Theses and Dissertations

2016

Exceptional leadership in exceptional times: perspectives and ideologies of special education directors in Southern California

Tangela R. Diggs

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/etd

Pepperdine University

Graduate School of Education and Psychology

EXCEPTIONAL LEADERSHIP IN EXCEPTIONAL TIMES:

PERSPECTIVES AND IDEOLOGIES OF SPECIAL EDUCATION DIRECTORS

IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction

of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership, Administration, and Policy

by

Tangela R. Diggs

June, 2016

Robert Barner, Ph.D. – Dissertation Chairperson

This dissertation, written by

Tangela R. Diggs

under the guidance of a Faculty Committee and approved by its members, has been submitted to and accepted by the Graduate Faculty in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

Doctoral Committee:

Robert Barner, Ph.D., Chairperson

Joan Mills-Buffehr, Ed.D.

Jennifer Rumack, Ed.D.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my great-grandparents, grandparents, and parents. I am proud of the high standards of achievement set by my great-grandparents and grandparents. It is upon their broad shoulders that I stand, as I reflect upon the personal sacrifices they made to take care of their families and make a difference in the lives of others as entrepreneurs, educators, and leaders in their communities. They remained resilient, productive citizens, despite the significant societal struggles of their respective generations. It is my privilege to carry on their legacy.

I want to thank my incredible mother, Lula, for always believing in me. She raised me in a caring, loving, nurturing environment and consistently championed my personal goals and dreams. My mother is the consummate role model of calmness, patience, kindness, and thoughtfulness. Her daily prayers for my well-being and success have provided me peace of mind and fortitude during challenging times. The highest compliment I can receive is when someone says I am just like my mother.

Additionally, I would like to acknowledge my father, Charles, who taught me the ideals of integrity, self-confidence, and independence. It is to him that I attribute my strong work ethic. He can lighten the mood with humor while providing critical input for reflection. Both of my parents have been staunch advocates of my educational and professional endeavors. I sincerely appreciate their love which sustains me in every area of my life.

Lastly, I would like to recognize the blessing of having supportive friends, siblings, cousins, and other relatives (especially Aunt Maggie and Uncle Frank) who regularly checked on my progress and sent encouraging messages throughout this journey. They understood when I could not go to "Taco Tuesday" or had to leave family events early because I had to attend class or go to the library to work on my dissertation. To God be the glory and honor!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

insight. Finally, I would like to acknowledge the six special education directors who graciously participated in my study. You have each inspired me in different ways and I am impressed by the invaluable work you do as transformational leaders to impact change within your respective districts. I have been rejuvenated by hearing your perspectives and unique insights concerning special education leadership. Your districts are fortunate to have you! Without the personal experiences you shared concerning your work, this study would not have been possible.

It is hilarious to me now, but I saved the Pepperdine-labeled bottle of water I received at the initial orientation session and told myself that I would not drink it until I was admitted to the university. I knew within my heart that the Graduate School of Education and Psychology – Educational Leadership, Administration, and Policy program was the one for me. I happily drank that bottle of water in my car before joining the opening session of classes in Malibu with my beloved cohort, C-10. Many of my cohort members have become like family and will be life-long friends. One cohort member, fondly known as our "Brother Rob", would always say, "Everything will be just fine"… and everything always was. Another cohort member, Cori, planned gatherings to celebrate birthdays and acknowledge personal accomplishments, and also frequently met me at the library as a study partner. Thank you all for your friendship and the contributions you have made to my learning. C-10 will forever be in my heart!

VITA

TANGELA R. DIGGS

EDUCATION

Pepperdine University, Malibu, CA   2016
     Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership, Administration and Policy

California State University-Dominguez Hill, Carson, CA   2000
     Master of Arts in Special Education – Emphasis: Mild/Moderate/Severe Disabilities

Northwestern University, Evanston, IL   1988
     Bachelor of Science, School of Communication – Emphasis: Radio-Television-Film

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Torrance Unified School District, Torrance, CA   2014 – Present
     Coordinator – Special Education

Torrance Unified School District, Torrance, CA   2012 – 2014
     Program Specialist – Special Education

Switzer Learning Center, Torrance, CA   2006 – 2012
     Director of Education

CREDENTIALS

Professional Clear Administrative Services Credential

Level II Education Specialist Instruction Credential

Professional Clear Multiple Subject Education Specialist Instruction Credential

PROFESSIONAL AFFLIATIONS

Association of California School Administrators (ACSA)

Council for Exceptional Children (CEC)

Council of Administrators of Special Education (CASE)

Phi Delta Kappa, International (PDK)

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the self-reported personal perspectives of special education directors in K-12 urban school districts in Southern California. Over 20,000 administrators oversee the delivery of special education services in the United States and the demand for such leadership exceeds the supply of qualified candidates (Crockett, 2007). This study is significant because a gap exists in the professional literature concerning the leadership of central office level special education directors. Four research questions addressed the following areas: whether special education directors use aspects of transformational leadership in their roles, beliefs and values concerning special education and how those impact leadership styles, unique challenges encountered in their work, and practices and strategies implemented to achieve positive outcomes for students and staff.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each of six special education directors for data collection. The 13 interview questions were designed to elicit study participants' candid reflections of their daily work experiences. The interviews were electronically recorded and transcribed for data analysis. Six key themes emerged from the interviews: charismatic leadership, intellectual stimulation, special education funding, litigation, shared responsibility for students with disabilities, and the types of support needed by special education directors.

Bass's (1985) transformational leadership theory was used as a conceptual framework for this study. Transformational leadership qualities are essential attributes for special education directors who must address the changing landscape of federal and state requirements amidst chronic levels of under-funding and litigation. Findings of the study yielded four conclusions. Study participants: use aspects of transformational leadership when implementing change, espouse beliefs and values that are congruent with their leadership styles, believe all children

should be treated equitably and have opportunities to maximize their learning, and experience

high levels of responsibility for factors that are beyond their control.

The researcher recommends a future study in which district superintendents, cabinet

members, and school site principals are interviewed for the purpose of juxtaposing perspectives

of special education directors with perspectives of other central office administrators with regard

to the various challenges, strengths, needs, responsibilities, and concerns of those working in the

field of special education.

Chapter One: The Problem

Chapter One will present the background of the study, statement of the problem, statement of the purpose, significance of the study, definition of terms, conceptual framework, research questions, limitations, delimitations, assumptions, and organization of the study. The background of this study will provide a broad perspective of special education in California by describing the manner in which education agencies in the state are structurally organized for oversight and guidance concerning provision of special education services. Additionally, an overview of the primary laws aimed at improving outcomes for students with disabilities will be given. Next, funding concerns and the impact of special education laws will be reviewed. Finally, the need for effective special education leadership at the LEA or district level will be presented.

Background of the Study

The success of all students within the educational system in America has long been a pressing national concern; however, the challenge of educating students with disabilities has become an even more troubling issue in recent decades. To understand the relevance of serving all students equitably, the field of special education requires close examination.

Special education in California.

Organizational structure. The special education division of the California Department of Education (CDE) investigates complaints, oversees compliance and collects data regarding special education laws (Taylor, 2014). The CDE organizes special education programs and services through a regional structure of Special Education Local Planning Areas (SELPAs) and Local Education Agencies (LEAs). California has 127 regional SELPAs that administer special education funding and services to approximately 1,000 school districts within their boundaries

(Taylor, 2014). Each LEA or school district usually has a special education director at the district administration or central office level to provide supervision and leadership for staff and programs under special education. Special education administrators rely on clear communication from state leadership to ensure they are legally compliant in their enforcement of special education initiatives (McLaughlin & Verstegen, 1998).

The law. Federal legislation and policies, with regard to special education, have placed emphasis on creating equity, monitoring accountability, and increasing access to basic education provided by schools (Marshall & Patterson, 2002; McLaughlin & Verstegen, 1998). Special education has been mandated and regulated by the federal government since the United States Congress initiated Public Law 94-142 in 1975 (Milligan, Neal, & Singleton, 2012). The law, inspired by the civil rights movement due to inequity in the country's educational system, was renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1990 and, 14 years later, was reauthorized and titled the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (Milligan et al., 2012; Skiba et al., 2008). It is one of the most significant laws guiding special education and is administered by the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP; Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 [IDEA], 2004).

The purpose of this law is to ensure students with IDEA-eligible disabilities from birth to age 21 have access to a free, appropriate, public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE; Southwest Special Education Local Plan Area, 2013). IDEA indicates that Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), including supports and related services, for such students must be implemented at the school level. This requires that educators and administrators adhere to both federal legal requirements and school district policies to achieve desired outcomes for children; however, interpretations of the IDEA mandates vary and local administrators are often

unclear what constitutes federal accountability requirements versus what has become local practice (Marshall & Patterson, 2002; McLaughlin & Verstegen, 1998). Weintraub (2012) posited that IDEA does not prescribe what is appropriate for children with disabilities, but rather supports the principle of individualization (i.e., selection from an array of placements, services, and instructional methodologies), where a program is built around a child and no common outcomes are assumed. Special education, as defined by IDEA, is instruction "specifically designed to address unique needs that result from a student's disability, and ensure access to the general education curriculum so that the student can meet educational standards that apply to all children" (Bays & Crockett, 2007, p. 149).

Special education administrators face unique challenges as they attempt to ensure their district's provision of FAPE to students with disabilities in their LRE because addressing such concerns often involves subjective determination of the appropriateness of an educational setting for students with disabilities. Educational leaders are responsible for ensuring that all students with disabilities receive access to the general education classroom and the same benefits granted to students who are nondisabled (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014; Paulsen, 2008). To this end, the general education classroom is typically considered the least restrictive educational setting for most students. However, students with disabilities are often educated in settings other than the general education classroom due to differing perspectives of stakeholders and varying interpretation of the law. In addition to the IDEA, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) plays a significant role in the operation of special education in the United States.

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 requires school districts to demonstrate accountability by improved outcomes on performance indicators, including proficiency on statewide testing by all subgroups of students. Under federal scrutiny, district administrators

have less autonomy in their decision making, which may reduce their influence upon student outcomes and systemic reform. Some leaders believe that their districts are placed at a disadvantage because students with disabilities are included in the challenging accountability requirements of NCLB. Superintendents of some school districts with large numbers of special education students have felt unjustly penalized because their schools were unable to reach NCLB targets. School leaders must make difficult decisions about how to most appropriately address the needs of diverse student populations without access to the necessary funding and resources (Johnstone, Dikkers, & Luedeke, 2009).

Special education is significantly affected by legal action in the courts, and is highly regulated by federal laws, including NCLB and IDEA (Marshall & Patterson, 2002). Since the passage of IDEA and NCLB, there have been significant increases in litigation, which creates a need for objective and accurate legal information to inform policy and practice in school districts (Zirkel, 2014). NCLB necessitates that students with disabilities be taught the same academic subject matter as their nondisabled peers, whereas IDEA 2004 expects educators to educate special education students by offering more intensive and specialized instruction, as detailed in an IEP (Bays & Crockett, 2007). School district leaders are required to maintain compliance with these closely aligned federal laws while weighing the ethics of their profession, sometimes by changing practices or focusing on different areas of need to ensure their districts continue to receive funding (Bays & Crockett, 2007; Johnstone et al., 2009). According to Frederick Weintraub (2012) in his address to the 2012 Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) convention in Denver, Colorado, "When school districts are monitored, every requirement is given equal weight and thus there is always some finding of noncompliance. The challenge we face is how to redirect our limited professional resources to focus on teaching and improved outcomes"

(p. 53). Educators and school site principals want district level leadership to ensure decisions at their schools concerning special education are not in violation of legal guidelines and procedural requirements (Marshall & Patterson, 2002).

Funding. Special education is highly regulated by federal and state laws that mandate the appropriation of funds for special education. Although the initial intent of the IDEA was to fund approximately 40% of special education costs, the federal government has never come close to providing this amount to states and typically only funds 16% of special education costs annually (Pazey & Cole, 2013; Taylor, 2014). Although California ranks as the eighth largest economy in the world, it is one of the most disparate states in the country in terms of provision of resources to students, due to limited funding appropriated for education (California Department of Education [CDE], 2011). Moreover, there is no new funding in the California state budget to address special education shortfalls (Dee, Jacob, & Schwartz, 2013). Despite having inadequate financial resources from federal, state, and local funds, special education administrators in school districts are tasked to meet the needs of all students with disabilities.

Federal, state, and local special education funding have declined and are not sufficient to cover the increasing costs of providing educationally related services for students with disabilities. Such funding impacts the work of school district leaders because they must determine how to effectively allocate their district's resources to improve outcomes for all schools, teachers, and students (Sansosti, Goss, & Noltemeyer, 2011). Additionally, there are competing interests for funding among categorical programs, which causes lack of cohesive policy at the district level (McLaughlin & Verstegen, 1998).

The average cost of educating students with disabilities is more than twice the cost of educating mainstream students, and local districts are required to cover the excess costs by

spending from their local unrestricted general funds, which is commonly known as *encroachment*. A variety of factors may contribute to rising costs of special education due to increased identification of severe disabilities, such as autism, which require more expensive services and interventions (Ehlers, 2013). Some general education administrators are concerned that all available funding will be usurped by special education (McLaughlin & Verstegen, 1998). As school districts' local share of special education costs increase, they have fewer resources to fund education and services for nondisabled students.

  Impact. The California Department of Education includes in its mission statement the belief that a world-class education should be provided for all students; however, many scholars contend that students with disabilities have been disregarded and relegated to a lower social standing with limited access to nondisabled peers, general education teachers, and curriculum (CDE, 2015a; DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014). DeMatthews and Mawhinney (2014) asserted that the IDEA has substantial impact on students with disabilities even though the gains have not been clearly disseminated across all student subgroups. Educational leaders who are committed to ensuring social justice for all students are challenged to take action when they recognize practices of inequitable treatment, exclusion, and marginalization in their schools and districts. Due to increased accountability for educational outcomes required by the federal mandates of the IDEA and NCLB, the roles and responsibilities of educational leaders have become increasingly more complex.

  Research suggests that few K-12 principals are well-prepared to address the complex responsibilities involved in leading and managing special education programs and safeguarding the best interests of students with disabilities (Bays & Crockett, 2007; DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; Pazey & Cole, 2013; Wigle & Wilcox, 2003). Many principals have received

insufficient training in special education legal, compliance, and procedural issues, and as a result, foster beliefs that hinder the appropriate delivery of special education instruction and services (Bays & Crockett, 2007; Goor, Schwenn, & Boyer, 1997; Pazey & Cole, 2013). Although principals are usually viewed as key school site decision makers, they are often in contention with district decisions related to serving the best interest of students with disabilities in regard to placement and discipline considerations (Marshall & Patterson, 2002; Pazey & Cole, 2013).

Ackerina (2015) asserted that, "as a result of social, political, economic, and global factors, the demands and expectations on school leaders have substantially increased, creating a direct impact on education" (p. 794). The climate and tone for learning environments within a school is generally established by school administrators (Pazey & Cole, 2013). However, when educators are left on their own to invent solutions for special education at their school sites, it may be perceived as the central office's deferment of leadership and responsibility for interpreting dilemmas impacting special education (Marshall & Patterson, 2002). Research from Marshall and Patterson (2002) reveals that educators may become frustrated due to inconsistent information concerning special education policy and unresolved concerns in the absence of district-wide leadership for special education. Therefore, teachers and school administrators often rely on district-level staff, such as special education directors and consultants, who may have more special education training and experience to provide expertise and leadership for special education (Garrison-Wade, Sobel, & Fulmer, 2011; Marshall & Patterson, 2002; Pazey & Cole, 2013). Thus, a pressing question emerges: Who is adequately prepared to lead districts in their quest to effectively manage the needs of students with disabilities while leading a team of teachers and service providers in an era of high accountability fraught with challenges?

Problem Statement

The work of special education directors is influenced by the impact of legislation, policies, and reform movements (Bays & Crockett, 2007). Responsibilities of special education directors may include providing instructional leadership and coordinating professional development for special education teachers, supervising designated instructional services providers (i.e., counselors, school psychologists, occupational therapists, speech and language pathologists, adapted physical education teachers, etc.), conducting evaluations, hiring classified and certificated personnel to support delivery of special education services, and collaborating with other district administrators and school site principals to implement federal, state, and local educational initiatives. Because much of special education directors' time is spent on procedural and compliance concerns, they often participate in resolution sessions, mediations, and due process hearings with support of legal counsel to ensure compliance with evolving education regulations. As a result of the stress from frequently dealing with compliance issues, many people who work in the field of special education quickly experience burnout, as evidenced by the high turnover rate of employment observed in special education. To effectively address the responsibilities of their roles, special education administrators must remain resilient. They must demonstrate educational leadership skills, such as working collaboratively and creatively, and sustain personal motivation as they strive to discover effective methods to improve outcomes for students and uphold local, state, and federal mandates. Given the numerous challenges that special education directors face, research is needed to explore their values and beliefs, their specific leadership characteristics, the unique practices and strategies implemented in their roles, and the barriers they encounter to effecting change in their districts.

This area of focus warrants research, given the unique circumstances K-12 public school district administrators in Southern California face as they strive to improve learning outcomes for all students. As districts work toward creating increasingly inclusive schools in response to federal initiatives, special education has become a key concern for school leaders. Researchers have studied the effective leadership practices of K-12 school principals and superintendents, and a small number of quantitative studies have been conducted on special education directors to address concerns regarding perceived roles and responsibilities, as well as their level of job satisfaction and burnout; however, investigators have not undertaken a qualitative study that explores the unique experiences, feelings, and ideologies of special education directors concerning their roles (Bays & Crockett, 2007). A gap exists in the professional literature concerning the personal perspectives of district level special education leaders who work to address mounting requirements in the field of special education; therefore, an opportunity now exists to explore the self-reported experiences of special education directors in Southern California K-12 urban public school districts.

Purpose Statement

Over 20,000 administrators oversee the delivery of special education services in the United States and the demand for such leadership exceeds the supply of qualified candidates (Crockett, 2007). The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe and explore the lived experiences of special education directors in Southern California urban K-12 public school districts. The study gathered information about these special education directors, including: their personal beliefs and values concerning education, what fuels their motivation to do their job, the ways in which they approach their job responsibilities, and what they perceive as their challenges in their roles. This researcher sought to interview a small group of special education directors

from Southern California K-12 urban public school districts who are willing to candidly share the experiences encountered in their leadership positions and relate how they manage their diverse responsibilities.

Significance of the Study

The findings from this study could potentially contribute to the field of special education on several levels. First, the study may demonstrate whether specific theories concerning effective leadership and motivation are applicable to the unique climate of special education in urban school districts. Next, the study may validate whether qualitative inquiry is an effective methodology to use when trying to establish why people do what they do regarding their leadership practices. Third, the findings of this study could provide professionals, researchers, and laypeople with newfound knowledge of special education leadership. Moreover, this study may contribute to the literature by informing stakeholders in special education—such as SELPA directors, board members, and superintendents—of ways in which to prepare, recruit, and retain effective special education directors. In turn, special education directors will likely become more knowledgeable concerning the ways in which to build and maintain strong special education school site teams through collaborative efforts, increase the district's level of compliance with federal mandates, and identify evidence-based practices that other directors have found essential to achieving increased academic outcomes for students with disabilities. It is anticipated that this study will affect the procedures for hiring special education directors, provide insight concerning succession planning, increase understanding of expectations among other district level administrators, and add to the literature on effective leadership practices.

This study is relevant because public school administrators must address the challenges of meeting the educational needs of all students. The population of students identified as eligible

for special education services continues to rise and special education personnel need appropriate

leaders to support them in their work. There is a need to understand who is providing that

leadership in districts and hear their stories of how they go about providing such specialized

leadership.

Definition of Terms

The following section will define commonly used terms in the field of special education

to assist the reader in understanding the context of this study.

- *California Department of Education (CDE):* The CDE (2015b) is the government

  agency that oversees funding and testing for the state's public school system and

  holds LEAs accountable for student achievement. The CDE's goals include

  increasing efficiency and effectiveness in administration of kindergarten through

  grade 12 education and providing statewide leadership that promotes good business

  practices so that California schools can target their resources to ensure success for all

  students.

- *Children with Disabilities:* IDEA defines children with disabilities as children with

  intellectual disabilities, hearing impairments, visual impairments including blindness,

  emotional disturbance, orthopedic impairments, autism, traumatic brain injury, other

  health impairments, or specific learning disabilities, and who by reason thereof need

  special education and related services (Southwest Special Education Local Plan Area,

  2013).

- *Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE):* FAPE is an education provided for

  children with disabilities who qualify for special education services and: (a) is

  provided at public expense, under public supervision and direction, and without

charge to the parent; (b) meets the standards of the California Department of Education; and (c) is provided to align with an IEP developed for students with disabilities to provide educational benefit and to be implemented in school programs at all grade levels (Southwest Special Education Local Plan Area, 2013).

- *Least Restrictive Environment (LRE):* To the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities will be educated with children who are not disabled, and special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the general education program will occur only when the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily (Southwest Special Education Local Plan Area, 2013).

- *Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP):* The OSEP provides fiscal resources and leadership to assist public agencies in protecting, improving results, and providing early intervention services for children with disabilities. OSEP activities are authorized through the IDEA (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

- *Special Education:* Special education encompasses the specialized services that schools provide for disabled students. Federal law only requires schools to provide special education services to students with diagnosed disabilities that interfere with their educational attainment. Approximately 10% of the state's public school enrollment (almost 700,000 children) receives special education services in California. The excess costs associated with providing special education services are supported by federal, state, and local funds. Special education involves the individually planned and systematically monitored arrangement of teaching

procedures, adapted equipment and materials, accessible settings, and other

interventions designed to help learners with special needs achieve a higher level of

personal self-sufficiency and success in school and community. These services are in

addition to what a non-disabled student receives (Taylor, 2014).

- *Special Education Local Plan Area (SELPA):* Collaborative of one or more school

  districts, county offices of education, and/or charter schools that coordinate to provide

  special education services for students with disabilities in their service area (Taylor,

  2014).

- *Educational Leadership:* Operationally defined, educational leadership practices are

  those behaviors used to carry out educational policies and to coordinate teachers,

  students, and parents in efforts to reach common goals. Leadership practices of

  special education directors include: cultural responsiveness, collaboration with

  parents and the community, implementation of preventative programs and strategies,

  collaboration with and empowerment of teachers and other staff, motivation of others

  to work together to meet the needs of all students, and creation of an inclusive

  educational environment (Obiakor, Beachum, Williams, & McCray, 2006).

Conceptual Framework

Although the foundations of scientific research on leadership were based on studies of

military, government, and business organizations dating back to the early 20th century, it

remains challenging to establish a firm relationship between the various theories and practices of

leadership. Leadership is an active, multi-directional, complex relational process that involves

experiential learning. No single general theory or model of leadership can be applied

consistently to address any given dilemma, because real-life leadership practices involve

constant negotiation between conflicting interests and are affected by the context of specific situations, cultural assumptions, and values (Middlehurst, 2008).

This study used Bass's (1985) transformational leadership theory as a conceptual framework to describe a type of values-based leadership, which may be useful to effect organizational change in educational settings. "Transformational leadership theories suggest that leaders can inspire followers to higher levels of achievement through the values they espouse, the aspirations they awaken and the levels of energy and commitment that are released to achieve particular goals" (Middlehurst, 2008, p. 336). Transformational leadership emphasizes the following areas: improvement of school conditions by restructuring the school and empowerment of staff members to develop and sustain a collaborative school culture, organizational learning, and shared leadership (Stewart, 2006). Additionally, transformational leadership focuses on what happens within an organization and also responds to the goals and desires of its followers (Paarlberg & Lavigna, 2010; Shields, 2010; Wilmore & Thomas, 2001). Such leadership may involve a mixture of reinforcement, persuasion, influence, initiation of structure, inducing compliance, and exchange of power among leaders and followers (Bass, 1990; Middlehurst, 2008; Wilmore & Thomas, 2001).

In his Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ), Bass (1985) identified and measured four components of transformational leadership: charismatic leadership or idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Stewart, 2006). Bass's transformational leadership theory espouses that transformational leaders inspire others, focus on helping all members of the team succeed, and motivate the team to work toward common goals. Transformational leaders facilitate change in others through the tools of respect and empowerment. Top-down leadership is the antithesis of transformational leadership; in

contrast, a transformational leader communicates a clear vision and inspires ethical and professional collaboration (Wilmore & Thomas, 2001). For the purpose of this study, transformational leadership theory provides a lens for educational leaders to apply in supporting staff to work toward mutually desirable goals for causes greater than themselves, while developing into leaders themselves. This is important because retention of special education staff has declined in recent years, and there is a need for effective leadership in the field of special education to be developed and sustained.

In addition to identifying whether special education directors employ the principles of transformational leadership, practices discussed in Daniel Pink's (2009) theory of motivation will be drawn upon to describe factors that may impact leaders' and employees' motivation to continue in their positions, despite challenges, morale issues, and circumstances they regularly encounter that may not be optimal when striving to achieve personal or professional goals. Pink's theory of motivation serves as a model to highlight several factors that might explain how special education directors sustain motivation to do their jobs while addressing the legal, professional, ethical, and personal challenges associated with managing and leading a team of diverse special education service providers. Pink's theory of motivation provides a framework for educational leaders that may be useful in understanding the underlying motivation for why people do what they do. The researcher used qualitative methods to identify common leadership themes among the stories of special education directors to ascertain whether special education directors incorporate characteristics and practices of transformational leadership into their daily work and practices.

Research Questions

This study sought to understand how special education directors attain and sustain motivation and resiliency to perform their jobs. The following research questions were addressed:

1. To what extent, if at all, do special education directors use aspects of transformational leadership in their roles to implement initiatives and change in their respective districts?

2. What are the personal values and beliefs of special education directors, and how do such personal values and beliefs influence their work?

3. What kinds of challenges, obstacles, or barriers do special education directors encounter in their roles and how do they overcome those?

4. What strategies and practices have been learned by special education directors to improve outcomes for students with disabilities and the staff who support them?

Qualitative research methods, including semi-structured interview questions, were used to explore these themes.

Limitations

This study was limited to special education directors in urban, K-12 school districts in Southern California. This geographic limitation may impact the findings of the study, as the region comprises the highest concentration of urban school districts in the state. The state is also composed of an ethnically diverse population; thus, the study's findings may be affected by the cultural, political, and socio-economic influences unique to urban school districts in California. Special education directors in rural districts will not be studied, which may restrict the variety of

responses received from participants, due to potentially different demographics and cultures of school districts in rural areas.

This study was limited to the lived experiences of special education directors as they work to fulfill their many roles and responsibilities. To diminish the limitations of regional influences, special education directors from one broad region, Southern California, were included in the study. These experiences, while important to the special education directors in the study, may not be applicable to special education directors in other parts of the United States. However, it is assumed that districts from the same region may have similar cultural values, economic conditions, legal and political environments, and overall educational level. Non-probabilistic purposive sampling was used because the target population was not randomly selected and is a non-representative subset of the larger population.

Delimitations

This study had the following delimitations: (a) this researcher conducted face-to-face or telephonic interviews with special education directors in Southern California; (b) this study focused on present or past special education directors who have served in a special education director position for at least three consecutive years; (c) the researcher conducted one-time interviews for a maximum time period of 30 - 60 minutes per interview; (d) the interviews involved semi-structured questions and prompts to gain additional information; (e) this study focused on special education directors who are currently or who have been members of the Association of California School Administrators (ACSA); (f) the sample of participants included special education directors who work in K-12 urban school districts that serve a minimum population of 20,000 students; (g) the sample of participants included both female and male respondents from various ethnic and racial backgrounds in the hope of exploring diverse

perspectives; and (h) participants agreed to participate in the study on a voluntary basis, without expectation of compensation or remuneration, other than a gift card from the researcher that was be provided to participants as a token of appreciation for their time.

Assumptions

This study assumed that the participants' perceptions of their experiences were authentic, truthful, and reliable. It was expected that the researcher would not influence or guide participants' responses. The self-reported information concerning experiences during at least three consecutive years of work as a special education director in a Southern California school district is presumed valid. The researcher believed that the lived experiences of a small group of special education directors across Southern California K-12 urban public school districts would contribute to the greater understanding of how to effectively lead special education programs and highlight the need for collaborative leadership practices.

Organization of the Study

This research study is presented in five chapters. Chapter One includes the background of the study, problem statement, purpose statement, significance of the study, definition of terms, conceptual framework, research questions, limitations, delimitations, and the assumptions of the study. Chapter Two presents a review of the literature, with applicable references to transformational leadership theory (Bass, 1985) and motivation theory (Pink, 2009). Chapter Three discusses the methodology of the study, Chapter Four presents the study's findings, and Chapter Five details the researcher's conclusions and recommendations resulting from the findings.

Transformational leadership theory and motivation theory are complementary in several ways, as they both place value on the employee contributions and focus on intrinsic motivation

of the employee. Transformational leadership theory is relevant to this study because it is the leadership theory most commonly utilized in public service and educational sectors. Motivation theory is relevant to review for this study because educational leaders need to understand the rationale supporting positive work performance and the most effective ways to support such performance, with an emphasis on the quality of service provided to students with special needs.

Of particular relevance to this study are the concepts of autonomy, mastery, and purpose, as related to intrinsic motivation in leaders. When educational leaders experience these competencies in their work, it is anticipated that they may be able to nurture the development of similar qualities in their staff and the students with whom they work. For example, employees tend to experience greater job satisfaction, perform their work more efficiently, and produce a higher level of quality when they experience autonomy (choice and freedom), mastery (accomplishment), and a sense of purpose (a higher reason for completing a task). Educational leaders engage in work that requires reflection, creativity, and accountability. They reflect upon practices so that they may improve outcomes. They work collaboratively with their staff and other administrators to come up with creative solutions to problems. They are accountable to the district superintendent, the district school board, their respective SELPAs, the CDE, and also to federal agencies for reporting information concerning students with disabilities.

Chapter Two: Review of Relevant Literature

Chapter Two presents a review of the literature relevant to educational leadership, beginning with an introduction of the study, supported by a brief historical perspective of special education in the United States and the organizations in California that offer special education stakeholders guidance and technical support. Special education stakeholders may include students with disabilities and their families, schools, community organizations and businesses, regional centers that provide services for students with developmental disabilities, mental health and medical organizations, and lawmakers, among others. A brief summary of special education laws will be discussed to provide a larger context for understanding this study.

Next, an explanation of the conceptual framework for the study will be followed by a survey of leadership perspectives from various researchers. Finally, leadership characteristics, practices, values, and challenges of school administrators are explored in the literature, with consideration of their applicability to district administrators, and more specifically to the roles of special education directors.

History of Special Education in the United States

The history of special education in the United States extends back several decades. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was first passed by Congress in 1965. ESEA authorizes and regulates the majority of federal K-12 education programs, and the law must be reauthorized by Congress every five years (National Education Association and National Association of State Directors of Special Education, 2004). Funding for this law is appropriated annually. With each reauthorization, stronger accountability requirements for results have followed.

The Education for All Handicapped Children Act (1975), known as P.L. 94-142, is the original special education law. It guaranteed all children with disabilities in the United States the right to a FAPE in the LRE. By the late 1990s, based on research showing that students with disabilities usually perform better with access to the general education curriculum, lawmakers wanted to ensure appropriate access for these students (National Education Association and National Association of State Directors of Special Education, 2004). P. L. 94-142 was reauthorized as P. L. 105-17, and in 1997 became known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). IDEA 1997 required that students with disabilities must have access to, participate in, and progress in the general education curriculum (National Education Association and National Association of State Directors of Special Education, 2004). Additionally, IDEA required that students with disabilities also be included in state and district-wide assessments.

NCLB is also a federal law with provisions to support students with disabilities. NCLB references IDEA and will likely influence IDEA's reauthorization. NCLB sanctions and interventions only apply to schools receiving Title I funds (National Education Association and National Association of State Directors of Special Education, 2004). At the federal level, in light of requirements for increased accountability based on data and best practices, the goal of the OSEP is to support states in improving results for children with disabilities. OSEP provides the core principles for Results-Driven Accountability (RDA), which provides guidelines and expectations for data-based decision making and reporting concerning outcomes for students with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

Special education leaders are responsible for ensuring compliance with laws governing special education; however, those laws are open to interpretation (Bon & Bigbee, 2011). With regard to interpretation of the laws governing special education, an example would be the

common disagreement among general education and special education teachers and administrators concerning the concepts of inclusion and LRE. The law does not specifically mention the term *inclusion*. Some proponents of inclusion believe that all students, regardless of their disabilities and individualized needs, should be educated in the general education setting. However, others believe that the intent of the law concerning inclusion and LRE is to consider a continuum of educational placements to support students in successfully accessing the general education curriculum.

IEP teams are required to review the continuum of placements in consideration of a student with disabilities' LRE. To this end, the continuum of placements may include, from least restrictive to most restrictive, the following types of educational settings: (a) general education setting in the public school with no supports; (b) general education setting in the public school with designated instructional services supports such as speech and language, counseling to address social-emotional needs, behavior intervention support, occupational therapy, or specialized academic instruction from a special education teacher for a portion of the day; (c) a special education setting (separate classroom) in a public school, which are often referred to as special day classrooms (SDCs) where students spend the majority of their day in one classroom and receive instruction from a credentialed special education teacher; (d) placement in a nonpublic school educational setting that exclusively serves students with disabilities, such as a site-based program operated by the county office of education; (e) home/hospital services, where a credentialed instructor comes into a student's home to provide services because the student is temporarily unable to physically attend school due to medical necessity, as approved by a physician; and (f) residential placement, where a student attends school and resides at a site

outside of the home due to mental health issues with require around the clock supervision and intensive intervention.

The IEP team determines a student's LRE by evaluating the student's present levels of performance (i.e., how a student is currently performing on the assigned curriculum with any appropriate modifications and/or accommodations to help the student access the curriculum); the results of any formal and informal assessments (i.e., psycho-educational evaluation, academic, social-emotional, health, behavior, etc.) conducted by related services providers, such as special education teachers, school psychologists, counselors, school nurses; and progress towards current IEP goals. In general, a student's LRE is determined by an IEP team's evaluation of whether the student is capable of meeting his/her measureable IEP goals in the current setting with the designated supports, related services, accommodations, and modifications discussed and documented in the IEP document. Such an evaluation takes into consideration whether the student needs a less or more restrictive environment to make progress toward the IEP goals.

In special education, assessments drive goals, goals drive services, and services drive placement. To this end, IEP decisions need to be based on data from multi-disciplinary assessments, as IEP documents are legally binding and therefore the information contained therein must be legally defensible. The school principal or an administrative designee typically attends the IEP meetings held at school sites and authorizes funding decisions concerning placement and services agreed upon by the IEP team. Occasionally, IEP teams may need to consult with a special education administrator concerning particularly challenging questions or issues concerning a student's placement or services.

Often, special education administrators who wish to make decisions in the best interest of students are faced with discrepant options related to legal mandates, the professional code of

ethics for special education, and administrative directives (Bon & Bigbee, 2011). The decisions special education leaders make concerning implementation of policies and regulations, services, placement, and instructional practices ultimately impact a child's access to educational opportunities.

Federal and state agencies have put professional standards in place for educators and educational administrators as a measure to communicate performance expectations, as a measure of accountability, and as a way to ensure that children are receiving the quality of educational service they deserve and need. The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC, 2010) is an international organization that represents a large community of special educators across the world. The CEC has adopted the Ethical Principles for Special Education Professionals, which may provide guidance and perspective to those who strive to do the right thing for the right reasons for students with disabilities. Appendix A provides a list of the principles adopted by the CEC.

Special Education in California

The CDE implements leadership and policy direction at the state level and also administers the IDEA for school district programs that serve individuals with disabilities (newborn through age 22). In 2014-15, there were 1,022 school districts in California, with a total of 6,235,520 students enrolled in public schools. The ethnic distribution of public school students in California consists of 53.25% Hispanic or Latino, 25% White, 8.7% Asian, and 6.16% African American. In 2013-14, 705,279 individuals received special education services in California, with the top three disability categories in California being (a) specific learning disability: 281,822; (b) speech or language impairment: 160,686; and (c) autism: 84,713 (CDE,

2016). Special education services support specially designed instruction and are provided in a variety of environments, including classrooms, community, and work settings.

The Superintendent of Public Instruction monitors special education programs to ensure that funds appropriated to SELPAs are used to assist LEAs in provision of special education and related services to individuals with exceptional needs. The administrator of each SELPA is responsible for fiscal administration of the annual budget and allocation plans for special education programs of school districts within the SELPA (Special Education Programs, General Provisions, n.d.).

An Advisory Commission on Special Education is also a component of the California state government. Seventeen appointed members are "selected to ensure that the commission is representative of the state population and composed of individuals involved in, or concerned with, the education of children with disabilities" and members are expected to be "knowledgeable about the wide variety of disabling conditions that require special programs in order to achieve the goal of providing an appropriate education to all eligible pupils" (Advisory Commission on Special Education, 2005, § 335900). The California Education Code states that the role of the commission includes providing advisement and recommendations with regard to special education research, development and implementation of policies, program development, and evaluation (Advisory Commission on Special Education, 2005).

The CDE is a resource for teachers, state and local education administrators, and parents. Resources listed on the CDE's website include the California Standards for the Teaching Profession (CSTP) and the California Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (CPSEL). The CSTP addresses six domains in particular: (a) engaging and supporting all students in learning, (b) creating and maintaining effective environments for student learning,

(c) understanding and organizing subject matter for student learning, (d) planning instruction and designing learning experiences for all students, (e) assessing student learning, and (f) developing as a professional educator (Commission on Teacher Credentialing, 2009). These guidelines provide insight into statewide performance expectations for all teachers, including special education teachers. It is common for school site and district level administrators to reference the CTSP guidelines when conducting formal evaluations of teachers. Likewise, the CPSEL standards are used for accountability and evaluation purposes of school administrators. These standards outline expectations for school administrators and have been summarized for the purpose of this discussion.

Each of the CPSEL standards contains elements that are congruent with the basic tenets of transformational leadership theory. The six CPSEL standards state that school administrators: (a) facilitate the development of and communicate a shared vision to the school community while integrating school programs and resources towards attainment of the vision for all students; (b) promote a school culture of high expectations, equity, fairness and respect by sustaining an instructional program conducive to student learning and support professional growth, collaboration, distributed leadership, and shared responsibility among staff; (c) promote the success of all students by establishing processes, resources, and contractual agreements that support student learning and foster a professional work environment; (d) promote the success of all students by collaborating with diverse community stakeholder groups and partnerships; (e) promote the success of all students by modeling a personal code of ethics and inspiring others to higher levels of performance and motivation; and (f) promote the success of all students by understanding the larger political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context to ensure that the school is compliant with federal, state, and local laws. School administrators also acknowledge

themselves as both the leader of a team and a member of a larger team (Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium, 1996).

California is currently experiencing a defining moment in the field of education. Standards-based curriculum and testing are replacing the curriculum and testing methods that have been in place for several years. For school districts that have been early adopters of the changes, general education teachers have received ongoing training to prepare them for the changes. Unfortunately, support of training for special education teachers to this regard has lagged behind and special educators are not as well prepared as their general educator counterparts to address the pressing accountability concerns before school districts and their employees. Hence, special educators tend to experience not only decreased motivation in their work, but also less access to qualified special education administrators for support, as well.

In an article discussing motivational factors toward pursuing a career in special education, Stephens and Fish (2010) asserted that U.S. school districts are in crisis due to chronic shortages of qualified special education teachers. Results of the study revealed reasons teachers become frustrated and leave the field of special education: lack of administrative support, lack of empathy from general education colleagues for students receiving special education services, current special education legislation and federal government requirements, overwhelming paperwork and testing requirements, and lack of clarity about their administrators' expectations. This abbreviated list of concerns highlights a significant need for effective leadership in special education. Organizational structure to provide guidance and oversight of special education procedures at the state level, district level, and even school site level have not been sufficient to reverse the exodus from the field of special education.

Conversely, Fullan (2010) listed incentives that work to keep teachers in the teaching profession. Fullan's list of incentives for teachers includes: "good salaries, decent surroundings, positive climate, extensive professional learning, supportive leadership, getting helpful feedback, reasonable class size, and realizable moral purpose" (p. 89). Fullan asserted that "realizable moral purpose is especially effective in reenergizing disheartened teachers" (p. 89). Fullan is a staunch believer in collective capacity building. He shared the *seven practicalities*, a list created by Ben Levin (as cited in Fullan, 2010). The seven practicalities for leadership development are:

1. Establishing a vision and goals.

2. Building a strong team.

3. Creating and supporting the right culture.

4. Communication, vision, direction, and accomplishment.

5. Establishing a vision and goals.

6. Recruiting, developing, and retaining leaders.

7. Building internal and external support.

8. Maintaining the focus on teaching and learning. (p. 88)

This researcher proposes that the tenets of transformational leadership are complementary to this list and promote deeper insight concerning the type of leadership that may prove beneficial at the district administration level to have positive bearing upon the crisis of special education in California, and even the nation.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study was Bass's (1985) theory of transformational leadership. According to Wright, Moynihan, and Pandey (2012), "Over the last 30 years, transformational leadership has become one of the most prominent theories of organizational

behavior" (p. 207). An overarching premise of transformational leadership theory is that charismatic leaders, who view all employees as contributors, are able to motivate employees to join forces, "transcend their own self-interest for the sake of the organization and its clientele" (p. 207), and become invested in a common goal to accomplish organizational change (Groves & LaRocca, 2011). Charismatic leaders, according to Davis (2003), tend to be energetic, self-confident, and adept at communicating and modeling their ideas. Such leaders are able to translate their beliefs about an organization's vision to others clearly and eloquently. However, simply having a vision is not sufficient; support and resources must also be provided to employees by leaders who wish to demonstrate organizational improvement via transformational leadership (Finnigan & Stewart, 2009).

Transformational leaders inspire employees to believe change can happen. To implement and sustain change, the community of participants must have a clear understanding concerning why they are being asked to contribute and what they stand to gain by contributing. Wright et al. (2012) emphasized that transformational leaders need to proactively "communicate the organization's mission in ways that not only clearly articulate what the organization hopes to accomplish, but also how the organization hopes to accomplish it and why such accomplishments benefit the community it services" (p. 212). Transformational leaders find ways to value the input and leadership of all members of a group.

Participation in professional learning communities is one way in which staff members, as a group, may contribute to organizational change within their school sites and districts without adopting formal leadership roles (Hord & Sommers, 2008). Transformational leadership has been shown to have indirect effects on teacher motivation and professional learning activities. The work of Thoonen, Sleegers, Oort, Peetsma, and Geijsel (2011) confirms that

transformational leadership promotes teacher motivation and collaboration, which are key components of professional learning communities. The study's results acknowledge that effective use of transformational leadership is important for reform-based school improvement.

Several studies have been conducted that discuss the merits and impact of transformational leadership in educational settings. A study by Raes et al. (2013) demonstrated that a transformational leadership style has a positive relationship to team or group learning, which holds potential for development of more effective teams with higher quality learning outcomes. This positive relationship comes about because the transformational leader engenders a sense of purpose and respect to members of the team, enabling team members to experience a feeling of psychological safety and confidence. Although the effects of transformational leadership appear to be overwhelmingly positive, there are other perspectives of this leadership model.

Schuh, Zhang, and Tian (2013) conducted a study on the interactive effects of transformational leadership. These authors contend that transformational leadership behaviors are generally diverse in nature and therefore hold potential to impact followers' reactions as followers attempt to discern whether the rationale behind the leader's goals and intentions are altruistic or selfish. Interestingly, the authors' findings contradict the supposition that transformational leadership behaviors are inherently effective in gaining followers' compliance. Conversely, the authors stated that leadership models are more effective when they incorporate more than one leadership style and "complement existing efforts in fostering transformational leadership with measures focusing on high morality and low authoritarianism . . . in order to develop and sustain the virtues of (authentic) transformational leadership" (p. 638). Transformational leaders should strive to be transparent in their leadership efforts, as followers'

motivation to join with the leader may be in some measure based on their perception of the leader's intent.

Integral to transformational leadership theory is the concept of motivation. Pink's (2009) theory of motivation is referenced in this study, with consideration of the ways in which leaders become and sustain intrinsic motivation and how that impacts their roles. Pink discussed his beliefs about what motivates people in *Drive: The Surprising Truth about What Motivates Us*. He proposed that the motivational operating system that has been in use and thought to be effective for decades (i.e., carrots and sticks, rewards and punishments) should be reconstructed. Pink discussed research and cites examples from earlier studies by behavioral scientists and economists to establish his perspective that a new motivational operating system that better correlates with the realities of current society is needed. Pink questions the effectiveness of extrinsic rewards to increase motivation and states that intrinsic motivation should be the focus of the new motivational operating system he espouses because it is more effective than extrinsic motivation. Fuller, Morrison, Jones, Bridger, and Brown (1999) cited studies where transformational leadership behaviors resulted in positive outcomes for employees, including increased intrinsic motivation and higher levels of job satisfaction. In addition, Ackerina (2015), in her study of motivation and commitment in education, found that despite exceptionally stressful work conditions and increasing accountability demands, school district administrators typically possess significant levels of public service motivation and value the intrinsic rewards of their work because of the associated feeling of accomplishment.

It is often discussed in educational and other professional settings that educators are underpaid and undervalued for the work they perform in society. Pink (2009) noted that in work settings where baseline compensation is inadequate or inequitable, once the concern over basic

compensation has been removed, factors such as autonomy over time and task can produce exceptional results. Pink suggests that goals and extrinsic rewards be used carefully in organizations because they can lead to unethical behavior and decrease intrinsic motivation. Instead, he emphasizes the importance of autonomy, mastery, and purpose in relation to workplace motivation.

Autonomy. According to Pink (2009), management was about control under the past motivational operating system, which he calls *Motivation 2.0.* Under his proposed motivational operating system, *Motivation 3.0,* management is about creating an environment where people can do their best work, be self-directed, and have choices. Scholars who conducted hundreds of studies exploring intrinsic motivation have concluded that human beings naturally want to be autonomous and self-determined.

Mastery. Pink (2009) stated that "autonomy leads to engagement, and only engagement can produce mastery – the desire to get better and better at something that matters" (pp. 110-111). Although the quest for mastery can take a long time and a lot of hard work, mastery is never entirely achievable. Once people develop a deep sense of engagement, whether in work or play, they have an opportunity to strive for mastery, which is one of the key elements to leading a fulfilling personal life.

Purpose. The drive toward mastery is fueled by a sense of purpose (Pink, 2009). According to Pink (2009), research shows that our internal desire to direct our own lives, to exceed our current abilities, and to live a meaningful life is the foundation of extraordinary performance. Autonomy, mastery and purpose are demonstrated "when we're listening to our own voice – doing something that matters, doing it well, and doing it in the service of a cause

larger than ourselves" (p. 146). The theory of motivation, as touted by Pink, provides the lens from which motivation in educational leadership will be reviewed.

Educational Leadership

Values and beliefs. Fundamental to the culture and climate of an organization is trust. According to Wellner (2012), the culture of special education needs to change from a negative climate of conflict to one of building bridges with families through consideration and collaboration. Special education leaders need to understand how to build trust with families. Wellner stated that a leader's use of purposeful trust actions (establishing rapport, listening with empathy, inviting parents to partner on the team, and creating safety for open disclosure) can reduce the number of due process cases and complaints, fostering trusting relationships.

In promoting change and improvement, district leaders need to support a culture that defines "common values and norms of work for the district as a whole" (Anderson, Mascall, Stiegelbauer, & Park, 2012, p. 415). It is important that leaders who believe in transformational leadership as an effective method of leadership build trust with all their employees.

In addition to building trust, "transformational leaders influence followers and drive organizational changes by promoting process values such as honesty, loyalty, and fairness, while emphasizing the end values of justice, equality, and human rights" (Groves & LaRocca, 2011, p. 514). Leaders, as change agents, must work strategically with other leaders to sustain long-term organizational change based on commitment, evidence, principles, and values (Davis, 2003; Reeves, 2002). The internal values and beliefs of a leader will manifest outwardly in the leader's characteristics.

Characteristics. Davis (2003) stated that leadership "implies movement, taking the organization or some part of it in a new direction, solving problems, being creative, initiating

new programs, building organizational structures, and improving quality" (p. 4). He added that

leadership must be in some way transformational in order to meaningfully influence an

organization (Davis, 2003). Important leadership characteristics include understanding the

strengths of the team, leading with questions to facilitate an open exchange of ideas, providing

opportunities to collaborate, and giving employees the autonomy to do what they do well.

Educational leaders should also possess distinctive qualities that balance the need to be

assertive with the need to build relationships. It is essential for good leaders to be skillful

listeners who understand the nuances of their work environment (Klar & Brewer, 2013). Collins

(2001) declared that that "leadership is about vision, (but) leadership is equally about creating a

climate where the truth is heard and the brutal facts confronted" (p. 74). Likewise, Davis (2003)

posited that leadership involves enthusiastically getting others to support a vision while

reflecting upon the purpose and the people the organization serves.

Wise leaders are proactive in managing communication, establishing procedures about

the ways in which communication might be best received and taking care to prevent conflict by

avoiding implied threats, sarcasm, or stereotypes (Davis, 2003). To this end, it may be surmised

that important leadership characteristics include the ability to care enough to hear the truth from

employees, as well as share the truth with employees in an appropriate, professional manner.

Among other leadership characteristics discussed, Reeves (2002) asserted that a leader

influences behavior, not attitudes and beliefs. He contended that "if behavior is successful,

belief follows" (p. 71), which indicates that if the behavior demonstrated or requested by the

leader results in positive outcomes, people will then believe the leader.

Practices and strategies. Reeves (2002) stated,

> The job of management is complex, maintaining the interrelationships between people, technology, and organizational units. Leadership, by contrast [according to Kotter], "defines what the future should look like, aligns people with that vision, and inspires them to make it happen despite the obstacles."(p. 87)

In *Good to Great*, Collins (2001) detailed research on many companies and their leaders concerning their transition from good to great. One practice Collins described pertains to the importance of being intentional in the manner of choosing one's team. Collins proposed that first the right people need to be hired (get them on the bus) and then one can place them in the proper positions (figure out where to drive the bus). If the wrong people are hired (get them off the bus), then it does not matter what position they are placed in; productivity will be low and growth will not take place.

Educational leaders have incredible pressure to be successful in terms of student learning outcomes and school reform. Successful principals facilitate professional learning opportunities for staff; provide instructional leadership; build coalitions with outside groups, agencies, and stakeholders; and take the initiative to recruit and hire the most suitable staff to work collaboratively as a team (Scribner, Crow, Lopez, & Murtadha, 2011).

Themes that emerged from the Scribner et al. (2011) study of successful principals include: a focus on building personal relationships, the importance of being student-centered, determination to do what is morally and ethically right for students and families, unconditional responsiveness and resourcefulness, a focus on student learning; equity for students; curricular, instructional, and structural innovations; data-based decision-making, and passion about instruction and student learning. Goor et al. (1997) asserted that the principal's attitude and

beliefs toward special education and students with special needs affects the administration of special education programs, and an effective principal reflects (rethinks and reevaluates) to ensure decisions are legally defensible before engaging in action. Consequently, the culture of a school is affected by the tone set by the principal. When a principal is viewed as being supportive of special education by his or her staff, then the school staff (teachers, related services providers, paraeducators, and clerical staff) become more aware of their interactions with students with disabilities, which results in more positive outcomes for students. The school site leader sets the tone and expectations for the school site staff, and the superintendent and executive district level administrators create the climate for mid-level administrators and staff throughout the district. A leader's focus, priorities, and commitments are communicated to subordinates through their actions, even more so than by what is verbalized or put in writing.

Rath and Conchie (2008) posited that effective leaders know how to work in their areas of strength and build a team around them to balance talents, skills, and responsibilities. They further stated, "For a team to create sustained growth, the leader must continue to invest in each person's strengths and in building better relationships among the group members" (p. 76). In essence, effective leaders know how to get the right people on the bus and in the right seats on the bus, as stated by Jim Collins in *Good to Great* (2001). Furthermore, when district level administrators hire and retain the most appropriate personnel for school site and district leadership positions, teams can be developed that work collaboratively and creatively toward a common goal.

Another line of thought concerning leadership practices described by Connors, Smith, and Hickman (2004) asserts that employees must be trained and coached to shift their thinking to "understand the crucial relationship between accountability and results" (p. 176). Successful

leaders foster processes that encourage accountability (Scribner et al., 2011). Integral to implementing ongoing practices of accountability within an organization, leaders must adopt *above the line* attitudes and behaviors, as described in the *Oz Principle* (Connors et al., 2004). Such behaviors involve deciding what can be done and taking initiative instead of blaming and complaining. Staying above the line places one in a position of empowerment to achieve results (Connors et al. 2004). Hence, the authors believe that for positive organizational change to occur, leadership and employees need to collectively hold each other accountable for their actions as they work to achieve common goals (Conners et al., 2004; Hord & Sommers, 2008).

As Bolman and Deal (2002) asserted, a leader's ability to reframe situations when making management decisions is an important leadership practice. They stated, "The best leaders use multiple frames or lenses, each offering a different perspective on common challenges" (p. 3). Subsequently, this assertion supports the premise that effective leaders use the skill of stepping back and viewing a situation holistically before considering options. The concept of considering options includes maintaining open communication and a willingness to hear and accept others' reality. Often leaders do not wish to hear or address challenges from their staff; however, leaders must determine how they will address the challenges they face personally in their roles as administrators. The choices school and district level leaders make when confronting obstacles ultimately determines the leaders' personal growth and professional development.

Challenges and barriers. According to Goor et al. (1997), school principals are not usually prepared to provide administrative guidance to their staff concerning the legal mandates, best practices, and rights of students with special needs, although they must regularly respond to concerns involving such students. Some principals tend to delegate the responsibility of

participating in IEP meetings to others because they do not think attending such meetings constitutes the best use of their time. IEP teams assess and regularly review students' special education eligibility, collect data to evaluate students' present levels of performance, review baseline data to establish students' level of progress toward achievement of current goals, propose new measureable goals in specific areas of identified need, discuss transition plans for the student when appropriate, and document parents' concerns. Additionally, IEP teams work to ensure that students with disabilities are appropriately placed in their LRE when the IEP team offers FAPE to a student on behalf of the school district.

For principals to be effective in their role as administrators of special education programs on their campus, they need to be able to: identify sources of information (central office, state offices of special education, federal agencies); understand the impact of disabilities on student performance; support and monitor the student referral-to-placement process; manage student records and confidentiality; support and encourage parental involvement; participate in the hiring process of general education teachers and paraprofessionals who are public service motivated and who can work collaboratively with special educators; consider the discipline concerns of students with special needs and the impact of the disability upon behavior; be culturally sensitive; be aware of assistive technology that may be required to augment special education services; and work collaboratively with staff, parents, and students to problem solve and ensure effective provision of services (Ackerina, 2015; Goor et al., 1997). Additionally, as Ackerina (2015) posited,

> It is incumbent on educational leaders to influence a school environment that fosters
> acceptance, values, and service to affirm loyalty toward the profession. This may be

achieved by creating a climate that removes obstacles and promotes empowerment of its

public. (p. 795)

Therefore, despite the myriad responsibilities and time commitments educational leaders have, it

is important for them to establish a climate of trust and positive relationship-building based on

service among teachers, service providers, and the families they serve.

For example, school leaders experience challenges when parents do not trust that their

children's needs are being addressed and supported adequately. The process of building trusting

relationships is reflective of transformational leadership (Poon-McBrayer & Wong, 2013). Such

circumstances could potentially result in parents filing state complaints and due process

proceedings against the LEA. When school administrators are not familiar with special

education law and procedures as they support their staff in addressing the needs of students with

disabilities on their campuses, the district may be placed at considerable risk of legal liability

(Pazey & Cole, 2013). However, sometimes parents win due process proceedings filed against

school districts, not because of a school site team's failure to implement the services in a

student's IEP or offer FAPE, but because of procedural errors.

According to California Education Code, during IEP meetings, school teams and

educational agencies are required to inform parents and students of parent rights and procedural

safeguards under the IDEA and complaints may be filed concerning alleged violations of the

IDEA within one year of the date of occurrence. Those involved in special education disputes

are encouraged to participate voluntarily in non-adversarial prehearing mediation conferences to

seek resolution to concerns before requesting a due process hearing. However, if during the

mediation conference the issues are not resolved satisfactorily according to all parties, the party

that initiated request for mediation may file for a state level due process hearing (California

Legislative Information, n.d.). Within 15 days of receiving notice of a parent's request for due process hearing, the LEA should offer a resolution session with the parents and relevant members of the IEP team who are knowledgeable about the facts identified in the request. The resolution session "shall include a representative of the LEA who has decision-making authority on behalf of the agency" (California Legislative Information, n.d., Title 2, Division 4, Part 30, Chapter 5, Section 56501.5(a)(2)). LEAs also have the right to file for due process against parents. This highlights the need for experienced, well informed administrators and educational leaders to oversee special education-related concerns within school districts.

Role of the Special Education Director

The work of special education directors is to ensure that students who have disabilities are educated equitably, in terms of the manner that is most appropriate to address their individual needs, and that teachers and related services providers receive the support they need to do their jobs (Crockett, 2007). Special education directors normally manage programming for students who require accommodations or specialized services in educational settings (Sansosti et al., 2011). Students have different strengths, needs, learning styles, and perspectives of their experiences. Each of these differences should be considered when evaluating a student's LRE, as related to the educational setting that provides the greatest access for him/her to achieve academic, social, emotional, and behavioral progress toward the educational curriculum and his/her individual goals.

In understanding the larger context of establishing more inclusive educational settings, special education directors should understand who the stakeholders are in the educational system, their respective communities, and school districts. All members of the school community are stakeholders (i.e., students, families, students' advocates, teachers,

administrators, business owners, religious leaders, law enforcement officers, social service providers) and perform an important role in aspects that contribute to a positive school environment, such as the provision of resources and skills.

Stakeholders' personal values may impact their level of willingness to increase their investment. Just as data drives the development of educational goals, and goals drive the specific services that will be provided to support attainment of those goals, stakeholders form their opinions and outlook concerning their investment based on whether they perceive the outcomes from their investment as congruent with their expectations.

Not all stakeholders share the same expectations. Some stakeholders expect political gains or financial gains. Other stakeholders expect job security or status. Additionally, some stakeholders may expect the educational system to free them from personal accountability and responsibility. What is really at stake is the promise of students' futures. To reap the benefits from investing in education, stakeholders need to first consider students and what must be done to support their strengths, address areas of need, and create opportunities for students to become productive citizens by seeing all students as worthy of respect and social justice, based on their individuality. The educational system cannot meet students' needs by discarding them based on differences. Those implementing the educational system need to view all students as part of the whole. The system will not change without stakeholders taking a closer look at the basis of their personal perspectives and then re-evaluating and prioritizing what their investment should be to maximize opportunities for successful outcomes for students, and not seek outcomes based on personal gains.

Wigle and Wilcox (2003) stated that "special education directors need the collaborative support and involvement of both special education and general education administrators"

(p. 286). The effectiveness of special education programs and the students served by those programs are affected by the vision, decisions, and actions of transformational leaders (Voltz & Collins, 2010; Wigle & Wilcox, 2003). As Groves and LaRocca (2011) noted, "By influencing followers through the development of a collective vision that inspires them to look beyond self-interests for the good of their organization and community, transformational leaders articulate the salience of multiple stakeholders in determining vision attainment" (p. 516). However, Futrell (2011) asserted, "Transforming our education system will not work unless we transform the leadership within the system" (p. 645). It is important to understand who does the job of a special education director, and what their values, beliefs, and practices are because of the level of influence they have on the lives of students with disabilities, their families, and the staff who serve them.

Summary

This chapter outlined the history of special education in the United States and provided information about special education in California, citing details about laws that impact both K-12 general and special education. The literature review focused on leadership characteristics, values, and practices as detailed by various authors, including Bass's (1985) transformational leadership theory and Pink's (2009) theory of motivation. Important themes of successful leadership practice that emerged from the research of Scribner et al. (2011) include a focus on: building personal relationships, being student centered, doing what is morally and ethically right on behalf of children and families, being unconditionally responsive and resourceful, pursuing equity for students, using data to make decisions, and being passionate about one's work.

Additionally, the literature review recognizes the importance of strong, compassionate, inspirational leadership in challenging environments. The review of literature also indicates that

change is needed in educational settings if students are to demonstrate educational benefit. Special education is a field fraught with challenges that involve the educational system and the laws that govern it, as well as community stakeholders, students, teachers, and district administrators.

Recommendations for future study include improved administrator preparation and training. Universities must provide programs to prepare future special education leaders for the challenges they will encounter. Milligan et al. (2012) asserted that high quality administrative preparation programs should include: (a) graduate programs and professional development must be grounded in practice and include field-based experiences, and (b) a sound mentorship component. Another recommendation for future study is the development of an effective collaboration model for general education and special education administrators. Too often blame is placed by either party of administrators (i.e., school site principals and special education directors) when costly procedural errors occur at taxpayers' expense, instead of delegation of time for meaningful collaboration. School site and district office administrators need to be reminded of the purpose of what they do; their work should be about students. No one knows everything, but in working together to discuss issues, a higher likelihood exists of achieving resolution with fewer recurrences of similar complications.

Bass' (1985) theory of transformational leadership and Pink's (2009) theory of motivation are appropriate models to consider when looking to implement change in an educational environment because employees respond well to charismatic leaders that empower, trust, and appreciate their work. As stated succinctly by Mary Hatwood Futrell (2011) in her article about redefining leadership,

Changes will occur if we have transformative leaders who understand and appreciate the

importance of working with the members of their faculty as a team to implement a

culture that values learning for all students, regardless of who they are. (p. 641)

Futrell added that educational leaders "must also be well educated in understanding the cultural,

political, and economic challenges defining our communities and, thus, our schools . . . and be

willing to consider new modes of leading" (p. 643). In light of the existing literature and in

consideration of the fact that little literature exists concerning district level special education

directors, this researcher believes exceptional leadership is required for the exceptional times in

which we live and is therefore passionate about the opportunity to explore the stories of K-12

special education directors of urban school districts in Southern California.

In summary, a synthesis of the literature review discusses transformational leadership

attributes and the role of motivation in the life and work of a transformational leader.

Transformational leaders are intrinsically motivated to selflessly work towards a vision greater

than themselves to benefit the larger community or organization. By the strength of their

charismatic personality, caring relationships, and behavior, transformational leaders motivate

their followers to work collaboratively as leaders themselves. Research by Barbuto and Scholl

(as cited in Barbuto, Fritz, & Marx, 2000) indicated that "transformational leadership behaviors

can be explained by comparing leaders' behaviors with their source of motivation" (p. 299).

Along the same lines, "Sergiovanni (1990) has pointed out that school administrators should

possess intrinsic motivation (i.e., the work itself serves as the impetus) and be disposed to

collegiality practices in implementing strategies toward school improvement" (McCollum &

Kajs, 2009, p. 12). In essence, transformational leaders create an atmosphere that supports the

development of intrinsic motivation. They inspire and motivate their followers to take

ownership and grasp the vision. As noted previously, school site administrators and district level

special education directors would benefit from working together in a supportive partnership to

address the significant challenges affecting education for all students.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Long before the passage of the IDEA and NCLB, the need for strong leadership in the field of special education in United States local school districts was apparent. School district administrators have struggled to understand how to maintain compliance with the incongruent federal laws governing education. In an environment where inclusion of students with special needs into the general education setting is legally required and generally valued, the fact remains that many school site administrators are acutely unprepared to manage the considerable impediments to providing leadership for special educators and related services providers while meeting the needs of students with disabilities and their families. Professional preparation and research-based professional development is needed, not only for the staff who serve students with disabilities, but also for the administrators who support the staff as well, if such leaders are to advance the purpose of the federal, state, and local mission statements as they pertain to education of all students.

This chapter delineates the design of the study, sample, data collection, and data analysis used to conduct this study on special education directors' perspectives of their work experiences and leadership. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to identify and understand the ways in which special education directors addressed the many challenges they faced, the tools they used, the values they hold, and lessons they have learned from personal experiences in their urban school districts. Fundamentally, this research study sought to understand the unique experiences and responsibilities that special education directors encountered in their daily functions as central office administrators in school districts and how they approached their roles, from a leadership perspective. To this end, the guiding research questions to elicit data for the study were:

1. To what extent, if at all, do special education directors use aspects of transformational leadership in their roles to implement initiatives and change in their respective districts?

2. What are the personal values and beliefs of special education directors, and how do such personal values and beliefs influence their work?

3. What kinds of challenges, obstacles, or barriers do special education directors encounter in their roles and how do they overcome those?

4. What strategies and practices have been learned by special education directors to improve outcomes for students with disabilities and the staff who support them?

Research Design and Rationale

This study employed a qualitative research design. Of the three primary research approaches—(a) quantitative, (b) qualitative, and (c) mixed methods—the qualitative approach lent itself best to the researcher's philosophical assumption, which reflect the constructivist worldview. A worldview is an established belief that influences one's choice of action (Creswell, 2014). In a constructivist worldview, the researcher looks for overarching meaningful concepts, such as the understanding of social interactions and intentions (English, 2005). This researcher believes the personal stories of district level special education directors need to be considered and understood because their stories hold potential to unveil the complexity of their roles, as well as expand and enrich the limited volume of literature concerning the work of special education directors today.

This study exemplified the following attributes of qualitative research: data were collected directly by the researcher in a natural setting via a face-to-face or telephonic interactive process, data were reviewed and organized into themes, the meaning participants brought to the

research and what was learned from participants was essential to the research design development, the researcher used both deductive and inductive thinking throughout the research process to reflect upon how personal experiences may potentially influence interpretations of the themes advanced and affect the progression of the study, and a holistic account of the issue under study was presented by reporting multiple perspectives and then contextualizing the findings (Coleman & Briggs, 2002; Creswell, 2013; Lunenburg & Irby, 2008). According to Cooley (2013), qualitative research, although often viewed as the most controversial method of inquiry, is actually the "most robust and inclusive means of attempting to understand the complexities of education" (p. 248). Narrative data gleaned from the qualitative methods process was used in this study to highlight existing similarities among special education directors from their personal perspectives of their day-to-day work experiences. The rich detail provided in participants' narratives created an intimate portrait of the day-to-day work of special education directors and the complex realities they encounter.

Creswell (2013) discussed five qualitative inquiry conventions that are commonly used in health and social sciences domains. Of the five designs—which include narrative, ethnography, grounded theory, case study, and phenomenology—phenomenology was chosen for this study because the researcher wanted to study individuals and the meaning they ascribe to shared social problems (Creswell, 2014; Leedy & Ormrod, 2010). In this exploratory dissertation design, empirical research was conducted to obtain data for the study, using qualitative methodology to ascertain the *how* and *why* of the phenomenon explored, and with a greater focus on description, understanding, and interpretation, than on explanation and measurements (Butin, 2010; Coleman & Briggs, 2002; Lunenburg & Irby, 2008). Interview questions, designed to gather perspectives and help the researcher better understand participants' experiences of particular circumstances or

situations, were aligned with the research questions (Butin, 2010; Leedy & Ormrod, 2010). During the research process, the researcher suspended any personal biases, a practice known as bracketing or epoche, that had the potential to influence information imparted by participants (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010).

Procedures outlined by Moustakas (1994) were used for conducting the phenomenological research of this study. In keeping with the primary steps outlined in Moustakas's approach, the researcher considered the following:

1. Determine whether the research question(s) are most appropriately investigated using a phenomenological methodology.

2. Identify an appealing phenomenon to examine.

3. Be aware of the broad philosophical suppositions of phenomenology and set aside their personal experiences and views.

4. Collect data such as recorded interviews, observations, and written accounts of various experiences from individuals who have lived through the phenomenon.

5. Ask participants broad open-ended questions that will provide rich descriptions of their experiences and lead to an understanding of general phenomenon.

The rationale for conducting this study in the tradition of qualitative research was that the study was exploratory in nature, with the expectation that themes would emerge as the data gleaned from study participants were analyzed.

Sample and population. The study was based on participants' experiences in K-12 urban school districts in Southern California, with enrollments in the range of 20,000-65,000 students, and that offer a wide range of service delivery models from inclusive instruction to special education classes with designated instructional services. The number of students who

receive special education services in the districts ranged from 1,600-5,200, or at least 8% of the district's total student population. Special education directors from the respective K-12 urban school districts were interviewed as participants in the study. The respective school districts represent the natural work settings of the participants. Participants completed the face-to-face or telephonic interviews in their offices or an alternative setting, such as their home.

Description of Sample Participants

The sample of participants was drawn from approximately 30 middle-to-large sized urban school districts because urban school districts typically have larger, more diverse student populations, and more complex administrative configurations. Most of California's special education directors hold the singular special education directorial position in their districts, although there are many other district administrators who impact decisions at school sites, and those decisions have bearing upon students with disabilities and the staff who provide special education services.

Each participant had past or current experience of at least three years as a district level special education director. The gender, racial composition, and educational backgrounds of participants varied to allow for more diverse responses and contextual information from the interviews. Of the six participants, four were Caucasian females, one was an African-American male, and one was a Caucasian male. Four of the study participants held doctoral degrees and two were currently enrolled in doctoral programs. Participants worked in districts located in three different counties in Southern California. Five of the six participants were currently employed in K-12 urban school districts in Southern California, and one participant was a retired special education director.

Description of Sampling Methods

An online survey was emailed to special education directors of at least 30 middle-to-large population size urban K-12 school districts in Southern California, with the expectation that approximately one third of the selected population would respond to the survey and agree to participate in the study. The online survey consisted of nine questions related to demographics concerning the special education directors and the school districts within which they work. The purpose of the survey was to attain an eligible sample size of at least five to seven participants for the study. In addition to completion of the online survey, study participants acknowledged their availability and willingness to participate in the face-to-face or telephonic interview component of the study. The online survey was open for a period of two weeks to give the participants time to complete the survey. The rationale for using an online survey to gather and track demographic data was that potential respondents might be more quickly accessed than by using other means of data collection.

Human Subject Protections

Dissertation studies involving human subjects are subject to approval of all research activities by Pepperdine University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). IRBs are responsible for ensuring that research adheres to the three fundamental ethical principles of the Belmont report: (a) respect for persons, (b) maximizing benefits for the study while minimizing risks to participants, and (c) ensuring just and fair procedures for participants. In consideration of the these principles, the following matters were addressed: informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymity, risks of participation, benefits of participation, site or supervisory approval, deception, remuneration, conflicts of interest, and copyright clearance and/or licensing.

- Informed Consent. Participants were informed that they would be asked to participate in an online survey instrument to gather demographic information, determine eligibility to participate in the study, and willingness and availability to participate in the study. Participants were informed that they could ask questions or express concerns before agreeing to participate. Participants were provided an informed consent form before beginning the interview if they were eligible and agreed to participate in the study.

- Voluntary participation. Participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they may withdraw from the study at any time, without negative consequences.

- Confidentiality. The researcher assured participants that personally identifiable and private information would not be disclosed. Additionally, district-specific information was not made known. Practices to ensure confidentiality included using codes to identify participants and not actual names; data was reported in aggregate manner, and research records have been stored in locked files.

- Anonymity. Anonymity was not claimed; however, participants were assured they would only be identifiable to the researcher who recruited them for participation in the study.

Risk Minimization and Benefit Maximization

- Risks of participation. Any anticipated risks of participation in the study were minimal. A possible psychological risk was that participants, as a result of participation in the study, might more closely evaluate their personal strengths, reconsider their job responsibilities, and reflect upon their perceived level of

effectiveness in their current job positions, which could potentially result in cognitive dissonance. The researcher did not identify any potential physical, legal, economic, or social harm as a result of participation in the study.

- Benefits of participation. The benefits of participation have social ramifications, whereas aggregate data may be generalized and will add to the gap in the literature concerning special education directors.

Confidentiality and Data Management

- Site/supervisory approval. Prior to data collection, documentation of permission to conduct the study was acquired from participants. Supervisory permission was not required.

- Deception. All aspects of the study were fully disclosed to participants upfront by the researcher.

- Remuneration. Remuneration was provided to participants for full participation in the study. Full participation entailed completion of the interview protocol. A thank you card and a gift card of $25 value were provided to participants upon completion of their respective interviews.

- Conflicts of interest. The study did not involve financial considerations and the researcher was not aware of any personal conflicts of interest that might compromise the reporting of research. The researcher interviewed two special education directors with whom the researcher is acquainted; however, the researcher did not interview special education directors under whom the researcher is currently or has in the past been employed.

- Copyright clearance and/or licensing. The survey instrument was developed by the

  researcher. Copyrighted material was not used without permission of the copyright

  holder.

Due to the chosen design of this study, the researcher filed for exempt review. After review and approval by the IRB, the researcher began recruitment, obtained informed consent from all human subjects, requested voluntary participation, and collected data.

Instrumentation

Surveys. The nine-question survey used in this study was designed by the researcher to ascertain demographic data and establish whether participants met the guidelines to participate in the study. The survey was administered online to potential participants via Survey Monkey. It requested basic demographic information such as geographical location of school district, number of years in current position, number of years of experience as a special education director, number of employees supervised, and the participants' willingness and availability to participate in the study. Survey questions are shown in Appendix B. Upon survey completion, participants returned the survey to the researcher by clicking *submit*. Data were gathered electronically in a confidential manner via data collection processes embedded in the survey instrument. The total time for a participant to finish the survey took no more than 2-3 minutes. After participants completed the survey, the researcher contacted them to schedule and conduct interviews.

Interviews. The researcher developed interview questions from a review of the themes within the literature with relevance for addressing the research questions. A semi-structured interview protocol was developed for use in conducting face-to-face and telephonic interviews with study participants who consented to be interviewed. The interview protocol consisted of 13

questions developed to guide study participants toward openly sharing their primary areas of challenge, values and beliefs, practices, and lessons learned from personal experiences in their leadership roles. The interview questions served as a guide, rather than a fixed protocol, for each interview, and the questions were framed to gain deeper insight into special education directors' experiences as district level administrators.

As an introduction to the interview session, a brief description of the study's purpose and the importance of participants' responses were provided to each participant. The researcher asked follow-up questions to clarify or expand upon special education directors' responses, in keeping with the phenomenological approach used in this study (Creswell, 2013). Interview questions and probes were used to prompt participants to share additional or clarifying information within the context of the interview protocol. These are found in Appendix C and Appendix D. Study participants were asked to share their reflections candidly throughout the interviews. The time length of each interview ranged from approximately 30-60 minutes for each participant. Table 1 displays the relationship between the research questions and interview questions.

Data Collection

Data collection for this study involved: (a) demographics screening surveys and (b) interviews. Participants were recruited by posting an informational invitation on the CEC's online general forum. This recruitment document shared information about the study and its purpose, in addition to informing potential participants about how they could contact the researcher if they wished to participate in the study or suggest other potential participants. The recruitment notice is presented in Appendix E. In an additional recruitment effort, the researcher emailed an Information/Facts Sheet for Exempt Research, with a link to the online survey, to

special education directors within the target sample population. The Information/Facts Sheet is shown in Appendix F. To generate the first type of data, respondents were requested to complete the initial survey for the study independently, individually, and privately. Non-respondents were contacted via email and telephone after a period of one week to explain the purpose of the study and to encourage participation before the close of the survey.

A second area of data collection included semi-structured face-to-face or telephonic interviews. A total of six interviews were conducted. Interviews were conducted during March 2016. The goal of the interviews was to provide an in-depth examination of study participants' overall experience with special education leadership. Each participant was assigned an identification code before the interviews commenced. The respective codes were announced at the beginning of each electronic recording and affixed to transcriptions of participants' responses. Qualitative data acquired through electronically recorded individual face-to-face or telephonic interviews of participants were transcribed and analyzed using techniques commonly employed in qualitative inquiry. The researcher took notes while the interviews were electronically recorded. Two electronic audio recorders were used during the interviews, with one being a back-up. A back-up copy of all raw data was made after it was coded to be used for analysis (Coleman & Briggs, 2002). The researcher made one visit to each of four participants for a face-to-face interview. Two participants were interviewed telephonically. The semi-structured interviews were electronically recorded and transcribed for analysis later. Before beginning each interview session, the researcher presented participants with an Informed Consent form for review and signature. The form was emailed or mailed to participants who were interviewed via telephone. Appendix G shows the "Informed Consent for Participation in Research Activities" form.

Data Analysis

The primary goals of data analysis were to identify common themes within the participants' responses and to establish how the themes were inter-related (Bays & Crockett, 2007; Leedy & Ormrod, 2010). The acquired data were analyzed for content and frequency of themes and sub-themes. Both words and sentences were considered as units for analysis. Relevant literature related to transformational leadership practices were compared to the themes that emerged from data analysis. The culmination was a general account of the phenomenon as viewed through the eyes of participants' firsthand experiences (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010).

The data analysis procedures included the following steps (Creswell, 2013; Creswell, 2014; Leedy & Ormrod, 2010):

- Step 1. "Print interview transcripts with line numbers" to assist "in identifying specific excerpts from long transcripts" (Coleman & Briggs, 2002, p. 270).

- Step 2. Review transcripts of interviews. The transcripts were compared to the electronic audio recordings of the interviews and examined for accuracy. To attain comprehensive understanding of what the participants said, the transcripts were read and re-read multiple times.

- Step 3. Relevant phrases or sentences were identified that were related to the topic and that individually suggested a specific concept, thought, or idea.

- Step 4. Statements that express the range of perspectives of the phenomenon as experienced by study participants were grouped into categories.

- Step 5. Meaning units were grouped into common themes.

- Step 6. The various manners in which participants have experienced the phenomenon were considered.

- Step 7. The various meanings derived were used to develop a composite description of the phenomenon as individuals characteristically experience it.

The results were interpreted and reported with reference to how participants answered the interview questions. Conclusions and inferences were drawn from the results to discuss implications for practice.

Table 1

Relationship between Research Questions and Interview Questions

Research Questions	Interview Questions
RQ1: To what extent, if at all, do special education directors use aspects of transformational leadership in their roles to implement initiatives and change in their respective districts?	What is your philosophy on implementing change in the workplace? What are the most important characteristics a special education director needs to possess?
RQ2: What are the personal values and beliefs of special education directors, and how do such personal values and beliefs influence their work?	What are your personal work-related goals, as a special education director? What is your belief system concerning special education leadership? What drives or motivates you?
RQ3: What kinds of challenges, obstacles, or barriers do special education directors encounter in their roles and how do they overcome those?	Describe the unique challenges you face, if any, in your district as a special education director. Describe the conditions that make (or would make) you feel successful in your role. What have been some of the hardest lessons you have learned as a leader? What do you wish people understood about your job as a special education director?
RQ4: What strategies and practices have been learned by special education directors to improve outcomes for students with disabilities and the staff who support them?	What was your path in becoming a special education director? Of what practices are you most proud in your work? Why? What have been some of your greatest successes as a leader?

Coding. Transcripts from interviews were read and coded with one- to three-word codes labeling phenomena "for reference purposes to help with retrieval, checking, audit trails and

preserving anonymity" (Coleman & Briggs, 2002, p. 271). Each point (i.e., fact, opinion, perception) made by a participant was indicated by a code. Codes were then organized into broader themes that described the phenomenon expressed by participants. These themes were substantiated by direct quotes. The researcher conducted manual coding in addition to electronic coding using the qualitative data analysis software, HyperResearch.

Reliability and validity. Reliability and validity were enhanced through triangulation of data sources, including checking consistency of information from the interview to written documents and from the interview to the researcher's notes (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010; McLaughlin & Verstegen, 1998). Participants were informed that they could review the transcripts of their interviews by contacting the researcher to confirm that their thoughts were conveyed and reflected as they intended after the culmination of the coding and interpretation processes was complete. Face validity was important in gaining the confidence of study participants because it provided assurance that the characteristic that that was intended for measurement was actually being measured. It was anticipated that the conclusions drawn from the study would be generalizable to other contexts and have external validity because the study focused on real-life circumstances in real-life settings. The researcher established internal validity by ensuring the inferences made from the data collected were warranted (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010). Expert review was conducted to determine consistency among raw data, codes, and findings.

Written analysis. Writings emerged as reflections of the researcher's position and represent the collaborative process of qualitative research that seeks to have all voices be heard (Creswell, 2013). This study presented findings and interpretations as a "detailed descriptive portrait" (Creswell, 2014, p. 204). The writing style of the analysis included quotes and detailed

stories from participants. Themes or common threads were developed from the data to share various perspectives from in-depth accounts of the participants' experiences.

Positionality Statement

The researcher has worked for more than 20 years in the field of special education in various positions, including instructional aide, special education teacher, school administrator, and district level special education administrator. Most of the researcher's work in the field of education has been as a director of education in several nonpublic schools in Los Angeles County in Southern California. Nonpublic schools usually serve students who have significant learning, emotional, behavioral, or physical disabilities. The researcher's extensive professional work experience in nonpublic schools has afforded her opportunities to build collegial working relationships with special education directors in more than 12 different school districts. It is essential to build trust and collegial, collaborative relationships with district special education directors because directors refer students with disabilities from their districts to nonpublic schools to provide services that their districts may not be well-equipped to address.

The researcher has been intrigued by the ways in which district special education directors address the challenges of leading a team of special educators and service providers in the face of incongruent federal accountability standards, severe legal ramifications for procedural errors, and often insufficient support to achieve proposed district goals. In the interest of having the truth of their lived experiences revealed, the researcher wishes to share the untold self-reported stories of special education directors. In hopes of exploring the perceptions of district level special education administrators concerning their personal leadership roles, responsibilities, qualifications, and experiences, the researcher analyzed the themes that emerged from the accounts disclosed by study participants.

An important goal of this study was to add to the literature so that aspiring special education administrators, especially non-traditional candidates, could build capacity for leadership by applying the lessons learned from the stories of experienced special education directors to their work towards improving the lives of those who require special education and to improving the work of those who serve such students. Exceptional individuals serve with purpose, lead with purpose, and live with purpose. The researcher believes that insights from such individuals are waiting to be heard and shared.

Summary

This chapter offered an overview and rationale for the qualitative phenomenological research methodology that this study used to gather and analyze data gathered regarding the lived experiences of special education directors. Subsequently, considerations concerning human subjects were outlined with regard to IRB requirements. The IRB Approval Letter is shown in Appendix H. Details regarding sample selection and participant solicitation were discussed, in addition to descriptions of the survey instrument and interview protocol. A brief discussion of the data collection and data analysis process followed. The researcher's positionality was disclosed to provide insight into the researcher's background, perspectives, and interest in conducting the study. The following chapter will describe the data findings that arose from participant interviews.

Chapter Four: Presentation of Findings

Overview

This chapter provides a general overview of the study, the results of the study relative to each research question, and a review of essential findings. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study included: (a) exploring the self-reported experiences of district level special education directors, (b) examining whether the special education directors embody transformational leadership characteristics in carrying out their work, (c) assessing what practices special education implemented to accomplish the myriad responsibilities of their roles and (d) understanding the goals, accomplishments, needs, and recommendations of special education directors with regard to supporting retention of future special education directors.

Four research questions guided the study:

1. To what extent, if at all, do special education directors use aspects of transformational leadership in their roles to implement initiatives and change in their respective districts?

2. What are the personal values and beliefs of special education directors, and how do such personal values and beliefs influence their work?

3. What kinds of challenges, obstacles, or barriers do special education directors encounter in their roles and how do they overcome those?

4. What strategies and practices have been learned by special education directors to improve outcomes for students with disabilities and the staff who support them?

This phenomenological study employed participant interviews to ascertain the beliefs, values, challenges, and perspectives of special education directors in K-12 urban school districts in Southern California. The researcher interviewed six special education directors from six K-12

school districts located in three different Southern California counties. One of the six

participants was a retired special education director and the other five participants were currently

employed in K-12 urban school districts in Southern California. The participants were asked 13

questions in a semi-structured interview format and received interview probes to elicit additional

information, as needed. The final interview question, number 13, allowed study participants to

add any additional information they desired which was not addressed by the researcher prior to

conclusion of the interview. The interview questions corresponded to specific research questions

and were designed to elicit rich description of the participants' experience. Data were collected

during a 2-week period in early March 2016 through interviews with directors who had worked

or who were currently working as a district level special education director for a minimum of 3

years.

Findings

Participants' responses to semi-structured interview questions were analyzed to discover

themes within the context of the text (Creswell, 2007). Six special education directors completed

face-to-face or telephone interviews. Following the interviews, the electronic audio recordings

of the interviews were transcribed. The researcher read each transcript multiple times and

independently conducted hand-coding to ensure familiarity with the text and understanding of

potential multiple meanings in participants' responses. Qualitative data analysis software,

HyperResearch, was used to re-code transcriptions. The researcher developed a Code Book in

HyperResearch to create and organize codes into a structure of 12 groups, with a total of 50 sub-

codes listed under the respective groups. HyperResearch software produced frequency reports of

each code's occurrence among all interview respondents. Although some transcribed statements

were identified by multiple codes, the dual coding process (hand coding and software coding)

added to the researcher's insight concerning participants' meanings. The purpose of the data analysis was to identify common themes among participants' responses, with relevance to each research question. Transcripts and electronic audio recordings were labeled with an identification code assigned to each participant. In an effort to maintain confidentiality for the participants and their respective school districts, participants were assigned identification codes when citing direct quotes from specific participants in the discussion of findings.

Research question one. The path of inquiry for the first research question related to whether transformational leadership characteristics were embedded within the participants' leadership practices. Transformational leadership included the following attributes: charisma; individualized consideration; inspirational leadership; and intellectual stimulation (Bass, 1985). According to Bass (1985): (a) charismatic leadership is displayed by leaders who have high self-confidence and self-esteem, are persistent, assertive, and who are concerned about successful organizational change; (b) inspirational leadership relates to non-intellectual and emotional qualities of influence; whereas, (c) leaders who exemplify intellectual stimulation focus on strategic thinking, logic and rationality, rather than appealing to feelings and emotions; and (d) individualized consideration among leaders features mentoring, expressions of appreciation, and treatment of subordinates based on their individual needs and abilities.

The following paragraphs highlight themes culled in participants' responses, related to each interview question. Evidence that participants embrace transformational leadership qualities is inferred in the following quotations when participants relate actions taken during their roles to implement change within their respective districts. The following two interview questions were asked of participants related to research question one.

Interview question eight and interview question 11. Interview question eight requested information about the participants' philosophy on implementing change in the workplace and interview question 11 requested information about the key characteristics a special education director should possess. Study participants spoke of many notable aspects of transformational leadership as part of their own leadership behaviors, such as: gaining buy-in from staff, families, and other stakeholders; frequent communication, including being a good listener; consensus building and collaboration; empowerment of staff; relationship development; intrinsic motivation; and having a strong sense of purpose with regard to their work. Specific quotes from some of the study participants will be reported to summarize common themes recognized in the responses obtained for research question one. Participant A3100 stated the following, with regard to the importance of gaining buy-in from stakeholders through a collaborative process when implementing change:

I don't believe in change for the sake of change, but I also believe you can get stagnant. You have to constantly be evaluating what's going on, what's a problem, and what do we need to fix. Then from there, you gather a group of subcommittees and talk to people about "What do they see? Do they have any solutions? What do people think?"

Congruent with the tenets of transformational leadership, Participant C3200 shared the significance of having a strategic plan and communicating the vision to a team when working toward a common goal:

We met with all of the other cabinet members, so business personnel, ed services, and talked about the vision. Then we met with the principals, just the principals. Talked to them about the model of what we were doing. Then we met with the SAI [specialized academic instruction] teachers. We had work groups with gen ed teachers,

administrators, special ed teachers and kind of talked about the things they were thinking, training things that they were thinking they needed. We did a summer institute for our gen ed teachers to come. We did a number of topics for them based on their feedback. We established and got their ideas. We had teams that came together. We did a district-wide meeting and it was kicked off by the superintendent because we wanted this message not to come from special education. It wasn't another thing that special ed was doing to them. It was we are changing our service delivery model and this is why…because we are not meeting our goals for least restrictive environment. We want to be able to do it on our own terms. The literature supports that students do better in a general education setting than they do in segregated settings. We did all of that.

In regard to encouraging and motivating employees to work together, Participant E1801 shared the following sentiments:

I'm into building people up so that they can come together and collaboratively resolve problems and collaboratively come up with an action plan, or plans to become better together. I believe doing it together and collaboratively gives more ownership and buy-in.

Summary. As evidenced by the preceding quotes, responses to the interview questions yielded poignant declarations supporting the fact that special education directors do indeed use various aspects of transformational leadership in their roles to implement change in their respective districts. Study participants engage in collaborative communication with stakeholders, passionately spread their vision, and value team members as integral to the process of initiating change within their districts.

Research question two. The focus of research question two was to delve into participants' personal beliefs and values and how those beliefs and values influence their work. The following three interview questions were asked of participants regarding research question two.

Interview question three. The intent of interview question three was developed to identify study participants' personal work-related goals. This question was posed because it is conceivable that one's goals may be an indicator of one's beliefs and values. One participant stated goals concerning personal professional development, and those goals were expressed in terms of a desire for career advancement in a broader scope outside of the field of special education, while also pursuing personal professional development to build personal capacity to better serve the participant's district of employment in areas of need. Additionally, another participant shared the desire to build a collaborative parent community. Four participants described goals of building programs to support students and four participants spoke of goals pertaining to building the capacity of staff to more effectively support students. Personal work-related goals of participants were summarized by Participant A0800 thusly:

Every year I do a mission statement specifically for my department. I pull it out every month or so and review it with my staff. Generally speaking, I want ensure that our students are getting academically what they should be getting . . . that they are being supported with Common Core, and that our teachers are being trained in an equitable manner, not only in instruction and curriculum, but also in compliance. I want to be sure that our programs are cutting edge. You're always going to have lawsuits and due process filings, but I want to make sure that it's not because we screwed up. It's because

some parents just need to file. That's my goal. I want to have a parent community that is

a collaborative community.

Interview question five. Interview question five requested information about

participants' belief systems concerning special education leadership. A number of study

participants shared similar belief systems, as evidenced by comments made that reflect working

in special education as a calling, not just a career, that the rewards of the job are intrinsic in

nature, and that they value every team member. Two participants expressed the belief that

addressing students' needs being a priority. Four of the six respondents focused on team

building from the perspective of supporting staff to do their jobs. With regard to a core belief in

team building, Participant C3200 asserted,

> It is not just in special ed, . . . I think leadership in general, the successful leaders are the
>
> ones that can build strong teams because not one person can do it all. You bring in people
>
> under you that can fill in the knowledge base so that you can be well-rounded in your
>
> team. You have to, as a leader, support your team under you. I think you have to be a
>
> big picture kind of person. You have to be, I think, detail-oriented because skipping
>
> details can get you in big trouble.

Interview question six. Interview question six asked participants about their source of

motivation. This question was posed because it is possible that one's driving force may be, in

some manner, associated with one's beliefs and values. One participant expressed that being

successful (i.e., feeling competent and efficient) is a personal motivator. Another participant

shared that approaching new challenges, such as developing new programs to meet the needs of

students within the district, is a motivational factor, whereas a different participant conveyed

personal passion for the work as being motivating. Two participants mentioned that they are

motivated when they see children with disabilities making progress. Similarly, one other participant voiced that one motivational factor for her work in special education is when she thinks of her son. Participant A0800 shared, "I have a son with autism and he's really high functioning. He's doing great. He came along after I was already well into the field. His experiences are always in my mind." Two of the participants reflected that they feel motivated by acknowledgement of their work, such as positive comments, praise and recognition. A desire to impact social justice by giving back and making a difference in the lives of staff, children, and their families was recounted as the impetus driving the work of three of the six participants. Along that frame of mind, Participant A0800 elaborated,

> I'm a really sensitive person, as far as injustices and things like that. It goes beyond the world of special education. I don't want children who have disabilities to be treated differently and to not have the opportunity to be successful. It's very, very basic for me. It's like a mission. It's a calling.

Participant C1900 shared a similar thought associated with the empathic feelings of those whose motivation is to positively impact lives, "All these years of remembering of that the parents are coming from a different place. I've got to, as much as I can, step into their shoes . . . which is a difficult journey, I know, but I try." Thoughts expressed by Participant E1801 embody many of the participants' sentiments:

> What motivates me is that I am making a difference in people's lives, not only for students, but for parents, as well. It just really makes you feel good when you're actually able to help a parent and there's a smile saying "Thank you, I've been needing help for a long time." It also drives me to see the faces of the people that I work with every day, that they feel good about their jobs, that they're passionate about it, that they also feel

like they are making a difference in this world and in our community. That really drives me. It's not just a job for me, but it's a passion.

Summary. Study participants' beliefs and values are evident in the selfless goals and aspirations they espouse. Participants felt that their personal values and belief affect the work they perform on behalf of children and families, as well as their leadership of staff. All participants intimated that the work they do is larger than themselves and they feel called to carry out such a special vocation. The special education directors respect the staff who make up their teams. Throughout the interviews, participants indicated a perspective that their role is to support and serve. The broader implication is that one's perspectives influence one's leadership style both directly and indirectly.

Research question three. Research question three asked about the types of challenges, obstacles or barriers participants encounter in their work and how they surmount those. The following four interview questions were asked of participants related to research question three.

Interview question two. The focus of interview question was to ask participants about unique challenges faced in their work positions. A number of study participants described similar challenges faced by special education directors, including: a high level of accountability, high turnover among special education directors, difficulty developing relationships with other central office departments, and the need for more special education control from the central office. With regard to the high turnover of special education directors, Participant A2501 explained the condition as "a function of both the stamina of the individual director and of the supports that they have in their district for special education." However, challenges more frequently discussed (i.e., each concern was mentioned by two participants) include the following: isolation of special education teachers and special education directors, difficulty

working with general education teachers, and improving relationships with families. Upon reflection of the need for support to diminish the challenges of isolation, Participant A2501 stated,

> I think if you have the belief and buy-in on the part of your upper management, that spills over to principals, and spills over into a situation where everybody does have respect for you and the work that you do, as well, and you're not just an afterthought.

Another major challenge faced by three of the six participants was the task of changing the mindset of staff to develop inclusive educational programs. This challenge was summarized by Participant A2501:

> Other challenges would include, I would say, working with general educators or trying to establish a rationale for the work that we're doing or why is this student in my general education class or why are these kids going to be back on my campus explanations. I think that requires some communication skills and extra time with people.

Consistent with that thought, Participant C3200 disclosed,

> There are obviously challenges to changing the mindset of people working in special education, especially in California, because I have been in other places and California has more of a segregated piece with having separate classes for students with disabilities, more so than other states I have lived in. Getting people to go into that inclusive kind of mindset and including our students with disabilities has been a challenge for everybody.

Additionally, 50% of the respondents discussed the challenges faced with the expansive scope of district special education departments impacts the level and how the departments affect the level of communication from the special education department to the central office, school sites, parents, and other stakeholders. To this end, Participant A2501 elaborated,

I think a lot of jobs at the district office have challenges of different types, but I think the

special ed director is a unique position in terms of the emotionality of it and the scope.

It's exponential in terms of the amount of staff you are assisting with the supervision of,

hiring of, with the amount of staff just in your own department that you oversee, and with

the number of students whose success is the measure of your effectiveness as a director.

I think that's a huge responsibility for anyone going into a special ed director position.

Participant A2501 added, "I was challenged greatly by the scope of the job and I had a

department of approximately 700 or so employees, and it's very hard to move that many people

without working your tail off constantly." Four of six participants considered the concept of

encroachment to be a significant challenge for special education directors. Participant E1801

explained, "Special education is under-funded, so we obviously encroach on general funds.

Managing that is always a challenge." A similar thought was reflected in Participant A2501's

statement,

I feel like they [my district] understand the challenges that I am facing . . . just a real

understanding about the encroachment and that it's not my fault, not personal to me. It's

a community problem and we have to work toward solving it rather than [saying], "You

figure it out, you find a way, you need to make cuts, you need to do this, do you have it in

your budget."

Lastly, in response to interview question two, 100% of participants expressed that legal issues

(including litigation and compliance) are among the foremost challenges they experience.

Interview question four. The focus of interview question four was the conditions that

make participants feel successful. One participant noted a feeling of success when observing

teachers enjoying their work. Another participant recalled feelings of success upon being able to

build a strong team. A different participant expressed feelings of success when seeing everyone (general educators and special educators) working together on behalf of students. Participants also related that they would feel successful if something could be done about funding for special education, when they create programs to bring students back to the district (from alternative outside programs), when their staff feel supported, and when they personally receive support from the superintendent. Fifty percent of participants described the ways in which receiving acknowledgement and positive feedback garner feelings of personal success. Participant A0800 explained a desire for acknowledgement by surmising what she wished to hear:

"We see in our spreadsheets that we can't really spend less money, but you're spending your money more efficiently and getting more out of the dollar. We see that your students are academically achieving at a rate that's comparable to students without disabilities. We see that the lawsuits are down for these reasons. We see that the level of support that you provide your teachers is great." Some acknowledgment of that would be nice, and all of the feedback in each of those areas, as well.

Fifty percent of participants also reported feeling successful when they develop programs to help students with disabilities make academic progress. Participant A2501 stated "I would feel successful if I was able to create programs that provided a safe, secure environment where students could truly maximize their learning." Consistent with that thought, Participant E1801 added, "When I see the academic trends of special education students improving academically, by looking at the data, that makes me feel successful that the kids are being successful."

Interview question nine. The focus of interview question nine was to request that participants share some of the hardest lessons they have learned as leaders. Each participant shared a different lesson that was important to them. The six lessons shared are:

1. It is okay to make mistakes. Participant E1801 stated,

In trying to understand the culture of an organization and the politics, you have to make

mistakes. And for some people like myself, who I guess I'm kind of a perfectionist, I

hate to make mistakes. But when you're in a new position, or you're learning a new

culture, you will make mistakes and the mistakes aren't negative. They're actually there

to build you up.

2. Humility. Participant A2501 explained,

I think a lot of administrators think that they are in charge, but we're not really in charge.

We pretend to be in charge, but parents are in charge at all times. When we're dealing

with our special ed parents, we're dealing with people who have had a trauma of sorts.

They've been through some things; they may still be mourning the loss of the perfect

child. They may not be ready to hear what you have to say, so you have to be even more

patient than you normally would. You can't imagine what their response is going to be

because you haven't been in their shoes.

3. Importance of pre-meetings. Participant C1900 shared,

Pre-meets are really important. Whether you are going into a resolution or a mediation, if

you haven't sat down and really done the due diligence to study an issue, [you need to]

get all the different stakeholders' input. Do a chronological review of the historical

factors before you just step into a meeting. Really try to understand where everybody is

coming from. I've learned that you need to do that. When you don't, the meetings may

not go as well.

4. Do not let your ego get involved. Participant A3100 commented,

You're not always right. Sometimes you are right, but you can't get anybody to buy in,

so it doesn't matter if you're right or not. If no one's going for it, you need to let it go

and not let your ego get involved. You can't lead the parade if no one's following you.

5. Provide support despite your personal feelings. Participant A0800 disclosed,

You may meet people, like principals, that you don't like and don't respect. At the end of

the day, you got to support them and be perceived as supporting them regardless. You

can still make changes and get things done. I've worked with some pretty ridiculous

principals who have done some pretty harsh things with students, really unforgiveable

kind of things. At the end of the day, I have to continue to work with that person.

6. Accept you can't make everyone happy. Participant C3200 responded:

I think you just have to stay the course. You have to be thick-skinned, not just from the

outside, but even from within the inside, because not everybody understands what you

do, understands your challenges. This is probably the position in the district that is hard

because sometimes you don't make anybody happy. You have to be able to say no once

in a while and know that people aren't going to be happy with that piece, but they

understand why.

Interview question 12. Interview question 12 requested information about what study

participants wish people understood about their job. One participant expressed a desire for

people to be considerate and understand that special education directors have feelings, just as

others do. Participant C1900 shared,

We tend to see a lot of unhappiness in the role that I'm in. You tend to be working a lot

with families that are unhappy. You get all the litigation . . . people are suing. So I

would like people to remember that when they step in this door that I may have even had

or somebody on my team may have had a rough day. Have some patience and some

kindness and give us a moment to breathe. Really, overall, we are in it because we like

children and we want to make the best of it. I hope they remember that's why we are

there. Not for any other reason, but to give the best education we can.

Another participant explained that people need to understand that special education

directors must often balance a triangle of what appears to be in the best interest of the district,

family, and the law. Three participants said they wish people understood that a special education

director's job is very challenging and involved, requiring them to address many aspects of

running a department, instead being able to focus primarily on one concentrated area, such as

personnel, finances, or curriculum. Three participants also stressed they would like people to

understand there needs to be shared responsibility between special education and general

education, that all students are everyone's responsibility.

Summary. Participants acknowledged that they have demanding, confusing jobs and

they do not think most people understand all the roles their position entails. Participants believe

they are often isolated while working in the field of special education and often feel unsupported

by other central office administrators. Additionally, participants expressed particular concern

about insufficient funding for special education and find the blame associated with the concept of

encroachment disturbing. Although participants expressed feelings of being successful in their

roles of serving students and supporting their teams, they acknowledged feeling unappreciated

because they receive little acknowledgement or support concerning their efforts from the central

office. During the interviews, participants identified "lessons learned" as ways to approach

current challenges and potentially avoid future complications in their work as special education leaders.

   Research question four. The intent of research question four was to identify strategies and practices used to improve outcomes for students and staff. The following three interview questions were asked of participants related to research question four.

   Interview question one. Interview question sought information about study participants' paths in becoming special education directors. This question was posed first to help participants become comfortable talking openly about themselves and to provide the investigator background information about participants. A person's career path, including background information such as educational and work experience, may be viewed as influential with regard to strategies and practices used in one's work due to any consequent knowledge or skills acquired along the journey. Three of the six participants stated that they worked as general education teachers and one of the six participants is certified to teach general education, but never taught general education. All participants, with the exception of one, have been special education teachers. Five participants were school site principals or assistant principals before becoming special education directors, two of whom were school site administrators at nonpublic schools. Only two participants mentioned that they have a master's degree in special education; however, five of the six participants have doctoral degrees and one is currently enrolled in a educational leadership doctoral program. All participants work or have worked as a special education director from between 4-11 years. The cumulative years of experience participants held special education directors is 47 years, with 7.6 years being the average number of years with work experience as a special education director. Concerning work preferences, Participant A0800 disclosed:

I have the opportunity to be a school principal. I'm not interested in that. Very few

directors have not been principals, but I don't care about that. I don't care about the

whole school, to be quite honest. I do, but that's not my focus. I have an opportunity to

be assistant superintendent, but it would encompass beyond special education. That

would mean I will have to turn over the special education piece to a director. I don't

want to do that. I want to do this. This is what I want to do.

Interview question seven. The focus of interview question seven was work practices

which bring participants a sense of pride. This question was posed to elicit specific with regard

to unique practices used by directors to support positive outcomes for staff and students.

Participants listed various personal practices as sources of pride in their work. One participant

mentioned that helping others achieve job satisfaction is an important work practice. Participant

A3100 stated,

I believe that part of my job is to help other people prepare for their next job, to have job

satisfaction, to have goals, and encourage those things. Special ed is like civil rights. It's

what you do because it's the right thing to do. If we're called to special ed, we work

harder than a regular teacher, we have more headaches than a regular teacher, we're not

paid any more money and we're not acknowledged, so we have to find job satisfaction

from knowing that we're doing our purpose, which is to help kids.

Another participant noted that creating themes to keep staff student and parent-focused is

a particularly helpful practice. Other participants mentioned team building and establishing

structure and stability as important practices that impact outcomes for students and staff. Three

of six participants highlighted respectful, collaborative communication as a constructive practice.

Participant C1900 elaborated:

I think people say that I know I don't always have an answer, but that I can sit down with them. We can talk it through and together we can come up with solutions. No matter how long you have been doing something, there is nothing black and white in our job. You can have all the information. You've learned it all, but every child is unique and you might have to come up with something different for each child.

Additionally, four participants indicated that creating new programs,—such as inclusive schooling, positive behavior intervention system (PBIS), structured training for paraeducators, and autism programs—results in positive outcomes within their districts.

Interview question 10. The intent of interview question ten was developed to identify study participants greatest successes as leaders. One participant felt successful about being able to "spot talent" and get great people through the hiring process. Two participants specified that building teams is a personal success for them, whereas two other participants credited part of their success to the ability to bring people together effectively. Along those lines, Participant C1900 elaborated, "We have a team that has the right mindset to be in this position. We don't all agree, which is fine, but we all have one common purpose . . . that is to make the best education we can for our kids." Participant E1801 stated, "Success is being able to bring people together in a positive drive for change and be able to solve any problems that come our way to where we feel there's nothing we can't handle together." Furthermore, two participants said that they experienced success in developing new programs. Participant A3100 asserted, "I think getting the board and cabinet to support big changes, doing the research, building up information that allows them to want to support what I want to change. That was a success." Participant A0800 enthusiastically pointed out,

I built a credit recovery high school program for students with mild to moderate

disabilities. Prior to its coming, there was no other option for them other than a fifth year

of high school because our continuation school did not accept them with an IEP. They

would drop out. This is now going into the fourth year with this program. We've

graduated almost 200 students who would have dropped out. I'm proud of my programs.

I'm proud of bringing together the parents.

Summary. With regard to research question four and the associated interview questions,

participants described various practices they use to improve outcomes for students and strategies

to support the staff under their leadership, as well as other staff within the district. All

participants shared background information concerning their career paths leading to becoming a

special education director. Although the participants had different paths, each participant

brought a wealth of education and professional work experience to his/her role. All participants

expressed pride when discussing the programs they developed to benefit students within their

respective districts. The participants expressed fundamental beliefs that doing research,

providing equitable training, having a stable organizational structure, and collaborative team

building are important foundational practices to use when developing new programs to support

students.

Summary of Key Findings

Analysis of participants' answers to interview questions identified 12 themes and 50

corresponding sub-themes across the four research questions. The prevalent themes that

emerged interrelate and overlap across multiple research questions. Of the 12 themes that

emerged from data analysis, six occurred most frequently: charismatic leadership, special

education funding, intellectual stimulation, legal concerns, shared responsibility, supportive

practices used by special education directors, and support needed by special education directors to be most effective in their roles.

The key themes that emerged during the study related to three of the four research questions. Research question one aligns with the transformational leadership characteristics: charismatic leadership and intellectual stimulation. The key themes highlighted for research question two focused on how personal values and beliefs impact the work of special education directors, and these also align with transformational leadership characteristics. The themes that emerged for research question three were funding, legal concerns, type of support needed by special education directors, and shared responsibility. Table 2 displays the key themes as they relate to the research questions. The findings relative to the six key themes will be discussed in Chapter Five.

Table 2

Alignment of Research Questions and Key Themes

Focus of Research Questions	Six Key Themes	Sub-groups
RQ1: Transformational Leadership Characteristics	Charismatic Leadership	Gain buy-in, frequent communication, empowerment, strong sense of purpose, passion, vision
RQ2: Personal Beliefs and Values	Shared Responsibility	collaborative work with stakeholders, building capacity of staff, addressing students' needs is a priority, belief that all staff should have empathic feelings for students with disabilities and their families
RQ3: Challenges	Funding for special education	Encroachment, insufficient funding
	Litigation	Blame for litigation and cost of service provision
	Administrative Support	Lack of acknowledgement from superintendent; lack of support and understanding from general educators, school site administrators, and central office department heads; isolation
RQ4: Strategies and Practices	Intellectual Stimulation	Team building, establishing structure and stability, structured training for staff, conducting research, developing new programs to support students

Chapter Five: Findings, Conclusions and Recommendations

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to determine who special education directors are and what motivates them to do their jobs by exploring the self-reported perspectives and ideologies of special education directors, and to thereby understand their goals, challenges, needs, values, beliefs, and practices with regard to leadership. A review of the study's purpose, analysis and conclusions of the study's key findings, implications for policies, practices, and recommendations for further study will be presented in this chapter. A summary with personal insights from the researcher will be included.

In light of the study's purpose, it is important to understand the general context of special education in the U.S. Federal legislation and policies require school districts to create equity and increase access to basic education for students with IDEA-eligible disabilities. School districts are federally mandated to educate such students in the LRE and to provide support to address the students' individualized needs. District administrators are tasked to make decisions about how to address the needs of students with disabilities while their districts are significantly under-funded at the federal and state levels. Consequent to inadequate funding levels, local districts must contribute funds from their unrestricted general funds to cover the excess expenses of educating students with disabilities. The practice of using funds from a district's general education account to cover special education expenses is known as encroachment.

Interpretation of Key Findings

As the evidence has shown, special education directors often feel isolated, unsupported, and misunderstood in the scope of their roles. School site administrators and higher level central office administrators are generally unprepared to fully understand and address the complex

realities involved with meeting federal compliance standards while serving the needs of a diverse population of students with special needs. They must often rely on the expertise of special education directors for guidance concerning special education administration of special education programs, adherence to procedural and legal compliance issues, and ways to implement change to remain current with federal and state special education requirements. To be effective in their roles, special education directors must both support and receive support from other district administrators to meet federal requirements concerning serving all students in an equitable manner. There is an abundance of literature on leadership styles and traits of principals and superintendents; however, a gap exists in professional literature regarding leadership styles and traits of special education directors. For this reason, this researcher embarked on this study to obtain insight from special education directors and identify ways in which actions can be undertaken to provide more support to special education directors.

The focus of the research questions was to identify whether special education directors' leadership is characterized by transformational leadership qualities, in what ways personal values and beliefs influence their work, what challenges they experience in their roles, and what strategies and practices they use to support students and their staff. Participant interviews were used in this phenomenological study to learn about the perspectives of special education directors in K-12 urban school districts in Southern California, using the four guiding research questions. Participants included six district-level special education directors from three different counties in Southern California. Interview questions were posed in a semi-structured format and probes were used, as needed, to elicit additional information. The interview questions corresponded to specific research questions and were designed to elicit detailed descriptions of participants' personal experiences and perspectives. The average time length of interviews

ranged from approximately 30-60 minutes. Data were collected during a 2-week period in early

March 2016 through face-to-face and telephonic interviews with directors. Six key themes of

charismatic leadership, intellectual stimulation, funding, litigation, shared responsibility and

administrative support were identified in the findings.

  Transformational leadership. Bass (1985) held that transformational leaders are self-

confident and are willing to stand for what they believe is right, even if this includes efforts to

change the organization's shared values. Through communication of vision and by role

modeling, the transformational leader raises followers' level of awareness concerning important

issues and inspires high standards of performance for the good of the organization.

In alignment with Bass's thoughts, study participants spoke of several transformational

leadership characteristics that were integral to their leadership styles. Findings revealed two

specific areas of transformational leadership that were particularly evident in participants'

descriptions of their experiences: charismatic leadership and intellectual stimulation.

  Charismatic leadership. One of the essential descriptors of a transformational leader is

that the leader is charismatic. In keeping with characteristics of charismatic leaders, participants

said others describe them as fair, patient, approachable, compassionate, respectful, likable, and

having a sense of humor. Participants explained that these personal attributes are beneficial in

their jobs where the scope of responsibility is broad and fraught with internal and external

challenges. Participants shared that they deal with multiple crises in the course of a day, seldom

receiving acknowledgement from the central office for positive outcomes, and frequently receive

blame for issues which are not their fault.

  Bass (1985) contended that charismatic leaders tend to come to fore in organizational

cultures that are in transition and where there may be both acute and chronic crisis. Additionally,

Bass stated, "With charisma, transformational leaders structure and articulate problems for followers, enabling the followers to more easily comprehend problems so that they can more effectively deal with them" (p. 31). Participants strongly expressed a belief in consensus building with staff by engaging in active listening, allowing for joint decision-making, being responsive to staff needs and striving to empower their employees for success.

Study participants ardently discussed their efforts to implement change within their organizations. According to Bass (1985), "Charismatic leaders relate the work and mission of their group to strongly held values, ideals, and aspirations shared in common by their organization's culture" (p. 40). Likewise, participants described the processes involved in developing innovative new programs to serve the needs of students with disabilities, such as developing relationships with school site administrators and central office administrators to hear their thoughts and concerns, holding meetings with staff and providing professional development trainings to address those concerns, and gaining buy-in concerning impending changes throughout the department or district. Study participants who viewed themselves as charismatic leaders described themselves as assertive, ambitious, and passionate about their work. They said their work in special education was more than a job; it was a "calling" about which they felt compelled to convince others to share and understand their beliefs. Participants stressed that excellent communication skills were essential to convince others of their vision concerning a new direction for the organization.

Intellectual stimulation. Intellectual stimulation is an extension of charismatic leadership. In keeping with the tenets of intellectual stimulation, evidence revealed that participants worked closely with staff to ensure that their special education teachers were well-trained in order to support student learning. Participants viewed themselves as competent,

organized, open-minded, detail-oriented, focused, and goal-oriented. According to the data analysis, 100% of participants overwhelming identified two practices, strategic planning and development of new programs, as evidence that they use the concept of intellectual stimulation in their roles as special education directors: strategic planning and development of new programs. Participants felt that strategic planning was integral to implementing change. They believe that good strategic planning is done first, conducting research concerning the problem or issue that requires change to explain why the change needs to occur, explaining how it ties into the organization's values, and detailing the ways the change will benefit the organization. One participant noted that when people in an organization are resistant to change, it helps to have the message of change disseminated through various channels, from the top down and directly from employee to employee. Once the superintendent and cabinet are committed to the initiative, it is helpful for the message of change to be communicated directly from the superintendent to employees and also for employees to share information with each other via site or department-based learning communities. To be effective, strategic planning involves getting all stakeholders on board—including parent organizations, community members, and school site staff—in a systematic manner. One participant provided an example of how strategic planning was used to implement an inclusive schooling program one grade level at a time each year, so that special education classrooms would be phased out gradually and students with disabilities could be successfully integrated into general education classrooms, with the required supports.

Challenges. As the evidence shows, two major challenges of special education are funding and litigation. Interestingly, these challenges are somewhat intertwined whereas one component of funding concerns is due to feelings that special education encroaches upon districts' general funds. Likewise, one of the primary reasons special education expenditures are

so high in some districts is because of the costs incurred by litigation against districts, as well as costs of districts filing suit against families to protect districts' rights to offer FAPE.

   Special education funding. All participants expressed concern regarding special education funding. The federal government has fallen dramatically short of its intent to fund approximately 40% of California's special education costs (Taylor, 2014), yet districts must address the individualized needs of all students with disabilities amid competing interests for funding within districts (McLaughlin & Verstegen, 1998). Participants revealed that they felt as though they were being blamed for the costs of special education supports and services, although a lack of adequate funding is the case. In support of that feeling, one participant shared that when special education directors request technology, staff, or programs, they are not looking to spend more money; rather, they are looking to provide appropriate education for students who belong to the district. The participant added that the concept of encroachment should be viewed as a contribution to supporting students' education.

   Although participants do not control funding for special education, they expressed positive and resilient attitudes with regards to finding other ways to meet students' needs despite insufficient funding. Participants shared that one way to reduce special education costs would be to invest in developing programs and services for the district in-house instead of using outside agencies. For example, one participant stated that districts need to put money into developing in-house programs to save money, without changing or decreasing the amount of services, because it is significantly less expensive to provide services in-house with district-run programs.

   Litigation. All participants expressed concern regarding legal challenges and costs of litigation. Special education directors are responsible for ensuring district compliance with laws governing special education (Bon & Bigbee, 2011), and the work of special education directors

has become more challenging, due to significant increases in litigation in recent years (Zirkel, 2014). Weintraub (2012) stated that findings of noncompliance always emerge when school districts are monitored. Although participants expressed that they do not like the high level of litigation in their districts, they understand that some level of litigation is inevitable due to legal mandates and compliance issues. Instead of trying to avoid conflict, as leaders, they choose to face conflict from the perspective of building consensus to ensure children receive what they need, whether or not parents are completely happy with the outcome. Additionally, participants shared that taking time to build legally defensible programs for students with disabilities is one way to reduce the amount of litigation.

Needs. The evidence showed that study participants identified two common themes regarding their needs to be effective in their jobs: shared responsibility and administrative support. Study participants felt that increased levels of administrative support for special education would positively impact district culture with regard to the belief that all staff are responsible and accountable for serving all district students, including students with disabilities.

Shared responsibility. Shared responsibility refers to participants' desire to have general education administrators and staff understand that all students, whether general education or special education students, are everyone's responsibility. Special education students are not to be exclusively served by special educators, as they are entitled to receive access to general education as well. One participant shared that one change that would help realize greater outcomes for students is if everyone worked with all students in a seamless manner to provide instructional supports and assessments. Another participant expressed that special education should not be a silo because successful programs are blended between general education and special education. Participants expressed the need for shared responsibility in a manner of

advocating for the rights of students with disabilities. Without changing the mindset of both general educators and special educators, school site administrators and district administrators, the question emerges, How is the district to be compliant with federal legislation requiring districts to create inclusive settings?

   Administrative support. Participants stated how they support principals, but generally felt that principals could be more supportive of special education staff. All participants discussed the importance of having the support of the district's superintendent and cabinet. Due to federal oversight and increased accountability requirements, superintendents have less influence upon systemic reform (Johnstone et al., 2009); however, participants expressed that support from the superintendent and cabinet are critical to what they are able to accomplish. One participant expressed that it is advantageous for special education directors to be able to communicate on their own behalf to cabinet members at their central district office in order to facilitate an opportunity to express concerns and address questions. The participant added that it is crucial to have a superintendent and cabinet who understand special education and believe in supporting students because the way to build programs is by having central office administrators who support special education directors in doing their jobs. Study participants felt it was more effective when messages regarding district-wide change were communicated directly to staff from the superintendent, as opposed to the special education director only, to avoid staff feeling that yet another directive for change was coming from the special education department.

   Connections to conceptual framework. As stated by Middlehurst (2008), leadership is an active, multi-directional, complex relational process. The complex leadership experiences of special education directors will be discussed in the context of (a) transformational leadership,

(b) challenges experienced by special education directors, and (c) needs expressed by special education directors.

Transformational leadership. Bass's (1985) transformational leadership theory was used as a conceptual framework for this study, and the first two themes identified in this chapter, charismatic leadership and intellectual stimulation, are aspects of transformational leadership. Additionally, Fullan (2010) provided Ben Levin's list of Seven Practicalities for Leadership Development. As shown in Tables 3 and 4, the Seven Practicalities of Leadership Development (Fullan, 2010) and the California Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (CPSEL; Interstate School Licensure Consortium, 1996) are closely aligned to transformational leadership principles.

Challenges experienced in leadership. The most significant challenges facing special education directors today are special education funding and litigation. The literature provides insights concerning leaders and ways in which they must be prepared to address challenges. Bolman and Deal (2002) stated, "The best leaders use multiple frames or lenses, each offering a different perspective on common challenges" (p. 3). According to Kotter (1996), leadership "defines what the future should look like, aligns people with that vision, and inspired them to make it happen despite the obstacles" (p. 25). Goor et al. (1997) asserted that, with regard to concerns about litigation, it is important for administrators to ensure decisions are legally defensible before engaging in action.

Table 3

Alignment of The Seven Practicalities for Leadership Development with Transformational Leadership Characteristics

The Seven Practicalities of Leadership Development	Research Question One: Themes
1. Establishing a vision and goals	Charismatic Leadership
2. Building a strong team	Charismatic Leadership
3. Creating and supporting the right culture	Charismatic Leadership
4. Communication, vision, direction, and accomplishment	Intellectual Stimulation
5. Recruiting, developing, and retaining leaders	Intellectual Stimulation
6. Building internal and external support	Intellectual Stimulation
7. Maintaining the focus on teaching and learning	Intellectual Stimulation

Note. Adapted from *All Systems Go: The Change Imperative for Whole System Reform,* by M. Fullan, 2010, p. 88, Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin. Copyright 2010 by the author.

Table 4

Alignment of CPSEL Standards with Transformational Leadership Characteristics

California Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (CPSEL)	Research Question One: Themes
1. Develop and communicate a shared vision.	Charismatic Leadership
2. Promote a school culture of high expectations, equity, fairness and respect	Charismatic Leadership
3. Promote success of all students and foster a professional work environment	Charismatic Leadership
4. Collaborate with diverse community stakeholder groups	Intellectual Stimulation
5. Model a personal code of ethics and inspire others to higher levels of performance and motivation	Charismatic Leadership
6. Ensure that the school is compliant with federal, state, and local laws.	Intellectual Stimulation

Note. Adapted from *Standards for School Leaders,* by the Interstate School Licensure Consortium, 1996, retrieved from http://soe.unc.edu/academics/requirements/standards /ISLLC_Standards.pdf. Copyright 1996 by the authors.

Needs of leaders. As evidence has shown, the special education directors interviewed reveal the desire for shared responsibility and administrative support as key to success in their positions. As cited by Wigle and Wilcox (2003), "Special education directors need the collaborative support and involvement of both special education and general education administrators" (p. 286). As mentioned earlier, for positive change to occur in organizations,

employees and their leaders need to collectively hold each other accountable as they work toward common goals (Conners et al., 2004; Hord & Sommers, 2008). To this regard, leaders, as change agents, must work strategically with other leaders to sustain long-term organizational change (Davis, 2003; Reeves, 2002). Stephens and Fish (2010) stated that the reasons people leave the field of special education include: lack of administrative support and lack of empathy from general education colleagues for students with disabilities. The literature bears evidence concerning the self-reported needs of special education directors.

Conclusions

The literature review on leadership and data-based findings from participants' interviews support the conclusions of this study. Following, there will be discussion regarding conclusions reached for each of this study's research questions.

Conclusion for research question one. Findings show that special education directors in the study use aspects of transformational leadership, such as charismatic leadership and intellectual stimulation, when implementing change. Evidence of charismatic leadership includes having a passion for one's mission, communicating one's vision for change, gaining buy-in from staff before implementing new initiatives, being accessible and responsive to staff, and raising staff's awareness of organizational needs to work together for a cause greater than themselves. Examples of intellectual stimulation include strategically planning for change and including all stakeholders in the process, providing the training and support needed by staff to do their jobs effectively, and explaining the rationale behind research-based, data-driven decisions when developing new programs to benefit students.

Conclusion for research question two. Findings show that special education directors in the study espouse beliefs and values that are congruent with their leadership styles and the

ways in which they carry out their work. Special education directors believe their work is purpose-driven and part of their goal is to support staff within their department and district-wide. Additionally, they find job satisfaction from their work helping students with disabilities. Special education directors are intrinsically motivated and receive internal rewards from knowing they have made a difference in the lives of students and families. They believe that they are giving back to people through their work. They believe every team member is important and is a leader. To that end, special education directors support their teams with professional development and evidence-based strategies and ensure that team members have clear roles, understand expectations, and are working toward common goals on behalf of the district. Special education directors believe that all children should be treated equitably and have opportunities to maximize their learning and experience success. To that goal, they work collaboratively with school site principals to create safe, welcoming, inclusive environments for students. Special education directors overcome the challenges they encounter in their roles by doing the research on best practices and educating central office administrators, school site administrators, special education department staff, and families in an effort to change people's mindsets to recognize that all children belong to the district and deserve to receive the best possible education.

Conclusion for research question three. Findings indicate that special education directors who participated in the study experience high levels of responsibility for factors that are beyond their control, such as encroachment and litigation. In their line of work, they feel conflict is unavoidable; however, they understand that positive growth can occur from conflict. Special education directors experience the challenges of having other people control decisions that impact their ability to adhere to the legal requirements of special education. Such

requirements include having individualized supports in place, which may be costly, to allow students with disabilities access to the general education curriculum. Findings also indicate that special education directors are challenged by the fact that special education is often viewed as a separate entity within their districts instead of being viewed as an opportunity to support all district students according to their needs. Special education directors often experience being the target of blame and complaints about legal filings against the district and the ensuing costs of providing specialized services for students with disabilities, even though special education directors do not control federal, state, or local funding for special education, or the reasons parents file for due process. Special education directors have not yet overcome the majority of challenges they face; however, efforts are being made to stem these challenges by putting procedural guidelines in place for district employees concerning legal compliance, maintaining open lines of communication and accessibility to answer questions, and building teams with the breadth of knowledge and experience to support and implement new programs.

Conclusion for research question four. Special education directors use specific practices and strategies to improve outcomes for students and support staff. One practice to empower team members is to help them understand where they fit in with working towards a common goal for the organization. A second practice is that team members are provided autonomy and pushed to do things they have not done before for personal growth development. A third practice is to become a master communicator and speak sincerely to the superintendent, cabinet members, central office department heads, and parents about goals, concerns, and needs. A fourth practice is to create a department mission and vision statement that aligns with the district's mission and vision statement and review them regularly with team members. A fifth practice is to take ownership when a mistake has been made. A final, sixth practice is to be well-

prepared to address conflictual situations by reviewing historical factors of a case and getting

input from all stakeholders before making decisions that may impact students, families, and staff.

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

  Recommendation one. The researcher recommends that superintendents consider

making special education directors part of the cabinet, or provide them the opportunity to meet

directly with the superintendent regularly. It is imperative for superintendents to build trusting

relationships with special education directors so they, as the pinnacle of district leadership, may:

have a clear understanding of federal and state requirements regarding special education,

understand the reason for litigation against the district involving special education,; and provide

oversight and support for strategic plans to implement change to improve outcomes for students.

Additionally, superintendents need to recognize the strong qualities required of candidates for

special education director positions and ensure that the director has commitment to district

success. Transformational leadership qualities are essential attributes for special education

directors who must address the changing landscape of federal and state requirements, amidst

chronic levels of under-funding and litigation. Superintendents need to support and provide

acknowledgement to their special education directors as regularly as they do to directors of other

central office departments.

  Recommendation two. The researcher recommends that districts avoid being short-

sighted and invest in special education supports and services, thereby reframing the typical

negative perspective of encroachment by understanding that strategically planned program

development may require initial funding commitments, with the potential for future gain in terms

of financial savings to the district long term. District administrators should conduct research and

gain buy-in from everyone who will be impacted by the change before implementing san

initiative. Based on ongoing needs assessment, districts should dedicate funds for training and quality professional development in advance of initiating development of new programs.

   Recommendation three. School districts should hire special education directors who are committed to positive change, not just from a financial perspective, but from an ongoing relationship perspective. Special education directors need to be accessible, responsive, and caring of their staff. They need to be transformational leaders, not only managers and administrators. Transformational leaders have a direction and are able to articulate their vision so that followers will become willing to contribute their energies and ideas towards achieving common goals. Special education directors need to be interested in communicating via various modes, including letters, memorandums, telephone conversations, electronic communication, and face-to-face meetings. Employees cannot identify with a person who they never see, who does not answer the telephone, or who does not respond to emails. Relationship building, team building, and consensus building are skills that a special education director should possess and should be considered in hiring new people to this position.

Recommendation for Further Research

   This is one of the first qualitative research studies to explore the lived experiences and leadership perspectives of district level special education directors of K-12 school districts in Southern California. The researcher makes the following recommendations with regard to the participant sample, methodology, and future studies.

   Participant sample of the study. Given that the study was conducted with participants whose work experience has been in moderate-sized urban school districts of 20,000-65,000 students, the researcher recommends expanding the participant sample to include special education directors from districts that have both smaller (less than 20,000 students) and larger

student populations (greater than 65,000 students) outside of California. Additionally, the researcher recommends interviewing participants from rural school districts. Widening the participant sample may provide insight into whether special education directors in small rural or large urban have experiences similar to those of participants in this study. The rationale for such expansion of the participant sample is the potential to produce more significant findings across a broader demographic area in support of local, federal, and state public policy recommendations with regard to the field of special education and the development and sustainability of special education directors.

Methodology of the study. The online demographics survey was designed as a screening tool to determine whether participants were eligible to participate in the interview portion of the study. A pilot survey was conducted among nine people who work in the field of special education to ascertain the clarity and adequacy of survey questions. Piloting the survey was useful in helping the researcher refine survey questions; however, few participants in the sample responded to the official survey tool that was emailed to them. Additionally, posting recruitment information on the CEC's website was not an effective means of reaching qualified participants, although the website posting was effective as a point of contact for a former director who agreed to participate in a pilot of the interview questions. Most participants agreed to participate in the study as a result of an initial telephone contact from the researcher after the researcher did not receive sufficient survey responses. The researcher recommends contacting potential participants via telephone to explain the study and ask whether they would be willing to complete an online demographics survey before sending the screening survey.

Future studies. The researcher recommends a future study in which district superintendents, cabinet members, and school site principals would be interviewed for the

purpose of understanding their perspectives of special education. The researcher believes the findings yielded from such interviews would be informative and would also add to the limited body of literature concerning administrators of special education departments. The purpose of such a study would be to juxtapose perspectives of special education directors with perspectives of other district level (central office) administrators with regard to the challenges, benefits, needs, impact, and concerns of those working in special education.

Summary

This chapter discussed key findings of the study in terms of common themes identified during data analysis. Conclusions concerning each research question were shared. Additionally, the findings from the study guided the researcher to make three recommendations based on review of the pool of study participants and methodology, in addition to recommendations for future study.

Personal Insights

The researcher feels passionate about the domain of special education and believes that collaboration, strong leadership, ethics, professionalism, and caring are essential to creating positive outcomes not only for students with disabilities, but also for the staff who serve them as well. The researcher concurs with current research concerning effective school site administrators, and believes that the indications are also applicable for district level special education directors. Therefore, the researcher's perspective is that effective special education directors must possess the following characteristics and beliefs with respect to addressing the experiences they encounter in their unique roles: they endeavor to provide equitable support to staff and students, they possess personal integrity, they are culturally proficient, they have intrinsic motivation to do their jobs, and they have the ability to balance the freedoms of

authority with the obligations of principled morality. The researcher has observed special education directors who exemplify model leadership principles, as well as special education directors who personify a sense of hopelessness and appear misplaced in their professions. As in any profession, one encounters examples of strong leadership as well as non-examples of leadership. The researcher was privileged to encounter special education directors as study participants who provided open, honest perspectives of their experiences in their challenging roles. They were true transformational leaders who will continue to effect positive change within their districts. Special education directors who are transformational leaders understand that their work is to serve. They are called to serve students, families, staff, and the community through their leadership. It is hoped that special education directors will receive what little they ask in exchange for doing their jobs: understanding, patience, support, acknowledgement, and respect.

Special education directors wield significant power and authority over the staff in their department throughout the district at various school sites. This power can be used for good (to support staff in serving students and families) or it can be used for self-aggrandizement. Such power can be a precarious tool in the hands of one who does not believe in working collaboratively with central office administrators, school site principals, team members, and other stakeholders.

The collaborative process facilitates opportunities for team members to ask questions. Stakeholders who care about students' outcomes should be encouraged to ask questions of central office administrators. Central office administrators should deem it their duty to ask questions and have meaningful discussions with special education directors. Questions lead to insight. Too often a culture of fear exists within districts and people are hesitant to ask questions

for fear of being embarrassed or appearing uninformed. In the absence of district-wide leadership for special education, educators may become frustrated due to unresolved concerns regarding special education policy (Marshall & Patterson, 2002). When one needs to gain knowledge, common practice is to consult an expert. Special education directors should be viewed as a valuable part of a district-wide team as a resource and resident expert for personnel throughout the district.

Research and data tell a story to inform implications for future change, just as leaders' beliefs, values, the ways in which they address challenges, and their sources of motivation tell a story of who they are. The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of special education directors, to find out who they are, as well as to determine how and why they accomplish their challenging jobs. It is clear that the demand for special education leadership exceeds the supply of qualified candidates (Crockett, 2007). People hiring special education directors would be well served to consider candidates who possess keen understanding of leadership. Futrell (2011) stated that the education system cannot be transformed until leadership inside the system has been transformed. Certainly a successful candidate would need to be experienced and knowledgeable of special education laws, regulations, and guidelines; however, it is equally important to seek a deeper understanding of a candidate's leadership abilities, which are not always apparent from a traditional interview. Although they lead and manage teams, special education directors must also be capable of being productive members of the central office administrative team. One participant stated it was crucial that districts be selective of whom they choose for special education director, as it can make or break a district. Special education directors impact lives, and the lives of all students matter, as well as the lives of all staff who serve students.

Conclusion

Special education directors who participated in the study remained confident, optimistic, and upbeat about the future as they shared their beliefs, values, challenges, goals, accomplishments, and needs concerning their personal leadership. While living in an era of unprecedented change within education, those who serve as district leaders within the domain of special education are charged with being exceptional leaders. It is particularly important for special education directors to use aspects of transformational leadership in their work because of their unique needs to: gain support for initiatives by communicating a vision based upon common organizational values; earn the confidence and trust of subordinates, colleagues, and superiors through seeking buy-in; and strategically plan ways to adhere to federal laws governing special education, despite the challenges they encounter. The findings of this study captured the lived experiences of special education directors in Southern California and inspired thought-provoking questions concerning what challenges the next generation of leaders might face as districts begin to create more inclusive educational settings and reframe thinking around structural organization of special education departments, the cause of the significant increases in litigation across the state, the ongoing impact of encroachment with regard to federal requirements, and whether special education leaders in other parts of the country share similar experiences or whether they might provide alternative models based on their unique lived experiences.

REFERENCES

Ackerina, J. (2015). Serving the public: Motivation and commitment in education. *Journal of School Leadership, 25*(5), 794-819. Retrieved from https://rowman.com/page/JSL

Advisory Commission on Special Education (2005). Cal. Educ. Code § 33590 (1976). Retrieved from California Legislative Information Website: http://legislature.ca.gov

Anderson, S. E., Mascall, B., Stiegelbauer, S., & Park, J. (2012). No one way: Differentiating school district leadership and support for school improvement. *Journal for Educational Change, 13*, 403-430. doi:10.1007/s10833-012-9189-y

Barbuto, J. E., Fritz, S. M., & Marx, D. (2000). A field study of two measures of work motivation for predicting leaders' transformational behaviors. Coleman & Briggs, 2002; *Psychological Reports, 86*, 295-300. doi:10.2466/pr0.2000.86.1.295

Bass, B. M. (1985). *Leadership and performance beyond expectations.* New York, NY: Free Press.

Bass, B. M. (1990). From transactional to transformational leadership: Learning to share the vision. *Organizational Dynamics, 18*(3), 19-31. doi:10.1016/0090-2616(90)90061-S

Bays, D. A., & Crockett, J. B. (2007). Investigating instructional leadership for special education. *Exceptionality: A Special Education Journal, 15*(3), 143-161. doi:10.1080/093628307015-3495

Bolman, L., & Deal, T. (2002). *Reframing the path to school leadership.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Bon, S. C., & Bigbee, A. J. (2011). Special education leadership: Integrating professional and personal codes of ethics to serve the best interests of the child. *Journal of School Leadership, 21,* 324-359. Retrieved from https://rowman.com/page/JSL

Butin, D. W. (2010). *The education dissertation: A guide for practitioner scholars.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

California Department of Education. (2011). *A blueprint for great schools: The current California context* [White paper]. Retrieved from http://www.cde.ca.gov/eo/in/bp/bpcontext.asp

California Department of Education. (2015a). *Belief and purpose* [White paper]. Retrieved from http://www.cde.ca.gov/eo/mn/mv/

California Department of Education. (2015b). *Role & responsibilities: Brief description of the California Department of Education* [White paper]. Retrieved from http://www.cde.ca.gov/eo/mn/rr/index.asp

California Department of Education. (2016). *Special education – CalEdFacts* [White paper]. Retrieved from http://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/se/sr/cefspeced.asp

Coleman, M., & Briggs, A. R. J. (Eds.) (2002). *Research methods in educational leadership and management.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Collins, J. (2001). *Good to great*. New York, NY: Harper Collins.

Commission on Teacher Credentialing. (2009). *California standards for the teaching professional* [White paper]. Retrieved from http://www.ctc.ca.gov/educator-prep/standards/CSTP-2009.pdf

Connors, R., Smith, T., & Hickman, C. (2004). *The Oz principle*. New York, NY: Portfolio.

Cooley, A. (2013). Qualitative research in education: The origins, debates, and politics of creating knowledge. *Educational Studies, 49*. 247-262. doi:10.1080/00131946.2013.783834

Council for Exceptional Children. (2010). *Ethical principles and practice standards* [White paper]. Retrieved from http://www.cec.sped.org/Standards/Ethical-Principles-and-Practice-Standards

Creswell, J. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Crockett, J. B. (2007). The changing landscape of special education administration. *Exceptionality: A Special Education Journal, 15*(3), 139-142. doi:10.1080/09362830701503487

Davis, J. R. (2003). *Learning to lead: A handbook for postsecondary administrators.* Westport, CT: Praeger.

Dee, T. S., Jacob, B., & Schwartz, N. L. (2013). The effects of NCLB on school resources and practices. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, *35*(2), 252-279. doi:10.3102/0162373712467080

DeMatthews, D., & Mawhinney, H. (2014). Social justice leadership and inclusion: Exploring challenges in an urban school district struggling to address inequities. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 50*(5), 844-881. doi:10.1177/0013161X13514440

DiPaola, M. F., & Walther-Thomas, C. (2003). *Principals and special education: The critical role of school leaders*. Gainesville, FL: University of Florida, Center on Personnel Studies in Special Education.

Ehlers, R. (2013) . *Overview of special education in California* [White paper]. Retrieved from http://www.lao.ca.gov/reports/2013/edu/special-ed-primer/special-ed-primer-010313.aspx

English, F. W. (Ed.) (2005). *The Sage handbook of educational leadership: Advances in theory, research, and practice.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Finnigan, K. S., & Stewart, T. J. (2009). Leading change under pressure: An examination of principal leadership in low-performing schools. *Journal of School Leadership, 19*(5), 586-618. Retrieved from https://rowman.com/page/JSL

Fullan, M. (2010). *All systems go: The change imperative for whole system reform.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

Fuller, J. B., Morrison, R., Jones, L., Bridger, D., & Brown, V. (1999). The effects of psychological empowerment on transformational leadership and job satisfaction. *The Journal of Social Psychology, 139*(3), 389-391. doi:10.1080/00224549909598396

Futrell, M. H. (2011). Redefining leadership: Working together to change America's education paradigm and prepare for tomorrow's world. *Journal of School Leadership, 21*, 635-648. Retrieved from https://rowman.com/page/JSL

Garrison-Wade, D., Sobel, D., & Fulmer, C. L. (2011). Inclusive leadership: Preparing principals for the role that awaits them. *Educational Leadership and Administration, 19*, 117-132. Retrieved from http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ819953.pdf

Goor, M. B., Schwenn, J. O., & Boyer, L. (1997). Preparing principals for leadership in special education. *Intervention in School and Clinic, 32*, 133-141. doi:10.1177/105345129703200303

Groves, K. S., & LaRocca, M. A. (2011). An empirical study of leader ethical values, transformational and transactional leadership, and follower attitudes toward corporate social responsibility. *Journal of Business Ethics, 103*, 511-528. doi:10.107/s10551-0877-y

Hord, S. M., & Sommers, W. A. (2008). *Leading professional learning communities*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 20 U.S.C. 1400 et seq. (1997).

Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004, 20 U.S.C. §1400 (2004).

Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium. (1996). *Standards for school leaders* [White paper]. Retrieved from http://soe.unc.edu/academics/requirements/standards/ISLLC_Standards.pdf

Johnstone, C. J., Dikkers, A. G., & Luedeke, A. (2009). Educational leadership in the era of accountability. *Educational Considerations, 36*(2), 14-18. Retrieved from http://coe.ksu.edu/EdConsiderations/

Klar, H. W., & Brewer, C. A. (2013). Successful leadership in high-needs schools: An examination of core leadership practices enacted in challenging contexts. *Educational Administration Quarterly. 49*, 768-808. doi:10.1177/0013161X13482577

Kotter, J. P. (1996). *Leading change.* Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press.

Leedy, P. D., & Ormrod, J. E. (2010). *Practical research: Planning and design* (9th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education.

Lunenburg, F. C., & Irby, B. J. (2008). *Writing a successful thesis or dissertation: Tips and strategies for students in the social and behavioral sciences.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

Marshall, C., & Patterson, J. A. (2002). Confounded policies: Implementing site-based

    management and special education policy reforms. *Educational Policy, 16*(3), 351-386.

    doi:10.1177/08904802016003001

McCollum, D. L., & Kajs, L. T. (2009). A confirmatory factor analytic study of the goal

    orientation theory of motivation in educational leadership. *Educational Research*

    Quarterly, 33(1), 3-17. Retrieved from http://erquarterly.org

McLaughlin, M. J., & Verstegen, D. A. (1998). Increasing regulatory flexibility of special

    education programs: Problems and promising strategies. *Exceptional Children, 64*(3),

    371-384. doi:10.1177/001440299806400306

Middlehurst, R. (2008). Not enough science or not enough learning? Exploring the gaps between

    leadership theory and practice. *Higher Education Quarterly, 62*(4), 322-339.

    doi:10.1111/j.1468-2273.2008.00397.x

Milligan, J., Neal, G., & Singleton, J. (2012). Administrators of special and gifted education:

    Preparing them for the challenge. *Education, 133*(1), 171-180. Retrieved from

    http://www.projectinnovation.com/education.html

Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

National Education Association and National Association of State Directors of Special

    Education. (2004, November). *IDEA and NCLB: The intersection of access and outcomes*

    [White paper]. Retrieved from

    http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/HE/IDEANCLBIntersectionsfina2004.pdf

Obiakor, F. E., Beachum, F. D., Williams, D., & McCray, C. R. (2006). Building successful

    multicultural special education programs though innovative leadership. *Educational*

    Considerations, *34*(1), 27-31. Retrieved from http://coe.ksu.edu/EdConsiderations/

Paarlberg, L. E., & Lavigna, B. (2010). Transformational leadership and public service

    motivation: Driving individual and organizational performance. *Public Administration*

    Review, *70*(5), 710-718. doi:10.1111/j.1540-6210.2010.02199.x

Paulsen, K. J. (2008). School-based collaboration: An introduction to the collaboration column.

    Intervention in School and Clinic, 43(5), 313-315. doi:10.1177/1053451208314494

Pazey, B. L., & Cole, H. A. (2013). The role of special education training in the development of

    socially just leaders: Building an equity consciousness in educational leadership

    programs. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 49*(2), 243-271.

    doi:10.1177/0013161X12463934

Pink, D. H. (2009). *Drive: The surprising truth about what motivates us.* New York, NY:

    Riverhead Books.

Poon-McBrayer, K. F., & Wong, P. (2013). Inclusive education services for children and youth

    with disabilities: Values, roles and challenges of school leaders. *Children and Youth*

    Services Review, 35(9), 1520-1525. doi:10.1016/j.childyouth.2013.06.009

Rath, T., & Conchie, B. (2008*). Strengths based leadership: Great leaders, teams, and why*

    people follow. New York, NY: Gallup Press.

Raes, E., Decuyper, S., Lismont, B., Van den Bossche, P., Kyndt, E., Demeyere, S., & Dochy, F.

    (2013). Facilitating team learning through transformational leadership. *Instructional*

    Science, 41, 287-305. doi:10.1007/s11251-012-9228-3

Reeves, D. B. (2002). *The daily disciplines of leadership: How to improve student achievement,*

    staff motivation, and personal organization. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Sansosti, F. J., Goss, S., & Noltemeyer, A. (2011). Perspectives of special education directors on response to intervention in secondary schools. *Contemporary School Psychology, 15*, 9-20. doi:10.1007/BF03340959

Schuh, S. C., Zhang, X., & Tian, P. (2013). For the good or the bad? Interactive effects of transformational leadership with moral and authoritarian leadership behaviors. *Journal of Business Ethics, 116,* 629-640. doi:10.1007/s10551-012-1486-0

Scribner, S. M. P., Crow, G. M., Lopez, G. R., & Murtadha, K. (2011). Successful principals: A contested notion for superintendents and principals. *Journal of School Leadership, 21,* 390-421. Retrieved from https://rowman.com/page/JSL

Shields, C. M. (2010). Transformative leadership: Working for equity in diverse contexts. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 46*(558), 558-589. doi:10.1177/0013161X10375609

Skiba, R. J., Simmons, A. B., Ritter, S., Gibb, A. C., Rausch, M. K., Cuadrado, J., & Chung, C. (2008). Achieving equity in special education: History, status, and current challenges. *Exceptional Children, 74*(3), 264-288. doi:10.1177/001440290807400301

Southwest Special Education Local Plan Area. (2013). *Parents' rights and procedural safeguards* [White paper]. Retrieved from http://swselpa.org/sites/swselpa.drupalgardens.com/files /201302/SW%20SELPA%20Parent%20Rights%20English%20revFeb2013.pdf

Special Education Programs, General Provisions. (n.d.). Retrieved from: Cal. Educ. Code § 56048. Retrieved from California Legislative Information Website: http://legislature.ca.gov

Stephens, T. L., & Fish, W. W. (2010). Motivational factors toward pursuing a career in special education. *Education, 130*(4), 581-594. Retrieved from

http://www.projectinnovation.com/education.html

Stewart, J. (2006). Transformational leadership: An evolving concept examined through the works of Burns, Bass, Avolio, and Leithwood. *Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy, 54,* 1-29. Retrieved from

https://www.umanitoba.ca/publications/cjeap/

Taylor, M. (2014). *Review of the California Department of Education* [White paper]. Retrieved from http://www.lao.ca.gov/reports/2014/education/review-cde/review-cde-082814.pdf

Thoonen, E. E. J., Sleegers, P. J. C., Oort, F. J., Peetsma, T. T. D., & Geijsel, F. P. (2011). How to improve teaching practices: The role of teacher motivation, organizational factors, and leadership practices. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 47*(3), 496-536. doi:10.1177/0013161X11400185

U.S. Department of Education. (2016). *US Department of Education principal office functional statements: D. Office of special education programs* [White paper]. Retrieved from http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/om/fs_po/osers/special.html

Voltz, D. L., & Collins, L. (2010). Preparing special education administrators for inclusion in diverse, standards-based contexts: Beyond the Council for Exceptional Children and the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium. *Teacher Education and Special Education, 33*(1), 70-82. doi:10.1177/0888406409356676

Weintraub, F. J. (2012). A half century of special education: What we have achieved and the challenges we face. *Teaching Exceptional Children, 45*(1), 50-53. doi:10.1177/004005991204500107

Wellner, L. (2012). Building parent trust in the special education setting. *Leadership*, *41*(4), 16-

    19. Retrieved from

    http://www.acsa.org/FunctionalMenuCategories/Media/LeadershipMagazine/2012-

    Archives/MarchApril-2012.aspx

Wigle, S. E., & Wilcox, D. J. (2003). Special education directors and their competencies on

    CEC-identified skills. *Education, 123*(2), 276-288. Retrieved from

    http://www.projectinnovation.com/education.html

Wilmore, E. L., & Thomas, C. (2001). The new century: Is it too late for transformational

    leadership? *Educational Horizons, 79*(3), 115-123. Retrieved from

    http://pilambda.org/archive/

Wright, B. E., Moynihan, D. P., & Pandey, S. K. (2012). Pulling the levers: Transformational

    leadership, public service motivation, and mission valence. *Public Administration*

    Review, 72(2), 206-215. doi:10.1111/j.1540-6210.2011.02496.x

Zirkel, P. A. (2014). The law in the special education literature: A brief critique. *Behavioral*

    Disorders, 39(2), 102-107. Retrieved from

    http://www.ccbd.net/publications/behavioraldisorders

APPENDIX A

Special Education Professional Ethical Principles

Professional special educators are guided by the CEC professional ethical principles, practice standards, and professional policies in ways that respect the diverse characteristics and needs of individuals with exceptionalities and their families. They are committed to upholding and advancing the following principles:

1. Maintaining challenging expectations for individuals with exceptionalities to develop the highest possible learning outcomes and quality of life potential in ways that respect their dignity, culture, language, and background.

2. Maintaining a high level of professional competence and integrity and exercising professional judgment to benefit individuals with exceptionalities and their families.

3. Promoting meaningful and inclusive participation of individuals with exceptionalities in their schools and communities.

4. Practicing collegially with others who are providing services to individuals with exceptionalities.

5. Developing relationships with families based on mutual respect and actively involving families and individuals with exceptionalities in educational decision making.

6. Using evidence, instructional data, research, and professional knowledge to inform practice.

7. Protecting and supporting the physical and psychological safety of individuals with exceptionalities.

8. Neither engaging in nor tolerating any practice that harms individuals with exceptionalities.

9. Practicing within the professional ethics, standards, and policies of CEC; upholding laws, regulations, and policies that influence professional practice; and advocating improvements in the laws, regulations, and policies.

10. Advocating for professional conditions and resources that will improve learning outcomes of individuals with exceptionalities.

11. Engaging in the improvement of the profession through active participation in professional organizations.

12. Participating in the growth and dissemination of professional knowledge and skills.

(Council for Exceptional Children, 2010)

APPENDIX B

Electronic Survey Questions

Special Education Administrators: Demographics Survey

Thank you for participating in this survey. Your input is important.

Instructions: Indicate only one answer per question by checking the box of the most accurate answer and/or filling in the blank.

1. Is your school district (of current or past employment) located in an urban area of Southern California?
   - ☐ Yes
   - ☐ No

2. What grade levels does your school district serve?
   - ☐ Elementary School grade levels only
   - ☐ Middle or Junior High grade levels only
   - ☐ K – 8 grade levels only
   - ☐ High School grade levels and/or adult students only
   - ☐ Preschool, K-12, adult transition, and adult school
   - ☐ Other: _____

3. What is the approximate total student population in your school district?
   - ☐ 0 - 20,000 students
   - ☐ 20,001 – 30,000 students
   - ☐ 30,001 – 40,000 students
   - ☐ More than 40,000 students

4. What is the approximate number of students in your school district who receive special education services?
   - ☐ 0 – 2,000 students
   - ☐ 2,001 – 3,000 students
   - ☐ 3,001 – 4,000 students
   - ☐ More than 4,000 students

5. Are you currently working (or have you in the past) in the capacity of a district level special education director (regardless of the specific job title)?
   - ☐ Yes: Please list your specific job title under "other".
   - ☐ No
   - ☐ Other: _____

6. How many consecutive years have you worked in your position (current or past) as a district level special education director?
- ☐ 1 month to 3 years
- ☐ More than 3 years but less than 5 years
- ☐ More than 5 years but less than 8 years
- ☐ More than 8 years but less than 10 years
- ☐ More than 10 years
- ☐ N/A: I have not worked in the capacity of a district level special education director.

7. Approximately how many people work in your department, either directly or indirectly under your supervision/management/leadership?
- ☐ 0 – 50
- ☐ 51 – 100
- ☐ 101 – 300
- ☐ 301 – 500
- ☐ 501 - 700
- ☐ More than 700

8. Are you a past or current member of the Association of California School Administrators (ACSA)?
- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

9. Are you willing to participate in an interview about the day-to-day experiences of district level special education directors?
- ☐ Yes: Please provide contact information under the response for "other".
- ☐ No: Thank you for your time. This concludes your participation.
- ☐ Maybe: Please provide contact information under the response for "other".
- ☐ Other: _____
  (Name, email address, phone number and best time to reach you)

- ☐ SUBMIT: By clicking "submit" at the end of this survey, you certify that your responses are true and accurate to the best of your knowledge.

APPENDIX C

Interview Questions (Copy for Participant)

1. What was your path in becoming a special education director?

2. Describe the unique challenges you face, if any, in your district as a special education

    director.

3. What are your personal work-related goals, as a special education director?

4. Describe the conditions that make (or would make) you feel successful in your role.

5. What is your belief system concerning special education leadership?

6. What drives or motivates you?

7. Of what practices are you most proud in your work? Why?

8. What is your philosophy on implementing change in the workplace?

9. What have been some of the hardest lessons you have learned as a leader?

10. What have been some of your greatest successes as a leader?

11. What are the most important characteristics a special education director needs to

possess?

12. What do you wish people understood about your job as a special education director

13. Is there anything else you would like to share to help people understand the

responsibilities, challenges and leadership of special education directors?

APPENDIX D

Interview Questions and Sample Probes (Copy for Researcher)

(Start electronic recording device and back-up recorder)

Researcher: Thank you for reviewing and signing the consent form. Before we begin the interview, do you have any questions?

Thank you for participating in a study about the lived experiences of special education directors in Southern California. The title of the study is "Exceptional Leadership in Exceptional Times: Perspectives and Ideologies of Special Education Directors in Southern California." The interview will be recorded and transcribed for research purposes. You may take as much time as you wish to answer questions. I may ask follow-up questions to probe for more descriptive details. You and your school district will not be personally identified in the research results. You may review the transcript of your interview to confirm accuracy or if you wish to clarify any information.

Let's begin. Please state your name, job title and today's date. (Interviewer will state numeric identification code for the recording. This code will be affixed to transcripts of the recording.)

Note-taking process:

1. The interviewer will manually record the time the participant begins a response to each question for transcript tracking purposes.

2. The interviewer will manually record key words or phrases that might be useful for coding purposes.

1. What was your path in becoming a special education director?

    a. What part of your educational background, if any, prepared you to work in the field of special education?

    b. What jobs, if any, did you have previously that prepared you for the work you currently do?

    c. Who or what experiences, if any, influenced you to become a special education administrator?

2. Describe the unique challenges you face, if any, in your district as a special education director.

    a. What responsibilities, if any, make your job different from other jobs in education?

    b. What things would you change, if any, in your district to make your department better?

    c. What needs to happen to help people understand what it is like to be in your position?

3. What are your personal work-related goals, as a special education director?

    a. Where do you see yourself, career-wise, in the next 3 to 5 years? In the next ten years?

    b. Where do you see your department in the next 3 to 5 years?

    c. What steps are you taking to work towards your work-related goals?

4. Describe the conditions that make (or would make) you feel successful in your role.

    a. What supports are (or should be) in place to help you do your job effectively?

    b. How would you change, restructure, or reorganize special education in your district to realize greater outcomes for students?

    c. What could your district do differently, if anything, to make the job of a special education director more efficient or productive?

5. What is your belief system concerning special education leadership?

    a. How would you summarize your feelings about people who work in your department?

    b. What is your personal mission statement with regard to special education and the work you do?

c. What leadership traits does a strong district level special education leader demonstrate?

6. What drives or motivates you?

    a. Why do you come to work every day?

    b. Discuss three things that would motivate you to do your job even better.

    c. What would it take to make you want to leave your job?

7. Of what practices are you most proud in your work? Why?

    a. What have you accomplished during the time you have worked as a special education director?

    b. What do you think people say about you as a director, and why?

    c. What do you wish people knew about you?

8. What is your philosophy on implementing change in the workplace?

    a. Describe your leadership style.

    b. What are the most important things to remember when leading people through a process of organizational change?

    c. What changes have you implemented or are you in process of implementing and what key factors characterize the process of implementation?

9. What have been some of the hardest lessons you have learned as a leader?

    a. If you had it to do all over again, would you have taken this job? Why or why not?

    b. How do you feel about your job when situations become difficult at work?

    c. What warnings would you share with others who might consider becoming a special education director?

10. What have been some of your greatest successes as a leader?

    a. What does leadership mean to you?

    b. Discuss the leadership legacy you wish to leave in your district.

    c. On a scale of 1 – 10, with one being ineffective, five being someone effective, and ten being highly effective, how would you rate your performance as a leader in your

school district? Discuss the reasons for your rating.

11. What are the most important characteristics a special education director needs to possess?

    a. What personality traits should a strong special education director have?

    b. List three words that describe an effective special education director.

    c. If you were hiring a special education director for your district, what type of person would you seek to hire?

12. What do you wish people understood about your job as a special education director?

    a. What is the job of a special education director? Please elaborate and tell me more.

    b. If you could make a statement to help people in your district understand special education, what would it be?

    c. What things, if any, do people misunderstand about your role?

13. Is there anything else you would like to share to help people understand the responsibilities, challenges and leadership of special education directors?

APPENDIX E

Online Recruitment Post

(Posted in the General Forum of Council for Exceptional Children's Website)

If you are a special education director who meets the following criteria, you may be interested in participating in a doctoral research study which hopes to add to the limited literature on special education directors. Here is your opportunity to help the educational community understand the values, beliefs, challenges, and leadership of special education directors.

> Are you a current or past district special education director with at 3 consecutive years of experience in the role?
> Are you a current or past member of Association of California School Administrators?
> Do you work (currently or in the past) in a Southern California school district with a total population of 20,000 – 65,000 students?

If you can answer "YES" to each of these questions, please follow the link (survey link will be inserted) to participate in the brief survey. Please respond by (date will be inserted), if you wish to participate in the study.

Participation is voluntary and confidential. Qualified participants who complete the study will receive a gift card in appreciation of their time. If you have questions or concerns, please email or call: (email address and phone contact information will be inserted)

APPENDIX F

Information/Facts Sheet for Exempt Research

PEPPERDINE UNIVERSITY

Graduate School of Education and Psychology

INFORMATION/FACTS SHEET FOR EXEMPT RESEARCH

Exceptional Leadership in Exceptional Times:
Perspectives and Ideologies of Special Education Directors in Southern California

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Tangela R. Diggs, M.A. – principal investigator and Robert Barner, Ph.D. – faculty advisor at the Pepperdine University, because you have at least three years of experience as a special education director in a Southern California school district. Your participation is voluntary. You should read the information below, and ask questions about anything that you do not understand, before deciding whether to participate. Please take as much time as you need to read this document. You may also decide to discuss participation with your family or friends.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the study is to investigate the day-to-day experiences of special education directors, including their beliefs, values, challenges, and leadership styles.

PARTICIPANT INVOLVEMENT

If you agree to voluntarily to take part in this study, you will be asked to participate in a 5 minute survey and a 60 minute audio-taped interview. You do not have to answer any questions you don't want to; if you don't want to be taped, you cannot participate in this study.

PAYMENT/COMPENSATION FOR PARTICIPATION

You will receive a $25 gift card for your time. You must complete the interview in order to receive the card. The card will be given to you by the researcher upon completion of the interview.

PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

Your participation is voluntary. Your refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights, or remedies because of your participation in this research study.

ALTERNATIVES TO FULL PARTICIPATION

The alternative to participation in the study is not participating or completing only the items with which you feel comfortable.

CONFIDENTIALITY

I will keep your records for this study confidential as far as permitted by law. However, if I am required to do so by law, I may be required to disclose information collected about you. Examples of the types of issues that would require me to break confidentiality are if you tell me about instances of child abuse and elder abuse. Pepperdine's University's Human Subjects Protection Program (HSPP) may also access the data collected. The HSPP occasionally reviews and monitors research studies to protect the rights and welfare of research subjects.

The data will be stored on a password protected computer in the principal investigator's place of residence. The data will be stored for a minimum of three years. The data collected will be coded, de-identified, and transcribed for data analysis.

Any identifiable information obtained in connection with this study will remain confidential. Participants have a right to review audio recordings and transcripts. Your responses will be coded with a pseudonym and transcript data will be maintained separately. The data, including audio recordings and transcripts, will be stored on a password protected computer in the researcher's office for three years after the study has been completed and then destroyed.

INVESTIGATOR'S CONTACT INFORMATION

I understand that the investigator is willing to answer any inquiries I may have concerning the research herein described. I understand that I may contact Tangela R. Diggs, Principal Investigator, at ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ or ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ . I may contact Dr. Robert Barner, Faculty Advisor, at ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ , if I have any other questions or concerns about this research.

RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT – IRB CONTACT INFORMATION

If you have questions, concerns or complaints about your rights as a research participant or research in general please contact Dr. Judy Ho, Chairperson of the Graduate & Professional Schools Institutional Review Board at Pepperdine University 6100 Center Drive Suite 500 Los Angeles, CA 90045, 310-568-5753 or gpsirb@pepperdine.edu.

By clicking on the link to the survey questions, you are acknowledging you have read the study information. You also understand that you may end your participation at any time, for any reason, without penalty.

You Agree to Participate

You Do Not Wish to Participate

If you would like documentation of your participation in this research you may print a copy of this form.

APPENDIX G

Informed Consent for Participation in Research Activities

PEPPERDINE UNIVERSITY

Graduate School of Education and Psychology

INFORMED CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH ACTIVITIES

Exceptional Leadership in Exceptional Times: Perspectives and Ideologies of Special Education Directors in Southern California

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Tangela R. Diggs, M.A. - Principal Investigator and Robert Barner, Ph.D. at Pepperdine University, because you have at least three years of experience as a special education director in a Southern California school district. Your participation is voluntary. You should read the information below, and ask questions about anything that you do not understand, before deciding whether to participate. Please take as much time as you need to read the consent form. You may also decide to discuss participation with your family or friends. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign this form. You will also be given a copy of this form for you records.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the study is to investigate the day-to-day experiences of special education directors, including their beliefs, values, challenges, and leadership styles.

STUDY PROCEDURES

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in a 5-minute survey and a 60-minute electronically audio-recorded interview. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to; however, if you do not consent to be audio-recorded, you cannot participate in this study. The interviews will be conducted face-to-face in a quiet setting or via Skype.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

There are no anticipated risks associated with participation in this study. Although minimal, the potential discomforts associated with participation in this study include psychological or emotional concerns which may arise during the interview process as participants explore and share experiences and feelings about their roles as special education directors.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY

While there are no direct benefits to the study participants, the anticipated benefits to society include: the common themes that emerge from aggregate data concerning the lived experiences of special education directors will add to the literature concerning special education leadership.

PAYMENT/COMPENSATION FOR PARTICIPATION

You will receive a $25 gift card for your time. You must complete the interview in order to receive the card. The card will be given to you upon completion of the interview.

CONFIDENTIALITY

I will keep your records for this study confidential as far as permitted by law. However, if I am required to do so by law, I may be required to disclose information collected about you. Examples of the types of issues that would require me to break confidentiality are if you tell me about instances of child abuse and elder abuse. Pepperdine's University's Human Subjects Protection Program (HSPP) may also access the data collected. The HSPP occasionally reviews and monitors research studies to protect the rights and welfare of research subjects.

The data will be stored on a password protected computer in the principal investigator's place of residence. The data will be stored for a minimum of three years. The data collected will be coded, de-identified, and transcribed for data analysis.

Any identifiable information obtained in connection with this study will remain confidential. Participants have a right to review audio recordings and transcripts. Your responses will be coded with a pseudonym and transcript data will be maintained separately. The data, including audio recordings and transcripts, will be stored on a password protected computer in the researcher's office for three years after the study has been completed and then destroyed.

PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

Your participation is voluntary. Your refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this research study.

ALTERNATIVES TO FULL PARTICIPATION

The alternative to participation in the study is not participating or completing only the items which you feel comfortable.

EMERGENCY CARE AND COMPENSATION FOR INJURY

If you are injured as a direct result of research procedures you will receive medical treatment;

however, you or your insurance will be responsible for the cost. Pepperdine University does not provide any monetary compensation for injury.

INVESTIGATOR'S CONTACT INFORMATION

I understand that the investigator is willing to answer any inquiries I may have concerning the research herein described. I understand that I may contact Tangela R. Diggs – Principal Investigator at ███████████ or ████████████████████ . You may contact Dr. Robert Barner- Faculty Advisor at ████████████████████, if I have any other questions or concerns about this research.

RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT – IRB CONTACT INFORMATION

If you have questions, concerns or complaints about your rights as a research participant or research in general please contact Dr. Judy Ho, Chairperson of the Graduate & Professional Schools Institutional Review Board at Pepperdine University 6100 Center Drive Suite 500 Los Angeles, CA 90045, 310-568-5753 or gpsirb@pepperdine.edu.

SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT

I have read the information provided above. I have been given a chance to ask questions. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction and I agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

AUDIO/VIDEO/PHOTOGRAPHS (*If this is not applicable to your study and/or if participants do not have a choice of being audio/video-recorded or photographed, delete this section.*)

    □ *I agree to be audio -recorded*

    □ *I do not want to be audio -recorded*

_____

Name of Participant

_____   _____

Signature of Participant   Date

SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR

I have explained the research to the participants and answered all of his/her questions. In my

judgment the participants are knowingly, willingly and intelligently agreeing to participate in this study. They have the legal capacity to give informed consent to participate in this research study and all of the various components. They also have been informed participation is voluntarily and that they may discontinue their participation in the study at any time, for any reason.

_____

Name of Person Obtaining Consent

_____   _____

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent   Date

APPENDIX H

Institutional Review Board (IRB) Approval

PEPPERDINE

NOTICE OF APPROVAL FOR HUMAN RESEARCH

Date: February 04, 2016

Protocol Investigator Name: Tangela Diggs

Protocol #: 16-01-171

Project Title: Exceptional Leadership in Exceptional Times: Perspectives and Ideologies of Special Education Directors in Southern California

School: Graduate School of Education and Psychology

Dear Tangela Diggs:

Thank you for submitting your application for exempt review to Pepperdine University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). We appreciate the work you have done on your proposal. The IRB has reviewed your submitted IRB application and all ancillary materials. Upon review, the IRB has determined that the above entitled project meets the requirements for exemption under the federal regulations 45 CFR 46.101 that govern the protections of human subjects.

Your research must be conducted according to the proposal that was submitted to the IRB. If changes to the approved protocol occur, a revised protocol must be reviewed and approved by the IRB before implementation. For any proposed changes in your research protocol, please submit an amendment to the IRB. Since your study falls under exemption, there is no requirement for continuing IRB review of your project. Please be aware that changes to your protocol may prevent the research from qualifying for exemption from 45 CFR 46.101 and require submission of a new IRB application or other materials to the IRB.

A goal of the IRB is to prevent negative occurrences during any research study. However, despite the best intent, unforeseen circumstances or events may arise during the research. If an unexpected situation or adverse event happens during your investigation, please notify the IRB as soon as possible. We will ask for a complete written explanation of the event and your written response. Other actions also may be required depending on the nature of the event. Details regarding the timeframe in which adverse events must be reported to the IRB and documenting the adverse event can be found in the *Pepperdine University Protection of Human Participants in Research: Policies and Procedures Manual* at community.pepperdine.edu/irb.

Please refer to the protocol number denoted above in all communication or correspondence related to your application and this approval. Should you have additional questions or require clarification of the contents of this letter, please contact the IRB Office. On behalf of the IRB, I wish you success in this scholarly pursuit.

Sincerely,

Judy Ho, Ph.D., IRB Chairperson

cc: Dr. Lee Kats, Vice Provost for Research and Strategic Initiatives

PEPPERDINE

Pepperdine University
24255 Pacific Coast Highway
Malibu, CA 90263
TEL: 310-506-4000

Mr. Brett Leach, Regulatory Affairs Specialist