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SCHOOL ADMINISTRATOR PREPARATION IN SPECIAL EDUCATION:
A CROSS-CASE ANALYSIS

by

Emily Ruiz

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

May 2022

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EDUCATION: A CROSS-CASE ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

Special education has been part of public education for 46 years and has evolved considerably in that time. Despite improvements made in special education law, there remains a disconnect between law and current practices. Several studies suggest this disconnect is associated with administrators' insufficient preparation for supporting special education in their schools.

This study utilized an explanatory sequential design to study Southern California school principals' special education preparation. During the first phase of the study, the researcher emailed surveys to administrators who were selected using a stratified random sampling strategy. Unfortunately, the response rate was too low to employ the regression analysis strategy stipulated in the study's design. Rather the survey results were used to identify administrators to interview during the second, qualitative phase of the study. Four administrators were selected to be interviewed and agreed to participate. Case studies were used to present the interview data, and emergent themes were identified during a cross-case analysis.

This study's findings are consistent with the current literature's suggestion that administrative credential programs do not adequately educate administrators about special education's historical and legislative context or effectively prepare them to support their special education departments. However, the purpose of this study was to identify *specific* areas of weakness that currently exist in order to generate solutions and promote the development of successful administrative strategies. All four administrators reported a lack of contextual experiences as a significant weakness in their credential programs and suggested their personal/professional experiences throughout their careers were the most influential factor in their leadership development for special education. This finding suggests that more

contextualized experiences, e.g., principal shadowing, should be added to formal principal preparation programs. Simulations such as problem-based learning scenarios might also be employed in the preparation classroom.

Additionally, although not explicitly stated as weaknesses in their credential programs, all four administrators highlighted the importance of relationship-building and demonstrating initiative in their leadership practice to better serve their special education departments. These emergent themes suggest two additional topics to attend to in both pre-service and in-service principal development programs.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

In an ideal world, all students would receive comprehensive support for their unique needs to be successful academically and socially. However, this is not the reality. Instead, some individuals, including students with disabilities, have long been disadvantaged. Therefore, there is an obligation to remedy the lack of support for particular students in the past. At a recent virtual educator event with The White House (2021), Becky Pringle, President of the National Education Association, emphasized the purpose of education and reflected on the need for transformation in the education of students:

Reclaim public education as a common good, as a foundation of this democracy and then transform it to something that it was never designed to be—and that is a racially and socially just and equitable system that prepares every student, every one, to succeed in a diverse and independent world and to live into their brilliance. (33:18)

Inquiry into how to better serve students with disabilities is a tangible action towards Pringle's transformation. One way to do this is to examine the role public school administrators play in supporting special education. School administrators' leadership skills are crucial in promoting effective public education, generally, and particularly in special education. Unfortunately, historically, public education was not designed to serve students with disabilities; it did not even include students with disabilities for decades (Salend & Duhaney, 2011). Students with disabilities require additional support in cognitive, emotional, or behavioral development. Needless to say, there remains much work to be done concerning special education to truly reclaim public education as a common good that is socially just and equitable for all, including those with disabilities (Boscardin et al., 2011).

The challenge alluded to in the previous paragraph seems especially significant today because the diagnoses of developmental disabilities in the United States is increasing exponentially. From 2006 to the present, there has been a 144 percent increase in the number of students diagnosed with autism alone (PowerSchool, 2017). Overall, the percentage of students served by public school special education programs increased from approximately 8 percent in 1977 to 14 percent in the 2019-2020 school year (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). Furthermore, the issue of disparity in special education is also very much an issue of racial inequity. The percentage of students served by public school special education programs in the 2019-2020 school year was highest for American Indian/Alaska Native students (18 percent), followed by Black students (17 percent) and students of two or more races (15 percent). In addition, Pacific Islander students accounted for 11 percent, and Asian students accounted for seven percent of students who are in special education programs (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). These percentages are not proportionate to the percentage of these groups in general education. For instance, American Indian/Alaska Native students account for one percent of students enrolled in public elementary and secondary schools; Black students account for 15 percent, students of two or more races account for four percent, Pacific Islander students account for less than one half of one percent, and Asian students account for five percent of public school enrollment (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021).

With 14 percent of students requiring special education and a majority of those students being students of color, school administrators' leadership becomes exceedingly important. At the very least, administrators need to have a basic understanding of special education law and best practices to ensure a racially and socially just and equitable educational environment. Several studies suggest that administrators lack preparation in special education law and best practices

(Lasky & Karge, 2006, Praisner, 2003, Angelle & Bilton, 2009, Davidson & Algozzine, 2002).

In the following section, the role and responsibility administrators have in special education will be discussed.

Background to the Study

The instructional practice of special education in United States schools is relatively new, considering public education has been compulsory in the United States since 1918 (and, in some places, before that). In fact, students with disabilities did not have any educational rights until 1975 (National Education Association of the United States, 1975). In November 1975, President Ford signed PL 94-142. This law enforced the equal rights protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. Education for All Handicapped Children (EAHCA) was the impetus behind the provision of educational services, as well as the rights of students and parents, backed by federal funds (National Education Association of the United States, 1975). EAHCA was renamed as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1990, which will be discussed in more detail in the following section on the current legislation. Furthermore, during the 46 years that special education has been part of the public school system, the strategies and approaches employed to educate people with disabilities have evolved considerably, resulting in today's emphasis on inclusion (i.e., being educated in the general education setting with typically developing peers¹ as much as possible, given an individual's abilities and needs), high-quality

¹ In the field of special education, "typically developing" or simply "typical" peers are currently the most widely accepted terms for children who acquire developmental milestones and academic skills similar to the majority of children within the same age and culture (Webster, 2020).

instruction, and equity.² However, despite the developments made in the special education law, there remains a disconnect between the law and current practices.

The most current legislative framework for special education is the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (IDEA, 2004). The cornerstone of this act is its commitment to providing Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) to all students with disabilities. The emphasis in this legislation is on promoting inclusion, which means students should be in the "least restrictive environment (LRE)" for their needs (IDEA, 2004). The law states that its purpose is that "special education can become a service for such children rather than a place where such children are sent" (IDEA, 2004). The intention of the policy is that students with disabilities receive supports and services in the LRE, the general education classroom. However, school districts may choose to implement this differently by making particular supports available to students outside of the general education classroom. This is an example of a gap between policy and practice. In practice, the least restrictive environment could be with typically developing peers in the general education classroom without any specialized support. The most restrictive environment could be to place these students in a separate classroom or school.

There are a variety of service models to modify and accommodate a student's environment within those two extremes. One example of a less restrictive model would be a student spending most of the day in the general education class and having a few hours per week of support in a small group, separate setting. An example of a slightly more restrictive model for a student that requires more support would be spending most of the day in separate classrooms with a special educator and specialized support staff, but mainstreaming for enrichment activities

² In this context, equity in education refers to putting systems in place to ensure that every child has an equal chance for success. proportional representation regardless of race, class, gender, or ability.

(e.g., physical education, visual and performing arts, recess, lunch). Finally, examples of the most restrictive model would be complete removal from the public school with a referral to a separate school specializing in behavior support or even a residential school, eliminating a student's access to the general education curriculum and peers.

A school administrator, most often the school principal, is responsible for ensuring a FAPE for students with disabilities in their school. However, the results of a recent study of elementary school principals' attitudes about the inclusion of students with disabilities indicated only approximately one in five principals have a positive attitude toward inclusion; most are "uncertain" (Praisner, 2003). Having an "uncertain" attitude towards inclusion could suggest that inclusion is not being implemented appropriately and affect the principal's ability to ensure legal compliance of FAPE.

Another study conducted with school principals looked at leadership preparation programs from the perspective of readiness to support special education issues in their schools. The findings suggest that the principals in this study were not provided sufficient preparation to assume a leadership role in special education (Angelle & Bilton, 2009). Finally, a study surveying novice administrators' perceptions of special education law showed they self-reported insufficient knowledge. They were dissatisfied with their training in this area, claiming they needed additional special education law preparation (Davidson & Algozzine, 2002).

These studies demonstrate the uncertainty and lack of readiness school administrators have towards special education as law, and best practices have been implemented and evolved through the years. The following sections will provide how the historical context has shaped the field of special education through legislation time and time again. The ever-evolving nature of

special education legislation illustrates how and why administrators may feel uncertain and unprepared in special education law and best practices.

The Historical Context

Historical literature demonstrates that individuals with disabilities existed in society for thousands of years, long before formal education began. Children and adults with disabilities were initially viewed as “burdens, worthless, demons, and buffoons” (Rotatori et al., 2011, p. ix). Early societal views of individuals with disabilities assumed they should be feared and segregated. These historical perceptions of people with disabilities are supported by a substantial amount of convincing historical evidence. For example, Salend & Duhaney (2011) indicated that, before the 1700s, individuals with disabilities were primarily “ignored or subjected to inhumane treatment, ridicule, isolation, and at times put to death (p. 2), and they provide a wealth of evidence to support this claim. It should also be noted that these historical views reflect a Western view of disability as this study takes place in a Western context.

Fortunately, perceptions and treatment of people with disabilities have changed throughout the years, and this change has been reflected in the field of special education. The 16th and 17th centuries brought about new philosophical beliefs about human dignity, which were supported by the efforts of educators and advocates who were working on individually designed approaches to educating people with disabilities (Winzer, 2014). However, these individually designed approaches focused mainly on the sensory disabilities of the wealthy. Winzer (2014), for example, documents that oralism, lip-reading, and sign language were developed to teach wealthy deaf individuals to communicate in order to prepare them to inherit their family's wealth.

Development of Institutions and Specialized Schools

As special education expanded from just serving people with motor impairments and sensory disabilities and began to include individuals with cognitive, emotional, and behavioral disabilities, society saw the rise of institutions and specialized schools (Salend & Duhaney, 2011). Salend & Duhaney provide a wealth of historical evidence to document that, due to the negative perceptions and fear of people with disabilities still held by society, the number of institutions and asylums grew at an alarming rate in the mid-19th century. These institutions served to separate and control individuals who society viewed as defective, deviant, and threatening (Winzer, 2014).

In the early 1800s, several specialized schools and interventions were developed and implemented in Europe to much success, proving that individuals who were previously considered unable to learn could, indeed, learn (Salend & Duhaney, 2011). Salend & Duhaney provide historical evidence that demonstrates that this discovery helped improve the societal perceptions of individuals with disabilities and led to the formation of advocacy groups calling for more and better inclusion and education in the early 1900s.

The Civil Rights Movement and Historic Court Decisions

Historians have demonstrated that legal precedents for the field of special education, as we know it today, were a product of the civil rights movement in the 1950s. The landmark 1954 Supreme Court decision in the case of *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* established that separate but equal is not equal. This decision became a foundation for parents of children with disabilities to take legal action in matters of their child's education. This decision also greatly influenced the inclusive education movement (Blanchett et al., 2005).

Legal action took a variety of forms. For example, in the case of *Hobson v. Hansen* (1967), the court ruled that the standardized test score tracking system discriminated against African American and poor children, thus making it unconstitutional. In 1970, in the case of *Diana v. State of California*, it was determined that students must be assessed in their primary language to address the overrepresentation of minorities in special education. In *Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children v. Pennsylvania* (1972), the court ruled that a free and appropriate education must be provided for all children with disabilities, regardless of the severity. In another 1972 case, *Mills v. Board of Education in the District of Columbia*, the court recommended timely reevaluation and parents' rights to appeal, notification of testing and placement, and access to their child's educational records. In addition, *LeBanks v. Spears* (1973) determined that Louisiana schools must educate their students with disabilities appropriately. They have the right to be educated with their peers without disabilities, when appropriate.

Despite many favorable court rulings for students with disabilities, there were still no federal laws protecting the civil rights of students with disabilities. Weber (2009), for example, documented that, in 1974, over 1.75 million students with disabilities were not receiving any specialized educational support, and 2.5 million students were enrolled in insufficient programs for their needs.

Finally, due to this long history of adverse treatment of students with disabilities, in 1975, Congress enacted the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (Public Law 94-142). This law was intended to support states and localities in protecting the rights and meeting the needs of students with disabilities with the security of federal funding. This landmark legislation was amended and renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1990. Terminology such as "handicap" was changed to "disability," and people-first language was

emphasized in this amendment. The purpose of using people-first language is first to acknowledge and honor the individual's dignity and then consider their disability second. This language change helps emphasize that a disability is *part* of an individual's identity, not their primary identity. The cornerstone of this act is its commitment to providing Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) to all students with disabilities. The emphasis in this legislation is on promoting inclusion. Additional amendments were passed in 1997 and 2004 to ensure equal access to education (IDEA, 2004).

A Closer Look at Current Legislation

The Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA)

The U.S. Department of Education defines IDEA as "a law that makes available a free appropriate public education to eligible children with disabilities throughout the nation and ensures special education and related services to those children" (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). IDEA governs how states and public agencies provide early intervention, special education, and related services to eligible individuals from birth to age 22. IDEA also authorizes formula grants and discretionary grants. Formula grants are allocated to states to support early intervention, special education, and related services. Discretionary grants are distributed to state educational agencies, institutions of higher education, and other nonprofit organizations. The funds support research, demonstrations, technical assistance and dissemination, technology development, personnel preparation and development, and parent training and information centers (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). Because this law is classified as an entitlement law, all students that meet the eligibility requirements are entitled to the promise of free appropriate public education (FAPE). The following are the six provisions that guide IDEA: child find and zero reject, nondiscriminatory identification and assessment, individualized

education program (IEP)³, least restrictive environment (LRE), procedural safeguards, and parental participation (U.S. Department of Education, 2020).

Child Find and Zero Reject. The first provision of IDEA includes the concepts of “child find” and “zero reject” (IDEA, 2004). Child find refers to the school district's responsibility to identify and evaluate unserved students with disabilities. This provision means that all teachers are obligated to monitor for differences in learning, behavior, or social and emotional development in their students and make referrals to ensure their students are receiving FAPE. Zero reject refers to the fact that school districts cannot exclude a child with a disability from receiving FAPE, regardless of the severity of their disability. Historically, students with disabilities received "special" treatment (i.e., they were segregated and often received less than acceptable education in terms of goals and standards), and zero reject is an attempt to rectify this historical inequity (Ashbaker, 2011).

In the 1997 amendment of IDEA, child find and zero reject was extended to apply to children with severe behavior problems. In 2004, IDEA addressed the complex nature of dealing with discipline for students with disabilities. Administrators can suspend students with disabilities, but only for up to 10 school days, and procedures were put into place to ensure these students are still receiving FAPE despite disciplinary action (Ashbaker, 2011). Furthermore, if it is determined that the student's actions were caused by their disability, they cannot be expelled (U.S. Department of Education, 2020).

Nondiscriminatory Identification and Assessment. The second provision of IDEA states that all students suspected of having a disability will have a nondiscriminatory evaluation

³ An Individualized Education Plan (IEP) is a written legal document that details the program of special education instruction, supports, and services to meet a student's unique needs and is covered by the IDEA.

in all areas of suspected disability (IDEA, 2004). The areas of suspected disability categories under which a child may be found eligible for special education and related services are as follows: Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), blindness, deafness, emotional disturbance, hearing impairment, intellectual disability, multiple disabilities, orthopedic impairment, other health impaired, specific learning disability, speech or language impairment, traumatic brain injury, or visual impairment (U.S. Department of Education, 2020).

The evaluation must be conducted by a team of knowledgeable and trained professionals in using the evaluation instruments. The evaluation team is typically made up of a school psychologist and education specialist, at the very least. The rest of the evaluation team is determined by the suspected disability of the student. For example, a speech and language pathologist would be included on the team if there are concerns with a student's expressive or receptive language abilities. An occupational therapist will be included if there are concerns for a student's fine or gross motor skills or self-regulation abilities. There are other more specific specialists and evaluators for any particular area of suspected disability (IDEA, 2004, §300.304).

The evaluation materials and procedures must be executed in ways that are not racially or culturally discriminatory. For example, in the case of *Larry P. v. Riles* (1972), the court ruled that IQ tests discriminated against African-American children because the procedures were racially and culturally biased and did not accurately assess these students' cognitive abilities resulting in misplacement and over-identification of African American students in special education. The evaluation materials must also be administered in the child's native language. More than one evaluation must be used to determine eligibility; however, the student cannot be administered unnecessary assessments. The team must utilize the evaluation information to identify the student's educational needs and develop an instructional plan that meets those needs,

which is documented in their IEP (Ashbaker, 2011). Reevaluation occurs at least every three years to ensure the student still qualifies for special education services, and this is referred to as the triennial review of the IEP.

Individualized Education Program. The third provision listed in IDEA mandates that a student who qualifies for special education services must have an Individualized Education Program (IEP) (IDEA, 2004). The IEP is a written, legally binding document highlighting students' strengths and needs in the eligible areas affected by their disability. This document also lists the goals for areas of improvement in each of those identified areas. The priority of the IEP is to make a plan for reasonable progress toward the general education curriculum and standards. The IEP also addresses special factors that affect the student's ability to learn. IDEA lists five special factors that the IEP team must consider: behavioral needs, English language proficiency, blindness or visual impairment, communication needs, and assistive technology (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). Addressing these special factors shows that the student is receiving FAPE.

The IEP is developed through a collaborative process by the IEP team. The IEP team includes the student's general education teacher, the special educator, the parent, a representative of the school administration, and any related service providers (i.e., speech and language pathologist, occupational therapist, etc.). All IEP team members must be actively involved in this process as they all serve essential roles in the student's education. When developing the student's IEP, the team will discuss the student's present levels of performance and make goals in each area of need that can be reasonably met in one year. The team will consider the student's area of need and goals and determine what specialized academic instruction and related services are needed to support the student in achieving those goals. The details of measuring progress on

goals and informing parents of that progress are also documented on the IEP. The team meets at least once a year to update all aspects of the IEP (U.S. Department of Education, 2020).

Least Restrictive Environment. IDEA's fourth provision requires students with disabilities to be educated in the least restrictive environment (LRE) for their needs to prevent them from being segregated due to their disability (IDEA, 2004). As described previously, the way to view the least restrictive environment is to envision it on a spectrum and relates to a student's access to general education and peers. The LRE requirement of IDEA was often referred to as "mainstreaming" but is now called inclusion. LRE must be individualized to each student and, "to the greatest extent possible, satisfactorily educate disabled children together with children who are not disabled, in the same school the disabled child would attend if the child were not disabled" (Ashbaker, 2011, p. 34). Placement is determined after the IEP has been developed. This policy ensures that schools cannot predetermine placement; this decision must be made by the entire IEP team, including parents (Ashbaker, 2011).

Procedural Safeguards. The fifth provision of IDEA requires procedural safeguards for parents. Procedural safeguards were designed to protect the rights of children with disabilities and their parents. They serve as an outline of how to work with the school regarding their child's education. Procedural safeguards were created due to the natural fact that grievances may occur between what the school decides is appropriate education for a student and what a parent deems appropriate education for their child. There are 10 procedural safeguards outlined in IDEA:

- Procedural safeguards notice. The school must provide parents with a written explanation of their rights and a verbal explanation if requested.

- Parent participation. Parents have the legal right to participate in all meetings about their child's education, and parents can even call an IEP team meeting at any time. If parents call an emergency IEP meeting, the school must arrange for it to be held within 24 hours.
- Access to educational records. Parents have the right to access and get an explanation of their child's school records, and parents can also ask for corrections to their child's records.
- Confidentiality of information. The school is responsible for protecting student confidentiality, including student name, address, social security number, and other personal details or sensitive information.
- Informed consent. Before evaluating or providing special education services for the first time, the school must inform the parent of what is involved. Parents must provide permission in writing before the school can move forward.
- Prior written notice. The school must provide parents with written notice before any changes are made to a student's special education services. The prior written notice must include what the school proposes to change and why.
- Understandable language. When the school provides any written notice, it must use language that is easy to understand and in the parent's native language.
- Independent Educational Evaluation (IEE). If a parent disagrees with the school's evaluation results, they have the right to get an IEE from an outside evaluator. The school must consider the results of the IEE; however, they are not required to accept the findings.

- “Stay Put” rights. If a parent disagrees with a proposed change to their child’s IEP services or placement, the “stay put” protection maintains the student’s current IEP while the parent and school work out the details.
- Dispute resolution options. Parents have the right to disagree with the school about what is best for their child. Dispute-resolution options for parents are to:
 - Negotiate directly with the school and IEP team.
 - Utilize mediation, where a neutral third party assists the parent and the school in resolving the dispute,
 - Initiate due process, which begins with a formal, written complaint and ends with a decision after a hearing with a judge. The decision will be reflected in the IEP. It should also be noted that due process can be initiated by the parent or the school if either feels the student's needs are not being met.
 - File a complaint with the state if the school is violating IDEA or file a complaint with the Office for Civil Rights for the U.S. Department of Education if the parent believes their child has experienced discrimination. (IDEA, 2004, §300.504).

Parental Participation. As mentioned previously in the overview of procedural safeguards, parents must participate in the special education process, including IEP meetings. They must be given proper notification, in a timely manner, of all meetings and included in all decisions made about their child's education. The parent has the right to participate fully in the entire special education process and any educational decisions made for their child during or outside of formal IEP meetings.

Financial Implications of the IDEA

The current legislation clarifies that students with disabilities are educated with the support of a federally funded program with comprehensive rights and considerable protections for their education. School districts face the very costly reality of legal action if they fail to uphold the rights of students with disabilities. Every year, the number of due process cases has been climbing exponentially across the country. Consider San Diego County, for example. In the 2018-2019 school year, the three largest school districts in San Diego County spent 3.5 million dollars settling due process cases (Taketa, 2019). The largest district, San Diego Unified, spent two million dollars to settle 128 due process cases, roughly \$15,625 per case (Taketa, 2019). Sweetwater Union, the second-largest district in the county, spent \$400,000 to settle 31 cases, approximately \$12,900 per case (Taketa, 2019). And Poway Unified, the third-largest district, spent \$1.1 million to settle only 25 cases, roughly \$44,000 per case (Taketa, 2019). The settlement money reimburses parents for services they claim should have been covered by the district, additional tutoring, private assessments, private school tuition, transportation, and reimburse parents' attorneys (Taketa, 2019). According to state data, in the 2007-2008 school year, there were 2,626 due process cases filed. In the 2018-2019 school year, 4,854 cases were filed, resulting in a staggering 85% increase in only a decade (Taketa, 2019).

Given the incredibly tight budgets with which school districts must work, this enormous amount of money could be spent on a multitude of better resources: school supplies, school counselors, enrichment programs, visual and performing arts, physical education, teacher salaries, additional support staff, STEM curriculum, tutors, or after school programs, just to name a few. The sad reality is that the money spent on special education litigation could be saved

if administrators were better prepared to understand and support their special education programs in their schools (Taketa, 2019).

The Evolving Role of Administrators

It is well documented that the role of school administrators has evolved considerably since the inception of public education (Searby, 2010; Urban & Wagoner, 2009). In the early 1900s, the role of the school administrator was primarily related to discipline and supervising teachers (DiPaola et al., 2004). Therefore, the measure of an effective administrator was the public perception of the school, which was determined by how many high achieving, reputable students their school was able to produce (Brown, 2006, DiPaola et al., 2004). As public education has evolved, so has the role of administrators. As schools have increased enrollment and included students with disabilities, administrators have had to adapt to several increased responsibilities. Administrators must still manage discipline and supervision of teachers in addition to public relations, federal legal compliance, financial allocations, curriculum, and academic outcomes for all students, not just high achieving students (Hess & Kelly, 2007).

There is overwhelming evidence that administrative credential programs have failed to prepare administrators to assume a leadership role in special education (Lasky & Karge, 2006, Praisner, 2003, Angelle & Bilton, 2009, Davidson & Algozzine, 2002). Boscardin et al. (2011), for example, concluded that, although administrators must be proficient in educational administration, general education, and special education, there is a need for an increased level of competency and expertise in special education due to the increasingly litigious nature of an IEP. Crockett (2002) reinforced the idea that administrative preparation programs are lacking in special education content.

Although California professional standards for educational leadership exist (California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, 2014), there is no consistency in administrative credential programs in California as it relates to special education topics. The California professional standards for educational leadership are as follows:

- Standard 1: A school administrator is an educational leader who prompts the success of all students by facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of *a vision of learning shared and supported by the school community*.
- Standard 2: A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by *advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth*.
- Standard 3: A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by ensuring *management of the organization, operations, and resources* for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment.
- Standard 4: A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by *collaborating with families and community members*, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources.
- Standard 5: A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by *modeling a personal code of ethics and developing professional leadership capacity*.
- Standard 6: A school administrator is an education leader who promotes the success of all students by *understanding, responding to, and influencing the larger political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context*. (pp. 4-10)

Special education programs and students with disabilities are included in statements such as promoting the success of "all students," which is repeated several times above. However, there is still no consistent guidance on how to educate future principals to promote the success of all students in current administrative credential programs.

Statement of the Problem

As mentioned previously, a school administrator, usually the school principal, is responsible for ensuring FAPE in their school. They are responsible for attending every individualized education plan (IEP) meeting at the school, understanding each special education student's unique needs, and being knowledgeable about the special education laws to ensure their school provides FAPE for every student (McElhinny & Pellegrin, 2014). One might presume that administrative credential programs properly educate administrators about the historical and legislative context of special education and prepare them to support their special education students and staff effectively (or at least in a way that is consistent with legal expectations). However, the literature overwhelmingly suggests otherwise (Singh, 2015, Praisner, 2003, Angelle & Bilton, 2009, Davidson & Algozzine, 2002). What is noticeably lacking in the current literature is a solution, including documentation of successful strategies that have been (or could be) used for administrator preparation in special education.

In order to produce solutions and promote successful administrative strategies, however, one must first identify *specific* areas of weaknesses that currently exist. The existing literature does not provide this sort of specificity.

Additionally, to identify specific areas of current weakness, "a need exists in the literature to not only obtain quantitative results," to appeal to school district decision-makers with concrete and measurable data but also "to explain such results in more detail, especially in terms of

detailed voices and participant perspectives" on administrative preparation in special education (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011, p. 151). This dual need seems especially important in conducting research to identify specific areas of weaknesses in administrative preparation in special education law and best practices because so little is known about this matter.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this study is an attempt to fill the current gap in the literature about administrator preparation in special education law and appropriate leadership practices for educating students with disabilities. The study focuses on administrators in Southern California. Administrators were surveyed and interviewed to identify and examine their perceptions of the specific areas of weakness in their preparation in special education law and best practices. The following questions guided the study:

1. What pre-service training did the administrators in the study receive in special education law and best practices, and how competent do they feel in terms of this training?
2. What aspects of their training in special education law and best practices do the participating administrators identify as areas of strengths and weaknesses in their preparation?

Significance of the Study

Adequate preparation in special education laws and best practices is critical for administrators to effectively support their special education programs. The literature lacks evidence of what is specifically lacking in their training relative to special education. Therefore, this research studied administrators' perceived areas of strengths and weaknesses in their credentialing programs in an attempt to provide more specificity. Administrators were also asked

to identify aspects of special education they had to learn “on the job” that they wish they received more training in their credentialing programs.

This study has four significant implications as it attempts to identify specific topics lacking from administrative credentialing programs. The first point of significance is that the study findings could assist policymakers at the state-wide level to provide more detailed guidance regarding special education preparation for administration. As Boscardin (2007) postulated, special education is an incredibly specialized, litigious field requiring increased expertise and experience to ensure that students with disabilities are best supported. If there was more specific guidance, universities might use that information to reform their coursework in special education, both in terms of quantity and quality of instruction in their administrative credentialing programs.

The second point of significance is that this study could also assist districts in providing and developing better quality ongoing professional development and support to their administrators in special education. The overwhelming lack of pre-service preparation in special education for school administrators has been well documented (Angelle & Bilton, 2009; Davidson & Algozzine, 2002; Lasky & Karge, 2006; Praisner, 2003). Unfortunately, other studies have also shown that many school administrators are receiving "little to no formal...in-service training," which calls for a need for ongoing professional development (Wakeman et al., 2006, p.154). Because there is currently no uniformity in how administrative credentialing programs implement special education content, there is an increased responsibility for individual districts to provide that level of support to their administrators, both new and tenured faculty, as the laws are continuously evolving.

The third point of significance is that individual professionals in administrative positions and those interested in going into administration might find this study useful as a guide to understanding potential strengths and weaknesses in their preparation in special education. As will be further discussed in the study's findings, several administrators will attest to the importance of their initiative to seek out professional development opportunities in special education or conduct their own research regarding special education laws and may find this study to be another resource for their professional growth.

The fourth and final point of significance is that this study could potentially address the financial burden that litigation costs schools at all levels listed above. Pazez and Cole (2013) concluded that special education, both law, and content, have been overlooked in administrator preparation programs and is ignored in the development of programs that claim to be more conscious of a social justice model of leadership in education. The reality is that legislation guides litigation, and school administrators require more training in special education law and best practices to prevent litigation.

COVID-19 Global Pandemic

The lives of every family in the United States, particularly families with school-aged children, were altered when every school district in the country closed and transitioned to distance learning, which “posed new challenges for parents, teachers, school administrators, and students” (U.S. Congress Joint Economic Committee, 2021, p. 1). This dissertation study was conducted in late Spring of 2021 and, at that time, 24 percent of schools remained fully remote, 18 percent were teaching fully in person, and the majority of schools, with 51 percent, were operating under some variation of a hybrid model that offered in-person instruction on limited days of the week. Evidence also suggests that this disruption to children’s education harms

student learning, as well as impacts the mental health of parents, students, and teachers (U.S. Congress Joint Economic Committee, 2021).

The pandemic affected entire school systems, including the delivery of special education services, and placed additional burdens of responsibility on school administrators. The school closures have had a significantly negative effect on, “children with special needs due to the potential challenges associated with learning support, behavioral issues, routine, and technical barriers” (Sakarneh, 2021, p. 1012). Students with special needs were struggling with the online learning approaches due to both a lack of structure and a lack of social contact resulting in increased behavior problems (Sakarneh, 2021). As postulated by Duraku and Nagavci (2020), school closures exposed the ineffectiveness of delivering inclusive education virtually as most parents complained that their students have been left out. School administrators were tasked with considering the mental health impacts of the pandemic on their students, responding to and supporting families who were having a difficult time with their children at home, while also innovating ways to support the learning for students with special needs at their schools.

Additionally, administrators were also responsible for supporting the special education teachers navigating stressful new roles providing distance learning for students with special needs. Special education teachers were already a vulnerable group as evidenced by attrition rates as high as 25% and turnover rates approaching 50% (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). In a study on the mental health impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on special education teachers, 468 participants were surveyed and:

38.4% met clinical criteria for generalized anxiety disorder, a rate 12.4 times greater than the U.S. population, and 37.6% for major depressive disorder, a rate 5.6 times greater than the population...The impact of the pandemic was moderate to extreme on stress

(91%), depression (58%), anxiety (76%), and emotional exhaustion (83%). (Cormier et al., 2021, p. 1)

It is important to note these factors as part of the context of the study as the COVID-19 global pandemic affected the methodology, and the study overall, so profoundly.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this chapter is to expand on the literature introduced in the problem framing section. This section will review the strengths and limitations of relatively recent studies in which the focus is closely aligned with the topic of this study, i.e., administrator preparation in the area of special education. Finally, this section will also review literature focused on the importance of relationship-building in school leadership, as this was an emergent theme from the interview data in this study.

The Pre-service Literature

As has already been suggested, special education is highly litigious. As a law-driven field in the broader scope of general education, special education is charged with interpreting federal and state laws, abiding by legally-binding timelines, understanding formal evaluations, and following mandates that can be confusing to an administrator without formal legal education or training while still making educationally appropriate decisions about the education of students with special needs that go beyond minimal or token legal compliance. Moreover, the highly individualized nature of an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) makes it challenging to prepare administrators for all possible scenarios with their special education students and families. Furthermore, administrators must uphold their responsibility to provide Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) on top of all the other administrative duties they must perform to run a school (Weber, 2009; McElhinny & Pellegrin, 2014).

In a 2009 study, school principals were asked about their preparation programs from the perspective of readiness to support special education issues in their schools. The findings suggest that the principals in this study believed they had not received sufficient preparation to assume a

leadership role in special education (Angelle & Bilton, 2009). This study highlights the gap in preparation; however, it does little to highlight the specific skills and knowledge areas missing from these preparation programs. This lack of specificity could be due to the fact that the study utilized a survey design (Angelle & Bilton, 2009). Another study surveying novice administrators' perceptions of special education law showed that they self-reported insufficient knowledge of special education law and are dissatisfied with their training, claiming they need additional preparation in special education law. Again, this study reinforces the bulk of the literature findings claiming administrators lack sufficient preparation but does not identify particular areas of preparation needed (Davidson & Algozzine, 2002).

In a 2006 study of 205 California administrators, the participants disclosed that they spent an average of 19.5 hours of their time dealing with special education issues weekly. The great majority of these administrators reported having no experience working with students in special education, and 80% felt their education did not adequately prepare them to support special education staff. The study concluded that administrators need special education training prior to starting their career and ongoing professional development in supervising special education programs. This conclusion is a valuable finding; however, further research is still needed to identify specific training and professional development areas required to better prepare school administrators (Lasky & Karge, 2006).

Administrators perceive special education law as intricate, forever evolving, and frustrating. They report an eagerness to ensure FAPE in their schools, but 92% disclosed having received no formal training in special education matters (Webb et al., 2010). Again, in a 2007 study surveying graduates of administrative preparation programs, 40% reported a lack of special education law knowledge. Twenty-eight percent of the participants reported a lack of certainty in

how to support their special education staff and a lack of confidence in managing special education programs in general (Garrison-Wade et al., 2007).

A lack of understanding of all that goes into special education can also be highly problematic because parents could interpret the lack of knowledge as apathy for their child's education. In a 2005 study, findings suggested a lack of sincerity by school administrators as one of the primary reasons parents filed a due process claim (Scheffel et al., 2005). Another study on elementary school principals' attitudes about the inclusion of students with disabilities indicated only approximately 1 in 5 principals have a positive attitude toward inclusion; most are "uncertain" (Praisner, 2003). These studies highlight the need for school administrators to not only have a foundational understanding of special education but to be acutely aware of how their attitudes toward special education are projected onto the parents of their students with disabilities.

Another challenging aspect of navigating special education as an administrator is that it is an ever-changing field. With increased due process claims, a rise in special education advocates, and new research in special education being published, the legislation changes at a rapid pace. There is a constant flow of local and state court decisions that affect special education, amendments to laws, and new evidence-based practices (Weber, 2009; McElhinny & Pellegrin, 2014). Even if administrators had a more effective preparation program for special education, keeping up with the steadily evolving climate of the field is a daunting task without ongoing in-service professional development for administrators.

The In-service/Professional Development Literature

The overwhelming lack of pre-service preparation in special education for school administrators has been well documented and reviewed in the section above (Angelle & Bilton,

2009; Davidson & Algozzine, 2002; Lasky & Karge, 2006; Praisner, 2003; Scheffel et al., 2005). Unfortunately, other studies have also shown that many school administrators are receiving "little to no formal...in-service training," which calls for a need for ongoing professional development (Wakeman et al., 2006, p.154).

Though there is consistency across most studies about the limited amount of professional development principals receive in special education, the studies themselves suggest significant limitations in generating insights into the content or quality of preparation beyond the amount of development education received alone. For example, a study conducted by Wakeman et al. in 2006 investigated principal knowledge of special education, and the variables associated with that knowledge demonstrated the limitations of the professional development literature in this area generally. Although the Wakeman study detailed a strong conceptual framework and a comprehensive understanding of the current literature, the study was limited in several ways. First, of 1,000 surveys administered, only 362 were returned, resulting in a 36% response rate, which is low. More importantly, this study was conducted on a national level. With the United States being so expansive and with education laws varying by state, the results—even with a higher response rate—would be hardly generalizable or easy to interpret. Also, the discussion of findings appears to be contradictory. On the one hand, the study reported that principals report having knowledge of special education; however, later on in the discussion, the author reported that only 28% of the principals had a basic understanding of the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) (Wakeman et al., 2006). Although at the time of the study, there was little universal knowledge of UDL, it is now a core principle of inclusion in special education (Wakeman et al., 2006).

An example of a study with fewer problems is one conducted in Southern California by Singh in 2015. Singh wanted to identify the knowledge of special education law that administrators in a Special Education Local Plan Area (SELPA) possessed to identify administrators' training needs. In 1977, all California school districts and county school offices were mandated to form groups in geographical regions of appropriate size and scope, called SELPAs, to provide for all special education service needs of the students living within the region's boundaries. This mandate ensures that each region has a uniform, local plan describing how it will provide high-quality special education services (California Department of Education, 2020). Like the study discussed above, this study, once again, used a self-report survey design, but, in this case, the survey had an 84% response rate. Also, the survey instrument exhibited a substantial amount of face validity because it was detailed and covered the six fundamental principles of IDEA.

This study had one other positive feature: Its findings appear to be generalizable, at least within the state of California. The generalizability claim is based on the fact that, when considering the education level of study participants, their years of service and experience, their ethnicity, and the average number of students per administrator of the administrators in the SELPA compared to the population of administrators throughout the state of California, they are very similar to demographic details in other California SELPAs. Thus, this study's findings presumably can be generalized throughout the state of California, and we can reasonably conclude that the results gap between administrators' perceived knowledge and actual knowledge of special education law documented by the study is valid for the state as a whole. However, the findings still lack any detailed description of specific areas of weakness in school administrator knowledge of special education as it relied solely on quantitative survey data.

The Relationship-building in Leadership Literature

This dissertation study aimed to identify specific areas of weakness in school administrator preparation in special education from the perspective of school principals. Consistent with the literature presented in the previous sections, the findings suggested a deficiency in pre-service preparation and inconsistency in the in-service professional development in matters of special education law and best practices. However, an emergent theme that was not present in the literature reviewed on school administrator preparation in special education was the importance of relationship-building to the participants in their school leadership practice. This was a significant finding in this dissertation study as it provided an answer to the research question that sought out specific areas of weakness in administrative credential programs in special education law and best practices. One specific area of weakness is relationship-building. Therefore, two main concepts will be examined related to relationship-building in leadership: relational leadership and distributed leadership.

Relational Leadership

In the text, *Advancing Relational Leadership Research: A Dialogue Among Perspectives*, Uhl-Bien & Ospina (2012) define relational leadership as "views that recognize leadership, not as a trait or behavior of an individual leader, but as a phenomenon generated in the interactions and relationships among people (p. 540). Day (2000) describes this as a collective capacity and notes that relational leadership processes "generally enable groups of people to work together in meaningful ways" (p. 582). In their own ways, these definitions highlight the importance of interactions between people, working together, and relationships in leadership.

In her book, *Rethinking Leadership: A New Look at Old Leadership Questions*, Ladkin (2010) postulates what occurs in the relationship between leaders and followers (p. 55-73). She

explained that relational leadership theories leave the question of how the 'middle space' between leaders and followers operates unanswered and offered some ideas.

Firstly, perception plays a central role in the leaders' and followers' understanding of each other, and these mutual perceptions are "constantly in a process of co-construction" (p. 66). Ladkin offers an example of this phenomenon through an exercise she utilizes in leadership development programs. The activity is called 'leading hands,' and participants are asked to stand face-to-face with their partners. One participant chooses to be 'A,' the other chooses to be 'B,' and both are instructed not to talk during the exercise. In the first round, 'A' is instructed to act as the leader, and 'B' is instructed to act as the follower. Leader 'A' is told to move their follower's hand, with the back of their hands as the only point of contact while moving around the room. An added challenge is that Follower 'B' must have their eyes closed. After a few rounds, roles are reversed. Finally, after both participants have had the opportunity to lead and follow, they are instructed to close their eyes and continue to move around the room without speaking while maintaining contact through the backs of their hands. Ladkin notes that in all of the years she has used this exercise, not one participant has even stumbled in this final task. When asked to reflect on the exercise, participants typically remark how they were unsure who was leading and who was following in the third stage of the exercise and how that was actually a relief. They explained the absence of feeling responsible for the 'follower' allowed them to experience a "flow of energy working between them, a kind of invisible exchange of leading and following" (p. 68). Ladkin also noted that, so far, no pair has been able to articulate this phenomenon precisely and concludes that somehow, "the relationship has taken over, as a mutually experienced and binding force" and likens this "kind of flow" to that of which is "at the heart of a relational view of leadership" (p. 68).

Secondly, Ladkin builds on the idea of the “flow” between leader and follower and offers this perspective on the ‘middle space’ between leaders and followers:

Although the in-between space is entirely dependent on the entities which constitute the relationship, that relationship has a dynamism that is more than just the combination of entities that comprise it. *The interaction itself has a life of its own.* (p. 71)

This idea highlights the importance of the space between leaders and followers that is in a constant state of fluctuation and co-construction. Leadership is not simply the presence of a leader and a follower; leadership lies in the relationship between leader and follower. The existence of this third entity of the 'middle space' between a leader and follower begs the question, how can one strengthen that 'in-between' space? Ladkin provided an example of how Barack Obama’s 2008 Presidential campaign used the Internet in an unprecedented way. His campaign utilized daily emails that felt personal and gave glimpses into his personal life that strengthened the space ‘in-between’ his campaign and his supporters (p. 72). School administrators could benefit from training in relational leadership theory and provided strategies to strengthen the ‘middle space’ between themselves, their staff, and the IEP teams as a whole.

Distributed Leadership

Another leadership theory closely aligned with relational leadership that could be beneficial to school administrators' preparation in special education is distributed leadership. In their chapter, *Distributed Leadership and Democratic Community*, Brooks & Kensler (2011) describe distributed leadership as "noteworthy in that it emphasizes the way that leaders and followers interact in situations...and how the behavior of leaders and followers evolves over time" (p. 93). They highlight the reflexive nature of distributed leadership in that, in specific scenarios, a person could be a leader. Still, in another situation, that same person might take up

the role of follower (Brooks & Kensler, 2011, p. 93). For example, in the context of a school principal, they are the formal leader of their school, but in a meeting of district representatives and resource specialists, they would take up the role of follower. Another example would be in an IEP meeting; they would still be in a formal leadership role as principal and responsible for ensuring FAPE for the student in question. However, when it is time to discuss the students' progress and goals in their expressive and receptive language skills, the principal would defer to the Speech and Language Pathologist to make recommendations as they are the IEP team expert in that area.

When viewed in this distributed leadership lens, similar to relational leadership, leadership is not attributed to any particular skills or characteristics. Instead, it is "a fluid phenomenon that happens *between* leaders and followers" (Brooks & Kensler, 2011, p. 93). This concept correlates to Ladkin's perspective on the space 'in-between' leaders and followers, and she provided examples of ways to strengthen that space. Similarly, Brooks & Kensler (2011) suggest informal routines as an essential component of distributed leadership theory (p. 94). They recognize formal routines (e.g., committee meetings, assemblies, instructional observations, performance reviews) as typical organizational structures of schools (p. 94). However, informal routines (e.g., how people are greeted in the hallway, having lunch in a shared space, informal interactions amongst peers) are increasingly important in the practice of leadership according to distributed leadership theory (p. 94). Brooks & Kensler (2011) reiterate, "leadership and followership are fluid and something that happens between people rather than being necessarily something that certain people enact due to their relative authority (p. 94). One example of this fluidity could be a new principal at a school recognizing an informal routine at their new school of the staff eating lunch together on a particular day of the week and deciding to

join. Their own authority did not enact this routine, but they chose to participate in building relationships in their new community.

Another aspect of distributed leadership is the collaborative nature of the relationship between leader and follower (Brooks & Kensler, 2011, p. 95). This collaboration is particularly salient in the context of school leadership (Diamond & Spillane, 2006). School principals must collaborate with different grade level teams, special education teams, parent groups, and district representatives, amongst other roles. In their special education departments alone, a school principal must collaborate with unique IEP teams for every single student with a diagnosed disability at their school. Furthermore, as mentioned previously, an IEP team is comprised of several different specialists, and the school principal needs their expert opinion to make informed decisions. This process demonstrates the fluid, collaborative nature of distributed leadership and its importance in school leadership.

Despite the positive attributes of distributed leadership theory, there are legitimate critiques of the theory in practice. The foremost critics describe the model as blind to difference as it "fails to account for the political and power dimensions of issues such as race, sexism, and class bias" (Brooks & Kensler, 2011, p. 95; see also Larson & Murtadha, 2002; Maxcy & Nguyen, 2006). In response to this critique, there has been a call for coupling distributed leadership with ethically grounded perspectives, such as leadership for social justice, to make it more sensitive to these political and power dynamics present in educational leadership (Brooks et al., 2007). When combined with "constructs, theories, and conceptual frameworks" aligned with the moral dimensions of educational leadership, distributed leadership has much promise (Brooks & Kensler, 2011, p. 103).

When considering specific training areas to improve school administrator preparation in special education, incorporating relational leadership and distributed leadership theories could instill the importance of relationship-building in school leadership practice.

Conclusion

To summarize, the literature on principals' preparation to manage special education initiatives in their schools is quite limited. Some of the limited studies available have a substantial number of limitations and problems. Fortunately, there are at least one or two relatively well-done studies. Consequently, there is reason to believe that there is, indeed, a problem with administrators' knowledge base in the special education area. Unfortunately, even quality studies such as the one conducted by Singh had one limitation: Like the rest of the existing literature on this subject, the Singh (2015) study relied exclusively on quantitative survey findings and, consequently, does not answer certain questions, including the questions asked in my dissertation research.

As suggested, the existing literature examining school administrator preparation in special education has primarily utilized quantitative research methods. The survey data have provided valuable findings that highlight the lack of preparation these administrators receive. However, there is an opportunity to deepen this research. This dissertation study aimed to extend the existing research by using qualitative interviews with school administrators that produced rich qualitative perspectives of what is explicitly lacking from current administrator preparation programs. The intent was to create a dialogue with school administrators to make better informed, actionable recommendations about how to correct the problem, which is currently lacking in the existing literature. In terms of this research, opening the discussion of what is and is not working in our special education system was the first step in reconciling the current lack of

special education preparation. If districts can name the issues contributing to the lack of administrator preparation in special education, they have an opportunity to effect change in their schools. One such issue that emerged from this dissertation study was the importance of building relationships in schools, particularly amongst members of the IEP team.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

There has been much written about the deficiencies in administrative preparation programs as well as the lack of ongoing professional development or in-service training in content related to special education. The purpose of this study was an attempt to begin to fill the current gap in the literature surrounding administrator preparation in special education law and appropriate school practices for students with disabilities. In order to produce solutions and promote successful administrative strategies, however, one must first identify specific areas of weaknesses that currently exist. The existing literature does not provide this sort of specificity. This study surveyed and interviewed participants to identify and examine their perceptions of the specific areas of weakness in their preparation in the area of special education law and best practices. The following questions guided the study:

1. What pre-service training did the administrators in the study receive in special education law and best practices, and how competent do they feel in terms of this training?
2. What aspects of their training in special education law and best practices do the participating administrators identify as areas of strengths and weaknesses in their preparation?

This chapter outlines the explanatory sequential mixed methods approach that was utilized in this study. Specifically, the survey procedures, how research participants were selected and recruited, the qualitative interview methods, and the cross-case analysis are discussed. Finally, an overview of the researcher's positionality relative to this research is presented.

Research Design

An explanatory sequential mixed methods design was used in this study, which involved first collecting quantitative data through survey procedures and then attempting to make sense of the quantitative results by collecting more in-depth qualitative data through semi-structured interviews. The rationale for utilizing an explanatory sequential mixed methods design was to establish complementarity. Creswell & Plano Clark describe the goal of complementarity as a means to "seek elaboration, illustration enhancement, and clarification of the findings from one strand with the other strand" (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011, p. 290).

Quantitative Phase: Survey Design

The initial phase of the explanatory sequential mixed-methods study utilized a quantitative survey design. This design was appropriate for this phase of the study because its purpose is to gather "information about a larger number of people that can be inferred from the responses obtained from a smaller group of subjects" (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p.23). Neuman posits that "survey research uses a written questionnaire...to gather information on the backgrounds, behaviors, beliefs, or attitudes of a large number of people" (2013, p. 49). The survey was developed from reviewing the current literature on principal preparation in special education law. The survey is included in Appendix A. The survey included questions about the administrators' years of experience, special education familiarity, credentialing program, and demographic information. The survey data from each interview participant were used to individualize the general interview guide to provide a more rich, in-depth description of the survey data for each participant. Because the response rate for the survey portion of the study was low, this tailoring of the interview guide became especially important in this study.

Qualitative Phase: Interview Design

The next phase of the explanatory sequential mixed-methods study utilized a qualitative interview design. This design was appropriate for this phase of the study because its purpose is to provide methodological triangulation. Denzin (1978) identified four types of triangulation: Data source triangulation, which is the result of the researcher looking for the data to remain the same in different contexts; Investigator triangulation, which is when several investigators examine the same phenomenon; Theory triangulation, which is when investigators with different viewpoints interpret the same results; and Methodological triangulation, which is when one approach is followed by another, to increase confidence in the interpretation. The quantitative survey approach was followed by the qualitative semi-structured interview approach to increase confidence in the interpretation. For this reason, the semi-structured interview guide was developed to align with questions from the survey. Additionally, the semi-structured interview guide approach was followed by a document review to examine the credential programs' course information to compare with the participants' reports and California Administrator Performance Expectations (CAPE). As noted above, the survey results also helped me individualize interviews with each participant. The general interview guide is included in Appendix B.

Research Site and Participants

Quantitative Phase: Survey Participant Selection

The study utilized stratified random sampling as this strategy can be effective to "increase confidence in making generalizations to particular subgroups or areas" (Patton, 2015, p. 182). The study was conducted in Southern California and stratified by school type (elementary, middle, and high school) as well as region (North, South, Central/East counties). In the first phase of the study, a survey was sent to 10 randomly selected school principals in each of the

nine stratified categories to assess their preparation concerning special education for a total of 90 school principals. Administrator email addresses are publicly available and were gathered from official school websites. The survey concluded with a request to participate in a thirty-minute interview conducted on the Zoom video conferencing platform. If there were fewer than 10 responses in any stratified category, additional participants were randomly selected from the remaining pool of principals in their respective stratified categories. As it turned out, even with selecting additional participants, the response rate for the survey, unfortunately, was quite low. Consequently, the survey functioned to identify participants for the interview portion of the study and guide the interview for the selected participants.

As mentioned in the introduction, the COVID-19 global pandemic had an immense impact on this study. Entire school systems were closed in March 2020 and this study was conducted when 24 percent of schools remained fully remote, 18 percent were teaching fully in person, and the majority of schools, with 51 percent, were operating under some variation of a hybrid model that offered in-person instruction on limited days of the week. School administrators were juggling additional burdens of responsibility, overseeing the quick evolution of distance learning, and considering the mental health of students, teachers, and parents (U.S. Congress Joint Economic Committee, 2021). These increased duties and stress factors could explain why administrators would have been reluctant to participate in a voluntary research study.

Qualitative Phase: Interview Participant Selection

From that point, interviewees were purposely selected from those indicating a willingness to participate. During this second phase of the study, purposeful sampling was used as this strategy allows the researcher to select "information-rich cases for in-depth study" (Patton, 2015,

p. 182). The initial goal was to interview two principals in each of the nine stratified categories for a total of 18 interviews. However, all nine administrators who participated in the survey were invited to participate in the follow-up interview due to the low response rate. This decision will be further outlined in the discussion of the qualitative data collection and analysis.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

Quantitative Phase of Data Collection

As noted, in the first quantitative phase of the study, a survey developed from the literature review was distributed to 90 randomly selected school principals in Southern California schools utilizing a stratified random sampling method. The participant pools were stratified by school type (elementary, middle, and high school) as well as region (North, South, Central/East counties). A solicitation email was sent via email to 10 randomly selected school principals in each of the nine stratified categories for a total of 90 participants. Within one week, four participants indicated their willingness to participate in the survey. In the second week, a second and third request for participation was sent out to the same 90 participants, which resulted in two more participants indicating their willingness to participate in the survey by the end of the two-week mark. Since there were fewer than 10 responses in each stratified category, additional participants were randomly selected for each stratified category's remaining pool of principals. As a result, the solicitation email was sent to another 84 randomly selected school principals. This request for survey participants resulted in three more participants indicating their willingness to participate, for a total of nine participants for the initial quantitative phase of the study.

Quantitative Data Analysis

The initial goal was for the survey responses to be compiled and analyzed to determine trends within the quantitative data. The quantitative data was to be coded by assigning numeric values to each response and preparing the data for analysis with the Statistical Program for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The data would have then been explored by visually inspecting the data and conducting a descriptive analysis to determine general trends within groups of interest in the quantitative sample. The initial groups of interest were to be divided by district and school type (i.e., elementary, middle, and high school). Participants who are typical or representative of each group would be purposefully selected for the follow-up interviews to understand how the groups may differ. For example, if the quantitative data indicated a trend of low levels of reported competency from their pre-service training, the researcher would have selected interviewees who reported low competency levels to provide a deeper explanation of that quantitative data. Regression analysis was to be utilized to identify which variables have an impact on the groups of interest and determine if there is any correlation between variables. The primary dependent variable would have been the answers to the following survey question: When you began your career, how prepared did you feel to support your school's special education department? Examples of independent variables that could have been likely in the regression models were whether or not principals had prior experience in special education, years of experience, and, possibly, age. If the data revealed any other compelling trends within other groups (e.g., demographic information, years of experience, etc.), those would have also been considered when planning participant selection for the second qualitative phase.

However, regression analysis or any other inferential statistical analysis was not viable due to the low response rate. Therefore, the quantitative survey results were used to identify,

through maximum variation sampling, who to interview for the qualitative phase. All nine administrators who participated in the survey were invited to participate in a follow-up interview for the qualitative phase of the study.

Qualitative Phase of Data Collection

The original design for this study included a second qualitative phase conducted as a follow-up to the quantitative phase to help explain the quantitative results. In this follow-up phase, semi-structured interviews were conducted to examine the school administrator's perceptions of their preparation in special education. The initial goal was to purposefully select two participants from each of the nine stratified categories for a total of 18 semi-structured interviews. However, all nine administrators who participated in the survey were invited to participate in the follow-up interview due to the low response rate. Four participants agreed to participate in the follow-up interview. Consequently, aggregate survey results were less important than the individual responses of the person being interviewed.

There is a continuum of qualitative interview formats ranging from the informal conversational interview to the slightly more structured interview guide approach to the highly structured and standardized open-ended interview (Patton, 2003, p. 437). For this study, the interview guide approach was used, so the same central ideas guided all the interviews, but the goal also was to maintain a more conversational nature to the interview. Consequently, the interview guide functioned primarily as a checklist used at the end of the interviews to ensure all relevant points were covered.

There are a number of reasons that an interview guide was used rather than using a pure conversational interviewing approach. The first reason is that school principals have limited time: an informal interview approach kept the interview focused yet still provided flexibility to

explore unique or idiosyncratic things in participants' responses. There was also an intention to build rapport and, as a consequence, yield more authentic answers than a highly structured interview format would potentially produce.

The interviews were roughly thirty minutes and were conducted on the Zoom video conferencing platform. Each interview was recorded with the participant's permission; jot notes were taken during the interview and expanded into analytic memos following each interview.

Qualitative Data Analysis

Once all interviews were conducted, the recordings were transcribed for analysis. Zoom provides an audio transcription of the recordings, which were cleaned up by the researcher. Polkinghorne (1988) mentions two approaches to data analysis, narrative analysis and the analysis of narrative. Narrative analysis consists of organizing qualitative data into a story format. The analysis of narrative strategy consists of coding the narratives from the stories that arise from the interviews into categories. The analysis of narrative strategy was used in this study.

The qualitative data from the interviews were coded into general categories to see if themes arose and to compare and contrast the findings from each interview (Saldaña, 2016, p. 262). The initial coding categories were derived from the study's research questions listed above. For example, the first question—What pre-service training did the administrators in the study receive in special education law? —used the coding category: *training*. The second question—What aspects of special education do the participating administrators identify as areas of strengths and weaknesses in their preparation? —used the coding categories: *strengths* and *weaknesses*. Because coding is a cyclical act, as Saldaña explains, “rarely is the first cycle of coding perfectly attempted. The second cycle of recoding further manages, filters, highlights, and

focuses the salient features of the qualitative data record for generating categories, themes, and concepts, grasping meaning, and building theory” (2016, p. 8).

These initial codes were primarily used to provide a very general index of the data; however, through several rounds of coding, more specific subcategory codes emerged from the analysis of the data in addition to those initial coding categories. Subsequent rounds of coding categories were derived from survey questions. For example, the questions—To what extent can you attend professional development training in special education in your district? —and—How knowledgeable do you feel your district resource specialist is in matters of special education? —used the coding category: *districts*. Another question—How would you describe your knowledge of the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)? —used the coding category: *LRE*. One of the final survey questions—How would you describe your knowledge of inclusion? —used the coding category: *inclusion*. Upon further rounds of coding the interview data, themes emerged across all participants' data in the topics of relationships and initiative; therefore, the final subcategory codes were *initiative* and *relationships*.

Case Studies and Cross-Case Analysis

The codes derived from the qualitative data were then used to develop case studies of each participant for cross-case analysis. At this phase of the study, a case study design was utilized as it was investigating one particular context in great detail (Neuman, 2013, p. 42). The goal was to generate grounded causal hypotheses about the relation between administrator-reported feelings of competence and the identified areas of strengths and weaknesses in their preparation programs for special education. Merriam (2016) explains, "As is true in other forms of qualitative research, the investigator as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis assumes an inductive stance and strives to derive meaning from the data. The result of this type

of qualitative study is a theory emerges from, or is "grounded" in, the data—hence, grounded theory" (p. 31). Through this process, the researcher was able to identify themes across the individual case studies that could be used to address the study's research questions and detail implications for future research (Charmaz, 2014).

Confidentiality

In each phase of the study, the participants consented to release their identity as the researcher needed to know the participants' identities for follow-up interviews; however, their identity has been kept confidential as no identifying information has been included in the study. All names used in the presentation of results and discussion of findings are pseudonyms, and the administrators' school identifying information has been omitted.

Positionality

Peshkin (1988) acknowledged that subjectivity is inevitable in case study research as the researcher acts as the primary instrument (p. 20). When subjectivity is appropriately managed, it can be considered an advantage as the researcher has insider knowledge and an ability to understand participant responses more deeply (Peshkin, 1988, p. 20). I am a Mild to Moderate Education Specialist. I have had experience working at two public schools as well as a non-public school for students with exceptional behavior needs and emotional disturbances. In my five years of teaching, I have been able to work with five different administrators and had five very different experiences working with each one. This incongruence is what inspired me to conduct a study of this nature. Therefore, it is important to define my positionality that may influence the lens through which I make meaning of both the quantitative and qualitative data. Due to my insider knowledge, I was very attentive to how survey and interview questions were

worded to avoid leading or influencing the way participants responded. I also utilized member checking in the interview phase in order to mitigate these biases as much as possible.

The next chapter summarizes the survey data and presents four case studies of administrators developed as a result of this methodology. Each begins with a brief summary of their academic background and career experience, followed by a description of the demographics of their school, a discussion of their training and preparation in special education prior to starting their administrative career, as well as their access to quality district support resources. Finally, each case study concludes with each participant's definitions of LRE and inclusion and provides examples of implementation at their respective schools. The remaining emergent themes from the cross-case analysis will be detailed in the discussion of findings.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

The purpose of this chapter is to present the results of the study. The chapter will begin with a brief overview of the survey results, which, due to the low response rate, were mainly used to further develop the interview guide and select interview participants. Finally, the bulk of the chapter will be presenting four case studies of the administrators who participated in the follow-up interviews. The names used in this chapter are pseudonyms, and any identifying information (i.e., school names, school districts, universities) has been redacted to protect participant confidentiality.

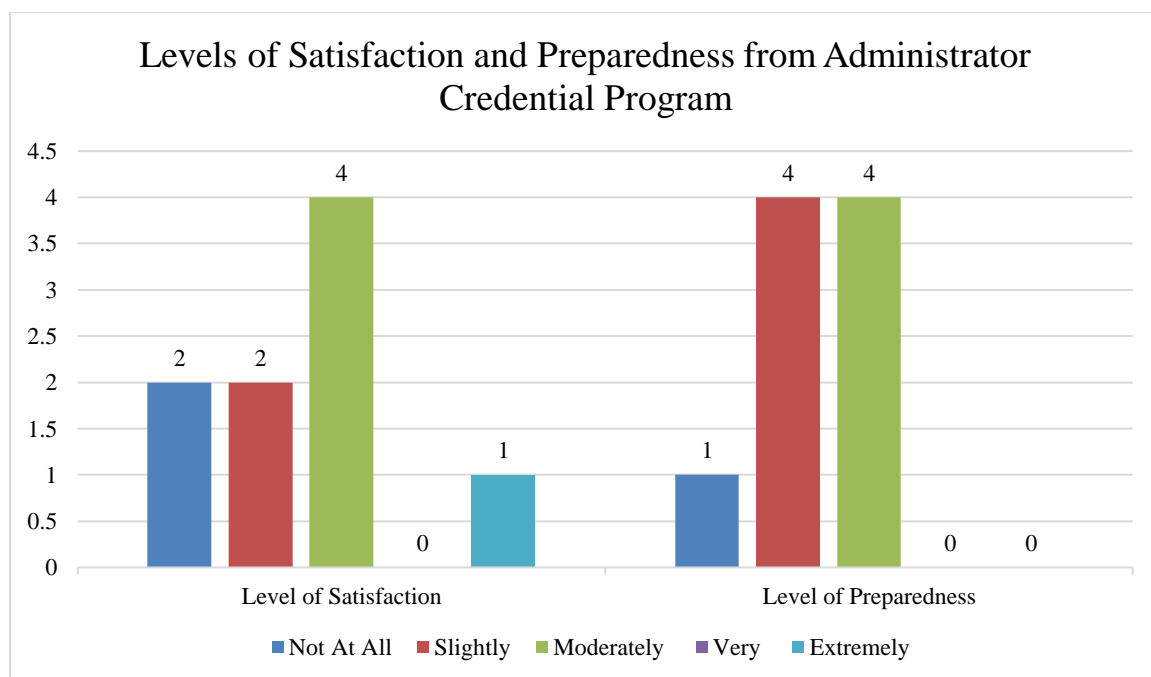
Survey Results

The first survey question asked participants to indicate the number of years they have been school administrators. The answers ranged from one to 19 years, with 9.7 years as the mean and nine years as the median years of administrative experience. The second question inquired if any participants had experience in special education prior to becoming administrators (i.e., education specialist/special education teacher, related service provider, case manager). All participants responded that they had no prior special education experience. Having a lack of experience in special education presents an additional learning curve for new school administrators. The next question asked at what institution participants completed their administrative credentials. The most frequent response was at a local state university, with four out of nine administrators completing the on-campus program offered at this local institution. The remaining five participants completed various online credential programs from five different Southern California universities.

When asked to identify how satisfied they were with their administrative credential program's coverage of their role in special education, two administrators were "not satisfied at all," two administrators were "slightly satisfied," four administrators were "moderately satisfied." One administrator was "extremely satisfied." When asked how prepared participants felt to support their schools' special education departments when they began their careers, one administrator indicated they felt "not prepared at all," four administrators indicated they felt "slightly prepared." Four administrators indicated they felt "moderately prepared." See Figure 1 below.

Figure 1

Levels of Satisfaction and Preparedness from Administrator Credential Program



Of the two administrators that indicated that they were "not satisfied at all" with their credential program's coverage of special education, one indicated that they felt "not prepared at all" to support their school's special education department when they began their career. The other indicated that they felt "slightly prepared." Of the two administrators that indicated that

they were "slightly satisfied" with their credential program's coverage of special education, both indicated that they felt "slightly prepared" to support their school's special education department when they began their careers. Of the four administrators that indicated that they were "moderately satisfied" with their credential program's coverage of special education, one indicated that they felt "slightly prepared" to support their school's special education department when they began their careers. The other three indicated that they felt "moderately prepared." Finally, the administrator that indicated they were "extremely satisfied" with their credential program's coverage of special education felt "moderately prepared" to support their school's special education department when they began their career. Overall, six out of nine administrators' satisfaction levels correlated with their perceived level of preparedness (i.e., they were slightly satisfied with their credential program's coverage of special education and reported they felt slightly prepared to support their school's special education department). Two of the three remaining administrators indicated higher levels of satisfaction with their administrative credential programs compared to their perceived preparedness to support their schools' special education departments (i.e., they indicated they were moderately satisfied with their credential program's coverage of special education but felt only slightly prepared to support their school's special education department). Only one administrator indicated a lower level of satisfaction with their administrative credential program (not at all satisfied) compared to a higher level of preparedness to support their school's special education department (slightly prepared).

The data from these two questions were then ordered by years of experience to examine if there was any correlation between how recently the administrators completed their credential and how satisfied they were with their programs' coverage of special education or their perceived

level of preparedness to support their schools' special education departments. There was no correlation.

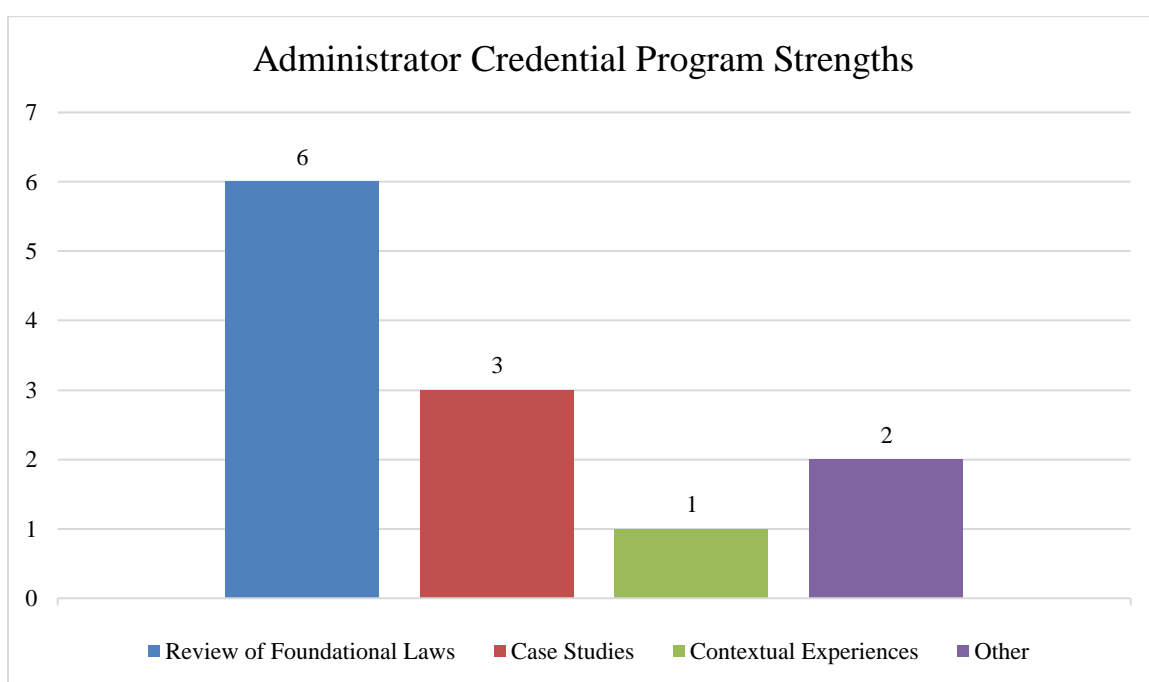
Additionally, the four administrators that completed their administrative credentials at the same institution also varied in responses. One administrator indicated they were "slightly satisfied" with their administrative credential program's coverage of special education. Two administrators indicated they were "moderately satisfied." One administrator indicated they were "extremely satisfied." Although these responses varied, they still skewed slightly higher than the responses of participants who had participated in various online credential programs. Of the five administrators that completed their administrative credential through various online programs, two administrators indicated that they were "not satisfied at all" with their administrative credential programs' coverage of special education, one administrator indicated they felt "slightly satisfied." Two administrators indicated they felt "moderately satisfied."

Despite the participants' varying levels of satisfaction with their administrative credential programs' coverage of special education and their perceived preparedness to support their schools' special education departments when starting their careers, there was more consistency when the participants were asked to identify areas of strength in their administrative credential programs' curricula as they relate to the principals' role in special education. The options listed for this question were: 1) review of foundational laws, 2) case studies, 3) contextual experiences (e.g., principal shadowing), and 4) other (with a text box), and participants were asked to select all that apply. Six out of nine administrators selected review of foundational laws, three out of nine administrators selected case studies, two out of nine administrators selected "other" and noted that they could not identify a strength. One of those administrators wrote, "I sincerely don't remember getting any special education support in my program. It must have been present to

some degree but was not notable enough to remember." Finally, only one administrator selected contextual experiences (e.g., principal shadowing). This administrator also selected a review of foundational laws and case studies (included in the counts above) and also was the one administrator that indicated they were "extremely satisfied" with their administrative credential program's coverage of special education. See Figure 2 below.

Figure 2

Administrator Credential Program Strengths

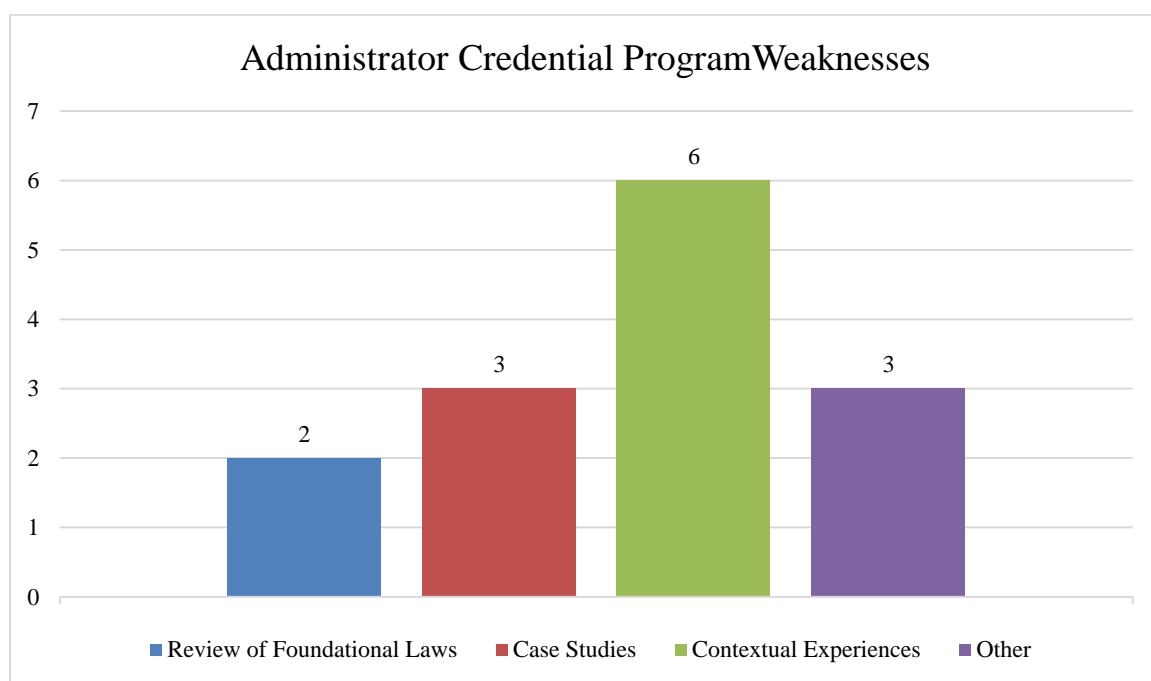


The next question asked participants to identify areas of weakness of their administrative credential programs' curriculum as they related to their role in special education and had the same options of 1) review of foundational laws, 2) case studies, 3) contextual experiences (e.g., principal shadowing), and 4) other (with a text box). Again, participants were asked to select all that applied. Six out of nine administrators chose the most frequent answer, a lack of contextual experiences (e.g., principal shadowing). Three out of the six administrators that selected lack of contextual experiences also selected a lack of case studies. Two out of the nine participants chose

a lack of review of foundational laws, both of these administrators were the participants who indicated that they were "not satisfied at all" with their administrative credential programs' coverage of their role in special education. Three out of nine participants selected "other" and noted areas of weakness in coverage of "administrators key role in IEPs and special education caseloads," "a general understanding of how different districts implement federal legislation," and "facilitating IEP meetings." See Figure 3 below.

Figure 3

Administrator Credential Program Weaknesses

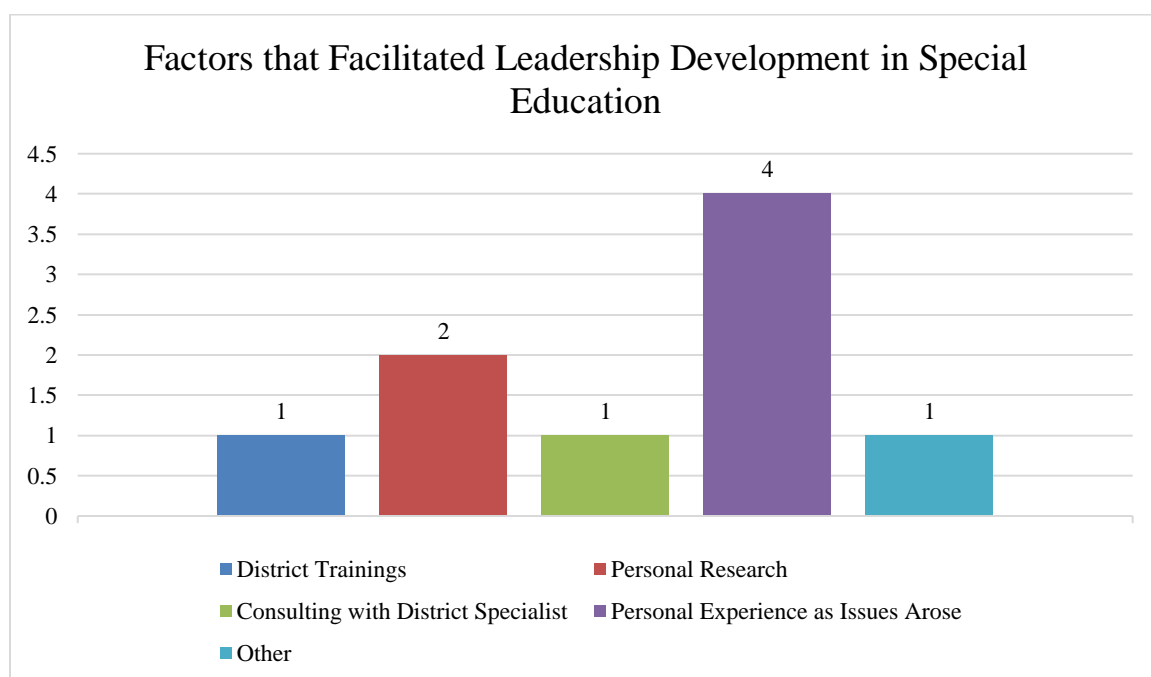


Administrators were then asked if, at the current time, they felt their level of preparedness to support their schools' special education department has improved from the start of their careers. All participants responded yes. The next follow-up question asked participants to indicate what factor they thought facilitated this improvement the most. The options listed for this question were: 1) district professional development training, 2) personal research (e.g., Googling special education laws, seeking outside training or resources), 3) consulting with

district resource specialists, 4) personal experience as issues arose throughout their careers, and 5) other (with a text box) and participants were asked only to select one option as the question indicated which factor *most* impacted their improvement. Four out of nine participants selected personal experience as issues arose throughout their careers. Two out of nine participants selected personal research, one selected district professional development training, and one selected consulting with their district resource specialist. The final administrator selected "other" and noted, "When I worked in my first district, we received training each year. I also took the initiative to grow and understand and had some pretty rough cases my second year that caused me to research and seek support." See Figure 4 below.

Figure 4

Factors that Facilitated Leadership Development in Special Education

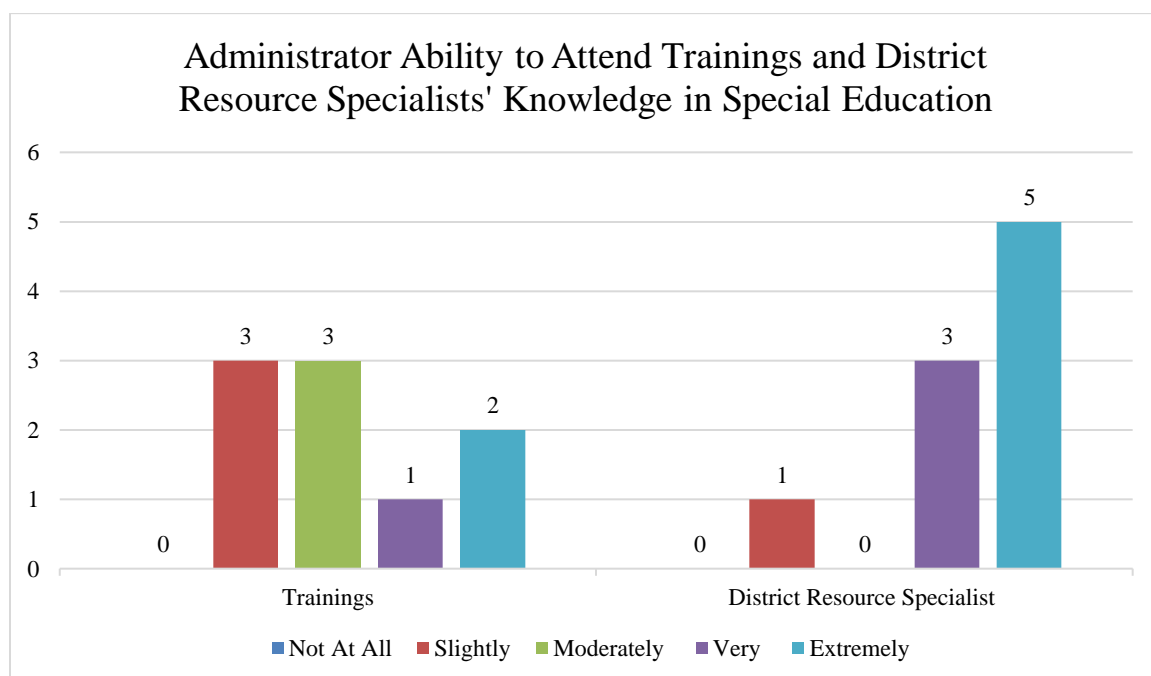


The next question asked to what extent participants could attend professional development training in special education in their school districts. The most frequent answers were "slightly able" and "moderately able," with three administrators selecting each option. Two

participants indicated that they were "extremely able," and one participant chose that they were "very able" to attend professional development training in special education in their districts. Administrators were then asked how knowledgeable they felt their district resource specialists were in matters of special education. The most frequent answer that five out of nine participants selected was "extremely knowledgeable," followed by three participants selecting "very knowledgeable," and only one participant selected "slightly knowledgeable." See Figure 5 below.

Figure 5

Administrator Ability to Attend Trainings and District Resource Specialists' Knowledge in Special Education

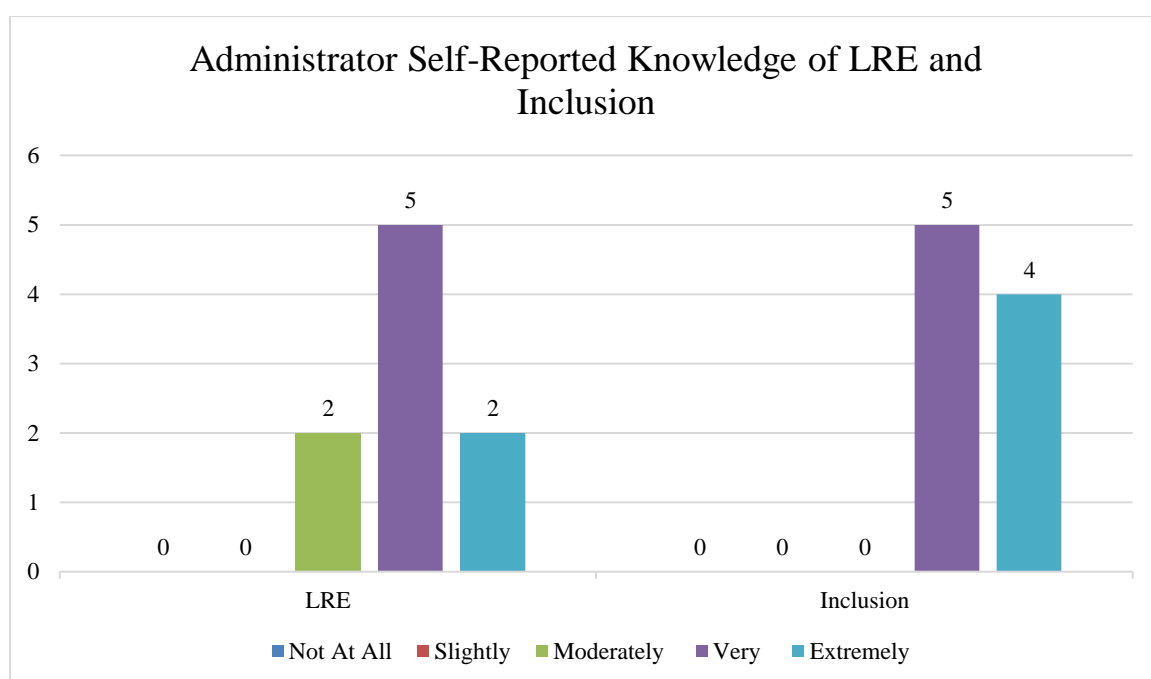


The next set of questions asked participants to describe their knowledge of two critical components of special education, the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) stipulation and the concept of inclusion. When asked to describe their understanding of LRE, five out of nine participants indicated that they are "very knowledgeable," two participants indicated "extremely

knowledgeable." Two participants indicated that they are "moderately knowledgeable." When asked to describe their knowledge of inclusion, five out of nine participants indicated that they are "very knowledgeable," and four participants indicated that they are "extremely knowledgeable." Participants were asked to describe both of these concepts later in the interview portion of the study to see if their perceptions of knowledge were accurate. See Figure 6 below.

Figure 6

Administrator Self-Reported Knowledge of LRE and Inclusion



The remaining questions were related to demographic information. When asked to specify their ethnicity, seven out of nine participants identified as Not Hispanic or Latino, and two participants did identify as Hispanic or Latino. When asked to select their race, seven out of nine participants identified as White, one participant identified as Black or African American, and one participant identified as White and Asian. Six participants identified themselves as female, and three participants identified themselves as male. The participants' ages ranged from 37 to 55 years of age, with 47.2 years being the mean and 47 years being the median age of

participants. Demographic information was collected to examine possible trends related to age, years of experience, race, ethnicity, or gender, but there were no correlations. See Table 1 below.

Table 1

Participant Demographic Information

Characteristic	<i>n</i>	%
<i>Ethnicity</i>		
Hispanic or Latino	2	28.6
Not Hispanic or Latino	7	77.8
<i>Race</i>		
White	7	77.8
Black or African American	1	11.1
Asian	1	11.1
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	3	33.3
Female	6	66.7
<i>Age</i>		
30-39	1	11.1
40-49	5	55.6
50-59	3	33.3

The final survey question asked the participants to indicate if they were willing to participate in a follow-up interview. Four out of the nine participants indicated that they were willing. As outlined in the methodology section, the initial plan had been to purposely select interviewees based on the likelihood that they would be "information-rich cases for in-depth

study" (Patton, 2015, p.182). As it turned out, I had only nine survey respondents, and only four of these indicated a willingness to be interviewed. Consequently, all four participants who indicated their willingness to participate in the follow-up interview were selected for the qualitative portion of the study. The survey data from each interview participant was used to individualize the general interview guide (See Appendix B) to the extent possible in order to provide a more rich, in-depth description of the survey data for each participant. For example, if a participant indicated that contextual experiences were lacking in their preparation program, that was worked into the interview guide, and the participant was asked to describe how that could have been improved and if they could recall a specific learning moment in their career that would have been a beneficial contextual experience. Appendix C provides an example of how one interview guide was individualized to compare with the general interview guide (Appendix B). The interview data will be presented in the following sections as four individual case studies.

Case Studies

As was already noted, the names used in this section are pseudonyms. Any identifying information (i.e., school names, school districts, universities) has been redacted to protect participants' confidentiality. The following case studies will include some demographic data for the administrators' schools to contextualize the case and, consequently, provide more insight into the population of students in their school communities. School percentages related to race/ethnicity, English Learners (EL), students with disabilities, and socioeconomically disadvantaged students will be included in each case study and how those percentages compare to the county statistics. ELs are defined as "students who are learning to communicate effectively in English, typically requiring instruction in both the English Language and in their academic courses" (California Department of Education, 2020). Socioeconomically disadvantaged students

are defined as "students who are eligible for free or reduced-price meals; or have parents/guardians who did not receive a high school diploma" (California Department of Education, 2020).

Each case study will be organized into sections describing each participant's experience in their training and preparation in their administrative credential programs related to special education. Specific strengths they recall, specific weaknesses they recall, the level of support or resources they have in their school districts, their understanding of Least Restrictive Environment (LRE), and their understanding of inclusion will also be included. For reference, the legal definition of LRE is:

the requirement in federal law that students with disabilities receive their education, to the maximum extent appropriate, with nondisabled peers and that special education students are not removed from regular classes unless, even with supplemental aids and services, education in regular classes cannot be achieved satisfactorily. (IDEA, 2004)

There is no federal definition of inclusion because IDEA does not specifically use the term "inclusion," however, as outlined in the above definition, IDEA requires schools to place students in the LRE. If the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) team decides that an alternative placement outside of the regular classroom is appropriate, inclusion would be maximizing opportunities for students with disabilities to interact with nondisabled peers, to the extent appropriate based on the individual needs of the student (U. S. Department of Education Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services, 1994).

Catherine Rodriguez

Catherine Rodriguez is the principal at a public elementary school in the central region of the Southern California county. She had seven years of administrative experience at the time of

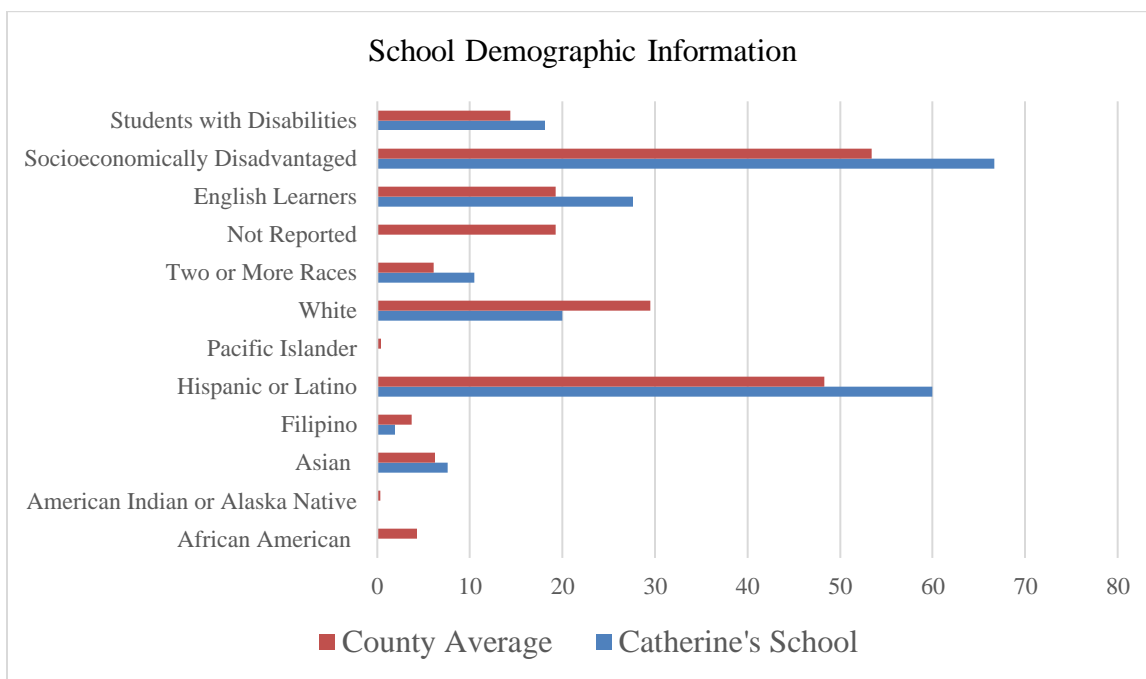
her interview, and she received her administrative credential at a local state university that offers an on-campus program. She was 43 years of age and identified herself as White.

Ms. Rodriguez's elementary school serves 105 students from preschool through the sixth grade. The ethnicity/race data that are reported on her school's School Accountability Report Card, which is publicly available on the California Department of Education website, are as follows:

- 0.0% African American (compared to the county average of 4.3%),
- 0.0% American Indian or Alaska Native (compared to the county average of 0.3%),
- 7.6% Asian (compared to the county average of 6.2%),
- 1.9% Filipino (compared to the county average of 3.7%),
- 60.0% Hispanic or Latino (compared to the county average of 48.3%),
- 0.0% Pacific Islander (compared to the county average of 0.4%),
- 20.0% White (compared to the county average of 29.5%),
- 10.5% two or more races (compared to the county average of 6.1%),
- and 0.0% not reported (compared to the county average of 1.0%).

An examination of other student group factors revealed that:

- 27.6% are students classified as ELs (compared to the county average of 19.3%),
- 66.7% are students who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch and, consequently, are considered socioeconomically disadvantaged (compared to the county average of 53.4%),
- and 18.1% are students with disabilities (compared to the county average of 14.4%). See Figure 7 below.

Figure 7*Catherine Rodriguez's School Demographic Information****Training and Preparation***

In the survey, Catherine indicated that she was slightly satisfied with her administrative credential program's coverage of her role in special education and reported that she felt slightly prepared to support her school's special education department when she began her career. When asked to elaborate on this and to summarize the training and preparation she received in special education law and best practices in her administrative credential program, she responded, "Mediocre to poor. I don't remember having a specific special education class. In my opinion, my program was just a hoop to jump through; it did not prepare me to be an administrator."

Program Strengths. Catherine identified the review of foundational laws in special education as a strength in her administrative credential program's curriculum in the survey.

When asked to elaborate on how this was a strength, she replied, "I really just remember learning

a lot about IDEA during my program, and special education is a part of IDEA, but that was the extent of the coverage of special education, as I remember it."

Program Weaknesses. Later in the survey, Catherine indicated that both case studies and contextual experiences were lacking in her administrative credential program. When asked what she thought could have improved her program in these areas, she explained,

I should have shadowed an entire special education department. You know, I just talked about this with my team. If I had been able to shadow each layer of the special education department, that would have been meaningful. I would have liked to shadow all the way from paraprofessionals⁴, up to the director. That would give a better sense of what it means to be "boots on the ground," what it means to be a service provider, and what it means at every level. That would have allowed me to understand things better.

District Supports and Resources

After getting a better understanding of Catherine's administrative credential program related to special education, it was apparent that the weaknesses outweighed the strengths. On the survey, she indicated that she felt her level of preparedness to support her school's special education department has improved since the start of her administrative career and reported that "personal experiences as issues arose throughout her career" facilitated this improvement the most. When asked to elaborate or provide an example of one of these experiences, she explained,

Honestly, the best tool that I have had is working with really great service providers. The most that I've learned is sitting in IEP meetings with really great psychologists, occupational therapists, and speech and language pathologists. Just learning from them and hearing the conversations they had, that's really where most of my knowledge has

⁴ Paraprofessional is the job title for instructional assistants that work specifically in special education.

come from. I've been very lucky to work with teams of people where the vast majority have been great.

When asked to discuss factors that she believes impede her ability to better support her special education department, she cited systemic problems within her district:

I think that, right now, the situation of the special education department as a whole in my district feels very disconnected. For example, I've had a different school psychologist every year for the last three years and, actually, in one year, I had two. So I have had a rotating school psychologist. There is no ability to create real impact or lasting relationships with those school psychologists, and they obviously cannot create relationships with our students and community. That has been the most challenging thing.

We say we have a continuum of practice in our district, but we really don't. Also, coming from other districts that really did have a solid continuum, it makes it obvious that these sorts of things are what really impede our ability to support our students.

When asked what a "solid continuum" of practice would look like, Catherine explained that the district would have a more centralized role in ensuring all schools had frequent professional development, so everyone is "on the same page" and more permanent staff hired to prevent "rotating" staff that is unable to make lasting impact or relationships.

In one of the open-ended text box response options on the survey, Catherine also shared that a general understanding of how different districts implement federal legislation was lacking from her credential program. When asked to clarify what she meant by that, she responded, "I have worked in seven districts in my career and, what is continually shocking to me, is how different those programs look, even just a few miles away." She also shared that she is only slightly able to attend professional development training sessions in special education in her

current district but believes that the district resource specialist is extremely knowledgeable in special education matters.

Least Restrictive Environment and Inclusion

In her survey responses, Catherine indicated she feels very knowledgeable about both LRE and inclusion. When asked to define LRE, she explained,

For me, LRE is always the place where students can be successful with the least amount of support, whether that be with push-in support, whether that be outside of general education, whatever that looks like for a particular student because it is always different based on student needs. I think that sometimes what we forget about LRE is the idea that the student has to be successful. It is not LRE if the students are in general education and not being successful. I think that's the piece that is sometimes missing because, right now, the push is for students to be in general education because that is LRE, but that's not always the case for some of our kiddos.

She then went into more detail about what she meant by “the push is for students to be in general education because that is LRE”:

I mean, the push is inclusion, but without strong support for what does that mean for teachers, what does that mean for students, and what does that mean for students who [are] full-time general education is not what's best for them? You know, we can be a world where there are going to be students who general education is not the best place for them, just like we have adults where college is not the best place for them. Well, right now, that is not a popular sentiment. If I share that not everybody can be in general education, or it is not the most successful place they could be, is how I should say it, then I'm not there for my students. That's how I feel within my district. Whereas in other

districts, there was a genuine understanding of the spectrum of students and that being embraced. It is not right or wrong that a student may not be able to be successful in a general education classroom; what is wrong is placing judgment on that.

It started to appear that there was a discrepancy between Catherine's understanding of inclusion and what she believes her district believes to be inclusion, so she was asked, once again, to provide her own definition of inclusion. She stated,

Inclusion, to me, is access to typically developing peers, the most that we can do based on a student's needs and what they can tolerate. How often they can be with their typically developing peers and to what extent for some of our students, that is just eating breakfast and lunch, and that is what they could tolerate; for others, it is 100% of the time with typical peers. It is really about what they can tolerate while still being successful, both academically and social-emotionally. I've had students who could tolerate being in a general education classroom academically. Still, their ability to self-regulate went out the window when they were in general education because of their social-emotional skills.

Jackson Fuller

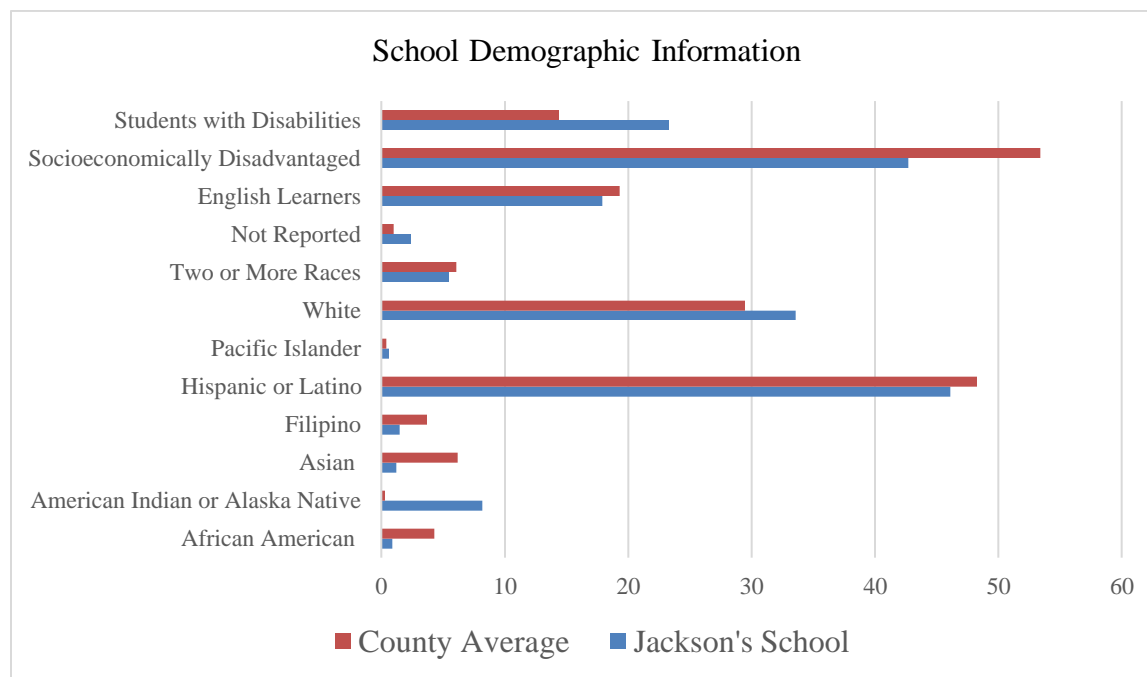
Jackson Fuller is the principal at a public high school in the northeast region of the Southern California county. He had twelve years of administrative experience at the time of the interview, and he received his administrative credential by completing an online program through a Southern California university. He was 47 years of age and identified himself as White.

Mr. Fuller's high school serves 330 students from the ninth through the twelfth grade. The ethnicity/race data that is reported on his school's School Accountability Report Card, which is publicly available on the California Department of Education website, are as follows:

- 0.9% African American (compared to the county average of 4.3%),
- 8.2% American Indian or Alaska Native (compared to the county average of 0.3%),
- 1.2% Asian (compared to the county average of 6.2%),
- 1.5% Filipino (compared to the county average of 3.7%),
- 46.1% Hispanic or Latino (compared to the county average of 48.3%),
- 0.6% Pacific Islander (compared to the county average of 0.4%),
- 33.6% White (compared to the county average of 29.5%),
- 5.5% two or more races (compared to the county average of 6.1%),
- and 2.4% not reported (compared to the county average of 1.0%).

An examination of other student group factors revealed that:

- 17.9% are students classified as ELs (compared to the county average of 19.3%),
- 42.7% are students who qualify for free or reduced lunch and, consequently, are considered socioeconomically disadvantaged (compared to the county average of 53.4%),
- and 23.3% are students with disabilities (compared to the county average of 14.4%). See Figure 8 below.

Figure 8*Jackson Fuller's School Demographic Information****Training and Preparation***

In the survey, Jackson indicated that he was moderately satisfied with his administrative credential program's coverage of his role in special education but reported that he only felt slightly prepared to support his school's special education department when he began his career. When asked to elaborate on this and to summarize the training and preparation he received in special education law and best practices in his administrative credential program, he responded, "I felt pretty confident going into it for the first year as principal, so I would say it was okay. I would say it was adequate." In terms of the breadth and depth covered in his program, he explained,

I know there was one class that was specifically dedicated to special education. Then another class was more focused on educational law with a fairly robust unit that went through [special education]. Then there were some conversations about it in other classes,

but for the most part, it was just the one course and then a unit or two embedded in the other course.

Program Strengths. In the survey, Jackson had identified the review of foundational laws as a strength in his administrative credential program's curriculum related to special education. When asked to elaborate on how this was a strength, he replied, "There was probably good coverage of the various laws that go into special education, readings that were intended to demonstrate how the law might apply to situations." However, he went on to explain that "until you've actually sat in on a few IEP meetings and had to work through some interesting cases, I don't think you have enough experience to necessarily understand what is in the textbooks. It is not black and white."

Program Weaknesses. Later in the survey, Jackson indicated that contextual experiences were lacking in his administrative credential program. However, when asked what he thought could have improved his program, he focused mainly on case studies. He explained,

Finding some outliers, case studies that don't neatly fit as black and white to a particular topic, and having small groups or projects to really look at some real-life cases. It would be even better if they were genuine cases that really stymied some districts or administrators and having to work through what you would do in the situation.

Jackson went on to add that it was "the interpretation piece and the experiential piece, the practicum piece, that was all very limited." He provided this story as an example,

I started out as an administrator in a school with a very small special education population. There weren't a whole lot of severe or unique situations, very few things that required higher-up attention, mostly things that were relatively easy to navigate. As I grew as an administrator and moved onto different schools and found more diversity, I

realized that I wasn't really thinking about many aspects of special education. I felt like I had the foundational laws. Still, really, until you've sat down with IEPs with certain types of things happening in them, or certain types of parents that are particularly litigious, or certain types of disabilities that don't neatly fit into individual boxes, you really don't think about those things. I believe it has been in the past four or five years that I've grown in special education to where I feel confident to address anything that comes across my desk. It is something that grows from experience, from having an opportunity to see different situations and sometimes making mistakes that you have to go back and correct. In that sense, I don't think coming out of my program, I certainly was not prepared for that.

District Supports and Resources

On the survey, Jackson indicated that he felt his level of preparedness to support his school's special education department has improved from the start of his administrative career and reported that "personal experiences as issues arose throughout his career" facilitated this improvement the most. When asked to elaborate on what factors were most impactful, he explained,

I think two things: You find mentors that have greater experience and certain skill sets that you can go to and ask questions. I believe that is certainly beneficial. That's one kind of direction, and the other type of direction is sometimes you get dropped into these situations where it's sink or swim, and you have to figure it out for yourself. That was true in my current position because I have a very large, very diverse, special education population here and not much support at the district level. It's like you are on your own, and that has really forced me to do a lot more side reading and to seek out folks from

other places that can help you with specific ideas or problems that I might be having. I think it comes down to strong mentorship and really being put into situations where you have to figure it out for yourself to some degree.

When asked to discuss factors that he believes impede his ability to better support his special education department, he noted budgetary and resource restraints at the district level. He explained,

There's always pressure from up high not to give more than you necessarily have to. Sometimes, individual kids really need that little extra, and it's always kind of a fight. I have to say that this student really does need this particular type of chair or device, or this other student needs a one-on-one aide. Things like that are relatively expensive, and there's always pressure to say no, so I have to be firm because a student really does need specific support. There are always those budgetary constraints, especially in special education. I also think special education is understaffed. A lot of students could use more push-in support. Ideally, there could be a push-in teacher or paraprofessional in every class, but that is not realistically going to happen.

He also shared that he is only slightly able to attend professional development training in special education in his current district and feels that the district resource specialist is only slightly knowledgeable in special education matters.

Least Restrictive Environment and Inclusion

In the survey, Jackson indicated he feels very knowledgeable about LRE and extremely knowledgeable about inclusion. When asked to define LRE, he explained,

LRE is where students are able to function independently in the most highly rigorous classes humanly possible. That differs for every student. Sometimes LRE is completely

general education with maybe just some assistance with organization or notes to function independently. Perhaps in honors or AP courses, a student may need more support, so they need somebody to push into their classroom for support. Other students may need something more specific, a place they can go because they need content delivered in a different way, or they need extra time. It depends on the student and their particular learning style and needs. However, we do need to be thoughtful about monitoring success. Sometimes our hearts say, this student needs to be protected; this student needs this extra support because they are doing well. But the reality is that we need to challenge the student to take that next step to be that much more independent. If we've done our job right up until then, we know the student can go ahead and be successful. Of course, it is important to have supports in place if the student starts regressing. We can immediately slide in there with interventions, but I think it is important to be very individualized and focused on what is best for each student.

When asked to define inclusion, he stated,

I believe there is a desire and need for all kids to feel like they belong, so inclusion is giving kids, even kids with some severe disabilities, opportunities to interact with other kids that are differently abled. That is key. I think diversity in classrooms is a huge strength of the American education system, so giving kids opportunities to be included in all cross-sections of the school is essential. Having students with mild disabilities in your honors and AP classes is one thing, but also having some of our students with moderate to severe disabilities in our general education English class with push-in support so that they can be part of that class, part of those larger communities, is important.

Joseph Miranda

Joseph Miranda is the principal at a public elementary school in the eastern region of the Southern California county. He had eleven years of administrative experience at the time of the interview, and he received his administrative credential at a local state university that offers an on-campus program. He was 49 years of age and identified himself as White and Asian.

Mr. Miranda's elementary school serves 555 students from kindergarten through sixth grade. The ethnicity/race data that is reported on his school's School Accountability Report Card, which is publicly available on the California Department of Education website, are as follows:

- 13.2% African American (compared to the county average of 4.3%),
- 0.2% American Indian or Alaska Native (compared to the county average of 0.3%),
- 1.1% Asian (compared to the county average of 6.2%),
- 1.3% Filipino (compared to the county average of 3.7%),
- 55.5% Hispanic or Latino (compared to the county average of 48.3%),
- 1.3% Pacific Islander (compared to the county average of 0.4%),
- 18.9% White (compared to the county average of 29.5%),
- 8.6% two or more races (compared to the county average of 6.1%),
- and 0.0% not reported (compared to the county average of 1.0%).

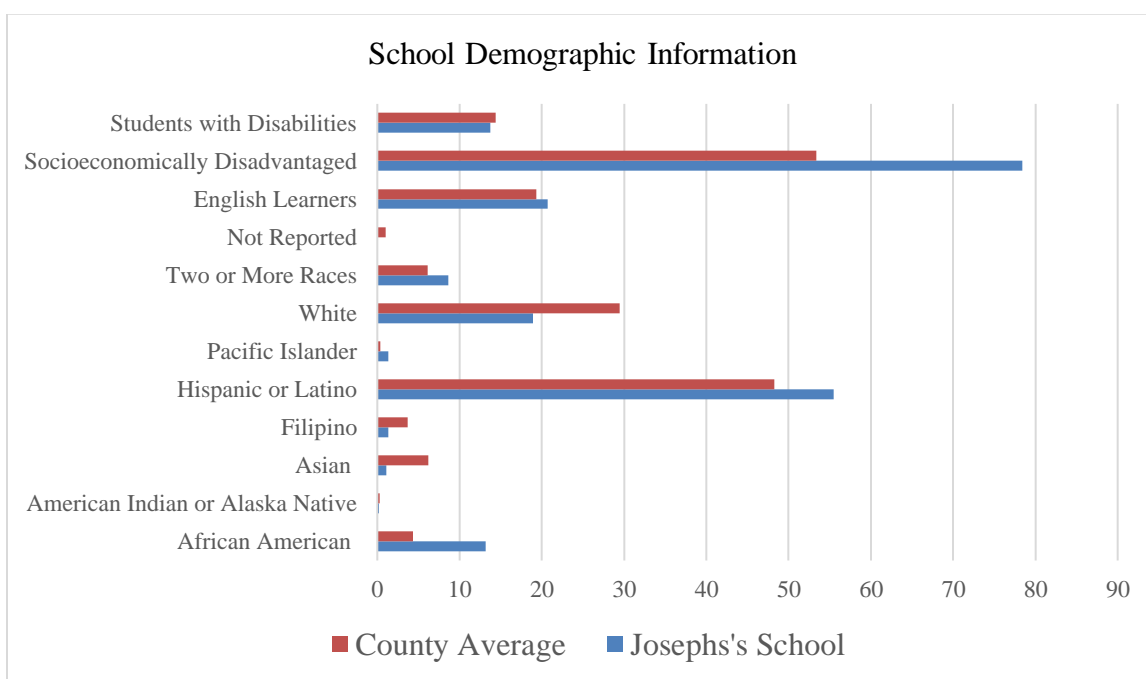
An examination of other student group factors revealed:

- 20.7% are students classified as ELs (compared to the county average of 19.3%),

- 78.4% are students who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch and, consequently, are considered socioeconomically disadvantaged (compared to the county average of 53.4%),
- and 13.7% are students with disabilities (compared to the county average of 14.4%). See Figure 9 below.

Figure 9

Joseph Miranda's School Demographic Information



Training and Preparation

In the survey, Joseph indicated that he was moderately satisfied with his administrative credential program's coverage of his role in special education and reported that he felt moderately prepared to support his school's special education department when he began his career. When asked to elaborate on this and to summarize the training and preparation he received in special education law and best practices in his administrative credential program, however, he responded, "I don't remember a lot from my credential program. When I got out, I

knew that I had to get a lot of professional development just to learn. Everything is so legal; you don't want to make mistakes." He elaborated further: "I didn't feel like there was a complete deficit. I wasn't going into IEP meetings blind or anything. I'm sure there was just a general overview in the program, and it would not have been anything extensive."

Program Strengths. Joseph identified the review of foundational laws as a strength in his administrative credential program's curriculum related to special education in the survey.

When asked to elaborate on how this was a strength, he explained,

The lawyers would come, and they would go over IDEA. That was good because you could sit down and read the laws, see the text, study like you were in college. Then you can see how the laws would apply to the situations in the school setting. For example, LRE would have been a basic example we covered.

Program Weaknesses. Later in the survey, Joseph indicated that contextual experiences were lacking in his administrative credential program. He admitted, "it's hard in the credential program to get live experiences when you're in a classroom-type setting. When asked how he thought that could be improved, he explained,

Shadowing principals for a day, or really more, would have been beneficial. As many hands-on, live experiences you can get versus textbook experience. To see, beyond the legal side, to be able to sit down and see conversations with contentious parents and how to deal with those situations—or even having conversations with advocates that would have been an eye-opener.

District Supports and Resources

On the survey, Jackson indicated that he felt his level of preparedness to support his school's special education department has improved since the start of his administrative career

and reported that personal experiences as issues arose throughout his career facilitated this improvement the most. When asked to elaborate on what factors were most impactful, he explained,

One of the most significant factors is that we are very inclusive at my particular school site and work a lot on culture. It's not like, "those are the special education students; they belong to the special education teacher." No, all students are all of our students. I think it is a lot about culture and mindset.

When asked to discuss factors that he believes impede his ability to better support his special education department, he noted resource constraints at the district level. He explained,

The level of need that my students need is just so diverse. So although we do get support, personnel-wise, even that is just not enough. For instance, right now, my special education teachers have a caseload of around 24, which is not super huge; they've had bigger caseloads. We have two paraprofessionals with each teacher, which sounds like a lot of support, but their caseloads span two or three grade levels, so they are spread thin.

He also shared that he is moderately able to attend professional development training in special education in his current district and feels that the district resource specialist is extremely knowledgeable in special education matters. He reported, "I do call my program manager a lot, we get along really well, and I get her advice often. Especially when lawyers get involved, I like to consult with her."

Least Restrictive Environment and Inclusion

In the survey, Joseph indicated he feels extremely knowledgeable about LRE as well as inclusion. When asked to define LRE, he explained succinctly, "The LRE would be maximizing

the time a special education student has with general education students and still having them make adequate growth.” When asked to define inclusion, he elaborated more and gave examples,

I would describe inclusion [as], one way or the other, students with disabilities being with general education students. When I was at my last school, a middle school, we actually did reverse push-in at times. So general education students would also go to the moderate to severe classrooms to increase social opportunities. I felt like that was important for general education students to see their environment and how students with disabilities are just like them but have different accommodations to support them. I also think it's important to include students with disabilities in all of the activities. So if we are having a field day, being able to make accommodations, they can participate. That's what inclusion means to me.

Noelle Hamilton

Noelle Hamilton is the principal at a public middle school in the central region of the Southern California county. She had nine years of administrative experience at the time of the interview, and she received her administrative credential by completing an online program through a Southern California university. She was 37 years of age and identified herself as White.

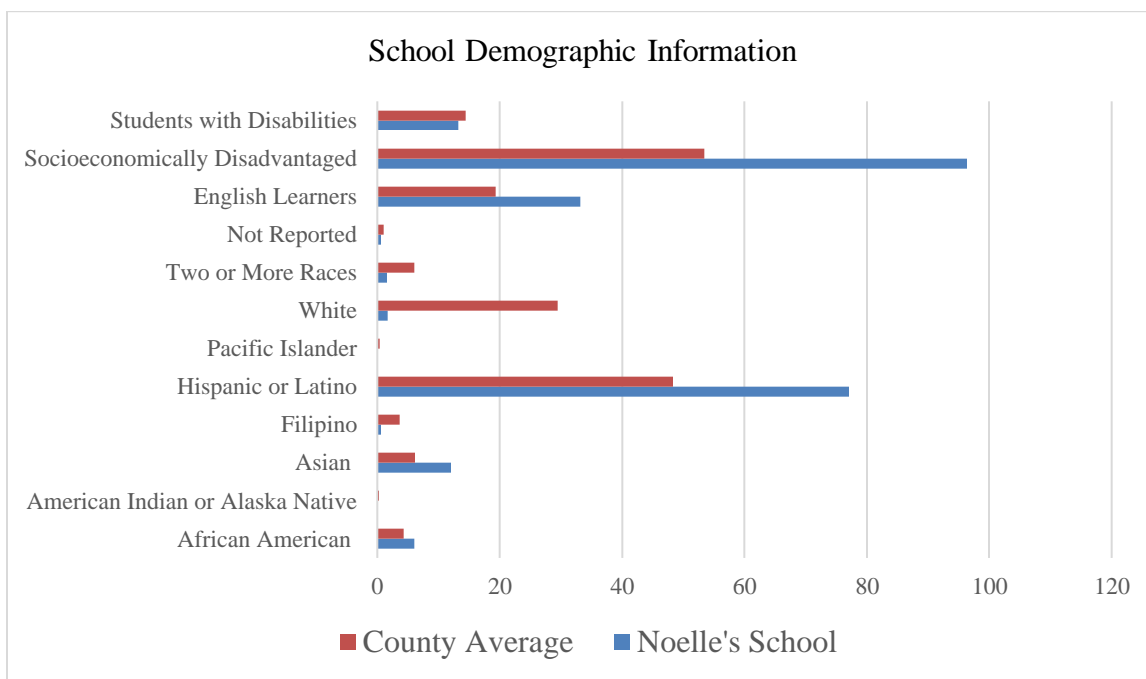
Ms. Hamilton's middle school serves 933 students from the sixth to the eighth grade. The ethnicity/race data that is reported on her school's School Accountability Report Card, which is publicly available on the California Department of Education website, are as follows:

- 6.1% African American (compared to the county average of 4.3%),
- 0.1% American Indian or Alaska Native (compared to the county average of 0.3%),

- 12.0% Asian (compared to the county average of 6.2%),
- 0.6% Filipino (compared to the county average of 3.7%),
- 77.1% Hispanic or Latino (compared to the county average of 48.3%),
- 0.1% Pacific Islander (compared to the county average of 0.4%),
- 1.7% White (compared to the county average of 29.5%),
- 1.6% two or more races (compared to the county average of 6.1%),
- and 0.6% not reported (compared to the county average of 1.0%).

An examination of other student group factors revealed:

- 33.2% are students classified as ELs (compared to the county average of 19.3%),
- 96.4% are students who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch and, consequently, are considered socioeconomically disadvantaged (compared to the county average of 53.4%),
- and 13.2% are students with disabilities (compared to the county average of 14.4%). See Figure 10 below.

Figure 10*Noelle Hamilton's School Demographic Information****Training and Preparation***

In the survey, Noelle indicated she was not satisfied at all with her administrative credential program's coverage of her role in special education and reported that she felt only slightly prepared to support her school's special education department when she began her career. When asked to elaborate on this and to summarize the training and preparation she received in special education law and best practices in her administrative credential program, she responded,

My online program had one course every two months, and I don't remember what special education was combined with. I know the law was combined with human resources, and we maybe did one case study related to special education. I don't really remember, which I think tells us that the course was not noteworthy. I remember other specific assignments about other things, and I would say my preparation program wasn't rigorous in general.

Any knowledge I got about the field of special education really came from being a teacher. My program, pretty shockingly, did not prepare me, and it wasn't notable nor memorable.

Program Strengths. In the survey, Noelle did not select any areas of strength in her administrative credential program's curriculum related to special education. She instead chose "other" and wrote, "I sincerely don't remember getting any special education support in my program. It must have been present to some degree but not notable enough to remember." When asked if she wanted to elaborate on this response at all, she replied, "Not really, it may have just not been notable to me, but I can't recall any strengths as it relates to special education."

Program Weaknesses. Later in the survey, Noelle selected all three options for areas of weakness: a review of foundational laws, case studies, and contextual experiences. When asked what she thought could have improved her program in these areas, she provided several ideas. She explained how she has worked in districts in different Special Education Local Plan Areas (SELPA's), so the documents look different, and even just navigating that paperwork takes time. She suggested,

There should be an entire unit on what constitutes a quality IEP. Not just the meeting, but the process. What do appropriate goals look like? Then being able to wrestle with some different IEP packets because they all look different, but all IEPs will need to include some robust present levels. They are going to have an impact statement guiding service hours.

She also noted better preparation in LRE is crucial. She explained,

Honest conversations about LRE are needed because that's the biggest one you encounter as a new leader. Teachers will say they don't think a student should be in general education; new administrators need tools to have that conversation about placement.

She added that related to LRE, there is a need for better coverage on behavior intervention plans.

She provided the following example,

I had some tough on-the-job training with students with Autism injuring people, throwing things, biting. Nothing prepared me for that. So behavior intervention plans: what do they look like? What are the components? How should they be written, and when should they be written? Because that relates to LRE. Teachers will say this student needs a different placement because of severe behaviors, but do they have a behavior goal? Is anybody taking data? We can't change placement without these things in place so that all needs to be beefed up as well.

We continued to talk about how sensitive these situations related to behavior can be, and she added how discipline is another major area of weakness in preparing administrators. She explained that there are "serious misunderstandings about the role of discipline for students with disabilities. That is an area that I've seen leaders lacking ethical guidance in how to navigate those situations."

District Supports and Resources

Noelle indicated that she felt her level of preparedness to support her school's special education department has improved since the start of her administrative career and reported a number of factors in the open-ended text box response option on the survey. She noted, "When I worked for my first district, we received training each year. I also took the initiative to grow and understand. I also had some pretty rough cases that caused me to research and seek support."

When asked to elaborate or provide an example of one of these experiences, she explained that she had had two very different experiences in the two districts in which she has worked.

Her first district provided ongoing training once she became an administrator. She was a vice-principal at the time, and there was a yearly mandatory training on special education, specifically for principals and vice-principals. The training was led by a lawyer who would present to the administrators both a general overview of special education law as well as what is new in the special education area. She explained, "What was great about that training was he reviewed the new law in the past year and new trends that advocates are seeing. This training was a tier-one expectation for district administrators; no one was exempt." She also explained how her former district had monthly professional development sessions for one lead teacher per school. She described it as "a better pipeline for teachers to also be up to date with what is expected in special education." She added that the district would also conduct internal audits of IEPs to look for best practices. She highlighted this as a strength of her previous district because, she said, "[She] wasn't the only person getting the knowledge. There was a teacher pathway, and there was an administrator pathway. Far from perfect, but really fairly comprehensive."

When she compared her experiences in her previous district to her current school district, Ms. Hamilton reported that she could only recall two professional development opportunities for special education occurring in the district where she worked at the time of the interview. She did say they were "fabulous," and all administrators were expected to attend, but added, "That's only, you know, two in four years." She also noted that she is "not seeing very much of anything for vice principals that's not voluntary, so they really are not well-equipped." When asked what has facilitated her growth as an administrator since moving to her current district, she stated,

It truly has been my own initiative. Part of why it was important to do this interview for me is not to say I'm the be-all-end-all for general education administrators. Still, I find many of my colleagues woefully unprepared. So I've been reflecting on, well, why am I more prepared? And I believe part of it was just interest, rather than any systemic learning.

When asked to discuss factors that she believes impede her ability to better support her special education department, she noted systemic problems at several levels. She provided the following example:

There are eight mild-moderate special educators here; each of us [herself and two vice principals] supervise between two and four of them. I took on the people I perceived in most need of support. There was one who was new to our school but not within the district. Come to find out, he had some fundamental misunderstandings and made some pretty significant errors. This misunderstanding was a problem at the teacher level, but there was an issue that one of my vice-principals was supervising this teacher, and he just didn't know what he should be looking for either. I was thinking, how did it get this far? There is a lack of systems.

In the survey, Noelle reported that she is only slightly able to attend professional development training in special education in her current district but believes that the district resource specialist is very knowledgeable in special education matters. She shared that she does have district contacts to go to "when a case gets tricky," and she's never felt as though there was an issue in which she didn't "have a thought partner." She also explained,

I have been on two due process cases in the last year, and that person who supports our district with that is internal, and she's been very helpful by showing trends they are seen,

but again, that's because I'm already in due process. It would have been nice to know about those trends before due process. So that's wildly different in terms of expectations and training between the two districts.

Least Restrictive Environment and Inclusion

In the survey, Noelle indicated she felt very knowledgeable about both LRE and inclusion. When asked to define LRE, she explained,

That is the combination of place and services, determined by the IEP team, that a student gets to experience most access to general education peers and general education curriculum with supports. And that's on a continuum. It's not, "you are in a moderate, severe classroom," or, "you're in general education." There's a number of layers and supports that you can put all of those levels on because it's not just a place; it's a place combined with other services as needed.

When asked to describe inclusion, she stated,

Providing maximum opportunities for students to access the general education curriculum and general education peers with supports. Again, it's not just a place; we are not talking about dropping them in a room. When I started my career as a general education teacher, I remember students with disabilities were included for electives and science, but why? Then there were no supports, and it was just counting the time the students were "included." Inclusion needs to be socially and educationally meaningful and still needs to be supported.

Comparing Preparation Programs

As made evident in the cases above, not only is there a lack of effective preparation in special education law and best practices for the participating administrators in their credential

programs, there also appears to be a lack of consistency amongst the credential programs themselves. For example, Noelle Hamilton reported that she could not recall any notable coverage of special education, not even one class within a course. Catherine Rodriguez reported that she does not remember any specific special education class. Despite similar reports, these participants completed very different programs. Ms. Hamilton completed an online credential, and Ms. Rodriguez completed an on-campus program at a local university.

Joseph Miranda had a slightly better experience as he reported that he did not feel there was a complete deficit. He recalled a general overview of special education within the program but admitted it could not have been anything extensive. Interestingly, Mr. Miranda completed an on-campus program at a local university, the same university as Ms. Rodriguez. It should be noted that they completed their credential six years apart, which could be a factor in their different perceptions and opinions about their program.

Jackson Fuller provided the most positive account of his administrative credential program as it related to special education. He reported that he felt confident going into his first year and described his program as adequate. There was one class specifically dedicated to special education and another class on educational law that discussed special education as well. The programs completed by Ms. Hamilton, Mr. Rodriguez, and Mr. Miranda have the credential program information, including a complete course list, publicly available for prospective students. These three participants do not recall a single specific course in special education, which is consistent with the course lists available on the program websites. Mr. Fuller, on the other hand, did report having a class dedicated to special education and consequently felt more prepared to go into his first year as an administrator. However, the university in which Mr. Fuller

completed his online credential is now closed, and the course information is no longer publicly available.

Conclusion

The four cases presented above capture the complexities and challenges school administrators grapple with concerning special education's highly litigious and complicated nature throughout their careers. While each of the four administrators serves different types of schools with different populations, their perspectives provided some interesting insights into how they overcome barriers to support their students better. Their efforts will be the focus of the cross-case analysis in the following chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

Overview

Chapter One of this study discussed the background of special education, including the historical context, through the current legislation and financial implications of litigation. This chapter also presented the evolving role of school administrators, concluding with the introduction of the research study. Chapter Two presented a review of the literature on relatively recent studies on school administrator pre-service preparation and in-service professional development, as well as on relational leadership theories. Chapter Three provided the explanatory sequential research mixed methods study design and methodology, including a review of the research questions guiding the study. This chapter also detailed the development of the survey and interview instruments, participant selection, the data collection, the data analysis procedures, and discussed the positionality of the researcher. Chapter Four presented the results of the survey data and presented the four case studies developed from the survey and interview data. Chapter Five provides a summary of the dissertation study and presents the major findings from the cross-case analysis of the four case studies. This final chapter also concludes with the study's limitations as well as recommendations for future research.

Summary

While considering the historical context, current legislation, the evolving role of school administrators, and the financial implications of special education litigation, this study examined the perceived strengths and weaknesses of school administrators' preparation in special education law and best practices. The existing literature overwhelmingly suggests that administrative credential programs do not properly educate administrators about the historical

and legislative context of special education and prepare them to support their special education students and staff effectively (Praisner, 2003, Angelle & Bilton, 2009, Davidson & Algozzine, 2002, Singh, 2015). There has also been much written on the lack of ongoing professional development or in-service training in content related to special education (Wakeman et al., 2006). What is noticeably lacking in the current literature is a solution, including documentation of successful strategies that have been (or could be) used for administrator preparation in special education.

In order to produce solutions and promote successful administrative strategies, however, one must first identify *specific* areas of weaknesses that currently exist. The existing literature does not provide this sort of specificity.

Survey Results and Case Studies

The results of the survey were presented; however, due to the low response rate, regression analysis or any other inferential statistical analysis were not viable. Consequently, aggregate survey results were less important than the individual responses of the person being interviewed. The case studies included demographic information for the administrators' schools to contextualize the case and, consequently, provide more insight into the population of students in their school communities. School percentages related to race/ethnicity, English Learners (EL), students with disabilities, and socioeconomically disadvantaged students were all included in each case study, as well as how those percentages compare to county statistics. After the demographic and contextual information, each case study was organized into sections describing each participants' experience in their training and preparation in their administrative credential programs as it relates to special education, specific strengths they recall, specific weaknesses

they recall, the level of support and/or resources they have in their school districts, their understanding of LRE, as well as their understanding of inclusion.

Cross-Case Analysis

The four cases presented in the preceding chapter captured the complexities and challenges that accompany the highly litigious and complicated nature of special education for school administrators. Although some participating administrators cited a review of foundational special education laws as a relative area of strength in their preparation program, there was an overwhelming consensus that there was much lacking from their programs as it relates to special education. The specific area of weaknesses that all participants identified was a lack of contextual experience in their administrative credential program. Two out of the four participating administrators also reported a lack of case studies in their programs' curriculum as an area of weakness. Since primary areas of weakness were identified, I wanted to better understand how the participating administrators believed they were able to improve from their limited preliminary knowledge of special education to their increased understanding and ability to support their current special education staff and students. When asked how that improvement happened and what factors impacted this growth the most, the following themes emerged across all participants' data were demonstrating initiative as school leaders and building relationships. These final two emergent themes will be the focus of the cross-case analysis.

Initiative as School Leaders

The first emergent theme arose from the participants sharing about how, especially in the first few years of their administrative roles, there were several situations in which they were not adequately prepared. Consequently, they had to take action for their students.

Building on Prior Experience and Coaching

To compensate for the inadequacy of their administrative training, each participant took the initiative to learn on the job. Two participants even took the initiative to familiarize themselves with matters of special education prior moving into administrative roles. For instance, Ms. Hamilton took the initiative to attend all IEP meetings she was invited to as a math teacher, which provided her some knowledge and experience when she became an administrator, while Ms. Rodriguez undertook coaching by special education interventionists prior to her administrative role.

Ms. Hamilton stated, “Anything I knew about the field of special education really came from being a teacher before becoming an administrator, not from my credential program.” To expand on this idea, she provided the following anecdote:

At every school I've ever worked at, special educators are just kind of at the mercy of whichever general education teacher wants to be a part of their IEP. So they will send out a wide invite, and then the same few people will always come. At that time, I was a middle school math teacher, I was not married, I had no children, so I could stay after [school]. My special education colleagues grew to appreciate that I would always be there because that was making them legally compliant. But that is another systemic thing that needs to change. Here at my current school, we've tried to divide the IEP meeting load amongst the different content areas: math, science, social studies, etcetera. So each general education teacher is responsible for attending x amount of IEP meetings. We need a little bit more structure in that area, but we've at least started to shift. So truly, that was just my own initiative. Part of why it was important to do this interview, for me, is not to say I'm the be-all-end-all for general education administrators, but I really find

many of my colleagues woefully unprepared. So I've been reflecting on why I am seemingly more prepared, and I believe part of it was just interest rather than systemic learning.

Ms. Rodriguez explained, "I did some coaching before, and after I became an administrator, so I was working really closely with interventionists and our special education team. I learned a lot more in that realm than I did actually in my program." She also clarified that this coaching was not through her district; it was a service she sought out before her role as administrator and utilized them again in her first year as an administrator. This coaching focused on how to avoid making common mistakes in IEPs and identifying current trends in due process cases. Ms. Rodriguez budgeted this expense from her site funds because she thought it was an important step to better support her special education staff and students.

Ongoing Professional Development

Additionally, in their current positions, all four participants emphasized the importance of continuing professional development training for themselves and their staff. Mr. Miranda stressed the importance of ongoing professional development trainings in his leadership practice. He explained, "I know that when I got out [of the credential program], I had to get a lot of professional development training just to learn more. Everything is so legal; you don't want to make mistakes." He added, "You want to make sure that everything is done right, so I know I took a few professional development trainings right after just because I wanted to, I had more learning to do." Mr. Miranda explained how this is one aspect of his practice that is ongoing. He expressed, "Even now, I'm 11 years in, and I'm still always checking in with my program manager to make sure everything is right. Also, I actually just signed up for another five-day professional development on special education for next month." Mr. Miranda clarified that

although this professional development is through his school district, it is not required for all administrators to attend, and he is choosing to participate in improving his leadership practice.

Similar to Mr. Miranda, Ms. Hamilton prioritized professional development to build the skills and knowledge of her entire team. Ms. Hamilton explained that since her middle school serves 1,000 students, she has three supporting vice-principals to divide administrative and supervisory duties. She also noted that her three vice principals have a large discrepancy in their years of experience, as well as knowledge of special education law and best practices. As reported in Ms. Hamilton's case study in the preceding chapter, she shared that her previous district had more comprehensive special education support and resources compared to her current district. She had reported that her previous district implemented mandatory professional development trainings throughout the year, and she recalled one being especially beneficial as it reviewed new laws that passed within the past year, as well as trends advocates were noticing in due process cases. She shared that she thought it was so beneficial that she sent her current team (i.e., special education staff and vice-principals) and paid for it out of site funds. She also added that she did not advertise that to her district leaders because she knew they would say they offer something comparable that she would not have had to pay for out of site funds. However, in her opinion, the district trainings she has been to thus far have not impacted her leadership experience, and she wanted to go with what she believed worked.

Seeking Mentors

Another way in which all four administrators demonstrated initiative in their administrative roles was by seeking out mentors in special education. Ms. Hamilton and Mr. Miranda found mentorship from their district resource specialists. Ms. Rodriguez sought out mentors within her own IEP team by consulting with more experienced school psychologists or

related service providers for their knowledge and experience. Mr. Fuller took the initiative to find mentors, he explained:

You find mentors that have greater experience and certain skill sets that you can go to and ask questions. I think that is certainly beneficial, and that's the first kind of direction that is important to find.

The need for strong mentors becomes clear when administrators realize that they have to learn on their own. Mr. Fuller expanded:

I often feel as though I'm on my own, so you know that's really forced me to do a lot more side reading and to seek out folks from other places that can help. It helps to have someone to share certain thoughts or ideas, or problems that I might be having.

Relationships

The second emergent theme arose from the participants sharing about how important relationships became in their leadership practice, particularly while navigating more complex and litigious IEP cases. All four participants shared stories about important relationships amongst IEP team members, with parents and families, with district personnel, and related service providers.

Positive Relationships Amongst IEP Team Members

Ms. Rodriguez reported that the relationships she developed within her IEP team are an integral piece of her leadership practice:

Honestly, the best tool that I have had is working with really great service providers. The most that I've learned is by sitting in IEP meetings with really great psychologists, occupational therapists, and speech and language pathologists and just learning from them by hearing the conversations they had. That is really where most of my knowledge

has come from is working with great service providers. I've been very lucky to work with teams of people where the vast majority have been great.

Noelle Hamilton shared a similar perspective to Ms. Rodriguez. Ms. Hamilton reported that building positive relationships with strong leaders within the special education department, such as teacher leaders and related service provider leaders, was extremely beneficial to her leadership practice. She explained:

I don't know how systemic this is, but I just had really phenomenal related service providers: psychologist, speech and language pathologist, occupational therapist, and school nurse—just off the charts wonderful to the point where they are leaders in their own departments. Their level of expertise has made things so seamless, and we now have a relationship where we trust each other's judgment. I don't have to closely supervise them, which allows me to dedicate my time elsewhere.

Mr. Miranda cited the inclusive nature of his school's culture as a positive influence on his ability to support his special education program. He described how general education teachers are also a part of the IEP team and their attitude towards inclusion plays a large role in student success. He explained:

I think one of the biggest things at my site is that we are very inclusive, and we work a lot on culture. We emphasize the importance of the language we use when referring to students; students with disabilities are all of our students. You don't hear, 'Oh, those are special education students; they belong to the special education teacher.' For example, the fourth-grade team will embrace all of the fourth-grade students. I think a lot of that is just building the culture and mindset that special education students are not someone else's responsibility; we have a collective responsibility to *all* students.

Positive Relationships with Parents and Families

Ms. Rodriguez also shared how strong relationships with the families involved in the IEP process at her school have also made positive impacts. She explained:

One of the roles I take on is supporting my staff in making sure they are using family-friendly language. We have a lot of very sweet families, and nobody is complaining because they are happy that we are taking care of their kids. It's really important to me that we don't take advantage of that positive culture on my campus and that we really are doing what is right for students and families.

Joseph Miranda built positive relationships, particularly with students' families, to produce positive outcomes for the students at his school. He recalled a story of one particular student and his parents:

I actually just got an email from a parent because her son is graduating from high school this year, and they've always given me updates on how this student is doing. He is actually a student I had in elementary at the first school I was a principal. Then a few years later, I moved to middle school and had this student again. When I first started at this middle school, the parents made it clear they wanted to mainstream their son. He is a student with Autism, and they didn't want him in a class with only other students with Autism. They fought with the other administrator before I came in and were adamant about the placement they wanted for their son. When I came in, I said, okay, let's try it. We gave him push-in support and kept him in all general education classes. As a team, we had to have a lot of conversations that this student had added stressors and struggles with the academic and instructional side, but on the social side, we all felt this would be better for him. There are always two sides: the instructional side and the social side. In

this case, the parents were accepting that the instructional side would present more potential stressors but were okay with it because they believed the social side was more important for their son at that time. The student ended up having a very positive experience that carried over into high school. He was on the football team, on the homecoming court, and just overall, socially well-adjusted. I think the academic side came along as best as it could, but that was just one of the really good experiences I've had with a student and their family.

The above example demonstrates the positive outcomes that can occur when the IEP team truly works collaboratively. Had Mr. Miranda not had a prior relationship with this student's family, he perhaps may have been hesitant to try out mainstreaming, similar to the prior administrator, in fear of potential adverse outcomes. However, he was able to trust the opinion of the student's family as well as trust the culture of his school to embrace this student's mainstreaming journey.

Poor Relationships

On the other hand, two participants provided examples of how the lack of relationship was a major hindrance to their special education departments. Ms. Rodriguez shared:

Right now, the state of the special education department as a whole in my district feels very disconnected. Because of the way that our program runs, the special education personnel seems to have a high turnover rate. For example, I've had a different school psychologist every year for the last three years. Actually, in one year, I had two. So I've had a kind of rotating school psychologist, and there's no ability to create, you know, real impact or lasting relationships in this scenario. More importantly, those rotating psychologists can't create relationships with our students and community.

Mr. Fuller also recalled a situation involving a new student and their family and highlighted the potential consequence of failing to build a positive relationship:

I had a new family come into my school right before winter break, and the family reported that their child hadn't been in school very much that school year because she was having some emotional problems. They explained that she was going to some kind of special counseling program, but she wasn't really engaging very well. Immediately, I sort of felt something was off, that there was some information they were withholding. I really felt that they were trying to create a narrative around their child, which was different from what my staff perceived as they got to work with this student more. About six to eight months later, the child kind of disappeared, stopped attending school. At that point, we had to report the absences to the School Attendance Review Board (SARB), and the parents responded with a kind of lawsuit about us not providing services. There were actually two major lessons in this case: 1) learning to invest more time and energy into figuring out how to deal with different family dynamics, and 2) being attentive to students' social and emotional difficulties. Being more knowledgeable now, I would make sure the school psychologist addressed the full spectrum of psych diagnostics upfront, rather than waiting and more misunderstanding occurring between the school and the family.

Considering all four participating administrators provided several instances in which relationships played either a positive or negative role in student outcomes, the skill of relationship-building appears to be crucial in the leadership practice of school administrators. As discussed in the literature review, the theory of distributed leadership emphasizes the collaborative nature of the relationship between leader and follower (Brooks & Kensler, 2011).

The importance of this collaboration is evident in the context of school leadership and principles of distributed leadership theory could enhance the skill of relationship-building for new school administrators.

Similarly, Mr. Miranda offered an example of how the COVID-19 school closures also had an impact on relationships between schools and student homes. He explained how the last time he needed to consult with his district resource specialist was because a parent hired an advocate and was filing a due process case because she wanted more services for her student to be provided at her home. She believed her child's needs were not being met through the virtual delivery of distance learning and believed the school had a responsibility to provide in-person services. His school was fully remote at the time, so he had to seek guidance in how to respond appropriately to a such a request, in such an unprecedented time. The COVID-19 pandemic shed light on how important it is to have positive relationships built with students' families, as well as the need for administrators to be better prepared to adapt to major crises that may result in school closures.

Conclusions and Implications

The experiences shared by the four participating administrators offer valuable insight into the complexities and challenges that accompany the highly litigious and complicated nature of special education as school administrators. As evidenced by the case studies in the preceding chapter, the participating administrators reported feeling not at all prepared to moderately prepared to support the special education staff and students at their schools at the start of their careers. Three out of the four administrators reported the review of foundational law as the single strength in their administrative credential program, while one reported no strengths in her program. These findings are consistent with the current literature that suggests administrative

credential programs do not properly educate administrators about the historical and legislative context of special education and prepare them to support their special education students and staff effectively (Praisner, 2003, Angelle & Bilton, 2009, Davidson & Algozzine, 2002).

The purpose of this study, however, was to identify *specific* areas of weakness that currently exist in order to produce solutions and promote successful administrative strategies. The major area of weakness that was identified in this study was a lack of contextual experiences, followed by a lack of case studies and an absence of content on special education in some programs. The findings also suggested areas to promote successful administrative strategies, including the importance of building relationships and demonstrating initiative in their leadership practice to better serve their special education staff and students. The implications of these findings will be detailed below.

Contextual Experiences

All four administrators reported a lack of contextual experiences as a major weakness in their administrative credential program, and they all also reported that their personal experiences with special education issues that arose throughout their careers were the most influential factor that facilitated their leadership development as it relates to special education. Contextual experiences, such as principal shadowing, were absent from preparation and viewed as a major area of weakness and a best practice strategy that should be a more central aspect of the administrative credential program curriculum.

Principal shadowing is an effective strategy to prepare administrators, but current preparation programs are sorely lacking in this area. Shadowing is most commonly used as a research methodology, but principal shadowing is, “a useful way to learn the intricacies of a complex job” (Peterson, 1986, p. 154). Novice administrators should spend several days

following a veteran principal in everything they do and have a chance to discuss and analyze problems together. “Shadowing can help a prospective principal develop a better sense of the nature of the work without having to take direct responsibility for important school decisions” (Peterson, 1986, p. 154). Administrative credential programs should expand the opportunity to learn from experience.

In relatively more recent articles, principal shadowing remains a suggested strategy to promote successful administrative practices. In an article on experiences of new administrators, it was reported that, “the shadowing component, was perceived as being a valuable form of leadership development which encouraged reflection on practice” (Earley et al., 2011, p. 39). Furthermore, in a study on observational research on the work of school principals, principal shadowing is reported as, “useful in documenting the nature and content of contemporary principal’s work (Pollock & Hauseman, 2016, p. 104). Shadowing can also help new administrators, “achieve a more complete understanding of the intricate interplays between one’s actions and interactions with others. *It can offer a level of detail no other method seems to be able to provide*” (Tulowitzki, 2017, p. 105).

Special Education Content in Credential Programs

Considering the range of coverage of special education in the administrative credential programs reported in the preceding section, the California Administrator Performance Expectations (CAPE) will be presented for comparison. The CAPE Program Standards can be found on the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CTC) official website (California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, 2014). According to the CTC, the overwhelming majority of education administrators begin their careers in local school leadership positions, and “research studies during the last two decades have shown that school leadership

plays a pivotal role in improving the quality of education” (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007).

Therefore, the focus of California’s preliminary preparation program is to prepare candidates to assume a leadership role at a school site. The program mission is as follows:

The administrative services preparation program prepares instructional leaders to serve effectively in a variety of public schools and school districts. The design of the program is based on a sound rationale informed by theory and research and aligned with the California Administrator Performance Expectations and principles of adult learning theory. The program includes a coherent, developmental, integrated, and interrelated set of theoretical and practical learning experiences designed to provide extensive opportunities to engage candidates in developing knowledge, skills, and dispositions to advance teaching and learning. The program includes both formative and summative assessments based on the California Administrator Performance Expectations (CAPE). (California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, 2018, p. 17)

There are five CAPE program standards: (1) Program Design and Rationale, (2) Collaboration, Communication, and Coordination, (3) Development of Professional Leadership Perspectives, (4) Equity, Diversity, and Access, and (5) Role of Schooling in a Democratic Society. Of the five CAPE program standards, one includes language related to special education, and that is standard four on equity, diversity, and access. It states:

By design, the administrative services preparation program provides each candidate with an opportunity to understand and apply theories and principles of educational equity within the educational context for the purposes of creating more socially just learning environments. Through coursework and fieldwork, candidates (a) examine their personal attitudes related to issues of privilege and power in different domains, including race,

gender, language, sexual orientation, religion, *ableness*, and socio-economic status; (b) learn ways to analyze, monitor, and address these issues at the individual and system level; (c) understand how explicit and implicit racial bias impacts instruction, classroom management, and other school policies; and (d) come to understand the role of the leader in creating equitable outcomes in schools. The program provides opportunities for candidates to learn how to identify, analyze and minimize personal bias, how policies and historical practices create and maintain institutional bias, and how leaders can address and monitor institutional-level inequity.

The program prepares candidates to improve schooling for all students with an emphasis on vulnerable and historically underserved students by examining teaching, learning, student engagement, student discipline, school culture, family involvement, and other programmatic supports in the school for the purposes of providing effective instruction and equitable access for all students. The program ensures candidates understand pedagogical approaches that recognize the importance of building on students' strengths and assets as a foundation for supporting all students, especially historically underserved students, including English learners and students with *special needs*. (California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, 2018, p. 17-18).

With students with special needs being explicitly addressed in only one out of five program standards, it is not surprising to hear the minimal coverage of special education reported in the participants' case studies. If courses are designed to follow the CAPE program standards, it is reasonable to assume that special education would only be addressed as one part of an entire course on "Equity, Diversity, and Access," which would be a very dense course with the several student groups and topics listed in the program standard above. One implication of this finding

could be that CAPE program standards should be broken down into smaller parts to better guide administrative credential programs to design their curriculum to better address all student groups and issues, including special education.

Initiative as School Leaders

The findings also suggested areas to promote successful administrative strategies, including the importance of demonstrating initiative to better serve special education staff and students. As discussed previously, the first emergent theme arose from the participants sharing about how, especially in the first few years of their administrative roles, there were several situations in which they were not adequately prepared, which resulted in the administrators having to take action for their students. Building on prior experience and coaching, ongoing professional development, and seeking mentors were the ways in which the participating administrators demonstrated initiative as leaders in special education. “Effective principals tend to be proactive and take initiative. They constantly attack problems rather than waiting for problems to attack them” (Peterson, 1986, p.153).

Building on Prior Experience and Coaching

Ms. Rodriguez and Ms. Hamilton both demonstrated initiative to familiarize themselves with special education prior to moving into administration. Ms. Rodriguez sought coaching with special education interventionist and Ms. Hamilton participated in effective professional trainings with special education advocates. Both participants ended up allocating site funds to provide these trainings and coaching services for their special education teams. At an individual administrator level, budgeting for additional professional development for special education teams is one potential strategy for new school administrators that feel unprepared to support their special education staff and students. At a district level, this information could inform

professional development planning to offer more ongoing coaching, so administrators do not need to utilize site funds for this type of expense. From an administrative credential program planning standpoint, consulting with interventionists and advocates to improve their curricula as it relates to special education could be an improvement as both administrators sought out these professionals to educate themselves and their staff.

Ongoing Professional Development

The participants emphasized the importance of participating in ongoing professional development trainings. The participants that had more positive impressions of their school districts reported frequent, mandatory trainings in special education for all administrators. From an individual standpoint, seeking out professional development opportunities is certainly a positive strategy for new administrators to continue their leadership growth, especially related to special education. At the district level, ongoing professional development in special education could be implemented as mandatory training rather than as an optional opportunity. Considering the ever-evolving nature of special education law, best practices, and trends, ongoing professional development appears to be more necessary. Although ongoing professional development is not something administrative credential programs can realistically provide, Mr. Miranda cited the legal complexity and his weariness of making mistakes as his primary motivator to continue seeking these professional development opportunities. Perhaps administrative credential programs could build more contextual experiences that can better prepare candidates to face the inevitable complexities of the litigious aspect of special education. This could be in the form of real case studies, shadowing a due process case, or having an advocate present real scenarios to dissect.

Seeking Mentors

Another way in which the administrators demonstrated initiative in their administrative roles was by seeking out mentors in district resource specialists, expert IEP team members, and other administrators with greater experience to guide them. At the individual level, this is sound advice for incoming administrators to seek out mentors early on in their careers to help them think through complex scenarios. At the district level, one recommendation could be to develop a mentorship network. Typically, there is one resource specialist that the entire district consults with for special education questions and concerns, which is important, but a mentorship network could be an additional support strategy, especially for new administrators navigating a number of new challenges. At the administrator preparation program level, creating scenarios in which candidates must seek out mentors or thought partners on a case study could be a beneficial exercise to start building this leadership skill.

Relationships

The findings also suggested the skill of building positive relationships as a content area to promote successful administrative strategies. The participants reported the importance of relationships in their leadership practice, particularly while navigating more complex and litigious IEP cases. All four participants shared stories about important relationships amongst IEP team members, with parents and families, with district personnel, and related service providers.

The importance of relationship-building for the participating administrators was two-fold. The first being the role relationship played in their growth as leaders in special education. All four administrators shared how seeking mentors helped develop their leadership practice, particularly in special education, as they developed relationships with district resource

specialists, IEP team members with expert knowledge, and other administrators with greater experience. The second benefit of building relationships, especially with students' families, was the way in which positive relationships prevented conflicts and escalations to due process. As outlined in the introduction, special education litigation can be enormously costly for school districts. The participating administrators all provided examples in which having positive, collaborative relationships with student families prevented conflict and due process cases. Two participants also provided cautionary examples of how negative relationships with students' families escalated to due process and had poor student outcomes.

At the individual level, new administrators could benefit from familiarizing themselves with the literature that involves relationship-building, such as relational leadership and distributed leadership. Texts such as, *Rethinking Leadership: A New Look at Old Leadership Questions*, by Donna Ladkin (2010) and, *Distributed Leadership and Democratic Community*, by Brooks & Kensler (2011) offer practical views and exercises to understand and build relationships between themselves and the many individuals that make up unique IEP teams for each of their students. From a district perspective, building these leadership theories into professional development trainings for their principals could be impactful for both new and veteran administrators. Finally, from an administrator preparation program standpoint, the incorporation of relational and distributed leadership theories into their curricula would be advantageous as the ability to grow positive relationships can be an important aspect of successful student outcomes, as evidenced by the many experiences shared by the participating administrators above.

Limitations

Although this study contributes to the current literature on school administrator preparation in special education law and best practices, it does have clear limitations. The first major limitation is the low response rate. While this explanatory sequential mixed-methods study intended to survey 90 administrators and purposefully select 18 interview participants to provide more in-depth qualitative data to make sense of the quantitative data, only nine administrators participated in the survey portion of the study, and only four administrators participated in the interview portion of the study. The researcher believes that this is due, in part, to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on schools since March of 2020. The introduction to the study and review of the literature already detailed the evolving role of school administrators to increase administrative responsibilities, but to add the immense stress of navigating the COVID-19 pandemic as a school administrator, it is not surprising that administrators would have been reluctant to invest any time on answering a survey.

Another limitation is my positionality within this study. As mentioned in the methodology section, I work in the field of special education and have had my own range of experiences working with different school administrators in different school settings. My experience and passion for my career field have the potential to introduce bias to the data if not appropriately addressed and managed. Peshkin (1988) acknowledged that subjectivity is inevitable in case study research as the researcher acts as the primary instrument (p. 20). When subjectivity is appropriately managed, it can be considered an advantage as the researcher has insider knowledge and an ability to understand participant responses more deeply (Peshkin, 1988, p. 20). Due to my positionality, I was very attentive to the way survey, and interview questions were worded to refrain from leading or influencing the way participants responded. I

also utilized member checking in the interview phase to mitigate these biases as much as possible. For example, instead of relying on my interpretation of their survey responses, I worked participant responses and statements from the survey into the interview questions to allow participants to provide a more detailed and nuanced explanation of their survey responses.

The final limitation of this study is the findings lack generalizability, at least in the traditional scientific perspective. The study's low response rate, as well as the use of purposeful sampling methods, make it difficult to generalize the findings to other populations. However, Donmoyer (2009) suggests Piagetian schema theory, specifically ideas “of assimilation, accommodation, integration, and differentiation,” provides a different way of considering generalizability for case study research (p. 197). He explains that when we utilize this alternative way of thinking about this type of research, qualitative case studies are far more applicable and practical for “applied fields,” such as education (Donmoyer, 2009, p. 197-198).

Recommendations for Future Research

Based on the data from the participating administrators, it is evident that there are some areas of strength that their administrators come into the profession with, primarily a review of the foundational special education laws. However, there is certainly great room for growth. Seeing as the district cannot control which institution their incoming administrators are receiving their preparation, nor what that preparation entails, school districts should consider developing incoming administrator orientation programs. These orientation programs should continue to include the foundational special education laws but, more importantly, be focused on providing contextual experiences and practical case studies for their new administrators to develop a deeper understanding of their role in special education.

This would attempt to mitigate the insufficient preparation school administrators receive in special education and work towards greater equity for students with disabilities in their school district. By taking the extra step of ensuring all administrators receive the same basic training and orientation in special education law, they would be creating a culture that values special education and students, thus demonstrating their commitment to providing FAPE in every single school within their district. A further step that districts should consider is to have comparable training for all administrators to provide ongoing professional development trainings, especially considering the ever-changing special education laws and trends reported by advocates.

One recommendation for future research would be to continue with this same study with a greater sample size at a more ideal period of time. This would allow for other areas of strength and weakness to be identified and examined. Furthermore, perhaps conducting this study with one district, in particular, would yield a better response rate, and the results could inform specific district leaders on how to better prepare their incoming administrators as well as provide ongoing professional development trainings for existing administrators. Another idea for future research is to create a pilot program of incoming administrator orientations targeting the areas of weakness identified in this study, primarily contextual experiences and relationship-building, to determine if they will yield positive outcomes for special education students and staff.

Final Words and Reflections

The purpose of this chapter was to offer a cross-case analysis of the four school administrators who participated in this study. The participants' individual case studies were presented in Chapter Four to capture the complexities and challenges school administrators grapple with concerning the highly litigious and complicated nature of special education throughout their careers. While each of the four administrators serves different types of schools

with different populations, their perspectives provided some interesting insights into how they overcome barriers to better support their students. The two emergent themes that arose from the cross-case analysis were the roles of relationship-building and initiative in the participating administrators' leadership practice as it relates to special education law and best practices.

The field of special education can be incredibly complicated, resulting in contentious relationships between students' families and school staff, expensive litigious cases, special education staff burnout, and, most importantly, poor outcomes for students with disabilities. The four school administrators who graciously sacrificed their valuable time and made this study possible offer a fresh perspective on how to promote successful administrative strategies for special education law and best practices. Hopefully, their insights have a positive impact on school administrators' ability to best serve their students with disabilities who deserve a quality education and support.

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APPENDIX A

Default Question Block

How many years have you been a school administrator?

Did you have experience in special education prior to becoming an administrator (i.e., education specialist, related service provider, case manager)?

- Yes
 No

At what institution did you complete your administrative credential?

How satisfied were you with your administrative credential program's coverage of your role in special education?

- Extremely satisfied
 Very satisfied
 Moderately satisfied
 Slightly satisfied
 Not satisfied at all

When you began your career, how prepared did you feel to support your school's special education department?

- Extremely prepared
 Very prepared
 Moderately prepared
 Slightly prepared
 Not prepared at all

Please identify areas of **STRENGTH** in your administrative credential program's curriculum as it relates to your role in special education (select all that apply):

- Review of foundational laws
 Case studies
 Contextual experiences (e.g., principal shadowing)
 Other:

Please identify areas of **WEAKNESS** in your administrative credential program's curriculum as it relates to your role in special education (select all that apply):

- Review of foundational laws

- Case studies
- Contextual experiences (e.g., principal shadowing)
- Other:

At the current time, do you feel your level of preparedness to support your school's special education department has improved from the start of your career?

- Yes
- No

What factor do you think facilitated this improvement the most?

- District professional development trainings
- Personal research (e.g., Googling SPED code)
- Consulting with district resource specialist
- Personal experience as issues arose throughout your career
- Other:

To what extent are you able to attend professional development trainings in special education in your district?

- Extremely able
- Very able
- Moderately able
- Slightly able
- Not able at all

How would you describe your knowledge of the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)?

- Extremely knowledgeable
- Very knowledgeable
- Moderately knowledgeable
- Slightly knowledgeable
- Not knowledgeable at all

How would you describe your knowledge of inclusion?

- Extremely knowledgeable
- Very knowledgeable
- Moderately knowledgeable
- Slightly knowledgeable
- Not knowledgeable at all

How knowledgeable do you feel your district resource specialist is in matters of special education?

-
- Extremely knowledgeable
 - Very knowledgeable
 - Moderately knowledgeable
 - Slightly knowledgeable
 - Not knowledgeable at all

Please specify your ethnicity:

- Hispanic or Latinx
- Not Hispanic or Latinx

Please specify your race (select all that apply):

- White
- Black or African American
- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- Other:

Please specify your gender identity:

- Female
- Male
- Non-binary/third gender
- Prefer to self-describe:
- Prefer not to say

Please specify your age:

Are you willing to participate in a follow-up interview?

- Yes (please type your email address below):
- No

APPENDIX B

General Interview Guide:

- How would you summarize the training and preparation you received in special education law from your administrative credential program?
 - How much time was spent on special education law and/or best practices?
 - How would you describe the quality of coverage in special education law and/or best practices?
- At the start of your career how competent did you feel in your ability to support the special education staff and students at your school? Why?
 - In what ways has that changed?
- What other influences have an impact on your ability to support the special education staff and students at your school?
- What aspects of special education do you identify as areas of weakness in your preparation?
 - Can you recall a time in your career where you felt unsure how to support your special education staff and students and had to seek guidance from your school district or other resources?
- What aspects of special education do you identify as areas of strength in your preparation?
 - In what instances do you feel confident in supporting your special education staff and students?
- How would you define the Least Restrictive Environment?
- How would you define inclusion?

APPENDIX C

JACKSON FULLER:

- After reviewing your survey data, I saw you have 12 years of administrative experience, have those all been in Southern California?
- You specified that your credential was a test option at Argosy University, can you please elaborate on what went into that option?
- How would you summarize the training and preparation you received in special education law from your administrative credential program?
 - How much time was spent on special education law and/or best practices?
 - How would you describe the quality of coverage in special education law and/or best practices?
- At the start of your career you indicated you felt slightly prepared to support the special education staff and students at your school? Why?
 - In what ways has that changed?
- What other influences have an impact on your ability to support the special education staff and students at your school?
- What aspects of special education do you identify as areas of weakness in your preparation? You indicated that contextual experiences were lacking; how do you think that could have been improved?
 - Can you recall a time in your career where you felt unsure how to support your special education staff and students and had to seek guidance from your school district or other resources?

- What aspects of special education do you identify as areas of strength in your preparation? You indicated review of foundational laws in the survey, can you describe how that was an area of strength?
 - In what instances do you feel confident in supporting your special education staff and students?
- When asked what factor you believed impacted your ability to better support your special education department, you selected personal experience as issues arose throughout your career. Can you recall an example of one of those experiences, what did you have to learn?
- How would you define the Least Restrictive Environment?
- How would you define inclusion?

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Title: School Administrator Preparation in Special Education
Creation Date: 4-18-2021
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Principal Investigator: Emily Ruiz
Review Board: USD IRB
Sponsor:

Study History

Submission Type Initial Review Type Expedited Decision **Approved**

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