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Examination of K-12 School Administrators' Perceptions of Their Preparation
to Lead Special Education Programs

By

Jaime Davies

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Faculty of
Kennesaw State University
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Education
in Educational Leadership
in the Bagwell College of Education

Kennesaw State University, Kennesaw, GA

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Jaime Davies

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Examination of K-12 School Administrators' Perceptions of Their Preparation
to Lead Special Education

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ABSTRACT

Current research tells us that when school administrators are not prepared to lead special education, the result can be an educational detriment to the student involved and cause a costly fiscal impact to the school district. The researcher set out to ascertain school administrators' perceptions of the skills necessary to effectively lead special education programs; it was also important to gauge school administrators' preparation to lead special education programs based on their special education knowledge. Ball and Green (2014) state that it is the role of the school principal to develop teachers and related support within their buildings, while Pazey, Gevarter, Hamrick, and Rojeski (2014) find that schools where special education programming is improperly implemented are confronted with lawsuits at increasingly higher rates. This study utilizes qualitative research methods through the use of transcendental phenomenology by interviewing current school administrators about their knowledge pertaining to special education and their perceived ability to lead the special education programs within the buildings they support. The interviews were conducted with two school principals, two assistant principals, and two special education administrators. The results of this research are discussed in detail, and recommendations are offered regarding how to better equip school administrators to lead special education.

Keywords: The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA), Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE), Individual Education Plan (IEP), Least Restrictive Environment (LRE), Leadership Preparation Programs, Special Education, School Administration

DEDICATION

To my loving family, Mike, Cole, and Blaine: I could not have done this without your love and support. To my parents, Jack and Debbi: Thank you for encouraging me and instilling in me the importance of education; that is a gift for which I will be forever grateful.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The expectations of today's elementary school principals (also referred to throughout this study as general education administrators) have increased tremendously since the creation of No Child Left Behind. The job of a principal is more complex than ever before and carries demanding responsibilities, which include managing all of the following: personnel, students, government and public relations, external development, finances, long-term planning (to promote the vision, mission, and goals of the school), instructional performance, and academic performance (Lynch, 2012). The principal has a significant impact on student performance, secondary only to the teacher (Leithwood et al., 2010). Included in this student group are, of course, special education students, which is why, due to the increased emphasis on school improvement and student success, special education courses become a critical requirement for school leaders (Wakeman, Browder, Flowers, & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2006). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) and Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) require school districts across the nation to demonstrate student proficiency in academic areas through the use of standardized testing. Principals are expected to support all areas of special education; they should be equipped to competently design, lead, manage, and implement programs to ensure that every student in the school is able to meet the expectations set forth by the state (Praisner, 2003). In order to do this, school principals must have the knowledge and skills to implement and support the instruction of special education programs within the school building. For years, reform in leadership preparation programs has called for a change to better connect theory to practice with field experiences (McHatton, Boyer, Shaunessy, & Terry, 2010),

and current legislation requires schools to be accountable for the academic success of all students, regardless of the student-group.

Research shows that general school administrators do not have the necessary knowledge, skills, and training in special education to properly support, mentor, and model instructional practices within their buildings (Correa, 2011). General school administrators by and large perceive themselves as being well-informed about special education, but when their formal knowledge is assessed, their lack of understanding regarding the requirements and implementation of special education practices becomes evident (Wakeman, Browder, Flowers, & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2006). Future general school administrators must be properly prepared to address the varying needs within special education programming. In order for this to happen, leadership preparation programs need to ensure that coursework adequately embeds special education within their certification programs.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

When principals are not properly prepared to lead inclusive schools, the rights of special education students can be violated. If this happens, the school and district are at risk for litigation (Ball & Green, 2014). In today's economy, schools are already facing financial crises in funding the cost of public education. Failure of general school administrators to properly implement IDEIA can lead to litigation, which can be fiscally devastating to a school district (Schaaf, Williamson, & Novak, 2015).

When general school administrators are underprepared to lead special education programs, several problems can arise. Empirical research suggests that the mistakes of unprepared general school administrators negatively impacts the academic achievement of students with disabilities. These mistakes and procedural errors can lead not only to significant

academic setbacks for the students involved, but also to costly litigation (Ball & Green, 2014; Daane, Beirne-Smith, & Latham, 2000; Frost & Kersten, 2011; Loiacono & Palumbo, 2011; McHatton, Boyer, Shaunessy, & Terry, 2010; Pazez, Gevarter, Hamrick, & Rojeski, 2014; Thompson, 2011; Wakeman, Browder, Flowers, & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2006). General school administrators who are not properly prepared to lead special education programs can impact the ability for students with disabilities to access a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE). If general school administrators are not familiar with local, state, and federal laws that protect students with disabilities, they may inadvertently violate these laws. For example, if administrators do not require that students are scheduled in the least restrictive environment, the school may be held legally responsible.

PURPOSE AND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this research is to ascertain the following: 1) general school administrators' perceptions of the skill sets needed to effectively lead special education programs, and 2) the administrators' preparation in regards to special education knowledge. In addition, this research highlights perceived and documented examples of the ways in which underprepared general school administrators can have negative financial outcomes for a school district due to a lack of required special education background knowledge. Insufficiencies in special education background can have implications for students with disabilities, families of students with disabilities, and school districts. Mueller (2009) found the estimated cost of a case, if it makes it to federal appeals court, is between \$60,000 and \$100,000. Upon identifying areas of focus for development, school districts and leadership preparation programs will be able to improve professional learning and coursework to address the deficits.

The results of this study can provide researchers and school districts with insight into areas where school leaders need further training and support, specifically in regards to leadership in special education. When services are provided the way in which they are outlined in a student's Individualized Education Plan (IEP), then school districts will be less likely to find themselves in litigation, which will in turn save school districts money. This money can provide better instructional support to students.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In order to determine school administrators' perceptions of their preparation to lead special education programs and their perceptions of whether they have the skills needed to lead these programs, the following questions were examined:

1. What are school administrators' perceptions of the skills needed to support special education within the local school building?
2. What are school administrators' perceptions of their preparation to lead special education professionals in P-12 schools?

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Social constructivists attempt to make sense of the world in which they live through their own point of view (Creswell, 2013). Lev Vygotsky is a well-known social constructivist who argues that a person becomes more likely to acquire and apply skills when the learning is scaffolded, meaning that the next phase of learning takes place when the learner is ready (Gindis, 1999). This is an important element for general school administrators because they must first have an understanding of special education practices before they can be required to train and support others in those practices. I am choosing to examine general school administrators'

perceptions because this will help determine where the principals feel their baseline of knowledge is. Once general school administrators' basic level of understanding regarding special education has been determined, recommendations for training based on empirical research can be made.

This research being conducted is based on and supported by three underlying concepts regarding professional learning for general school administrators. Research suggests that principals do not receive adequate preparation to lead special education programs. There is empirical research that supports the idea of school leaders being among the most qualified to provide input into their professional learning needs (Johnson, 2016). Professional learning impacts leader behavior and effectiveness. An essential component for supporting the success of special education hinges on school administrators having input into their professional learning (Johnson, 2016). DuFour (2002) states that general school administrators need to shift from the concept of teaching to a concept of learning, where the focus is on results and ensuring that the goals of learning are met.

Unfortunately, some school leaders do not receive adequate preparation within their leadership programs, yet since school administrators are the instructional leaders of the school, they are still depended upon to have the background to be able to support special education. The results of the research from Frost and Kersten (2011) show that principals who had special education teaching certificates were the only general administrators equipped to lead special education. Principals need professional learning to occur annually in order to remain current in the legal, foundational, and contextual areas of special education; additionally, less-experienced administrators also need intensive legal training to prepare them to manage the responsibilities of special education. Another responsibility of general school administrators is mentoring and

supporting the special education teachers in the building. Correa and Wagner (2011) found that preparation of special education instructional practices is critical to the success of the program within the building. Since most school administrators do not hold special education certificates, professional development is an essential requirement to support new teachers.

Professional development does impact the effectiveness of school administrators when supporting the special education programs within the school (Isis, 2103). Thompson (2017) found that training positively impacted general school administrators' ability to effectively lead special education within the school building. Thompson outlined twenty-five competencies that professional development needs to target in order to ensure that general school administrators are maximally effective in their role as school leaders. Lynch (2012) found that general school administrators are best equipped to lead special education when they focus on learning core competencies related to academic aspects of special education, as well as legal aspects of special education. When all school leaders are given the tools and knowledge to support special education programs, students will win because the money that would have been spent fighting court cases for incorrectly administering their IEPs can now be funneled directly back into their correctly administered educations.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Principals are required to be knowledgeable about and prepared to lead special education (Wakeman, Browder, Flowers, & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2006). Principals must have the legal, contextual, and foundational knowledge of special education in order to be successful (Roberts and Guerra, 2017). Principals must also have professional knowledge in the areas of inclusion, data-driven decision-making, instructional leadership (due to the impact of ESSA and the reauthorization of IDEIA), high-stakes testing, accountability systems, teacher evaluations, and the impact of inclusion on all students in the general education setting (McHatton, Boyer, Shaunessy, and Terry, 2010). This review of literature is organized into four sections to include: 1) the administrative skills required to lead special education in schools; 2) the professional learning needs of school leaders; 3) the legal ramifications of underprepared school leaders; and 4) a summary of the review.

REQUIRED SKILL SETS FOR SCHOOL LEADERS

Setting the direction of special education within the school is important, but being able to develop the people who support special education is equally crucial. The job of developing teachers and related support staff within the school building is the responsibility of the school principal (Ball & Green, 2014). Daane, Beirne-Smith, and Latham (2006) state that there is an increase of students with disabilities being included in the general education setting. Due to this surge, there is a greater need for school leaders to be capable of supporting teachers in providing appropriate instruction to special education students within the general education setting. In order for teachers to feel supported by school administrators, the school administrators must

increase their knowledge of special education instructional practices. This can be accomplished by providing school administrators with more training both to increase their overall knowledge of special education and to provide training on effective inclusive practices (Daane, Beirne-Smith, & Latham, 2000). Ball and Green (2014) investigate the attitudes, training, and experience of school leaders to determine if these factors impact the delivery of services for students with disabilities in the general education setting. They find that school leaders are critical in creating the structure for effective learning and teaching. The more knowledgeable school leaders are about special education, the more likely it is that the needs of all students will be met.

Thompson (2017) identifies four competencies that are required for school leaders to support special education programs at the school level. The first competency is the ability to communicate. This includes effectively listening, advocating for the special education staff within the building when communicating with parents and other administrators, and ensuring proper communication when speaking with administrators, teachers, outside agencies, paraprofessionals, and families. The second competency is the ability to interpret the laws and policies at the federal, state, and local levels. This requires principals to have the knowledge of special education rules and regulations (in addition to case law) in order to ensure comprehensive understanding of FAPE and least restrictive environment (LRE) and in order to interpret national trends in special education legislation. The third competency is the ability to make decisions regarding students with disabilities based on upon communication, trust, and mutual respect. This requires fostering positive relationships with families, facilitating a bond between teachers and students that is trusting and comforting, ensuring that students are given the best opportunity to demonstrate success, and cultivating positive relationships between special education and

general education teachers. The last competency is ensuring correct dispensation of case management procedures so that students with disabilities receive appropriate services. This includes securing and managing the funding/budget for special education programs and developing a budget to secure resources and instructional materials/assistive technology to support the needs of the students in special education (Thompson, 2017).

The current legislation requires schools to be accountable for the academic success of all students, regardless of the student-group into which they fall. Winterman and Rosas (2014) find that strong leadership skills are required to ensure that all students' needs are met. Best practices are a necessity to instructionally lead a school and make certain that student achievement occurs. In order for school leaders to meet the rising expectations of educational reform, changes will be needed in the educational system so that administrators can lead all students, regardless of their student- group.

In order to be effective school leaders, principals must possess certain skills. Crockett, Becker, and Quinn (2009) outline the knowledge that school leaders today must possess. These include: law and policy, personnel training and development, leadership roles and responsibilities, leadership preparation and development, learning environments, accountability for student learning, collaboration and communication, technology, and leadership for special education. Roberts and Guerra (2017) divide the required knowledge within special education into three categories, including legal, foundational, and contextual. To demonstrate a competency in legal knowledge, a school administrator must grasp the notions of eligibility under IDEIA, identification and evaluation of students, FAPE, LRE, related services, procedural protections, IEP planning, and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. In addition, general school administrators must exhibit foundational knowledge of special education, which centers around

the collaboration between regular education and special education teachers. Principals must also meet the requirements of inclusion, manage the impact of school decision-making on special education, communicate with parents, handle staffing concerns, facilitate professional development, and ensure that they act as an agent of positive change. Lastly, general education administrators must display contextual knowledge. This knowledge relates to best practices in special education and regular education; the effects of inclusion on students with and without disabilities; the development of effective IEPs; understanding of the difference between an accommodation and a modification; mastery of classroom management strategies; and the supervision and evaluation of teachers, support professionals, and paraprofessionals. Roberts and Guerra (2017) find that school administrators rate their contextual knowledge of special education as their weakest area, yet they do not seem to understand the components that comprise contextual knowledge, since no participant requested additional training on skills that fall in that subset. This supports the discrepancy that principals rate themselves as understanding the legal, foundational, and contextual knowledge of special education, yet when their knowledge is formally evaluated, their perceived knowledge and their actual knowledge do not align (Frost and Kersten, 2011).

In order for principals to improve their legal, foundational, and contextual knowledge, they need to have a firm understanding of IDEA and the implications it has on educating students with disabilities. General school administrators are required to oversee and support the special education programs and students within their buildings. When leadership preparation programs fail to provide coursework in the field of special education, school leaders do not gain the required knowledge of special education procedures. The failure to properly implement special education programming within schools is causing an increase in lawsuits within school

districts (Pazey, Gevarter, Hamrick, & Rojeski, 2014). School leaders must be knowledgeable and able to implement the legal, foundational, and contextual areas of special education programming within their buildings in order to ensure that the needs of special education students are being met.

In order for school leaders to address their foundational knowledge of special education, principal preparation programs should embed this information within the current course requirements. When administrators do not receive the proper training, their perceptions of their knowledge tend to be higher than their actual abilities suggest (Frost & Kersten, 2011). The majority of general school administrators admit that they were not properly prepared—either in their initial teaching licensure program, or in their leadership preparation program—to understand, implement, and support the requirements needed to ensure FAPE is provided to all special education students within their local buildings (Schaaf, Williamson, & Novak, 2015).

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING NEEDS

The role of the principal is to influence teachers, and the role of the teacher is to influence the students (Lynch, 2012). In order for general school administrators to fulfill this role, they will require improved and additional professional development. Lynch (2012) addresses the core competencies that should be a required part of state certifications for educational leadership and must therefore be included in principal preparation programs. The competencies include both the legal and academic aspects of special education. The legal aspects include knowledge surrounding the IEP process, the identification and referral process, re-evaluations, discipline, due process and mediation, LRE, accommodations and modifications, and the use of outside services. The academic aspects of special education include the knowledge of research-based

instruction for special education students, appropriate educational settings, appropriate accommodations and modifications, and the creation of supportive educational environments.

Lyons (2016) finds that principal preparation programs are not properly preparing general school administrators to address the needs of special education students and therefore recommends that special education topics be embedded into the coursework already being offered. Areas of focus need to be: inclusive education, disability issues, and support for special education programs. Pazey, Gevarter, Hamrick, and Rojeski (2014) found that principals more successfully support the special education programming within their buildings when they have the confidence to set the direction of special education, the skills to develop the people who support special education, and the knowledge to redesign the organization to ensure the success of the special education programs and students.

The better a general school administrator understands special education, the more involved s/he can be with the programming within his/her building (Wakeman, Browder, Flowers, and Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2006). Wakeman, Browder, Flowers, and Ahlgrim-Delzell (2006) find that a combination of fundamental knowledge (the understanding of the functioning and history of special education and the students served within special education) and current issues (those that drive the development of research, policy writing, and the practices within special education) are key components in helping a principal truly understand special education. When school principals have fundamental knowledge and a grasp of current issues, they are able to engage better with the special education programs within their buildings. This finding supports the need to require school administrators to complete additional graduate courses and fieldwork in special education as part of their leadership preparation programs (Frost & Kersten, 2011).

It is the principal's responsibility to set the direction of instructional programs within the school. Principals must therefore have training in all areas associated with supporting the learning needs of students (DiPaola, Tschannen-Moran, and Walther-Thomas, 2004). The school principal should be able to demonstrate expertise in curriculum, provide instructional materials and resources, facilitate evidence-based intervention practices, and offer methodologies and strategies to support teachers in meeting the needs of all learners in their classroom (Loiacono & Palumbo, 2011). Loiacono and Palumbo (2011) find that principals who understand effective evidence-based instructional practices are better prepared to support teachers in meeting the diverse learning needs of students in special education. In order to achieve this level of proficiency for all principals, it is imperative that states add the requirement of special education instructional strategies to the instructional syllabi within leadership preparation programs (Bateman, Gervais, Wysocki, & Cline, 2017).

Principal preparation programs and the professional development offered by school districts must address the identified gaps in training. McHatton, Boyer, Shaunessy, and Terry (2010) examine the perceptions of principals regarding the efficacy of their leadership preparation program; they also examine the perceived efficacy of the professional development provided by the principals' various school districts. McHatton, Boyer, Shaunessy, and Terry (2010) ask principals if they can adequately respond to the needs of students identified as requiring special education support. The findings show that principal preparation programs are not providing future school administrators with the skills to fulfill the job demands of educating students with disabilities. However, school administrators must have a firm understanding of the foundations of exceptional student education in order to do their jobs properly. The foundations include the knowledge of instructional approaches to use with different disability categories,

what to look for when conducting observations of teachers in special education support classrooms, how to be the Local Education Agency (LEA) for IEP meetings, and practices and procedures in delivering special education services to students with disabilities.

There is limited evidence of research-based strategies and interventions being used in classroom's today, which can directly be attributed to the inability of leadership preparation programs to provide future leaders with an understanding of research-based strategies for students with disabilities (Lynch, 2016). Lynch (2016) completed research to inform school districts and leadership preparation programs about skills that principals need to ensure the use of evidence-based instructional strategies in the classroom. The results show that principals recognize the need to provide research-based instructional strategies, but they cannot define or give examples of what these strategies look like. Principals who have an understanding of such topics will be better prepared to improve the educational outcomes for students in special education (McHatton, Boyer, Shaunessy, & Terry, 2010).

School leaders hold the key to ensuring school-level compliance in regards to special education; consequently, they not only have to understand the strengths of their school, but they also need to be able to restructure the school to accommodate any weaknesses. The principal's skill set will determine the success or failure of inclusive practices. When principals do not have the required skills for effective leadership, the inclusive practices of the school could fail, leaving the school at higher risk for legal liability (Ball & Green, 2014). School leaders are critical in creating a structured environment where effective learning and teaching can take place. The more knowledgeable school leaders are about special education, the greater the possibly that progress will be effectively created to meet the needs of all students. The results from the research conducted by Ball and Green (2014) demonstrate that there is a link between the

experience and training of school leaders and their attitudes and success in supporting special education programs within their schools.

LEGAL RAMIFICATIONS

School districts rely on general school administrators to train, support, and lead special education teachers and programs within their buildings. When general school administrators do not have the proper knowledge of the rules and procedures of IDEIA and FAPE, mistakes can be made. Since an IEP is a legally binding document, the mistakes can be costly to the school district if legal action is brought against them. With litigation on the rise, it is important for leadership preparation programs to train tomorrow's leaders adequately for the current requirements to educate all students. Research shows that principals do not have the necessary knowledge, skills, and training in special education to properly mentor and model these practices in their building (Correa, 2011). When general school administrators are mentoring new teachers, this becomes a major concern. It is the responsibility of school leaders to hire and build the capacity of special education teachers to ensure that they are prepared to implement the proper special education programming and to provide the appropriate level of support/instruction that special education students require (Werts, Mamlin, & Pogoloff, 2002).

When principals are not properly prepared to lead inclusive schools, students with disabilities are at a higher risk of having their legal rights violated. The denial of FAPE places the school and district at risk for litigation (Ball & Green, 2014). Schaaf, Williamson, and Novak (2015) state that litigation can be fiscally devastating to a school district. Hearings are costly (financially, educationally, and emotionally) to both families and schools (Mueller, 2009; Yell & Drasgow, 2000). The estimated cost of a case—if it makes it to federal appeals court—is

between \$60,000 - \$100,000 and can be even higher if a school district is required to provide parents with or reimburse parents for services (Yell & Drasgow, 2000). Not only is litigation monetarily costly to school districts, but also the time and effort it takes to defend a case take principals' focus off of other critical areas of need throughout the school; therefore, there are ample reasons to ensure that school administrators are properly trained in the field of special education from the outset (Thompson, 2011). Hill and Hill (2102) find that it takes years for the process of a case to be heard in the court system and for a decision to be rendered. Going through due process can place a strain on the relationship between the family and the school, can have high financial costs, and can cause emotional anxiety (Mueller, 2009), not to mention that the child's education may continue to suffer in the meantime. This undesirable and unfortunate situation can be avoided if school administrators are initially properly trained within leadership preparation courses to support special education students and programs.

For years, reform in principal preparation programs has called for a change to better connect theory to practice (McHatton, Boyer, Shaunessy, & Terry, 2010). The reason for this is that school principals generally believe they are well-informed about special education, but they actually lack a full understanding of the requirements of special education (Wakeman, Browder, Flowers, & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2006). This lack of understanding is costing school districts millions of dollars a year in legal fees. When principals are not aware of the individual needs of the special education services that a student is receiving, there can be problems. Bandu and Jelas (2012) found that school administrators are not always aware of individual needs of students served in special education. This is a concern because many school districts rely on school administrators to train and support new special education teachers. If the school administrator is not able to provide ample time for mentoring due to the constraints of his/her job, the special

education teacher will not receive the proper support to be successful, which in turn means that the special education student is at risk for not receiving the required services that are outlined within the IEP. If services are not given to a student, then FAPE is denied, and the results are costly.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to examine administrators' perceptions of the special education preparation received in their leadership preparation programs. With an increase in the frequency of litigation, there is a critical need for leadership preparation programs to address special education in order to prepare tomorrow's leaders for the current requirements to educate all students. The researcher utilized qualitative research methods with transcendental phenomenology. After examining numerous types of phenomenology, including hermeneutical and interpretive, the researcher determined that transcendental phenomenology was the most appropriate model. Transcendental phenomenology was determined to be an effective methodology because the researcher had to set aside prejudgments on the topic to ensure that she did not utilize her own knowledge of the phenomenon or her own experiences while analyzing and coding for results. The researcher has had numerous years of leading special education and has observed that most of the school administrators with whom she worked did not have the required skills to lead special education. Within those schools, parents hired advocates and attorneys because they did not feel the school district was providing the resources and instruction that their child required. Prior research on the topic showed that school administrators did not have the necessary knowledge, skills, and training in special education to properly support, mentor, and model instructional practices within their buildings (Correa, 2011). The researcher wanted to see if the perceptions of current school administrators were aligned to these findings. Since the researcher had knowledge and first-hand experience on this topic, transcendental phenomenology was the best methodological approach to follow.

The researcher completed the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) on January 23, 2018. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Kennesaw State University approved this research on 01/25/18 (See Appendix B). The application and approval for research within the targeted school district was approved on February 28, 2018 (See Appendix C).

RESEARCH DESIGN

Within qualitative research, Moustakas (1994) named two components of transcendental phenomenology: intentionality and intuition. The first area is the intentionality behind the research; the researcher must determine the difference between the noema (features of an experience) and the noesis (the beliefs and perceptions added to the experience) (Moustakas, 1994). The second area is intuition, where the researcher must describe and give meaning to the experience (Moustakas, 1994). In order to collect this data, six school administrators from a large metropolitan school district located in the southeast of the United States. The administrators interviewed are each responsible for leading special education within a school building that they oversee. After all administrators were interviewed, the interviews were transcribed; then participant responses were coded to determine themes in school administrator perceptions of their preparation to lead special education.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In order to determine school administrators' perceptions of their preparation to lead special education programs and their perceptions of whether they have the skills needed to lead these programs, the following questions were examined:

1. What are school administrators' perceptions of the skills needed to support special education within the local school building?

2. What are school administrators' perceptions of their preparation to lead special education professionals in P-12 schools?

PARTICIPANTS

Creswell (2013) states that the participants within a phenomenological study need to be a group of people who have experienced the same phenomenon. The group of people can range in size from three individuals to fifteen individuals. Based on this information, the researcher chose six school administrators to study (two principals, two assistant principals, and two special education administrators. Note: Throughout the study, the researcher interchangeably refers to the principals and assistant principals as “general education administrators” so as to differentiate them from the special education administrators). This sampling includes school administrators with and without special education backgrounds. The general administrators and special education administrators who participated in the study speak about both their leadership preparation programs and their direct involvement with the special education programming within the buildings that they support.

The research was completed in the Santa DeMarco School District, which is a large metropolitan school system located in the southeast region of the United States. This district was selected due to the diverse demographics of the schools. Santa DeMarco School District has 114 schools and serves students from pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade. The district serves over 113,000 students. Of these students, roughly 44% qualify for free and reduced lunch, approximately 15% are transient, and about 14,000 students qualify for special education services.

DATA COLLECTION

Creswell (2013) states that data collection in phenomenology typically involves interviews but can also include observations, poems, and documents. For the purposes of this study, the researcher chose to use interviews as the data source. Participants were selected through a volunteer basis, and all participants were given pseudonyms for the purpose of anonymity. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews that were recorded. Semi-structured interviews allowed the questions to change based on the responses of each individual participant, although each participant had the same base questions. Likewise, by asking semi-structured questions, the researcher was able to be patient and silent at times, which encouraged the participants to keep talking and sharing their experiences (Van Manen, 1990). Van Manen (1990) explains that recording interviews allows the researcher to have more conversation-related responses (in which the participants will share anecdotes, stories, experiences, and incidents).

TRUSTWORTHINESS

When conducting phenomenological research, ensuring the trustworthiness of the research is important. Creswell (2013) discusses the importance of clarifying any biases to ensure that the reader has an understanding of the researcher's past experiences, which might shape the interpretation and approach the study takes. Creswell (2013) also proposes the importance of member-checking (having the participants ensure that the correct meaning was given to their statements), peer review and debriefing (which allows the researcher to talk with peers to ensure that biases is not being inserted into the research), and accurate transcribing. Moustakas (1994) notes the importance of using epoche and transcendental-phenomenological

reduction to ensure that the results are valid and that the researcher is not allowing any judgement or preconceptions of the phenomena under study to influence the results.

When humans are the primary research instruments, trustworthiness becomes an important element in order for the research to maintain credibility (Lincoln and Gruba, 2011). The researcher therefore took multiple precautions to help ensure trustworthiness. The first step was to ensure that all of the interviews were transcribed accurately. All interviews were recorded and sent to rev.com to be transcribed. The researcher chose Rev.com because the company safely stores the audio files. To guarantee confidentiality, the transcriptions are sent back to the researcher through an encrypted service. Once the interviews were transcribed, each interview was analyzed separately. This followed Creswell's (1994) reliability component by ensuring that conclusions were only being drawn from the single interview, and all other alternative conclusions were being considered. The next step followed Creswell's (1994) peer review/debriefing. The peer review model allowed the researcher to have discussions with a person not involved in the research. This person was able to ask critical questions regarding the interview process so that the results were honest and no biases were evident within the results. The third step involved member-checking. By taking the findings and interpretations back to the participants for them to review, the researcher was able to assure the credibility of each participant's accounts of the phenomenon. This helped keep bias to a minimum in the results.

By engaging in these steps, the researcher was able to safeguard the trustworthiness of the results (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher minimized any preconceptions, beliefs, and knowledge of the phenomenon by following the epoche process, utilizing peer reviews, and engaging in member checking. Transcendental-phenomenological reduction was ensured by transcribing each interview separately and by keeping a research journal. By analyzing each

transcribed interview as a separate entity, meaning was derived solely from that isolated interaction and not from past experiences. This helped ensure that the themes that emerged were authentic and came directly from the experiences of the participants. The researcher used memo writing throughout the process to allow any preconceptions or personal beliefs to be documented throughout the research (Saldana, 2013). The journal was referenced during the analyzing portion of the interviews to ensure that the researcher's beliefs were not impacting the statements made by the participants.

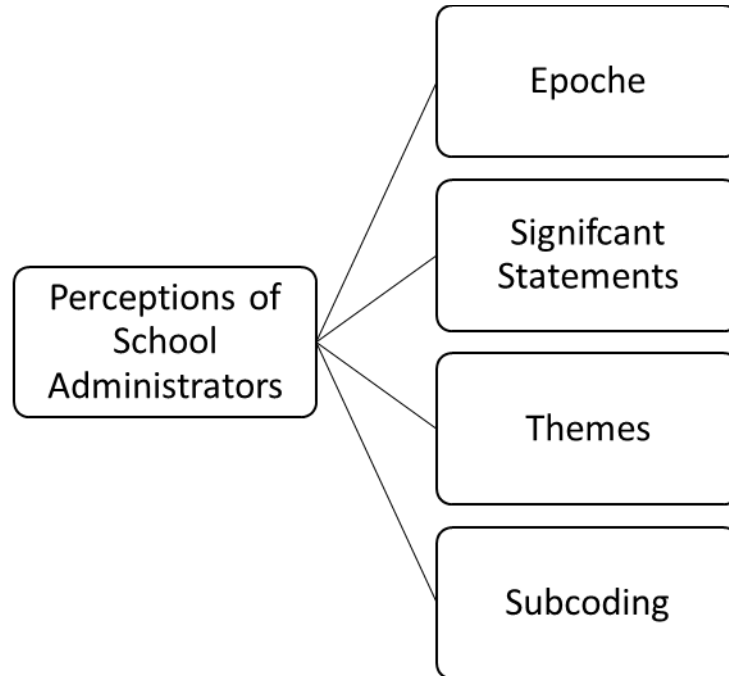
DATA ANALYSIS

Creswell (2013) explains that, when collecting data within phenomenology, the collection process should follow systematic procedures that start narrow, move into more broad units, and then unfold into detailed descriptions. This means that the researcher will look at specific statements that the participants made, add meaning to those statements, and then determine not only what was experienced, but also how each respondent experienced the phenomena. This research involved interviewing principals, assistant principals, and special education administrators. The results of the study were analyzed using the coding techniques outlined by Saldana (2014). All of the interviews were recorded and then sent to rev.com to be transcribed. The data was coded in the program Atlas.ti (QUARC Consulting, 2011). Atlas.ti is a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis product that allowed the researcher to code all transcribed interviews in order to determine common themes. Once the interviews were transcribed and entered into Atlas.ti to be organized, then all codes were assigned by the researcher based on the template for coding a phenomenological study (See Figure 1). Per figure 1, the researcher coded through the use of epoche, significant statements, themes, and sub-coding to sort out

comparisons among codes. Saldana (2014) states that during phenomenological research, the codes/themes are determined during the analysis stage.

Figure 1

Template for Coding



LIMITATIONS AND DELIMITATIONS

Creswell (2013) discusses that the researcher within phenomenology cannot take him/herself completely out of the research because there are shared experiences the researcher will have with the phenomenon being studied. Based on this information, it is important that the researcher focus solely on the responses of those studied; in this study, this will be conducted through the use of memo writing using a reflective log and utilizing a critical friend. In taking these steps, the researcher will be able to put aside her views and potential biases to focus solely on the data that emerges from the respondents' comments. Creswell (2013) explains that the

research within phenomenology begins with a hypothesis in mind, and the researcher hopes the results will support that hypothesis. However, the researcher has an ethical responsibility to report the findings regardless of whether or not they support the perceived hypothesis.

One limitation is that the findings are difficult to generalize to other districts. Every school district has different criteria to consider regarding how schools support special education students and whether or not the support is provided from the district level or the local school level. In the school district sampled, each individual school was responsible for supporting the needs of the special education students zoned for that attendance area.

A second limitation is that the researcher has a professional relationship with each person interviewed. Due to this commonality, there was a level of trust that allowed the respondents to share more personal information during the interview process than they would have shared with an unknown entity. Since the interviews were semi-structured, each set of questions was slightly different; for example, each interview varied in length, and some topics that came up in one interview might not have emerged in another. As referenced in Appendix C, interview questions were structured in order to best answer the following research inquiries: (1) What are the perceptions of school administrators regarding the skills needed to support special education within the local school building? and (2) What are the perceptions of school administrators regarding their preparation for leading special education professionals in PreK-12 schools?

SUMMARY

This study examined administrators' perceptions of whether or not they had received the proper training in their leadership preparation programs in order to lead special education within their buildings. The study utilized qualitative research through the use of transcendental phenomenology. The participants sampled were all school administrators (two principals, two

assistant principals, and two special education administrators). The interviews were transcribed, and common themes were identified. These themes were then used to determine the perceptions school administrators had about whether or not they possessed the required skills to lead special education within their building.

CHAPTER 4

DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

This chapter presents an analysis of data collected to investigate school administrators' perceptions of their ability to lead special education programs within the buildings that they support, as well as their perceptions of how adequately their leadership preparation programs readied them to lead special education. The section will then outline the background of the participants. Next, the themes that emerge from the research are introduced; this is followed by a description of each of the themes and subthemes. Lastly, a chapter summary is presented.

Participants were required to sign a consent form prior to being interviewed and participating in the study (Appendix D). Each participant received the same interview questions (Appendix A); however, based on the responses of each participant, additional questions were asked. The transcribed interviews were entered into Atlas.ti, where responses were coded by topic. Based on the responses of the participants, the words and statements were analyzed and coded to give meaning to the answers. The codes were then analyzed to identify common themes that emerged from the responses. The researcher went through each interview numerous times to analyze the data to the point of saturation. Once no new topics were identified, the individual topics were coded into themes. The themes were then arranged in order to cluster them into broader groups based on similar characteristics. This process was performed until 10 coded clusters remained. From within the 10 coded clusters, four themes emerged; from within each of the four themes, several sub-themes were identified. The findings will be summarized by each of the themes that were identified.

SUMMARY OF PARTICIPANTS

The results of the study were gathered by interviewing six school-based administrators. All participants were selected through a volunteer basis. Of the six participants interviewed, four

are females and two are males. The participants have between ten to thirty years in teaching experience and between four and fifteen years in total leadership. Table 1 provides a summary of descriptive information about each participant.

Debbi is an elementary school principal (general administrator) with over twenty-five years of experience in the field of education. She has taught at the elementary and middle school levels and has been in school-based administration for over ten years. Debbi holds a bachelor's degree in Elementary Education, and she also earned a master's degree, a specialist's degree, and a current certification in educational leadership.

Sam is an elementary school principal (general administrator) who has been in the field of education for over fifteen years; she has been in school administration for almost ten years. Her experience is in K-5 education, and she holds certifications in elementary education and educational leadership. Her highest degree earned is a doctorate degree.

Melissa has worked in the field of education for over fifteen years and is currently an assistant principal (general administrator). Her background is in K-5 education, and she holds a specialist's degree in educational leadership.

Bill has been in education for over ten years, and over five of those years have been in K-5 school administration. He is currently an assistant principal (general administrator) and holds a specialist's degree in educational leadership.

Stefanie has been working in the field of education for over twenty years, and almost five of those years have been in school administration. She is a special education administrator, and her background is in K-12 special education. Stefanie holds a specialist's degree in educational leadership.

Jack has been working in the field of education for over twenty years and has been in school administration (special education) for over five years. His background is in K-12 special education, and he holds a master’s degree in educational leadership.

Table 1

Position	Gender	Highest Degree Level	Types of Experience
Principal	Female	Specialist	K-8
Principal	Female	Doctorate	K-5
Assistant Principal	Male	Specialist	K-5
Assistant Principal	Female	Specialist	K-5
Support and Service Administrator	Male	Specialist	K-12
Support and Service Administrator	Female	Masters	K-12

Emerging Themes

As noted in Chapter Three, Creswell (2013) states that all participants must experience the same phenomenon when studying phenomenology. For the purposes of this study, all of the administrators have special education programs within their school buildings and therefore are supervising special education teachers and programs. Based on the recommendation of Van Manen (1990), the interviews were recorded, and the questions were semi-structured because Van Manen (1990) states that participants are more likely to share anecdotes, stories, experiences, and incidents when interviewed in this manner. After transcribing and coding all of

the interviews, the researcher identified the following themes: It All Comes Down to Being Prepared, General Education Administration—It is All About What You Know, Leadership Coursework—Changes Are Needed, and Special Education Administrators—Not the Answer to Everything or are They?

THEME ONE: IT ALL COMES DOWN TO BEING PREPARED

After examining the interview transcripts, the first theme to emerge was the necessity for all school administrators to be properly prepared in order to effectively lead special education programs. This theme has four subthemes. The first subtheme is the “benefit of experience,” which examines not only the way in which educators learn to become administrators, but also the overall general education administration experience. The second sub-theme is “growing and expanding special education knowledge.” For the special education administrators, this knowledge base is gained over the years from experience by first learning to become a special education teacher, then learning how to teach other special education teachers, and lastly becoming a special education administrator. However, for general education administrators, this knowledge comes from on-the-job learning. The third sub-theme consists of “the challenges within the educational system.” There are numerous hurdles that school administrators must face in today’s educational climate, including complications from lawyers and litigation, inadequacies of professional development, and a lack of continuing education. There are instances where a general administrator is not adequately prepared to lead special education in his/her building but also does not have a special education administrator placed there to fill these gaps. Likewise, sometimes special education administrators have to teach the principal about special education because s/he does not have the background knowledge to support it. The last sub-theme is “growing through learning,” which addresses the following: 1) professional development at the

teacher level 2) training that a principal can and cannot provide 3) training that an assistant principal can and cannot provide 4) training that a school district can and should provide at a leadership level, and 5) how the special education administrator and principal can work together to foster the growth and development of special education knowledge at the school level. I will further expand on these sub-themes below.

BENEFIT OF EXPERIENCE

When the researcher examined the interviews, a sub-theme called the “benefit of experience” emerged. The participants discuss not only how they learned to be administrators, but also the benefits of hands-on learning, multiple experiences, and learning from those experiences. The administrators note how they morphed their understanding of special education and general education into their current roles and explain how they were able to make judgements and decisions based on their prior experiences. The administrators with general education backgrounds had their principal’s and/or their assistant principal’s experiences from which to pull, as well as their personal knowledge gained from leading special education within their buildings. These general education administrators explain how much they learned from the special education administrators staffed at their schools, and they also elaborate on the difficulties that they faced in supporting special education prior to having a special education administrator placed in their buildings. Some of the interviewees’ schools had full time special education administrators, and others had part time ones. Those who had part-time support found it difficult to operate successfully when that administrator was not in the building because of their own lack of special education knowledge or their own inability to pull from their background knowledge. The principals and assistant principals rely heavily on the special education administrators to provide the training and modeling to the special education teachers

within their buildings. This is important because the principals and assistant principals do not feel that they have the background, knowledge, or training to provide the necessary level of support.

Across the interviews, there is a distinct difference in how the administrators view special education based on their formal educational background. Four of the participants interviewed held general education certifications and had limited knowledge of special education prior to moving into the role of general administrator. When answering interview questions, all of the participants were able to use key special education terms like IEP, specialized instruction, data collection, and eligibility; however, only the special education administrators had in-depth knowledge of these topics and could give more than superficial responses about the meaning of and implications of supporting special education teachers and programs. Debbi sums up this deficit best when she states, “I really don’t have the extensive knowledge and background to help support my teachers with strategies, accommodations; I just don’t have that wealth of knowledge.” Likewise, Bill points out that all of the knowledge he has gained regarding special education has been “on-the-job” training. On-the-job training is something that all of the general education administrators interviewed believe they have received. Melissa says:

I don't have a background in special education, so while I know good teaching practices that will work with all kids—good behavior management techniques that work with all kids—I do not know certain programs or specialized instruction that [the special education administrator] would know in order to provide the training to those teachers.

On-the-job training is problematic because the general education administrators do not initially feel equipped to provide special education training to the other teachers in their buildings; they must try to glean this over time, but the irony is that they do not have the time to spend trying to

learn it; they need to know it right away to successfully lead special education programs within the buildings that they support. In order to confidently provide special education training to others, Debbi feels that she needed more instruction in her leadership preparation programs regarding special education. She states that her leadership preparation programs

needed to be more in depth of the different disabilities, and what are their needs? What are their needs instructionally? What are their needs behaviorally? How can I manage them more effectively? How can I provide support for my teachers within those areas of their disability? How can I support my teachers? I'm sorry, my parents, also.

Clearly, Debbi recognizes a lack of adequate coursework in her leadership preparation program to prepare her for a comprehensive role in general administration.

Growing Special Education Knowledge

The second sub-theme to emerge is “growing special education knowledge.” Two of the participants interviewed had special education backgrounds, and these administrators possess different skill sets compared to their general education counterparts, with their strongest level of knowledge being in the area of special education. The special education administrators discuss the years it took them to grow their special education knowledge. They first started off as special education teachers, in which role they learned the individual disability categories and how to serve the students who fall within those categories. They received coaching along the way from other special education teachers and special education leaders. The educators who eventually become special education administrators were first successful as teachers; based on their success in the classroom, they were promoted to special education lead teacher, where they had to learn how to teach and support other special education teachers. Within these positions, the special

education administrators expanded their knowledge of special education by interacting in different support roles with special education department chairs, eligibility coordinators, diagnosticians, special education supervisors, and special education administrators. Due to these prior experiences, these special education administrators are able to make decisions in the best interest of the students; they have a level of special education expertise that has not only been groomed through experience, but also through additional professional development that is provided to them due to their role (this same level of professional development is not provided to the general administrators within the district, however).

Stefanie acknowledges that “good leadership is good leadership, whether it’s special education leadership or general education leadership.” She believes that, with special education administration specifically, the special education administrator really

need[s] to [train] with somebody to show them how to do it, or model for them how to do it rather than just tell them. You can't just say to someone, ‘Write this IEP.’ You really have to show them and teach them.

Ideally, a school leader would come into the position equipped with special education knowledge in order to support and train the special education teachers. Stefanie elaborates by saying that “you develop as a leader, and then you develop as a special education person. I’ve integrated my leadership with my special education skills and abilities, but this was not taught in a course.”

Developing adequate special education knowledge takes years, and time is not a luxury that these general education administrators have. When they do not enter the job fully prepared to lead in all capacities, students suffer and litigation occurs. To be truly effective in being a well-rounded general education administrator, knowledge of all student needs and leadership skills have to be merged into one. Sometimes even the special education administrators feel inadequate, despite

their knowledge of special education; they still face challenges, such as the legality of leading special education. Jack explains that “just being the one responsible for making sure that everything’s being implemented correctly, having to be able to answer to principals, county personnel, local school, families, just being the one responsible for all of that” is daunting and comes with hefty legal implications. In order to manage all of this, the special education background training and knowledge has to be strong, as does the continuing education to address the ever-changing field of special education. Jack makes the following point:

I’ve been in a leadership role for special education, and I have felt like everything comes through me, that the knowledge of the assistant principals and the head principal more times than not is not real strong in special education.

This puts a lot of pressure on the special education administrator.

CHALLENGES OF THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

The school administrators discuss many challenges that they face within the educational system. The biggest challenge, specifically noted by general education administrators, is the lack of professional developmental and training for leaders. The general education administrators feel that they do not have enough training on special education research theories or on the differing disability categories. They believe that this is a pitfall of the formal educational system and think that this information should have been an integral part of their master’s, specialist’s, and/or doctoral programs. Due to this lack in the education system, the special education administrators feel like they have to train principals and assistant principals; the principals and assistant principals agree that they must learn from the special education administrators because the information has not been previously taught to them. The special education administrators

who are placed in the schools can create professional development for the teachers based on individual school need, and they can make recommendations to the general education administrators about IEPs; from this, the general education administrators glean some background knowledge but still do not feel equipped to train others regarding special education.

The special education administrators feel that their knowledge is continuing to grow due to the professional development that is offered to them; during these training sessions, they are given the opportunity to learn from other special education administrators at other schools. Unfortunately, the general education administrators are not receiving these same training opportunities and strongly believe that this should be included in their principal/assistant principal leadership meetings provided by the district. This training becomes crucial due to the increase in litigation and the influx of lawyers coming into the district and schools. Parents are educated and can afford legal support. Since the principals and assistant principals do not feel equipped to support special education, they do not know how to handle the difficult situations that arise during IEP meetings.

The general education administrators feel that situations resulting in litigation could be resolved before this point if more support and training are given to the schools with higher due process complaints and hearings. Adding more special education administration support to a school and/or better continuing education training for general education administrators would be beneficial because then less time and resources would be required by the district to defend cases in court. The general education administrators point out the tremendous amount of pressure that special education advocates and attorneys place on the administrative teams and teachers. Due to their lack of training in and understanding of special education issues, general education administrators are making mistakes in the areas of compliance, placement, and services. The

principals and assistant principals who I interviewed feel that when a special education administrator is stationed at their school, they now have the proper and adequate support for special education in their buildings. Prior to gaining a special education administrator on their school staff, assistant principals and principals relied on central office staff who really did not possess the proper knowledge base regarding special education. If specific special education support was required, it took time to get the support to the buildings, and this support often arrived too late, causing relationships to break down between the school and families whose students attend there.

Even though Jack comes from a special education background, he still finds it “challenging to stay on top of the legal aspects of special education and making sure that everything’s being implemented correctly.” However, fortunately with his knowledge and expertise, he is able to

redeliver best practices of teaching to special education teachers, how to really teach in small groups, what is co-teaching, and make sure that that’s really happening organically, the way it should. Then also supporting the students of what their needs are.

Due to his knowledge base, Jack feels better equipped than the general education administrators to support special education in his building, although it is a lot to manage simultaneously. Sam feel totally differently from her viewpoint as the principal of a school. She states:

I need someone to help me understand [special education]. I need to ask, come in and show me, is this what [special education teachers’] lesson plan should look like? Is this what their goals should look like? Because I can’t evaluate a teacher on something I don’t know. So I think I would need some guidance.

Likewise, Debbi admits, “I have no formal training in leading special education programs.” In order for the general administration to feel prepared to lead special education within the buildings that they support, Jack suggests that:

there could be courses designed around how to work with the families, how to work with the teachers. I think that would go a long way, and then also how to lead the special education teachers, and motivate them, and keep them driven to keep doing more for the kids.

Clearly there is a glaring need for general education administrators to receive adequate training on special education both before entering general administration as well as throughout their employment in a leadership role.

Another challenge school administrators face is the litigiousness of today’s society. Sam notes that

the most litigious sections are schools that have high populations of parents who are educated and parents who can afford legal support; I think there needs to be restructure of how either we are trained to handle that, or there needs to be somebody specifically over the schools who have the most.

School administrators who are lacking in their special education knowledge do not feel equipped to handle or support special education compliance within the building to ensure that everything is being handled correctly so as not to risk litigation. Sam believes that

it would cut down on a lot of time and resources that the district has to put in when they have to go to court. It could be nipped early on and done the right way. Then I think we could avoid a lot of that.

Debbi has found herself in IEP meetings where parents are frustrated. She says:

they want some strategies, and sometimes some of our newer special education teachers are a little hesitant and unsure and unconfident to discuss some possibilities for them and some options for the future. I think if I had that knowledge base and that in-depth knowledge base, I could do a better job of supporting them in meetings.

A principal who is better able to support teachers in IEP meetings would also be able to help parents feel confident that their questions are being answered correctly and would therefore hopefully cut down on due process proceedings.

GROWING THROUGH LEARNING

All of the school administrators interviewed discussed the importance of professional development and how the proper training and support can help them grow their special education knowledge. All of the schools that employ the interviewees provide professional development to their teachers, but this focuses on general education initiatives and instruction that benefits the learning of all students. The general school administrators feel that they are lacking in special education small group training sessions. The assistant principals say that they are only comfortable providing training to their teachers on instructional strategies; they cannot confidently provide training on special education laws and regulations and IEPs. However, the principals claim that they would be comfortable providing training about special education issues as long as nothing changes, but the reality of the situation is that the laws and procedures are ever-changing. New situations always arise, and the general education administrators are not equipped to handle these. Therefore, it is important that the special education administrator and the principal work together to keep the principal updated about special education changes. The

principals feel that a section pertaining to special education policy needs to be added to their leadership meetings; here, updates could be given regarding procedures, and school principals could talk to other principals and learn from their peers. At these meetings, monthly updates could review various scenarios involving special education, which would provide proactive training instead of creating reactive scenarios when something goes wrong. The special education administrators discuss that this structure is in place for them but not for the general education administrators. The special education administrators collaborate with specialists and trainers within the district, and support staff will come out to their schools to work with them and train them; the same assistance needs to be provided to general education administrators—especially if they do not have a special education administrator stationed in their school.

Bill admits how limited his knowledge of special education was when he took his first administrative position. Regarding his first year on the job, he recalls, “I learned so much about procedures, all the federal mandates and all that you need to really know. I felt like I needed that experience much earlier, definitely before I entered into administration.” He goes on to say that there has been training done infrequently on “some new procedures, whether it is through the state or through the county,” and he reiterates that this needs to occur on a more regular basis.

When it comes to training regular classroom teachers about special education, Melissa states:

We are pumping a lot of money and time and support into professional development of our general education teachers. I just got an email from a DHH [Deaf and Hard of Hearing] teacher who said, ‘I’m not getting the same training that my general education counterpart is, and I don’t think that’s fair to my students.’ I think we need to do a better job of including our IRR [Interrelated Resource] teachers in the training—we need to do

a better job of providing them with the same training that our general education teachers are getting so that their special education students can be exposed to the same level of rigor and excellence in teaching that our other kids are.

This is a common phenomenon in schools across the district: special education students are not receiving the same quality of education that regular classroom students are receiving due to lack of sufficient training at the teacher level. Melissa says that she does not feel equipped to train teachers about special education and explains that “it is the special education administrator’s role to provide specific special education training. I do not know certain programs or specialized instruction that [he or] she would know in order to provide the training to those teachers.”

THEME TWO: GENERAL EDUCATION ADMINISTRATION—IT IS ALL ABOUT WHAT YOU KNOW

The second theme to emerge from the interview transcripts is General Education Administration—It is All About What You Know. Within this theme, there are two sub-themes. The first subtheme is “the do’s and don’ts of general education administrators: growing their special education knowledge.” This sub-theme addresses the fact that most teachers have their first experience with special education by being a teacher and having special education students in their classes. Then the teacher eventually changes roles from teacher to support staff and goes from facilitating special education students to bolstering special education teachers. Ideally a general education administrator will have a special education background if s/he is going to be supporting special education teachers. Once in administration, the principal’s attitude towards special education becomes a huge factor. There are roadblocks that general education administrators will encounter when supporting special education; along with their attitude toward special education, affect their ability to support special education within their buildings. The second sub-theme is “what is missing from general education administration.” The themes that I

found within the interview transcripts reveal that general education administrators do not have special education experience and therefore do not understand special education enough to support the programs within their buildings. I will further expand on these themes below.

THE DO'S AND DON'TS OF GENERAL EDUCATION ADMINISTRATORS: GROWING THEIR SPECIAL EDUCATION KNOWLEDGE

It is important that general education administrators grow their knowledge of special education because, ultimately, the principal is responsible for everything that happens within the school building. It is beneficial for principals and/or assistant principals to have a special education background, but data tells us that this is typically not the case. A school administrator has a different job once s/he leaves the classroom, and that job shifts from being responsible for teaching a class full of children to leading the instruction of an entire building, which includes students and teachers. It becomes the responsibility of the school administrators to ensure the needs of all students are met. Unfortunately, numerous administrators have a negative attitude that will adversely influence their support of special education. One administrator interviewed illustrates this point. She claims:

For me to spend an inordinate amount of time training in special education would not be in my best interest in my aspirations of becoming a principal. Now, if I wanted to be some sort of director in special education or a special education administrator, then for sure, I would need to seek more training.

Such a dismissive attitude can cause numerous problems within a school building, such as: not knowing what the special education administrator's role is, not understanding appropriate referrals to special education, not recognizing how to appropriately schedule the building to

support special education, and not knowing how to ensure that the school is fully compliant with each IEP. School administrators must be comprehensively knowledgeable about special education because their decisions have legal ramifications. When school administration does not understand special education, then the special education teachers feel disenfranchised. This leads to the administration being unable to support to their special education teachers within meetings.

All of the general education administrators interviewed feel that they have learned about special education on the job, yet the special education administrators feel that they are the only ones in the building who truly have a firm grasp on the many intricacies of special education. Based on the educational backgrounds of each school, both the general and special education administrators were asked to determine whether or not they felt equipped to lead special education. Bill, who is a general education administrator, recalls that he did not understand special education at all when he took his first administrative position. He recounts one of his initial administrative meetings:

We were doing placement in the beginning of the year, and people were using the term ‘segments,’ and I had never heard that term as a teacher. I had never heard ‘segments’ and [did not know] what that meant, and so that was all just new to me, but I acted like I knew exactly what I was talking about. You just play it.

This is an example of how general education administrators learn on the job. Bill elaborates by saying that he was “fortunate enough to work with a principal that had come from a special education background. A lot of her training and her experience was years ago, and as you know, special education law and all that changes,” but he was still able to learn a lot about special education from her. Debbi received on-the-job training because her first assistant principal

position was in a school that houses numerous special education small group program classes. Through that experience, she took the initiative to attend IEP meetings and to learn the processes within special education. This was not knowledge she possessed going into the job, but due to her school placement, she was fortunate to learn a lot. Melissa had hands-on learning of special education while she was a general education teacher who had special education students in her classroom. In this manner, she gained an understanding of the IEP process, but she does not feel that she “would be able to provide a quality level of instruction to those teachers when it comes to laws and rules and IEPs and regulations.” Laws, Rules, and Regulations is an area in which the general education administrators feel they are lacking knowledge in order to train and support their special education teachers within their buildings.

All of these various threads must be woven together to create the best program to support special education students. The general education administrator has to have the proper knowledge of special education, has to be able to effectively lead special education within his/her building, and has to know how to properly allocate resources to meet the needs of each student. When these puzzle pieces do not fit together, there can be legal ramifications. Sam finds that “in today’s society of being so litigious, that [special education is] the most litigious section, and there needs to be a restructure of how we are trained to handle that.” Melissa brings up the point that her job is “more of the building leadership. Not to be the specialized special education person that knows all the ins and outs about special education but to talk about how our school runs, our procedures and policies here.” Melissa feels that the role of special education in meetings needs to be represented by a person with a special education background and not by the general education administrator. Stefanie and Jack see that the lack of knowledge in the area of special education can have dire consequences and warn that “a myriad of areas

could be compromised by that lack of knowledge.” Administrators who do not have the proper knowledge of special education make “significant errors in terms of services we [special education educators and administrators] provide, how we provide them, how we commit resources.” Jack has found himself in IEP meetings where the teachers

have developed goals, or maybe have developed accommodations, and not been able to explain why they specifically did for that child. Then, if the special education teacher can’t speak to that, then it’s my responsibility to try to navigate through what the thinking was.

Jack possesses the in-depth knowledge about special education to do this, but he expresses concern that there could be serious ramifications if there is not a special education administrator at the table who can capably lead that conversation.

WHAT IS MISSING FROM ADMINISTRATION PREPARATION?

Upon analyzing the interviewees’ answers to the interview questions, it becomes evident that the school general education administrators feel that they do not have adequate special education experience and knowledge. Despite not having experience in this area, they are responsible for evaluating special education teachers and programs. This is problematic because they do not know what they are looking for, and they have not received training about how to teach special education or about how to evaluate the efficacy of this. The assistant principals remember starting off as beginning administrators and not even understanding what was being discussed in regards to special education; regrettably, they are still the ones responsible for evaluating and supporting the programs. They recall learning through experience and feeling like that training should have taken place prior to their placement in that role. Since an assistant

principal never knows what s/he will be supervising, s/he needs to know about Response to Intervention (RTI), IEPs, computerized IEP programs, scheduling, specialized instruction, and basic special education knowledge; assistant principals find it difficult to support and train special education teachers due to their lack of knowledge in each of these areas. The principals admit that it is very difficult to find the time required to support special education and everything else within their buildings. They do not have time to ensure that IEPs are being implemented correctly in specialized instruction. The principals bemoan not having experience with low incidence students, and they express an interest in wanting to learn. They need help understanding how to evaluate special education teachers, how to teach special education teachers to correctly plan lessons, and how to assist special education teachers in creating goals and objectives. The principals just do not know what they are looking for or how to go about helping their special education teachers achieve the desired ends.

When school administrators do not have a background in special education, it is of critical importance to provide professional development that will endow administrators with the skills required to support the programs within the local school. Special education is constantly changing, so professional development is required regularly to help stay current on trends and on the changing procedures and practices. Sam says:

I feel comfortable as long as things don't change, so some of the practices have been the same for years, that's completely comfortable. There's a lot of the same issues that arise with parents, and advocates, and lawyers, and that sort of thing. Some that kind of thing, I'm not that concerned about. It's just new situations, if I haven't experience something, that is where I need training.

Sam goes on to say that:

professional development doesn't necessarily have to come from an outside source. It could come from even colleagues. Other schools and other SSAs [Support and Service Administrator] that have that a large population, that they could share their knowledge. I know that our SSAs, that they go to monthly meetings and they have trainings. If they could disseminate the information and have some of them come to our principal meetings and teach us, I think that that would be a benefit to us.

General education administrators need to have continual professional development in order to meet the expectations of special education.

Sam states that the district should provide ongoing professional learning as part of the principal meetings to spend time "growing professionally with the knowledge of special education." Many school administrators do not have special education backgrounds, and Sam mentions that she has never taught special education. Based on this fact, she admits, "I don't think I have the experience. I don't think anyone should train someone unless they've actually taught it and done it. So I don't think I could train [the special education teachers]." A general education administrator's job includes being a leader and being a trainer; therefore, professional development is needed in order for general education administrators to do their jobs. Sam remembers when there used to be a time at leadership and learning meetings where:

there was a section where it was special education. And [district leadership] would update [school principals] on policies, or procedures, or sometimes just time for principals to talk. And I don't recall this year being able to do that very often. And I know that if something happens, and you kind of get your hands slapped for something. You get a training specialized for your school, so we've had one of those, but I think that those were helpful when special education spoke to us even if it's 15 minutes, just to kind

of go over scenarios. This happened. Who do you call? What do you do, that kind of thing, so we used to do that. And I think that's where I got some of my, here's the department to call, that kind of thing.

Bill also feels that more professional learning is needed. He states that the

county has provided several trainings to administrators where they invite the assistant principals and the special education administrators in the county to go over some new procedures, whether it's through the state or through the county. But those have been kind of seldom. I think I've been to maybe one or two.

These have been beneficial but have not happened often enough. Melissa does not feel she needs professional development in all areas of special education because she believes that, as an effective leader, she will hire people with those skills; however, she does believe that professional development is needed in "funding, allotting special education teachers, how that works at the district level. How my students get funded based on their segments and Full Time Equivalency [FTE]."

As special education administrators, Stefanie and Jack receive more professional development than the school principals and assistant principals; in their interviews, they mention monthly administrative meetings that they attend where they receive training on policy, practice, and instruction. Jack has found particularly valuable the opportunities that these meetings afford him to work with the other special education administrators in the district and the other county specialists (behavior, testing, instructional, and cognitive, for example). Jack elaborates on this point:

I've had many that have come out to the school and have had me come to their school, just to sit down, look at forms, or documents, and just be an ear and give advice. That's been really supportive. Without that, I think it would be very hard to do this job.

Stefanie explains the problematic discrepancy between the special education administrators' and general education administrators' trainings when she compares special education to the Navy command structure:

When you have an aircraft carrier, the main job of that aircraft carrier is to go to a place where planes are needed, and be able to take off and land planes. Well, that's a key function of that ship. And so the commanding officer of that ship also has to be a pilot, too. He can't just be an officer. For example, my husband, he's a surface warfare officer; he's a nuclear engineer. He could command a ship, but he could never command a naval aircraft carrier because he's not a pilot. And so I'm not saying that every administrator needs to be trained in special education. But we have administrators now who have zero special education experience. They know nothing. They know nothing, and we're putting them in positions of authority. And more importantly, we're recognizing their authority over the special education administrators' knowledge.

When school principals have the final call in a school, it is important that they have proper knowledge of special education and total understanding of the ramifications if the wrong decision is made. This is the main reason that professional learning is so important and is also the main reason why leadership preparation programs begin to think about the skills that school leaders must have regarding special education.

All of the general education administrators feel that allocation of resources from the county is handled well in the district(s) in which they work, especially as it pertains to the staffing needs of teachers. The general education administrators all state that they are equipped to hire the necessary staff members to fill special education positions, and they always receive the required teaching allotments to meet the instructional needs of the students in their local buildings. Regarding teacher training and provision of materials, all of the general education administrators praise their local school foundations for providing the required funding to buy the extra materials that are needed for additional teacher trainings. Debbi gives the following example:

Training wise, material wise, resources, we [the administrative team] come back and we compile a list and then we prioritize what's necessary, what's needed, what's the most important, and then we look at our instructional monies, our local monies, and our county money, to see where can we pull from to meet those needs.

From this, the school is able to prioritize the needs that they anticipate for the upcoming year.

THEME THREE: LEADERSHIP COURSEWORK—CHANGES ARE NEEDED

The third theme that emerges from the interview transcripts is the necessity to change leadership coursework. This theme examines leadership courses that are taken within educational leadership preparation programs. All of the general education administrators acknowledge that a special education law course was offered in each leadership preparation program in which they were enrolled, but there were not any special education courses offered. The school administrators were in agreement about how little special education content was provided in their leadership preparation programs. They concur that the information provided was entry-level and very basic. The school administrators all agree that having coursework

dedicated to working with special education families and leading/motivating special education teachers would be beneficial. Since special education is such an important aspect of leading a school, the interviewees offer suggestions for how their degree programs could better prepare them for this crucial component of their jobs. Their suggestions include coursework in each of the following areas: how to better articulate the needs of special education students, how to offer support to teachers and parents, how to differentiate among the various disability categories, and how to adequately prepare accommodations and strategies for special education students. The general education administrators also discuss adding field work experience in addition to the course work to allow on-the-job training for interacting with parents, attending IEP meetings, and evaluating special education teachers. Sam says:

I think that our master's programs and our specialist's programs, they need to offer and provide more in-depth training, and information, and research, and theories with regards to the different disabilities for leaders. As a leader, I would like to know more about that so I can support it better. I think it needs to be more specific and a little deeper, not just cover the whole gamut and the many years of special education in general within the schools, and be more specific.

By increasing on-the-job learning opportunities, school administrators can delve more deeply into special education and be better prepared to lead it within their schools.

Special education knowledge can be instructional, in the form being taught within the classroom, as well as in the form of experience/hands-on learning. All six school administrators took a special education law class within their leadership preparation programs. Debbi states that she did not have any courses to prepare her to lead special education, but she did have a course on special education law in her master's, specialist's, and doctoral programs. Sam

mentions taking a class in college on different exceptionalities within special education; in addition, her specialist's and doctoral programs in educational leadership provided a special education law class. Bill, Melissa, Stefanie, and Jack all had similar responses about taking a special education law class. Stefanie's and Jack's responses stand out from the general education administrators' responses because of their extensive coursework that was taken in special education courses in either their undergraduate or master's programs. Outside of special education law classes, the general leadership preparation coursework did not contain any other content related to special education.

THEME FOUR: SPECIAL EDUCATION ADMINISTRATORS—NOT THE ANSWER TO EVERYTHING OR ARE THEY?

The fourth and final theme that emerges from the transcripts is: Special Education Administrators—Not the Answer to Everything or are They? This theme examines the role of the special education administrator and identifies how the two special education administrators found themselves in this role after starting off as education teachers and then moving to their current administrative positions. The special education administrators share how their special education knowledge has evolved in their role as special education administrators. They find the role challenging because the job is all-encompassing, and they are faced with time constraints. At times, they question if they are a school administrator or a lead special education teacher or both. They find it challenging to answer to the principal as well as to district level staff. The job of a special education administrator has not been clearly defined by the school district, so every school is using the role differently. The special education administrators generally provide training, handle all special education materials and resources, regulate special education behavior, determine eligibilities, model instructionally for teachers, provide assistance with scheduling, and take on anything else assigned; it is difficult to do all of this simultaneously and

do it all well. Despite the challenges that the special education administrators face, the benefit of having a special education administrator in a school is readily apparent; they can be proactive in truly getting to know the students and families who are supported within their schools. Also, they have a support system of other special education administrators within their school systems to go to when they need assistance. This theme will be examined further in the section below.

Both Stefanie and Jack find that their administrative teams rely heavily on them to provide the special education training and support in their buildings. Stefanie states that her administrative team will often tell her, "I don't know. This is you. I'm completely depending on you," when it comes to special education information. Regarding other administrators with whom Stefanie works, she observes that there is "a real gap in skills. There are [general education] administrators that literally have no idea what [special education administrators] do. No idea. Have no idea of the law, have no idea of what's an appropriate referral, have no idea of scheduling." These are key components involved in supporting and leading special education; if a school does not have a special education administrator stationed in it, all of these questions would go unanswered, and the students who require these services would fall by the wayside. When a student(s) fall by the wayside, litigation is imminent.

All of the general education administrators interviewed feel that the special education administrator who is stationed at their school is vital to their administrative team. The special education administrator is the dedicated expert in special education in the school building because, of course, not every educator can be an expert on everything. Although this may be true, school leaders need to have an understanding of the major areas of education in order to properly support the needs of all the students in their buildings. The principals and assistant principals all agree that the special education administrator is a critical role within a given school

and believe their expertise is invaluable; the general education administrators really need them in their schools because they do not have the required expertise to support special education on their own in the buildings. Debbi recognizes that she has learned a lot from having a special education administrator in her school. She observes the special education administrator and listens carefully when they are discussing students together; just hearing the special education administrator's suggestions has helped her grow her special education skills and knowledge. Similarly, Bill comments that, in his school, the administrative team relies heavily on the special education administrator for special education issues and needs that arise. By having a special education administrator in her school, Melissa was relieved of the pressure to know everything about this area of education because, in her opinion, the role of the special education administrator is to provide all of the special education training. Melissa says:

I don't have a background in special education, so while I know good teaching practices that work with all kids, I do not know certain programs or specialized instruction that [the special education administrator] would know in order to provide the training to those teachers.

Sam agrees that the training of teachers by the general education administrator is important, and since her background is not in special education, she relies on her special education administrator to provide the training that is required for the special education teachers to be able to properly do their jobs.

The support that the special education administrators provide for the teachers and students is an invaluable benefit of the position. Debbi mentions that her special education administrator is "in the classrooms with those teachers and those students on a daily basis, and she's monitoring their individual needs, the teachers, compiling that, and then organizing staff

development as needed.” This is a critical contribution of the special education administrator because the general education administrator who does not possess special education expertise does not always understand what to be looking for while in the classrooms. When a special education administrator is stationed at a school, s/he can go into the classrooms and tailor professional development that directly address areas of need for the staff.

The role of the special education administrator has its noted benefits, but there are also some pitfalls of the role as well. As special education administrators, Stefanie and Jack understand the importance of their role, but they note that the principal ultimately makes the final decisions in the building; at times, that this can be a challenge. Stefanie has encountered general education administrators who, during meetings, will make comment that cause her to wonder: “Did [the principal] really just say that out loud?” Without the proper knowledge, general education administrators can “make significant errors in terms of services [special education administrators] provide, how we provide them, how we commit resources,” fears Stefanie. Also challenging is when the special education administrator has the knowledge and expertise to give a recommendation, but the general education administrator overrides that suggestion. Stefanie has found that “a superior to you, could in essence say, ‘We’re not doing that,’ and not take the advice that you’re giving.” This is a problem when the advice being given is the proper procedure to follow in the situation.

There is also the challenge of not truly feeling like a part of the administrative team, especially when the special education administrator has to serve more than one school or when the job is not properly defined. Stefanie states:

I feel like there’s a lack of parity. I have the expertise and the knowledge, truly, of an [assistant principal], but I am not necessarily recognized as that in terms of pay, in terms

of the website. I'm not listed on the website as an administrator. I think that if you're going to ask people to assume this level of responsibility and require them to have this level of expertise, you need to recognize them and treat them with parity like we treat all administrators.

Another pitfall pertains to pay; the special education administrator is not paid on the level of an administrator but rather on the level of a teacher. Stefanie states that, by calling the position by a different name (when it should really be referred to as an assistant principal) the position is made to stand apart from the rest of the administrative team, both in terms of status and in terms of pay scale.

SUMMARY

Chapter Four outlines the results of the research regarding whether school administrators perceive that they have the required skills to lead special education. The particular method of conducting interviews was selected in order to get the true experiences of leading special education through the eyes of two school principals, two assistant principals, and two special education administrators. The researcher describes the main themes that were found when analyzing the responses from the interviews and then details the subthemes that emerged from these categories. The summary of those findings is presented in the figure below (see Table 2).

Table 2

Coded Clusters with Identified Themes

	Theme One	Theme Two	Theme Three	Theme Four
Theme Title	It All Comes Down to Being Prepared	General Education Administration—It is All About What You Know	Leadership Coursework—Changes are Needed	Special Education Administrators—Not the Answer to Everything or are They?
Theme Subcategories	<i>Growing Special Education Knowledge</i>	<i>Growing Special Education Knowledge—The Do’s and Don’ts</i>	<i>Leadership Courses</i>	<i>Getting the SSA Job</i>
	<i>Benefits of Experience</i>	<i>What is Missing from Administration</i>	<i>How to Learn Special Education</i>	<i>Challenges of the SSA</i>
	<i>It is All About the Training</i>		<i>Special Education Coursework</i>	<i>How SSAs Grow</i>
	<i>Challenges of the Educational System</i>		<i>Leadership Requirements</i>	<i>That is the SSA</i>
	<i>Growing Through Learning</i>			

Chapter 5

CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study was to not only to ascertain school administrators' perceptions of the skills necessary to effectively lead special education programs, but also to determine their preparation to do so based on their special education knowledge. When school administrators are not prepared to lead special education, the fiscal impact to the school district can be costly. Mueller (2009) found that the estimated cost of a case, if it makes it to federal appeals court, is \$60,000 - \$100,000. This study analyzes current administrators' perceptions of whether they feel prepared to lead special education. Ball and Green (2014) state that it is the role of the school principal to develop teachers and related support within their buildings. Pazey, Gevarter, Hamrick, and Rojeski (2014) find that schools where special education programming is improperly implemented are increasingly confronted with lawsuits. Current research tells us that when school administrators are not prepared to lead special education, the results can be costly, both monetarily and in terms of the negative impact on the instruction for a student who does not get the services that s/he requires.

This study utilizes qualitative research methods through the use of transcendental phenomenology since the researcher has a history of leading special education within the school district where the study was conducted; the researcher has likewise worked with school administrators who are not equipped to lead special education. Through the use of semi-structured interviews, the following research questions were answered.

1. What are school administrators' perceptions of the skills needed to support special education within the local school building?

2. What are school administrators' perceptions of their preparation to lead special education professionals in P-12 schools?

The conceptual framework for this study follows social constructivism. Social constructivists seek to understand the world in which they live through their own point of view (Creswell, 2013). Empirical research shows that school leaders are best equipped to provide input regarding their professional learning needs since they are most aware of what they need to do to improve their practice (Johnson, 2016). By allowing school administrators to have input into their learning, the outcomes of the learning will be more successful. Numerous school leaders do not receive adequate preparation to lead special education in their leadership preparation programs. Frost and Kersten (2011) find that principals who hold special education certificates are the only administrators equipped to lead special education. In order for general education administrators to be properly prepared to lead special education, they must receive the correct professional development to build their legal, foundational, and contextual knowledge of special education. Correa and Wagner (2011) discover that having the proper preparation of special education instructional practices is critical to the effectiveness of the special education programming within the building. Lastly, an increase in professional learning opportunities will positively impact the effectiveness of school administrators when assessing their readiness to support special education programs (Isis, 2013). School administrators will have a positive impact on special education programs within their buildings when they are properly trained (Thompson, 2017). Student success will occur when all school leaders are given the tools and knowledge to support special education programs.

The literature shows that the job of a principal is very complex and carries demanding responsibilities (Lynch, 2012). School principals must be knowledgeable about and be prepared

to lead special education (Wakeman, Browder, Flowers, & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2006). School leaders must understand FAPE and the LRE in order to be successful in leading special education. These regulations are difficult for school leaders to master because they are not incorporated into leadership preparation programs (Roberts & Guerra, 2017), yet school districts continue to rely on school administrators to train, support, and spearhead special education teachers and programs within their buildings. When school administrators do not have the proper knowledge and training regarding the rules and procedures of IDEIA and FAPE, mistakes are made, and the mistakes leave a school district at risk for litigation (Ball & Green, 2014).

CONTEXT OF FINDINGS

For this study, the researcher interviewed current school administrators about their knowledge pertaining to special education and their perceived ability to lead the special education programs within the buildings they support. All of the participants provided transparent answers, as well as examples of how their preparation (or lack thereof) in special education prepared them to lead special education within their buildings. Each one of the school administrators believes his/her job is to support every student in his/her building, and this includes students with disabilities. The findings show four themes that emerge from the interview responses, and within each theme, subthemes are identified. The themes are: It All Comes Down to Being Prepared, General Education Administration—It is All About What You Know, Leadership Coursework—Changes are Needed, and Special Education Administrators: Not the Answer to Everything or are They? The themes are discussed below.

THEME ONE: IT ALL COMES DOWN TO BEING PREPARED

The first theme to emerge is that all school administrators understand that effectively leading special education comes down to being properly prepared. This theme has four subthemes. The first subtheme is the benefit of experience, which examines the ways that educators learn to become administrators and the overall general education administrator experience. The second sub-theme relates to growing special education knowledge. For the special education administrator, this happens at a school level by learning to become a special education teacher, then by learning how to teach other special education teachers, then by growing special education knowledge within the position of a special education lead teacher, and lastly by becoming a special education administrator. For general education administrators, this is on-the-job learning. The third sub-theme consists of the challenges presented by the educational system. There are numerous roadblocks that school administrators today must face. Schools have to learn to navigate lawyers and litigation, and there must be professional development and training for leaders to be prepared to handle the complications of legality and illegality. There are instances where no special education administrators are present to fill these gaps; there are also circumstance when the special education administrators have to teach the building principal about special education because s/he does not have the background knowledge to support it. The last sub-theme is growing through learning, which addresses professional development at the teacher level, training that a principal can and cannot provide, training that an assistant principal can and cannot provide, training that a school district can offer at a leadership level, and how the special education administrator and principal can work together to foster the growth and development of special education knowledge at the school level. I will further expand on the results below.

BENEFITS OF EXPERIENCE

The results show that special education administrators benefit from having multiple experiences to help mold their knowledge of special education and their leadership abilities into the role of a special education administrator. The administrators with special education backgrounds have a well-rounded understanding and a special viewpoint because of having been a special education teacher; they also have first-hand experience with the requirements of IDEIA and FAPE. Therefore, they are more prepared to lead special education than their general education counterparts. The administrators who have previously worked in special education classrooms are able to utilize their knowledge to make decisions that ensure legality while also fostering academic success.

One point that the administrators interviewed repeatedly make is that good leadership is good leadership, regardless of whether the general education administrator has a proficient knowledge of special education. Some general education administrators believe that it is their job to hire someone with the knowledge to perform special education tasks if the general education administrator cannot do so him/herself. This coincides with the findings of Ball and Green (2014), who discover a link between the experience and training of school leaders and their attitudes towards special education. The administrators who have more experience with special education feel that it is their responsibility to ensure that the special education programming is correctly implemented, whereas the administrators who do not have a special education background simply perceive that special education is an area for someone else to handle. This mindset could potentially create problems when IDEIA is violated. Ultimately, the job of the school principal is to develop teachers and set the direction of special education (Ball

& Green, 2014). In order to accomplish this successfully, special education knowledge is required.

GROWING SPECIAL EDUCATION KNOWLEDGE

The interview results show that it takes years to grow special education knowledge and that the special education administrators have had years to learn special education; therefore, it is close to impossible for the general education administrators who come in with minimal special education knowledge to make up for this dearth of experience and understanding.

Special education administrators begin their journey as special education teachers, where they learn about different eligibility categories and how to support the academic needs of various students in the classroom. These administrators have numerous mentors throughout their careers, such as fellow special education teachers and special education leaders; these mentors are able to provide coaching and support over the years. The special education administrators are then able to grow their special education and leadership knowledge by accepting leadership positions outside of the classroom, such as special education lead teachers; here they can further develop skills to support teachers in the classroom.

The administrators with general education backgrounds do not have these same opportunities. Instead, these administrators enter the leadership role without a complete understanding of special education. They have to learn special education through on-the-job training and by relying on others with special education backgrounds to take care of the details of special education with which they are not familiar.

CHALLENGES OF THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

The results of the research conducted for this study show that the special education administrators feel responsible for training the principals and the assistant principals because otherwise they would not have the required skills to lead special education. The general education administrators agree that they do not receive the proper special education training in their master's, specialist's, and/or doctoral leadership preparation programs. Prior to accepting their first administrative positions, the general education administrators feel that they need more training in special education research theories and on the differing eligibility categories in order to confidently and competently facilitate the special education programming within the buildings that they serve.

Professional development is another challenge of special education. The special education administrators are continuously receiving professional development where they are able to learn from other special education administrators. The special education administrators are receiving legal updates, as well as instructional strategies, to ensure that they are able to provide the best possible support to the special education students within their buildings. On the other hand, this same professional development is not being provided to the general education administrators. The general education administrators expect that the special education administrators will provide a redelivery of information, but it is not the same as receiving the training first-hand. It is important that all school leaders are receiving the same training. When school administrators make errors regarding special education in compliance, services, or placement, the results can be devastating. This lapse in first-hand knowledge not only creates an unfortunate educational experience for the student, but it also results in a costly legal battle for the school and district. Today's society is litigious, and all school administrators need to be

prepared to support students and their families and also need to be knowledgeable in order to answer questions that arise. In order for this to happen, more special education training is required for all school administrators but specifically for general education administrators who do not have special education backgrounds.

GROWING THROUGH LEARNING

All of the respondents report that professional learning is needed because principal preparation programs are not properly preparing school administrators to address the needs of special education programs (Lyons, 2016). Professional learning needs to address current trends, changing practices and procedures, funding, allotment of teachers, specialized instruction, IEPs, and the eligibility process. Although all of the administrators interviewed for this study feel that special education professional development is needed, only the special education teachers report receiving constant professional learning to successfully lead special education. The school principals who are invested in making sure that special education takes place properly within their buildings state that there have been a few break-out sessions that have occurred at their principal leadership meetings over the years, and this was not a reoccurring topic on their agendas at their monthly meetings. Instead, the special education administrators are responsible for reporting back to their administrative teams and teachers from their own professional development sessions. Some principals, however, are unwilling to allow the special education administrators to provide training to their teachers.

Of the school administrators interviewed, all believe that the professional development offered at the school level is primarily focused on general education initiatives; not all special education teachers were included in those trainings. This is especially problematic because special education students are general education students first, and every teacher should be

receiving the same training regardless of what type of class s/he is teaching. School administrators need to be more cognizant of including all teachers in professional development opportunities.

In regards to professional development for school administrators, the special education administrators receive monthly professional development in order to stay current on policy and procedures. However, the general education administrators unfortunately receive training infrequently (if at all), and when training was provided, it was reactive in nature. In order for training to be effective, the district needs to be proactive in providing training in the area of special education so that all school administrators can remain current on special education laws and regulations and to ensure that they are staying up-to-date on special education practices.

THEME TWO: GENERAL EDUCATION ADMINISTRATION—IT IS ALL ABOUT WHAT YOU KNOW

Based on the results of this study, this theme can be split into two subthemes. The first subtheme is “growing special education knowledge—the do’s and don’ts.” This subtheme contains the roadblocks that general education administrators face that interfere with their ability to properly lead special education. The second subtheme is “what is missing from general education administration”: here the data shows that general education administrators do not have enough special education experience and understanding to support the special education programs within their buildings.

In order to support special education at the school level, Thompson (2014) found four competencies that school leaders must possess. School leaders have to communicate effectively and maintain high ethical practices; they have to adequately interpret laws and policies; they have to make good decisions regarding students with disabilities; and they have to ensure that the

special education students receive their proper services. Of the six school administrators interviewed by the researcher, four did not feel equipped with the required skills when they accepted their first leadership roles. Two of the administrators admitted learning through experience by working under great principals who had special education backgrounds and could mentor them and teach them the skills that they did not know. Even with this support, they did not feel equipped to make special education decisions and to fully support teachers in IEP meetings when they encountered trouble. All four general education administrators explain how heavily they depended on their special education administrator to provide training, support, and follow-up in their buildings. When there are special education questions, these four administrators would turn to their special education administrator, which begs the question of what would happen if these general education administrators did not have the luxury of having a special education administrator staffed at their school.

The special education administrators discuss the ramifications of what could happen if they are not sitting at the table to facilitate the IEP meeting. The special education administrators feel that their leadership teams in the school depend on them to handle special education issues that arise in the building. Although they feel equipped to handle these situations, they explain that—without their presence—the legal ramifications would be significant. The special education administrators are able to immediately handle situations as they arise in their buildings and problem-solve before situations turn into crises. Both special education administrators describe that, if it were not for their support, situations could escalate and turn litigious due to the improper implementation of services. The failure of schools to properly implement special education programming is causing school districts to be confronted with lawsuits at an increasingly higher rate (Pazey, Gevarter, Hamrick, & Rojeski, 2014).

GROWING SPECIAL EDUCATION KNOWLEDGE—THE DO’S AND THE DON’TS

School administrators must have an understanding of special education because the decisions that school leaders make have legal ramifications. The results of this study show that the general education administrators do not have an understanding of special education prior to entering their first administrative positions and are therefore not prepared to lead special education within their buildings. The general education administrators have learned special education through on-the-job training by those leaders who have special education knowledge and through experience and hands-on learning opportunities within their leadership roles as either assistant principal or principal. Even though the general education administrators have learned on the job, the results showed that they still do not have the knowledge to support or train their teachers when it comes to the IEP process or rules and regulations. Also, during the time it takes for them to learn through trial-and-error on the job, mistakes are being made that have lasting consequences both for the student’s education and for the school’s and district’s budgets. All of the general education administrators end up relying on their special education administrators for this support. This is a problem when a special education administrator is not available, and therefore the assistant principal or principal is required to support the special education teacher/student within the building.

The big picture shows the importance of school administrators being knowledgeable about special education, whether their background is in general education or in special education. School leaders are required to effectively lead special education and to allocate resources to properly meet the needs of each student. When this is not done correctly, the consequences are two-fold: they are harsh for the student who has been negatively impacted academically by these errors, and they can lead to legal proceedings, which are costly to a school district.

WHAT IS MISSING FROM ADMINISTRATION?

The results of this study show that the general education administrators do not have special education knowledge and experience when they became administrators. General education administrators are responsible for evaluating special education teachers, and this is problematic when they are not aware of the requirements of a program or when they do not understand the instructional practices that they should be observing. General education administrators need to have an understanding of RTI, IEPs, computerized IEP programs, scheduling, specialized instruction, and basic special education knowledge prior to becoming administrators. General education administrators state that they do not know how to evaluate special education teachers, how to support them in creating appropriate lesson plans, or how to create appropriate goals and objectives. The local school system should be responsible for providing this level of training for administrators. Since special education is ever-changing, it is also the school district's responsibility to provide professional development that keeps the school leaders up-to-date on the current trends and changing procedures and practices.

THEME THREE: LEADERSHIP COURSEWORK—CHANGES ARE NEEDED

The third theme to emerge from the research relates to leadership coursework and the classes that are offered as part of leadership preparation programs. Principal preparation programs are not adequately priming future school leaders to address special education. Special education content should be embedded into the coursework already being offered (Lynch, 2016). Of the six administrators interviewed, only two had special education certification and training. The four administrators with general education certifications did not feel prepared to lead special education upon entering their first administrative positions. All six administrators state that a special education law course was included in the requirements of their leadership preparation

programs, but no other special education content was covered. This is problematic for two reasons: the first reason is that laws are ever-evolving, so the material covered in the course content during the administrators' leadership training may not still be relevant to them as administrators (this is compounded by the fact that continuing education is also not provided); the second reason is that the preparation programs cannot possibly be comprehensive enough in the area of special education if all they are offering is one course. Overall, general education administrators do not feel prepared to lead special education, whereas special education administrators do feel that they possess the required skills to lead special education.

Based on the results of this study, special education administrators learn special education through coursework in their graduate and undergraduate programs, and both general education and special education administrators learn through hands-on experience. Since special education programming is a required part of a general education administrator's job description, the participants of this study feel that there needs to be more special education material presented within their leadership preparation programs. The school administrators would like to receive training on working with special education families, and this can be accomplished by adding field work to leadership preparation programs. This would allow for the following: first-hand training to learn how to interact with parents who have students with disabilities; opportunities to attend IEP meetings where they can learn how to be the LEA; and learning how to evaluate special education teachers. These activities are important for future general education administrators who do not have special education backgrounds, since school leaders are responsible for all of these areas of special education.

THEME FOUR: SPECIAL EDUCATION ADMINISTRATORS—NOT THE ANSWER TO EVERYTHING, OR ARE THEY?

The final theme discovered in this study is the role of the special education administrator and whether this position is necessary or superfluous. The results show that both of these characterizations are correct. Having a special education administrator stationed in a school ensures that there is a person supporting the school who understands special education and can ensure that the laws, rules, and procedures are being followed properly. On the other hand, there are pitfalls to having a special education administrator in a school. Since this role is not considered an assistant principal position by the county, not all school administrators would listen to the advice and recommendations that are given by the special education administrator. Likewise, there are times when the job of a special education administrator is so vast that they do not feel adequate to complete all of the responsibilities that are assigned.

The job of the special education administrator has not been clearly defined by the county, and due to this, each school uses their designated special education administrator differently. Based on the specific school to which the special education administrator is assigned, s/he might be providing training, handling all special education materials and resources, handling all special education discipline, writing special education eligibilities, supporting and modeling instructional practices for teachers, assisting or being responsible for special education scheduling, and the list goes on. This is a pitfall because, if the role is not clearly defined, then it is hard to guarantee that every special education administrator is ensuring that special education procedures are being properly adhered to at the school s/he supports. Yet the good news is that the role of a special education administrator seems to create proactive opportunities in which the

special education administrators are able to get to know the special education students and their families and respond to concerns and situations before problems arise.

Despite certain drawbacks, the overwhelming response of those who were interviewed is that the special education administrator is a much-needed member of the administrative team. The general education administrators agree that the special education administrators bring invaluable knowledge to their leadership teams; this is necessary because the general administrators simply do not have the expertise in special education that is required to adequately support the special education programs within their buildings. Due to the complexities and demands of a principal's responsibilities, having a member of the administrative team who specializes in special education is endorsed by all of the participants in the study. The findings show that the special education administrator can model, train, and support new teachers, as well as assist in improving the specialized instruction in the classroom. By filling this role, the school administrators with general education backgrounds feel more confident that the needs of special education students are being met.

The special education administrators endorse the same sentiments as the general education administrators, except they also find that there are some pitfalls of their position. Some general education administrators who have a special education administrator assigned to their school feel that they do not have to take a role in supporting special education, and they consequently do not take the opportunity to learn what they do not know; they have an attitude that makes them wonder why to bother when someone else is there to just take care of it all. In addition, the special education administrators oftentimes feel like they are not a school administrator since they are not referred to as assistant principals, and they do not receive administrative pay like their other counterparts. Another pitfall of the job is that some general

education school principals do not appreciate the importance of their special education administrator meeting with their special education teams to redeliver and train the teachers on updated practices and procedures. When teachers and schools do not receive the proper support, the school is at risk of failing to provide FAPE to students. Daane, Beirne-Smith, & Latham (2000) state that the best way for general education administrators to increase their overall knowledge of special education and inclusive practices is to provide more training. If principals are refusing the training, then these skills will not improve. The school principal ultimately has the final decision-making power within a school building, and it becomes a challenge when the special education administrator makes a recommendation that is not followed by the leader of the school. This is why it is so important that all school leaders have a firm understanding of special education; it cannot be left up to one person on an administrative team.

This research study set out to answer the following research questions: (1) What are school administrators' perceptions of the skills needed to support special education within the local school building? and (2) What are school administrators' perceptions of their preparation to lead special education professionals in P-12 schools? The results demonstrate that school administrators need numerous skills to support the special education programming within their local schools and that the administrators with general education backgrounds are lacking in their basic knowledge and understanding of special education due to their lack of instruction and training in this area. Some recommended areas of instructional need are training on how to interact with parents who have students with disabilities, training on how to facilitate an IEP meeting and how to be the LEA, and learning how to evaluate special education teachers. The special education administrators feel that they possess the required skills to lead special education programs within the PreK-12 setting, but general education administrators do not

perceive that they are equipped to lead special education prior to entering their first leadership position.

LIMITATIONS OF FINDINGS

The limitations of this research revolve around the number of participants, the size of the district, the fact that the district utilizes special education administrators, and the fact that, two weeks after the conclusion of the study, the district announced a change to the special education administrator position, which could have changed the results of the study. Since the sample size is small (six participants), it will be hard to generalize the findings to other districts across the United States. Though IDEIA is a law governing the entire United States, each state and district interprets the law slightly differently. This difference of interpretation means that services are delivered with variations in every district and state. There are six participants in this study, and the results across participants are similar; therefore, the findings are most likely the same, regardless of whether or not more people had been interviewed. However, a larger sample would be beneficial for future research. Another complicating factor for this research study are the districts that do not have special education administrators on each administrative team. Interviews with these administrators would likely yield very different responses regarding how the general education administrator handles problems related to special education when they arise in his/her building. Lastly, two weeks after the conclusion of the study, the district where the research was completed removed special education administrators from the local school and moved the position back to the central office; now each special education administrator supports two school buildings. The change also means that the special education administrator becomes a support to the local school but is no longer a member of the local school administrative team; therefore, the special education administrator is no longer in charge of numerous local school

responsibilities. I believe the results of the research would have been significantly different if the research had been conducted a few months later since the job of the special education administrator was changed two weeks after the research was completed. I believe the school administrators would have felt like they did not have significant support to address their special education needs since the schools would no longer have a full time special education administrator.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FINDINGS

This transcendental phenomenological study examines two questions: 1) What are school administrators' perceptions of the skills needed to support special education within the local school building? 2) What are school administrators' perceptions of their preparation to lead special education professionals in P-12 schools? The findings indicate that school administrators need additional training in special education to be successful in leading special education programs within their buildings. The areas of need that were specifically mentioned include current trends, changing practices and procedures, funding, allotment of teachers, specialized instruction, IEPs, and the eligibility process. The school administrators believe that more training is needed because their leadership preparation programs did not adequately prepare them to successfully lead special education on their own.

The findings also reveal that school administrators all feel that special education is a critical component of education that requires precise execution of services and support because of the legal ramifications and the educational detriment to the student when IEPs are not fully implemented as they are written; this can have significant financial consequences for the school district when a parent brings a lawsuit against a school or district for not properly servicing their child. Though not every administrator feels that s/he has to be an expert on special education,

each one agrees that more instruction must take place through coursework in leadership preparation programs and through professional development offered by the school district. The more often that these concepts are discussed, the better equipped school leaders will feel to handle the situations as they arise in their buildings.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Researchers have been studying educational leadership and special education for years, and the research continues to reveal similar results. Empirical research suggests that the mistakes of unprepared school administrators negatively impact the academic achievement of students with disabilities. These mistakes and procedural errors can lead to litigation, which can be very expensive to school districts (Ball & Green, 2014; Daane, Beirne-Smith, & Latham, 2000; Frost & Kersten, 2011; Loiacono & Palumbo, 2011; McHatton, Boyer, Shaunessy, & Terry, 2010; Pazey, Gevarter, Hamrick, & Rojas, 2014; Thompson, 2011; Wakeman, Browder, Flowers, & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2006). Leadership preparation reform calls for the revamping of coursework so that it includes special education topics in order to better prepare future leaders to facilitate special education programs. For this study, the researcher interviewed school administrators to see if they believe themselves to possess the required skills to lead special education; this topic was built around prior research, which has typically utilized surveys to gain information about the ability of school leaders to lead special education.

The researcher recommends that more research be conducted using the lens of existing school administrators as the unit of analysis. This allows a unique perspective in that these administrators are serving in roles that are directly responsible for meeting these needs of students with disabilities. These individuals bring a wealth of knowledge that will likely enrich the knowledge base of others who work in the field of special education.

The research highlighted in this study came from a school district that assigns special education administrators to each school. Additional research from school districts that do not utilize special education administrators on every leadership team may be beneficial. This type of research may identify some additional strategies that are utilized in the absence of dedicated special education administrators. Information gathered from both scenarios could help identify areas of curriculum that may be beneficial if included in educational leadership preparation programs.

Further research that analyzes the return on the investment of employing school-based special education administrators would help evaluate whether the special education administrator is a welcome addition to a school's leadership team. Every participant in this study discussed the importance and value of having a dedicated special education administrator.

Conclusion

When the researcher first began exploring the preparation of school administrators to lead special education, she was already concerned—based on her experience in the school system—that administrators did not have the required skills to effectively lead special education programs. The research that had been previously conducted made recommendations about leadership preparation programs including special education coursework in their programs but based on the researcher's experience, she had not seen these recommendations implemented. For years, reform in leadership preparation programs has called for a change to better connect theory to practice with field experiences (McHatton, Boyer, Shaunessy, & Terry, 2010), and current legislation requires schools to be accountable for the academic success of all students, regardless of the student group into which s/he falls. Research continues to show that school administrators do not have the necessary knowledge, skills, or training in special education to properly support,

mentor, and model instructional practices within their buildings (Correa, 2011). Previous research also has shown that school administrators perceive themselves to be more informed about special education than they really are; a formal assessment of their purported knowledge exposes their lack of understanding regarding the requirements and implementation of special education practice (Wakeman, Browder, Flowers, & Ahlgrim-Dezell, 2006).

During the interviews, the researcher discovered that school administrators are indeed not coming into their leadership positions with the knowledge to lead special education effectively, but the research also shows that the administrators are aware of the skill deficits that they have in this area. The school administrators interviewed have learned about special education on the job through good mentors and through the knowledge of their assigned special education administrators. The schools heavily rely on the knowledge and support of the special education administrators within their buildings, and they do not feel equipped to take on the responsibility of leading special education without that support and guidance in place.

Today public education is facing a financial crisis and struggles to fund the required programs within public schools. When school administrators fail to implement IDEA, school districts can receive a devastating financial blow in order to try to defend their practices (Schaaf, Williamson, & Novak, 2015), as the cost to defend a case that goes all the way to federal court is between \$60,000 and \$100,000 (Mueller, 2009).

In order for school districts to correctly facilitate special education to ensure that schools are properly educating every child within their buildings, leadership preparation programs and professional development within the districts has to change. The results of this study show that general education administrators need to have the following special education topics of instruction embedded into their leadership preparation programs: current trends, changing

practices and procedures, funding, allotment of teachers, specialized instruction, IEPs, and the eligibility process. Even if these concepts are properly embedded into the leadership preparation programs, special education is constantly changing, and therefore, it is necessary for school districts to build professional learning into all leadership meetings conducted at a county level so that all district leaders are receiving the same information at the same time. As more of this becomes a common practice within school districts and within leadership preparation programs, leaders will become better versed in special education. When leaders are better versed in special education, all students will receive better services as outlined in their IEPs. When all students receive better services as outlined in their IEPs, litigation will decrease. When litigation decreases, districts will save money. When districts save money, more funding can be put into the schools to fund more educational programs and to better support the learning taking place every day within the schools across the country.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Tell me about your years of experience in education.
2. Tell me your educational background and the degrees and certifications that you hold.
3. Describe your experiences with leading special education.
4. Describe your formal training in leading special education.
5. Do you feel prepared to lead special education? Why or Why not?
6. What courses, classes, and/or experiences have prepared you to lead special education?
7. Talk about your experiences with students with disabilities from the viewpoint of being a student, a teacher, an administrator
8. How do you handle the allocation of resources when supporting special education?

APPENDIX B: KSU IRB Approval

1/25/2018

Jaime Davies, Student

Re: Your followup submission of 1/12/2018, Study #18-307: Examination of K-12 school administrators perceptions of their preparation of lead special education programs

Dear Mrs. Davies,

Your application has been reviewed by IRB members. Your study is eligible for expedited review under the FDA and DHHS (OHRP) designation of category 7 - Individual or group characteristics or behavior.

This is to confirm that your application has been approved. The protocol approved is Recorded interviews of principals, assistant principals, and special education administrators to ascertain school administrators' perceptions of the needed skill sets to effectively lead special education programs and their preparation in regards to special education knowledge. The consent procedure described is in effect.

NOTE: All surveys, recruitment flyers/emails, and consent forms must include the IRB study number noted above, prominently displayed on the first page of all materials.

You are granted permission to conduct your study as described in your application effective immediately. The IRB calls your attention to the following obligations as Principal Investigator of this study.

1. The study is subject to continuing review on or before 1/25/2019. At least two weeks prior to that time, go to <http://research.kennesaw.edu/irb/progress-report-form.php> to submit a progress report. Progress reports not received in a timely manner will result in expiration and closure of the study.

2. Any proposed changes to the approved study must be reported and approved prior to implementation. This is accomplished through submission of a progress report along with revised consent forms and survey instruments.
3. All records relating to conducted research, including signed consent documents, must be retained for at least three years following completion of the research. You are responsible for ensuring that all records are accessible for inspection by authorized representatives as needed. Should you leave or end your professional relationship with KSU for any reason, you are responsible for providing the IRB with information regarding the housing of research records and who will maintain control over the records during this period.
4. Unanticipated problems or adverse events relating to the research must be reported promptly to the IRB. See <http://research.kennesaw.edu/irb/reporting-unanticipated-problems.php> for definitions and reporting guidance.
5. A final progress report should be provided to the IRB at the closure of the study.

Contact the IRB at irb@kennesaw.edu or at (470) 578-2268 if you have any questions or require further information.

Sincerely,

Christine Ziegler, Ph.D.

KSU Institutional Review Board Director and Chair

cc: Ajohn560@kennesaw.edu

Appendix C: Cobb County School District Approval



COBB COUNTY
SCHOOL DISTRICT

One Team, One Goal: Student Success

514 Glover Street
Marietta, GA 30060
Telephone: (770) 426-3300
www.cobbk12.org

February 28, 2018

Jaime Davies
1311 Partridge Way
Marietta, GA 30062

Dear Ms. Davies:

Your research project **Examination of K-12 School Administrators Perceptions of Their Preparation to Lead Special Education Programs** has been approved. Listed below is the school where approval to conduct the research is complete. Please work with the school administrator to schedule administration of instruments or conduct interviews.

School

East Side Elementary School Keheley Elementary School
King Springs Elementary School Shallowford Falls Elementary School
Tritt Elementary School

Should modifications or changes in research procedures become necessary during the research project, changes must be submitted in writing to the department of Accountability, Research & Grants prior to implementation. At the conclusion of your research project, you are expected to submit a copy of your results to this office. Results cannot reference the Cobb County School District or any District schools or departments.

Research files are not considered complete until results are received. If you have any questions regarding the process, contact our office at 770-426-3450.

Sincerely,

Cindy Nichols
Grants & Research Manager
Accountability, Research & Grants

cg

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SUPERINTENDENT

Chris Ragsdale

Appendix D: Informed Consent Form to Participate in Study

Title of Research Study: Examination of K-12 School Administrators Perceptions of Their Preparation to Lead Special Education Programs

Researcher's Contact Information: Jaime Davies, 770-318-1921, Jaime11679@bellsouth.net, Jaime.Davies@cobbk12.org, or Jadelman@students.kennesaw.edu

Introduction

You are being invited to take part in a research study conducted by Jaime Davies of Kennesaw State University. Before you decide to participate in this study, you should read this form and ask questions about anything that you do not understand.

Description of Project

The purpose of the study is to ascertain school administrators' perceptions of the needed skill sets to effectively lead special education programs and their preparation in regards to special education knowledge. This study will use qualitative measures to analyze school leaders perceptions on their knowledge and ability to lead special education. Results of the analysis will be used to determine if school administrators have the required special education background knowledge. Once we know the areas that need to become the focus of development, school districts and leadership preparation programs will be able to develop professional learning and coursework to address the deficits.

Explanation of Procedures

Participants were selected for this study through a volunteer basis and all participants will be given pseudo names for the purpose of anonymity. Data for this research will be collected through semi-structured interviews which will be recorded and recordings will be secured in a locked cabinet for security. The audio version of the interviews will be transcribed. The researcher will look at specific statements that the participants made, add meaning to those statements, and then determine what was experienced, and how each respondent experienced the phenomenon.

Time Required

The time required for interviews will be approximately 20 minutes in length. Once the interviews have been analyzed there is a chance that a 5-10 minute follow-up interview might be required if further questions need to be asked.

Risks or Discomforts

There are not any known risks associated with this study.

Benefits

The benefits of this research will come from the findings. The administrators interviewed are responsible for leading special education within their building. The participants will be able to add their individual and unique perceptions on whether or not they have the skills to lead special education. Based on the responses, I will know the areas of special education that need to become the focus of

development, school districts and leadership preparation programs will be able to develop professional learning and coursework to address these deficits.

Compensation

There is no compensation associated with this study.

Confidentiality

The results of this participation will be confidential. The transcriptions and audio files will be stored in a secured and locked location for 3 years. There will be no identifying information on the participants to keep their participation confidential and their identity's secure.

Inclusion Criteria for Participation

Participants must be 18 years of age or older to participate in this study.

Signed Consent

I agree and give my consent to participate in this research project. I understand that participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw my consent at any time without penalty.

Signature of Participant or Authorized Representative, Date

Signature of Investigator, Date

Signature of School Principal, Date

PLEASE SIGN BOTH COPIES OF THIS FORM, KEEP ONE AND RETURN THE OTHER TO THE INVESTIGATOR

Research at Kennesaw State University that involves human participants is carried out under the oversight of an Institutional Review Board. Questions or problems regarding these activities should be addressed to the Institutional Review Board, Kennesaw State University, 585 Cobb Avenue, KH3403, Kennesaw, GA 30144-5591, (470) 578-2268.