of special education within the school was asked of teachers in order to gain a sense of the general attitude among the faculty towards

special education students and their needs in the school. Most teachers reported that overall the perception of special education was positive. Teacher 1 stated, “We have a very good working relationship with the regular classroom teachers and special ed. support staff and everybody tries to help the child”. However, Teacher 3 was the only negative report: “it’s not on the forefront. There’s a lot of unassurance from teachers, they don’t know what the protocol is exactly...they are just unsure what to expect”. Positive perceptions of special education included: faculty being dependent on special education teachers (teacher dependent) and having collaborative relationships.

When asked to what extent principals provide leadership for special education within the school, teachers provided a sense of how effective of a leader the principal is when it comes to the area of special education, from the teacher’s perspective. Teachers indicated that principals: make efforts to build relationships with students, are very active and visible in the context of special education in the school, are always there, and secures resources. These codes were linked to larger themes: “classroom support” and “visible involvement”. Teacher 2 spoke about the principal, as well as, the two assistant principals and their approach to leadership. “All three of them, especially with the students on my caseload, I usually see all three every day. They come by. They check in. They check-in on those students. They are very active.”

Table 5

Effective leadership practices of principals leading special education programs

	Themes				
	Collaborative Faculty Relationships	Current Professional Development	Classroom Support	Visible Involvement	Parent Relationships
Principal Codes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • collaborative efforts with teachers • teacher dependent • special education director support • talking with special education teachers • unstructured conversations • communication 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • self-initiated professional development • life experiences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • awareness of students • secure resources • student relationships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • sitting in on IEP meetings • visibility • active • always there 	
Teacher Codes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • collaborative relationships • teacher dependent 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • supportive • understanding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attends meetings • participative 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knows parents

Note. Codes and themes related to Research Question 1.

Research Question 2

To what degree are effective principals involved in special education decisions, activities, and instruction?

The researcher attempted to gain knowledge about the principal's prior experience with special education students, and how their life experiences are linked to their current level of involvement with students with special needs as a principal. Most of the principals discussed their experiences with students with special needs when teaching in the classroom, as well as, the types of disabilities encountered as an administrator. Principal 4 and Principal 5 were both former special education teachers, which seemed to provide them with better insight into special education once they entered the principalship. Principal 6 stated, "I worked closely with our special ed. teachers to make sure that students had the accommodations they needed in the inclusive classroom". Principals responded that working collaboratively with other teachers, special education teachers, helped them when working with special education students. This links to one of the larger themes of the study, "collaborative faculty relationships".

In order to help the researcher understand how well the principal was able to articulate a description of the students with special needs in the school, principals were asked to describe the population of special education students in the school, as far as, disability and extent of needs. Responses for this question differed, as some principals were able to give specific details of individual special needs, and others provided more of a generic description of special education students, as a whole in the school. Principal 1 said "the majority of our kids are LD or speech. We only have 1 Autistic child and 1 Other Health Impaired". Principal 2 said "a wide range of special needs, ranging anywhere from, you know Other Health Impaired to, Autistic, to Down

syndrome kids”. Principal 3 said “here not as bad...most of our students are in the regular classroom...inclusion...we have a couple of students whose IQ and ability is on the low end of the spectrum”. Principal 4 said students with special needs in the school were “just not hitting the benchmarks”. Principal 5 said “less than 10 AAA...we have Autism...Bipolar, Schizophrenic. We have the whole gamut”. Principal 6 said “we have the Autism Unit...we also have pre-K classes, inclusive pre-K...we also have a pretty large number of special needs students with Specific Learning Disability. Also, I think that our number of speech students is higher”. Principal 7 said “we do not have severe cases of special ed. students...Our population is more speech students, as well as, academic students...we don’t have too many special ed. students who are severely Autistic or OHI”. Four out of the seven principals were able to provide categories, or specific exceptionalities of the students being served in special education in the school, an indicator of the level of involvement of the principal in special education matters.

Teachers were also asked to describe the population of special education students in the school. This was asked of both principals and teachers in order to compare and contrast perceptions of each group, as it relates to the level of involvement in special education. Special education teachers described the population of students by exceptionality and how the numbers were distributed across grade levels. Teachers were also able to describe specific medical diagnoses of students. Teacher responses were more specific across the board than those of principals.

Principals were also asked to reveal how well they felt the special education programs were working in the school and to what extent special education students received what they need in the school. This also helped the researcher clarify, further, the extent of involvement of principals in special education and better understand how the principal approaches such tasks.

Responses indicated that students: received much classroom support, were provided everything, had strong teachers, teachers with good teacher relationships, had great resources, and needs were met. These codes were linked to larger themes, including: “collaborative faculty relationships” and “classroom support”. Principal 4 emphasized the practice of collaboration.

Our resource teachers do a really good job of scheduling with our classroom teachers to meet those needs of our students. I think that balance of good relationship with resource teachers and classroom teachers is probably key to that.

Teachers were also asked about the extent to which students receive what they need. This, also, was asked of both principals and teachers. This question helped the researcher explore any discrepancies among principals and special education teachers in how they felt students with special needs were getting what they need. Teachers responded that students: receive good instruction and have ample instructional opportunities. Teacher 4 responded that the regular practice of working with special education students in the school was: “anytime we find extra time, we’re here to help them.” These codes were linked to the larger theme “classroom support”.

The researcher, further, asked principals to describe the special education programs implemented in the school. This was asked of principals in order to gain a sense of how knowledgeable they were about how students with special needs are being served in the school, as far as, specific programming and services. The principals responded by explaining the general schedule of inclusion time and pull-out time for students during the day. Three principals described other programs occurring in the school, such as, pre-K for students with special needs, sensory integration programs, and self-contained units for Autism, behavior, or Severe and Profound students. Some of the extra programs mentioned by principals were actually system-

wide programs housed within the school, however, the principals stated that the programs were still considered under their leadership, since they were in the school building. As Principal 5 described the special education programs, the statement was made that “special education students are not stigmatized”. The principal communicated that students with special needs participated, and were included, as every other student in the school. Principal 6 described the Response To Intervention (RTI) program implemented in the school that provided “an extra dose of instruction” for all students, outside of their instruction in the regular classroom and the intervention they receive from the special education teacher. This particular response indicated ample instructional opportunities for students, which was linked to the larger study theme: “classroom support”.

Table 6

Involvement in Special Education Decisions, Activities, and Instruction.

	Themes	
	Collaborative Faculty Relationships	Classroom Support
Principal Codes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Working with special education teachers • Teacher relationships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Classroom support • Students provided for • Strong teachers • Great resources • Needs of students met • Ample instructional opportunities
Teacher Codes		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good instruction • Ample instructional opportunities

Note. Codes and themes related to Research Question 2.

Research Question 3

How much time does the effective principal spend on special education matters?

The researcher asked principals to explain the amount of time they dedicate to special education, as it relates to the level of involvement principals commit to special education in the school. Principals, in general, answered that it really depends on what is going on with the

students on any given day. Some days require more time than others. Furthermore, during the spring, when most of the IEP's are written, much more time is spent daily planning and attending IEP meetings. Responses to this question varied, as some principals spend anywhere from 30 minutes to two hours daily. Principal 5 answered that 20% of the school day was spent on special education matters. Principal 2 did not answer the question directly, but rather stated "it varies, depending on what's going on", alluding to designated days set aside for eligibility or IEP meetings. However, the principal did report doing a daily walkthrough of the special education classrooms "to be that appearance and to see the kids and say hi".

Specific to having discussions about instructional issues, the researcher wanted to better understand the attention, or level of priority, principals give to instructional leadership of special education. When asked, specifically, the amount of time spent per week discussing instructional issues with special education teachers, principal responses ranged from daily to 1 hour per week. These discussions on instructional issues in special education took place in both a structured setting, such as, Professional Learning Team (PLT) meetings and unstructured setting. For example, Principal 4 could not directly state an average amount of time, but stated "more non-structured time you can spend with somebody is probably more meaningful than a structured...we probably have more progress doing that than anything."

This was asked of both principals and teachers to compare and contrast responses and to see if discrepancies exist between the two groups. Teacher responses to this question, for the most part, coincided with responses from principals, previously discussed. However, it is important to note that the response of "2 hours" marked by an asterisk, in Table 7 is questionable as the teacher used body language, nodding head "no", when answering this question. Another observation is that most teachers did not differentiate between speaking with principals about

special education, in general, versus instructional issues. Most responses indicated a lack of discussion on instructional issues and more of a discussion on what is going on with students, specifically behavioral issues. Teacher 4 stated that the amount of time speaking with the principal, “depends, maybe once a week to daily. It just depends on if we have any issues with behaviors.”

Table 7

Principals’ time spent on special education matters

	Time Spent Daily on Special Education Tasks	Time Spent Weekly Discussing Instructional Issues with Special Education Teachers
Principal Response	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 30 min.-1 hour • 1 hour • 20% of day • 2 hours 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 hour • 2-3 hours • 20% of week • 2-4 times • daily
Teacher Response	-	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 30 min. • 1-2 times • 2 hours* • 1 time • daily

Note. Based on principal and special education teacher interview data.

Research Question 4

How proactive are effective principals in setting up appropriate special education programs for their students?

The researcher asked principals to describe how they remain current in their knowledge of special education policies, issues, and best practices. This question was asked of principals to understand how principals perceived the importance of having current knowledge needed to set up appropriate special education programs for students. Principals responded with: district workshops, state department workshops, professional development through professional

organizations, such as, CLAS, special education director support, emails from subscriptions to special education websites, self-initiated professional development, and professional journals. These codes were linked to a larger theme: “Current Professional Development”. There was a strong response of electronic forms of professional development among the principals. Principal 6 said he stays up-to-date “with different emails and information I receive, the things I signed up for. I normally keep up-to-date through email.”

This question was asked of teachers, also, to understand how teachers perceived their principals of having current knowledge needed to set up appropriate special education programs for students, and to compare and contrast teacher responses to those of principals. Teachers responded that principals are: teacher dependent, interested, and current on a daily basis. Most of the teachers communicated that the principal mostly depended upon the special education teachers to educate them on legal issues and to carry out best practices on a daily basis. Teacher 1 stated, “I educate him (principal) often about best practices”. Teacher 2 stated, “when it comes to the law part, they rely on us more”. Teacher 4 felt like the principal remained current on a daily basis, specifically because the principal’s spouse was a special education teacher and conversations on current issues would naturally occur often. The initial codes were linked to the larger theme of the study “Collaborative Faculty Relationships”.

In an attempt to capture other valuable information related to the research topic, the researcher asked principals to share other information they feel contributes to the success or lack of success of special education programs in their schools. This question was intended to capture any aspect of the principal’s leadership of special education programs that was not previously brought out in the interview. Any potential additional information that would be shared by the principal could be an indicator of how proactive principals were in providing leadership for

special education. Principal 6 represented this. “We want to make sure we have a good handle on each student’s disability. We know exactly what their needs are, strengths and weaknesses, but we can pass that on to (the next school). So if we can have a support system in place as soon as they arrive at the middle school and continue that, they can have a greater chance of completing high school.” Information that emerged from the principals’ responses include: great student-teacher ratios, fostering professionalism among teachers, efforts to include special education teachers in professional development with general education teachers, being dependent upon teachers, open communication, goal of student success, good teachers, and preparing students and teachers for transition. These initial codes were linked to larger themes emerging from the study including: “Collaborative Faculty Relationships”, “Classroom Support”, and “Goal of Student Success”.

Again, the same question was asked of teachers, to capture any aspect of special education program leadership that was not brought out previously in the interview. Positive teacher responses included: open communication with all. Negative responses from teachers were connected to curriculum issues and class size of a self-contained Autism unit, which were not directly related to the principal, but to central office staff. Teacher 4 stated, with concern over a large class size, “My principal is trying to back me up on it, but it’s the higher up that doesn’t see it.” Even out of the negative responses, teachers were complimentary of the principals in that they were trying to help them as best they could and were always supportive. Codes which emerged from responses to this question were linked to the larger theme “Collaborative Faculty Relationships”.

Table 8

Proactive principals setting up appropriate special education programs for their students

	Themes			
	Collaborative Faculty Relationships	Current Professional Development	Classroom Support	Goal of Student Success
Principal Codes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • professionalism among teachers • Teacher dependent • Open communication 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • district & state department workshops • professional development through professional organizations • special education director support • emails from subscriptions to special education websites • self-initiated professional development • professional journals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Great student teacher ratios • Good teachers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Goal of student success • Preparing students and teachers for transition
Teacher Codes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher dependent • Interested • Open communication with all 			

Note. Codes and themes related to Research Question 4.

Larger Conceptual Framework

As brought out in the data from interviews with both principals and special education teachers, principals are both different and alike in the approaches to providing leadership to special education programs in schools. There is also a discrepancy in the way principals and

special education teachers, each, perceive effective leadership of special education. While many codes emerged from the interview data, ultimately, they were categorized and linked to four larger, overarching themes: “Collaborative Faculty Relationships”, “Current Professional Development”, “Classroom Support”, and “Visible Involvement”. Among the teacher group, another theme emerged, “Parent Relationships”. Also, out of the principal group, an additional theme emerged, “Goal of Student Success”, all indicated in Figure 1.

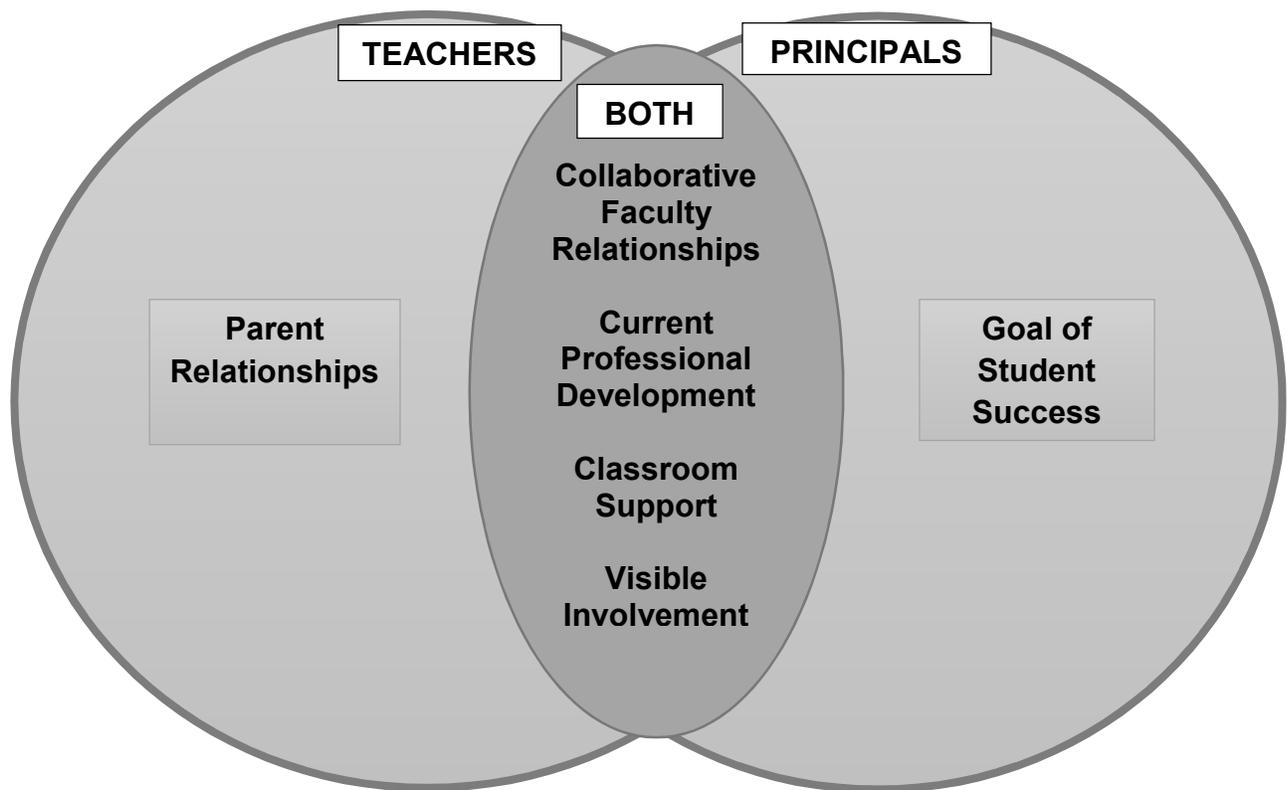


Figure 1. Effective Principal Leadership of Special Education Programs. This figure illustrates a conceptual framework for effective principal leadership of special education programs.

Conceptual Framework for Effective Principal Leadership of Special Education Programs

Both principals and teachers indicated that “Collaborative Faculty Relationships” was important to the effective principal leadership of special education programs. Evidence of this theme was found in the interview responses. Principals spoke to the importance of building an

atmosphere conducive to professional collaboration among faculty members. Specifically, having open lines of communication between the principal and special education teachers and between special education teachers and general education teachers were all included in interview responses. Principals and teachers described communication as centered around the needs and concerns of students.

Principals and teachers also indicated “Current Professional Development” was important to the effective principal leadership of special education programs. Evidence of this theme was found in interview responses, indicating different modes of professional development in which principals engage. Teachers indicate that the principal remains current on special education issues. Principals elaborated on the ways in which they do this. Many reported on-line articles through a website subscription, or e-mail correspondence. Some reported on the dependence on the system’s special education director. Others are involved in professional development through the local district, or through the State Department of Education. Principals reported that professional development efforts were typically informative on topics related to current special education law.

Another theme indicated by both principals and teachers, as important to effective principal leadership of special education, was “Classroom Support”. Principals and teachers provided examples of both human resources, such as, teachers and levels of support and intervention, and material resources, such as, instructional curricula and materials. Principals and teachers stated that low student-teacher ratios, providing appropriate accommodations for students, having strong, knowledgeable teachers, and providing many instructional opportunities for students, were all indications of “Classroom Support”.

A final theme indicated by both principals and teachers, also important to effective principal leadership of special education, was “Visible Involvement”. Evidence of this, provided by principal and teacher interviews included principals being out in the school, in and out of classrooms, and participative in meetings and conversations about students with special needs. In other words, principals who are visibly involved have a presence and interaction within the school, including the special education population.

An outlier, so to speak, among the themes emerging from teacher interviews, was “Parent Relationships”. Teachers referred to the way in which principals seek to build and develop positive relationships with parents, address parental concerns, and make an effort to get to know families of students with special needs. Another outlier, but among the themes emerging from principal interviews, was “Goal of Student Success”. Principals emphasized that the ultimate goal of our efforts, as educators, should be the success of students, all students, including those with special needs. Interviews revealed an effort to make students with special needs as much a part of the school as any other student, providing every and all opportunities.

Summary of Study Findings

Interviews with elementary principals and special education teachers provided a description of what effective leadership among principals leading special education programs might look like. Analysis of the interviews resulted in four overarching themes of effective leadership: “Classroom Support”, “Visible Involvement”, “Collaborative Faculty Relationships”, and “Current Professional Development”. An additional theme emerged from the teacher group, “Parent Relationships” and the principal group, “Goal of Student Success”. Interview data among both special education teachers and principals resulted in overlapping codes and themes,

as well as, some discrepancy among principals' perceived importance of and effectiveness in providing leadership of special education programs.

Interview questions with both principals and special education teachers were directly linked to the aforementioned research questions. Both positive and negative responses were reported and considered in relation to characteristics of 'effective' leadership. Nonverbal data were also noted, as it impacts the trustworthiness of the participant's response. Analysis of the data was an on-going process throughout the study, which resulted in the findings reported.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Effective principal leadership of special education programs has many components to consider, as is evident from the study findings previously discussed. The following chapter provides the perceptions of the researcher on the findings from the study. It provides implications for current practice and offers recommendations for further research on the topic. The purpose of the current chapter is four-fold: to interpret study findings in general and in the context of the literature on the topic of study; to reflect on the adequacy of the research design and methods; to reflect on the implications of study findings; and, to speculate on further research to which the study points.

This chapter is organized into seven major parts: introduction; summary of study; interpretation, meaning, and significance of study findings; meta-reflection on research design and methods of study; practical and policy implications of the study; next steps in research on topic; and, what has been learned about self and the researcher's profession from doing this study. The actual interpretation of the study findings will be organized according to each research questions and the emergent themes of the study associated with each question.

The organization of the chapter follows a logical sequence, in keeping with the purpose of the chapter. To conclude the dissertation, the researcher wants to provide an overview of the study as a whole, from its beginning to the end. The researcher also makes an effort to explain the connections of each part of the research process for this study and how each part contributed

to the end result. Findings from the study are discussed within the context of the literature on the topic, previously reviewed. By doing this the researcher reconciles previous research with current findings and can explain how the current study addresses the knowledge gap within the research topic.

The researcher chose to frame the interpretation of study findings around the emergent themes, within the context of each research question. In keeping with the nature of a qualitative study, themes emerged out of the interview data. The study was not based on any particular theory. Therefore, organizing the discussion around the emergent themes, within the context of each research question, is appropriate.

Summary of Study

The purpose of the study was fourfold: 1) to determine if discrepancies in perceptions exist between study principals and special education teachers as to what makes for ‘effective special education leadership’ by a principal; 2) If so, what might these discrepancies be?; 3) If not, what are the common themes/perceptions?; 4) to provide a description of what effective leadership among principals leading special education programs might look like.

This topic is important to the field of special education because it seeks to improve the leadership for the programs that enable students with special needs. This topic is also important to the field of educational leadership because it provides another domain of leadership within schools that has not been adequately developed.

Guiding research questions for the study inquired into principal practices and approaches to special education leadership. The review of literature within this topic, previously discussed, yielded several related themes, including the role of the principal as instructional leader and an overview of how special education has found a place in that role. The research topic and the

related research questions called for a qualitative research design. Grounded theory was fitting to the purpose and intent of the research study.

Four major themes emerging from the study, representing effective principal leadership of special education programs are: “classroom support”, “visible involvement”, “collaborative faculty relationships”, and “current professional development”. One theme emerging from the teacher group was “parent relationships”. One theme emerging from the principal group was: “goal of student success”.

Interpretation, Meaning, and Significance of Study Findings

The current research study utilized a qualitative, grounded theory method of inquiry, which resulted in a set of emergent themes from interview data with principals and teachers. The following interpretation of emergent themes is organized around each research question, presented as topics, in light of the literature reviewed relating to the study. The four major themes which emerged from the study, representing effective principal leadership of special education programs are: “classroom support”, “visible involvement”, “collaborative faculty relationships”, and “current professional development”. An additional theme emerging from the teacher group was “parent relationships”. Also, an additional theme emerging from the principal group was: “goal of student success.

Supportive Leadership Practices for Special Education

Many of the practices and approaches of principals who are recognized by their peers and teachers as being strong in leading special education programs in their school have been identified from this study. Principals and special education teachers revealed specific examples of principal behaviors related to “collaborative faculty relationships”, “current professional development”, “classroom support”, “visible involvement”, and “parent relationships” that have

been found to be effective. Each of these themes, within the context of effective special education leadership practices are discussed. Throughout all of these themes, one common element, which was also found in a study by Praisner (2003), is that of positive attitudes of principals. Supportive leadership practices emerge out of the principal's desire to include students with special needs, as an important part of the school, and the desire to serve those students.

Collaboration, in the form of direct face-to-face communication between the principal and special education teachers, as well as, collaboration between general education and special education teachers was found to be a contributing factor to the success of special education programs. Principals who provide opportunities for collaboration to occur within the school are considered "effective" leaders. This finding supports a former study by Crockett (2012), where principals who were found to have effective special education programs reported having regular meetings with their special education staff. The rationale was that it enables them to have a better understanding of all the disabilities in their school and instructional strategies that are successful with these students. While this does not conflict with findings of the current study, the current study emphasized the use of unstructured conversations versus regular meetings. This finding should encourage principals to seek out opportunities to talk with teachers and to be available as concerns arise. Likewise, Supovitz, Sirinides, and May (2010) support the idea that principals are most influential on student achievement when they work through others, collaboratively, to meet student needs. The idea here is that it takes a team to meet all of the unique needs of a particular student. These studies, as well as, the current study suggest the need for a culture of collaboration within the school towards a common purpose, the student.

Collaborative efforts are necessary for principals to be effective. Many researchers, as described in the literature review, have found this, as well. A publication by the B.C. School Superintendents' Association (2002) provides five essential factors of effective leadership. These include: shared vision, modeling the way, facilitating others' action, meet challenges, and encouragement. Collaborative faculty relationships entail the principal and faculty having a shared vision, meeting and working through challenges together, and providing encouragement to teachers. In the current study, principals did not communicate the idea of a "shared vision", although it may be implied in the concept of collaboration that emerged, as it suggests that individuals are working together for a common purpose. Facilitating others' action relates to the way principals provide opportunities for collaboration in the school. Meeting challenges, as well as, encouragement also relate to the concept of collaboration in special education as the group is meeting the needs, or challenges, of students and providing support, or encouragement to teachers.

The study also confirms the findings from DiPaola, Tschannen-Moran, and Walther-Thomas (2004) who hold the belief that administrative leadership is the driving force behind positive, cooperative attitudes among teachers implementing inclusion, a type of special education programming. The five key elements of effective leadership of principals they found include: promoting an inclusive culture within the school, providing instructional leadership for the school, modeling a collaborative leadership style, managing and administering organizational processes effectively, and building and maintaining positive relationships with teachers, families, and those in the community. While the current study brought out the need for positive relationships with teachers and parents, community relationships were not mentioned throughout

the interview data. This may indicate one area that is lacking among principal leadership as many community agencies are often involved in providing services to students with special needs.

Guzman (1997), found that principals made it a collaborative effort to build the school's philosophy of inclusion and to establish policies which addressed discipline of students with special needs. Although collaborative efforts, in general, were discussed in interviews, these particular concepts were not found in interview data of the current study. This may be one area for improvement as principals seek to establish positive perceptions of special education among the faculty. Also, addressing the discipline of students with special needs should be important to a principal as there are often many factors involved related to the nature of a student's disability. Cookson and Smith (2011), likewise, felt it important to involve teachers in planning, from the beginning of implementation, so they might have ownership and accept the special education program in the school. Ultimately, concerns of all stakeholders, including teachers, parents, students, and the community were heard in order to make the program successful. The principals in the study also felt that having a working philosophy of special education was essential to implementing a program. However, this was not a finding of the current study. Rather, the current study revealed that principals often depend on teachers' special education knowledge.

This research study finds principals who are also engaged in current professional development are effective, as illustrated by Wakeman et al. (2006, as cited in, Crockett, 2012). They found that school administrators who possess a greater knowledge about special education, in general, are found to practice leadership behaviors such as, purposeful reflection on experiences, continuing education on the needs of specific disabilities, securing resources for effective instruction, and a greater participation in making decisions regarding special education programs and services. Likewise, administrators with a thorough knowledge of special education

also gives way to stronger participation in making decisions regarding special education programs and services (Crockett, 2012). As was found in the interview data for the current study, staying current on special education issues and trends will allow principals to effectively lead programs for students with special needs, as they will have a more in-depth understanding of those needs. One implication, from the current study, is that part of being an effective leader is getting to know those special populations of students and how they can best be served in the classroom.

Another, seemingly obvious, but important practice of effective special educational leaders was visible involvement, including ways in which principals are interactive and proactive with special education in the school. This goes beyond being aware of the students in the school with special needs. Effective principals know the needs of those students, have a relationship with them, and are active in making decisions regarding their education. A couple of principals communicated their need to know what is going on and not be surprised by student or parent issues arising. Principals can accomplish this by being visible and active in the school to have a comprehensive knowledge of all of the dynamics going on within the school. Furthermore, teachers, students, and parents will have a likelihood of supporting the principal's decisions when they feel he or she truly knows the student and the situation. In other words, visible involvement, helps to validate the principal and the decisions made for the school.

Principals provided examples of visible involvement, such as, stopping by classrooms daily, participating in IEP meetings, and just being visible and active. In a previous study, Guzman (1997) also found this as an important factor among the principals, describing the active involvement they played in the development of IEP's for students. The principals took initiative to be personally engaged with parents of students with special needs. Visible involvement

implies that principals should make every effort to be out in the school (visible) and engaging with teachers and students (involved) to effectively lead special education programs.

Special education teachers have seen effective principals engage in activities to support parental involvement of students with special needs. Principals who take the time to get to know the students and their families provide an environment for parents to feel safe and know their voice is heard. Parents want to feel that the needs of their child are being met at school and principals, as the school leaders, should be able to facilitate that relationship. While positive parent relationships were revealed among the principals in the current study, this was not found to be the case in a study by Zaretsky (2004) who found principals, generally, dismiss input from parents or parent advocates.

A previous study by McLaughlin, Smith, and Wilkinson (2012) also makes the point that administrators should have the knowledge necessary to communicate to parents and practitioners the differences between the technical and the core substantive components of the student's IEP. While the current study reveals the need to have a positive, working relationship with parents, it is also necessary that principals be able to clearly explain the processes involved in special education and implementing an IEP for their child. Brotherson, Sheriff, Milburn, and Schertz (2001) also found that principals recognized and understood the need to support parents from the beginning. Especially, at the elementary level, this is important as these interactions will set the tone for future interactions, for the remainder of a student's education. The implication here for principals is to make parent relationships a priority as the effort put forth now, will, likely, have a positive pay off further down the road.

Principal Involvement in Special Education in the School

The research study revealed that effective principals are involved in special education decisions, activities, and providing students with instructional opportunities. The researcher found it interesting that, in general, teachers were able to describe the population of special needs students in more detail than principals. Furthermore, some principals were more descriptive of their special needs population than their peers. The researcher felt that the differences in the level of descriptions inferred a possible connection to the extent of involvement in special education. Stated another way, there may be a correlation between the level of description of the special education population and the level of involvement of the principal, so that the more descriptive a principal is, the more involved he or she may be.

Frost and Thomas (2011) argue that a major role of the principal is to ensure that the needs of special education students are being met, effectively. As indicated in the current study this goes beyond knowing the types of disabilities of students in the school. Principals must find ways to increase their level of involvement with special education students. Principals in the study felt, in general, that students receive the instruction and support they need in the school. This is a result of principal leadership to facilitate collaborative faculty relationships and provide classroom support, two emergent themes of the study.

Principals revealed that working collaboratively with other teachers, special education teachers, helped them when providing leadership for special education students. One of the themes from the study, “collaborative faculty relationships” relates in that it describes how principals can be involved with special education affairs. The concept of collaborative faculty relationships, within this context, encompasses all of the ways principals and teachers work together, or collaborate, so that the special needs student can be successful. This includes

principal efforts to build a meaningful, professional relationship with special education teachers to create an atmosphere for student-centered conversations to occur. Communication was emphasized as important, but principals in the study claimed that having more frequent, shorter, and more focused conversations about students brought about more desirable results, rather than scheduled monthly meetings. This implies that principals should be in constant contact with special education teachers in order to know what needs and concerns exist. Another means of collaboration, specified within this context was teacher-to-teacher relationships. Principals should place value on creating an atmosphere where faculty members can and want to collaborate with one another. Collaboration is essential between the general education teacher and special education teacher where student schedules have to be worked out to include, for example, inclusion or pull-out intervention. Additionally, teachers must communicate about specific academic, developmental, or behavioral IEP goals of the student and how to meet those needs throughout the school day. Collaborative faculty relationships, as they relate to the level of involvement of principals in special education is an indicator of effective leadership. Principals can naturally be more involved in special education matters when they are communicating with teachers about the needs of those students. Schechter and Asher (2012) found that principals can actually empower themselves, through information, new knowledge, and collaboration with staff. The current study reveals that principals who are effective arrange for collaboration to occur in the school.

Having adequate classroom support for students with special needs was another major contributing factor to successful programming for these students. The concept of classroom support entails both human and material resources provided for students. The study revealed that the involvement of effective principals, such as, selecting strong teachers so that students receive

good instruction, seeing that the needs of students are met, providing resources, and scheduling ample instructional opportunities for students with special needs were evident. Frick, Faircloth, and Little (2012) also found that effective principals took ownership of making sure that all students were academically successful. The researchers emphasize the importance of principals being capable of making ethical decisions and balancing both the necessity of meeting the best interests of all students in the school, but also meeting the best interests of those students with special needs, especially in the diverse educational system we find ourselves today. The current study supports these findings. Principals are wise who place importance on and make a determined effort to secure the services and resources special education students need.

Teachers, in the current study, felt that their role to instruct students with special needs was supported when their principals planned and arranged for ample and a variety of instructional opportunities for students. This study highlighted the need for principals to know the needs of students and teachers and have the capacity to fulfill those needs. This was also found in a study by Bailey and du Plessis (1997) who conducted a study of school principals' attitudes towards inclusion. The researcher concludes that principals in the study approached the practice of inclusion responsibly because they recognize the importance of adequate resources and support to be able to implement inclusion effectively. The implication this finding has for current principals is that, as the school's leader, they are responsible for securing the resources students need and making sure the instructional support is adequate in the classroom.

Principal Time Spent on Special Education

The researcher asked principals to explain the amount of time they dedicate to special education on a daily basis, as it relates to the level of priority principals place on special education in the school. Principals, in general, answered that it really depends on what is going

on with the students on any given day. Some days require more time than others. Furthermore, during the spring, when most of the IEP's are written, much more time is spent daily planning and attending IEP meetings. Responses to this question varied, as some principals spend anywhere from 30 minutes to two hours daily. When asked, specifically, about the amount of time spent per week discussing instructional issues with special education teachers, principal responses ranged from daily to 1 hour per week. One principal stated about 20% of time was spent on special education tasks. These discussions on instructional issues in special education took place in both a structured setting, such as, Professional Learning Team (PLT) meetings and unstructured setting.

The current study confirms findings from a study by Cruzeiro and Morgan (2006) who investigate the role principals have in special education leadership. Survey data indicated that 79% of a principal's time at school was spent on general education tasks, leaving only 21% of a principal's time left to spend on special education responsibilities. While principals in the current study did not justify the times given, the principals from the Cruzeiro and Morgan (2006) study reported that some of the barriers to leading special education in their schools were: constraints of administrative tasks, preparation of teachers, resource and funding allocation, being in opposition to change, economic challenges, and geographic and logistical challenges for rural schools.

One disclaimer about this particular research question is that most all principals and teachers indicated that the amount of time spent on special education tasks varies, depending on the day. Another observation is that most teachers did not differentiate between speaking with principals about special education, in general, versus instructional issues. Most responses indicated a lack of discussion on instructional issues and more of a discussion on what is going

on with students, specifically behavioral issues. This implies more of a “reactive” approach, rather than “proactive” approach to special education. In other words, time principals spend on special education matters depends on when and how they must react to student behavior versus planning for the effective instruction of those students. There was an exception, Principal 1, who indicated she meets with all departments to discuss data and instructional issues, including special education, every Wednesday.

Considering the majority of interview responses, it is the researcher’s interpretation that discussions between principals and special education teachers on instructional issues, do not occur often enough. Principal 4 verified this, when asked how much time he spent discussing instructional issues with special education teachers, stated: “Probably not as much as I need to, just to be honest with you.” This sentiment was communicated throughout the interviews, revealing an area of focus for principals to consider. An implication for current principals is to make efforts to center discussions around instructing students with special needs, rather than responding to behaviors or other incidents that come up.

Proactive Principal Practices for Special Education

In addressing this question, principals and teachers provided evidence of proactive leadership, which fell under the following categories, or themes of the study: “Collaborative Faculty Relationships”, “Current Professional Development”, “Classroom Support”, and “Goal of Student Success”. Although some of these themes surfaced in data from other research questions, the way in which they present themselves, within the context of proactive leadership, differs in some ways.

Effective principals were proactive in setting up appropriate special education programs for their students through the use of collaborative faculty relationships. Principals did this by

having an open disposition to communication within the school. Being interested is associated with the disposition of openness in that teachers are more likely to think of the principal as open and approachable when they show interest in the special needs of students. Irvine, Lupart, Loreman, and McGhie-Richmond (2010) also found that themes positively relating to effective inclusive practices included that of open communication, among other things. Before problems surface, having a collaborative relationship in place will provide an environment for constructive discussions and problem-solving to occur when needed.

Principals also commented on the professionalism among teachers in the school and how they often depend on those teachers for input when it comes to special education. This relates to being proactive in setting up special education programs in that principals seek a reliable source to inquire about what may be best for any particular student. An effective principal surrounds herself with a good faculty and builds upon each individual's strengths for the good of the school. A principal can and should use the expertise of special education staff to develop appropriate special education programs for students. This finding validates one particular study by Prather-Jones (2011), that revealed the importance of an instructional leader to have the ability to recruit and retain qualified teachers in the field of special education. This is an important implication for principals as they must take seriously, the task of hiring knowledgeable and effective teachers. Being proactive involves thinking ahead and knowing how to put things in place that will result in successful outcomes. What goes on in the classroom directly affects student outcomes, therefore, principals should, proactively, seek out talented, skilled special education teachers to ensure their students succeed.

One area with the strongest response with regards to how proactive principals are in setting up appropriate special education programs is the study theme, "Current Professional

Development". This makes sense as educators rely on professional development to remain current and inform their practice in any area. But, as mentioned by some principal interviews, special education is continuously changing. A couple of principals had the opinion that their graduate programs did not address special education to the extent they felt it should have, compared to what is expected of them on the job. This finding confirms a previous study by Crockett (2002) who discusses the intersection of special education and leadership. It was concluded that there is a lack of special education training required in principal preparation programs, although they are ultimately responsible for the education of all students. However, the principals in the current study did not use this lack of preparation as an excuse, and, instead, they spoke of various ways they try to involve themselves in current professional development. As was also found in a study by Zaretsky (2005), having special education knowledge and skills encourages positive special education processes.

The means by which principals remain current varied across the participant group, however, no particular method appeared to be more advantageous than another. Whether a principal relies on the special education director to pass along updates, or, he or she receives updates through an online source, both were helpful in keeping the principal informed on important special education matters. Principals described involvement in workshops from both the school district and the state department, which was one of the recommendations in a study by Yell et al. (2012). Many school systems are receptive to personnel input regarding professional development. Principals should make an effort to communicate their professional development needs, as they relate to special education, in order to benefit from local professional development opportunities. Also, principals participate in professional development through professional organizations, such as, CLAS, or subscribing to professional journals. A commonality between

all of these approaches is that, for most principals, this was self-initiated professional development. They participate in these professional development opportunities because they are interested and want to know the latest information on special education issues so they can know how to best serve their special population of students.

Boscardin (2004) argues that appropriate training and professional development in special education practices and issues is a requirement for principals. Likewise, the current study suggests the same as it found that effective principals are seeking current information to help them lead special education programs, though they may come from a variety of sources. The researcher feels that using the many forms of professional development that are available to administrators make it easy for them to access current information. This is important, mainly, for two reasons: student achievement, as well as, legislation requiring public schools to provide specialized instruction, classroom accommodations, and appropriate services for students with special needs, as explained by Pazey and Yates (2012).

The study found that the principal, as an effective leader, provides students with access to an appropriate educational program. This entails being proactive in setting up the program with a good, effective teacher and low student- teacher ratios. Principals have the task of setting class rolls and creating the master schedule for the school. With this in mind, much thought must be given to how a special needs students' program is planned. This is fitting with Pazey and Cole's (2012) research, within the reviewed literature, which found that principals must pay special attention to the needs of each student and how they are being met, especially in the era of litigation within special education. Every student is unique and has their own specific needs, whether academic, behavioral, developmental, or physical in nature. Setting up a program, from the beginning with a knowledgeable teacher who the student will work well with can make a

significant impact on a student's success. Having said this, it is implied that the principal must first know the needs of the student and the teachers well enough to know what is best. With regards to the master schedule, principals must give thought to how a student functions throughout the day and when those prime instructional periods during the day may be for the student. Again, considering a team of teachers who works well with the student should also bear an important influence on the student's schedule.

Having low student-teacher ratios is good for any class, however, it is especially important when planning for students with special needs. Consideration has to be given to the extent of needs of a particular student and how those needs can be met in the classroom. Principals reported that having low student- teacher ratios enables students to have more instructional opportunities throughout the day. The implication, here, is for principals to staff the school with skilled special education staff and with an adequate number of teachers, so that students may thrive. Likewise, principals should also consider the needs of the teacher so that students with special needs are not clustered in one class, making it difficult to meet all of their unique needs.

Principals felt that keeping the goal of student success as their focus helped in their leadership of special education programs. One principal, in particular, emphasized this as the reason educators do what they do. Having the goal of student success as the main focus will cause principals to engage in tasks that are student-focused. This is one way the paradigm shift from what Crockett (2012) calls a "compliance-driven model" to an "instructional model of equitable educational attainment", is apparent. The responses of principals were not with the intention of just making sure the law is being followed, although that is important. Rather, the motivation behind their actions appeared to be more focused on making sure students benefit

from their educational program. One specific example provided by a principal in the study was that of preparing students and teachers for transition between schools. When a student spends five years in one school, the faculty knows the student well and they have figured out how to meet all of the needs of that student. Then, when the student goes to the next level, such as, a middle school, they are in a new environment with new teachers, new students, and new expectations. The culture of the schools will differ, as well. Principals can be proactive in providing for the needs of students, even as they transition.

The B.C. School Superintendents' Association (2002) also agrees that the goal of student success is important and should inform how principals facilitate the practice of inclusion in the school. This includes leadership from the principal, such as, creating a system of support for students with special needs in an environment in which they are accepted by faculty and students. The implication for principals is to center the planning and the decisions that are made around the goal of student success. By doing so, the effective principal creates a culture within the school that is not only accepting of students with special needs, but take the time and effort necessary to make the education of these students meaningful. The research study also supports the findings of Supovitz, Sirinides, & May (2010) as they examine how the leadership of the principal has an effect on the instructional practice of teachers and, ultimately, on student achievement. The study provides empirical evidence that supports the idea that the leadership of the principal has an indirect effect on student achievement through the instructional practices of teachers. Finally, the findings of the current study support research by Steinke (2010) which indicated that effective school leaders leading special education programs have a student-focused philosophy. Indeed, principals should keep students as the focus and allow that focus to affect decisions made.

Summary of Findings Discussion

The current study brought out that principals are both different and alike in the approaches to providing leadership to special education programs in schools. There is also a discrepancy in the way principals and special education teachers, each, perceive effective leadership of special education. This was also found in a study by Oyinlade and Gellhaus (2005) who looked at teacher perceptions of the effectiveness of principals' and superintendents' leadership in schools for students with disabilities. The results of this study revealed a discrepancy between what teachers perceive as effective leadership compared to principals' perceptions. Teachers suggest the need for improvement in principal leadership; however, principals in the study rated themselves as being better leaders than was indicated by teachers. While there were not disagreements in the current study of the level of effectiveness between principals and teachers, some differences existed in what was considered effective.

As a result of the research study, "Collaborative Faculty Relationships" was found to be important to the effective principal leadership of special education programs. Principals should be engaged in building an atmosphere conducive to professional collaboration among faculty members, having open lines of communication between the principal and special education teachers and between special education teachers and general education teachers that is centered around the needs and concerns of students. As we are educators living in the era of professional learning communities (PLC's), the concept of collaboration is a very familiar one, yet not always carried out in the most effective way. This study provides examples of effective principals facilitating collaborative faculty relationships in schools for the improvement of special education programs.

“Current Professional Development” was also a study finding found to be important to the effective principal leadership of special education programs. In the age of accountability and in light of IDEA 2004, where students with special needs have many legal safeguards, it is important for principals to engage in current professional development to remain current on processes, requirements, and research-based intervention strategies to use with students. Principals in the study offered a variety of modes through which professional development can occur. The researcher recommends taking advantage of online training, especially when time or funding does not permit for travel to a workshop or conference. Also, sharing information through venues, such as, administrator meetings, can be helpful, as well. Regardless of how it is accomplished, professional development is and will continue to be a necessity for principals.

The study also yielded the theme: “Classroom Support” as important to effective principal leadership of special education. This includes human resources, such as, teachers and levels of support and intervention, and material resources, such as, instructional curricula and materials. The researcher feels this is an area that cannot be overlooked for instructional leadership. Principals should make every effort that the school is staffed with quality teachers, that those teachers get what is needed to instruct students, and that those students have every educational opportunity to learn. Sometimes it may take creativity on the part of the principal, especially when funding is low. However, being resourceful is a characteristic of an effective instructional leader.

Another theme, important to effective principal leadership of special education, was “Visible Involvement”. Principals being out in the school, in and out of classrooms, and participative in meetings and conversations about students with special needs were examples provided in the study. As an LEA representative, a mandatory participant in an IEP meeting,

principals usually fulfill this role. However, being visibly involved is more than merely sitting in a meeting. It requires meaningful participation where the principal has an active knowledge of the student and the needs, and can contribute, meaningfully, to the meeting. As a result, the principal can have an informed response to concerns or requests during the meeting. Much can also be said for the impact that visible involvement may have on student behavior. If students expect to see the principal out in the halls and classrooms throughout the day, it sometimes serves as a deterrent for misbehavior, and a motivation for appropriate behavior. Students want and need to see that the leader of the school is interested in them and in what goes on in the school.

“Parent Relationships” emerged out of teacher interviews. As was stated earlier, this is an important effort from the moment a student is identified and qualifies for special education. One cannot emphasize enough the importance of building positive parent relationships. The relationship established from the beginning, often paves the road through elementary and secondary education. Principals should seek out many ways to reach out to and connect with parents. It is also important to help parents locate a network of advocates or other parents of children with special needs for community support. Involve parents in the school in any way possible to help cultivate a positive relationship.

Finally, the research yielded the theme: “Goal of Student Success”. This supports Thurlow, Quenemoen, and Lazarus (2012) who reported that school leaders should hold the expectation for all students to learn, with the use of effective learning strategies. The ultimate goal of our efforts, as educators, should be the success of students, all students, including those with special needs. This may be easier said than done for some, however, as indicated from the research study, it is the focus of effective leaders. Decisions that are made about a student should

have the student's best interests at heart, as we try to look at the big picture, the student's future and what will make them successful.

Meta-reflection on Research Design and Methods of Study

Validity and Usefulness of Methods In Relation to Study Purpose

The research topic of exploring the way in which principals engage in leading special education programs in their schools and the related research questions called for a qualitative research design. Qualitative research was appropriate because the researcher explored the, above, stated topic, using an inductive process, without any particular theory base yet found in the literature. Morse (1991, as cited in, Creswell, 2003) outlines the need for qualitative methods in instances where concepts or phenomena have been inadequately researched, but need to be understood. A grounded theory approach was particularly appropriate as data were collected through participant interviews. The researcher considered only interviewing principals, however, the decision to interview special education teachers, as well, was a logical and valuable choice. This allowed for a validity check, as principal and teacher interview responses were compared and contrasted.

The reliability and validity of the interview protocol questions were also considered. Kvale and Brinkman (2009) refers to reliability as consistency (p. 245). Also, they refer to validity in interviewing as the quality of interviewing which includes "careful questioning to the meaning of what is said and a continual checking of the information obtained as a validation" (p. 249). A semi-structured interview took place with each participant. Reliability was evident in that the interview was based from a specific set of questions for principals and teachers, although participants were also encouraged to elaborate on responses as they desired. Validity of the interview questions was also evident as they were formulated with the study purpose and

research questions in mind. The researcher feels the interview protocols were appropriate for both principals and teachers and the questions were a reflection of the overall purpose of the study.

Data analysis, according to Creswell (2003) “is an ongoing process involving continual reflection about the data, asking analytic questions, and writing memos through the study” (p. 190). In grounded theory studies, analyzing data consists of “constant comparison” where each bit of datum is compared with other data and similarities and differences can be identified (Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtler, 2006, p. 272). Data analysis took place throughout the study: during interviews, following interviews, during transcription of interviews, and throughout the coding process to develop themes of the study. The researcher feels that the process used to analyze the interview data was rigorous, yet productive, as it yielded a conceptual framework of effective leadership from which principals may benefit.

Challenges

For the most part, the research process did not pose any major challenges. Because the data emerged from the interviews, it required the researcher to keep a constant check on possible bias brought into the study because of her profession as a special education teacher. Also, there were times that the researcher needed to find ways to get the participant to elaborate further on specific questions or points. This occurred on a couple of occasions when interviewing teachers with whom the researcher is acquainted.

Another incidental challenge was one particular principal interview in which it seemed the principal provided elaborate responses, but did not always fully address what was being asked. For example, the principal had much to say about the many community outing experiences for her students with special needs whom she taught many years ago. In detail, she

described places they visited and activities with which they were involved. While interesting, the researcher felt that it did not add meaning to the research topic, specifically. However, once the interview was transcribed and analyzed, useful data were able to be gleaned from the interview.

Different Approach to Study

If the researcher were to do the study differently, consideration might be given to increasing the number of participants for the study. Perhaps given more time, the researcher would have liked to have interviewed a total of 10-12 principals and eight teachers. Additionally, it would have been ideal to be able to interview a pair, principal and teacher, from the same school. This occurred on a few occasions for the current study, however, having principal/teacher pairs consistently throughout the study would help to validate claims and statements from interviews. The researcher, still, would use a qualitative, grounded theory methodology through the use of interviews to collect data, as this is most appropriate for the study purpose.

Practical and Policy Implications of Study

Practice and Practitioners

As educators, whether teacher or administrator, we have an obligation to serve the students in our schools by providing them with an enriching educational experience. The role of principal as instructional leader represents the new age of principalship in which one must be both knowledgeable about and effective in the instruction of students. For this reason, requirements of what principals must know and do, in all instructional areas, must be refined to meet these demands. Honig (2012) refers to the role of instructional leadership as what principals do to “improve classroom instruction.” (p. 734). It is the specific instructional support practices that principals incorporate into their everyday activities that reflect that of instructional leadership. Frost and Thomas (2011) quote that “a central role of the principal is providing

instructional leadership to ensure that the rights of students with disabilities are protected and that these students receive an appropriate education (Heumann & Hehir, 1998, as cited in Frost and Thomas, 2011). The authors highlight the importance of the school principal's role as instructional leader among both general education and special education teachers.

These responsibilities assumed by principals encompass important aspects of instructional leadership which should be considered. Instructional leadership requires leadership in all aspects of instruction within the school.

This study informs current practice by providing a conceptual framework for principals to be effective in the way they lead special education programs in their schools. Examples of effective practices of principals are provided through the interview data previously described. The researcher hopes this will prompt principals to consider their current practices and compare them to the effective practices brought out from the study. As educators, we must always have an open mind to change our practices as education as ever-changing around us.

Policy and Policy-makers

Alongside the shift from management to instructional leadership is the special education legislation that has required more from schools in addressing their students with special needs and the rapid increase of students in this population. The legal mandate that all students should have access to a 'free and appropriate education' involves more than just allowing students with special needs to be in our schools. Having an appropriate education means that students are receiving the services and resources needed to learn, grow, and excel in school, to their highest potential. The topic of principals leading special education programs is a contemporary issue.

Since the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA), was established in 1975 that public schools have been required to not only accommodate students with special

needs, but to provide appropriate services necessary for their education (Pazey & Yates, 2012, p. 17). This brought about a new age of special education in which there was a focus on the ability of students with special needs to access the curriculum through instructional accommodations or modifications. This is still the focus for children receiving special education, however, the role of leadership for special programs has somewhat shifted to the building principals. Sage and Burrello (1994, as cited in, Pazey & Yates, 2012, p. 31), claim that it is the principal who is responsible for leading, creating, and implementing educational programs in the school. This must also include the special education programs in the school.

It is the monumental No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation in 2001 and the reauthorized Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004 that sets the stage for principals today (Pazey & Yates, 2012, p. 31). Principals are now operating in an educational environment which demands direct involvement with special education teachers, students, and parents. It can be observed that more and more responsibility of special education is being delegated to school principals, especially in districts where the special education population is growing and strict funding does not allow for additional district-level staff to oversee them.

According to Thurlow, Quenemoen, and Lazarus (2012), principals now have a priority to increase student achievement among all groups of students, including those with special needs (p. 3). This is taken from the leadership standards set forth by the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) which includes, as Standard 2, “Developing a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth;” (Boscardin & Lashley, 2012, p. 44). Crockett (2012) indicates that as the roles of general and special education administrators merge, school principals now hold more of the responsibility “to assume leadership for providing effective instruction to all students” (p. 57). Principals not only

have to shift into a role of instructional leader for their school, but their instructional leadership must also include the special education programs in the school.

One way in which this study informs current policy in education is that it brings to light the importance and necessity of effective principal leadership of special education within the school. Principals must engage themselves in practices that will enable students with special needs to be successful. As policy-makers, this is a valid point to keep in mind when making decisions about the education of this special population, as well as, decisions regarding legal requirements and obligations of schools to these students. As principals, the goal is student success. This should also be the goal of policy-makers.

Next Steps in Research on Topic

Questions Raised

During the research study, the concept of “effective” leadership was defined by principal and teacher interview data. While the data yielded themes, representing specific practices of effective principals, the question may still be asked: What else makes a principal “effective” in leading special education? In other words, are the themes which emerged from the study comprehensive of all that makes a principal effective? Replicating the study with a different sample of principals and teachers would help to identify if there are and what other practices contribute to successful special education programs in schools.

Another question raised by the researcher during the study was: How would parents of students with special needs define an “effective” instructional leader? Since, ultimately, it is the success of the student that is the determining factor, asking the parent’s perspective, and, age-permitting, asking the student, would be a way to explain further what effective leadership of special education programs might look like. Possibly comparing principal, teacher, and parent

interview data would be a way to triangulate data to check for accuracy and to contrast different perceptions.

New Direction for Study

After the study, the researcher feels that more inquiry into effective methods for developing the capacity for special education leadership of principals, is warranted. For new administrators, this may mean including more emphasis on special education in principal preparation programs at the university or district level. For seasoned administrators, further research may help identify ways to: 1) communicate and promote the importance of special education leadership in schools, and, 2) develop successful approaches to professional development in special education leadership. A new direction for the study might be to investigate effective methods for developing the capacity for special education leadership of principals, based on the six major themes which came out of this study. For example, because “collaborative faculty relationships” was found to be a contributing factor to the effective principal leadership of special education programs, how can this be promoted among principals?

Also, more information needs to be gathered on how principals lead special education, as a part of, what makes them a successful instructional leader. This study focused only on a small group of elementary principals and teachers from a localized area. To extend the current study, interviewing a larger sample and including middle and high school principals, as well, may uncover new ways in which principals are found to be effective. Additionally, exploring this topic within a different region, such as, a large inner-city school system, or a remote, rural region, may yield varied results given the resources available in those areas, as well as, the diversity in disabilities.

What Has Been Learned?

Professionally

From this study, the researcher has learned that leadership is presented differently, even across the group of principals interviewed here. Because of each principal's background, including, prior teaching experience and the diversity of special needs with which they have encountered, the perceived level of importance of being a special educational leader varied within the group. As an aspiring administrator, this helps the researcher to understand, not only that differences in leaders exist, but also how to work together with those differences.

The researcher believes, as a general rule, the principal participants put forth their best effort to support special education in the school. With that being said, differences in the effectiveness among principal leadership was apparent, from the study. Professionally, principals should consider the themes from this study and how they measure up in their own practice. Everyone has an area for improvement and we should be proactive in making those changes, as a professional and because we want to see all of our students successful. This research study is encouraging and motivating to the researcher as she seeks an administrative position, which will allow her to use and share the findings of this study.

Personally

As a researcher, it was important to engage in reflexivity. This "is an awareness of the self in the situation of action and of the role of the self in constructing that situation." (Bloor and Wood, 2006, as cited in, Glesne, 2006, p. 150). As a special education teacher and with an interest in educational leadership, this study has provided the researcher with more clarity and understanding of effective special education leadership from both a teacher and administrator's point of view. Going into the study and having worked with diverse populations of students and

under diverse leadership styles, the researcher understands the needs of students with special needs and how those needs have been met or not been met, depending upon the leadership of the principal. This study was enlightening as it shed light on ways that principals are being effective in the leadership of special education.

As a special education teacher and aspiring school administrator, this study has helped the researcher to better understand how to be an effective instructional leader for the special education population of students in our schools. Special education should be a priority for administrators so that we can ensure that we are providing a meaningful educational experience for students with special needs. This study has helped the researcher strengthen her own leadership capacity, even in her current position. By sharing the results of this study with colleagues, the researcher hopes to begin a dialogue within her own district about ways principals can be effective special educational leaders for students. Doing this study has also helped the researcher broaden her perspective towards special education. The study brought out the point that special education teachers and principals have different perceptions, because of the nature of their role and responsibilities. Something else learned from the study is that it is not about the principal knowing each disability of every student in detail or being skilled in teaching specific strategies to use with each student, but, a principal can be an effective instructional leader by having the ability and desire to develop relationships, work together, learn, and grow.

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APPENDIX A

Principal Interview Protocol

1. Please state you're the number of years you have served as a school administrator.
2. Describe your teaching experience prior to becoming a principal, including content area, grade level and number of years in the classroom.
3. Describe the extent of your experience with special education students.
4. Describe the population of special education students in your school, as far as, disability and extent of needs.
5. To what extent do you believe students with special needs receive the instruction and support they need in your school?
6. Describe the special education programs implemented in your school.
7. What do you feel has best prepared you to provide leadership for the special education students in your school?
8. How much time do you spend during a typical school day on special education tasks?
9. How much time do you spend during a typical school week discussing instructional issues with special education teachers?
10. In what ways do you remain current in your knowledge of special education policies, issues, and best practices?
11. What practices in which you engage, do you feel contribute to the success of the special education programs in your school?

12. Please tell me any other information you feel contributes to the success or lack of success of special education programs in your school.

Special Education Teacher Interview Protocol

1. Please state the number of years you have served as a special education teacher.
2. Describe the overall perception of special education within your school.
3. Describe the population of special education students in your school, as far as, disability and extent of needs.
4. To what extent do you believe students with special needs receive the instruction and support they need in your school?
5. To what extent do you feel your principal provides leadership for the special education students in your school?
6. How much time do you spend during a typical school week discussing instructional issues with your principal?
7. To what extent do you feel your principal remains current in his/her knowledge of special education policies, issues, and best practices?
8. What practices in which your principal engages, do you feel contribute to the success of the special education programs in your school?
9. Please tell me any other information you feel contributes to the success or lack of success of special education programs in your school.

APPENDIX B

November 7, 2014

Office for Research

Institutional Review Board for the
Protection of Human Subjects



Jessica Lynn
ELPTS
College of Education
Box 870302

Re: IRB # 14-OR-381, "Principal Leadership of Special Education Programs:
An Exploration of the Practices and Approaches of Effective Special
Education Leaders"

Dear Ms. Lynn:

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board has granted approval
for your proposed research.

Your application has been given expedited approval according to 45 CFR part
46. Approval has been given under expedited review category 7 as outlined
below:

*(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including,
but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity,
language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior)
or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program
evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.*

Your application will expire on October 21, 2015. If your research will
continue beyond this date, please complete the relevant portions of the IRB
Renewal Application. If you wish to modify the application, please complete
the Modification of an Approved Protocol Form. Changes in this study cannot
be initiated without IRB approval, except when necessary to eliminate
apparent immediate hazards to participants. When the study closes, please
complete the Request for Study Closure Form.

Please use reproductions of the IRB approved stamped consent forms to
obtain consent from your participants.

Should you need to submit any further correspondence regarding this
proposal, please include the above application number.

Good luck with your research.

Sincerely,



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