

2016

# A Phenomenological Study of the Roles of Principals in Special Education

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# Walden University

College of Education

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Sarah Parker

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Walden University

2016

Abstract

The Roles of Principals in Special Education

by

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MA, Indiana Wesleyan University, 2007

MA, Walden University, 2005

BS, Hillsdale College, 2001

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

K-12 Education Leadership

Walden University

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## Abstract

An understanding of the increasing population of special education students and their needs, of laws and regulations affecting special needs students, and how to work with parents advocating for their children effectively, are all important aspects of a principal's job. Research has shown that training programs for principals do not adequately prepare them for the demands of being a leader in the area of special education and that principals do not have a clear understanding of what their job looks like on a daily basis in regards to special education practices. However, to date there has been little research conducted on the lived experiences of principals overseeing special education to explain how preparation affects their school leadership responsibilities. To understand the complexities of the daily demands placed on a principal overseeing special education, I conducted this phenomenological qualitative study. The conceptual framework, based upon Bandura's social learning theory, views the principal as the role model for teachers and the leader in building relationships with families and supporting student success. Ten principals from K-12 schools were interviewed in person and on the phone. A priori and open coding were used to support interpretive analysis. Principals reported three main areas of concern related to their expanded role: knowing how to work with staff, students and parents, responding to citations their district received due to not following laws, and learning how to handle challenging situations better. These results suggest that having more preparation and continuing training in these specific areas of special education leadership might contribute to principals' effectiveness and better serve the needs of the growing population of special education students.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

To be a principal in the 21st century in the United States is a demanding job with expectations changing every day. Principals have numerous demands from the federal, state, and local levels, as well as from staff, parents, and students (Pazey & Cole, 2013). Overseeing special education services for students is one job that principals perform every day. Over the last 15 years, there have been dramatic changes in laws that govern and guide special education instruction (Cobb, 2015; Gueye, n.d.; Lanear & Frattura, 2007; Pazey, Gevarter, Hamrick, & Rojeski, 2014; Yell, Rogers, & Rogers, 1998).

Principals are responsible not only for daily operations of the building, budgets, human resource issues, maintenance, and curricula, but also they need to have a complete understanding of special education laws and regulations. A full understanding of the increasing population of special education students and their needs, as well as how to effectively work with parents advocating for their children, is an important part of a principal's job (Cobb, 2015; Goor, 1997; Pazey et al., 2014; Sumbera, Pazey, & Lashley, 2014). This study was designed to explore principals' lived experiences regarding special education services. Information about what it takes to be a principal overseeing special education in the 21st century will hopefully shed light on the job duties of principals and how to prepare them for the future demand of special education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **Background**

In the past, providing services for students with disabilities meant pulling the student from the regular classroom to provide instruction on a particular subject or by

offering educational services in a classroom only for those with disabilities. Over the past decade, there has been a movement to provide students with disabilities the necessary support and assistance in the classroom with the general education population . It is the responsibility of the principal to ensure students with disabilities receive the necessary educational services in the least restrictive environment (M. F. DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; Lynch, 2012). With these changes, the role of a principal has evolved from that of the disciplinarian to a supervisor and leader of many different aspects of the school community (Cisler & Bruce, 2013; Cobb, 2015; Jahnukainen, 2015; O'Malley, Long, & King, 2015).

Principals have many roles with regards to servicing special education students. Principals lead and guide the staff in the implementation process of the special education curriculum, accommodations, and modifications. The principal must also assist with an evaluation of student needs, and determine the resources required to ensure the classroom has adequate supports. Principals have to be able to help staff craft individual plans for students based on each student's needs. Principals are held responsible for student achievement gains according to students' individual education plans (IEP), while at the same time ensuring that all students are receiving the best quality of instruction with the fewest restrictions (Lynch, 2012; Thompson, 2011). Additionally, principals are held responsible for building relationships and working with parents as they go through the special education process. Collaboration between staff and parents is necessary to accomplish the educational goals for each student. There is a need for frequent and

effective communication between staff, parents, and students to ensure collaboration within the school community. In special education situations, principals are working increasingly with parents who are more empowered and effective advocates for their child's needs than they were in the past (Murray, Handyside, Straka, & Arton-Titus, 2013).

These roles and responsibilities require a principal to have a strong foundation of knowledge. A principal who has a full range of understanding about the learning disabilities students may experience and the individual needs of the students tends to have an easier time forming a collaborative team . Principals also need to understand the strategies and methods that will help the students learn and be successful (Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Lanear & Frattura, 2007; Pazey & Cole, 2013; Sumbera et al., 2014). Principals also need to be well versed in applicable regulations and laws that govern special education. On a daily basis, principals are accountable for overseeing and management of special education services as outlined in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) 1997 and Individuals with Disabilities Educational Improvement Act (IDEIA) 2004. For principals to be successful, they should have a full understanding of special education policies, practices, and procedures (Pazey & Cole, 2013). However, the complexity of and frequent modifications in federal and state regulations have left many principals scrambling to keep up with compliance requirements (Lynch, 2012; Sumbera et al., 2014). Lastly, principals must master curricula, budgets, facilities, and other operating features of a school.



Principals who are knowledgeable about the range of learning disabilities, instructional methods to meet those needs, and the laws and regulations that a school must comply with when serving this population will be more effective in guiding students to achieve success (DeMatthews, 2015; DeMatthews & Edwards, 2014; Jahnukainen, 2015; Lynch, 2012; Pazey et al., 2014; Sumbera et al., 2014). Unfortunately, training of principals over the years has not changed despite these increasing demands (Cobb, 2015; Kemp-Graham, 2015; Leithwood, Patten, & Jantzi, 2010; Marks & Printy, 2003; Pazey et al., 2014; Sumbera et al., 2014). An initial review of the literature indicates that little, if any, specialized professional development training is available to prepare school leaders to address the educational needs of special education students (DeMatthews & Edwards, 2014; Jahnukainen, 2015; Kemp-Graham, 2015; Pazey et al., 2014). Principals are not receiving adequate training in the best methods, resources, and strategies to assist those instructing the students in their district. Principals need to be prepared to oversee instruction given with the goal of achieving academic growth and proficiency to at least grade level or beyond each year for all students (Cobb, 2015; DeMATTHEWS, 2015; M. F. DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; Goddard, Goddard, Kim, & Miller, 2015; Starman, Larson, Proffitt, Guskey, & Ma, 2014).

Although several studies of principals and special education have been conducted recently (Cobb, 2015; DeMatthews & Edwards, 2014; Jahnukainen, 2015; Milligan, Neal, & Singleton, 2012; O'Malley et al., 2015; Pazey & Cole, 2013; Pazey et al., 2014; Printy & Williams, 2014), none have focused solely on what it is like to be a principal

who may not understand the various special education issues such as increased numbers of students (Cobb, 2015; DeMatthews, 2015; Goddard et al., 2015; Kemp-Graham, 2015; Milligan et al., 2012; Murray et al., 2013). Current research on principal leadership remains primarily focused on questions regarding how principals support the general population of students. There is limited research on the role of principals in regards to special education responsibilities (Cisler & Bruce, 2013; DeMatthews & Edwards, 2014; M. F. DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; Jahnukainen, 2015; Starman et al., 2014; Sumbera et al., 2014).

Recently, several studies addressed some of the issues related to principals and the provision of special education services (Cisler & Bruce, 2013; DeMatthews & Edwards Jr, 2014; Milligan et al., 2012; Parylo, Zepeda, & Bengtson, 2012; Pazey et al., 2014). One study focused on the experiences of principals in Canadian school districts and how best to create an inclusive environment (Irvine, Lupart, Loreman, & McGhie-Richmond, 2010). This study addressed the issues of leadership, knowing the rules and regulations, and collaboration with parents and staff. However, the study was limited to issues of leadership, mediation, and collaboration and did not provide a thick description of the lived experiences of principals dealing with particular special education issues on a daily basis, nor did it address the role of special education certification or preparation.

Hoppey and McLeskey (2010) documented one principal in a successful school and explored the experiences that led to the overall success of the students. Hoppey and McLeskey focused on how the principal created collaborative efforts with everyone in his

building with a focus on inclusion, but Hoppey and McLeskey avoided the technical difficulties that he worked through before he created a successful environment, and did address his preparedness. Likewise, Cobb (2014) examined literature from a 10-year period, which addressed principals' ideas on programming, collaboration among the staff, and parental engagement.

White-Smith (2012) conducted a phenomenological study that included the lived experiences of three principals in urban school districts in California and how they integrated students of all demographic and cultural backgrounds. White-Smith explored how these principals worked to create a positive learning environment through various leadership strategies to establish a climate of successful collaboration amongst staff. However, White-Smith did not focus on special education situations or describe how it feels to deal with the various special education issues on a daily basis.

I addressed the lived experiences of several principals as they navigated their daily responsibilities related to special education. This study was needed to explain the increasing demands on school leaders. Taking a phenomenological approach, I explored principals' experiences providing education services for students with learning disabilities, how principals handled parents of special needs children and their requests and demands for servicing, and how principals met various building needs that arose while meeting all state and federal requirements. Other researchers did not investigate what it feels like to be a principal managing special education and general education responsibilities. Other studies addressed the ways in which principals successfully

worked with staff and met their general responsibilities (Hoppey & McLeskey, 2010; Irvine et al., 2010; White-Smith, 2012).

### **Problem Statement**

Special education oversight is one aspect of a principal's job in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. When conflicts arise, parents, staff, and students rely on the principal's expertise to address the problem, find a solution, and encourage overall student success. Training programs for principals do not adequately prepare them for the demands of being a leader in the area of special education (DeMatthews, 2015; Jahnukainen, 2015; Pazey & Cole, 2013; Williams, Pazey, Shelby, & Yates, 2013). O'Malley et al. (2015) found that principals do not have a clear understanding of what their job looks like on a daily basis in regards to special education practices. Other researchers looked at the importance of principal leadership and the need for better preparation (Cisler & Bruce, 2013; Cobb, 2015; Goddard et al., 2015; Sumbera et al., 2014). However, to date there has been little, if any, formal research conducted on the lived experiences of principals overseeing special education, to explain how preparation affects their school leadership responsibilities. To understand the complexities of the daily demands placed on a principal overseeing special education, this phenomenological qualitative study was conducted. I explored the lived experiences of principals working with students, parents, and staff within the rules and regulations that govern special education.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of principals overseeing special education, including extensive legal requirements, increasing numbers of special needs students, and more empowered parent advocates. Understanding the lived experiences of administrators in the area of special education was important to determine how the administrators faced challenges and provided support to teachers, staff, students, and parents. An implication of the study would be a better understanding of how principal preparation programs should be designed to meet the needs of future leaders (Bellamy, Crockett, & Nordengren, 2014; Cobb, 2015; Gümüş, 2015; Jahnukainen, 2015; Milligan et al., 2012; O'Malley et al., 2015)

### **Research Question**

The research question guiding this study was the following: What are the lived experiences of principals overseeing special education in the current environment?

### **Conceptual Framework**

Principal leadership, roles, and experiences have been studied numerous times over the years (Cisler & Bruce, 2013; Milligan et al., 2012; Pazey & Cole, 2013; Printy & Williams, 2014; Roberts & Guerra, 2015; Schaaf, Williamson, & Novak, 2015). However, researchers have not examined the viewpoint of the principal leading and influencing special education practices. Principals are faced with many different situations that they need to be prepared to address. Special education services are one

particular area that principals use their knowledge and understanding to lead parents, staff, and students while working within the laws and regulations.

The conceptual framework for this study was based on Bandura's social learning theories of modeling and observing appropriate behaviors (Bandura, 1971; Hallinger, 1992; Lentz, 2012). According to this framework, both preservice preparation and on-the-job learning help principals understand and prepare for the various demands of being a principal overseeing special education services. Based on this preparation, principals form an understanding of the special needs of students, federal and local rules and regulations, and how to address the demands of parents. In addition to preparation and knowledge, principals apply leadership practices that can be understood in terms of theoretical models of different nonauthoritarian leadership styles (Hallinger, 1992; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1990; Leithwood et al., 2010; Lentz, 2012; Marks & Printy, 2003). Through the various stages of leadership behavior, principals model proper practices for teachers and staff. As a result, changes in programs begin to happen throughout the school (Hallinger & Huber, 2012; Sun & Leithwood, 2012).

There are four types of leadership styles that principals use as they model for their staff. The first style of leadership is transformational leadership, which encourages a team to work toward a common set of goals (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1990; Lentz, 2012; Marks & Printy, 2003; Siegrist, 1999). Second, collaborative leadership creates a community environment to promote positive student outcomes (M. F. DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; Goddard et al., 2015; Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Sage & Burrello, 1994; Sumbera et

al., 2014). Third, shared instructional leadership empowers staff with the resources they need to be successful (Hallinger, 1992; Lentz, 2012; Marks & Printy, 2003; Milligan et al., 2012; Siegrist, 1999). Lastly, integrated leadership requires the principal to be hands-on and active in daily tasks (Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Hallinger & Huber, 2012; Lentz, 2012; Marks & Printy, 2003; Printy & Williams, 2014)

Through social learning and leadership theories, principals have the ability to develop a style of leadership that is effective when modeling best practices (Bandura, 1971; Goor, 1997; Hallinger, 1992; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1990; Marks & Printy, 2003; Milligan et al., 2012; Schaaf et al., 2015). If positive change in leadership behavior takes place, then the possibilities that result would be positive educational programing and student achievement (Brown, Squires, Connors-Tadros, & Horowitz, 2014; Goddard et al., 2015; Hallinger, 1992; Lentz, 2012; Milligan et al., 2012).

### **Nature of the Study**

I investigated the training, preparation, and leadership experiences principals had in the area of special education. Participants were asked during the interview process to describe their experiences prior to becoming a principal, reflect on their past, and discuss what they saw as a need going forward. I used the interview process for data collection by asking participants to respond to a series of seven interview questions. Moustakas (1994) described interviewing as a research approach to allow open-ended conversations regarding the subject at hand. In my study, interviewing allows participants to discuss

their preparation in the area of special education prior to taking on their leadership role (Lester, 1999; Moustakas, 1994; Simon & Goes, 2011; Van Manen, 2007)

To conduct the study, I identified principals willing to participate and be transparent in discussing their experiences as principals, as well as their administrative training and how adequate they believed it was. Of particular interest in the study was the preparedness and leadership approach of the principals regarding special education and their roles in supporting it. To gather the necessary data for the study, I conducted interviews with 10 principals representing school districts of varying sizes in the Northern Midwest United States. The interviews focused on the lived experiences of the participants, their background experiences, and what it was like to be a school principal overseeing special education services with all of the demands from parents, students, staff, and local, state, and federal regulations.

Data analysis included extensive transcript coding and theme identification. I used basic descriptive coding as well as coding for structural and content elements that were derived from the research question and related topics of interest (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003; Lester, 1999; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Some of the content elements included education, administrative certification programs, professional development, personal training participants had taken advantage of throughout their career, length of time in their role as a school principal, length of time leading a special education program, interactions with parents, concerns about the growing population of special education, and areas that participants indicated needed to be improved to prepare better principals.



## Definitions

*504 Plan:* Part of the 1973 Rehabilitation Act prohibiting discrimination against an individual with a disability by any federally funded agency or organization (Yell, Rogers, & Rogers, 1998).

*Accommodations:* The act of adapting curriculum and various situations that an individual with disabilities faces and allowing her to have the necessary means to participate to the best of his or her ability (Yell et al., 1998).

*Administrator/principal:* Spearheads cultural and strategic planning; leads personnel, students, government and public relations; oversees and manages finance, instruction, and academic performance (Lynch, 2012).

*Inclusion:* Integration of all learners regardless of disability in the general education classroom setting, while maintaining state and federal standards to ensure adequate yearly progress as well as overall student achievement (Lanear & Frattura, 2007).

*Individual education plan (IEP):* An individualized plan that includes the student's goals and objectives for the school year, the educational placement, and measurement and evaluation of goals (Yell et al., 1998).

*Individual Disabilities Education Act (IDEA):* Created in 2004 to increase the principal's leadership responsibilities, requiring principals to ensure that students with disabilities receive individualized academic and social instruction in the least restrictive environment (Lynch, 2012).

*Special education leadership:* A leader that is properly trained in special education means obtaining the background necessary from course work as well as field experience in the areas of special education (Angelle & Bilton, 2009).

*No Child Left Behind (NCLB):* A law created to ensure that schools meet adequate yearly progress (AYP) to receive the federal funds administered for education. A principal's job performance evaluation depends on the performance of all students in the district (Lynch, 2012).

*Principal leadership:* Demonstrating the importance of teacher leadership and collaboration for enhanced school performance is the characteristic of a model building leader (Marks & Printy, 2003).

*Special education:* A system of strategically planned, individualized academic and social supports designed, implemented, and monitored by teachers and administration to ensure that students with disabilities are appropriately educated (M. DiPaola, Tschannen-Moran, & Walther-Thomas, 2004).

### **Assumptions**

This study contained several assumptions. First, I assumed that the principals had the basic education qualifications to hold an administrators certificate, and were highly qualified educators according to federal and state standards. Second, I presumed that all participants understood the terminology used in the interview process and the study related to special education services. Third, I expected that all participants were familiar with special education compliance requirements of state and federal special education

laws and procedures. Fourth, I assumed that all principals had a basic understanding of their role going into their position and could articulate their preparation from their preemployment training.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

The scope of this study included K-12 public school principals in the Northern Midwestern United States. The study was limited to principals who did not have anyone else in the building directly overseeing special education services provided to the students. In some cases, there was a special education director who oversaw several buildings within a district; however, in some instances the principal and the management company were the only oversight.

### **Limitations**

There were some limitations in conducting this study. One limitation was finding principals willing to share their experiences within the scope of the IRB guidelines that the principals had to meet outside of their school buildings. This limitation did cause problems in the collection of data. I made it possible for principals to meet face to face or have a phone conference. Additionally, I respected their time and other commitments and kept the interviews within the allotted time frame established within the informed consent. Another limitation, but one I tried to handle appropriately, was completing the interviews in an unbiased manner. Interviewer bias could cause reliability problems and ethical issues in the data collected.

To minimize ethical concerns, I sent participants a letter outlining the nature of the study at the time they were asked to participate. Throughout the data collection process, participants were given transcripts of their interview responses. Participants were informed of the progress of the study until its completion, and were provided a final copy at the conclusion of the study. I made every effort to maintain transparency and authenticity with the participants throughout the study to ensure bias and other ethical concerns were minimized.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study was unique because it focused on the principals' lived experiences, feelings, attitudes, and leadership roles as they related to special education instructional services. Although there have been many studies on principal leadership and the influence on student outcomes, few focused on special education leadership. An important objective was to help administrators become more aware of their role and understanding the relationship between knowledge about special education laws, procedures, challenges, and related issues requires successful leadership. Principals who have received proper training have the necessary information to modify, implement, or improve the delivery of instructional services to the special education staff and students, as compared to principals who rely on the expertise of their special education staff (Cisler & Bruce, 2013; Goor, 1997; Milligan et al., 2012; Pazey & Cole, 2013; Pazey et al., 2014; Roberts & Guerra, 2015; Schaaf et al., 2015; Williams et al., 2013).

Before identifying areas that may need to be improved, it was necessary to explore the experiences principals had regarding development opportunities and their preparation before assuming their role as educational leaders in a school. In taking their role as school principal, the principals likely believed they had received adequate training in the area of special education. Equally significant was whether the school leaders understood their roles and added value to the instructional teams and the academic success of students. After principals shared their experiences, I was able to identify ways to improve preparation for future leaders and effect social change.

Research indicated a disparity between the knowledge administrators and principals need and the actual understanding of special education procedures, laws, and instructional requirements they are given. Previous studies indicated that this disparity causes issues with staff performance, attitudes, and instructional services provided to students (Goor, 1997; Pazey & Cole, 2013; Roberts & Guerra, 2015; Schaaf et al., 2015; Sumbera et al., 2014; Williams et al., 2013). Through interviews with school leaders presently working to meet the needs of this population of students, there was an opportunity to discuss their life experiences and any insights they had to explain their prior experiences preparing them to be a principal. Some of the principals interviewed reported gaps in current professional development opportunities; looking forward, there may be opportunities to develop programs to improve the preparation of school leaders in the area of special education.

### **Implications for Social Change**

There are three important implications of this study. First, before a principal begins working as a leader, he or she needs more understanding on how to work with parents, students, and staff within the specific rules and regulations governing special education. Second, principals are encouraged to take control of their preparation and seek professional development opportunities to improve their knowledge and skills. Third, I wanted to raise awareness regarding gaps in preparation of principals so that colleges, universities, and state departments of education could enhance their certification and professional development programs.

My study revealed gaps in professional preparation, as well as a lack of understanding of the importance of the role a school leader plays in the special education process. Raising awareness of the principal's role could foster communication between staff and administration and promote a stronger personal commitment on the part of individuals to seek additional professional development opportunities (Goor, 1997; Loiacono & Valenti, 2010; Pazey & Cole, 2013). Research indicates that when the principal becomes involved with preservice training, there is a higher likelihood of success for both students and the program (Goor, 1997; Loiacono & Valenti, 2010; Marks & Printy, 2003; Pazey & Cole, 2013). Enhancing administrative certification programs and professional development opportunities may strengthen the quality of education services schools provide by giving school leaders more knowledge and better equipping them with instructional resources (Goor, 1997; Pazey & Cole, 2013).

## **Conclusion**

This phenomenological study addressed the lived experiences of principals overseeing special education in the current environment, which included extensive legal requirements, increasing numbers of special needs students, and more empowered parent advocates (M. F. DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; Sumbera et al., 2014). Interviews with 10 principals were conducted to determine whether there were common experiences regarding their preparation and ability in overseeing special education. Understanding the backgrounds that principals bring to their role as school leaders is important to help shape the future of administrative certification and professional development preparation programs. This study supports the need for better training at the administrative level and for better services for special needs students.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

In this chapter I provide the backdrop for the study by reviewing the current research on the role of school leaders. I focused specifically on the role of principals related to instruction and academic achievement of special education students in eight sections: introduction of the historical timeline of special education, principals' involvement in special education, training and preparation of staff and principals for their role in providing special education services, attitudes regarding special education in the educational system, improvement of principals' roles in the special education process, principals' impact on special education, conceptual framework, methods, and conclusion. The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of principals overseeing special education in the current environment, which includes extensive legal requirements, increasing numbers of special needs students, and more empowered parent advocates.

As part of determining the appropriate level of administrative preparation school leaders need, I included a review of federal, state, and local special education laws and regulations. Parents of students receiving special education services are becoming stronger advocates for the rules and regulations, so it is critical for principals to be knowledgeable (Loiacono & Valenti, 2010). Also, local districts may have school board policies that impact programs offered to students, which also impact services available to students. A review of these compliance regulations provides insight as to whether there is



sufficient preparation of school leaders to meet the academic and behavioral challenges students with learning disabilities encounter in school.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

I conducted key word searches in various databases including ERIC and SAGE. I also used the Google Scholar search engine. Key terms included: *educational leadership*, *special education leadership*, *K-12 professional development*, and *school leadership*. Key words became more focused with searches using phrases including *principals' attitudes toward special education*, *principals' role in special education*, *principals' professional development*, *principals' preparedness*, and *special education student achievement*.

### **Timeline of Special Education**

A review of the history of the development of special education regulations includes the extensive regulatory compliance challenges school leaders face. The landmark 1954 U.S. Supreme Court decision, *Brown v. Board of Education*, declared all students are entitled to receive free and appropriate public education. In the late 1960s, parents and advocates began aggressively raising awareness of the rights of students with disabilities to receive the public education appropriate to their needs.

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act enacted in 1973 set forth the foundational civil rights protections for physically challenged individuals. Section 504 also established certain benefits and levels of federal assistance for individuals with disabilities. New antidiscrimination laws, both at the federal and state levels, have been applied to individuals with disabilities of all types (Gueye, n.d.; Yell et al., 1998).

The Education for All Handicapped Children Act, P. L. 94-142, was signed into law by President Gerald Ford in 1975. This Act constituted a declaration by the federal government that education, in every school district and in every state, is for all students regardless of disability (Gueye, n.d.; Sumbera et al., 2014; Yell et al., 1998). P. L. 94-142 required that school districts must provide nondiscriminatory testing, evaluation, and placement procedures when decisions are made regarding the special education services provided to a student. Additionally, students are to be educated in the least restrictive environment. P. L. 94-142 mandated certain due process requirements that included parental involvement in the decisions regarding the appropriate education program for their child (Gueye, n.d.; Yell et al., 1998). The centerpiece of P. L. 94-142 was the creation of the process known as an individualized education plan (IEP). P. L. 94-142 was a critical education regulation. It became the first significant intrusion of the federal government in the actual program and process to be followed by an instructional team when providing education services to students with special needs. The IEP required individual planning and programming to meet the needs of each student (Gueye, n.d.; Yell et al., 1998).

Special education laws were revised in 1990 at the federal level with the passage of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1990 (IDEA). IDEA expanded the definitions and added elements to some of the regulations for IEPs. This legislation required schools to use person-first language when referring to individuals with disabilities. Also, autism and traumatic brain injury related disabilities were separated

into distinct disability classifications (Gueye, n.d.; Sumbera et al., 2014; Yell et al., 1998). Lastly, IDEA required that the IEP contain a transition plan to be developed for students at the age of 16 (Gueye, n.d.; Yell et al., 1998).

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1997 (IDEA) focused on improving educational performance and success in schools (Gueye, n.d.; McHatton, Boyer, Shaunessy, Terry, & Farmer, 2010; Sumbera et al., 2014; Yell et al., 1998). The Act gave disabled students access to the general education curriculum, as well as the special education curriculum (Gueye, n.d.; Sumbera et al., 2014; Yell et al., 1998). Local and statewide academic assessment of students began including individuals with disabilities (Gueye, n.d.; Sumbera et al., 2014; Yell et al., 1998). The IEP was amended to add measurable annual goals, as well as benchmarks for short-term and long-term objectives, as part of the IEP process in order to document achievement and academic progress (Gueye, n.d.; Yell et al., 1998).

The most significant change in the 1997 legislation was the additional provisions that addressed behavior and the discipline of individuals with disabilities. The regulations affected the manner in which principals and staff interacted with students. It became a requirement of student discipline that a student could not be disciplined in the same manner as a general education student, until it was determined whether a particular behavior was a manifestation of the disability by a hearing of all members of the IEP team (Gueye, n.d.; Sumbera et al., 2014; Yell et al., 1998). Although it was recognized that a safe school climate for all students is essential, the regulations held that if a

student's conduct was a manifestation of the individual's disability, then school leadership must address the behavior in a manner that accommodates the disability while balancing the safety of all students (Guyeye, n.d.; McHatton et al., 2010; Sumbera et al., 2014; Yell et al., 1998). If a student's behavior was found to be a manifestation of the disability, the student may still face disciplinary action by the school; however, the educational services must still be provided, even if they are off site or home bound (Gueye, n.d.; Sumbera et al., 2014; Yell et al., 1998). The instructional team is charged with the development of a student's individual education plan (IEP) to address behavior challenges and set forth strategies addressing both behavior and academic accommodation to maximize student achievement.

The federal government approved sweeping educational reforms in 2001 with the passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB). This legislation established standards that students should meet to show they were making adequate yearly progress academically and was applied to all pupils regardless of disabilities. In addition, school districts became accountable for disaggregated data for all students, but also for various subgroups such as students receiving special education services (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Stecker, 2010; Lanear & Frattura, 2007; Loiacono & Valenti, 2010; McHatton et al., 2010; Smith, Robb, West, & Tyler, 2010; Sumbera et al., 2014). With the implementation of NCLB, principals and school leaders became even more responsible for student performance through rigorous instruction to ensure academic growth and proficiency.

This increasing amount of regulation, accountability, compliance reporting and oversight created a level of urgency to prepare principals to meet these responsibilities as they work to assure state authorities, parents, and advocates that they can handle the changing roles stemming from the ongoing regulatory changes. Principals must have more in-depth knowledge of the regulations to ensure compliance when leading a team to develop a student's IEP, while also making certain the school has the necessary data and resources to meet the state and federal standards (Fuchs et al., 2010; Lanear & Frattura, 2007; Loiacono & Valenti, 2010; McHatton et al., 2010; Sumbera et al., 2014). One of the additional requirements of the NCLB legislation was the mandate that all teachers be highly qualified to teach the subjects and specific groups they are instructing, so even more professional development requirements became essential for principals and instructional staff members (Fuchs et al., 2010; Lanear & Frattura, 2007; Smith et al., 2010; Sumbera et al., 2014).

The Individuals with Disabilities Educational Improvement Act (IDEIA) of 2004 required schools to provide free and appropriate public education (FAPE) with all accommodations and modifications necessary regardless of cost (Lanear & Frattura, 2007; McHatton et al., 2010; Pazez & Cole, 2013; Sumbera et al., 2014). This has proven significant because government statistics indicate only about 16% of the federal education budget goes to meet the obligations of these new special education regulations, instead of the 40% that was promised at the time the law was passed (Pazez & Cole, 2013). Schools have regulations without the corresponding promised resources to

accomplish all that is required; nevertheless, principals are expected to ensure that the needs of students are met. IDEIA of 2004 also changed some of the requirements regarding who must be involved in the development of a student's IEP (Loiacono & Valenti, 2010; McHatton et al., 2010; Smith et al., 2010; Sumbera et al., 2014). These changes in federal laws were met with mixed reviews. The law change meant that some IEP team members are not required to be physically present at the IEP meeting. However, this can also mean delays in the IEP process, as documentation has become essential to effective plan development and as a means to constructively address all concerns. "School leaders have the ability under current federal legislation and in fact, the responsibility to go beyond compliance with current regulations and integrate the various regulations at the school level on behalf of all learners" (LaNear & Frattura, 2007, p. 105).

Beginning in 2007, educators across the nation began developing what is commonly referred to as response to intervention (RTI) teams. The RTI movement originated in response to IDEIA, 2004 (Fuchs et al., 2010; Pazey & Cole, 2013; Smith et al., 2010; Walker, Emanuel, Grove, Brawand, & McGahee, 2012). Response to intervention allowed opportunities to maintain students with disabilities in the general education classrooms more consistently. Additionally, RTI created the opportunity for earlier intervention services to address learning concerns and, in many cases earlier detection of disabilities (Fuchs et al., 2010; Pazey & Cole, 2013; Smith et al., 2010; Walker et al., 2012). Modifications and accommodations could be initiated within the

general education curriculum, and by doing so staff could obtain supporting data to track possible disabilities prior to the formal special education testing process. The result was that more individuals with disabilities began receiving services earlier, thereby achieving the educational goals needed for full participation in society and life (Fuchs et al., 2010; Gueye, n.d.; Lanear & Frattura, 2007; Pazey & Cole, 2013; Smith et al., 2010; Sumbera et al., 2014; Yell et al., 1998). The RTI model was first brought on the scene in 2004, and since that time it has taken many years for full implementation (Printy & Williams, 2014; Roberts & Guerra, 2015; Schaaf et al., 2015; Walker et al., 2012). The federal government and many state governments have made funding possible to ensure training and resources are available for implementation (Cobb, 2015; Printy & Williams, 2014; Walker et al., 2012). Over time districts have witnessed a change in the overall approach and collaboration surrounding special education services (DeMatthews & Edwards, 2014; Printy & Williams, 2014; Walker et al., 2012).

### **Special Education Legislation**

The number of students needing special education services has increased significantly over the past 40 years. In 1976-1977, approximately 3.6 million children received special education services in the United States (Lanear & Frattura, 2007; Pazey & Cole, 2013). The most recent national statistics for the academic year 2011-2012 indicated that approximately 6.4 million children were receiving special education services (Snyder & Dillow, 2015). In the State of Michigan for the 2014-2015 school year, 12.9% of students qualified for special education services, which means 206,203

students had individualized education plans (IEPs) in the schools (State Department of Education, 2016).

### **Principals' Leadership for Special Education**

Historically, principals or school leaders were responsible for establishing the student expectations, performance standards for staff, and evaluation for compliance with those standards while supervising classroom instruction and establishing curricula (Lynch, 2012; Marks & Printy, 2003; McHatton et al., 2010; Sumbera et al., 2014; Supovitz, Sirinides, & May, 2009; Voltz & Collins, 2010). School leaders have frequently failed to meet these responsibilities for a number of reasons (Marks & Printy, 2003; Voltz & Collins, 2010). With the continuous school reform measures, principals have often felt pressured to be accountable for performance in areas they were unprepared to properly supervise (Lynch, 2012; Marks & Printy, 2003; McHatton et al., 2010; Sumbera et al., 2014; Walker et al., 2012). A key responsibility of principals is to articulate the broad vision and mission of the organization and establish goals to accomplish this mission (Sumbera et al., 2014; Supovitz et al., 2009; Voltz & Collins, 2010). Studies have been conducted to investigate the direct effect of the role of the principal in student achievement, while other studies have addressed the mediated effects and reciprocal effect (Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Lynch, 2012; Sumbera et al., 2014; Supovitz et al., 2009). These studies concluded that in a measurable manner all principals have an impact on the effectiveness of the school's operation and directly or indirectly, principals impact student achievement (Grigg, Kelly, Gamoran, & Borman, 2012;



Sumbera et al., 2014; Supovitz et al., 2009). It is worth recognizing that principals are pivotal in shaping school culture, and, are key to administering and managing special education policies, procedures, laws, and programs (Hallinger & Heck, 2010; McHatton et al., 2010; Sumbera et al., 2014; Supovitz et al., 2009).

To be effective principals need to be knowledgeable about the various laws, policies and procedures of special education in order to lead the instructional team in meeting the academic and behavioral needs of all students (Loiacono & Valenti, 2010; Lynch, 2012; McHatton et al., 2010; Sumbera et al., 2014; Thompson, 2011; Walker et al., 2012). School principals must confront the challenges that flow from the implementation of special education policies, regulations, and the related laws (Loiacono & Valenti, 2010; Lynch, 2012; McHatton et al., 2010; Sumbera et al., 2014; Thompson, 2011; Walker et al., 2012).

Principal's role is not limited only to the school building. Due to the oversight and regulatory compliance requirements, the principal is often the one who must attend meetings with county, state and local officials as the school district representative. The principal is responsible for staying up-to-date on an ever-changing educational landscape of regulations, policies and procedures (Loiacono & Valenti, 2010; Sumbera et al., 2014; Supovitz et al., 2009; Thompson, 2011; Voltz & Collins, 2010). Principals provide the necessary professional development training for staff members regarding the compliance requirements (Grigg et al., 2012; Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Loiacono & Valenti, 2010; McHatton et al., 2010). In the role as the school leader, the principal becomes the

example to model leadership that handles change. The principal must be the leader of social change, and a result, principals are frequently described as transformational leaders (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1990; Leithwood et al., 2010; Marks & Printy, 2003; Sumbera et al., 2014).

In addition to knowledge regarding regulatory requirements, understanding the various disabilities that serviced in a school district presents a challenge for principals. The broad special education classifications group students as: Learning Disabilities (LD); Otherwise Health Impaired (OHI) which includes those with medical diagnosis outside LD, such as those individuals with ADD and ADHD; Cognitive Impairments (CI); Visual Impairments (VI); Emotional Impairments (EI); and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). There are other classifications, but these are considered the typical classifications of special education students within the general student population. Principals need to have an understanding of these different classifications, as well as the general needs of individuals with disabilities, and the knowledge to prepare the instructional staff to meet the students' needs (Fuchs et al., 2010; McHatton et al., 2010; Sumbera et al., 2014). Guiding the instructional team to incorporate the wide variety of modifications and accommodations that can be offered to assist students in the learning process is an important aspect of the principal's responsibilities. Additionally, the principal must create a least restrictive environment for all pupils in the building (Fuchs et al., 2010; McHatton et al., 2010; Sumbera et al., 2014; Walker et al., 2012).

Leadership impacts every aspect of the educational process (Grigg et al., 2012; Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Lynch, 2012; Marks & Printy, 2003; Sumbera et al., 2014). Research substantiates that the impact of leadership on the learning process was underestimated (Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Leithwood et al., 2010; Lynch, 2012). Research has concluded that leadership is educationally significant (Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Leithwood et al., 2010).

As the leader of the school, principals handle monitoring and evaluate the effectiveness of the instructional staff as they seek to implement the required accommodations and modifications for each student. Principals are also responsible for reviewing the educational goals set out in each student's IEP and the achievement of those objectives. Principals are required to attend individualized education plan (IEP) meetings with parents, teachers and students to discuss current goals, accommodations, modifications and yearly progress (Goor, 1997; Loiacono & Valenti, 2010; Lynch, 2012; Sumbera et al., 2014). Principals must "sign off" or approve the IEP once it has been established and monitor the progress of the goals set forth.

In addition to the responsibilities related to student performance and the establishment of the IEP for a student, the principal is responsible for the preparation of staff. The principal must provide professional development opportunities for staff regarding changes in policies and laws (Goor, 1997; Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Loiacono & Valenti, 2010; Supovitz et al., 2009). Principals monitor classrooms to ensure quality education and communicate with parents and teachers regarding the special education

process and students' individual needs (Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Loiacono & Valenti, 2010; Lynch, 2012). There has been a significant increase in parental complaints, administrative agency appeals and court cases involving schools and individuals with disabilities. It appears to be the result of the ever increasing number of compliance requirements added to the principal's responsibilities, and the lack of adequate administrative leadership preparation to meet these needs (Lynch, 2012; Pazey & Cole, 2013; Sumbera et al., 2014; Supovitz et al., 2009; Walker et al., 2012).

Until about the mid-1970's principals served as building managers and disciplinarians. However, slowly over time their roles changed and it was proven that their leadership and functions indirectly affected student achievement (Angelle & Bilton, 2009; M. F. DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Lynch, 2012; Pazey & Cole, 2013; Sumbera et al., 2014; Supovitz et al., 2009). A list of the duties of a principal is daunting. Principal's understanding, defining and exemplifying the school's mission, as well as supervising curriculum and instructional teams, which includes supporting, mentoring, coaching and evaluation staff is just some examples of the principal's daily jobs. Additionally, principals may act as a direct instruction member of the team. A principal also has to be responsible for monitoring and observing student progress, promoting a healthy and active learning environment, and keeping parents and the community engaged and involved, while building a healthy school culture for all students (Angelle & Bilton, 2009; M. F. DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Lynch, 2012; McHatton et al., 2010; Sumbera et al., 2014).

Knowledge that is up-to-date on current special education regulations and laws is vital to the success of every school district (Angelle & Bilton, 2009; Loiacono & Valenti, 2010; Lynch, 2012; McHatton et al., 2010; Pazey & Cole, 2013; Sumbera et al., 2014; Supovitz et al., 2009; Walker et al., 2012). There are penalties imposed on school districts that fail to comply with all of the requirements, including financial consequences. Therefore, it is imperative that principals mentor teachers, ensure compliance in paperwork, monitor student achievement, and handle legal issues effectively when they occur, whether with parents, students or staff (Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Lynch, 2012; McHatton et al., 2010). Principals are held accountable by parents, special education student advocates, lawyers and government agencies to adhere to the best educational practices for the students in special education (Pazey & Cole, 2013; Sumbera et al., 2014; Supovitz et al., 2009; Walker et al., 2012). Administrators often believe they are prepared until they are faced with a problem that could result in substantial costs for their district (Pazey & Cole, 2013; Sumbera et al., 2014).

Strong leadership is indispensable to guide staff successfully (Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Loiacono & Valenti, 2010; Pazey & Cole, 2013). Quality special education professional development opportunities for all staff members prove to be a critical element necessary to ensure a successful program (Supovitz et al., 2009; Walker et al., 2012). Principal's supervision and evaluation of teacher performance as they implement interventions, modifications and accommodations in the instruction of students is a significant part of a principal's responsibility (Lynch, 2012; Pazey & Cole, 2013;

Sumbera et al., 2014). The principal's responsibilities toward student achievement must be met while still monitoring compliance and assuring all government reports are properly completed (Sumbera et al., 2014). As these responsibilities are mastered, principals must constantly look to the future and plan how to implement or improve instructional services for students with changing needs (Angelle & Bilton, 2009; M. F. DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; Hallinger & Heck, 2010; McHatton et al., 2010; Pazey & Cole, 2013). As many principals quickly realize their role in the special education process was not fully explained at the beginning of their career and they feel unprepared and overwhelmed (Angelle & Bilton, 2009; M. F. DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; Goor, 1997; Lynch, 2012; McHatton et al., 2010; Sumbera et al., 2014).

Program evaluation is an ongoing process for principals (State Department of Education, 2013; Parylo et al., 2012). Equally, principals must routinely evaluate personnel concerns so as to avoid turnover of staff. Working to prevent teacher attrition and vacancies of highly qualified staff members is an important key to a successful program (Cobb, 2015; DeMatthews & Edwards Jr, 2014; Goddard et al., 2015; Williams et al., 2013). As noted earlier that administrative certification preparation does not often include preparation to understand disabilities and the needs of students with learning limitations, therefore, there is an urgent need for ongoing program adjustments in the preparation of principals to assure they remain effective (Angelle & Bilton, 2009; Lynch, 2012; Pazey & Cole, 2013).

School leadership directs the future of the education process, so principals seek instructional staff involvement in the planning and decision-making process regarding educational matters (Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Lynch, 2012; Marks & Printy, 2003). Principals become agents of change in the development process and recognize teachers as equal professional partners with knowledge and skills that can add value to the process (Angelle & Bilton, 2009; Hallinger & Heck, 2010). Shared decision-making with instructional staff promotes the greater chance for real success and actual reforms as staff assist in shaping the culture of the school through the goal setting and school improvement planning process (Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Marks & Printy, 2003).

Special education has changed over the years from pulling out/exclusionary classrooms to keeping students in the classrooms with general education students, and bringing in the resources and instructional team members needed to support the student's learning within the general education setting (DeMatthews, 2015; M. DiPaola et al., 2004; Printy & Williams, 2014). It is the responsibility of the principal to assure this process is followed as seamlessly as possible so as not to cause discomfort or disparate treatment of students because of their learning limitations (Angelle & Bilton, 2009; M. F. DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; Lanear & Frattura, 2007; McHatton et al., 2010; Sumbera et al., 2014). Principals need to be able to facilitate effectively closing the achievement gap and support staff while monitoring the instructional goals of each student to have a successful school (Angelle & Bilton, 2009; M. F. DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; McHatton et al., 2010; Sumbera et al., 2014). Additionally, principals

provide the leadership necessary to assure students grow academically and achieve gains according to their IEP's, while ensuring that all students are receiving the best quality of care in the least restrictive environment (Goor, 1997; Loiacono & Valenti, 2010; Lynch, 2012; Thompson, 2011). All of the responsibilities identified herein must be met while working in collaboration with staff to establish classroom supports, obtain the necessary financial resources to serve the students, and collaborate with the community of parents to plan school activities and programs for each student. Further demands for better and more communication between the school and home continue to increase as well. Simply put, a principal is accountable for managing and overseeing special education services' as outlined in IDEA 1997 and IDEIA 2004 (Brown et al., 2014; Pazey & Cole, 2013; Pazey et al., 2014; Sumbera et al., 2014; Supovitz et al., 2009). Many of the responsibilities required by today's principals cannot be met without proper pre-employment preparation and ongoing professional development. Principals have to have the up-to-date knowledge of special education laws, regulations, and policies in order to implement and be a successful principal in schools of the 21st century (Bellamy et al., 2014; Cobb, 2015; Goddard et al., 2015; Milligan et al., 2012; Pazey & Cole, 2013; Printy & Williams, 2014; Roberts & Guerra, 2015; Sumbera et al., 2014).

### **Preparation of Principals**

As a principal, one must have a solid understanding of IDEA and NCLB to help administer and monitor special education programs (Angelle & Bilton, 2009; M. F. DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; Loiacono & Valenti, 2010; Lynch, 2012; McHatton et



al., 2010; Voltz & Collins, 2010). Understanding and the ability to clearly implement the laws and legislative requirements is essential to a successful special education program (Loiacono & Valenti, 2010; Lynch, 2012; McHatton et al., 2010; Pazey & Cole, 2013). It is essential that all school district instructional staff and those with direct contact with the children have training in special education requirements. Additionally, have the necessary pre-service training to prepare them effectively to meet the needs of all students, but it is even more critical when those students have learning disabilities (Lynch, 2012; McHatton et al., 2010; Pazey & Cole, 2013; Voltz & Collins, 2010). The more knowledge the whole staff has regarding special education and the needs of the students they serve, the higher the quality of education students will receive, and the better the services will be to parents regarding the individualized instruction of their child (Lynch, 2012; Pazey & Cole, 2013; Voltz & Collins, 2010).

The State Department of Education is the state agency responsible for setting the certification requirements for all educators in the state, including administrators (Gümüş, 2015; State Department of Education, 2013; State legislation, 2003). The state legislature established this authority within the State School Code (Gümüş, 2015; State of State, 2003) Acting within the parameters of this power, the State Superintendent of Public Instruction set forth in the Administrative Certification Code the basic education requirements, course content, and curriculum for administrators to obtain certification through colleges and universities (Gümüş, 2015; State Department of Education, 2013;

State of State, 2003). State colleges and universities must follow these regulations to have a qualified certification program.

Through the years, legislation has impacted State education certification programs. Two recent legislative changes significantly changed the programs colleges and universities can offer to those seeking certification as a school administrator. In 2010, under the granted authority of MCL 380.1246, the State Superintendent of Public Instruction modified the general requirements for administrators. The Superintendent established different requirements for those administrators employed before January 4, 2010, and established new requirements for those administrators that would be employed after January 4, 2010. Those administrators employed after January 4, 2010, became subject to additional requirements to “hold a valid school administrator certificate” or be enrolled in a program that would lead to certification within six months of being employed as an administrator (Gümüş, 2015; State Department of Education, 2013; State of State, 2003).

Based on this modification, colleges and universities began modifying the courses and curriculums they offered. However, there was some confusion regarding the administrative certification requirements for those administrators in special education (Bellamy et al., 2014; Brown et al., 2014; Gümüş, 2015). These administrative certification requirement modifications for administrators in special education has complicated the challenge of making certain principals are well equipped to oversee the

needs of students with learning disabilities (Brown et al., 2014; M. DiPaola et al., 2004; Pazey & Cole, 2013; Pazey et al., 2014).

### **The Principal's Role**

The principal sets forth the instructional requirements for classroom teachers and is responsible for building resource staff specialists. In addition, a principal or school leader coordinates and builds support networks within the district and across the county and state to assure the instructional team members have the necessary resources to meet the educational goals for each student (Lanear & Frattura, 2007; Lynch, 2012; Sumbera et al., 2014; Voltz & Collins, 2010). Organized efforts between special education and general education teachers support collaboration across the school district's instructional model (Angelle & Bilton, 2009; M. DiPaola et al., 2004; McHatton et al., 2010; Voltz & Collins, 2010).

Principals often indicate that they feel poorly prepared for the responsibilities of monitoring and overseeing special education requirements (Angelle & Bilton, 2009; M. DiPaola et al., 2004; Goor, 1997; Lynch, 2012; McHatton et al., 2010; Voltz & Collins, 2010). Principals report the lack of time and training leave them feeling less than effective as instructional leaders because the demands and scope of responsibilities continue to escalate (Angelle & Bilton, 2009; M. F. DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; McHatton et al., 2010; Voltz & Collins, 2010). Principals and teachers both report the lack of support, which increases their stress and levels of frustration as they work to accomplish all of the responsibilities for student achievement. Principals directly impact

many aspects of the educational programs in a school, including the academic mission and goals, the establishment of community and trust, and teacher performance (Goor, 1997; Loiacono & Valenti, 2010; May & Supovitz, 2010; Voltz & Collins, 2010). Also, administrators with the responsibilities of operating programs with limited funding and with budget constraints, often feel frustrated and unable to meet all of the needs of their staff and students (McHatton et al., 2010; Pazez & Cole, 2013; Voltz & Collins, 2010).

### **Improvement of Principal's Roles in the Special Education Process**

The preparation of principals prior to beginning their responsibilities as a school leader impacts the whole education process in a school, but even more so when it comes to the responsibilities overseeing a special education program because of the numerous compliance requirements and laws that are followed (Goor, 1997; Pazez & Cole, 2013; Voltz & Collins, 2010). Professional development programs currently provide some opportunities to gain an understanding of the regulations and the various laws that affect the special education process (Goor, 1997; Pazez & Cole, 2013; Voltz & Collins, 2010). School districts with successful special education programs and student achievement show that the principals of these schools have mastered the level understanding of special education regulations and instructional elements, as well as understanding the principal's role in the process. Opportunities for more training would allow for more monitoring and oversight at the building level, which would likely assure a higher quality of instruction and better services for students with disabilities (Goor, 1997; Pazez & Cole, 2013; Voltz & Collins, 2010). The opportunity for a new school leader or principal to gain more "on

the job training” combined with time to learn more about special education and the needs of students and curriculum, laws and other regulations would add a significant element to assure the success of any program (Goor, 1997; Pazey & Cole, 2013; Voltz & Collins, 2010).

Principals in collaboration with teachers would be more confident in providing the necessary leadership. Principals working in partnership with teachers helps to promote professional growth and strengthens the quality of special education services and programs (Brown et al., 2014; Goddard et al., 2015; Goor, 1997; May & Supovitz, 2010; Williams et al., 2013) Administrators and staff growing together through professional development opportunities and studying builds stronger instructional teams and improved programs for all students (May & Supovitz, 2010; Voltz & Collins, 2010).

A number of time principals’ focus on instructional leadership does influence student achievement. However, this influence has a correlation to instructional change (Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Marks & Printy, 2003). Three recognized leadership factors influence achievement. Recognizing that leaders inspire, motivate and stimulate individuals to personal growth and challenge them to grow as professionals (Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Marks & Printy, 2003). Through effective leadership, principals establish communication and trust with parents, students, and staff that can alleviate some of the problems that otherwise might arise in the educational process (Thompson, 2011). It is a responsibility of principals to provide sufficient guidance for teachers and other staff

members in the school district to ensure that needs are met in all aspects of the school building and services (Thompson, 2011).

The role of the principal evolves over time as they become more familiar with the needs of students, staff and education community; there are additional duties and responsibilities that emerge. Principals formulate and establish the strategic plan for the direction of the school and prepare the staff to meet the demands of students. They guide, mentor and coach employees through their leadership and professional development opportunities. On an ongoing basis, principals must look to the future. Keeping the strategic plan in mind so they can remain on track to accomplish the desired goals and growth of staff and students. Additionally, principals and school leaders understand their role and demonstrate leadership when they collaborate and manage the instructional programming for all students (Angelle & Bilton, 2009; Goor, 1997; Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Leithwood et al., 2010). Successful leaders work closely with teachers, students, parents and staff to improve learning because they recognize them indirectly and directly influence student achievement (Goor, 1997; Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Leithwood et al., 2010).

### **Principals' Attitudes on Special Education**

The principal's attitude toward various educational programs offered in a school district has a direct impact on the educational achievement and goals of all students (Goor, 1997; Loiacono & Valenti, 2010; Thompson, 2011). Assuring administrators are properly prepared is a precursor to a successful program. Too often principals come into

their positions unprepared to fully understand their roles and responsibilities. Therefore, principals are highly dependent on staff members to handle various special education situations, because they often lack the knowledge and experience to manage the concerns of parents and instructional staff (Goor, 1997; Loiacono & Valenti, 2010; Pazey & Cole, 2013). School leaders acknowledge there is a need for more training, but due to many responsibilities, lack of time, and inadequate professional development opportunities, it is hard to obtain the training they require (Loiacono & Valenti, 2010; Pazey & Cole, 2013). It is all too often that principals report that prior employment there is little to no preparation for the type of special education issues that confront them on a regular basis as a school leader (Goor, 1997; Loiacono & Valenti, 2010; Pazey & Cole, 2013).

Most principals report on the job experience provides most of the training to learn about effective leadership in special education. However, they report that they feel they need to be better equipped and need more “on the job training” to be effective (Goor, 1997; Loiacono & Valenti, 2010; McHatton et al., 2010; Pazey & Cole, 2013). Additionally, principals report that a lack of understanding of regulations, curriculum, and the aspects of the various learning disabilities cause them to struggle with, as well as fully to understand the scope of, all of their duties and responsibilities. The lack of preparation in special education administration results in principals indicating they are required to spend a lot more time on many tasks that could be delegated or handled more efficiently if they better understood their duties. Principals report that a combination of coursework, along with field experience before employment, would allow them to gain

the skills and confidence needed to be more competent dealing with special education issues in their districts (Goor, 1997; Loiacono & Valenti, 2010; Pazey & Cole, 2013). Thus, burnout and emotional exhaustion are frequently reported among principals and special education teachers who work with students receiving special education services (Brown et al., 2014; Cobb, 2015; O'Malley et al., 2015; Schaaf et al., 2015; Thompson, 2011).

### **Principals' Positive Impact on Special Education**

Principals and school leaders need to not only understand what must be done for individual students, but also how to achieve the educational goals and objectives in order to successfully include students with disabilities in the overall educational process (Bellamy et al., 2014; Brown et al., 2014; Goddard et al., 2015; Milligan et al., 2012; Pazey & Cole, 2013; Printy & Williams, 2014; Voltz & Collins, 2010). Principals should have extensive training in special education in order to meet the educational needs of students and the professional and instructional needs of the staff (Brown et al., 2014; Cale, Delpino, & Myran, 2015; Cobb, 2015; Goddard et al., 2015; Pazey & Cole, 2013; Roberts & Guerra, 2015). Training and knowledge should provide opportunities for personal growth, including “improving self-awareness, coping time management and conflict resolution” (Thompson, 2011). The most efficient leaders shape programs and establish the school’s available resources around the instructional goals and objectives of their students and staff (Cobb, 2015; DeMatthews & Edwards Jr, 2014; Goddard et al., 2015; Hallinger & Huber, 2012; Milligan et al., 2012).



It was important for principals to have a breadth of knowledge that allowed them to consider a wide variety of methods as they sought to identify the needs of teaching staff and students. Principals have a duty to meet the needs of those students with disabilities and to assure high-quality educational services, while pursuing academic achievement for all students in the school district. With a depth of knowledge and resources, a principal could appropriately influence instruction that would lead to improvement in overall student performance (Goor, 1997; May & Supovitz, 2010). When principals have the knowledge and experience needed, they can give more focused attention to programs and assessments, as well as confidently ensure that all policies and procedures are being followed. This results in a higher rate of student success (Goor, 1997; Thompson, 2011).

There are several different aspects to the role of a school leader that principals should embrace to be efficient and fruitful. The various aspects of their role include the ability to have a clear vision that can be articulated effectively to others, to obtain the collaboration necessary for the success of the district. A principal who can build a community and school culture that focuses on goals and a joint mission will build a bridge of collaboration (Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Marks & Printy, 2003). Principals and other school leaders who establish clear performance objectives for staff members will be more successful in building collaborative teams and be able more efficiently to evaluate not only program success and student achievement but also overall performance of individual team members. Under State law, principals are mandated to provide those

performance evaluations annually (Bellamy et al., 2014; Goddard et al., 2015; Gümüş, 2015; State Department of Education, 2013; Parylo et al., 2012).

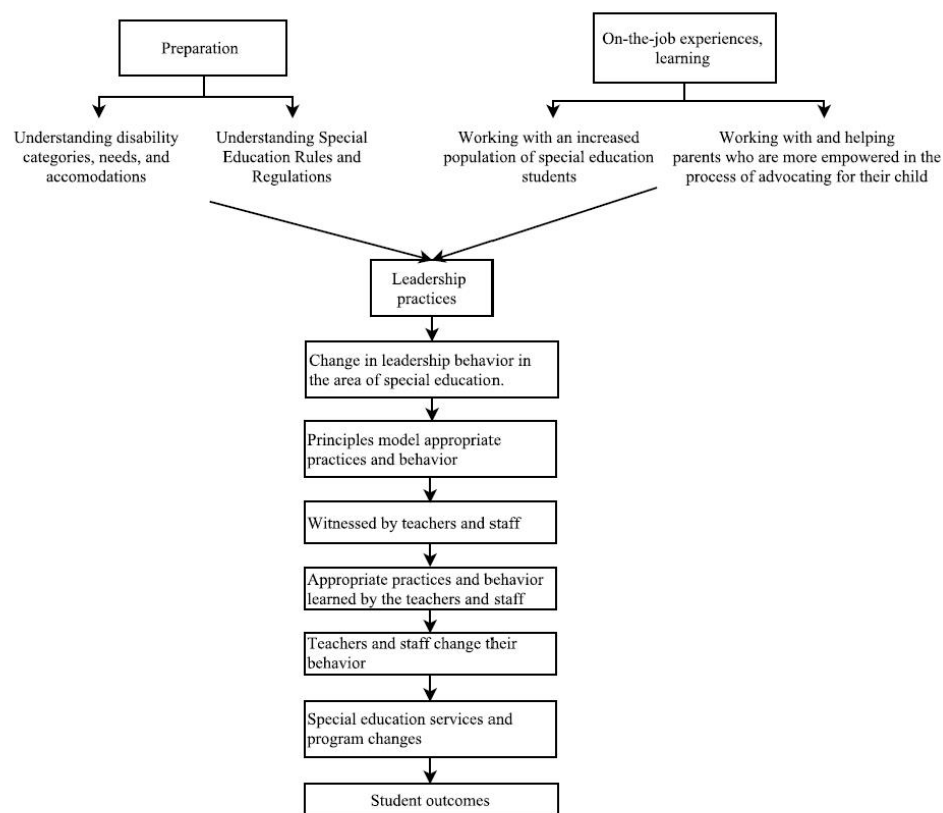
The responsibilities principals are held accountable for accomplishing by their boards of education must be met while providing support and guidance for students, parents, and staff in a plethora of daily activities and situations that might occur (Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Marks & Printy, 2003). Principals need to have knowledge of the resources available to meet those situations and be able to guide staff in critical thinking and creative problem solving so as to assure continued success of student achievement. (Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Marks & Printy, 2003). All of these aspects of school leadership are framed by principals modeling of personal attitudes, values and the encouragement of an organizational culture that builds collaborative decision making among the staff (Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Marks & Printy, 2003).

### **Conceptual Framework**

To develop an understanding of the lived experiences of principals as it relates to special education, leadership, this study conceptualized the role of the principal (Bellamy et al., 2014; Cobb, 2015; Marks & Printy, 2003; O'Malley et al., 2015; White-Smith, 2012). The process of managing special education services means understanding the frequently changing and complex special education rules and regulations; developing relationships with an increased population of special education students, and parents (Cobb, 2015; DeMatthews & Edwards Jr, 2014; Goddard et al., 2015; Milligan et al., 2012; Murray et al., 2013; Schaaf et al., 2015). Social learning and leadership theories

have laid the necessary foundation for 21st century principals to understand how to be an effective leader that has influence over a school culture (Goddard et al., 2015; Hallinger & Huber, 2012; Milligan et al., 2012; Pazy & Cole, 2013; Pazy et al., 2014; Supovitz et al., 2009). Albert Bandura's social learning theories suggest that through modeling learned, appropriate and effective behavior and practices have a positive effect on the individuals who are observing and learning from the leader (Bandura, 1971; Culatta, 2013).

According to this conceptual framework, principals use their pre-service preparation, as well as their on-the-job learning, to build up knowledge of special education-related topics. Using social learning theories as well as leadership theories the principal develops the leadership style needed to conduct the necessary duties as principal. They then make daily decisions to model appropriate behavior and practices while maintaining interactions with parents, students and staff. Several studies have been written about the way that principal leads and guides teachers, and the effect on student achievement (Hallinger & Huber, 2012; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1990; Lentz, 2012; May & Supovitz, 2010; Sun & Leithwood, 2012; Voltz & Collins, 2010). Principals are seen as indirectly influencing instructional practices through the fostering of collaboration and communication around instruction with staff (Bellamy et al., 2014; Leithwood et al., 2010; Marks & Printy, 2003; Pazy & Cole, 2013; White-Smith, 2012).



*Figure 1*

*Lived experience of principals as special education leaders*

Specifically, in the case of principals' influence on special education instruction, the factors conceptualized as contributing to effective leadership for special education are preparation and experience, as shown in Figure 1. Initially, principals' preparation is what informs their understanding of various disabilities, needs, and accommodations, as well as rules and regulations. However, as they acquire experience, principals develop or

learn the skills necessary, to face the increasing population of students as well as empowered parents who advocate for their children. The lower part of the figure shows the model of how preparation and experience can theoretically lead to changed principal behavior, which they model and which is witnessed by teachers who adopt appropriate practices, attitudes and behavior, which, ultimately positively influences special education programming, services, and treatment of special education students and their families.

This framework draws on two areas of theory: leadership theory and Bandura's social learning theory. Importantly, the nature of a principal's job is that he cannot be a traditional, top-down, authoritarian leader (Cale et al., 2015; Hallinger, 1992; Hallinger & Huber, 2012; Smith et al., 2010; Sun & Leithwood, 2012). Schools are loosely coupled systems, where teachers have a high degree of autonomy, and principals have to lead by persuasion (Pazey & Cole, 2013; Sumbera et al., 2014; Weick, 1976). Several different theorists have developed some concepts that explain this kind of leadership including transformational, collaborative, shared and integrated leadership (Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Marks & Printy, 2003; Siegrist, 1999). There are different leadership styles that a principal may use while modeling appropriate behavior and practices.

### **Social Learning Theories**

Bandura's theory states that modeling encompasses attention, memory and motivation as individuals interpret behavior observed, and as a result individuals modify their behavior to align with the conduct modeled (Culatta, 2013). This theory would

predict that a principal who provides a strong example of best practices in the area of special education will have the effect of encouraging the rest of the staff to use the knowledge they have gathered to continue to create strong programs for students.

According to Bandura, learning occurs internally as a result of physical and emotional influences, but also externally through the environment, culture, and associations. Bandura addressed social learning systems and contended that new patterns of behavior can be acquired through either direct experience or observing the experiences of others, and as a result of those observations and experiences, behaviors change (Bandura, 1971). The process of instructional leadership in the area of special education is a process of getting teachers and staff to change their behavior, and it begins with the principal.

Bandura researched the role of social modeling in human motivation, thought and action (Pajares, 2004). Bandura substantiated that the process of learning could be significantly enhanced through social modeling of expectations and actions. Bandura contended that by modeling behavior, the person in the leadership role will initiate new behavior patterns in a similar style, but add new techniques or knowledge based on how they adapt the modeling to their personalities and the environment they are working (Pajares, 2004). Bandura argued that modeling can promote creative solutions to enhance the learning climate and result in more rapid adjustments in behavior (Pajares, 2004). In this study, the role of principals is being examined regarding the ways they have gained knowledge of leading a special education program.

Observational learning should contain elements that encourage long-term retention through experience, activities, or implementation and feedback (Bandura, 1971). Principals modeling appropriate special education practices, and encouraging follow through in classrooms, can also reinforce and support the knowledge shared amongst peers. Reinforcement can serve to inform or provide incentives to encourage behaviors to be adopted, but also acts to elicit a response and or strengthen beliefs (Bandura, 1971).

In addition to learning through modeling and observation of behaviors, learning may result from physical conditions or experiences (Bandura, 1971). Within each of these learning systems, there is a structure through oral or visual processing that allows for the transmittal of information (Bandura, 1971). School districts will reap the highest levels of student academic achievement when the school leadership and instructional team have a high degree of understanding of special education processes and can effectively implement the appropriate systems to meet the needs of students (Supovitz, Sirinides, & May, 2010). A high level of understanding will also allow a school district to avoid negative consequences, which may result in low student achievement and the risks of litigation that may result from failure to follow one or more of the numerous special education regulations and laws (Supovitz et al., 2010).

### **Transformational Leadership**

Transformational leadership encourages principals to work with individuals while at the same time directing the team. As a leader of special education services, the

principal as a transformational leader will lead the IEP team toward an outcome of student achievement (Lentz, 2012). Transformational leadership works with the individuals' ideas, innovations, influences, and consideration while thinking of the whole team (Lentz, 2012; Marks & Printy, 2003). Principals focus on the individual and encourage each member of the team that are valuable and work for the common good of the district and the students. Principals also may question and confront thinking, and assumptions as a mean to improve practices and procedures within the district (Lentz, 2012; Marks & Printy, 2003).

### **Collaborative Leadership**

Principals who engage in collaborative leadership collaborate with others to develop effective learning communities within the instructional team. Collaborative leader principals genuinely believe that the school's mission is to achieve academic success for all and communicate this value to their internal and external audiences (Hallinger & Heck, 2010). These principals ensure that staff members have the support and resources needed to perform their jobs well; e.g., common planning time, manageable teaching schedules, heterogeneous classroom rosters, professional development opportunities, and skilled paraprofessionals (Sage & Burrello, 1994; DiPaola, & Walther-Thomas, 2003; Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Sumbera et al., 2014).

### **Shared Instructional Leadership**

Shared instructional leadership is inclusive in that it empowers teachers by providing necessary resources. It is the job of the principal and instructional team to



create a strong leadership relationship (Hallinger, 1992; Marks & Printy, 2003). Teachers that are given the resources and support needed to assume leadership responsibilities in maintaining and promoting the educational methods and programs of the school (Hallinger, 1992; Lentz, 2012; Marks & Printy, 2003). It is the principal's role to promote teacher collaboration and professional development. This process may be informal or formal as roles develop through learning and working together (Hallinger, 1992; Lentz, 2012; Marks & Printy, 2003; Siegrist, 1999). Overall, collaboration and leadership will not develop unless the principal and teachers are purposeful and intentional in promoting the integration of shared leadership (Hallinger, 1992; Lentz, 2012; Marks & Printy, 2003).

Teaching staff often resists the development of shared instructional leadership so the principal will need to encourage and invite participation by building trust and demonstrating the value of collaboration to improve school performance (Marks & Printy, 2003). Teachers have a responsibility to participate as a full partner to ensure effective growth in leadership and skills (Leithwood, Patten & Jantzi, 2012; Marks & Printy, 2003). As a school leader or principal, one must give emphasis on giving direction and purpose to instruction, curriculum, and assessment (Hallinger, 1992; Lentz, 2012; Marks & Printy, 2003). Principals have a significant impact on student learning and other outcomes based upon their leadership practice (Hallinger, 1992; Leithwood et al., 2010; Siegrist, 1999). Ultimately, a principal must support staff and encourage growth both individually and as a team to promote success (Leithwood, et al., 2012). Establishing

trust and respect as a school leader helps to encourage an environment where everyone can work together to achieve a common goal (Leithwood et al., 2010).

### **Integrated Leadership**

Integrated leadership orients principal's work to provide the vision and direction of the school as a transformational leader would, but then requires the principal to participate in the instructional tasks of the day. This style of leadership combined transformational and shared instructional leadership in a cohesive manner, and the result is a significant improvement in academic achievement, as well as a culture that promotes individual and overall excellence (Hallinger, 1992; Lentz, 2012; Marks & Printy, 2003).

Most data on principals with integrated leadership substantiate there is a direct correlation in improved student achievement (LaNear & Frattura, 2007; Sumbera et al., 2014). Principals collaborate with instructional staff to align curriculum, instructional methods, and assessment with the school's core mission (Sumbera et al., 2014). Where there is integrated leadership, the principals provide valuable instructional direction while accelerating leadership by their full partners—the instructional staff (Marks & Printy, 2003). Teachers accept that they too have responsibilities beyond the classroom instruction and become full partners in the educational process (Marks & Printy, 2003; Supovitz et al., 2010; Grigg et al., 2013; Sumbera et al., 2014).

In essence, a principal who leads with one of (or a combination of) the four different leadership styles, has to lead by example and model appropriate behavior and

practices. Albert Bandura, who developed several theories on social learning, is probably the leading theorist on learning through modeling (Bandura, 1971).

The connection between the K-12 leadership practices and special education student achievement is more significant than many school leaders may recognize (Supovitz et al., 2010). Application of Bandura's learning theories to this connection between school leaders and the resulting student performance is a way to understand the mechanism or process by which staff performance and higher student achievement for special education students can be achieved (Supovitz et al., 2010; Walker, Emanuel, Argabrite Grove, Brawand, & McGahee, 2012).

If the principal is an effective role model, this, in turn, encourages the staff to learn from his/her example. The principals' behaviors that are displayed consciously or unconsciously are critical examples for teachers and other employees in shaping a successful program. Bandura's social learning theory contends that modeling influences learning. The more principals can model the appropriate behavior while intentionally keeping the professional development needs of staff members as a priority, the higher the quality of targeted instructional services will be provided (Bandura, 1971).

According to Bandura, principals modeling for teachers makes teachers handle special education issues appropriately because teachers learn from watching others. Therefore, if the principal is a successful leader, modeling good practices and behavior the special education program will be successful. As a school leader, the principal becomes the visual example of Bandura's theory in that he/she must be the leader of

social change. Principals are frequently considered transformational leaders and therefore have the greatest impact on those they lead (Marks & Printy, 2003; Sumbera et al., 2014).

This study will examine the principals lived experiences in regards to special education preparedness and leadership in their building. Additionally, their role in the special education process is to observe the changes implemented by staff from the behavior being modeled by the principal. Attitudes and emotional reactions of staff members to the principal's modeled behavior are key to verification that the social learning theory presented by Bandura offers the right components for a successful and highly effective special education program. Integrated leadership supports the principles explained by Bandura's social learning theory (Bandura, 1971; Marks & Printy, 2003).

### **Conclusion**

The continual growth of the population of special needs students over the past 20 years assures that the roles and responsibilities of principals in overseeing services will also continue to expand and grow. Appropriate and efficient preparation of principals and school leaders to better understand the needs of this population of students, as well as the knowledge and resources to lead the instructional teams, mean they will be better prepared to lead and guide their staff and assure the school is providing successful programs. With better professional development preparation and additional pre-employment administrative training, principals will be able to accomplish the mission of a collaborative learning environment for staff, parents, and students.

The special education spectrum of education is fraught with numerous rules and regulations. A well-prepared principal will be able to guide more efficiently his/her staff through the overwhelming amount of regulations and the various aspects of the special education instructional process with less time and with few delays. The more a school leader is prepared, the better the education services and instruction under his/her direction.

Current research indicates those who develop administrative certification and professional development programs need a better understanding of the preparation principals require to be effective as school leaders of special education programs. This study added a level of data that will allow those parties to address the preparation programs and professional development opportunities to prepare those entering the field of education to be administrators of special education programs.

### Chapter 3: Research Method

This chapter presents the qualitative research method used in this study. The study included interviews with principals to understand their life experiences in the area of leadership of special education. The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of principals overseeing special education in the current environment, which includes extensive legal requirements, increasing numbers of special needs students, and more empowered parent advocates. Understanding the lived experiences of administrators in the area of special education was important to determine how the administrators face challenges and provide support to teachers, staff, students, and parents.

This study was designed to obtain data about the common challenges and experiences principals face in dealing with special education processes, regulation compliance, instruction of students, preparation of staff members, building relationships with parents, and establishing a school community and culture. Data were collected through interviews with principals. One anticipated implication of this study was that any gaps that may exist in the administrative preparation of principals would be evident when the common experiences were analyzed. Identification of gaps in preparation may lead to recommended changes in administrative certification or professional development programs to better prepare future school leaders. This chapter presents the purpose of the study, the research rationale, the role of the researcher, the methodology of the study, the

data collection plan, ethical procedures that were followed, and the data analysis and synthesis plan.

### **Research Design and Rationale**

The research question guiding this study was the following: What are the lived experiences of principals overseeing special education in the current environment? Exploring the lived experiences of principals shed light on the daily demands of school leaders in regards to special education services. Special education services require monitoring of federal, state, and local laws and requirements. While working within the confines of the laws and regulations, principals must also ensure student achievement while working with parents and teachers (Cobb, 2015; Goddard et al., 2015; Jahnukainen, 2015; Lynch, 2012; Milligan et al., 2012; Murray et al., 2013; O'Malley et al., 2015).

### **Research Tradition**

The design for this study was phenomenological (Lester, 1999; Moustakas, 1994; Van Manen, 2007). Moustakas is considered the founder of the phenomenological approach (Moustakas, 1994; Simon & Goes, 2011; White-Smith, 2012). Phenomenological research is based on an understanding of human interactions and lived experiences. It focuses on the perspective of the individuals participating in the study (Lester, 1999; Moustakas, 1994). Throughout this study the importance of the lived experiences of the participants was evident.

To understand the daily duties that principals face as they lead special education in their buildings, it was necessary to probe deeply into their lived experiences. This

study was a qualitative phenomenological study in which participants were asked to share their personal stories up to the present day in their career (Lester, 1999; Simon & Goes, 2011). The principals were asked to describe their experiences with parents, students, staff, and their engagement with and understanding of laws and regulations. It was necessary to listen to the stories that principals shared to understand their experiences (Lester, 1999; Van Manen, 2007). Being a principal in the 21st century requires extensive preparation and reflection on what was done in the past and what can be done better (van Manen, 2007). The changes in the special education field, as well as the demands from parents and students, require research to understand the challenges of being a principal through the eyes of those who participate (Simon & Goes, 2011).

In this study I explored principals' experiences providing education services for students with learning disabilities, how principals handled parents of special needs children and their requests and demands for servicing, and various needs that arose while meeting all legislative and federal requirements (M. F. DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; McHatton et al., 2010; Sumbera et al., 2014). Gaining a better understanding of principals' experiences as they managed all aspects of special education had not been addressed in previous studies. Other researchers studied principals in different ways, but no one focused on what it feels like to be a principal in the current environment providing special education support to parents, students, and staff. There have been various studies conducted addressing the importance of training in the area of special education. Information has been researched on the types of leadership principals need to



demonstrate for the teams they lead. Researchers have discussed how the laws have changed and added more demands to principals. Additionally, researchers have described the different ways that schools need to improve instruction and how principals affect that instruction (M. F. DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; Lynch, 2012; Marks & Printy, 2003; May & Supovitz, 2010; McHatton et al., 2010; Pazey & Cole, 2013; Sumbera et al., 2014). Most of the research conducted has indicated that more training is needed so principals can meet the demands of the ever-changing population of students, as well as the various rules and regulations.

### **Design Rationale**

There are five primary qualitative traditions: narrative research, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study (Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2012; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Van Manen, 2007). Although all of these approaches may be used to explain the preparation of administrators, only one of them—phenomenology—specifically focuses on the lived experiences of principals currently working as leaders of special education. Sharing the experiences of current administrators, with reflections from their past and present, was necessary and for future leadership (Lester, 1999; Simon & Goes, 2011; Van Manen, 2007).

When employing grounded theory, the researcher develops a theory from the current experiences of participants. Ethnography is used to focus on the experiences of a group or culture. The case study approach allows the researcher to examine one or more cases through a specific context or setting (Maxwell, 2012; Moustakas, 1994; Simon &

Goes, 2011; Van Manen, 2007). Phenomenology was the best approach for this study because it provided an opportunity to explore the educational preparation and experiences of principals (Lester, 1999; Moustakas, 1994).

The phenomenological approach allowed the participants to explain their individual educational backgrounds and expectations based on their training and preparation, and to relate their experiences and perceptions that followed that training (Lester, 1999; Moustakas, 1994; Van Manen, 2007). The characteristics of the phenomenological approach supported the interview style and the scope of this study more effectively than other approaches. I explored the lived experiences of current principals as they reflected on their past, present, and future as school leaders. This phenomenological study shed light on areas of improvement and areas of successful (Simon & Goes, 2011; Van Manen, 2007). Being a principal and having to manage the general education population and special education population is a remarkable undertaking. Understanding principals' experiences will provide opportunities to improve training and preparation for the future.

### **Role of the Researcher**

My role was observer-participant. The interview protocol included interview questions and probes to gather the necessary data. I took field notes and recorded the interviews either through face-to-face interviews or over the phone. As the interviews progressed, I remained as neutral as possible to avoid leading the interview participants. I had no professional or personal relationships with the participants. Professionalism and

impartiality were important so that I could remain free from bias and subjective assumptions. Throughout the process, I maintained objectivity to gather the data needed for a valid study. If at any time I felt that my perceptions and ideas were influencing data collection and analysis, I discussed these issues with my chairperson and moved back toward a neutral stance.

### **Methodology**

This section provides more details on how the study was conducted. I describe who the participants were, how the data was gathered, and what selection criteria was used to identify participants. I explain the specific procedures I used to gather and validate data.

#### **Participant Selection Logic**

The specific criterion for selecting principals was that they needed to be working in a K-12<sup>th</sup> grade building in the Northern Midwestern United States. This study was conducted with participants from school districts in which the principal was responsible for leading special education programs. Numerous principals were contacted to participate in the study. Ten principals were interviewed. For a phenomenological study, five to 25 participants are considered appropriate, although fewer participants allow for more time in the interview process to listen and understand the information shared by participants. It is necessary to gather information about participants' experiences and evaluate the data (Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2012; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Thirty principals working within a 100-mile radius were contacted through electronic mail to solicit their participation in the study. Careful attention was given to principals from districts of various sizes, traditional and nontraditional public schools, with K-12 grade levels. Special education programming is different by grades therefore it was important to interview principals that spanned various grade levels to ensure a full understanding of their special education leadership role.

Within a 100-mile radius there were several intermediate school districts that oversee smaller districts. I reviewed their published demographic information and made a list of potential principals to contact. First I removed any individuals I had previously worked with or might have had had a connection with. Then I organized the list based upon size of the district. I contacted the smaller district principals first. I contacted 10 kindergarten through fifth grade administrators with the goal of having interviews with three or four of them. For sixth to eighth grades, I contacted 10 administrators with the hope of interviewing two to three of them. For ninth to 12<sup>th</sup> grades, I contacted 10 administrators with the goal of interviewing three or four of them. The limitation of not being able to interview participants in their school buildings posed a problem in scheduling and willingness to participate for some principals. To accommodate their schedules, I arranged meetings at coffee shops and phone interviews that took place after school hours. This limitation did not impact the study outcome, only the recruitment of participants. In summary, the plan for this study was to produce interview data from a

minimum of three K-5th, two 6th-8<sup>th</sup>, and three 9th-12th grade administrators for a total of at least eight administrators.

### **Data Collection and Instrumentation**

The research followed the qualitative phenomenological approach, which required open-ended interviews. For this study, I used a semistructured interview protocol, which is included in Appendix A. All interview questions emerged from the research question and topics of interest that established the framework for this study. The interview questions were developed to gain an understanding of the experiences of the participants regarding their preparation and subsequent experiences as administrators. It was important for the participants to share their life experiences for the data to be valid and satisfy the purpose of the study.

I conducted an initial review of the interview questions with collegiate peers. Some questions proved to be hard to understand; therefore, they were rewritten and clarified. Two colleagues in the review were pretending to be principals, but they were actually involved in other aspects of education; one participant was a current superintendent. The superintendent offered excellent advice and guidance in rephrasing some of the interview questions. Additionally, insight was gained from this review in regards to data interpretation and analysis. There were also phrases a participant interpreted one way, which was not the original intent. Therefore, it became important to establish a data analysis and interpretation plan in advance of the actual interviews.

### **Data Analysis and Interpretation Plan**

Data analysis guided by the research question and topics of interest. Data analysis was ongoing based on the content of participants' responses. Hardcopy notes and Excel spreadsheets were used to help with the coding of data. This procedure facilitated the identification of common elements, common background experiences and common experiences of each as special education school leaders. With 10 participants from various schools and grade levels, coding was necessary for quick identification of commonalities.

Data analysis involved several types of coding, including coding for the characteristics of participants, basic descriptive coding, and coding for structural and content elements that derived from the research question and topics of interest (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003; Lester, 1999; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Some of the content elements included: education; administrative certification programs; professional development or personal training which participants took advantage of through their career; length of time in their role as a school principal; length of time leading a special education program; interactions with parents; any concerns about the growing population of special education; and areas they indicated need to be improved to prepare principals better.

Portions of this study lead to additional areas of interest and concerns. Ideas for improvements in preparation emerged, requiring additional structural codes. Possible structural codes that emerged would be rules, laws and regulations; parental issues that

frequently arise; staff training; the various aspects of the hiring process to assure sufficient numbers of staff with proper training; and the budget aspects of managing special education services and programs.

A phenomenological study that looks at lived experiences also contains elements of subjectivity and individual emotional considerations, so emotion coding was appropriate (Goleman, 2006). Emotion codes included coding of values, because the values, attitudes and beliefs of principals regarding special education services, special needs children and parents were relevant to their experiences (Gable & Wolf, 1993).

When the data was coded, it was aligned with the various aspects of the study which allowed for it to be categorized properly for appropriate analytical reflection and evaluation (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). Through analysis and reflection, common experiences allowed for objective conclusions that supported by the data derived from the research interviews and questions.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

For a qualitative study to be valid, there are four issues of trustworthiness that are essential elements (Morrow, 2005). The researcher, as well as, the participants need to establish a mutual level of trust, transparency, and credibility. The participants need to know that the research is being conducted in a valid, reliable and respectable fashion in order to be fully dependable to share their experiences. The elements of trustworthiness are: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability.

## **Credibility**

Credibility is established through the interview process and establishing contact as participant and researcher. The participants were encouraged to be transparent about their preparation to serve as school leader overseeing special education. The transparency was crucial for their answers to have credibility. Without credibility, the data would lack the validation needed to reach an objective conclusion to the study. Credibility was important to establish as each administrator answered a series of open-ended questions. The researcher used subsequently probing questions if there was a need to clarify a response or gather more information.

Open-ended questions used allowed each participant the chance to expand on their responses by sharing their experiences to maintain credibility in the study. Keeping the confidentiality of each participant was necessary. Therefore, data and taped interviews remained on and offline. After each interview had been completed, the audio recording was transcribed by the researcher. The audiotaped recording was then stored both on a password-protected computer, as well as placed on a flash drive that remained secured in a locked cabinet. Following the transcribing of each interview, the participant had an opportunity to review the transcript for accuracy. Participant verification and debriefing were methods used to strengthen the credibility of the data, as well as to assure the accuracy of the statements. Participants verified accuracy through electronic communication systems, such as email or fax. Additionally, upon completion of the study, the participants were given a copy of the final study.



## **Transferability**

Participant selection spanned across the K-12 spectrum to increase the opportunity for the results of the study to transfer to other aspects of education program administration. The districts were from a geographic cross-section of the state and included various size school districts, all led by a principal as the leader of special education services allowed for transferability of data. It was anticipated that there would be variations but also common aspects of educational training and administrative experiences. It was my understanding that preparation of administrators may need to be different based on the grade levels, as well as the types of disabilities students have and the amount of services that flow from those disabilities. Interviewing administrators from different grade level programs and learning of their experiences provided insight into the transferability of preparation and educational knowledge.

To complete the range of interviews with ten administrators, it was necessary initially to contact between 25 and 30 principals across the K-12 grade levels. The plan for this study was to produce interview data from a minimum of three K-5th, two 6th-8th and two to three 9th-12th grade administrators, for a total of at least eight to ten administrators. The variety of principals allowed for transferability amongst the principals. It was assumed that there would be some unique experiences each may have had in his or her careers, but also that there will be similar experiences common to all. Readers will gain confidence in the credibility of the study through these common aspects.

**Dependability**

The study maintained dependability throughout the study by using the literature review, participant selection, participants' responses and data analysis. The principals were asked to participate from a variety of school districts, within a 100-mile radius of each other. The participants willingly shared their personal experiences in regards to pre-service training in special education, before becoming a principal. The principals exhibited dependability amongst each other as they shared similar experiences, consistent with the literature reviewed. I used field notes, member checking, and literature as a form of triangulation in verifying the data collected.

**Confirmability**

As a researcher, using consistent questioning strengthens the quality of the results; the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the study (Morrow, 2005). Confirming that the data collected are accurate amongst the participants, as well previously collected research strengthens the outcomes of the study. Maintaining a record of the interviews, and allowing each participant to review the transcript also added to the strength of the conclusions and recommendations that may flow from the study. Field notes and recordings of the interviews were archived to maintain credibility a researcher and the trust of each participant. The maintenance of these records was confidential, and could be reviewed at any time by the participants and the dissertation committee members. When the study was concluded, participants had the opportunity to determine if they want the recordings and transcripts destroyed or returned to them.

Finally, trustworthiness was greatly enhanced with the interpretation of results, as they are consistent with findings in previous research studies, as described in the literature review. Current research data well supported this study. The results provided direct references to the texts of the participants' statements in the interviews conducted and/or subsequent communications that were needed to clarify understanding.

### **Ethical Protection of Participants**

Any known potential ethical concerns for the participants were addressed before the start of the interview process and their agreement to participate in the research study. The privacy rights of the participant, both as to their responses to questions were respected as well as measures were put in place to respect the participant's role and responsibilities to protect a vulnerable student population (Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2012; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

All Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines for informed consent and confidentiality were followed. The IRB approval from Walden University was obtained before any research was gathered or interviews conducted. Following IRB approval (01-14-16-0019994), all participants were sent an in-depth explanation of the research to be conducted and their rights (included in Appendix D). The participants were provided with information that explained: the purpose and procedures of the study, the benefits of the study, their voluntarily participating, their right to withdraw at any time. Additionally, participants were informed their right to ask questions, any and all privacy rights their right to review all information obtained through the interviews, and the right

to get copies of the study. A signed consent form was obtained from each participant (included in Appendix D). Copies of each signed form were archived as well as given to each participant. It was necessary during the study to keep the anonymity of the participant's safe.

After approval from the Walden IRB, data collection commenced. The data collection method used for this qualitative study was interviewed. Interviews with ten K-12th grade principals were scheduled from various areas around a northern mid-west state in the United States. An introduction was emailed to various principals explaining the purpose of the study and to request participation. Attached to the email was the consent form that needed to be signed before they could be considered a participant. Participants were asked to return the consent form within ten business days of the initial request to limit delay in finalizing the research. Completing all interviews within a short time frame aided in identifying common aspects in education and experiences of the participants. Follow-up communication was made within a week of sending out the invitations to confirm each participant's willingness to be interviewed. At that time, the study was discussed in a more detailed fashion, and the researcher established an initial relationship framework of trust with each administrator.

To ensure that the signed consent form was in hand from each participant before the initial interview meeting. I encouraged each participant to ask questions at any time during data collection. I explained the interview format of seven open-ended questions, and conveyed my respect for each participant's time and that I would take no more than

an hour to complete the interview process. Interviews were arranged at a time that was convenient for each interviewee. I confirmed the interview date, time, and place about a week before the scheduled meeting. Each interview was recorded and transcribed as soon as it was complete. All participants received copies of their transcripts after they were completed.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I set forth the methodology and research design of the study. I explained the participant selection process and the measures that were followed to validate the study and maintain ethical standards. The goal of this study was to explore the actual lived experiences of principals overseeing special education in the current environment, which includes extensive legal requirements, increasing numbers of special needs students, and more empowered parent advocates. Understanding the lived experiences of administrators in the area of special education is important to determine how the administrators faced challenges and provided support to teachers and staff, students and parents.

## Chapter 4: Results

This study was conducted to explore the lived experiences of principals overseeing special education in their current school buildings. Principals have various responsibilities including ensuring legal compliance with state and federal laws, ensuring the school has sufficient resources to meet the needs of the increasing numbers of special needs students, and interacting with more empowered parent advocates (Cobb, 2015; Gümüş, 2015; Jahnukainen, 2015; Murray et al., 2013; Schaaf et al., 2015; Williams et al., 2013). Understanding the lived experiences of administrators in the area of special education was important to determine how the administrators faced challenges and provided support to teachers, staff, students, and parents. Interviews were conducted with 10 principals in the Northern Midwestern United States. The purpose of this chapter is to describe the results of the interviews. Data analysis, emergent codes and themes, and findings from this research are presented as well as suggestions to improve principal preparation in the future.

### **Setting**

Ten interviews were conducted with principals within a 100-mile radius of my home in the Midwestern United States. Five interviews were conducted in person, and five interviews were conducted over the phone. Participants were contacted to determine interest in being interviewed. Several of the principals agreed to set up interviews after the holiday breaks. I had a situation that caused the interviews to be postponed for a few months. All of the participants were understanding and remained generous with their

time. The delay in starting the interview process was the only problem that occurred during the data collection process. My situation did not influence data collection or interpretation of results. Moreover, none of the participants expressed concerns that would influence their participation.

### **Demographics**

Ten principals were interviewed; however, four of them overlapped several grades. The original breakdown for participant selection was elementary (preK-5<sup>th</sup> grade), middle school (6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup>), and high school (9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade). Four principals interviewed had only elementary students in their building, one principal had only middle school students, and one principal had only high school students. Three of the principals interviewed had preK-8<sup>th</sup> grade students, and one principal served 6<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade students.

Only two of the principals interviewed had prior knowledge of special education due to college course work in their undergraduate programs. Both of these participants had worked as emotionally impaired (EI) classroom teachers prior to becoming administrators. A third principal, after becoming an administrator, pursued a doctoral degree with an emphasis on special education because he realized he needed to learn more about the laws, regulations, and standards, as well as how to work with teachers, parents, and students. The other seven administrators spoke about missing or very limited training, and most had learned through trial and error while on the job.

Participants were all public school principals. The average length of time as a principal was 10.5 years with administration experience responsible for overseeing

special education. Each principal was assigned a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality, as shown in Table 1. The principals worked in a variety of settings including public school academies and traditional public schools, and one principal worked in a building with only autistic students.



Table 1

*Participant Demographic Information*

Principal	Prior Job Experience	Years as Principal	Type of school	Grade Level	Type of District
Mr. Appleton	Title 1 Teacher	5 years	Traditional Public	Elementary K-5 <sup>th</sup> grade	Inner City
Mr. Barrett	Social Studies Teacher	28 years	Traditional Public	Middle School 6 <sup>th</sup> -8 <sup>th</sup> grade	Rural
Mr. Coleman	Middle School Teacher	5 years	Charter School	Middle/High School 6 <sup>th</sup> -12 <sup>th</sup> grade	Urban
Mr. Davis	History Teacher	20 years	Traditional Public	High School 9 <sup>th</sup> -12 <sup>th</sup> grade	Rural
Ms. Engle	EI/ASD Teacher	20+ years	ASD classified school	Elementary Pre-K-5 <sup>th</sup> grade	Inner City
Ms. Fisher	Elementary Reading Teacher	10 years	Charter School	Elementary/Middle School Pre-K-8 <sup>th</sup> grade	Suburban
Ms. Gilmore	Elementary Reading Teacher	4 years	Traditional Public	Elementary Pre-K-2 <sup>nd</sup> grade	Rural
Ms. Huntington	EI Teacher	3 years	Traditional Public	Elementary 3 <sup>rd</sup> -4 <sup>th</sup> grade	Rural
Mr. Ingersoll	Elementary Teacher	3 years	Traditional Public	Elementary K-5 <sup>th</sup> grade	Rural
Ms. Jackson	High School English Teacher	5 years	Charter School	Elementary/Middle School Pre-K-8 <sup>th</sup> grade	Inner City

### **Data Analysis**

The process for data analysis began after data collection. Interviews were conducted over a 30-day period with five interviews being face to face and five conducted over the phone. The interview protocol (Appendix A) contained seven interview questions regarding participants' preparation, leadership, training, experiences, and overall recommendations on how to prepare principals for future school leadership. Taped responses were transcribed, and transcript review and member checking were conducted. I manually transcribed the interviews and stored the data on my personal, password-protected computer and on Google Drive, which was also password protected. All of the transcripts were sent to each of the participants through electronic mail to obtain their approval. Once transcripts were approved, I printed them and began color coding them for various themes and similarities.

This process included transcript content analysis, interpretation, and development of themes. I used structural and content elements that were derived from the research question and related topics of interest to create themes (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003; Lester, 1999; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Some of the content elements included education, administrative certification programs, professional development and/or personal training that participants had taken advantage of through their career, length of time in their role as a school principal, length of time leading a special education program, interactions with parents, concerns about the growing population of special

education, and areas that participants indicated needed to be improved to prepare better principals.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

For a qualitative study to be valid, there are four essential elements to ensure trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability.

#### **Credibility**

Protecting participants' identities and the identities of the schools was essential to ensure that there would be no repercussions against principals or their schools. Participants were encouraged to be transparent about their preparation in special education prior to serving as school leaders. The transparency of principals was essential for their answers to have credibility. Without credibility, the data would lack the validation needed to reach an objective conclusion. Credibility was important because each administrator answered a series of open-ended questions. I used follow-up probing questions to clarify a response or gather more information as needed. The schools represented a cross section of the state and included various size school districts, and all schools were led by a principal who served as the head of the special education services. Therefore, there was initial credibility that allowed for transferability of data. As anticipated, there were variations in participants' responses, but also many commonalities in participants' administrative experiences. Open-ended questions were used to allow each participant to expand on his or her responses by sharing his or her experiences to enhance credibility.

Following transcription of each interview, I asked participants to review their transcripts for accuracy. Participant verification and debriefing strengthened the credibility of the data and ensured accuracy of the statements. Participants verified accuracy through electronic mail. Additionally, upon completion of the study, participants were given a copy of the final study.

### **Transferability**

Participant selection included K-12 grades to increase applicability to other educational programs and to enhance transferability in the preparation of administrators, while recognizing preparation may need to be different based on grade levels. Additionally, because of the various disabilities students might have and the different ways a disability may affect students over the years, transferability of preparation is essential so that administrators are prepared for the global aspects of their responsibilities as well as to meet the unique and special needs of individual students. Interviewing administrators from different grade level programs and learning of their experiences provided insight into the transferability of preparation and educational knowledge.

### **Dependability**

To complete interviews with 10 administrators, I initially contacted 25-30 principals across the K-12 grade levels. The plan for this study was to produce interview data from a minimum of three K-5th, two 6th-8<sup>th</sup>, and two or three 9th-12th grade administrators, for a total of at least eight administrators. This was done to enhance credibility and transferability among the principals. The participants shared unique

experiences they had in their careers, but also shared similar experiences. Readers will gain confidence in the credibility of the study through these common experiences.

### **Confirmability**

Using consistent questioning strengthened the quality of the results and the credibility of the conclusions. Maintaining a record of the interviews and allowing each participant to review the transcript also added to the strength of the conclusions and recommendations that flowed from the study. Field notes and recordings of the interviews were archived to maintain credibility as a researcher and the trust of each participant. Confidential records could be reviewed at any time by participants and the dissertation committee members.

Finally, trustworthiness was enhanced by the interpretation of results and was verifiable through other research studies. This study was well supported by current research data. The results were presented with direct references to the participants' statements in the interviews or subsequent communications that were needed to clarify understanding.

### **Results**

I conducted this study to answer the following research question: What are the lived experiences of principals overseeing special education in the current environment? I conducted 20- to 50-minute interviews including seven open-ended questions to generate responses from the principals to answer the research question. The responses were analyzed to identify ways in which principals felt they could have been better prepared

prior to begin working with special education students, parents, and staff members. The participants described their lived experiences and shared anecdotes regarding previous training in special education. Participants also addressed how they had learned to fill in the gaps in areas where they felt they lacked training.

### **Participant Introduction**

Mr. Appleton began his career working in Title 1 and literacy intervention. He then worked his way into the school administrator position. He had served in his current role for 5 years. He came from an inner city school district with a large population of students. This school is a traditional public school inside a larger school district. His building is a kindergarten through 5<sup>th</sup> grade building. His district had been cited for having too high of a population of African American boys identified as special needs students. After being cited by the state, the school district received a different grants to help with interventions and modifications that could lower the population of identified students. Mr. Appleton worked with reading specialists, special education teachers, and general education teachers to put new systems in place and adapt the RTI approach. Mr. Appleton reported that “implementing an RTI model, with the help of the State Integrated Literacy Behavior Initiative (MIBLISI), basically meant we had help with implementing a series of documented research based interventions in place for children.” Mr. Appleton recognized that he needed to enhance his knowledge in special education as he navigated this changing system. He saw success in his building and, after a year, the percentage of

children identified for special education decreased. The district has continued to see a decrease in identified students as the teachers work through the process.

Mr. Barrett was interviewed from a rural school district with about 688 students in the middle school where he serves as principal. This school is a traditional public school inside a larger school district. He started his career as principal 28 years ago in a different district and has been in his current district 26 years. As a new principal 28 years ago, he ran IEP meetings, child study meetings, and quickly learned what he could through reading and on the job experience. "There is no training I've ever gone to; I've never had a class specifically in special education. I have a master's degree and a Ph.D. and never had a special education class." Over his tenure as principal, he has noticed how much parents have changed, and that they are becoming more informed in ways to advocate for their children.

Mr. Coleman is the school leader at a 6th-12th-grade school in an urban area; his school is a charter school. He started his career as a teacher and worked his way into the administrator's role. He has had no formal training; only on the job training when it comes to special education. He has found particularly in high school level that finding appropriate programs for special needs students to transition into society when they complete high school is difficult. He believes that if you gear instruction and curriculum to all students, that you will not have to worry so much about the special education process, but rather what is best for the students to be successful.

“ philosophy towards learning in general of all students has helped me. All students should be helped to learn to their highest potential. Disability or not. Moreover, teachers in my district always ask how to help all students...when you approach every student as learning differently, then we create the best learning environment for all students regardless of IEP’s or not.”

In his building, he also has created a peer support system in place, which has worked well for them. Students learn to advocate for themselves and their modifications and accommodations that they need when it comes to various assignments and tasks.

Mr. Davis began his career as a history teacher and proceeded to obtain two master’s degrees and his EdD with special education leadership as a minor. He has been the administrator at his current district for six years. He pursued the minor in special education for his EdD because he knew that he did not receive enough training in the area of special education and wanted a greater understanding of the needs of special education students and how those needs could be met. A group of high school students in his district recently obtained a grant from MIT-Innovation, one of 14 schools in the nation to receive this grant. The students in his building have created a device called the ‘handle’ that will help a special needs child open a combination lock on their locker without using their hands. Mr. Davis also has been successful implementing a peer-to-peer support system in his high school. This system has resulted in about 10% of the district participates working together to support special needs students in the classroom, lunchroom, and in extra-curricular activities.



Ms. Engle is currently a principal of an inclusion school within a district for Autistic students. She began her career in the 70's focusing on special needs students and then pursued a teaching degree with an endorsement to teach emotionally impaired students. She had an interest in special needs students from her childhood when she befriended a child in her neighborhood. She knew that she wanted to help special needs individuals and that has been her focus from the beginning of her professional career. In the 1980s when she pursued her master's degree she worked with her university and the department of education to create a specific program that would allow her to have an administrator's degree with a focus on special education administration. This type of certification was the first one awarded in the state. She is an expert in the field, particularly for her work with Emotionally Impaired and Autistic individuals. She has conducted professional development training programs for other districts and statewide on these topics. She is very keen on the needs of the students in her building and understands that working hand in hand with parents is essential. Her biggest focus regarding special education is "I tell people do not get caught up in the physical aspects of the person but focus instead on the person as a whole...I like to look at special education from a different perspective, and change the cause." Ms. Engle believes she has looked at special education differently since she started dreaming of becoming a teacher as a young child.

Ms. Fisher works in a charter school in an urban area. Her school has Pre-K through 8th grade as a population. During her educational career, she became a classroom

teacher and then obtained a masters in literacy. While obtaining her two degrees she had some classes in test reliability as well as an overview of special education. However, there was a span of 15 years before she became principal and those few classes. Her primary focus while overseeing the operations of the school building is the students.

“We always make it work; it seems very sticky, and very stressful at times when something comes up with special education. It is very high stakes, very stressful; I cannot imagine how the parents feel who live it 24/7...we always try to help them and make it a win-win situation for both the family, student, and staff...You have to find a way to make it work; you have to get the kids to learn and figure out finding an agreeable solution for everyone.”

Ms. Fisher has concluded that it is necessary to build solid relationships with the parents so “they know that they can trust you [principal] and the school staff.”

Ms. Gilmore is a principal of a traditional public school that houses Pre-K through 2nd grade. She has previous administrative experience overseeing a building with 4th-7th graders. Her current building contains classes for all of the special education preschool classes for 3-5-year-olds. She indicated it has proven to be somewhat challenging working with the preschoolers who come to her building as a “blank slate” and trying to teach them appropriate ways to behave and respond in a school setting. As a classroom teacher, before becoming principal, she learned a lot about students who received specialized services. “After I became a principal I attended several pieces of training in regards to autism and how to hold successful meetings with parents and staff.” Over the

years, Ms. Gilmore realized that interacting with parents of students with disabilities and the students themselves has been somewhat of her biggest struggles. “Being a principal means that I need to lead the team, and work together with parents, students and staff to focus on the needs of the students and ensure their success.”

Ms. Huntington became a special education teacher focusing on Emotional Impairments right out of undergraduate school. She was a special education teacher for 17 years. In high school, Ms. Huntington worked as a teacher’s assistant in the special education classroom. Currently, she is a principal overseeing a 3rd-4th-grade building. She has been a principal for three years. Due to her background and prior experiences Ms. Huntington has been placed in her district on the K-12 administrative team as the special education expert. She is often sought out to answer questions for others and assists other principals with building needs and concerns.

“I have that foundation, and an understanding of processes of the system and I think that maybe for a principal that didn’t have those experiences it would take them a lot longer to get caught up on those. Because if you do not have any part of a special education background some things are left for interpretation of the district discretion and even though you have to follow the laws there are some gray areas in there.”

She considers being able to train the staff in areas of documentation is essential for a successful special education system as the staff does not always understand or appreciate the need for documenting, even though it is critical.

Mr. Ingersoll oversees a traditional public school that services 500 students K-5th grade. He began his career as a classroom teacher and advanced into the job of principal. He had some prior special education experience on the parent side, as his children were receiving special education services for a period. His current position as building principal also has him overseeing the district's self-contained EI program. He has had to “dig deeper” into the laws dealing with the suspension of a special education student, also learning when it is necessary just to send the child home. Additionally, it has been a struggle to determine the best means for meeting the various medical needs of the students in the building, and ways to incorporate services that are spelled out in the IEP plan.

“I work very hard with the specials teachers in how they can ensure success with the special education students in their classrooms. They need more specific awareness in the needs of the students, but often they are left out of the training we have in the district regarding special education.”

The last principal interviewed, was an inner city school leader named Ms. Jackson. The building she oversees is a charter school servicing grades K-8th grade. Before taking the role as a school principal, she was a high school English teacher. In her position as a teacher, she co-taught with a special education teacher and was able to learn how to accommodate and modify curriculum to meet the student’s needs. She also learned some of the numerous aspects required to work with special education students and parents. Before her beginning as principal of her current building, the district was

cited by the state for having too many suspensions of special education students.

Therefore, Ms. Jackson and her staff have had to work on discipline procedures and policies to lower the number of students suspended. As part of changing some of the procedures and protocols for working with students, the district has had to work on writing effective behavior plans and finding out the student's triggers so they can be more proactive in their approaches. Most importantly, "it is important to create and set up an environment that encourages the students to be successful."

### **Response to Interview Questions**

There were seven open-ended interview questions that participants answered in either face to face interviews or over the phone. The interview questions were designed around their personal experiences surrounding their job as principal. The questions addressed (a) initial preparation; (b) principal professional development; (c) learning experiences as a principal; (d) leadership role and style; (e) educator professional development; (f) principal reflection, and (g) changing preparedness for future leaders.

#### **Initial Preparation**

During the interview process, the first question asked was to "describe the training you received in special education before becoming a principal." The answers all were very similar with eight of the ten principals answering with a simple none as a response. Principals were asked to explain their answer more clearly; Mr. Barrett said "I had no training whatsoever in special education"; similarly, Mr. Coleman explained, "to

be honest with you, I received zero training in both my teaching certification as well as my administration certification programs.”

Ms. Engle and Ms. Huntington both had received teaching degrees in their undergraduate programs with an emphasis in Emotional Impairments (EI). Since both of them brought special education experience with them to their current role as principal, they felt a little more confident in how to handle various situations; however, they both admitted that there were still aspects of the special education process that they did not understand until learning while on the job as principal. Ms. Engle stated, “my prior experience and degree helped as I became an administrator. However, I wish that in my administration program I had received more specific special education finance training.” Ms. Huntington expressed “my personal and prior experiences had helped immensely, however in general, as a principal now I know that there needs to be more training in special education, especially in regards to laws.”

### **Principal Professional Development**

When the participants were asked about their training since becoming a principal all, ten indicated it was on the job training that has gotten them to where they are today. Mr. Appleton commented, “theoretical knowledge base is necessary; solid information, but the real learning, is when you are getting your baptism by fire, and you have to navigate through things.” Mr. Davis had received no training before becoming principal, however, through his continued pursuit of his education he sought out specific training, while receiving his EdD with a minor in special education leadership. He chose to

complete the coursework needed for that degree simply because he knew he needed more training in the area of special education, as it was an area he did not fully feel comfortable.

The participants all commented on various professional development classes that they had taken since becoming principal, especially in the field<sup>2</sup> of special education law, that had been helpful. Several also spoke of various intermediate school district training they attended, as well as speakers that had brought into their building for professional development of their staff as a whole. Topics included such areas such as behavior interventions, and crisis prevention intervention (CPI). Some of the principals also had received some individualized training on the compliance aspects of IEP documentation and how IEP's work, and what those mean for the student and the district. Overall, resounding through the responses was that while on the job experiences had provided adequate preparation, they wish that they had received more specific training before taking the job. Mr. Coleman commented:

“the real training that teachers and administrators these days are learning is on the job. Whatever they are not learning on the job, they will never know. I think that many students probably get the short end of the stick here due to administrators and teachers not understanding their rights, and are not being taught properly because the principal simply doesn't always know them unless the principal has a good director of special education.”

### **Learning Experiences as a Principal**

On the job experiences have proven to be beneficial for the principals interviewed, it has also been necessary for them to seek out additional training in the area of special education. Many pieces of training are provided by the local Intermediate School District, and through principal associations, such as State Elementary Principals Association, and State Secondary Principals Association. The principals interviewed that oversee charter schools, spoke about their management company offering various additional training as well.

The majority of the principals interviewed cited specific student or parent sticky situations that led them to dig deeper into laws, policies and procedures involving special education over their years in service. Mr. Appleton pointed out that he knew nothing about the IEP document, he would sit in meetings and not know what anything meant, until one day there was a situation with a former student and a transition plan. Through this situation, Mr. Appleton had many conversations with the director of special education in his district, as well as received training and assistance from a Walden University student that was interning as assistant principal. After having the countless hours of conversations with these two individuals, Mr. Appleton said:

“this situation helped deepen my knowledge about how to navigate specialized student services, and it helped me to look at things from two perspectives and always seeking to make the practices and procedures fit together, so it was awesome in my book, a true foundational understanding was gained.”



Ms. Huntington did have prior background in special education; however, she spoke about the need to attend more training on inclusion and restraint, as well as crisis prevention since becoming a principal. Additionally, she has taken advantage of several of the Intermediate School Districts training so that she can lead and guide her staff more successfully. Due to her prior experience in special education, she has not found too many things challenging. However, being able to train and lead and guide others has proven to be a little difficult, therefore requiring extra training.

Mr. Coleman expressed frustration when he discussed training he has had to seek out, and that simply there is not enough training when it comes to transitioning special needs students into society after high school. His school strives to be a college prep school; however, he understands that some of the students will not have the opportunity to go to college.

“My task right now is trying to find out more about other students, and training programs and things like that. There is information, but it is truly scattered out there. Additionally, there is not a place where an administrator can go and say ‘what do we do with these students, what resources are out there,’ you have to go and scour and find the resources. Regarding training and adequate resources there’s nothing out there.”

Ms. Fisher discussed the need to have more training on dealing with medical situations of special needs students that need to be addressed while the child is at school. “I think the biggest struggle with our staff in our building is the medical situation,” she said. Her building does not have a school nurse, so it has been relatively challenging to

ensure all needs are met within the confines of her building. She has a situation in her district that a child needs medical assistance to use the bathroom. To help this student be successful, several staff members including herself have had to take extra training to help this child. Working as part of a team with the parents, students and employees to ensure student achievement and overall success in the building is what required in each case.

### **Leadership Role and Style**

The leader within the principal is certainly developed over time and with experience. Principals acquire different skills to lead, guide, direct, and mentor their staff members. When speaking with the participants, many of these characteristics were discussed as they described their leadership role. Several of the principals openly admitted that they were learning and leading at the same time. They often found their learning experiences happened as they were working alongside a staff member.

Leadership does not always mean authoritarian top-down guidance. It means that a leader is guiding by example, Mr. Coleman expressed the need to “facilitate understanding”, and creating a collaborative “team effort as it is the collective responsibility of all parties to ensure student success.” According to Mr. Barrett, an excellent leader means that you have also to be a “good follower” and have an active “hands-on approach” with those that possibly have more understanding of the topics, policies, and procedures.

Not only are principals’ leaders of their staff, but they lead and guide the parents and students as well. Ms. Huntington explained that parents need a leader that can explain

various aspects of the special education process to them, as well as support them. One way to look at the principal's style of leadership is as Mr. Davis explained "student-focused leadership," which means that "all materials, staff and resources are available to ensure the success of every student in the building." It is necessary for the principal to "facilitate staff collaboration, and empower their employees to do what they need to do to help every child succeed," Ms. Huntington, Mr. Coleman, and Mr. Ingersoll all stated that this was a philosophy they followed in leading in their schools.

### **Educator Professional Development**

Mr. Ingersoll and Mr. Davis stressed that they understand that their staff needs to have continued training in special education. However, as Ms. Engle pointed out, many principals know that over time budget cuts and funding issues have impacted the amount of training that they can offer their staff. It is a State requirement that all teachers receive five days of training every year to stay compliant with state laws. The training must be "applicable to their job as a teacher." Many districts offer several days of professional development training at the beginning of each year. According to the majority of responses gathered, typically one of those five days is devoted specifically to special education.

The monetary issues that are affecting schools have meant that principals need to be more creative in ways that their staff can receive training. "Lunch meetings are held, team meetings, early release days for the students so teachers have a couple of hours to work on skills, and a district subscribing to various journals and DVD collections to give

the staff a way to receive training independently,” are just a few of the methods used by districts to get the staff the professional development opportunities.

Overall, Mr. Barrett, Mr. Coleman, Mr. Ingersoll, and Ms. Jackson realized that they did not have enough training themselves to be the person providing the training to their staff. First and foremost, they rely on the information from the special education department in their district or Intermediate School District, as well as publications relating to laws, policies, best practices, procedures, and any new curriculum improvements. They commented that often they sit in on the various training their staff participates in, as they need to learn the material as well. Additionally, it helps the staff to see them as a team player, and an equal partner with their employees in the learning process.

### **Principal Reflection**

As the principals interviewed related their lived experiences, they spoke about things they would like to go back and change about their preparation program. Through the passage of time they have each gained a better understanding of their roles and responsibilities, each expressed that there were many aspects of becoming an overseer of special education services that he or she did not understand and had to learn the hard way. Two of the principals interviewed were previous special education teachers, Ms. Engle, and Ms. Huntington. They spoke about aspects of their current job that they wish had been taught and explained to them taking on the role of principal. One of the critical aspect they pointed too was the financial side of special education.

Often the principal attends the IEP meetings being held. If they cannot make the meeting they send their assistant principal, and or another building representative. One aspect that was mentioned by Ms. Engle was the fact that they needed more specific training in the financial aspects of special education. “Understanding the financial side of special education is important to protect the district from litigation and financial burdens.” For example, as Ms. Huntington pointed out if a student requires a full-time assistant to help them throughout the day, the district representative at the meeting needs to understand how much that is going to cost the district and weigh any other options that might be similar and less costly. Ms. Fisher pointed out:

“the ability to decipher what is being agreed too, if it is doable for the district to supply, and is it the best practice for the student, is the administrator’s job in the meetings. If the principal does not have a clear understanding of financial aspects of modifications and accommodations, then it is hard for them to do what is best for the district and the students.”

Equally, one of the biggest areas that principals need to understand is the legal aspects of the special education process. “I see the greatest gaps in the legal side of training,” said Ms. Fisher. Being able to “understand all of the policies and procedures creates a foundational understanding to base decisions for the future on,” according to Mr. Davis. In general, it was a majority consensus of the participants that special education training is needed in administration certification and preparation programs. Additionally, it was expressed that there needs to be more to assist with understanding

IEP documentation, what documents means and how to use them effectively from the beginning. Several of the participants commented that they had to receive crash courses in what the IEP document was from a colleague. In several instances, it was too late as they already were in sticky situations. “The IEP is a legally binding document that creates a contract between the parents and the school district on the details of the services going to be provided to their child,” Mr. Appleton had an intern that taught him the ins and outs of the IEP document while he was dealing with a serious issue in the district.

In the training of principals, it is a fine line as Mr. Appleton stated, “universities are not going to be able to teach district and state-specific information to their population of students. Likewise, no university is going to be able to teach district politics; these are most likely the items that are going to be learned through on the job experiences.” However, being able to understand the timelines and the process that leads to the identification of a student and possible subsequent qualification in special education would be extremely helpful to comprehend before taking the job as a school principal is essential, was a critical point made by Ms. Fisher, Ms. Gilmore and Ms. Jackson.

According to Mr. Appleton, Mr. Coleman, Mr. Davis, Ms. Fisher, Ms. Huntington, and Ms. Jackson they rely on the “Intermediate School District, the special education director and or the teachers in the special education department to lead and guide training in their building.” Over the past several years’ Ms. Fisher pointed out “districts as a whole have been receiving training in crisis prevention intervention, trauma

interactions, as well as ways to identify and implement interventions for students before needing special education.”

### **Changing Preparedness for Future Leaders**

Many of the participants commented that having a universal training criterion at the university level would be the first thing they would like to see changed for the future. They pointed out that not all universities have a standard curriculum that they adhere. Therefore, the preparation is varied across the nation. Mr. Barrett and Mr. Davis, both having served in their position for 20 years, commented that it is not just the principals that are not uniformly trained, but it is the teachers as well. Ms. Engle pointed out in hiring teachers she can see much disparity in the undergraduate training a teacher receives.

In general, the principals suggested that more case study type scenarios are necessary and role playing some real life situations, would be helpful in the administrative preparation programs. It is important that principals have some knowledge before walking into various situations they might deal with. More in-depth training on the IEP document and the process as a whole is needed to create the foundation to understand best how to lead and guide. Mainly the recognition that “more training is required before taking the job, but also more opportunities for training is necessary,” Mr. Coleman explained.

Ms. Fisher said, “It would be beneficial to have a quick reference guide to refer to when handling situations and making decisions that affect a student in special education.”

Having a universal tool would allow principals to have something they could quickly reference. Additionally, it would help bridge the gap in preparation. “It is essential for the success of all students to embrace special education and general education students as a collective unit and help bridge the gaps in learning,” Mr. Davis stated. Keeping that in mind, many of the principals have found themselves in training classes and doing their personal research on various aspects of special education so that they can better serve the students in their building.

Many principals also realize that they are not appropriately trained in the area of special education. They have had to seek out additional training, rely on publications and associations, and their lived experiences to help them lead and guide the staff and students in their buildings. They have found it very challenging at times to learn on the job, but over time several commented that it has made them a stronger leader and a better advocate in meeting each and every child’s needs.

### **Themes**

The themes that emerged from the full scope of the interviews compiled from the participants shared experiences. The participants spoke of many similar experiences throughout their careers that lead them to learn more about special education. Their experiences broadly encompassed: a) how essential it is to know how to work with parents; b) resolving citations their district had received due to not following the laws; c) and personal experiences with sticky situations and ways requiring them to learn how to be a better leader in special education. The participants were not afraid to speak openly



about their experiences and ways that they wish preparation and preparedness could change in the future.

### **Working with Parents**

The majority of the participants spoke about one of the most difficult aspects of being a principal is in knowing how to handling conversations with parents. Parents are becoming much better advocates for their children, and their educational needs, commented Ms. Engle, Mr. Appleton, and Mr. Davis. Ms. Fisher stated that “as a principal it is necessary to have a foundation of the special education process to understand the situation as a whole better.” Additionally, being able to talk to parents and the ability to work as a team is the key to the success of any student, according to Mr. Coleman, and Ms. Fisher.

Over the years, Ms. Engle pointed out that “parents have brought more advocates and lawyers to meetings regarding their child, which can be overwhelming for everyone in attendance.” Mr. Appleton said it best when he commented: “The instances of a parent not loving their child, gosh, I do not think I can say I’ve met a parent that didn’t love their child, it is just the matter they did not know how to love them.” This statement resonated as principals spoke about their interactions with parents, and their overall need to have the ability to work with them successfully.

The number of advocates that are coming to meetings with parents is on the rise as well. Parents are seeking out advocates and lawyers to help them through the special education process since it can be very overwhelming. Therefore, more training and

understanding of the point and purpose of advocates, in general, is key to any preparation a principal could receive. Ms. Engle spoke of a situation that an advocate was paid by a parent to represent them in an IEP meeting in the parking lot of the school, and when the advocate came into the meeting, he was pushing for a transition plan to be written by the student. However, the student was in Kindergarten and therefore did not need or warrant a transition plan to be drafted. Once the principal was able to explain to the parents their reasoning behind no transition plan, they respectfully asked the advocate to leave. Had the principal not had some prior background as a former special education teacher, possibly this situation could have gone very differently.

An overall weakness in the education process most of the principals pointed out was the lack of training for administrators and staff in the relational competencies needed even to work with general education students and their parents. Mr. Appleton mentioned that “parents will come and advocate for their children, the biggest thing for the school administrator is navigating that communication of the teacher to parent, parent to teacher, as well as a school district to parent.” Through the actual learning from walking through sticky situations, many of the principals have learned that listening is a skill they have needed to work on and master. Additionally, learning how to ask appropriate questions is necessary, and knowing who to should be asked the questions also becomes an essential point. Mr. Barrett, Mr. Coleman, Mr. Davis and Mr. Ingersoll commented that parents need to know they can trust the district, the principal, teachers, other staff to care for and educate their child in the best possible way.

Ms. Huntington pointed out that “the ability to listen, ask questions, and put yourself in the shoes of the parent who is looking out for the needs of their child takes a lot of patience and practice.” This is something that is not necessarily specific only to special education; it pertains to all aspects of education. Mr. Ingersoll had no prior special education experience other than the fact he had children in special education. He really could relate to the parents and how they felt in this situation.

Mr. Davis spoke about a situation he had with a parent his first year in his current district. The parent previously had some negative experiences with the district and had filed a civil rights complaint. Mr. Davis needed to build a level of trust with the parents, show them integrity and create a bond as they transitioned to his building. Additionally, he had to work with various paraprofessionals and staff members to ensure the success of the programs they were implementing and overall achievement for the child. Setting a standard for communication, and working in the best interest of the child helped the parents to understand that Mr. Davis and his staff were working on the same team to meet the student’s needs.

In Ms. Fisher’s experience as an administrator, she has had several situations escalate quickly into bigger issues than they should have been. She particularly spoke of a situation with an EI student who had previously been homeschooled and was in 7th grade entering her building. She not only had to dig deeper into the laws regards to discipline and restraint, but she also needed to train her staff quickly regarding those aspects as well. Likewise, the parents came to the building seeking a new sense of hope

for this child. However, given that this was not something that could result overnight, they had to be guided to understand the steps in the process and the measures the staff was taking could be trusted. “As soon as the parents could see that we took the situation seriously, they became more willing to work with the school.” This was a relationship that took some extra effort on Ms. Fisher’s part but in the end was a win-win situation for the family, parents, student, and school district.

Mr. Coleman’s approach to learning and overall philosophy of his building is to approach every student individually and understand that they learn differently. With this method he does not get much resistance from his staff to give accommodations. Often parents come to his charter school seeking answers and help, as they have had previous negative experiences with the special education process. He commented that “parents come in seeing the IEP is a lifeline.” Over the course of working with the student and parents, he has witnessed parents relax a little and even sometimes he has been able to close the IEP all together and create a 504 plan in its place.

Often principals see special needs students switching schools frequently. Parents do this seeking a new sense of hope, and reassurance that their child’s needs are going to be met. Being able to build a trusting relationship and having parents see that you take their child’s needs and education seriously is critical for a successful transition. Having more training in disabilities, in general, would also be helpful for principals to understand a little more what parents are experiencing the day in and day out.

Parent interactions are essential to any special education program. Being able to interact with the parents also requires administrators to develop skills in communication. Ms. Fisher said it best “sometimes parent interactions can get ugly, they are advocating for their child, and they live with this disability 24/7; it is my job as a principal to remain calm and try to empathize with the parents. It also is vital to understand the child’s disability and explain it gently to the parents. I always like to think, ‘how would I feel in their shoes.’” Several of the principals interviewed commented that they not only did not feel adequately trained in special education, but they would desire more training on how to interact with parents.

### **Working with Staff**

When it comes to overseeing a special education program, generally it involves the whole staff to assure the best interests of the student remain a priority focus. Principals need to work with the general education teachers, specials teachers, lunch aides, paraprofessionals, and any other building staff that might have contact with the students. Mr. Ingersoll spoke about the need to work more with the specials teachers and the importance of training them in the best practices for overall student achievement in their classrooms. “In general, there needs to be more opportunities for the staff in general to have more of an understanding of what an IEP is and what their duties are in implementation.”

Several of the principals interviewed spoke about the special education teachers in their building somewhat educating them on the process of the IEP. Mr. Appleton spoke

specifically about an intern that sat him down and discussed every aspect of the IEP with him and showed him how to write goals and objectives and what various accommodations and modifications are typical in a child's special education program. Several commented that it was vital to the success of the meeting and overall student achievement for them to have a better understand of the process going into a meeting

Ms. Fisher commented that she has had to remember that attending a meeting does not mean just signing on the dotted line, but rather, you are looking out for the best interest of the students, and the district. Likewise, as a principal, it is essential to work with the staff to write appropriate accommodations that are doable for all parties involved. Ensuring that general education staff as well as special education staff is working together is vital to a job of principal.

“My role as principals is to be the keeper of fidelity of the process, and reminding teachers of what they already know, to trust the process, trust the procedures, compartmentalize all emotions.” Mr. Appleton pointed out that there are set policies and procedures for student identification and ways to implement the RTI process before beginning the special education process, however, many times due to pure frustration, the general education teachers, and special education teachers forget the steps necessary. Several of the other participants commented that it is a constant struggle to have special education teachers, as well as general education teachers, understand the responsibilities require they work together. Often the general education teachers have the attitude that

this is not their student and try to push the child and his or her success onto the special education teachers.

Working as a united front is necessary to for building the trust with parents and students. Often parents get upset and angry and defusing the situation becomes a necessary the part of the principal's role. If teachers are not following the process, and proper procedures that can add more problems in the end for the district, according to accounts from Mr. Davis, Ms. Engle, and Ms. Jackson. Mr. Coleman and Mr. Ingersoll pointed out that not only was there training lacking for special education staff but also in training a general education teacher to understand their role in handling special education students. So much of the information a general education teacher learns in regards to special education comes with on the job experience. As a principal making training opportunities available is key, but some of these training are hard to do for a teacher juggling the responsibilities of a classroom. Having more opportunities at the university level would be better served for those coming into the education field, according to Ms. Engle and Mr. Barrett.

#### Working with Students

Several of the principals interviewed spoke about the difficulties on a daily basis of dealing with various types of student's disabilities, while at the same time trying to work toward the success of every student in their building. Principals Gilmore and Ingersoll spoke about children who have emotional impairments and how their behaviors can be hard to manage while keeping the other students in the building safe. Ms. Engle,

Ms. Gilmore, and Mr. Ingersoll all serve as principals of buildings that contain the school district's special education classrooms.

Ms. Engle's school is the school district's self-contained autism classrooms spanning from the early to late elementary years. She spoke a great deal about how she works with the teachers and paraprofessionals on various student needs. "Every child, especially those with a disability need to be treated on an individual basis with everyone understanding the exact requirements of the child." She commented that she tried to be supportive, ensure that all resources and materials are available to benefit the students. "I truly focus on the success of the student." While working with every individual student, she also focuses on family needs as well, and how to support the family as a unit as their student ages.

Having the district-wide preschool program in her building, Ms. Gilmore spoke about not only having to address issues with the students in Kindergarten through second grade, with disabilities but also the struggle of dealing with the three to five-year-olds. With the preschool population of special needs students, Ms. Gilmore realized that you need to be tolerant of all the students, and figuring out what they need socially is essential before you can grasp their need academically. "Understanding individual student needs academically and socially, as well as determining how to support them and what is going to teach them is a huge part of special education classrooms in my building." Likewise, she noted that determining what is needed for the students before the IEP being written, prevents it from being written incorrectly.



Mr. Ingersoll's elementary building is the school for the district's emotional impaired program. He has had several student situations in which a student has gotten physically aggressive against a teacher, or another student. He has had to learn different techniques as well as seek out further help with the law to ensure student safety but also the safety of others in the building.

### **Legal Requirements**

Mr. Ingersoll is not the only principal that spoke about legal requirements. Several of the principals talked about the need to contact the special education director of their district, the district attorney, and dig deeper into laws themselves. All of the principals felt that they needed more training in the legal requirements, and various laws before taking the job as principal. Different principal associations around the state have provided legal education for the principals which they indicated was beneficial.

Two of the principals spoke about citations that they had received from the State due to over-identification of a certain sect of students, as well as too many suspensions of special education students. Both of those situations required special district-wide training, as well as oversight from the State. Mr. Appleton and Ms. Jackson, both attended extra training, as well as changed building practices to ensure compliance within the district. After a few years, both Mr. Appleton and Ms. Jackson reported that their district was able to improve their practices, and the citations were removed. To begin the change in their districts, they started with the implementation of a more strategic RTI process, and student assistant team program.

Four of the principals interviewed spoke about civil rights complaints that had been filed by parents regarding various special education situations. Mr. Davis commented that being able to mediate between the general education staff and special education staff on the ways to work together to meet the needs of the student has been a tricky aspect of his job. To avoid legal disputes and the citations that have occurred, “everyone needs to be on the same page, and that is the overall success of the student.”

Mr. Barrett pointed out that he relies on publications and journals to help him navigate the legal aspects. “I read all the time, especially the legal information.” He also spoke about having confidence in the special education director that oversees the district, but also the district attorney is essential. “I know I do not know everything; we have a lot of fairly complicated situations, especially the whole idea of rights, and rights of the school district; the special education director and I have a good relationship with the district attorney, and if anything is questionable we consult with her.”

Overall, the principals are in agreement that legal concerns are not ones they seek to address on their knowledge base. They know they need to seek advice and guidance from other sources. Through some of the examples, they shared, learning from on the job experience is also key.

### **Summary**

School Building principals are responsible not only for daily operations of the building, overseeing budgets, human resource issues, maintenance, curriculum, but also they need to have a complete understanding of special education laws and regulations.

Knowledge of the increasing population of special education students and their needs, and how to effectively work with parents advocating for their children, are important roles of a principal (Bellamy et al., 2014; Brown et al., 2014; Cisler & Bruce, 2013; Goor, 1997; Murray et al., 2013; Pazey et al., 2014; Roberts & Guerra, 2015; Sumbera et al., 2014). Throughout the interviews conducted, these ten principals shared their lived experiences, anecdotes, and recommendations on ways to improve preparation for future leaders and confirmed the contentions of current research.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

In this study I explored the lived experiences of principals overseeing special education in their current environments, which included extensive legal requirements, increasing numbers of special needs students, and more empowered parent advocates (Brown et al., 2014; Cobb, 2015; DeMatthews & Edwards, 2014; Gümüş, 2015; Jahnukainen, 2015; Milligan et al., 2012; Pazey et al., 2014; Schaaf et al., 2015; Williams et al., 2013). The phenomenological analysis indicated four themes pivotal to principals' lived experiences in regards to special education services and oversight. Implications and recommendations are offered to improve current preparation programs and professional development practices. This chapter provides suggestions for further research and concludes with my reflections on the overall research experience.

### **Interpretation on the Findings**

The findings indicated that three relationships are developed and nurtured throughout the special education process. Principals reported that an effective relationship with parents, staff, and students is needed to have a collaborative special education team. Participants also reported that the demonstration of a significant understanding of the laws and regulations governing special education is needed to enhance these relationships to promote successful student outcomes.

### **Relationship with Parents**

The most prominent theme that the participants reported was involvement and interactions with parents. Principals are working with parents who are more empowered

and effective advocates for their children's needs than they were in the past (Cobb, 2015; Murray et al., 2013; Pazey et al., 2014; Schaaf et al., 2015; Williams et al., 2013).

Throughout the interviews, principals spoke about the challenging aspects of working with parents, especially those who were advocating for their special needs child. Over the past several years, there has been an increase in parental complaints involving schools and individuals with disabilities (Lynch, 2012; Pazey & Cole, 2013; Sumbera et al., 2014; Supovitz et al., 2009; Walker et al., 2012). The number of parent advocates attending meetings has been on the rise. The principals discussed the overwhelming feeling they have when an advocate is at the meeting. Several of them felt that they did not have adequate understanding the role of an advocate. Ms. Engle reported that principals are held accountable by parents, special education advocates, lawyers, and government agencies to adhere to the best educational practices for the students in special education (Pazey & Cole, 2013; Sumbera et al., 2014; Supovitz et al., 2009; Walker et al., 2012). Ms. Gilmore commented that, "principals not only need to understand the role of the advocate, but they also need to be prepared to do what is best for the student, but also the district they represent."

Administrators often believe they are prepared until they are faced with a problem that could result in substantial costs for their district (Pazey & Cole, 2013; Sumbera et al., 2014). Several of the principals interviewed discussed the disadvantage they felt while interacting with parents of special needs students. Mr. Barrett stated that, "the fact I did not have the necessary training and foundation in the special education

process was a grave concern” to them as a whole. According to Mr. Appleton, “parent situations are generally one of the biggest challenges of my job as principal.” Mr. Davis pointed out that listening is a skill that principals can use when dealing with difficult parent situations. Parents need to know that their concerns are being heard and that they can trust the district to do what is best for their child. Ms. Huntington stated that, “principals need to listen, empathize, and have patience with parents, as everyone works together in the best interest of the student.”

Parents who advocate for their disabled child’s needs simply want to know that everyone is working together for the common good. Student success is created by a team of parents, teachers, and school leaders who unite in the best interest of the child without resistance. Participants reported resoundingly that having a solid relationship with parents helps to make the job as principal easier. The importance of this relationship is not specific to special education, but includes general education. Participants felt that having more training in the area of special education would help interactions with parents of students with disabilities.

### **Relationship With Staff**

An area that principals found challenging was establishing an effective relationship with staff. Being able to bridge the gaps between general education staff and special education staff is part of effective leadership. In the area of special education, principals need to hold teachers and staff accountable for meeting the needs of all students based upon federal, state, and local laws and regulations (Loiacono & Valenti,

2010; Lynch, 2012; McHatton et al., 2010; Sumbera et al., 2014; Thompson, 2011; Walker et al., 2012). Mr. Ingersoll pointed out that principals must work with “general education teachers, paraprofessionals, lunch aids, specials teachers, and any other district staff that have interaction and contact with the students.” It is the principal’s job to ensure there is collaboration regarding the individual needs of students, their IEP, and working toward student success (Cobb, 2015; Gümüş, 2015; O’Malley et al., 2015; Schaaf et al., 2015). Offering professional development opportunities for staff regarding changes in policies and laws may keep staff updated on changes that have been made (Goor, 1997; Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Loiacono & Valenti, 2010; Supovitz et al., 2009).

Participants spoke about their professional development training and what is offered to their staff. Ms. Engle spoke about the financial aspect of paying for conferences as well as substitute teachers to cover classrooms. Many of these costs can no longer be afforded by the district, so Ms. Engle spoke about her creative ways of incorporating appropriate trainings. She has weekly lunch meetings with staff to do training, and she has subscribed to many webinars and publications that the teachers have access too as well.

All of the participants spoke about the free trainings they encourage their staff to attend at the local intermediate school district. Two of the principals commented that they did not have a problem leading the training themselves for their staff, while the other eight said they usually participate along with the staff in the training. Special education professional development opportunities for all staff members are critical to ensure a

successful program (Brown et al., 2014; Roberts & Guerra, 2015; Schaaf et al., 2015; Supovitz et al., 2009; Walker et al., 2012).

Previous researchers addressed the need for quality leadership. Being an effective school leader means being adequately trained and able to model best practices for staff (Lynch, 2012; Pazez & Cole, 2013; Sumbera et al., 2014; Williams et al., 2013). A principal's supervision and evaluation of teachers as they implement interventions, accommodations, and modifications while instructing students is a significant part of leadership responsibility (Lynch, 2012; Pazez & Cole, 2013; Sumbera et al., 2014). Additionally, the principal's responsibilities toward student achievement must be met while monitoring compliance with government reports (Sumbera et al., 2014).

Several of the participants spoke about the struggle that often takes place between general education and special education teachers. There seems to be an attitude that only special education teachers are responsible for the success of a student with a disability. Participants pointed out that working together as a united front helps to build trust with the parents and students. Additionally, participants pointed out that if teachers follow policies and procedures, there may be fewer problems for the district. Mr. Appleton emphasized the importance of "fidelity, and believing in the process as a whole."

Many of the participants noted the advantage of having a relationship with the staff who can answer their questions and guide them toward a better understanding of special education. One of the principals spoke about an intern he worked with who sat him down and discussed every aspect of the IEP process with him. Another principal



spoke about having special education teachers in his building to lean on for guidance and direction when it came to gathering the foundational knowledge he felt he never was taught. Ms. Engle stated that “it is important to have the trainings not only for the staff, but also the principals prior to taking on their position.” Ongoing training as a method of staying up to date with policies, procedures, and best practices is important for staff and principals (Angelle & Bilton, 2009; Lynch, 2012; Pazey & Cole, 2013). Overall, training would benefit the students and the educational programming.

When principals were asked to describe their leadership style, they admitted that many of the foundational principles regarding leadership came with on-the-job experience. They used these skills in many different ways; however, they realized that leading by example was one of the best strategies. Participants spoke about their continued learning experiences and noted that attending meetings with staff is one of the best ways that they can exhibit this behavior.

Mr. Davis shared experiences in which he helped to change the overall mindset behind special education. After arriving to the school, his first decision was to start a basic program in the special education department. Mr. Davis reported that a “peer to peer program was created that over 10% of the general education students participate.” As a result of Mr. Davis’s new approach to special education, “the overall attitude in the school changed.” Recently his district was awarded one of 14 grants given by MIT-Innovation to create a device that students with disabilities can use to assist with opening lockers with combination locks. Mr. Davis was excited to share that these positive

advancements in integrating the general education and special education staff and students have created connections among staff, students, and parents, and “everyone is very excited to see the growing program.”

Mr. Davis’s example is one of many that were shared regarding the principal’s leadership role in forming collaborative efforts among the staff to create positive change in programing. Mr. Appleton and Mr. Coleman discussed their perceptions of special education meetings changing once they realized the importance of the IEP document and what it meant for the students as well as the district. “Attending an IEP meeting for a student no longer just means signing on the dotted line, but it means being part of the team to ensure the success of the student,” commented Ms. Fisher. The added role that the principal brings to the table is addressing the financial aspect of the accommodations and services a student might need to ensure academic success. Principals need to make it a win-win situation for all involved, Ms. Fisher pointed out. Ms. Engle and Ms. Huntington said that they did not understand all of the financial aspects of special education services until they became a principal, and even then they felt underprepared.

Creating a collaborative relationship with the staff helps to ensure success of students and improves programing (Hallinger & Huber, 2012; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1990; Smith et al., 2010; Sun & Leithwood, 2012). If the principal is an effective role model, this encourages the staff to learn from his or her example. The principal’s behaviors that are displayed consciously or unconsciously are critical examples for teachers and staff in shaping a successful program. Bandura’s social learning theory contends that modeling

influences learning (Bandura, 1971; Culatta, 2013). The more principals can model the appropriate behavior, the higher the quality of targeted instructional services that can be provided (Bandura, 1971). This was validated throughout the discussions with Mr. Barrett, Mr. Coleman, Mr. Davis, and Ms. Engle. These principals had very successful peer mentoring programs as well as intervention teams that aided in student achievement.

### **Relationship With Students**

The third reason participants said they needed more training and preservice preparation was interactions with students with disabilities. It is the responsibility of the principal to ensure that all students regardless of disability are being educated in the least restrictive environment (M. F. DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; Lynch, 2012). When a student comes to a district needing special education services, it is the responsibility of the school district to provide services in the least restrictive environment to meet that student's needs. Ms. Fisher spoke about a medical situation that a child came to her building with, which required the district to receive extra medical training to provide the student with an acceptable learning environment. Several of the principals spoke about needing to put policies and procedures in place that established protocols for addressing behavior situations that arose.

Mr. Coleman pointed to the lack of information and services available to transition students with disabilities into the adult world after graduation. He is working on finding a way to gather the information necessary to ensure the success of the students after high school. Many of the participants pointed out that they are actively involved

with students with disabilities well after they leave their building. Often a principal and or special education teacher is asked to attend meetings at the students new building to ensure proper transition from grade to grade. Being able to establish a relationship with the student and their parents is necessary as the team works together to form a successful academic program. The participants discussed several examples of student situations that have required them to quickly educate themselves on the various laws and requirements. A couple of the participants interviewed had self-contained classrooms in their buildings in which the students with disabilities. The students in these classrooms usually cannot be mainstreamed and often have behavior issues. Several of the other principals also spoke about individual cases in which they have had to deal with particular needs and behaviors of students that have caused them to become more educated in best practices. Overall, it takes a strong relationship with parents, students, and staff to be able to create a collaborative team that successfully works together.

### **Laws, Rules, and Regulations**

Not being well-versed in the legal aspects of special education could cause additional complications for principals in establishing the relationships with parents, staff, and students. The majority of the principals interviewed commented on the need for more pre-service training in regards to the legal requirements of special education. Many of the participants felt that several of the situations that they have dealt with could have been “avoided.” They did “quick researching” of various “laws, policies and procedures,” but it might have been easier if they had more legal knowledge. The legal aspects of

special education have changed over time, and therefore, it is important that principals be trained adequately and up to date on these changes.

Two of the principals interviewed related stories about their districts being cited due to violations of special education practices in their building. One district was cited for having too many African-American boys identified for special education services, and the other district was cited for having too many suspensions involving special education students. To correct the violations both principals had to get actively involved with the staff and attending training to learn new practices. Both principals commented that inside a short timetable their districts were able to clear the violations, and see improvement in their programming. These types of situation appear to be the result of the ever increasing number of compliance requirements added to the principal's responsibilities, and the lack of adequate administrative leadership preparation to meet these needs (Lynch, 2012; Paze & Cole, 2013; Sumbera et al., 2014; Supovitz et al., 2009; Walker et al., 2012).

The lack of preparation in special education administration results in principals indicating they are required to spend a lot more time on many tasks that could be delegated or handled more efficiently. Barrett commented that he "constantly is reading journals and other publications, to keep up to date on current policies, laws and best practices in special education." Mr. Coleman and Ingersoll agreed with the research findings stating that they wished they have been able to have more of a combination of coursework, along with field experience prior to employment, that would have allowed them to gain the skills and confidence needed to be more competent dealing with special

education issues in their districts (Angelle & Bilton, 2009; Cobb, 2015; Goor, 1997; Loiacono & Valenti, 2010; Milligan et al., 2012; Pazez & Cole, 2013; Pazez et al., 2014; Williams et al., 2013).

The three relationships that principals reported were important for them to maintain to judge themselves effectively are relationships with parents, staff, and students. These relationships are enhanced by a greater understanding of the laws and regulations governing special education. Without an adequate understanding of the “laws and regulations,” there is unnecessary tension between the relationships, with parents, staff, and students. The tension can cause “conflicts”, as “parents advocate” for their children, staff “bridge the gaps in programming”, and students have “individual needs that have to be met.” If principals were better trained before taking on their role of special education oversight, many of the issues brought up by the participants would most likely not have been a problem. This finding mirrors what other studies addressed, as far as the need for more efficient pre-service training of principals.

### **Limitations of the Study**

There were some limitations in conducting this study. One limitation was finding principals willing to share their experiences and take time away from their district. The restriction that the participants needed to be interviewed outside of their building caused some challenges in the collection of data. Another limitation was completing the interviews with an approach that did not lead toward bias in the answers provided. I have

an extensive background in special education and therefore needed to stay neutral so as not to sway the participants.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

The findings in this study are similar to previous research conducted on principals pre-service training before taking on their leadership role (Goor, 1997; Loiacono & Valenti, 2010). Additionally, it was found in previous research that principals who have extensive pre-service training experience a higher likelihood of success for the students and their overall program (Goor, 1997; Loiacono & Valenti, 2010; Marks & Printy, 2003; Pazez & Cole, 2013). The principals interviewed in this study shared their suggestions for more efficient pre-service training in the area of special education based on their lived experiences.

While several studies focus on the preservice training of principals, none of them specifically drew attention to the need for better preparation in the area of special education. The intention of this study was to expand the research on preparation essentials for principals before taking on their role of a school leader. Through listening to the participants and their stories, recommendations were made on ways to improve preparation in the future.

The findings were within the scope of the research. However, they also revealed ways that preparation is lacking for principals across the board. Through data analysis, there were various ways that the principals offered that they thought preparation could

improve for future leaders. The overall themes of the interviews remained consistent throughout compiling the data.

In order to have a successful special education program in a school, it was pointed out that the principal's relationships with parents, teachers, and students are essential. Overall, an understanding of the numerous legal requirements and laws should be the foundation of any relationship (Angelle & Bilton, 2009; M. F. DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; Loiacono & Valenti, 2010; Lynch 2012; McHatton et al., 2010; Voltz & Collins, 2010). The principal models best practices, positive attitudes, and provides leadership to the staff, if he or she is an effectively trained leader, then it will be evidenced in the staff (Bandura, 1971). If the principal and staff are working in collaboration, then the quality of education and the needs of the students they serve will be met, and parents will be satisfied with the education of their children (Lynch, 2012; Pazez & Cole, 2013; Voltz & Collins, 2010). It is safe to assume that if the principals are not adequately prepared and on the job training is not sufficient to ensure confident leadership, then preparation programs and requirements need to be changed.

The principals spoke of their initial training. Two of the principals interviewed had previously been special education teachers, while the other eight principals came from general education classroom experience. As I interviewed the participants, I was amazed at the lack of preservice training and began to look into the administrative requirements in the state. There is not a specific requirement to have special education training before obtaining an administrator's certificate. This was confirmed by all of the



principals interviewed as they said it was not required and therefore in many instances was not even mentioned in their training coursework. Additionally, upon reviewing the state standards for preparation programs, there is no specific mention of “special education training” being required (Gümüş, 2015; State Board of Education, 2013)

Principals who oversee special education services lived experiences and their pre-service preparation was the purpose of this study. The focus of the results was to make recommendations for meaningful changes in the way principals are trained before taking on the role of special education oversight. Using the four themes as a guide, recommendations for ways to train future principals in the area of special education are summarized in Table 2. The recommendations from the principals on the means to improve training in the future are offered as a way to possibly change preparation programs for future leaders.

Table 2.

*Preservice Training Recommendations*

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*Recommendations regarding preservice training from participants*

- Have a more universal criterion on training requirements at the university level
- Provide more training on federal, state and local laws and policies
- Provide training in regards to the financial aspects of special education that differ from normal district financial concerns
- Provide training on the IEP document, what each section of the document means for the student as well as the district
- Provide realistic type situations through case studies that can be role played with other professionals training to become a principal

*Recommendations regarding oversight from participants*

- Offer more opportunities to learn ways to create collaboration between special education and general education teachers
- Offer more training on the various types of disabilities that students with special needs have
- Develop a quick reference guide that principals could access with laws and regulations

*Recommendations regarding parental interactions from participants*

- Provide information on early identification and interventions that can be done prior to special education services
  - Offer more training on how to interact with advocates that attend meetings representing parents
  - Provide more training on how to have appropriate interactions and conversations with parents
  - Develop a quick reference guide that would help principals transition students from high school into society
  - Provide more information on post-secondary options for students with disabilities
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### **Implications for Social Change**

The implication for social change as a result of this study is to raise awareness of the gaps in principal preparation programs with regards to special education training.

Three societally changes that could result from this study are: (a) awareness created for school districts as they hire future school leaders; (b) greater knowledge in the gaps of preparation programs in which universities could change their certification requirements; and (c) future principals would be encouraged to seek out the training they lack prior taking on the role of school leader.

This study has the potential to influence school districts, county intermediate school districts, universities, and state departments of education. Much of the research found addressed preparation of principals in a general sense. However, it did not address the actual preservice preparation of principals in regards to special education and student achievement (Bellamy et al., 2014; Brown et al., 2014; Cisler & Bruce, 2013; Gümüş, 2015).

### **District Implications**

The findings from the research conducted provide a starting point toward awareness about the preparation that principals receive before taking on their role as a school leader, similar to other studies had found (Angelle & Bilton, 2009; Cisler & Bruce, 2013; Jahnukainen, 2015; Kemp-Graham, 2015; Lynch, 2012; Milligan et al., 2012; Pazey & Cole, 2013; Pazey et al., 2014; Schaaf, Williamson, & Novak, 2015). On an individual school district level, those who are in the process of hiring new principals

should be aware of the areas that preparation is lacking. One of the ways they can change this is to encourage any new hires to seek out training that would fill the gaps in their knowledge base.

Understanding special education laws, various disabilities that are serviced in a school building, ways to interact with staff and parents are key components to a principal's overall leadership success. There have been several studies that pointed to the relationship between principals pre-service training and the overall success and improvement of programming for students (Goor, 1997; Loiacono & Valenti, 2010; Marks & Printy, 2003; Pazez & Cole, 2013). However, there have not been any studies that directly correlate a principals' preparedness in special education and student achievement.

### **University Implications**

A greater awareness to the discrepancies in ways that principals are trained at the university level was discussed throughout the interviews conducted. Three of the principals had served in their current role over twenty years, five principals had been serving as principal for five to ten years, and two were new hires within the last three years. Eight of the ten principals were prepared at different universities, while two were both trained at the same university, however, there was about a ten-year gap in training.

Likewise, the seemingly general expectations of an up and coming administrator in the state department's administrative certificate requirements were very telling.

Additionally, from this study's results, and compiled literature review, state departments,

and universities might use these results to begin the process of evaluating their requirements for principal preparation. All of the principals interviewed indicated that they needed more pre-service training regarding special education in various different capacities prior to taking on their role as principal, which also was found throughout the literature (Brown et al., 2014; Gümüş, 2015; Milligan et al., 2012; Roberts & Guerra, 2015; Williams et al., 2013). Recommendations such as more case study review; training on how to work with parents; financial aspects of special education; training on the IEP document; and an overview of the special education laws and process. Improving training programs and changing certification requirements might provide a way to incorporate some of these items into pre-service training.

### **Principal Implications**

Lastly, raising awareness of the principal's role in special education and the need for pre-service training may foster communication between universities, school districts, intermediate districts, as well as other principals. With increased awareness and communication individuals might seek out additional professional development opportunities, their own job-shadowing experiences, and or classes as a sign of personal commitment to becoming a stronger leader (Goor, 1997; Loicaon(Brown et al., 2014; Goor, 1997; Gümüş, 2015; Loiacono & Valenti, 2010; Pazey & Cole, 2013)o & Valenti, 2010; Pazey & Cole, 2013). More awareness of the gaps in training, and the recommendations by current principals bringing about social change will provide students with disabilities the potential for a successful education career (Bellamy et al.,

2014; Cobb, 2015; Goor, 1997; Jahnukainen, 2015; Kemp-Graham, 2015; Pazey & Cole, 2013; Pazey et al., 2014).

### **Conclusion**

This phenomenological study explored the lives of 10 principals who presently oversee special education services. It conceptualized and created an understanding of what it is like to be a principal in the 21st century. Being able to spotlight their experiences from pre-service to present day shed some light on the daily demands of principals. Relationships with parents as they advocate for their individual student's rights is one of the most important factors of a principals' job. Understanding the various disabilities and the individualized needs to students is a key relationship principal must also establish. Building staff is also facing more demands as students are being mainstreamed; principals need to foster a collaborative team relationship amongst staff and building leaders to ensure student success. Throughout the process of establishing and maintaining relationships, principals must keep in mind the ever-changing laws, and regulations surrounding special education.

Being a 21st-century principal, with limited training and background experience, poses lots of stress as they learn on the job. The job duties of a current serving principal span from daily operations of the building, overseeing budgets, human resource management, maintenance, curriculum, general education student needs, as well as special education student needs. Principals are at a disadvantage as they take on this role, due to the inadequate training they have received. The principals interviewed have risen

to the occasion and successfully implemented strategies, policies, best practices, and programs to ensure the success of all students in their buildings.

With this study, it was my intent to shed light on the gaps in preparation and hopefully start to begin a process of changing the preparation standards. Numerous studies have been conducted in regards to principal preparation in regards to general education oversight, and various other aspects of the principals' job from elementary school to high school. This study mirrors the conclusion of other studies that found principals need more preparation before taking on their leadership role, and this study sheds light on the need for more special education training. Recommending changes to preparation programs and certification requirements are where it begins.

Taking the principals recommendations on ways that they feel could improve job performance would result in stronger leadership. Building the necessary relationships with parents, staff and students are vital to the success of principal leadership. Being a leader that can model appropriate attitudes, behaviors and best practices to the staff would result in overall staff improvement. Once school personnel begin working together in the best interest of the student, parental interactions would also improve.

The common experiences shared amongst the principals resonated through data interpretation; better preparation programs need to be created for future leaders, to ensure successful programs to meet the needs to students with disabilities. To better equip future leaders, more extensive pre-service preparation on legal requirements, documents, and ways to address various special education service needs, is necessary to improve

principal effectiveness. Establishing relationships with parents, staff and students help principals create a collaborative team to work toward a successful special education department.



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## Appendix A: Interview Protocol

**Interview Protocol:**

1. Describe what training you received in special education prior to being a principal.
  - a. Prompt: Explain what college was like as far as special education classes taken.
  - b. Prompt: What are some of the continuing education/professional development classes that you took prior to becoming an administrator that were geared toward special education?
  - c. Prompt: Any personal experiences with special education that allowed you to be more knowledgeable?
2. Describe what training in special education you have received since becoming a principal.
  - a. Prompt: what continuing education classes have you taken since becoming an administrator that has helped you along the way?
  - b. Prompt: explain the professional development classes you have participated in that have helped you better understand special education, and how to be an effective leader.
  - c. Prompt: What on the job experiences have taught you to be an effective special education leader?

3. Describe the learning experiences you have had in special education since becoming a principal.
  - a. Prompt: on the job training, sticky situations that have caused you to have to research and dig deeper into laws and regulations so you could handle the situation better?
  - b. Personal life experiences that have helped shape your leadership style?
4. Describe your leadership role in special education.
  - a. Prompt: In your building what is your job in the special education process?
  - b. Prompt: How involved are you with the students, parents and staff when it comes to special education?
5. Describe your role with training staff and teachers in special education.
  - a. Prompt: What professional development do you offer your staff in regards to special education?
  - b. Prompt: How often do you and your staff participate in special education training opportunities?
6. Is there training you wish you had received regarding special education prior to taking the role of principal?
  - a. Prompt: what experiences do you wish you had prior to taking on the role of principal?

- b. Prompt: If you could go back 5-10-15 years, what do you wish you had known then that you know now?
- 7. Is there anything else you would like to share in regards to special education training or preparedness?
  - a. Prompt: in regards to handling parent situations, students, and or rules and regulations?
  - b. Any helpful insights to how preparation could be different?

## Appendix B: Email Sent to Principals Requesting Participation

Subject: Dissertation Study

Dear Principal:

My name is Sarah Parker. I am currently a doctoral student at Walden University. I am conducting a study for my dissertation based upon interviews with school leaders and discussing their experience working in the area of special education. The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of principals overseeing special education in the current environment, which includes extensive legal requirements, increasing numbers of special needs students, and more empowered parent advocates.

Understanding the lived experiences of administrators in the area of special education is important in order to determine how the administrators face challenges and provide support to teachers and staff, students and parents.

There are three implications to this study. First, the results of this study may provide insights that will give school districts a better understanding of qualifications and training needed when hiring principals. The second implication may result in bringing a greater awareness to gaps in current preparation of administrators and school leaders so that colleges, universities and state departments of education enhance their certification and professional development programs before principals begin working as leaders of special education programs.

I am seeking out building principals such as yourself who would be interested in sharing your life experiences in regards to preparedness through an interview. The



interview should not take more than 30-45 minutes of your time. No information gathered from the interview will identify you, your school, or school district. The results of the study will remain confidential and only used for the purpose of this study. There is no harm or risk associated with participating in this study.

I would like to thank you in advance for considering setting up an interview with me. Please respond to this email if you are interested in participating. I will then contact you to set up an interview time. Your participation in this study is voluntary and you can stop participation at any time without any additional obligation.

Feel free to contact me or my dissertation chair, Dr. Andrew Thomas, at Walden University in the School of Education, if you have any additional questions.

I look forward to hearing from you regarding your participation, and setting up a time to discuss your experiences preparing for your job as a principal. Please respond if you are interested, so that we can set up an interview time. Thank you in advance.

Sarah M. Parker

## Appendix C: Follow-up Email

Dear Principal:

My name is Sarah M. Parker, and I am a doctoral student at Walden University. I recently sent a request for your participation in my study. I am conducting a study for my dissertation based upon interviews with school leaders and discussing their experience working in the area of special education. The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of principals overseeing special education in the current environment, which includes extensive legal requirements, increasing numbers of special needs students, and more empowered parent advocates. Understanding the lived experiences of administrators in the area of special education is important in order to determine how the administrators face challenges and provide support to teachers and staff, students and parents. This is an interview study that would answer seven questions and take no longer than 30-45 minutes of your time.

If you are interested in speaking with me please respond to this email, so that we can arrange a time to discuss your experiences with special education. All of your information is confidential and will only be used for this study. Thank you once again for your time, and I will forward to speaking with you.

Sarah M. Parker

## Appendix D: Informed Consent

### **Research Subject Information and Consent Form**

**Study Title:** The Preparedness of Principals in the Area of Special Education: A phenomenological study

**Name of Researcher:** Sarah M. Parker

**School Affiliation:** Walden University

#### **Purpose of the Study:**

The purpose of this research study is to determine the effectiveness of the preparation of school leaders in the area of special education, prior to them taking on the role as building principal.

#### **Description of the Study and Your Involvement:**

This study is designed to explore the life experiences and the preparation of administrators prior to taking their job as building principal and special education leader. There will be seven open ended interview questions asked during our meeting that will explore your preparedness prior to taking the role of school leader in the area of special education. Demographic information will not be collected, and all of your information will be kept confidential. Some of the questions that will be asked during the interview are:

What training in special education have you received since becoming a principal?

Describe the learning experiences you have had in special education since becoming a principal?

What do you perceive as your leadership role in special education?

What is your role with training staff and teachers in special education?

If you decide to participate in this research study, it will require approximately 30-45 minutes of less of your time to answer the interview questions.

**Risks and Discomforts:**

Some of the questions will require you to reflect on your personal life experiences in regards to your training, and overall preparedness for the job you are doing as principal.

There are no other risk factors or discomforts associated with this study.

If the research procedures might reveal criminal activity or child/elder abuse that requires reporting, it will be mandatory as an educator/researcher to report the suspected abuse or neglect to the proper authorities.

**Benefits of the Study:**

The data from this study can be used to develop training and staff development in the area of special education to encourage more awareness on the needs associated with special education students.

**Confidentiality:**

Potentially identifiable information about you will not be printed in this study. This information is being collected only for research purposes and will not be shared with anyone except the researcher. The results of this study may be presented at meetings or published in papers, but your name, school, or district name will not ever be used in these presentations or papers. Additionally, in order to protect your privacy, all of the data

collection is anonymous. The data will not be used for any purpose other than research. In order to protect the data from being shared with others, it will be stored on my password protected computer and permanently deleted seven years from the collection date.

**Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal:**

You do not have to participate in this study. If you chose to participate, you may stop at any time without any penalty. You may also choose not to answer particular questions that are asked in the study. You will be given a copy of this consent form for your records, and a signed copy will be obtained by the researcher. In the future, you may have questions about your participation in this study. If you have any questions, complaints, or concerns about the research you may contact:

Sarah M. Parker, Student Researcher      (xxxxxxxx)

Dr. Andrew Thomas, Dissertation Chair      (xxxxxxxx)

Walden Research Participant Advocate      (612)-312-1210

Walden University's approval number for this study is 01-14-16-0019994 and it expires on January 13, 2017.

**Consent/Permission:**

I have been given the chance to read this consent form. I understand the information about this study. Questions that I wanted to ask about the study have been answered. My participation in the interview process says that I am willing to participate in this study. I understand that I can withdraw at any time.

---

Signature

---

Date

## Appendix E: Confidentiality Agreement

**Name of Signer:**

During the course of my activity in collecting data for this research: “The Role of Principals in Special Education: A Phenomenological Study” I will have access to information, which is confidential and should not be disclosed. I acknowledge that the information must remain confidential, and that improper disclosure of confidential information can be damaging to the participant.

By signing this Confidentiality Agreement, I acknowledge and agree that:

1. I will not disclose or discuss any confidential information with others, including friends or family.
2. I will not in any way divulge, copy, release, sell, loan, alter or destroy any confidential information except as properly authorized.
3. I will not discuss confidential information where others can overhear the conversation. I understand that it is not acceptable to discuss confidential information even if the participant’s name is not used.
4. I will not make any unauthorized transmissions, inquiries, modification or purging of confidential information.
5. I agree that my obligations under this agreement will continue after termination of the job that I will perform.
6. I understand that violation of this agreement will have legal implications.

7. I will only access or use systems or devices I'm officially authorized to access and I will not demonstrate the operation or function of systems or devices to unauthorized individuals.

Signing this document, I acknowledge that I have read the agreement and I agree to comply with all the terms and conditions stated above.

Signature:

Date:



## Curriculum Vitae

**SARAH M. PARKER****AREA OF SPECIALIZATION**

- PhD. K-12 Leadership with emphasis in Special Education

**RESEARCH INTERESTS**

- Preparedness of principals in the area of special education prior to taking the role as school leader

**EDUCATION**

2007-Present **Walden University**, Baltimore, MD

Cumulative GPA 3.65

PhD (ABD) in K-12 Leadership/Administration

Expected date of completion: July 16, 2016

2006-2007 **Indiana Wesleyan University**, Marion, IN

Cumulative GPA 3.85

MS in Elementary/Intermediate Learning Disabilities

Endorsement in Cognitive Impairments, Emotional Impairments,  
and Learning Disabilities

2003-2005 **Walden University**, St. Paul, MN

Cumulative GPA 4.00

MS in Elementary Reading and Literacy with an emphasis in  
Elementary Reading and Literacy Instruction

- 2001-2011 **Ingham Intermediate School District**, Lansing, MI  
 Michigan Literacy Progress Profile training, 3-D LETRS training  
 START Training for Autistic Students, DIABLES training
- 1997-2001 **Hillsdale College**, Hillsdale, MI  
 Major GPA: 3.55  
 BS with ZA endorsement  
 Cumulative GPA 3.12  
 Major: Elementary Education  
 Minors: General Science, Music, Early Childhood Education

### **EXPERIENCE**

- 2011-Present **Scooter Gang Day Care**, Eaton Rapids, MI  
*Director and Owner of Day Care*
- 2001-2011 **Island City Academy**, Eaton Rapids, MI  
*Director of Before/After School Day Care Center\_(March 2009-2011)*  
*K-8 Special Education Teacher\_(Sept. 2004-2011)*  
*Young 5's Teacher (Sept. 2002-2011)*  
*K-5 Music Teacher (Sept. 2002-June 2004)*  
*First/Second Grade Teacher (May 2001-June 2002)*  
*Reading Instruction Coordinator (July 2001-2011)*  
*Summer School Teacher (July 2001-July 2010)*

- 2000-2001     **Pre-Professional Training**, Hillsdale, MI  
*Pre-Primary Student Teacher*, Mary Randall Preschool (8/00-12/00)  
*Kindergarten Student Teacher*, Mauck Elementary School, (1/01-5/01)
- 1999-2000     **MarineCo. LTD**, New Buffalo, MI  
*Office Manager*
- 1993-2007     **Law Office La Rae G. Munk, P.C.**, Midland, MI  
*Office Assistant*

#### **PROFESSIONAL CONSULTANCIES**

- Lead the teachers of Island City Academy through the decertification of the MEA process (2001)
- 2001-2002 Certified in Michigan Literacy Progress Profile Training
- Grant reviewer for Charter School Office, Michigan Department of Education (2003)
- Chairman of School Improvement Committee in charge of re-writing and aligning curriculum to meet state standards (2005)
- 2010 Certified in DIEBLES
- 2014 Consulted with Family of Cognitively Impaired student
- 2015 Consulted with family of Autistic student, attended meetings,

#### **HONORS AND AWARDS**

- 2000 National Speaker Award at National Collegiate Debate Tournament, Annapolis, MD

- 1999 and 2000 Jerrold E. Potts IBEW Scholarship for Leadership Excellence

**SELECTED PUBLICATIONS/PRESENTATIONS/INVITED LECTURES**

- September 2004 Presented at Old Redford Academy, Detroit MI on Literacy Instruction Strategies
- November 2004 Old Red Academy, Detroit MI on Literacy Instruction Strategies
- 8-27-07 Differentiate Instruction in Reading and Writing, Presenter
- 1-2009 Trained Teachers in Handwriting without Tears Practices
- 8/26/2008 Implementing Special Education Modifications and Accommodations in the General Education Classroom
- 8/27/08 Student Assistance Team Training
- 11/03/2008 Writing Grade Level Content Expectations for Special Education and General Education students
- 8/2009 Aligning general education curriculum with special education curriculum
- 11/2009 Reading and writing instruction for the special education student in your classroom
- 6/3/10 RtI and how to incorporate strategies in the classroom
- 8/2010 Response to Intervention training for general education teachers
- 1/2011 DIEBLES training for general education teachers

**PROFESSIONAL SYMPOSIA, WORKSHOPS, SEMINARS CONDUCTED**

**AND/OR ATTENDED**

2001-2011 Ingham Intermediate School District, Lansing, MI

- Completed Michigan Literacy Progress Profile training and 3-D LETRS training
- START Training for Autistic Students

- 10/2003 Literacy in 3D LTRS training
- 10/28/2003 Zig Ziglar Leadership Conference
- DIABLES training
- 9-19-07 Ingham ISD CRAN Autism Training
- 10-31-11-2-07 Writing, Research, Data Collecting, area of Special Education, Chicago, IL
- 11/2007 Pre-K-5<sup>th</sup> Grade Handwriting without Tears/Cursive writing conference
- 12-3-07 CIMS Special Education Monitoring
- 12-14-07 CIMS Special Education monitoring
- 1-21-08 Autism Training
- 2-6-08 CRAN Autism Training at Ingham ISD
- 2-26-08 CIMS Special Education Monitoring
- 3-14-08 CIMS special education monitoring
- 4-29-08 Grade Level Content Expectations Training for Special Education
- 4-25-08 START Training, Meeting Mechanics
- 6-4-08 Battle Creek Math/Science Center Curriculum Training
- 6-5-08 MEAP Grade Level Content Expectations Training for Special Education
- 6-19-20-08 Early Childhood Autism Training
- 7/9-12/08 National Conference and Exposition on Autism Spectrum Disorders, Orlando, FL
- 11/5-7/08 Response to Intervention: Stop Academic Failure, Lansing, MI
- 11/12/09 Making Math work for All Students
- 11/16-17/09 Response to Intervention Conference, Lansing, MI

- 11/2009 Differentiated Instruction for all students
- 1/28/2010 CRAN Autism Intervention Strategies
- 2/25/2010 CRAN Autism Intervention Strategies
- 3/19/2010 Community Mental Health Autism Awareness
- 3/25/2010 SDE Differentiate Instruction and RtI Making them work
- 4/22/2010 CRAN Autism Meeting
- 6/28-29/2010 Asperger Syndrome Re-Thinking the Glass House Theory
- 11/13/10 Annual Healthy Children Conference, Howell, MI
- 9/19/13 Leadership in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, Orlando, FL
- 9/18/13 Early Childhood Leadership, Orlando, FL
- 5/12/14 Toilet Training in Early Childhood Settings
- 5/12/14 Social and Emotional Development in Early Childhood Settings
- 5/12/14 Helping to control stress in children's lives
- 11/9/14 Safe Infant Sleep
- 7/20/15 Creating schedules and routines for children
- 7/21/15 Cultural Diversity in Early Childhood
- 5/2/15 Dr. Rowley Presents Brain Balance ... learning hot brain immaturity contributes to a child's behavioral, social and academic struggles
- 5/2/15 Coming to Terms: How to effectively use contracts and policies, Tom Copeland
- 5/9/16 CACFP new food standards, USDA
- 5/11/16 Early childhood diversity and inclusion, Lansing, MI
- 5/13/16 Michigan before and after school conference, MDE, Lansing MI

**COMMITTEE SERVICE AND POSTIONS HELD**

- Hillsdale College 4-year Debate Team member
- Assistant Debate coach for 2 years;
- 2000 Hillsdale College Debate Team Manager
- 1999/2000 Pi Beta Phi Assistant Treasurer
- Hillsdale College Choir member for 3 years;
- Hillsdale College Jazz Band;
- 2004-2005 Wrap around Committee Member for Eaton County
- 2008-2012 MTTC contributor for the Early Childhood Education Teacher Test

**PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS/MEMBERSHIPS**

- 1998-2001 Pi Beta Phi Sorority
- 1997-2001 Pi Kappa Delta Speech Fraternity