# INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP PREPARATION FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES:

## A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF PREPARATION AND EXPERIENCES OF THIRTEEN NOVICE ELEMENTARY PRINCIPALS

A Doctoral Research Project
Presented to
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School of Education
The Sage Colleges

In Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the
Degree of Doctor of Education
In Educational Leadership

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August 4, 2011

Abstract

Elementary principals serve an important role in the education of children and have encountered increased accountability for student achievement over the last 20 years. As a result of increased academic accountability, there has been a shift from managerial responsibilities to instructional leadership. Elementary principals are responsible for the implementation of all programs within their schools, including programming and services for students with disabilities. This doctoral research explored how preservice training and experience have impacted 13 elementary principals' understanding and implementation of instructional leadership for students with disabilities. The principals represented seven New York State counties, 11 school districts, and five district types. Each participant had at least one full year of experience, but no more than five years as elementary principal. In addition, the novice elementary principals did not have a formal background in special education, and therefore did not hold any special education teaching certifications. A significant finding of this study was that only one novice elementary principal felt adequately prepared to design, lead, manage, and implement programs for students with disabilities. New York State does not require any special education related coursework for administrative certifications and it is up to the discretion of colleges and universities whether or not these courses are offered. Principals within this study did not receive any formal training regarding instructional strategies for teaching students with disabilities in their administrative preparation program. Therefore, future administrators should attempt to obtain as much experience as possible working with students with disabilities as a way to better understand the instructional needs of students with disabilities. Informal, on-the-job experience was the most common way in which interviewees learned about special education. Establishing a structure for learning from a special education expert may help close the gap regarding what was lacking from

preservice training. The findings of this study are important for colleges and universities responsible for preparing principals for building level leadership. If principals are expected to be instructional leaders for all students, then these leaders need to be prepared for the job that awaits them.

Acknowledgements

Without setting goals, we cannot achieve our dreams. The journey to the goal is often more rewarding than obtaining the goal itself. Like any journey, I have rejoiced in the triumphs and reflected upon the bumps in the road. Although a cliché, it is true that only through setting goals, hard work, sacrifice, perseverance, and dedication can dreams come true. I encourage anyone reading this to follow your dreams with your head and your heart, to trust the process, and to never give up.

It has been a privilege to be enrolled in a doctoral program with two goals as the mission: teaching moral leadership and completing a doctoral dissertation. The balance of leadership coursework and how to conduct research is a perfect combination for those who want to grow professionally and learn how to analyze and solve a problem using data. I want to thank the entire Sage Graduate School teaching team for the quality of instruction, emphasis on doing the right thing, and encouragement along this journey. I would especially like to thank Dr. Ann Myers for continually provoking deep thought and for her vision in creating the Sage College Doctoral Program. Additionally, I would like to thank all of the principals who participated in my study; they generously gave of their time in order to enhance the quality of administrator education and preparation.

It is my opinion that goals can rarely be obtained without the support and love from others. There are many people to thank for their abiding dedication, support, and love. Mom, thank you so much for being a role model and instilling the value of hard work in me at such a young age. Joan and Bill, thank you for always being there for me. Joan, thank you for breakfast before every class; it always helped to start my day out right. Dr. Lois Powell, my cheerleader every step of the way, providing me with whatever support I needed at any time to

get the job done; thank you for all of your encouragement and support. Thank you to members of Cohort III. I have learned something from each and every one of you. Jill, thank you for being my doctoral buddy. Having a doctoral buddy with which to go through this process was invaluable. Whether it was writing out due dates together or asking each other for feedback, or just listening, you were always there. Beth, sharing progress with you always helped me stay on course.

To my Chair, Dr. Raymond O'Connell; you made yourself available at any time and were always extremely clear and concise with your directions, feedback, and encouraging words. Your commitment to me during this process will never be forgotten.

Finally, I want to thank my family and friends for all of your love and encouragement in allowing me to complete this journey. Many of you have made sacrifices on my behalf, and words cannot express how much that has meant to me. Finally and most importantly, to my partner, you have always rejoiced in my successes; my successes have been your successes. I never could have done it without you.

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## Chapter I. Why This Research?

Elementary principals serve an important role in the education of children. They have many responsibilities that exceed the managerial aspects of school operations. Building leaders have encountered increased accountability for student achievement over the last 20 years (Lyons & Algozzine, 2006). As a result of increased academic accountability, there has been a shift from managerial responsibilities to instructional leadership (Elmore, 2000; Graczewski, Knudson, & Holtzman, 2009; Mitchell & Castle, 2005; Smith & Andrews, 1989).

In a study examining instructional leadership for special education, Bays and Crockett (2007) defined instructional leadership as those practices used to improve teaching, learning, and school success. "As such, instructional leadership should improve special education for students who have unique educational needs and enhance the success of their schools in meeting annual targets for improvement" (Bays & Crockett, 2007, p. 145).

Effective instructional leaders are resource providers, serve as an instructional resource, have effective communication skills, and have a visible presence in the school (Smith & Andrews, 1989; Whitaker, 1997). According to Smith and Andrews (1989), principals engage in ongoing dialogue with staff and encourage the use of a variety of instructional materials and teaching strategies. "The principal is sought out by teachers who have instructional concerns or innovative ideas" (Smith & Andrews, 1989, p. 12). Therefore, in order for elementary principals to serve as an instructional resource, they must be knowledgeable about instructional materials and teaching strategies for students with disabilities.

## Purpose of This Research

The purpose of this study was to explore how preservice training and experience have impacted elementary principals' understanding and implementation of instructional leadership for students with disabilities. Principals are expected to design, lead, manage, and implement programs for all students, including those with disabilities. Building leaders have the ability to impact learning outcomes for students with disabilities.

This qualitative study grew out of this researcher's experiences as an educator for students with disabilities and working with both novice and experienced principals. In this researcher's experience collaborating with building leaders, it became apparent how important it is for principals to have an understanding of the instructional and programming needs for students with disabilities. In addition, it has also become apparent that elementary principals need to be kept up to date with changing special education regulations, instructional best practices, and skills to effectively monitor the success of recommended services and programs for students with disabilities. Students with disabilities exhibit diverse learning needs and require instruction that is individualized and differentiated based upon their unique needs. Learning on the job can be problematic for principals because they are left to rely on others for valuable information related to special education instruction. The researcher wanted to learn more about the ways through which novice principals without any background in special education were being prepared for instructional leadership for students with disabilities.

The method of inquiry included 13 interviews of novice elementary school principals from seven New York State counties, 11 school districts, and five district types. Community district types are divided into five categories: (a) small central, (b) small cities, (c) medium

central, (d) medium cities; and (e) large central and village. Participants from all district types were included in this study.

Principals had to meet two criteria in order to be included in the study. First, participants had to have at least one year of experience, but no more than five years of experience as an elementary principal. Second, elementary principals without any special education teaching certifications were selected to participate in this study. Participants without any special education teaching certifications were selected for this study in order to gain understanding of special education knowledge from those without formal special education training. Novice principals were selected to determine the extent of their knowledge related to instructional leadership for students with disabilities. The term "novice principals" is defined as those with one to five years of experience.

There were six research questions associated with this study:

Question 1: How has preservice coursework prepared principals with one to five years of experience to design, lead, manage, and implement programs for students with disabilities?

Question 2: How has on-the-job experience prepared elementary principals with one to five years of experience to design, lead, manage, and implement programs for students with disabilities?

Question 3: In what ways do elementary principals with one to five years of experience acquire updated information relevant to instructional leadership for students with disabilities?

Question 4: In what ways do elementary principals with one to five years of experience assess the success of programs for students with disabilities?

Question 5: How do elementary principals with one to five years experience use their knowledge of the special education regulations to best serve the needs of students with disabilities?

Question 6: To what extent does service in varying district types impact principals' knowledge of special education as it relates to instructional leadership for students with disabilities?

With increasing accountability for all educators, novice principals need to enter the principalship with an understanding of how best to educate those students who require specialized and individualized instruction. By interviewing 13 novice principals, the researcher was able to gain deep insight as to how novice elementary principals without special education teaching certifications and limited experience as elementary principal were prepared for the job that awaited them.

## Definitions

Many terms and acronyms are used in general and special education. It is important to have a clear understanding of the way these common vocabulary terms were defined in this study. The following terms were used within this study:

*Administrative Preparation Program:* Accredited administrative certification programs offered through a college or university.

*Building Leader:* This phrase was used interchangeably with principal and instructional leader.

*Committee on Special Education:* Every school district has a Committee on Special Education (CSE) that decides a child's special education needs and services. The CSE is responsible for children with disabilities, ages 5-21. The CSE determines where those special education services will be provided. The location where services will be provided and the student's placement must be in the least restrictive environment (NYSED Website, 2011).

*Differentiated Instruction:* Differentiated instruction promotes a rigorous curriculum for all students with varying levels of teacher support, task expectations, and methods for learning based on the student's abilities and interests (Friend, 2005).

*Inclusion/Coteaching/Collaborative Teaching:* Programs for students with disabilities in which students spend part, most, or all of their time with nondisabled students in the general education setting. The special education teacher and general education teacher share teaching responsibilities and work collaboratively in this setting.

*Impartial Hearing:* Parents may disagree with program and placement recommendations of the school district's CSE. In this event, parents may reject the district's recommendations by notifying the school district in a clear and concise manner of the reasons for the rejection of the recommendations. If the disagreements cannot be resolved, the case proceeds to an impartial hearing; a due process-based formal proceeding that allows the parents to challenge the district's individual education plan in whole or in part (NYSED Website, 2002).

*Individualized Education Program:* The Individualized Education Program (IEP) includes: programs, services, goals, modifications, special alerts, accommodations, and the present level of performance in the areas of academics, social/emotional, physical, and management functioning and needs (NYSED Website, 2011).

*Instructional Best Practices:* Instructional best practices are instructional approaches and strategies for teaching and learning within a differentiated learning environment. Best practices are scientifically researched-based instructional interventions proven to be effective for students with particular learning needs, such as inclusion.

*Instructional Leader:* Principals are instructional point people who have an impact on the quality of individual teacher instruction, student achievement, and the degree of efficiency in school functioning. Effective instructional leaders are resource providers, serve as an instructional resource, have effective communication skills, and have a visible presence in the school (Smith & Andrews, 1989; Whitaker, 1997).

*Least Restrictive Environment:* Each child with a disability must be educated in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). LRE means that placement of students with disabilities in special classes, separate schools, or other removal from the general educational environment occurs only when the nature or severity of the disability is such that, even with the use of supplementary aids and services, education cannot be satisfactorily achieved in the general education setting (NYSED Website, 2011).

*Related Services:* Related services are supportive services required to assist a child with a disability to benefit from special education. Related services can include speech or language therapy, occupational therapy, physical therapy, vision therapy, and counseling (NYSED Website, 2011).

*Response to Intervention (RTI):* Response to Intervention (RTI) is a multitiered method of service delivery in which all students are provided an appropriate level of evidence-based instruction based on their individualized needs (Barnes & Harlacher, 2008).

*Section 504:* Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 is a civil rights law designed to eliminate discrimination on the basis of a disability in any program or activity receiving federal financial assistance. Section 504 guarantees certain rights to individuals with disabilities, including the right to full participation and access to a free and appropriate public education to all children regardless of the nature or severity of the disability. Section 504 was designed to "level the playing field" to ensure full participation by individuals with disabilities (Wrightslaw Website, 2011).

*Students with Special Needs/Exceptional Children:* This phrase was used interchangeably with students with disabilities.

## Summary

The purpose of this study was to explore how preservice training and experience have impacted elementary principals' understanding and implementation of instructional leadership for students with disabilities. Principals have the ability to impact learning outcomes for students with disabilities.

Novice building principals need to enter the principalship with an understanding of how best to educate those students who require specialized and individualized instruction. By interviewing 13 novice principals, the researcher was able to gain insight and understanding as to how novice elementary principals were prepared for the job that awaited them. In chapter two, the research regarding the preparation and experience of principals will be presented.

## Chapter II. Literature Review

The purpose of this study was to explore how preservice training and experience have impacted elementary principals' understanding and implementation of instructional leadership for students with disabilities. Each participant selected for this study had at least one full year of experience, but no more than five years of experience as an elementary principal. In addition, only elementary principals without any special education teaching certifications were selected to participate in this study.

This chapter is divided into six sections: (a) setting the stage: changing roles of the elementary principals, (b) what principals need to know about special education, (c) principal accountability and responsibilities, (d) preparation, (e) experience, and (f) summary and implications. The chapter ends by summarizing how the role of elementary principals has evolved from building manager to instructional leader for all students, the importance of instructional leadership for students with disabilities, how novice principals are prepared for instructional leadership for students with disabilities, and how experience impacts instructional leadership for students with disabilities.

### Setting the Stage: Changing Roles of Elementary Principals

Elementary principals serve an important role in the education of children. They have many responsibilities that exceed the managerial aspects of school operations and have encountered increased accountability for student achievement over the last 20 years (Lyons & Algozzine, 2006). As a result of this increased academic accountability, there has been a shift from an emphasis on the managerial responsibilities of the building leader to an emphasis on instructional leadership (Elmore, 2000; Graczewski, Knudson, & Holtzman, 2009; Mitchell & Castle, 2005; Smith & Andrews, 1989). "Educators have great moral, ethical, and legal

obligations to create schools where all students can achieve their full potential and receive an equal opportunity to succeed in society. Central to that goal are principals who act as instructional leaders" (Smith & Andrews, 1989).

In a study examining the ways in which instructional leadership for special education occurs in elementary schools, Bays and Crockett (2007) defined instructional leadership as those practices used to improve teaching, learning, and school success. "As such, instructional leadership should improve special education for students who have unique educational needs and enhance the success of their schools in meeting annual targets for improvement" (Bays & Crockett, 2007, p. 145).

Effective instructional leaders are resource providers, serve as an instructional resource, have effective communication skills, and have a visible presence in the school (Smith & Andrews, 1989; Whitaker, 1997). According to Smith and Andrews (1989), principals engage in ongoing dialogue with staff and encourage the use of a variety of instructional materials and teaching strategies. "The principal is sought out by teachers who have instructional concerns or innovative ideas" (Smith & Andrews, 1989, p. 12).

In a study examining the relationship between aspects of instructional leadership by principals and professional learning opportunities, Graczewski, Knudson, and Holtzman (2009) found that principals ensure teachers have the opportunity to increase their knowledge and perfect their craft on the assumption that deeper teacher knowledge leads to changes in instruction and that, in turn, produces higher student achievement.

Teacher and principal accountability continues to increase as evidenced by the adoption of Education Law §3012-c.

> Education Law §3012-c requires a new performance evaluation system for classroom teachers ("teachers") and building principals ("principals"). New York State will implement a statewide comprehensive evaluation system for school districts and Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES). The evaluation system is designed to measure teacher and principal effectiveness based on performance, including measures of student achievement and evidence of educator effectiveness in meeting New York State teacher or school leader standards. In the 2011-2012 school year, the new evaluation system must include teachers of English Language Arts or mathematics in grades 4-8 (including common branch teachers who teach ELA or mathematics) and the building principals of the schools in which those teachers are employed. Beginning in the 2012-2013 school year, the evaluation system must include all classroom teachers and building principals. The purpose of the comprehensive evaluation system is to measure teacher and principal effectiveness based on multiple measures, including student achievement, to ensure that there is an effective teacher in every classroom and an effective leader in every school. The evaluation system will also foster a culture of continuous professional growth for educators to grow and improve their instructional practices (NYSED Website, 2011).

Teachers and principals need to be adequately prepared to ensure that all students make academic progress. However, according to the research conducted by Lasky and Karge (2006), elementary principals with less than five years experience may not be adequately prepared for instructional leadership for all students, particularly students with disabilities.

Although principals need to be prepared for instructional leadership, Wigle and Wilcox (2002) questioned whether or not educational professionals are being adequately prepared for

educating students with disabilities. In their study, they developed a survey based upon 35 skills identified by the Council for Exceptional Children as being important for administrators working in the area of special education. They compared the competencies reported by special education directors to the competencies on the same set of skills reported by special education teachers and general education administrators. The competencies reported by the three groups and differences between them were discussed regarding implications for special education programs and services in grades K-12.

Surveys were sent to 240 general education administrators, 240 special education directors, and 240 special educators. From a possible total of 720 surveys, 63 surveys were returned from general education administrators, 43 were returned from special education directors, and 49 were returned from special educators for a total of 155 usable surveys. Wigle and Wilcox (2002) indicated that the sample of education professionals across several states offered insight into various important competencies of groups of professionals who have the potential to impact students with disabilities in significant ways.

There were two significant findings within this study. First, college and university preparation programs should stress skills related to assessment, special education program development, collaboration, communication, and advocacy as these skills are critical to the success of special education programs. Second, college and university programs need to improve the skills of their preservice special educators and general education administrators in the area of educational technology and in the area of behavior management as they relate to students with disabilities. The consequences of not being skilled at helping students with disabilities learn appropriate ways to manage their behavior has serious implications for both special educators and general education administrators (Wigle & Wilcox, 2002).

"The fact that many special educators and general education administrators see themselves as lacking in some of these important skills should be a real concern to all professionals who have responsibility for special education programs" (p. 286). Special education directors need collaborative support and involvement from both special educators and general education administrators (Wigle & Wilcox, 2002). If professional educators do not have appropriate levels of competency in important skill areas, their decisions and actions may result in outcomes which lower the effectiveness of special education programs and result in serious consequences for the students served by those programs (Wigle & Wilcox, 2002).

## What Principals Need to Know about Special Education

Important aspects of instructional leadership include: (a) having knowledge and understanding of the history of special education, (b) special education law, and (c) inclusive practices.

Stevenson-Jacobson, Jacobson, and Hilton (2006) conducted a study examining principals' perceptions of critical skills needed for administration of special education. "Much of the administration and day-to-day management responsibilities for students with disabilities has moved from district office to individual school sites" (p. 39).

Stevenson-Jacobson et al. (2006) asked elementary and middle school principals what they considered to be critical competencies related to special education administration. Information was gathered regarding background, training, assignments, and specific practices related to administering special education at the building level.

Stevenson-Jacobson et al. (2006) developed a questionnaire based on 30 competencies identified previously as being important to the administration of special education. Information was gathered regarding the type of district the principals worked in, level of training in special

education, experience in special education, and percentage of responsibility for and amount of time spent on special education program administration. In addition, the questionnaire contained questions related to specific practices related to the delivery of special education.

Principals were randomly selected from the membership of the Illinois Principal Association resulting in 150 Illinois elementary and middle school principals. The sample was divided into two equal groups, those principals who had special education preparation and those who did not. From the sample, a total of 105 questionnaires were returned; 81 were usable and 21 were not as those principals did not currently hold a position as principal.

Responses of principals with and without special education certification were compared and resulted in the eight competencies required for the administration of special education: (a) managing education of students in a less restrictive environment (LRE), (b) case-study process, (c) collaborative teaching strategies, (d) parents' rights, (e) general/special education procedures, (f) federal/state special education laws, (g) state/federal requirements, and (h) listening, consensus building, and conflict resolution. It was recommended that these skills, at a minimum, should be included in preservice and in-service training programs for principals. When interviewing for principal positions, interview teams should develop questions related to these critical skills (Stevenson-Jacobson et al., 2006).

Survey results indicated that principals with training and experience in special education generally assume more responsibility for special education than principals without such training and experience. Principals with special education training and experience refer fewer students out of their home school for services. Significant differences were not notable between principals with experience and training and those without in granting release time for staff collaboration, evaluating special education staff, and participating in prereferrals.

According to Stevenson-Jacobson et al. (2006), additional research is warranted regarding the role of the district in developing special education knowledge and skills of their principals in relation to special education challenges. It was also recommended that higher education training programs and state education agencies work together to shape programs and certification requirements to meet the needs of principals so they can successfully administer quality educational programs for students with special needs.

**History of Special Education**

Public Law 94-142, also known as The Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 was enacted by congress on November 19, 1975 (Wrightslaw Website, 2010). The intent of the law was for all children with disabilities to "have a right to education, and to establish a process by which state and local educational agencies may be held accountable for providing educational services for all handicapped children" (Wrightslaw Website, 2010). The law focused on ensuring that children with disabilities had access to an education and due process of law that included legal checks and balances called "procedural safeguards" designed to protect the rights of children and their parents (Wrightslaw Website, 2010). Although there have been several reauthorizations made to Public Law 94-142, the basic elements remain (Smith, 2005). These elements require that all children with disabilities must be referred, evaluated, and determined to be eligible or not; all eligible students must have IEPs; and all must be provided with a free, appropriate public education, meaning that they must be educated in the least restrictive environment (Smith, 2005).

Since 1975, congress has amended and renamed the special education law several times and on December 3, 2004, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act was amended again (Wrightslaw Website, 2010). The statute was reauthorized to become the Individuals with

Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 and is known as IDEA 2004 (Wrightslaw Website, 2010). When reauthorizing the IDEA, congress increased the focus on accountability and improved outcomes by emphasizing reading, early intervention, and research-based instruction by requiring that special education teachers are highly qualified (Wrightslaw Website, 2010). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 had two primary purposes (Wrightslaw Website, 2010). The first purpose was to provide an education that meets a child's unique needs and prepares the child for further education, employment, and independent living (Wrightslaw Website, 2010). The second was to protect the rights of both children with disabilities and their parents (Wrightslaw Website, 2010). IDEA 2004 emphasized the need to align IDEA with other school improvement efforts such as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 (Wrightslaw Website, 2010). IDEA 2004 added to the complexity of special education practices by requiring school administrators to possess knowledge and understanding necessary to implement the changes both instructionally and procedurally (Protz, 2005).

**Special Education Law**

Special education laws are many and complex, so novice principals need to understand state and federal regulations as they impact the education and programming of students with disabilities (Protz, 2005). "School administrators must have knowledge of special education law and the competence to ensure compliance with it to ensure that students with special needs are being properly served within the classroom" (p. 15). Within the United States, the number of special education lawsuits presents clear and compelling evidence that parents are aware of their children's legal rights under IDEA 2004 (Protz, 2005). "To protect their children's educational rights, parents of children with disabilities are becoming increasingly legally literate" (p. 15).

The IEP is an essential component in providing a free, appropriate public education to

students with disabilities (Gartin & Murdick, 2005). IEPs ensure that students with disabilities are provided with services that are specific and individualized for their needs (Patterson, 2005).

Protz (2005) designed a study to determine the administrators' legal knowledge and their perceptions of their preparation for working with students with special needs. Public elementary, middle, and high school principals, assistant principals, and principal interns in one county in a southeastern state participated in the study. It was found that their knowledge base was questionable at best.

The knowledge base of public school administrators in one county serving approximately 3,200 students with disabilities was surveyed. Participants who received the survey and cover letter included 33 principals, 48 assistant principals, and one principal intern from elementary schools, middle schools, high schools, and alternative settings. Out of a total of 82 potential participants, 51 administrators completed the survey. Approximately half of the respondents were elementary administrators and the other half was split between middle and high school administrators. The survey instrument used was subdivided into three sections. The first section included questions about demographic information. The second section included questions pertaining to the respondents' views on the relevance of special education law in their administrative positions and their perceived need for training in special education law. The third section assessed school administrators' knowledge of special education law and each question presented a school-related situation.

Even though the sample size was small, Protz (2005) indicated that the size did not diminish the value of the results, as the number of student lives affected by administrators' knowledge, or lack thereof, of special education law was great. The findings of the study indicated that administrators in that district are inconsistent at best, in their knowledge and

understanding of special education law. As a result, this could place the district in jeopardy of not meeting the legally-mandated requirements as well as the educational needs of exceptional children. Protz (2005) stated that one reason why administrators were inconsistent in their knowledge and understanding of special education law could be due to having received little to no formalized instruction in special education law. Another reason why administrators were inconsistent in their knowledge and understanding of special education law could be due to the number of administrators with fewer than six years of experience.

Protz (2005) indicated that the findings of the study are essential and meaningful in that there is a need for an increase in administrators' knowledge of special education law and that practices could be brought about through formal graduate training. "A successful environment for students with disabilities has a direct relationship to school administrators' knowledge and understanding of special education laws in the their schoolhouse; administrators are ultimately responsible for ensuring the integration of goals and objectives of special education students within the regular education curriculum" (p. 16). Poor decisions made by school administrators regarding placement and discipline, as well as poor decisions made during CSE meetings can lead to costly settlements by school districts and compromise the education of all students.

**Inclusion**

Students with disabilities must be educated in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) (NYSED Website, 2011). Therefore, elementary principals need to understand instructional best practices, such as inclusion. The LRE regulation requires that students with disabilities be placed in special classes, separate schools, or removed from general education only when the nature of severity of the disability is such that, even with the use of supplemental aids or services, education cannot be achieved (NYSED Website, 2011). Administrative support for

best practices in the classroom and knowledge of legislation for students with disabilities leads to improved outcomes for students in these programs (McHatton, Boyer, Shaunessy, & Terry, 2010). Creating inclusive environments for all learners can more easily be realized through strong, inclusive leadership practices from school administrators (Garrison-Wade, Sobel, & Fulmer, 2007).

Prior to inclusive classrooms, there was mainstreaming. According to Friend (2008), initial interpretation of LRE meant mainstreaming. Students with disabilities were integrated into art, music, physical education or noninstructional times throughout the day if they could achieve at approximately the same level as their peers with some support delivered in a special education classroom (Friend, 2008). Inclusion occurs when students with disabilities receive their entire academic curriculum in the general education setting (Idol, 2006). Inclusion is also a belief system; an understanding that all students should be fully welcomed members of their school community and that all professionals in school share responsibility for their learning (Friend & Pope, 2005). The focus of IDEA 2004 has, and continues to focus on the inclusion of students with their nondisabled peers whenever and wherever possible (Gartin & Murdick, 2005). Principals play a critical role in the successful implementation of inclusion policies; it is critical for them to have a clear understanding of best practices related to inclusion (Edmunds, Macmillan, Specht, Nowicki, & Edmunds, 2009; Friend & Pope, 2005). Principals need to be well-informed about differentiated instruction that must occur in inclusive classrooms (Friend & Pope, 2005).

Garrison-Wade, Sobel, and Fulmer (2007) conducted a mixed-method study, examining both the special education teaching and administrator preparation programs at the University of Colorado at Denver. In order to determine program improvement and training needs, data was

collected from a focus group and current and alumni students from both programs were surveyed.

Garrison et al. (2007) examined whether or not the University of Colorado at Denver was doing an adequate job of meeting the needs for professionals striving to become the next generation of inclusive school leaders. Faculty from the Special Education (SPED) and Administrative Leadership and Policy Studies (ALPS) programs collaborated in a study that looked critically at the ALPS program to determine whether or not key content, knowledge, and skills related to disability issues were infused across all core courses in the administrative preparation program.

The study included both qualitative and quantitative research methods. Qualitative data were collected from two focus groups. Quantitative data were collected through the use of a survey instrument. Two research questions guided the study:

1. How well do graduates of the ALPS program feel they are prepared to lead inclusive school practices?
2. What are the most critical skills that administrators need to have for inclusive leadership?

A total of 124 participants participated in the study. Study participants were identified through the ALPS principal licensure, masters, and specialist in education programs database of alumni graduates between 2000 and 2005, in addition to students completing their final semester in the ALPS program.

Data were collected through a survey instrument and a focus group activity. The survey instrument was designed to determine perceptions of the effectiveness of the program to prepare administrators to lead inclusive schools. The on-line survey instrument consisted of four

background information questions, four open-ended questions, and 11 questions using a Likert scale.

The two focus groups fulfilled the qualitative portion of the study and were comprised of 25 students from a convenient sample of SPED students completing their final course in their masters program. SPED students were completing their master's degree and teaching in the field at the same time. Participants in the focus groups were gathered to discuss (a) the benefits and disadvantages of working within schools that serve students with diverse needs and backgrounds, (b) specific strategies that they perceived were effective in working with students that struggle, and (c) recommendations for principals and prospective principals to improve supportive inclusive practices.

Garrison et al. (2007) found that the focus group participants spoke passionately about issues that clustered around: (a) knowledge of special education law and disabilities; (b) skills to create inclusive environments including the ability to lead teachers in the best practices such as differentiation, collaboration, and positive behavior supports; and (c) genuine appreciation and support of what special education teachers do.

Practicing and future administrators reported their need for more training in a variety of topics including: (a) special education law, (b) strategies for organizing a school to best utilize the special and general education teachers, (c) strategies and resources about a variety of diverse needs, and (d) discipline issues with students displaying special education needs.

Garrison et al. (2007) found that in order to be supportive, principals should: (a) be knowledgeable about differentiated instruction, (b) help teachers attend professional development opportunities, (c) provide coaching, (d) arrange for teachers to visit each other, and (e) field questions that parents and family have about special education teaching practices. It

was also reported that in order to meet the responsibility of creating schools where every student can succeed, higher education preparation programs must look critically at basic values and existing organizational structures, be responsive to their students, and hold the highest expectations to ensure they are doing all they can to prepare administrators and teachers for the challenges of today's inclusive schools (Garrison et al., 2007).

Principals are held accountable and have a great number of responsibilities, including understanding the complexities of varied systems and alternative teaching strategies to ensure student success (Friend & Pope, 2005; Garrison et al, 2007).

## Principal Accountability and Responsibilities

Principals have been called to serve as instructional leaders in school (Bays & Crockett, 2007; Shahid et al., 2001). Bays and Crockett (2007) define instructional leadership as those practices used to improve teaching, learning, and school success. Principals need to be able to lead staff in successfully implementing best practices for educating students with disabilities (Lasky & Karge, 2006). Principals ensure that teachers increase their knowledge and perfect their craft on the assumption that deeper teacher knowledge leads to changes in instruction, which, in turn, produces higher student achievement (Graczewski et al., 2009). Even though a principal's most important task is instructional leadership, there is often difficulty giving instructional leadership the priority it deserves (Bays & Crockett, 2007; Shahid et al., 2001).

### Instructional Leadership with Respect to Students with Disabilities

Bays and Crockett (2007) conducted a study to generate a theory describing the ways in which instructional leadership for special education occurs in elementary schools. The inquiry focused on three questions: (a) what were the practices used in supervising specially designed instruction; (b) what needs were addressed by these practices; and (c) what conditions caused

instructional leadership and supervision to be conducted as it was? Bays and Crockett (2007) defined special education as specially designed instruction and defined instructional leadership to mean those practices used to improve teaching, learning, and school success.

Few studies address the supervisory practices used to ensure that students who have disabilities receive an appropriate public education (Bays & Crockett, 2007). Providing leadership for special education is problematic and influenced by political dimensions including student and teacher demographics, varied instructional settings, shared leadership responsibility, and the impact of legislation, policies, and reform movements (Bays & Crockett, 2007). "Instructional leadership is also a tool with the potential to help educators fulfill the individualized purpose of the IDEA by ensuring that a qualified student receives a free, appropriate public education that emphasizes special education" (p. 145). According to Bays and Crockett (2007), instructional leadership has been the focus of diverse research efforts; however, studies specifically addressing the supervision of special education is sparse.

The study was conducted in nine elementary schools within three school districts in the southeastern United States. It was reported that small school systems were selected for two reasons: more than 70% of the districts in that state enroll fewer than 5000 students and small school districts have less elaborate administrative structures. Districts were selected with a range of service delivery models from inclusion to special education classes. Within each school, interviews were conducted with the principal, at least one special educator, and one general education teacher who had children with disabilities in class for 80% or more of his or her instructional time. Participants included 24 teachers, nine principals, and three directors of special education. These 38 participants participated in interviews and observations.

Bays and Crockett (2007) found that the instructional supervisor's role is assigned by school board policy to the principal. The principal must negotiate among competing priorities and contextual factors to fulfill this role, and the outcome of this negotiation is the dispersal of responsibility for special education among administrative and teaching personnel. Principals collaborate with special education directors, trust teachers as instructional experts, and engage in practices of open communication, formal evaluations, and informal observations in supporting the delivery of special education (Bays & Crockett, 2007).

Principals attempted to balance management, administrative, and supervisory duties, monitor legal compliance, and ensure instructional quality (Bays & Crockett, 2007). However, despite the strategies they used, their interactions with teachers about improving teaching and learning for special education students occurred at a minimal level. Interactions among principals and special educators often centered on paperwork and regulatory compliance. Although these interactions are necessary, they are not sufficient to ensure positive learning outcomes for special education students (Bays & Crockett, 2007).

It was noted that responsibility of instructional leadership occurred both formally and informally and was dispersed between principals, directors, and teachers. The researchers feared that the casual dispersal of instructional leadership that was observed may threaten the quality of specialized instruction. It was recommended that when responsibility is distributed across multiple personnel, principals should take greater care to ensure that their instructional leadership practices include: (a) pursuing a vision that encompasses the effective instruction of students with disabilities; (b) extending norms of trust, collaboration, and academic press across all members of the school community; (c) providing teachers with meaningful support; and (d) monitoring the delivery of specially designed instruction and related innovations.

In conclusion, Bays and Crockett (2007) indicated that it is imperative in the current era of accountability, that there is a need for leadership that aggressively presses teachers to target learning outcomes of students with diverse educational needs. It is their hope that future research will support the supposition that instructional leadership that is well informed about special education and is intentionally distributed among principals, teachers, and special education administrators has the potential to ensure that high-quality educational programs are accessible to all students. This study did not explore how principals without certification or preservice coursework acquire knowledge regarding instructional leadership for students with disabilities.

Leadership is instrumental to the improvement of instruction and student performance (Elmore, 2000). According to Elmore (2000), leadership is the guidance and direction of instructional improvement. Mandates require principals to be well-prepared in the area of special and gifted education, specifically in the areas of inclusion, data-driven decision making, and instructional leadership (McHatton et al., 2010).

**No Child Left Behind**

In January 2002, the reauthorized Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was signed into law as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) (DiPaola, Tschannen-Moran, & Walther-Thomas, 2004). NCLB sets high expectations for all students and has raised the academic bar for students with disabilities (DiPaola et al., 2004). NCLB requires that student achievement be measured by tests closely aligned with comprehensive state academic standards (DiPaola et al., 2004). NCLB also expects all students to demonstrate adequate yearly progress (AYP) on state assessments by 2014 (DiPaola et al., 2004). Teachers, administrators, and parents cannot exclude low-achieving students from the assessment process. Instructional

leaders who understand students with disabilities, IDEA, NCLB requirements, and effective practice are better prepared to provide students and their teachers with appropriate classroom support (DiPaola et al., 2004).

According to Vannest, Mahadevan, Mason, and Temple-Harvey (2009), little is known of NCLB's effect on students with disabilities. Vannest et al. (2009) conducted a study to assess the impact of NCLB on special education by asking educators, administrators, and staff who serve students in special education about their perceptions of the impact of NCLB on students with disabilities. From across the state of Texas, 248 survey responses were received.

Results for participants indicated that there was an overall positive impact from NCLB, with high standards for students' performance, teacher qualifications, and teaching methods. The study found the perceptions of the impact of NCLB to be strongly positive for special education in: (a) teacher and paraprofessional qualifications, (b) the use of evidence-based practices, and (c) high standards for all students. As a result of NCLB, principals need to understand what evidence-based practices are, as well as having high standards for all students, including students with disabilities. Principals need to understand the instructional and programming needs of all students in their building (Edmunds et al., 2009; Garrison et al., 2007; Protz, 2005).

Although NCLB has established setting high expectations for all students and has raised the academic bar for students with disabilities (DiPaola et al., 2004), according to the 2009-10 New York State Special Education Annual Performance Report, students with disabilities are making progress in some areas but need to continue to improve (NYSED Website, 2011). An annual goal set by the state was 49 percent of youth with IEPs would graduate from high school with a regular high school diploma within four years as of August 2008. However, only 44

percent of youth with IEPs graduated from high school with a regular high school diploma within four years, as of August 2008. Another goal set by the state was no more than 16 percent of students with disabilities would drop out of school, [however] in the 2009-10 school year, the state's dropout rate was 16.7 percent (NYSED Website, 2011).

**Special Education Programming**

Ensuring appropriate educational opportunities for students with disabilities is one of the greatest challenges that public schools face (DiPaola et al., 2004). Principals provide leadership for all programs in their buildings (Goor & Schwenn, 1997). Building leaders need a strong, working knowledge of special education policies and procedures, an understanding of disabilities and some of the unique learning and behavior challenges various conditions present, and a comprehensive knowledge of research-based practices (McHatton et al., 2010).

DiPaola, Tschannen-Moran, and Walther-Thomas (2004) discussed the role of school principals and special education in creating the context for academic success. The researchers explored five dimensions of effective leadership by principals. DiPaola et al. (2004) found that effective special education services depend on the ability and willingness of school leaders to: (a) promote an inclusive school culture; (b) provide instructional leadership; (c) model collaborative leadership; (d) manage and administer organizational processes; and (e) build and maintain positive relations with teachers, families, and the community.

Effective principals believe that they are responsible for the education of all children and teachers can teach a wide range of students (Goor & Schwenn, 1997). Principals must ensure that fundamental changes are implemented, effective support services are provided, progress is monitored closely, and school momentum is maintained (DiPaola et al., 2004).

**Response to Intervention**

Principals are responsible for the implementation of Response to Intervention (RTI) within their schools. RTI is a service delivery method to improve academic outcomes for all students and a means to identify students with learning disabilities (Barnes & Harlacher, 2008). Barnes and Harlacher (2008) outlined five key principles and four features of RTI. The five principles of RTI include: (a) a proactive and preventative approach to education; (b) ensuring an instructional match between student skills, curriculum, and instruction; (c) a problem-solving orientation and data-based decision making; (d) use of effective practices; and (e) a systems-level approach. RTI also involves frequent assessment of students' progress, data-based decision making, and placement of students with a wide range of instructional needs.

School district personnel are required to identify students at risk for poor learning outcomes, monitor student progress, provide evidence-based interventions, and adjust the intensity and nature of those interventions depending on a student's responsiveness (National Center on Response to Intervention Website, 2007). Schools, under the guidance of building leaders, are required to show systematic, consistent application of evidence-based practices in academics in more comprehensive and quantifiable ways (Reeves, Bishop, & Filce, 2010). RTI includes two federal government mandates, NCLB 2002 and IDEA 2004 (Reeves et al., 2010).

According to the RTI New York State Guidance Document (NYSED Website, 2010) and Barnes and Harlacher (2008), ongoing professional development is required for all district personnel in order to acquire an appropriate level of knowledge of the core instructional program of RTI. This may include effective scope and sequence of instruction, instructional strategies, monitoring procedures, effective use of data, problem solving and decision making, and the identification and implementation of interventions appropriate to individual student needs.

Principals need to ensure that all staff receive instruction in the underlying concepts in order to support the RTI process (NYSED Website, 2010).

School leaders are responsible for ensuring that both nondisabled and disabled students have access to instruction in order to meet their education needs (Barnes & Harlacher, 2008). RTI is described as a systematic change in education that goes beyond providing an intervention and monitoring progress; it is a philosophical belief that all children can learn (Barnes & Harlacher, 2008). Principals are responsible for ensuring that the principles of RTI are implemented appropriately and this belief is evident in their schools (Barnes & Harlacher, 2008).

## Principal Preparation

Many principals report feeling unprepared for their roles in the administration of special programs in their schools and may be unaware of the extent of their responsibilities, or they may delegate their duties to other personnel in the building (Goor & Schwenn, 1997). When principals delegate most or all special education roles to psychologists, counselors, or special educators, they relinquish their leadership function (Goor & Schwenn, 1997).

There is little research examining the formal special education training or basic knowledge of special education law and practices of school principals, yet principals must have fundamental knowledge and skills that will enable them to perform essential special education leadership tasks (Lasky & Karge, 2006; DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003). School leaders must be adequately trained to assume leadership for special education programs, services, and personnel (Zaretsky, Moreau, & Faircloth, 2008).

### Lack of Preparation

According to Alvarez McHatton, Boyer, Shaunessy, and Terry (2010), there is a widening gap of the level of comprehensive knowledge critical for school improvement, such as

students with disabilities. Mandates such as NCLB and IDEA require principals to be well-prepared in the area of special education, specifically in the area of inclusion, data-driven decision making, and instructional leadership (McHatton et al., 2010). There is a lack of research examining the preparation of principals in the area of special education and inclusive practices (McHatton et al., 2010).

McHatton et al. (2010) conducted a study to examine school leaders' perceptions regarding the degree to which their administrator preparation program and school district provided professional development that addressed necessary skills and knowledge to effectively work with educators of children in special education and gifted programs.

A large metropolitan district in the southeastern United States was the pilot site for the survey. The topics addressed in the survey correspond with what the literature indicates principals should know about exceptional student education (McHatton et al., 2010). The district was ranked among the top 10 largest districts in the nation and serves approximately 200,000 students. The survey was sent to all principals from the participating district, 64 were completed and returned, and 61 were included in the analysis. The majority of the participants were working in elementary settings in either urban or suburban areas with student populations ranging from 250 to 1000. All schools provided a variety of program models including consultation, coteaching, resource, academic and/or enrichment pull-out, and self-contained. Four participants had a degree in special education, three at the undergraduate level and one at the master's level. It was reported that the study only included one district which could limit generalizability, as a larger sample size would have allowed for further statistical analysis to determine significant differences based on demographics (McHatton et al., 2010).

Questions within the survey were grounded in needs addressed in the existing literature base. The survey instrument consisted of six subsections: (a) demographics; (b) preparation (i.e., level of preparation in specific activities and educational experiences); (c) practice (i.e., how often respondents participated in specific activities); (d) perception of self-efficacy (i.e., participants perceived sense of efficacy in their ability to address various issues related to special and gifted education); (e) knowledge of effective teachers of exceptional students of culturally and linguistically diverse exceptional students; and (f) perceptions of exceptional students, their parents/caregivers, and their teachers. The researchers only reported on the subsections pertaining to preparation, practice, and perception of self-efficacy.

McHatton et al. (2010) reported that there was a disconnect between the activities school administrators engage in regularly and the emphasis placed on those activities in preparation programs and professional development. The participants reported a high sense of self-efficacy in the areas of the survey even though their preparation programs minimally included special and gifted education content. McHatton et al. (2010) hypothesized two possible reasons for this: Participants gain much of the information relative to their responsibilities on the job or there may be a discrepancy between what the participants think they know and what they actually know. The participants rated legal and funding issues as issues they felt less effective in knowing.

Although much of the content listed in the survey was not addressed in preparation programs or through district professional development, few participants expressed a desire for additional training on the topics. McHatton et al. (2010) attributed it to: (a) an already overwhelming workload, (b) a perception that they could obtain information from the district as needed, (c) a perception that they would gain necessary knowledge on the job, or (d) the high sense of self-efficacy reported by participants.

Additional research was recommended to clarify some of the points alluded to by the data (McHatton et al., 2010). Within the study, it was noted that there may be a discrepancy between what the participants think they know and what they actually know as participants reported a high sense of self-efficacy even though their leadership preparation programs minimally included special and gifted education content. Therefore, findings would be enhanced through individual or group interviews from survey respondents, allowing for exploration of discrepancies between reported lack of preparation and what they actually know. In addition, it was recommended that future studies could inform curriculum development and guide university-school-district partnerships in developing a comprehensive preparation program for future administrators.

**Requirements**

Valesky and Hirth (1992) conducted a study to examine state requirements for certification of school administrators to determine whether they require knowledge of special education law and special education in general. State directors of special education were sent a survey instrument with a total of seven questions, three of which requested information on endorsements offered, knowledge requirements for special education law, and a general knowledge of special education, and how that knowledge was acquired. The authors selected state directors of special education as respondents because they were considered most knowledgeable concerning special education requirements for administrative endorsements. The study included 52 responses representing 50 states. "Respondents" were referred to as states and "endorsements" was defined as licenses and/or certificates.

Valesky and Hirth (1992) wrote that general education administrators must have knowledge of special education and special education law for two reasons: to ensure an

appropriate education for all students with disabilities, and to minimize losing potential lawsuits from inappropriate implementation of special education legal requirements. Valesky and Hirth (1992) found that the number of due process hearings was not related to endorsement requirements because regardless of how much knowledge and background an administrator has of special education, and no matter how appropriate a program may be, parents can exercise their rights and request a hearing if they are not satisfied. However, it was noted that administrators must follow procedural requirements because a case may be won by parents when administrators fail to follow procedural safeguards and requirements. This is why the authors believe it is important for all administrators to have knowledge of special education law. The results of the study indicated that a majority of states do not have certification requirements that address this need. At the time the study was conducted, only two states required a special education law course for a general administrator endorsement. It was reported that the most common method of acquiring knowledge of special education law was through general law courses. However, due to the large amount of information covered in general law courses, the amount of time devoted to special education law is likely to be minimal (Valesky & Hirth, 1992).

Valesky and Hirth (1992) found that more state education agencies are offering special education endorsements, yet some researchers are indicating a need for unification of general and special education which would decrease the need for separate special education administration endorsements. Valesky and Hirth (1992) found encouraging results: (a) more states are offering special education administrator endorsements than in previous years, (b) seventy-five percent of all states offer special education in-service training programs for administrators each year, (c) almost all states have study councils or task forces that address special education concerns and the majority include regular education administrators, (d) few due process hearing decisions have

been appealed to the courts, and (e) the use of mediation prior to due process hearings has been adopted by most states.

Valesky and Hirth (1992) concluded the study by stating that state boards of education should consider revising administrator endorsement requirements to include knowledge of special education law.

In June 2006 in New York State, the Board of Regents adopted three administrative certifications. These include School Building Leader (SBL), School District Leader (SDL), or School District Business Leader (SDBL) certifications. Requirements for certification include a master's degree and three years of experience (NYSED Website, 2006). A Transitional D certificate is also available and requires commitment and district mentoring. The Transition D certification is available for candidates who do not have three years of classroom teaching service, pupil personnel service, or school leadership service and who have been offered a central office/district level position (e.g. superintendent of schools, assistant superintendent, other person having responsibility for district-wide administration with the exception of school district business leaders).

Experience requirements for school building leaders include three years of teaching and/or pupil personnel service for initial certification. Professional certification for school building leaders includes three years of leadership experience, including one year of mentored experience as school building leader. New York State does not require any coursework related to special education law, or any other special education topics for certification in any administrative certification area. If administrative candidates are interested in special education, they may opt to take courses in that area, but special education courses are not required for any administrative certifications (NYSED Website, 2006).

## Experience

Principals with experience related to special education may have more knowledge about special education instructional leadership than principals with less than five years experience (Stevenson-Jacobson et al., 2006). Stevenson-Jacobson et al. (2006) concluded that principals with training and experience in special education generally assume more responsibility for special education than principals without training and experience. Principals with special education training and experience referred fewer students out of their home school for services (Stevenson-Jacobson et al., 2006). In addition, significant differences were noted between principals with experience and training and those without regarding granting release time for staff collaboration, evaluating special education staff, and participating in prereferrals (Stevenson-Jacobson et al., 2006). The research does not address how principals make up for a lack of preservice coursework in special education; how they acquire special education knowledge without experience or coursework related to special education.

### On-The-Job Training

Lasky and Karge (2006) conducted a study to examine the formal training and experience of principals in a variety of school districts in southern California. The researchers asked the following questions: (a) What information do principals receive in university programs to prepare school administrators? (b) What experience do principals bring with them as they train and support teachers? and (c) How confident do principals feel in their ability to support and train teachers in regard to children with disabilities? There were a total of 205 respondents from 28 public school districts in southern California and a majority of the respondents were elementary principals. The majority of principals possessed general education credentials with only 18 being certified in special education.

Lasky and Karge (2006) found there is very little research examining the formal special education training of basic knowledge of special education laws and practices of school principals. If principals are the key figures in providing appropriate support and education to teachers, they must receive preparation in appropriate instructional approaches for students with disabilities (Lasky & Karge, 2006).

Respondents in the study reported that regardless of how long principals worked in their positions, they reported limited ability and knowledge related to children with special needs. Lasky and Karge (2006) reported that many respondents had children with disabilities in their classes when they taught but never attended an IEP meeting until they became a principal.

Out of all of the principals surveyed, 119 felt that coursework was critical to their development, and yet administrative training programs across many states seriously lack special education content. New York State does not have any requirements regarding special education coursework. Lasky and Karge (2006) found that many principals reported receiving their special education training on the job as they encountered challenges and successes in working with special education teachers, staff, and students.

**Professional Development**

In the study conducted by Valesky and Hirth (1992), they indicated that administrators need to be afforded professional development opportunities to acquire updated information regarding special education law as they are continually updated. New York State requires professional development for all administrators holding professional level certificates. Professional development maintains the validity of the professional certificate and 175 hours are required every five years. However, there are no requirements for professional development in the area of special education.

Wakeman, Browder, Flowers, and Ahlgrim-Delzell (2006) conducted a study to determine the comprehensive knowledge base of national secondary principals related to special education issues and the factors that are associated with that knowledge. The two research questions were: What level of understanding do secondary principals have related to fundamental and current special education issues and what is the relationship between the principal's level of understanding to demographics, experience and training, school performance, and their beliefs and practices? The researchers used a survey developed from the literature for assessing fundamental and current issues in special education. Data were collected from a national sample of secondary school principals and from the 1000 surveys mailed, 362 were returned.

Wakeman et al. (2006) indicated that research has demonstrated that many principals receive little to no formal preservice or in-service professional development regarding special education and in order to be considered competent, principals should have both fundamental and current knowledge of special education-related issues. The study results indicate that secondary principals have an adequate understanding of the fundamental issues in special education but need support in learning about current issues in special education. Wakeman et al. (2006) wrote that considering the minimal information most principals receive in their administration training and professional development and strong association between practices and knowledge, it's evident that secondary principals are learning about special education on the job and therefore, need access to professional development related to special education.

DiPaola and Walther-Thomas (2003) wrote an article examining key leadership issues related to effective special education and emerging standards for principal performance to determine the knowledge and skills that effective school leaders need. "Although principals do not need to be disability experts, they must have fundamental knowledge and skills that will

enable them to perform essential special education leadership tasks" (p. 11). DiPaola and Walther-Thomas (2003) emphasized the need for principals to have a thorough working knowledge about disabilities, special education law, IDEA, NCLB, and the unique learning and behavioral challenges various disabilities present. School districts need to provide ongoing professional development opportunities in this area for school principals to be effective (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003).

Zaretsky, Moreau, and Faircloth (2008) conducted a study to better understand the role of the principal in the administration and supervision of special education programs, services, and personnel from a cross-national perspective. The researchers indicated that such an understanding could assist in the development and/or restructuring of professional preparation programs and professional development activities that focus on instruction and instructional leadership in an accountability context in an attempt to better serve the needs of students with and without disabilities.

The study involved in-depth, semistructured, open-ended interviews with six elementary principals and two secondary principals from a large school district in Ontario, Canada. Principals with a high proportion of students with special needs in a variety of general and special education programs were given priority and each participant had a minimum of two years experience in his or her administrative role. Zaretsky et al. (2008) used interviews to better understand the roles of principals in schools where they identified special education as one of their primary leadership responsibilities. The results of the study focused on the results of the interviews with the Ontario principals. Limitations of this study include a small sample size and selection of participants from one district in one Canadian province.

Zaretsky et al. (2008) found that half the principals in the study had completed at least one additional qualification course in special education when they were teachers and all principals reported a need for ongoing professional development that targeted their roles as school leaders in special education. Principals expressed a fundamental curiosity to seek out new knowledge and research related to exceptionality and instructional interventions to support learners with special needs.

Zaretsky et al. (2008) concluded that given the complexities of special education, it is not surprising that many principals felt the need for ongoing professional development in order to equip them with the knowledge and skills necessary to lead with confidence.

## Summary

The literature points to arguments for principals being prepared for instructional leadership for students with disabilities from the first day on the job. The literature also points to novice principals not being prepared for the role that awaits them (Garrison et al., 2007; Protz, 2005; Stevenson-Jacobson et al., 2006). Due to increased accountability for teachers and administrators, both need to be prepared for their positions.

Graczewski, Knudson, and Holtzman (2009) defined instructional leadership as ensuring that teachers have the opportunity to increase their knowledge and perfect their craft on the assumption that deeper teacher knowledge leads to changes in instruction and that, in turn, produces higher student achievement. Principals are instructional leaders who can ensure that all students are receiving high-quality instruction.

Instructional leadership as it relates to students with disabilities has been the subject of recent research (Bays & Crockett, 2007; McHatton et al., 2010). Principals need to aggressively press teachers to target learning outcomes of students with diverse educational needs (Bays &

Crockett, 2007). Effective instructional leadership is based upon knowledge and skills that allow for a deep understanding of what is happening in every classroom (DiPaola et al., 2004). In addition, effective principals thoughtfully analyze student and teacher performance and address instructional issues directly to promote quality instruction (DiPaola et al., 2004).

When examining the research conducted regarding the importance of principals being prepared for special education instructional leadership, much has been done (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; McHatton et al., 2010; Wakeman et. al., 2006; Zaretsky et. al., 2008). However, what seems to be missing from the research is how novice elementary principals who do not have special education certifications are able to provide instructional leadership for students with disabilities. Consideration needs to be given to better prepare novice principals for the role as instructional leader for students with disabilities. The research indicates that on-the-job experience may be able to make up for limited exposure to special education (Lasky and Karge, 2006). However, little to no research has been conducted examining how novice principals are being prepared for their role as instructional leaders for students with disabilities, particularly in these times of increased accountability.

As such, the research of this study set out to answer six questions: (a) How has preservice coursework prepared principals with one to five years of experience to design, lead, manage, and implement programs for students with disabilities? (b) How has on-the-job experience prepared elementary principals with one to five years of experience to design, lead, manage, and implement programs for students with disabilities? (c) In what ways do elementary principals with one to five years of experience acquire updated information relevant to instructional leadership for students with disabilities? (d) In what ways do elementary principals with one to five years of experience assess the success of programs for students with disabilities? (e) How do

elementary principals with one to five years experience use their knowledge of the special education regulations to best serve the needs of students with disabilities? and (f) To what extent does service in varying district types impact principals' knowledge of special education as it relates to instructional leadership for students with disabilities? Methodology for this study is presented in chapter three.

## Chapter III. Methodology

In order to fully understand the impact of preparation and experience on instructional leadership for students with disabilities, this researcher employed a phenomenological qualitative study to determine to what extent elementary principals were prepared for instructional leadership for students with disabilities. This chapter describes the research questions addressed in this study, the methods chosen to conduct the study, and the rationale for using this methodology. The sections included in this chapter are: (a) selection of participants, (b) interview protocol, (c) data collection, (d) data validity and reliability, (e) researcher bias, (f) delimitations and limitations, and (g) summary.

The methodology selected was a phenomenological qualitative study. According to Merriam (2009), qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences. Creswell (2009) defined qualitative research as a way to explore and understand the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. Qualitative research has been described thus: "The process of research involves emerging questions and procedures, data typically collected in the participant's setting, data analysis inductively building from particulars to general themes, and the researcher making interpretations of the meaning of the data" (Creswell, 2009, p. 4).

Elementary principals with at least one, but no more than five years experience were selected in order to learn more about how they were prepared for instructional leadership for students with disabilities. Interviews were conducted to obtain an understanding of the lived experiences of other people and the meaning they make of those experiences (Seidman, 2006).

## Selection of Participants

A purposeful sampling strategy was selected in order to obtain participants with the background required for this study. "Purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned" (Merriam, 2009, p. 77).

The participants were required to have at least one full year of experience, but no more than five years as elementary principal. In addition, the novice elementary principals did not have a formal background in special education, and therefore did not have any special education teaching certifications. According to Creswell (2007), the inquirer selects individuals and sites for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem. Creswell (2007) described purposeful sampling as selecting individuals because they may have an understanding of the research problem or phenomenon in the study.

Elementary principals with limited experience and without special education teaching certifications were selected for a variety of reasons. Elementary principals were selected because their students obtain basic and prerequisite skills that impact their entire educational experience during their elementary school years. Therefore, elementary programs need to be rigorous and tailored to the needs of each individual student, especially those with learning challenges. Elementary principals needed to have at least one full year of experience because they most likely inherited special education programs that already existed in their school during their first year. From years two to five, elementary principals would have more opportunities to develop special education programs within their buildings. Participants without special education teaching certifications were selected because their only formal training and/or coursework in the

area of special education would have come from their college or university educational leadership program and not from their prior special education programs.

Upon approval from the Sage Institutional Review Board (Appendix A), principals were contacted via e-mail or telephone to determine if their background matched the requirements of this study. The e-mail also asked the potential participants whether or not they would be willing to participate in the study (Appendix B). If the potential participants met the criterion and were willing to participate, they were asked to respond to the initial e-mail within one week. The number of responses from each county and community district type was documented.

Originally, the researcher intended to interview at least two principals in three New York State counties from two different community district types as defined by the New York State Education Department. Community district types were divided into five categories: (a) small central, (b) small cities, (c) medium central, (d) medium cities, and (e) large central and village. A list of school districts and elementary schools from three counties in New York State were obtained from the web address "www.newyorkschools.com." From the generated list of elementary schools in each county and school district, the e-mail addresses of each elementary principal were obtained from the school district website.

The original procedure was to follow-up within 24 hours to the first two principals from each of the three New York State counties and two district types. This procedure was modified when the researcher discovered it was difficult to obtain participants with the background required for the study and from the limited amount of counties and district types. Many potential participants responded indicating they either had more than five years experience, not one full year, or had teaching certifications in the area of special education. The researcher expanded the search to include seven more counties in New York State and district types were not limited.

School districts and elementary schools from seven additional counties in New York State were obtained from the web address "www.newyorkschools.com." From the generated list of elementary schools in the additional seven counties and school districts, additional e-mail addresses of elementary principals were obtained from the school district website. From the updated list, potential participants were contacted either via e-mail or telephone to determine if their background matched the background required for this study. Each principal who indicated they were interested in participating and who matched the criterion required for the study, was sent a copy of the consent form which included a more in-depth description of the study (Appendix C). The participants either signed and mailed the consent form back to the researcher or signed it on the day of the interview. The research subjects who were interviewed over the phone were asked to mail the consent form prior to the interview. Participants were not turned away from the study unless their background did not match the requirements of the study. The participants in this study were both male and female. Ten of the participants were male and three were female. Due to the limited number of potential candidates for this study, every person with the proper background who was willing to participate was accepted into the study. A total of 230 elementary principals from 10 New York counties were solicited. Participants were told that at any time, they could decline participation or withdraw from the study. Participants were not provided any compensation.

Although the researcher originally intended to select two elementary principals from two different community district types within three counties, due to the limited number of participants with the background required for the study, the study includes 13 principals from seven New York State counties, 11 school districts, and five district types. Even though the number of counties, participants, and district types changed from the original research design, the

end result provided more insight, as it provided increased diversity to the responses of the interview questions.

Table 1.

*Counties and Community District Types Represented in Seven Counties as Reported via the New York State Basic Educational Data System (BEDS)*

| County | Small Central | Small Cities | Medium Central | Medium Cities | Large Central/and Village |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| A | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 3 |
| B | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| C | 0 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 1 |
| D | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| E | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| F | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| G | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Totals: | 2 | 1 | 3 | 1 | 6 |

This was a confidential study; the names of the participants and their school districts were not identified anywhere in the study. No real names were used when data were recorded, transcribed, or reported; pseudonyms were assigned to each participant. The participants' identities and responses remained confidential throughout the study.

## Interview Protocol

The researcher created an interview protocol for this study. The structure of the interview protocol and some ideas for interview questions were based upon a special education/educational leadership survey created by McHatton, Boyer, Shaunessy, & Terry (2010). McHatton et al. (2010) examined principals' perceptions of preparation and practice in gifted and special education. Permission was granted to modify the survey instrument utilized in that study (Appendix D).

McHatton et al. (2010) developed a quantitative study to examine school leaders' perceptions regarding the degree to which their administrator preparation program and the professional development provided by their school district addressed knowledge and skills to effectively work with educators in exceptional student education programs. McHatton et al. (2010) noted that there may be a discrepancy between what participants think they knew and what they actually knew as participants in their study reported having a high sense of self-efficacy even though their leadership preparation programs minimally included special and gifted education content. Exploration of discrepancies between reported lack of preparation and what school leaders actually know was recommended. A qualitative study was selected so the researcher could not only examine how preservice training and experience have impacted elementary principals' understanding and implementation of instructional leadership for students with disabilities, but also assess special education knowledge of the participants.

To ensure the interview questions were aligned with the research questions, with Sage IRB approval, the interview questions were reviewed for feedback by a panel of three experts who provided insightful feedback. The panel of experts included: (a) an assistant superintendent for pupil personnel services with 40 years experience as an educator, (b) a retired special

education administrator, and (c) Dr. Patricia McHatton; all of whom had an extensive background and understanding of special education. In addition, three interviews were piloted with nonparticipating interviewees. Seidman (2006) urged researchers to pilot a small number of participants to learn whether or not the research structure is appropriate for the study as envisioned. Seidman (2006) also wrote that researchers will come to grips with some of the practical aspects of establishing access, making contact, and conducting the interview. Upon completion of the piloted interviews, the structure of the interview protocol was more appropriate as the interview questions were more aligned with the research questions. The interview questions were categorized into six sections that corresponded with the six research questions. Data collected from the three piloted interviews were destroyed upon completion of the interviews. The interview questions were revised and resubmitted to the IRB for final approval.

The final interview protocol (Appendix E) includes 38 research questions organized into six categories: (a) preparation, (b) experience, (c) acquiring of knowledge, (d) accountability regulations, and (e) district-type. In particular, the interview questions focus on the impact of preparation and experience related to instructional leadership for students with disabilities.

## Data Collection

A phenomenological approach for the study was utilized to better understand common experiences in order to develop practices or policies (Creswell, 2007). Open-ended questions were asked to focus attention on gathering data that would lead to a textural and structural description of experiences, and providing a better understanding of the common experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2007). The study was designed to elicit themes that would lead to a greater understanding about how novice elementary principals acquired critical knowledge

related to instructional leadership for students with disabilities. Creswell (2007) recommended data collection procedures implemented within this study.

> The researcher attends to locating a site or person to study; gaining access to and building rapport at the site or with the individual; sampling purposefully using one or more of the many approaches to sampling in qualitative research; collecting information through many forms, such as interviews, observations, documents, and audiovisual materials and newer forms emerging in the literature; establishing approaches for recording information such as the use of interview or observational protocols; anticipating and addressing field issues ranging from access to ethical concerns; and developing a system for storing and handling the databases (Creswell, 2007, p. 144).

Interviews were scheduled once principals indicated they were willing to participate and had reviewed and signed the consent form. All interviews took place at a mutually agreeable time and location and at the convenience of the research subjects. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with nine participants and four were conducted via a telephone interview at their request. The requests to conduct telephone interviews were made due to limited time during the school day and it allowed interviewees to be interviewed in the comfort of their homes. No significant differences between face-to-face and telephone interviews were noted.

All interviews lasted for approximately one hour. All participants were asked questions regarding their background and knowledge of special education. The interviews were recorded using a digital audio recorder and then transcribed. The transcriber signed a confidentiality agreement guaranteeing confidentiality and that copies of the digital recording and transcriptions would be destroyed after the transcription was completed (Appendix F). Real names were not used when data were recorded, transcribed, or reported. After each recording, the data were sent

to the approved transcriber. Once each recording was transcribed, the data were sent to the researcher and stored on a password-protected laptop and desktop computer. All transcriptions were e-mailed to the participants within 24 hours of receiving the transcription. Research subjects were asked to ensure that the intent of their responses were accurate. If after 10 days the participants did not respond, the researcher either sent an e-mail or called the participants to confirm they were in agreement with their transcribed statements. All respondents reviewed their transcript and reported they were accurate. In one case, the respondent wanted additional reassurance that the information would remain confidential after seeing his/her words in print. Once reassured that all information would remain confidential, approval of the transcript was granted.

Once the accuracy of each transcription was verified, the researcher began analyzing the data, categorizing the responses, and identifying themes. Transcriptions from the interviews have not been included in the reference section of this dissertation to maintain the confidentiality of participants and their school district. Hard copies of data were shredded at the completion of the dissertation. Electronic data were deleted into the electronic trashcan and emptied at the completion of the dissertation.

## Data Validity and Reliability

Validity and reliability are both important aspects of any research study. The researcher ensured that the data collected were valid and reliable through a variety of procedures.

According to Creswell (2009), qualitative validity means that the researcher checks for the accuracy of the findings by employing certain procedures. One procedure was to ensure alignment between the research questions and interview questions. This was accomplished by having a panel review the interview questions. The panel included a current and a retired special

education administrator, and a university professor who conducted research involving gifted and special education. Due to the experiences and backgrounds of the panel, the three members provided a balance of experience in the field of special education and the theoretical perspective of a university professor who had experience as a researcher. The three members of the panel reviewed the questions and provided feedback to validate them for appropriateness. The interview questions were revised several times to ensure validity.

In order to ensure reliability of the data, the audio recordings were transcribed. Transcriptions were returned to each participant to review for the accuracy. The procedure of checking transcripts to make sure they did not contain obvious mistakes was employed (as cited in Creswell, 2009). Once all 13 transcriptions were reviewed and approved, the data were analyzed and coded to determine emergent themes. The researcher read each transcript several times to get a general sense of the data collected. Next, the data were divided into segments of information. Each segment of information was assigned a code. Codes were then continually reduced to decrease overlap and redundancy. Information that did not support or confirm the emergent themes was also documented. Finally, all major themes were identified and no new information could be added to the list of themes or to the detail of existing themes.

Another procedure implemented to ensure reliability was though triangulation. According to Merriam (2009), triangulation involves using multiple sources of data to confirm emerging findings, or themes. In this study, multiple sources of data included obtaining different perspectives from 13 participants from different New York State counties, school districts, and community district types. This process involved corroborating evidence from different sources to shed light on a theme or perspective (Creswell, 2007). The patterns that emerged from multiple sources of data enhanced the validity, reliability, and credibility of this study.

## Researcher Bias

Another validation strategy employed in this study was identifying any biases or assumptions that may impact the inquiry (as cited in Creswell, 2007). Creswell (2007) recommended the researcher comment on past experiences, biases, prejudices, and orientations that have likely shaped the interpretation and approach of the study.

This researcher believes that building leaders play a critical role in the life of all students, and in particular, students with disabilities, and it is critical that novice building leaders have an understanding of the educational needs of students with disabilities. Having been a special education teacher, Committee on Special Education (CSE) chairperson, and now a special education administrator, this researcher has and continues to work closely with principals over the past 15 years.

The researcher hoped to better understand how elementary principals acquired critical knowledge regarding special education instructional leadership. Bias was minimized by standardizing the data-collection process. The interview questions were reviewed by the panel of experts and revised based upon their feedback. In addition, three interviews were piloted with nonparticipating interviewees. Data reported in chapter four represents a balanced view of the responses to the interview questions. In conducting this study, the researcher was able to let themes emerge without being influenced by her personal experiences.

## Delimitations and Limitations

Delimitations were choices made by the researcher that limit the scope of the study. The researcher designed the study to include novice elementary principals. The term "novice principals" is defined in this study as those having one to five years of experience. Participants without any special education teaching certifications were selected for this study in order to gain

understanding of special education knowledge from those without formal special education training. Principals were solicited from a small geographic area in New York State to allow for face-to-face interviews.

Limitations were outcomes that arose that were not intended as part of the original design of the study. Due to the limited number of candidates who met the criterion for this study within 10 New York counties, the 13 respondents had the proper background and were willing to participate in this study. The research subjects were both male and female; 10 of the participants were male and three were female. Although the majority of principals were male, there did not appear to be any major differences between the responses of males and females.

It was not anticipated that out of the 13 participants, five interviewees were working on their doctorate in educational leadership and one participant had already obtained a doctorate in educational leadership. The five research subjects working on completing their doctorate and the one principal with a doctorate do not represent the typical pattern of most principals as principals are only required to have a master's degree and administrative certification or two master's degrees. The participant with the highest degree in education, or those in the process of receiving the highest degree in education, may have different viewpoints as they have taken more graduate coursework than what is required to become a principal. In spite of these principals having more education than most principals, these principals still considered themselves inadequately prepared for instructional leadership for students with disabilities.

The researcher originally intended to select two elementary principals from two different community district types within three counties. However, due to the limited number of participants with the background required for the study, the study includes 13 principals from seven New York State counties, 11 school districts, and five district types. A total of 230

elementary principals from 10 New York counties were solicited. Out of the 10 counties, only 13 principals were willing to participate and met the criterion of this study.

## Summary

In order to fully understand the impact of preparation and experience on instructional leadership for students with disabilities, this study examined to what extent elementary principals with at least one, but no more than five years experience were prepared for instructional leadership for students with disabilities. A qualitative phenomenological research study was the strategy of inquiry selected to study a small group of subjects to develop patterns and relationships of meaning (Creswell, 2009).

A total of 13 principals from seven New York State counties, 11 school districts, and five district types participated in the study. Each participant had at least one full year of experience, but no more than five years, as elementary principal. In addition, the novice elementary principals did not have a formal background in special education, and therefore did not hold any special education teaching certifications.

The researcher created an interview protocol for this study based upon the structure of an interview survey created by McHatton et al. (2010). To ensure the interview questions were aligned with the research questions, the interview questions were reviewed for feedback by a panel of three experts. Three interviews were piloted with nonparticipating interviewees. The final interview protocol consisted of 38 interview questions.

All 13 interviews were transcribed and checked for accuracy by the participants. The data were analyzed and coded to determine emergent themes. Although the researcher has 15 years of experience working in special education and working with numerous principals, the

researcher was able to let themes emerge without being influenced by her personal experiences. Chapter four contains the presentation of the data.

# Chapter IV. Findings

## Introduction

The intent of this study was to investigate how preservice training and experience has impacted elementary principals' understanding and implementation of instructional leadership for students with disabilities. The research indicates that novice principals are not adequately prepared to provide instructional leadership for students with disabilities (Goor & Schwenn, 1997; McHatton et al., 2010). As a result, interview questions were designed to obtain a deeper understanding of novice principals' preservice preparation and understanding of special education as it relates to instructional leadership for students with disabilities. Themes indentified within this chapter were based on the results of the interviews.

The research questions were as follows:

Question 1: How has preservice coursework prepared principals with one-to-five years of experience to design, lead, manage, and implement programs for students with disabilities?

Question 2: How has on-the-job experience prepared elementary principals with one-to-five years of experience to design, lead, manage, and implement programs for students with disabilities?

Question 3: In what ways do elementary principals with one-to-five years of experience acquire updated information relevant to instructional leadership for students with disabilities?

Question 4: In what ways do elementary principals with one-to-five years of experience assess the success of programs for students with disabilities?

Question 5: How do elementary principals with one-to-five years experience use their knowledge of the special education regulations to best serve the needs of students with disabilities?

Question 6: To what extent does service in varying district types impact principals' knowledge of special education as it relates to instructional leadership for students with disabilities?

In order to answer these questions, the researcher developed 38 interview questions that provided insight into how preservice training and experience has impacted elementary principals' understanding and implementation of instructional leadership for students with disabilities. A total of 13 principals were selected from seven New York State counties, 11 school districts, and five district types. As stated earlier in this study, pseudonyms were created for each participant in order to protect his or her identity. Each principal provided the researcher with information regarding their preservice training and experiences related to instructional leadership for students with disabilities.

Each participant selected for this study had at least one full year of experience, but no more than five years of experience as an elementary principal. Principals without any special education teaching certifications were selected. The interviewees described their preservice coursework and experiences related to instructional leadership for students with disabilities. From the 13 research subjects, five interviewees were working on their doctorate in educational leadership and one interviewee had already obtained a doctorate in educational leadership.

**The Impact of Preparation on Special Education Instructional Leadership**

The first research question addressed how preservice coursework prepared elementary principals with one-to-five years of experience to design, lead, manage, and implement programs for students with disabilities. The 13 interviewees were asked four questions related to their preservice preparation for instructional leadership for students with disabilities.

**Adequacy of Preparation**

> Unfortunately I feel like I was woefully unprepared, because in my…going into my fifth year now, I still feel like there's so much more that I need to know. I spend… I probably spend forty percent of my time studying and learning about special education law compliance and implementation, staffing, the continuum, you know. Student discipline, certainly I learned the hard way with that one. (Principal G, Principal Interview)

As was reported in the literature review (McHatton et al., 2010), many principals feel inadequately prepared for their roles in the administration of special education programs in their schools and may be unaware of the extent of their responsibilities, or they may delegate their duties to other personnel in the building. The researcher wanted to determine whether or not elementary principals believed that their educational leadership preparation program adequately prepared them for instructional leadership for students with disabilities. The findings revealed that 12 out of 13 elementary principals did not feel adequately prepared for special education instructional leadership in their administrative preparation program.

When asked to indicate the number of special education related courses that were included in their educational leadership preparation program, the responses included: none, one, maybe one, and two. Seven interviewees reported that they did not take any special education related courses while enrolled in their educational leadership preparation programs.

Table 2.

*Summary of Special Education Coursework*

| None | Maybe One | One | Two |
|---|---|---|---|
| 7 | 1 | 3 | 2 |

Principal I did not feel adequately prepared for instructional leadership for students with disabilities from preservice coursework even though two special education courses were embedded in his/her educational leadership preparation program. The two courses covered special education law and a general overview of special education. Not having had any background in special education, Principal I reported that the two courses provided helpful background information upon entering administration. Principal I reported that although outdated, the 700 page binder containing information about special education and special education law still serves as reference material. Principal I described the value of entering administration with some background in special education:

> And I'll be honest with you, my background…I was a general education classroom teacher. I had no interest in learning about special education, any kind of certification or anything like that. I wanted to work with special education teachers and help kids obviously, but for my own skill set I had no formal training in it whatsoever. So when I did make the jump to administration, it was nice I had something. Was it enough? No. But something is better than nothing, I think. (Principal I, Principal Interview)

Principal B was the only interviewee who felt adequately prepared for instructional leadership for students with disabilities as a result of preservice coursework. Principal B had also taken two valuable special education courses during his/her educational leadership preparation program. Like Principal I, Principal B took two courses that covered special education law and a general overview of special education. Principal B indicated that a full range of topics was covered in the two courses, everything from early identification of a disability, early intervention, the different categories of disabilities, how to use data to make informed decisions, and how to correctly and accurately collect data. In addition, Principal B learned about everything from required forms for parents, reporting requirements, timely notices, structure of the Committee on Special Education (CSE), and continuum of special education services. When asked, Principal B explained how valuable those two special education courses were:

> Absolutely. Absolutely. And especially the legal course. I would say that the courses on special education gave me breadth and understanding of how to work with special education students, because it was, in some cases, disability specific, giving me specific strategies or models of programs that may be beneficial to different types of children with different disabilities. But most of all my legal course gave me the nuts and the bolts of how to operate within special education law and 504. (Principal B, Principal Interview)

In contrast, Principal G, who did not have any background in special education and had not taken any special education coursework, indicated that after four years as an elementary principal, s/he recently learned what a continuum of special education services means. Both Principal B and Principal I took two courses that covered special education law and a general

overview of special education during their preservice coursework. Principal B felt adequately prepared for instructional leadership for students with disabilities and Principal I did not. Principal B was the only interviewee who indicated that preservice coursework was taught by former administrators, and felt there was great benefit from courses being taught by former superintendents, directors, and principals. In addition, Principal B was the only respondent to report a required emphasis on special education during the administrative internship. Principal B explained:

> There were certain things that I needed to do, tasks that I guess you would say that the program had me complete, which was to develop an IEP, you know, interview a CSE chair, and a director of special education. (Principal B, Principal Interview)

The interviewees were also asked to highlight any special education-related topics that were embedded into any other courses within their educational leadership preparation program. With one exception, all principals indicated that some aspects of special education law were discussed within other courses, such as a basic educational law course. None of the interviewees described any courses or topics related to instructional best practices for students with disabilities within their educational leadership preparation program. All interviewees who indicated that they had some exposure to special education law within other courses found the information to be helpful in their positions as elementary principal. However, the biggest complaint by participants was that there was not enough information taught about special education, even when there was some exposure to topics such as special education law.

When asked if anyone ever advised them to take courses related to special education in their educational leadership preparation program, with the exception of one interviewee, everyone said no. The only interviewee advised to take a special education course, special

education law, was enrolled in an educational leadership preparation program outside of New York State.

### Summary of the Impact of Preparation on Special Education Instructional Leadership

The first research question addressed how preservice coursework prepared principals with one-to-five years of experience, to design, lead, manage, and implement programs for students with disabilities. With the exception of Principal B, all other interviewees stated that their preservice coursework did not adequately prepare them to design, lead, manage, and implement programs for students with disabilities. Principal B explained that the course content, the administrators who taught the courses, and the requirements for the administrative internship all contributed to adequately preparing him/her to design, lead, manage, and implement programs for students with disabilities. The administrators teaching the courses provided real-life examples and experiences that Principal B found to be very helpful in understanding the application of the course content.

Except for one principal, everyone indicated that special education law was embedded within other courses and they appreciated learning about special education law. The biggest concern expressed by the participants in this study was that there was not enough information taught about special education during their educational leadership preparation program.

## The Role of Experience as a Source for Special Education Learning

The second research question addressed how on-the-job experiences prepared elementary principals with one-to-five years of experience to design, lead, manage, and implement programs for students with disabilities. Although the participants selected for the study had one to five years of experience as an elementary principal, their backgrounds and experiences varied greatly. None of the participants had been employed as a principal for more than five years. However,

nine research subjects had some experience working in administrative positions other than a principalship; for example, dean of students or assistant principal. Their current position as elementary principal was the first principalship for all of the participants.

Table 3.

*Summary of Years as Elementary Principal*

| One and a Half | Two | Two and a Half | Three and a Half | Four | Four and a Half |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 3 | 1 | 4 | 1 | 2 | 2 |

The researcher wanted to learn more about how on-the-job experiences prepared these elementary principals to design, lead, manage, and implement programs for students with disabilities.

**Preparation from Previous On-the-Job Experiences**

Interviewees were asked to describe their on-the-job experiences, either teaching or in previous administrative positions, that prepared them to design, lead, manage and implement programs for students with disabilities. Responses of experiences included: learning in previous positions, previous teaching positions, attending CSE meetings, being a member of the child study team, 504 chairperson, instructional coach, working with great teachers, working with a student who was blind, administrator at Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES), working in a residential facility, and working in a small school. Principal B explained the

significance of working in a small district: "As a building administrator, I'm employed in a small school. This is a one building school district of three hundred seventy children and so I'm intricately involved in all matters that are special education."

Out of the thirteen interviewees, six respondents described their experiences as general education coteachers and how that experience was helpful in preparing them for designing, leading, managing and implementing programs for students with disabilities. Principal J explained:

> I taught for, like I said, I taught for eleven years. And when I first started teaching in a city public school I was provided with the inclusion classroom. And at that time, inclusion was fairly new. And I worked with a special education teacher who used to… she was used to pulling her kids out into the hallway and that's where they taught. And I thought that was just a horrific experience for kids and teachers and it wasn't very friendly to my students if I kicked them out to the hallway. So we sort of sat together and I said I want to coteach, I want you; I think you have strengths, you know, I have weaknesses, I think we can make this work. And it really became an experience that I loved. I mean we learned from one another, whether it was me learning from the kids or the kids learning from me, and me learning from my coteacher. That was an experience that was invaluable to me in that it just kind of ignited sort of a passion for special education kids and kids who are struggling. (Principal J, Principal Interview)

Principal E was hired as an administrator in a BOCES program for one year and did not have any exposure to or experience with special education in any capacity prior to being hired for the position. Principal E was surprised when s/he was hired for the position and described that experience as boot camp for learning about special education. Principal E explained:

> On my first day there, we had the padded room. So I thought, what the heck did I get myself into? What are you doing here? And it was a…to be honest with you, it was a part of the population that really as a regular education teacher…I mean I was really removed. It's a part of the population you didn't really know existed in education. Whatever happened to those kids, I don't know. I didn't know that there were buildings that had padded rooms that people came in and did take downs of students and put them in those rooms. And I don't know that a college study could have prepared you for that. (Principal E, Principal Interview)

Experiences, either through previous teaching or administrative positions, was the most frequently reported mechanism for preparing novice elementary principals to design, lead, manage and implement programs for students with disabilities. For example, Principal J became passionate about working with students with disabilities as a coteacher, while Principal E was forced to quickly learn about special education when hired to supervise special education programs.

**Professional Development**

Interviewees were asked if they felt they needed additional training or professional development related to special education and, if so, in what areas. All interviewees reported that they do require additional training or professional development related to special education. When asked what areas specifically they felt they needed additional training or professional development in, responses included: Response to Intervention (RTI), prereferral strategies, special education in general, autism, programs that are effective, legal issues, 504, syndromes, how to evaluate all special education staff, modification of curriculum, and working with students with emotional disabilities. Principal D wanted to know more about how to evaluate

certain members of the special education department, such as related service providers. Principal D explained:

> I'll tell you the area that I really feel administrators need support…it's with the evaluation piece. If you're walking in, I think if you go in most classrooms, you can kind of identify some good practices of evaluations and instruction and what's going on. And I feel like even if I were at a high school or a middle school and I walked into a foreign language class and I didn't speak the language, I could have a pretty decent idea of, well…this is going well. Where I don't feel that so much is with speech therapy. I walk into speech, occupational therapy, physical therapy, and, you know, I'm lost. (Principal D, Principal Interview)

Principal G described a desire to learn more about special education in general.

> What I feel I need is time to spend learning more about special education in general. I feel that with time and with an expert at my disposal to answer questions, maybe in a seminar format, I might…that might just be the thing. We don't need lectures, certainly. We need some practical experience but we need some authentic study of the issues surrounding special education, time to digest it and synthesize it and to make sense of it all. (Principal G, Principal Interview)

All of the interviewees, including Principal B who felt adequately prepared for instructional leadership for students with disabilities, indicated that they needed additional training or professional development related to special education. Regardless of preservice training or experience, feeling adequately or inadequately prepared, none of the novice elementary principals viewed themselves as special education experts and desired more

professional development in the area of special education. The special education topics desired for professional development depended upon the needs of the students in their schools.

**Experience as a Source of Special Education Learning**

All interviewees were asked what had the greatest impact on their understanding of special education: preservice coursework, experience, on-the-job training and/or professional development. With the exception of two interviewees, all interviewees indicated that direct experience, either as a teacher or as an administrator, was the most common source of learning about special education. Principal D described learning about special education through daily experiences as an administrator:

> Well, I would say my on-the-job training has also in part turned into professional development and with working with my colleagues. That really has had the biggest impact on me. I mean, walking into this building and kind of jumping into the special education services that are offered here, and then dealing with the situations as they come up and kind of getting help as needed to work through these, has been the most important part. (Principal D, Principal Interview)

Principal M also explained learning about special education through on-the-job experiences as an administrator:

> You learn from being put into these building level positions where you really need to know your students, what are their needs, what are their classifications, their curriculum, and their modifications. I've had to learn what is the special education process, the role of the teachers, the teaching assistants, and hearing from parents of these students. That has been the most valuable for me. (Principal M, Principal Interview)

Two interviewees, Principals A and B, did not report direct experience, either through teaching or as an administrator, as their sources of learning about special education. Principal A indicated that being a parent of a student with a disability had the greatest impact on his/her understanding of special education. Parent A explained:

> Well, you know, as I said, I'm the parent of a special education child, so that, I think, had the most impact. And then taking that, which developed a great passion in me, and implementing it into my practice, I think had the most impact. Going back to my own son, you know, I can remember he was in third grade, and this was before the tests had begun and so there was no third grade test but there was going to be a fourth grade test. And the teacher said to me, well, you know, he's never going to pass that fourth grade test. And he was in third grade. And I said to her, I don't care, the test doesn't define my son, and I don't want you to define him by a test. And, you know, I stand by that. (Principal A, Principal Interview)

Principal B reported that the special education legal course had the greatest impact on his/her understanding of special education. Principal B explained:

> My biggest help was to have that legal course, you know, the legal course and having the legal book right next to my…right next to my computer here. I feel, like, by understanding the laws and the requirements, that it has really helped me to be effective. (Principal B, Principal Interview)

Experiences, either currently on-the-job or past experiences, were reported as the most common source of learning about special education. Experiences that assisted in learning about special education were learned through teaching, prior administrative positions or both.

### Summary of the Impact of Experiences Related to Special Education Instructional Leadership

The second research question addressed how on-the-job experiences have prepared elementary principals with one-to-five years of experience to design, lead, manage, and implement programs for students with disabilities. Interviewees described how their previous experiences as a teacher, administrator, student, or parent, impacted their understanding of special education.

The majority of the interviewees, 11 out of 13, indicated that direct experience, either as a teacher, administrator, or both, were the most critical sources of learning about special education. One interviewee, Principal E, described an uncomfortable situation in which s/he was hired to supervise special education programs and did not have any understanding of special education. Although uncomfortable, the situation was a great opportunity to learn about special education and Principal E was ultimately grateful for that experience.

### Acquiring OnGoing Knowledge Related to Special Education Instructional Leadership

The third research question addressed the ways in which elementary principals with one-to-five years of experience acquire updated information relevant to instructional leadership for students with disabilities. The researcher learned that the interviewees collaborate with special education experts and rely on others for receiving updated information relevant to instructional leadership for students with disabilities. Respondents obtain updated information relevant to instructional leadership for students with disabilities from: special education administrators, teachers, school psychologists, colleagues, Committee on Special Education (CSE) chairperson, and friends.

**Collaborative Decision Making in Special Education**

All interviewees reported that they were the building-based administrator responsible for the daily oversight of special education within their building. With the exception of two, all interviewees collaborate with a special education administrator when supervising special education programs, teachers, and staff. Principals B and G work in small school districts where there are no special education administrators with whom to share responsibility for the oversight of special education programs, teachers, and staff. However, both Principals B and G work closely with a CSE chairperson. In these cases, CSE chair people are not administrators and, therefore, do not work in a supervisory capacity. The interviewees who collaborate with special education administrators described the importance of this collaborative relationship. Collaboration is an essential aspect of supervising special education programs, teachers, and staff. Principal M described the value of collaboration and the importance of relying on the expertise of the special education leaders. The collaborative relationship that exists between building leaders and special education administrators was reported as critical since as all of interviewees did not view themselves as the knowledgeable experts regarding special education related issues.

All interviewees were asked whether or not they had the power to create, change, or eliminate special education programs in their school building. All of the interviewees, with the exception of Principal G, indicated that program decisions for special education are done collaboratively with at least one other person. Principal G does not have a special education administrator with whom to collaborate and was the only interviewee who reported having the power to create, change, or eliminate special education programs. Principal B also does not have

a special education administrator with whom to collaborate, but develops special education programming collaboratively with the CSE chairperson and superintendent.

Principal J discussed his/her collaborative relationship with the special education director in the district. As a result of their collaborative relationship, special education programs were described as very effective. Principal J explained an aspect of collaboration with the special education director:

> Every Wednesday morning for an hour and a half, the special education director and I have a meeting with special education staff. This is the second year we've been doing it. And we meet for an hour and a half and we talk about whether it's kids with IEPs or kids that are on our radar for academic intervention services. (Principal J, Principal Interview)

The majority, 12 out of 13 principals, reported that they contribute to decisions involving creating, changing, or eliminating special education programs, indicating that programming is driven by the individual needs of the students. One interviewee, Principal I, doesn't have the ultimate authority in creating new special education programs, but has been influential in expanding the coteaching model.

> I sought out our district's director of special education and just inquired as to the possibility of expanding the coteaching program beyond second grade, simply because I loved the model at the kindergarten--two level, and I thought well, why just make it primary based, can we breach into that intermediate real? So I reached out to our director of special education and she loved it, and boy, did it take off. In September of that year, I had two more cotaught classrooms. I do have to go to the director of special education. So we have a pretty good relationship, she trusts my judgment. But if I saw

> something that wasn't working for whatever reason or if I needed more of something for whatever reason, yeah, I would have to go to her. So I don't have the final say but I do have some input, which is nice. (Principal I, Principal Interview)

In summary, all interviewees reported that they were the building-based administrator responsible for the daily oversight of special education within their building. Two interviewees were the only supervisors of special education programs, teachers, and staff because there are no special education administrators with which to supervise. All interviewees, except for Principal G, do not have the power to create, change, or eliminate special education programs in their school building although they have input and can make recommendations. Principal G has the authority to create, change, or eliminate special education programs because there are no special education administrators to assist with these decisions. Principal B collaborates with the CSE chairperson and the superintendent when making decisions about creating, changing, or eliminating special education programs. Collaboration between building leaders and special education leaders is important for supervision of special education staff and the development of special education programs.

**Relying on Others for Information Related to Special Education**

When asked to describe their most valuable resource for information related to special education, interviewees responded: teacher leaders, special education administrators, psychologists, special education teachers, colleagues, consultants, a law book, and a friend. All interviewees reported that they rely on others to educate themselves about special education and do not view themselves as special education experts. Principal M explained:

> There's so much I don't know. But I also, again, rely on the experts around me to fill the gap. They have those roles, they know a lot, and I rely on them to lead in this area.

> There's so much I still need to do, it comes down to part of it being time. I don't have the time to devote to this area at this time. I'm very comfortable; I'm very pleased with the expertise around me to lead this area. So it's something that I would like to learn and gain more knowledge on, but I'm in no hurry to do it because we have a very…we have a system that is working well. (Principal M, Principal Interview)

Although all interviewees reported they must rely on others to educate themselves about ongoing information related to special education, not all interviewees were comfortable relying on the special education experts. Three interviewees reported that they have taught themselves about special education related topics as their discomfort stemmed from feeling inadequately prepared for instructional leadership for students with disabilities. Without building leaders receiving the proper foundational knowledge, dependency develops between the building leader and the special education experts. Principal C explained the discomfort that dependency on others brings:

> I do learn a lot in my Instruction Study Team (IST) and CSE meetings and in working with our elementary special education administrator, but I don't like to be dependent on that either. We have a strong special education department here in the building, but I …certainly wouldn't mind learning more about how to support those teachers working with children with disabilities, curriculum-wise. (Principal C, Principal Interview)

Interviewees were asked where they learned about the federal mandate, Response to Intervention (RTI) and how the mandate impacts both general and special education instructional practices. With the exception of three, interviewees reported learning about RTI from: workshops, a special education administrator, conferences, on the job, reading, and while

working in a previous school district. Three interviewees reported teaching themselves about RTI. Not being adequately informed about RTI had a negative impact on Principal G. Principal G explained:

> I learned about RTI during my first interview for administration and, to be honest with you, I lost that interview. And I went back and studied for myself, and I looked up any RTI plan that I could find. And then I began to see the links to special education. (Principal G, Principal Interview)

Interviewees were asked if they, or someone else, provide teachers and staff with ongoing professional development related to teaching students with disabilities. Every interviewee reported that they, themselves, do not provide teachers and staff with any professional development related to teaching students with disabilities as they do not view themselves as the special education experts. Ongoing professional development related to special education is provided by: district office administration, consultants, the school psychologist, professional development office, and conferences both in and out of the school district. Principal C collaborated with a consultant to enhance the coteaching model. Principal C explained:

> Certainly I work with teachers, I evaluate teachers. Most of the trainings that I provide in the building are based more around the routines and the different technology and things that we need to do there. The district provides a lot of staff development and in-house staff development too. And we contract out through BOCES and through other agencies as well. So we constantly have ongoing professional development opportunities for teachers that they can sign up for on a voluntary basis. Another example of that, though, over the last year and a half, we have been working with a teacher from central New York who's really kind of become our guru in differentiated

> instruction and coteaching. And he's been working with a building at a time. He'll work with a cluster team at a specific grade level in a building for a couple of weeks, talk to them, work through the process with them, how they teach a lesson. They plan a lesson, and then invite all the cluster teachers at that grade level to come in and do kind of a fish bowl opportunity. It's been very nice. We just had that in our school. He came in and worked with one of our special education teachers and a second grade teacher. And I think it was a very rewarding experience for them to help them to stop and think about the decisions that they were making when they were planning curriculum. And again, all the second grade teachers from the district came, the cluster teachers from the district came, and they watched the lesson. (Principal C, Principal Interview)

None of the elementary principals within this study provide special education related professional development to staff. Three interviewees reported having input regarding topics related to special education, but did not actually administer the training. Ongoing professional development related to special education is provided both in and out of the district by someone other than the principals.

**Summary of Acquiring Knowledge Related to Special Education**

The third research question addressed the ways in which elementary principals with one-to-five years of experience acquire updated information relevant to instructional leadership for students with disabilities. Collaboration between building leaders and special education leaders is an important aspect of acquiring updated information relevant to instructional leadership for students with disabilities. Principal J described the value of a strong collaborative relationship between a principal and the district special education administrator. Principal J indicated that

effective special education programs are related to strong collaborative relationships with special education administrators.

Decisions related to creating, changing, or eliminating special education programs are made collaboratively with at least one other person, primarily a special education administrator. Only one interviewee was responsible for making special education program decisions alone because there were no special education administrators with whom to collaborate.

All interviewees rely on others to obtain updated information relevant to instructional leadership for students with disabilities. When building leaders do not receive the proper foundational knowledge related to special education, dependency develops between the building leader and the special education experts. Principal C was not comfortable with depending on others for special education information.

Three interviewees reported that they have taught themselves about special education related topics, in particular, RTI. Collaboration and motivation to learn are both essential components of building leadership.

## Special Education Programming

The fourth research question addressed the ways that elementary principals with one-to-five years of experience assess the success of programs for students with disabilities. In order to develop an understanding of how the interviewees assess the success of their programs for students with disabilities, the researcher asked questions related to expectations, accountability, and understanding of instructional best practices for students with disabilities.

### Expectations and Accountability for Students with Disabilities

Each interviewee described his or her expectations for students with disabilities regarding passing the state assessments. The interviewees described how they communicate their

assessment expectations for students with disabilities with their teachers and staff. Both internal and external motivation was described as having an impact on assessment expectations for students with disabilities.

**Assessment Expectations for Students with Disabilities**

Interviewees were asked to describe their expectations for students with disabilities in relation to passing the New York State assessments and responses included: the assessments are unfair, same expectations as nonclassified students, each child should reach his or her maximum potential, not too concerned, realistic for some but not others, high expectations, and for students to do their best. Four interviewees reported having high expectations for students with disabilities passing the New York State assessments. Principal G described it this way:

> Well, I believe in that other cliché, that all children can learn at high levels. And my expectations for special education students, depending on where they are on the continuum, I expect them to be treated just as fairly as all general education students. I expect them to learn to their full potential, whatever that might be, and I do want to see results. I want to make sure that my special education staff is accountable. And sometimes they have to work much harder because, as we know, students still have to take the standardized assessments. And I want those students passing those assessments. And in my opinion, there are only very few students who cannot pass those assessments with the right instruction. (Principal G, Principal Interview)

Principal M felt the state assessments were unfair for students with disabilities because all children learn differently and at different rates. Principal M indicated that although New York State attempts to provide some modifications for children, it is still not enough for some children. Principal M stated that children are required to take exams and that requirement may

not be what is best for them and the New York State assessments are not the umbrella for all student learning.

Three interviewees explained that their expectations for students passing the state assessments depend on the student's disability. Principal D explained:

> And I do have some kids who, you know, for multiple reasons are in the regular education classroom, and they might have a one-to-one working with them and we're trying to modify the curriculum dramatically enough to meet their needs, but I don't expect them to meet or exceed the New York State standard on an assessment, I really don't. It's not a realistic goal…to have that focus I think would really not be honoring that child and what they need. (Principal D, Principal Interview)

Four interviewees explained that their expectations for students with disabilities are the same as they are for general education students, that is, "to do their best." Principal J is not too concerned about how students with disabilities perform on state assessments as they are one test, one day in their life. Principal J would much rather be concerned about their happiness, whether they are learning, and whether or not they are making a year's growth in a year's time. Principal J explained:

> With the state testing, what we do is we take the good practices that are good for special education students and we kind of put them out there for all students. So whether that's, you know, testing in a smaller environment…we have theater lighting to minimize the anxiety from the fluorescent lights. We have kids that sit on the exercise balls. I allow all kids to chew gum in school. All of those kinds of things that we know help kids with anxiety issues, I allow that at testing times for state testing. (Principal J, Principal Interview)

Interviewees described their varied expectations for students with disabilities in relation to passing the New York State assessments.

**State Assessments and Their Impact on Accountability**

Interviewees were asked if increased accountability for student achievement had impacted their motivation to learn more about special education instructional best practices. Out of the 13 interviewees, 8 reported that increased accountability had not impacted their motivation to learn more about special education instructional best practices. Interviewees described a desire to find balance between accountability and meeting each child's individualized needs. In Principal C's response, s/he referenced the book, *Drive* by Daniel Pink. Principal C described extrinsic motivators as having an opposite effect on motivation. Principal C explained:

> We are reading *Drive* right now. So increased accountability does the opposite for one's motivation, internal motivation to learn more. And that said, I am very motivated to learn more about things. You know, I think as a professional, there's so many things that I need to learn to become the type of principal that I want to be. (Principal C, Principal Interview)

Interviewees described how internal and external motivation has impacted their desire to learn more about special education.

**Internal Motivation Related to Student Achievement**

The eight principals who indicated that accountability had not impacted their motivation to learn more about special education instructional best practices described how internal motivation had contributed to their desire to assist students with disabilities perform their best. Principal F explained:

> I think the new political pressures that are being put on administrators for data are

irrelevant to me, just because I've always been about the data. So this new initiative is… for me personally, it doesn't affect me. As a whole I think it's great. I think we need to not use anecdotal data. I'm more of a quantitative person, not a qualitative person. And I'd like to have logic behind our decisions. So it's important, but at the same time, we need to deal with realities. You know, just because a school doesn't make AYP doesn't mean good things aren't happening. You've got to consider the populations you're dealing with, you've got to consider the resources that you have available, not just here but in other school districts as well. There's a lot to consider. There's a lot of variables. The way we are evaluated, the whole system could be ripped apart. And, you know, it's good to have a baseline, but if we just made that our sole source or bible, we are going to lose sight of what we are doing here. So there needs to be a balance, there needs to be a balance of what we are doing. (Principal F, Principal Interview)

Principal A also had not been motivated by increased accountability to learn more about special education instructional best practices. Principal A explained:

I don't know that the increased accountability has impacted my motivation. I mean I'm motivated for the children, but I am motivated to continually find ways to improve student performance. What I'm careful of doing is…I'm assuming you're thinking of accountability as state tests, so what I'm careful is, you know…and I kind of alluded to this before, is that the state test is one way of demonstrating mastery. It can sometimes be very frustrating for children with special needs. So what I'm careful is to not put too much pressure on students or teachers that they feel that this is the one demonstration of who they are, what they mean. (Principal A, Principal Interview)

**External Motivation Related to Student Achievement**

Increased accountability has increased motivation to learn more about special education instructional best practices for Principal E. Principal E is a principal of a school in need of improvement for students with disabilities in the area of English Language Arts (ELA). Principal E explained:

> It's affected me. We, our school, in terms of our ELA, we were labeled in need of improvement for students with disabilities. I don't know in what grades or if it's in multiple grades. So that affected me just as a new principal. Obviously, I want to see us get off of that and improve. So it affected the way in which, well, one, in which we prepare for our tests. Not that you teach to the test, but in terms of the proctors for the test, I found out in a couple of instances that proctors weren't aware of giving the students the right modifications that we were supposed to give them. The student who was supposed to have the test read wasn't. So now, before the test, we sit down with everybody and we make sure that we try to use the same people every time. (Principal E, Principal Interview)

With the exception of one interviewee, novice elementary principals were not motivated by test performance to learn more about special education instructional best practices for students with disabilities. Increased accountability has not been the sole motivator in their desire to provide quality programs for students with disabilities.

**Principals Create a Culture of Academic Expectations for Students with Disabilities**

All interviewees were asked how they communicate academic expectations for students with disabilities to teachers and staff. Every principal identified the ways in which they create a culture of expectations for students with disabilities. Interviewees create a culture of academic

expectations by: demonstrating trust and respect, not providing test preparation, communication at faculty meetings, e-mail, conversations, meetings, and through teacher leaders. Communicating their beliefs with the entire school community is an important aspect of creating a culture of academic expectations for students with disabilities.

Principal H described communicating academic expectations for students with disabilities by eliminating test preparation from the curriculum. Principal H explained:

> We don't do test prep. When I got here last year there were test prep books. I got rid of them all. You know, you don't teach to the test, you teach the curriculum. So, you know, that piece really frustrated me when I got here. I'm like, oh my gosh, we're spending way too much time on that. So, you know, give them quality practices. And we're really spending a lot of time working on our reading instruction right now to build that up to a point where we don't need those test prep books and those terrible things that you spend the last month before a test focusing on when you should be really teaching them. So, I think that's one thing that, I've learned is you don't put a lot of pressure on people. And once that pressure is gone, they meet those standards and those benchmarks because they can. With the right support and the right guidance they can do that. (Principal H, Principal Interview).

Sharing academic expectations for students with disabilities at faculty meetings was reported by seven research subjects as the mechanism for expressing academic expectations for students with disabilities.

Principal F explained: "Faculty meetings or e-mail, you know, that's my direct correspondence with them. I've made the statement to the staff that we can be doing it better."

Principal J indicated that trust and respect are important contributors in creating a culture of academic expectations for students with disabilities. Principal J explained:

> That's not an easy job. I feel like over the four years that I've been here I've been able to do it. I think that it really starts with communication and trust. They knew coming in that I had seven years of inclusion experience, they knew how I felt about special education. There were conversations, probably my first year, where they were talking about pulling kids out or whatever. And I had a couple of nonnegotiables, and one of the nonnegotiables was that special education kids would not be taught in the hallway. So those kinds of things. Having respect for…the idea is having respect for special education teachers because they know so much about instruction. A lot of the things that are aboveboard now, differentiated instruction and all that, are things that special education teachers have been doing for years. (Principal J, Principal Interview)

Principal M reported that their work goes beyond state test scores; that what is most meaningful are the goals on the IEP that have been developed for that child and agreed upon by the parents. Principal K explains to faculty that a disability is either a condition or a diagnosis, but it is not an excuse. Communication with faculty is an important aspect of creating a culture of academic expectations for students with disabilities.

**Principals' Understanding of Instructional Best Practices**

Interviewees were asked to identify the most effective instructional practices for teaching students with disabilities and to indicate how they learned about those practices. Responses included: knowing the IEP, knowing the child's learning modality, good teaching, having a goal in mind, differentiated instruction, small group and one-on-one instruction, brainstorming as a team, use of manipulatives, visuals, good questioning techniques, use of formative assessments,

breaking down concepts, relationship building, instructional strategies, and utilizing preassessments.

Differentiated instruction was the most common response cited as the most effective instructional best practice for teaching students with disabilities as indicated by seven respondents. Three principals, including Principal B, expressed a clear understanding of what it means to differentiate instruction for students.

> The instructional strategies that I find most effective are the ones that I've ascertained best meet the needs of the student. So what we're going to do is that we are going to, you know, like the RTI model, we are going to prescreen, you know, preassess, see where the students are, where their strengths and weaknesses lie. And then once the weaknesses have been identified, we know what research-based, data-driven interventions can be implemented to help bolster, if that's such a word, their skills in that particular area. Again, we know that everything begins with appropriate classroom tier-one-level instruction. And so, I'm looking at a differentiated approach. I'm looking at best practices such as: modeling expectations clearly posted, think alouds, you know; think, share, pair type of instructional strategies, having a very student-centered environment, managing the environment. Carol Ann Tomlinson has taught us that differentiated instruction…you can differentiate content process or product, but the other component there is also you can differentiate the learning environment. And I think that that's something that's very important to special education students, just understanding their triggers. Are the lights too bright, do we need to dim those down? Is the room too cluttered, do we need to take some posters down? Do we need to change the color of the room, do we need to change the physical layout? You know, these are important aspects

there. And therapeutic crisis intervention teaches us to know our kids, understand their triggers, and eliminate them so that we are creating an environment of success for the children. (Principal B, Principal Interview)

Other principals, such as Principals L and K, were not able to articulate or describe effective instructional best practice for teaching students with disabilities. Principal L described a program, not an instructional best practice, as the most effective way to teach students with disabilities: "And that really has been through the coteaching model, in terms of the collaboration between a learning specialist with a content specialist." Principal K described instructional best practices for students with disabilities in this way:

> And as far as best practices go, I think it's having to keep the goal and the student in mind. I feel that you have to keep in mind what the end result is without it being detrimental to the student that you're trying to service. (Principal K, Principal Interview)

Although differentiated instruction was the most frequent response, not all of the interviewees answered the question with as much detail and depth as Principal B. It is important to note that Principal B was also the only interviewee who felt adequately prepared for instructional leadership for students with disabilities.

**Assessing the Success of Programs for Students with Disabilities**

Interviewees were asked how they ensure that the recommended services and programs developed at CSE meetings help students make progress and to meet their goals. Responses included: meetings with teachers, reviewing data, conversations, trust, personal interaction, on-going communication, classroom walk-throughs, managing the school environment, quarterly reports, and supervision. Reviewing data was indicated by four interviewees as a way to ensure

that students with disabilities are making progress and meeting their goals. These four interviewees described a shift from monitoring progress using qualitative data to a more, data-driven, quantitative approach. Each of these four interviewees described the value of analyzing data as a means of monitoring the success of their programs. Principal C explained how the shift to a data-driven approach to program assessment occurred:

> That's been a hard thing to do up until this year. We have started, the district has bought an online data base, Performance Plus, where we are starting to input a lot of our assessment data into there. We haven't really trained our teachers yet, we are just kind of phasing it in, and the teachers aren't even really doing any data input at this point in time. They're still doing the regular assessments and handing them over to somebody else who's centrally inputting it. I think that's going to be a wonderful tool, especially in light of the new evaluation systems that are going to be coming out, that we're going to be required to sit down and have regular conversations with teachers that are specifically data-driven related to student performance. (Principal C, Principal Interview)

All of the other interviewees used a less data-driven approach to assessing whether or not students with disabilities are making progress and meeting their goals within the programs designed for them. For example, Principal A explained his/her qualitative approach to assessing whether or not students with disabilities are making progress and meeting their goals:

> That's really a function of the teachers and then my supervision of the teachers. And our teachers know that our policy here is that they know they have to be responsive to the IEP goals. So they should, we're very serious about teachers being thoroughly familiar with the children's IEPs. And then the idea that if they have a goal and they're moving

> toward the goal and they see that this strategy that they have is not working, that they need to be responsive and change it, or maybe, you know, the goal was unrealistic or maybe the goal needed to be tweaked a little bit. So it's really a matter, I think, of good practice. And we hire well and they know my expectations and they're just good teachers. I'm always walking through the rooms. If I see something that I need to talk to them about, I do. And in those ways those conversations always evolve. (Principal A, Principal Interview)

Interviewees described additional qualitative approaches for assessing the success of programs designed for students with disabilities. Discussing student progress in meetings was reported as a way to assess the success of programs designed for students with disabilities by four interviewees. Principal I schedules monthly grade-level meetings with the special education teachers. At those meetings, teachers communicate with one another. If they talk about a particular child who might be struggling, they may recommend that the child be referred to the school-based support team meeting. From there, if they feel it is warranted, they will go back to the CSE and address the situation.

Principal F does not feel it is the role of the principal to ensure that the recommended services and programs developed at CSE meetings are helping students make progress and to meet their goals. Principal F explained:

> I'm not at the CSE meeting and I'm not in the classroom. So my role… I see my role as setting up the structure, the culture of this building: setting up schedules, working with colleagues to manage the needs of all the students. You know, we have plenty of people here that offer plenty of different services. So it's a matter of maintaining that cohesive integrity of a classroom while having people come in, having people go out,

whether it be pulled-in, pushed-out for all those different services. So that's where my role plays in terms of following through with CSEs. It's the culture, it's the schedules. (Principal F, Principal Interview)

Interviewees reported that they ensure that recommended services and programs developed at the CSE are helping students make progress and to meet their goals by using both quantitative and qualitative methods. Communication with teachers was reported as an essential component of ensuring the success of programs designed for students with disabilities. Although four interviewees are using or starting to use data to assess the success of their programming for students with disabilities, all of the other interviewees are leaving that responsibility up to others.

**Summary of Assessing the Success of Programs for Students with Disabilities**

The fourth research question addressed the ways that elementary principals with one-to-five years of experience assess the success of programs for students with disabilities. Interviewees described both quantitative and qualitative approaches to assessing the success of programs for students with disabilities. Four interviewees use or are starting to use data to assess the effectiveness of their programs for students with disabilities. However, many interviewees leave that responsibility up to others, such as the teachers, to assess the effectiveness of programs for students with disabilities.

Interviewees described their academic expectations for students with disabilities. The responses included: testing is unfair, want students to do their best, and have high expectations. Clear communication was described as an important aspect of creating a culture of academic expectations for students with disabilities.

With the exception of one interviewee, novice principals were not motivated by test performance to learn more about special education instructional best practices for students with

disabilities. Accountability alone has not been the sole motivator in principals' desire to provide quality programs for students with disabilities. Internal motivation is an important aspect of learning about special education instructional best practices for students with disabilities.

## Special Education Regulations Related to Special Education Instructional Leadership

The fifth research question addressed the ways that elementary principals with one-to-five years experience use their knowledge of the special education regulations to best serve the needs of students with disabilities. Interviewees were asked questions related to their knowledge and understanding of special education law.

### Special Education Law

Interviewees were asked what they feel are the most important aspects of special education law and how important is it for them, as building leaders, to know and understand special education law, both at the state and federal levels. All interviewees reported that knowing and understanding special education law is very important for building-level leaders. Some interviewees described a sense of urgency of needing to know and understand special education law, while others thought it was important, but acceptable to rely on others for this type of information.

### Understanding Special Education Law is Important for Building Leaders

All interviewees reported that knowing and understanding special education law are important aspects of building-level leadership. Principal B stated that on a scale of 1 to 10, where 10 is the most important, knowing and understanding special education law is a 12. Principal B indicated that knowing and understanding special education law is one of the most important aspects of the job. Principals C and M said that knowing and understanding special education law is important, but they rely on the experts for this type of information. Principal M

explained relying on others for information about special education law: "It's important and I don't know them. I rely on the experts around me." Principal C also described how relying on the experts is important:

> I think it's very important, but I think that's one of those areas where I'm not as secure as I want to be. Luckily, I can fall back on my psychologist who has a lot of experience, or more likely the special education administrator for the elementary programs who comes and chairs most of our CSE meetings at the building level. (Principal C, Principal Interview)

Two interviewees felt it is important to know the basics of special education law. Principal L explained that although there is a special education administrator employed in the district, principals need to have at least a basic understanding to be a resource for teachers. Principal H reported that building leaders should know and understand the basics of special education law but part of being a good administrator is knowing what you don't know and asking for help when needed. Having a resource they can go to regarding special education law is important to three interviewees. Perhaps Principal I expressed it best:

> I'm not saying that…I'm not telling you I know every federal law and mandate. I think it's very important to be aware of them and to have a resource to go to should you have a particular question on one. Yes, I think it's very important because they're constantly changing, you know. And with the increase with the state, the testing accountability, I don't know, just the transparency and with so many other media outlets, and parents have so many ways of being informed nowadays with Facebook. So many districts have electronic database-sharing systems where parents sometimes get information before you do, and I just think there's so many, we're in such a digital age where electronic

> information goes so fast, I think you've got to be aware of it. If you don't know every single law and regulation (which, I think, it's pretty much an impossibility to know everything)…have a system in place, have a resource in place that you can go to ask the questions. For me, I've got a couple of administrative colleagues that were special education teachers, and the director of special education for our district with whom I've got a good relationship. (Principal I, Principal Interview)

Concern about not being prepared or knowing enough about special education law was expressed by three interviewees. Principal F knows very little about special education law. Principal F can get by because of a collaborative relationship with the special educators who provide guidance. Principal C is not as secure as s/he would like to be. Principal C can rely on the school psychologist who has a lot of experience, or more likely, the special education administrator. Principal G expressed frustration about not knowing enough about special education regulations:

> I can't imagine an administrator going into the job without knowing the law and knowing it well. And I think every administrator needs to be well-versed in special education law. And I mean well-versed, I don't mean just know about it. They need to be able to talk about it to the best of their ability. For example, this year, I'm embarrassed to say, was the first year that I really understood and knew about the special education continuum of services. There were services on the continuum I didn't really realize existed or had a particular name. (Principal G, Principal Interview)

All interviewees reported that knowing and understanding special education laws are important aspects of best serving the needs of students with disabilities and building-level leadership.

**Disciplining Students with Disabilities**

When asked to describe the most important aspects of special education law that elementary principals need to know, six principals replied that it was understanding how to discipline students with disabilities. Principal M did not know enough about special education law to answer the question: "I don't know the law. I don't know so I can't answer the question."

Other responses included: compliance, time tables, 504 regulations, scheduling as it relates to IEP implementation, service requirements, parent rights, and knowing the IEP. Principal G described disciplining students with disabilities:

> I think the eye opener for me was dealing with teachers when students are included in the general education classroom. When they have behavioral issues, you know, their first reaction is get him out of my room or their first suggestion to me is, you know, suspend him or whatever. And I have learned that it's really important to consider the disability of the student. And if it's related to the event or the activity, the behavior, then you really have to think a lot differently. And it's caused me to think a lot more creatively when it comes to discipline. And it's taught me to be more tolerant. But I think that's been a great thing. It's had a ripple effect on teaching my staff the same tolerance and understanding of disabilities. So I think that's probably the most important thing when we are talking about manifestation and, you know, the suspension and that sort of punitive behavior. How much does it really do? I can understand why children with disabilities are protected more strictly. (Principal G, Principal Interview)

Principal K indicated that compliance and accountability are the two most important aspects of special education law that elementary principals need to know. Principal F said that elementary principals need to realize that the IEP is a legal document and as the principal, you

need to make sure that everyone is adhering to that document. Principal F said that principals need to ensure that staff schedules match the IEP. Principal C stated it is important to know the requirements for particular services, such as required frequency and duration of related services. Principal B described the importance of time lines and parental rights. Principal B explained:

> Certainly everything that pertains to crossing the T's and dotting the I's with time requirements and safeguarding the parents' rights. I mean, I'm sure you know that within thirty days after the initial parent request, A, B, and C needs to be done. Sixty days after that, D, E, and F need to be done. And you just…you never want to fall into a situation where you're just, you know, blatantly dismissing these very regimented timelines. Because if New York State says that 15 days after A, you need to do B, then we make sure that we do those. If it says that you need to notify a parent in writing five days prior to a CSE meeting, we do that, we notify a parent five days prior, in writing. If it says that a parent can't be there, you have to make reasonable accommodations. We just…we make sure that we cross the T's and dot the I's that are outlined in New York State law. (Principal B, Principal Interview)

Most novice elementary principals in this study indicated that discipline is the most important aspect of special education law that elementary principals need to know.

**Avoiding Litigation**

Individualized Education Programs (IEP) are legal documents that ensure that students with disabilities receive appropriate programs and services they require as a result of their disability. The Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) ensures that students with disabilities are educated in an environment with their nondisabled peers to the maximum extent possible. Each student's LRE is documented on their IEP. Principals need their teachers and staff to implement

IEPs to meet the needs of each student with a disability and to avoid litigation. Interviewees were asked to describe the value of IEPs and what were the essential components of these documents. In addition, all interviewees were asked what it meant to educate students in the least restrictive environment. Knowledge and understanding of IEPs varied, but all interviewees understood the importance of these legal documents. Responses included: ensures needs are met, accountability, contains goals and modifications, provides protection, identifies weaknesses and how those weaknesses will be addressed, facilitates open communication, and allocates resources. Principal B, the only interviewee who felt adequately prepared to be an instructional leader for students with disabilities, thoroughly defined the importance of an IEP. Principal B explained:

> Obviously the IEP is the legal document, it's the binding document, it's the piece in which, you know…it grounds the special education teacher and the general education teacher. It's the piece that the board of education votes on and approves, indicating that us, as a district, are going to, in some cases, put our money where our mouth is or allocate the resources that are necessary to give the child what he needs and deserves. An IEP is going to contain data as to what assessments were done in order to assess the child's disability. It's going to give background information, obviously profile information, grade, date of birth, things like that. It's going to talk about interventions that are going to help level the playing field for the student in terms of extended time on tests, preferential seating, and special classroom modifications. Obviously the IEP would also contain goals for the student as well as when the next meeting would be and who the members of the meeting are and things like that. (Principal B, Principal Interview)

Responses to defining what it means to educate students in the LRE also varied. The majority (eight interviewees) was able to define LRE and Principal C was one of those interviewees.

> Ideally, all your students are going to be in general education populations and they're going to be mainstreamed into regular classrooms. Some students aren't able to get the most out of their educational experience in that environment, so we have to find different, more restrictive environments to support their needs. It should always be a goal of ours to make sure that students are in their least restricted, or as close to a general education population classroom as possible. You know, I think that it's a significant step for us to think of removing a child from a general-education classroom. And it often feels like a failure when we do because we think that we just weren't able to support that child the way we wanted to. So I guess it means keeping a student as close to a general education class as possible. (Principal C, Principal Interview)

Unlike respondents understanding the importance of IEPs, not everyone understood the importance of educating students in their least restrictive environment. Five research subjects did not understand the definition of LRE. For example, Principal K described the LRE as giving a crutch to students:

> I think it's giving them the support…the minimal amount of support that they need in order to be successful, to meet their potential. I feel like anything beyond that, it's almost like giving a child a crutch so they learn how to limp. I think this is to kind of get them through a difficult area, so we are modifying that environment so that they can succeed. (Principal K, Principal Interview)

All of the interviewees were asked if a parent in their school had ever initiated an impartial hearing against the school district. All 13 interviewees reported that under their tenure, no parents of children in their school had initiated an impartial hearing against the school district. Principals were then asked what steps, if any, they had taken to reduce the likelihood of an impartial hearing from occurring. The most frequent response, as reported by eight out of 13 interviewees, was that communication with parents and team members reduces the likelihood of impartial hearings. Principal L described how s/he avoids impartial hearings:

> I think very open communication…I mean being present at CSE meetings and annual review meetings. But I think that parents also need to feel welcome to come into the classroom and observe, either through American Education Week or just in general. It's a very transparent process, you know. (Principal L, Principal Interview)

The second most common response was to build relationships with parents. One interviewee reported that it is important to know your students, programs, and their needs. Principal F said that s/he would welcome an impartial hearing because s/he believed a student was inappropriately placed and the parents disagreed. Principal F was the only principal who expressed the point that avoiding impartial hearings may not be in a child's best interest. Principal F elaborated on this perspective:

> We had this one child, and it took us years to get him appropriately placed. And even though I personally wanted it and so did all the other professional staff, there's a learning curve that parents need to develop. And sometimes we would like to accelerate that learning curve for parents. Sometimes, you know what, we just don't have the patience for it. (Principal F, Principal Interview)

Interviewees avoid litigation by openly communicating with parents and developing relationships with them. Others avoid litigation by implementing IEPs appropriately and understanding the LRE for each child. All interviewees appear to value IEPs although some were able to describe the essential components of these documents better than others. Five interviewees were not able to accurately define what it means to educate students in the LRE.

### Summary of Knowledge of Special Education Regulations and Special Education Instructional Leadership

The fifth research question addressed the ways that elementary principals with one-to-five years experience use their knowledge of the special education regulations to best serve the needs of students with disabilities. All interviewees reported that knowing and understanding special education law are important aspects of best serving the needs of students with disabilities and building level leadership. Novice elementary principals in this study indicated that discipline is the most important aspect of special education law that elementary principals need to know. Knowing and understanding special education laws are important aspects of best serving the needs of students with disabilities and building level leadership. Elementary principals use their knowledge of the special education regulations to best serve the needs of students with disabilities, in particular, when it comes to disciplining students with disabilities.

## Impact of District Type on Special Education Instructional Leadership

The sixth research question addressed the extent to which service in varying district types impact principals' knowledge of special education as it relates to instructional leadership for students with disabilities.

### District Size Impacts the Special Education Principal Knowledge and Programming

Interviewees were asked if the size of their district impacted their knowledge of special education. Except for one, all interviewees indicted that the district size has impacted their

knowledge of special education. Responses were varied and included: I've had to learn on my own, more opportunities for interactions with more people, more diversity of families and students, more resources to pull from, made me more creative, more program options, parents know their rights, and I'm involved in everything. Only one interviewee indicated that the size of the district had no impact on knowledge of special education. Principal A indicated that experience had the biggest impact on special education knowledge.

Interviewees employed in small school districts reported that because their district is small, they had to learn more about special education because there are fewer special education experts to rely on for information. Interviewees who work in large school districts reported that because the district is large, there are fewer opportunities to learn more about special education because there are so many special education experts upon whom to rely. Principal M explained how working in a large school district has impacted his/her special education learning:

> Has it helped me? No. Because in our district, we have many people that I refer to as experts on special education. So it has not forced me to learn it. It has allowed me to reach out to them, who I consider to be the experts. Perhaps in a smaller district where there weren't as many people in those different roles, I would feel more responsibility and need to acquire it myself. (Principal M, Principal Interview)

Principal B, who works in a small school district, explained how working in that environment has impacted his/her special education learning: "I am more intricately involved here than I would be if, I feel like, if I were in a large school district."

All interviewees, except for one, reported that the size of the district has impacted their knowledge of special education. Interviewees reported that due to the size of the district, they

have either had to learn more or less about special education because district size is related to the special education specialists available to them.

**Adequacy of Resources**

Principals were asked whether or not they believed that their district provided adequate resources to ensure academic success for students with disabilities. They were asked to indicate what types of resources were available in their district to ensure academic success for students with disabilities and to describe what types of resources they wish were available to ensure academic success for students with disabilities.

The most frequent response, reported by seven out of 13 interviewees, was that their district had adequate resources to ensure academic success for students with disabilities. Four interviewees responded both yes and no to the question while two did not believe their district had adequate resources.

The size of the school district had an impact on districts providing adequate resources for students with disabilities. Principal C, who is employed in a larger district, felt that there are adequate resources for students with disabilities. Principal C explained:

> I think that I get to interact with a lot of very knowledgeable, very good professionals, and I think that that's helped me a great deal. And I don't know if I would have that opportunity in a smaller district. But at the same time, I guess you could make the argument that in a larger district you're fat with resources and don't have to really strive as hard with each child that maybe a smaller, less resource-rich district would have to do. I mean, that student that we had in first grade, we were able to place him in a BOCES program. A smaller, less affluent district wouldn't be able to do that, and they'd

be struggling to find ways to accommodate him in the general education population. (Principal C, Principal Interview)

Principal G needs to be creative when developing programs for students with disabilities because the district is small. Principal G explained:

> It has increased my knowledge and it has increased my need to be creative about solutions because we don't have tons of resources hanging around. So the folks we have, they have to be talented and they have to be versatile. And I have to use my general education staff sometimes. We really have to implement the RTI at the earlier stages much better I think, and take it much less for granted than they would in a bigger district that has more resources at hand. (Principal G, Principal Interview)

The four interviewees who stated that their district both does and does not provide adequate resources for students with disabilities indicated that there is a lot of administrative support but that more classroom support is needed. They would also like to have more occupational therapy and reading and math support, and the district could use more varied programming, more technology, more assistance from outside agencies, and updated buildings. Principal H explained:

> I think we're getting there. I think, you know, it depends on what need we're trying to meet. I love to see more occupational therapy work, absolutely. We have one or two occupational therapists that are shared throughout the district. Would I love to see more intensive reading support or math support? Absolutely. But it's one of those things that…it's a budget thing…so you get around it, you find ways to do it in your building that work for you. Is our speech pathologist really stretched to the max? Yeah. And can she do much discretionary stuff? No, because she's solely meeting the needs of the IEPs.

So those kinds of things are hard. But they're hard for any district right now, with budget cuts as they are. And you make the decisions based on: Legally what are you obligated to meet? And then if you have time left over, who are the most needy kids who need the support? I would love to see an occupational therapist in every first grade classroom working on skills and things like that, but it's just not reality at this point. But do we have the basics? Yeah. But, like I said, you know, I was just talking last week about what do you do for those kids who aren't meeting those most intensive interventions that you've got? And in some cases, even as a reading teacher myself, I don't know what else is out there. So it's hard and it depends on the particular child that you're talking about and whether you have the resources or not. (Principal H, Principal Interview)

Interviewees who stated that their district has adequate resources for students with disabilities indicated that their district offers programs to meet the needs of students, there is enough special education administrative support, there is assistance for social and emotional problems, and the district regulates the number of students with disabilities within inclusion classes. Principal A explained:

Actually, I feel this district is very committed to special education. For instance, in our inclusion classes, we will make sure that we don't have more than seven children who have been identified, which is not even anything that's a legal limit or anything but it's just from our experience. This allows the teachers to have enough time, enough capacity to provide services as best they can. We have more teachers, is one thing. We have the assistant superintendent of special services as well. She is in herself a resource. She knows…she's very good with the law, she knows the law to the T, she's up on the latest

interpretations of the law, the latest case studies. So she's a resource. And the fact that they have…they have two coordinators who serve the kindergarten through five and then the sixth through twelve who do the CSEs and liaison with parents. So I think the human resource that is afforded is very good. And we have adaptive physical education and we have programs on the computer. (Principal A, Principal Interview)

The two respondents who stated that their district does not provide adequate resources for students with disabilities indicated that their district needs more space, more inclusion classes, and a way to ensure that every child can pass the state assessments. Principal I explained:

I think it starts with more space. I tell you, I'd love to see more integrated classrooms. But we…I know the Director of Special Education wants the same thing, I've talked to her about it. But it's the space. We don't have the space. (Principal I, Principal Interview)

In summary, seven interviewees believe that their district has adequate resources to ensure academic success for students with disabilities because those districts are providing appropriate services and programs for students with disabilities and there is enough special education administrative support. In a district where there are adequate resources, there is special education administrative support and opportunities for collaboration. Two interviewees indicated that their district does not have adequate resources due to the need for more space, more inclusion classes, and a lack of a mechanism to ensure that every child can pass state assessments.

**District Support**

Superintendents are the district leaders and serve an important role in the development of quality programs for students with disabilities by either supporting or not supporting the efforts

of the building leaders. Interviewees were asked in what ways their superintendent has supported their efforts to develop quality programs for students with disabilities. Superintendent support is related to providing adequate resources for special education. When interviewees reported that their district had adequate special education resources, the superintendent had been supportive of the efforts of the building leader.

**Support of Superintendents**

Interviewees were asked to describe the ways in which their superintendent supported their efforts to develop quality programs for students with disabilities. Six interviewees reported that the superintendent was new to the district while two interviewees reported having an interim superintendent. Whether the superintendent was new to the district or had been in the position for an extended amount of time, at least 11 interviewees reported feeling supported by their superintendent to develop quality programs for students with disabilities.

Superintendents supported their efforts to develop quality programs for students with disabilities by being a good listener, maintaining special education programs in the midst of budget reductions, being supportive of new initiatives, supporting inclusion, allowing for professional development, providing enough staffing, supporting everything good for students, and supporting RTI. Principal G described support provided by the superintendent:

> Well, she has given all of my special education the financial resources for professional development. She has given us limitless time to train, to talk, to review the data, to consider students' needs, to measure, and to track behaviors. We have the resources available to bring in, you know, consultants and experts. And we spend a lot of time teaching, but we also spend a lot of time developing strategies, developing programs

and services. We have probably a little bit more staff than we actually need, but I think that's very helpful, very helpful. (Principal G, Principal Interview)

Principal L explained feeling supported by the superintendent:

> Special education teachers have room in their schedule that we purposely keep open and that's very transparent. It's…our teachers have the capacity to take on more students. We use that time in other ways with the provision that, okay, if we have another student come, move in tomorrow, we're ready to meet those needs. We're not bare bones, not worrying, like, what are we going to do, how do we do this? And also we spread out our students, if I may say, we're very balanced so that we're not loading one class or we're not trying to make one fit, and my superintendent has been very supportive of this. (Principal L, Principal Interview)

One interviewee reported not feeling supported by the former superintendent. Principal F explained: "My previous superintendent didn't allow me any latitude in terms of creating special education programs. You know, it was really a combination of the special education director and the superintendent."

Superintendents can either support or not support the efforts of the building leaders in the development of quality programs for students with disabilities. When interviewees reported that their district had adequate special education resources, the superintendent had been supportive of their efforts. The majority, 11 participants, were supported by their superintendent to develop quality programs for students with disabilities.

**Summary of the Impact of District Type on Special Education Instructional Leadership**

The sixth research question addressed the extent to which service in varying district types impacts principals' knowledge of special education as it relates to instructional leadership for students with disabilities.

Except for one, interviewees reported that district size has impacted their knowledge of special education. As indicated earlier in this chapter, Principal M explained how working in a large school has allowed for reliance on the special education administrative experts for special education learning. Principal L reported that working in a small school district has improved special education learning because there are fewer people to rely on for information.

Principal L explained:

> I've had to learn about special education on the job. I've had to, obviously, as a regular education teacher with very little, being point blank, very little experience with special education. Being in a smaller district, I've had to do more jobs. I can't…we don't have a PPS director or assistant director, you know, I can't pawn things off…not pawn, I can't shake my responsibilities. (Principal L, Principal Interview)

The majority of the interviewees believe that their district has adequate resources to ensure academic success for students with disabilities because those districts are providing appropriate services and programs for students with disabilities and there was enough special education administrative support. Interviewees described the importance of superintendent support in providing and developing quality programs for students with disabilities.

## Summary

This study investigated how preservice training and experience has impacted elementary principals' understanding and implementation of instructional leadership for students with

disabilities from the perspective of six research questions. First, how has preservice coursework prepared principals with one to five years of experience to design, lead, manage, and implement programs for students with disabilities? Second, how has on-the-job experience prepared elementary principals with one to five years of experience to design, lead, manage, and implement programs for students with disabilities? Third, in what ways do elementary principals with one to five years of experience acquire updated information relevant to instructional leadership for students with disabilities? Fourth, in what ways do elementary principals with one to five years of experience assess the success of programs for students with disabilities? Fifth, how do elementary principals with one to five years experience use their knowledge of the special education regulations to best serve the needs of students with disabilities? And finally, to what extent does service in varying district types impact principals' knowledge of special education as it relates to instructional leadership for students with disabilities?

The majority, 12 out of 13 interviewees, stated that they did not feel adequately prepared for instructional leadership for students with disabilities upon entering their positions as building leaders. Special education-related coursework was either not embedded within most preservice administrative leadership programs or was limited. Therefore, novice principals without any special education certifications began their careers only knowing about special education through their prior experiences. Principals who did have some exposure to formal instruction regarding special education found it valuable and still refer back to the information they received during preservice training. One principal felt adequately prepared for instructional leadership for students with disabilities as a result of taking two special education courses, because those courses were taught by former administrators, and there were special education related requirements for the administrative internship. All interviewees, except one, reported that some

aspects of special education law were discussed within other coursework. None of the interviewees learned anything about instructional best practices for students with disabilities during their preservice administrative coursework. Interviewees complained of not having enough exposure to special education topics within their preservice administrative leadership programs. Nobody advised these future educational leaders to take special education related coursework except for a principal who obtained administrative certification in another state. This study supports the proposal that college and universities are not adequately preparing educational leaders for instructional leadership for students with disabilities.

Participants in this study all had varied experiences, but none held any special education teaching certifications. Just about half of the principals had been general education coteachers, and found that experience to be helpful in preparing them for designing, leading, managing, and implementing programs for students with disabilities. Having some exposure to working with students with learning differences was reported as beneficial upon entering administration. However, even with coteaching experience, only one principal felt adequately prepared for instructional leadership for students with disabilities. All of the participants reported needing additional professional development related to special education.

All interviewees, except two, indicated that their professional experiences had the greatest impact on their understanding of special education. As stated earlier, even though all interviewees have had some experience either working with students with disabilities or learning about students with disabilities, all but one interviewee felt adequately prepared to design, lead, manage, and implement programs for students with disabilities.

Collaboration with at least one other administrator for supervision of special education staff and special education program development was required for everyone except two

principals. Therefore, collaboration is an important aspect of instructional leadership for students with disabilities. In addition, elementary principals rely on others to acquire updated information relevant to instructional leadership for students with disabilities. Without receiving proper foundation knowledge related to special education, dependency develops between the building leader and the special education experts.

Interviewees assess the success of their programs for students with disabilities by using data and communicating with teachers and staff. At least four interviewees use or are starting to use data to assess the success of programs for students with disabilities. However, many interviewees leave the responsibility of assessing the success of programs for students with disabilities up to others, such as teachers. Academic expectations for students with disabilities varied amongst principals. Clear communication regarding goals is an important aspect of creating a culture of academic expectations for students with disabilities. The majority, eight interviewees, were not motivated by test performance to learn more about special education instructional best practices for students with disabilities. Participants reported that internal motivation is an important aspect of their desire to learn more about special education instructional best practices for students with disabilities.

All interviewees agreed that knowing and understanding special education law are important aspects of best serving the needs of students with disabilities and building level leadership. The participants indicated that discipline is the most important aspect of special education law. Interviewees avoid litigation by openly communicating with parents and developing relationships with them, implementing IEPs appropriately, and understanding the LRE for each student. Only one principal expressed the point that avoiding impartial hearings may not be in a child's best interest. They value the importance of the IEP document although

not everyone was able to describe the essential components of these documents. Less than half of the participants were able to accurately define what it means to educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment.

Except for one, all interviewees reported that district size has impacted their knowledge of special education and the majority of the interviewees believe that their district has adequate resources to ensure academic success for students with disabilities. Interviewees described the importance of superintendent support in providing and developing quality programs for students with disabilities.

In chapter five, this researcher will present an analysis of these findings, and the implications for better preparing novice elementary principals for instructional leadership for students with disabilities. In addition, suggestions for future research will be recommended.

## Chapter V. Recommendations and Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to investigate how preservice training and experience have impacted elementary principals' understanding and implementation of instructional leadership for students with disabilities. Insight into this investigation was obtained through 38 interview questions; all 13 interviewees described their preservice coursework and experiences related to instructional leadership for students with disabilities.

Each of the 13 participants selected for this study had at least one full year of experience, but no more than five as an elementary principal. Principals without any special education teaching certifications were selected for this study. The principals were selected from 13 interviews of novice elementary school principals from seven New York State counties, 11 school districts, and five district types.

### Research Questions

The researcher developed six research questions. First, how has preservice coursework prepared principals with one to five years of experience to design, lead, manage, and implement programs for students with disabilities? Second, how has on-the-job experience prepared elementary principals with one to five years of experience to design, lead, manage, and implement programs for students with disabilities? Third, in what ways do elementary principals with one to five years of experience acquire updated information relevant to instructional leadership for students with disabilities? Fourth, in what ways do elementary principals with one to five years of experience assess the success of programs for students with disabilities? Fifth, how do elementary principals with one to five years experience use their knowledge of the special education regulations to best serve the needs of students with disabilities? Finally, to

what extent does service in varying district types impact principals' knowledge of special education as it relates to instructional leadership for students with disabilities?

**Preservice Coursework**

Findings of this study revealed that 12 out of 13 elementary principals did not feel adequately prepared for instructional leadership for students with disabilities after the completion of their administrative preparation program. Coursework involving special education topics were either nonexistent or limited to special education law. Instructional best practices for students with disabilities were not taught to any of the aspiring educational leaders during their educational leadership preparation programs. Novice elementary principals, especially those principals without any background in special education, need to be taught instructional interventions or strategies on how to instruct students with disabilities. Principals are not only managers responsible for the day-to-day operations of the building, but they are also instructional leaders for all students.

These findings were consistent with the research conducted by Lasky and Karge (2006) who found that administrative training programs across many states, including New York, seriously lack special education content. These findings were also consistent with the research indicating there is a disconnect between the activities school administrators engage in regularly and the emphasis placed on those activities in preparation programs (McHatton et al., 2010).

Only one principal, Principal B, felt adequately prepared for instructional leadership for students with disabilities. Principal B felt adequately prepared as a result of two special education courses in his/her administrative preparation program taught by administrators, and involvement in an administrative internship that included activities in special education. Those

experiences led Principal B to feel adequately prepared to design, lead, manage, and implement programs for students with disabilities when first hired as an elementary principal.

In a study completed by Wigle and Wilcox (2002), it was recommended that college and university preparation programs should stress skills related to assessment, special education program development, collaboration, communication, and advocacy as these skills are critical to the success of special education programs. In addition, college and university programs need to improve the skills of their preservice special educators and general education administrators in the area of educational technology and in the area of behavior management as they relate to students with disabilities. The consequences of not being skilled at helping students with disabilities learn appropriate ways to manage their behavior has serious implications for both special educators and general education administrators (Wigle & Wilcox, 2002).

All participants expressed concern about not having enough information about special education taught within their educational leadership preparation programs, even when topics including special education law were taught. Novice elementary principals within this study, with one exception, reported not being adequately prepared to design, lead, manage, and implement programs for students with disabilities after completing their educational leadership preparation program. This is consistent with the research regarding the need for an emphasis on special education during administrative preservice training.

**Experience**

With the exception of two interviewees, direct experience, either teaching or previous administrative experiences, were the most common sources of principals' learning about special education. Participants in this study learned about special education by working in their current position, previous teaching experiences, attending CSE meetings, participating in child study

team meetings, chairing 504 meetings, serving as instructional coach, working with great teachers, working with a student who was blind, being an administrator at BOCES, working in a residential facility, and working in a small school.

The findings in this study were consistent with research conducted by Lasky and Karge (2006). Lasky and Karge (2006) found that many principals received their special education training on the job as they encountered challenges and successes in working with special education teachers, staff, and students. However, according to Lasky and Karge (2006), experiences alone do not necessarily adequately prepare novice principals to design, lead, manage, and implement programs for students with disabilities. Respondents in the study reported that regardless of how long principals worked in their positions, they reported limited ability and knowledge related to children with special needs (Lasky & Karge, 2006).

About half of the principals, six out of 13, had been general education coteachers, collaboratively teaching students with disabilities with special education teachers. Coteaching experience was reported as helpful in preparing for designing, leading, managing, and implementing programs for students with disabilities because those principals had direct experience teaching students with learning differences. Exposure and experience working with students with disabilities was reported as beneficial for instructional leadership. Most principals in this study learned about special education by experience but only one principal within this study felt adequately prepared to design, lead, manage, and implement programs of instructional leadership for students with disabilities. Experience teaching students with disabilities, special education coursework, professors with administrative experience, and hands-on learning through internships were all contributing factors towards Principal B feeling adequately prepared to design, lead, manage, and implement programs for students with disabilities.

**Acquiring Special Education Information**

This study revealed that interviewees both collaborate and rely on others to learn about special education, whether it is basic information or receiving updated information relevant to instructional leadership for students with disabilities. Novice elementary principals rely on teacher leaders, special education administrators, psychologists, special education teachers, colleagues, consultants, a law book, and a friend to obtain information related to special education. Goor and Schwenn (1997) found that many principals may delegate their duties to other personnel in the building and when they do that, they relinquish their leadership function.

With the exception of two, all interviewees collaborate with a special education administrator when supervising special education programs, teachers, and staff. Working collaboratively with others is an important aspect of instructional leadership for students with disabilities. Two principals are employed in small school districts and do not cosupervise with any special education administrators because none are employed in those districts. However, Principal B makes programmatic decisions with the CSE chairperson and superintendent.

The interviewees do not view themselves as special education experts and, therefore rely on the experts for information. Collaborative relationships between elementary principals and others is a critical component of building leadership. Building level leaders need to be able to work together with many individuals regarding the implementation of special education programming and supervision of special education teachers and staff. These findings are consistent with the research that indicates that principals need to collaborate with special education directors, trust teachers as instructional experts, and engage in practices of open communication, formal evaluations, and informal observations in supporting the delivery of special education (Bays & Crockett, 2007). However, due to the shared responsibility of

educating students with disabilities, initially, collaboration may benefit principals by reducing the level of concern about a lack of special education knowledge, but may, in turn, prevent them from learning as much about instructional leadership for students with disabilities as they can rely on the experts.

Interviewees were asked where they learned about the federal mandate, RTI, and how the mandate impacts both general and special education instructional practices. With the exception of three, interviewees reported learning about RTI from workshops, a special education administrator, conferences, on the job, reading, and while working in a previous school district. Three interviewees reported teaching themselves about RTI. Not being informed about RTI had a negative impact on at least one principal as s/he was asked a question about it in an interview and s/he could not answer the question. Principals need to be informed about the implementation of RTI as they are responsible for ensuring that the principles of RTI are implemented appropriately and this belief is evident in their schools (Barnes & Harlacher, 2008).

Valesky and Hirth (1992) found that administrators need to be afforded professional development opportunities to acquire updated information regarding special education. Zaretsky et al. (2006) found that given the complexities of special education, it is not surprising that many principals felt the need for ongoing professional development in order to equip them with the knowledge and skills necessary to lead with confidence.

None of the study participants provide teachers and staff with any professional development related to teaching students with disabilities and they all would like to receive additional professional development related to special education topics. Ongoing professional development is provided by district office administration, consultants, school psychologist, professional development office, and conferences both in and out of the school district. Three

interviewees reported having input regarding special education related topics but do not actually administer the professional development.

DiPaola and Walther-Thomas (2003) wrote that although principals do not need to be disability experts, they must have fundamental knowledge and skills that will enable them to perform essential special education leadership tasks. DiPaola and Walther-Thomas (2003) emphasized the need for principals to have a thorough working knowledge about disabilities, special education law, IDEA, NCLB, and the unique learning and behavioral challenges various disabilities present. The data clearly illustrated that the only principal, Principal B, demonstrated fundamental special education knowledge and skills. In these times of increased accountability, it is even more important that principals, the instructional leaders for all students, possess the fundamental knowledge and skills that will enable them to perform essential special education leadership tasks.

In a study completed by McHatton et al. (2010), it was determined that there may be a discrepancy between what participants in their study thought they knew and what they actually knew as participants reported having a high sense of self-efficacy even though their leadership preparation programs minimally included special and gifted education content. Exploration of discrepancies between reported lack of preparation and what school leaders actually know was recommended. In this qualitative study, the researcher examined how preservice training and experience impacted their understanding and implementation of instructional leadership for students with disabilities and also assessed special education knowledge of the participants. In this study, there was not a discrepancy between what participants thought they knew and what they actually knew regarding special education. The research subjects did not proclaim to know more about special education than they actually did. One interview even revealed that s/he was

not hired for a principal position due to his/her lack of knowledge regarding Response to Intervention. Only one participant demonstrated fundamental and current knowledge regarding special education and special education instructional leadership.

### Expectations for Students with Disabilities

Participants in this study described their expectations for students with disabilities in relation to passing the New York State assessments. Their responses included: the assessments are unfair, same expectations as nonclassified students, each child should reach his or her maximum potential, not too concerned, realistic for some but not others, high expectations, and for students to do their best.

The majority, eight interviewees, reported that increased accountability had not impacted their motivation to learn more about special education instructional best practices as they reported being internally motivated to help students with disabilities perform their best. Bays and Crockett (2007) indicated that in the current era of accountability, it is imperative that there is a need for leadership that aggressively presses teachers to target learning outcomes of students with diverse educational needs. It was their hope that future research will support the supposition that instructional leadership that is well-informed about special education and is intentionally distributed among principals, teachers, and special education administrators has the potential to ensure that high-quality educational programs are accessible to all students.

In a study conducted by Vannest et al. (2009), there was an overall positive impact from NCLB, with high standards for students' performance, teacher qualifications, and teaching methods. The study found the perceptions of the impact of NCLB to be strongly positive for special education in: (a) teacher and paraprofessional qualifications, (b) the use of evidence-based practices, and (c) high standards for all students. As a result of NCLB, principals need to

understand what evidence-based practices are, as well as having high standards for all students, including students with disabilities. These two studies indicate that accountability and aggressively pressing teachers to target learning outcomes of students with diverse educational needs are important for building level leaders.

All interviewees were asked how they communicate academic expectations for students with disabilities to teachers and staff. Interviewees in this study communicated their academic expectations by developing trust and respect with teachers and staff, not providing test preparation, communication at faculty meetings, e-mail, conversations, meetings, and through teacher leaders. Communicating their beliefs within the entire school community is an important aspect of creating a culture of academic expectations for students with disabilities.

## Instructional Best Practices

Interviewees described the most effective instructional best practices for teaching students with disabilities and described how they learned about those practices. Responses included: knowing the IEP, knowing the child's learning modality, good teaching, having a goal in mind, differentiated instruction, small group and one-on-one instruction, brainstorming as a team, use of manipulatives, visuals, good questioning techniques, use of formative assessments, breaking down concepts, relationship building, instructional strategies, and utilizing preassessments. Differentiated instruction was the most common response to the question of what is the most effective instructional best practice for teaching students with disabilities. Only three principals were able to articulate a clear definition of differentiated instruction. Principal B, the only principal who felt adequately prepared for instructional leadership for students with disabilities, was one of those interviewees. Principals need to be well-informed about differentiated instruction that must occur in inclusive classrooms (Friend & Pope, 2005).

The research indicates that administrative support for best practices in the classroom and knowledge of legislation for students with disabilities leads to improved outcomes for students in these programs (McHatton et. al., 2010). Principals are held accountable and have a great number of responsibilities, including understanding the complexities of varied systems and alternative teaching strategies to ensure student success (Friend & Pope, 2005; Garrison et al, 2007).

## Program Assessment

Ensuring appropriate educational opportunities for students with disabilities is one of the greatest challenges that public schools face (DiPaola et al., 2004). Principals provide leadership for all programs in their buildings (Goor & Schwenn, 1997). Building leaders need a strong, working knowledge of special education policies and procedures, an understanding of disabilities and some of the unique learning and behavior challenges various conditions present, and a comprehensive knowledge of research-based practices (McHatton et al., 2010). Principals must ensure that fundamental changes are implemented, effective support services are provided, progress is monitored closely, and school momentum is maintained (DiPaola et al., 2004).

When asked how the participants ensure that the recommended services and programs developed at CSE meetings are assisting students to make progress and to meet their goals, responses included: meetings with teachers, reviewing data, conversations, trust, personal interaction, ongoing communication, classroom walk-throughs, managing the school environment, quarterly reports, and supervision. Reviewing data was indicated by four interviewees and those interviewees shifted from monitoring progress using qualitative information to a data-driven, quantitative approach. According to Stevenson-Jacobson et al. (2006), principals with training and experience in special education generally assume more

responsibility for special education than principals without such training and experience. Principals with special education training and experience refer fewer students out of their home school for services (Stevenson-Jacobson et al., 2006).

The remainder of the interviewees described using qualitative information to assess the success of their programs designed for students with disabilities. Less than half, four interviewees indicated discussing student progress in meetings as a mechanism to assess the success of programs designed for students with disabilities.

Interviewees ensure that recommended services and programs developed at CSE meetings are assisting students to make progress and to meet their goals by using both quantitative and qualitative methods, but most are using qualitative information. Communication with teachers was reported as an essential component of ensuring the success of programs designed for students with disabilities.

## Special Education Law

All research subjects indicated that knowing and understanding special education law is an important aspect of building level leadership. Although the research subjects indicated that knowing and understanding special education law is an importance aspect of being a principal, none of the respondents felt confident in their knowledge in this area. The principals often rely on others, the special education experts, to obtain information about special education law.

Protz (2005) designed a study to determine administrators' legal knowledge and their perceptions of their preparation for working with students with special needs. The findings of the study indicated that an increase in administrators' knowledge of special education law is essential and that practices should be brought about through formal graduate training.

A successful environment for students with disabilities has a direct relationship to school administrators' knowledge and understanding of special education laws in their schoolhouse; administrators are ultimately responsible for ensuring the integration of goals and objectives of special education students within the regular education curriculum (Protz, 2005, p. 16).

Concern about not being prepared or knowing enough about the special education law was expressed by at least two interviewees. One interviewee knows very little about special education law and can get by as a result of having a collaborative relationship with special educators. Another participant relies on the school psychologist or the special education administrator for information regarding special education law.

Six participants in this study indicated that discipline of students with disabilities is the most important aspect of special education law that elementary principals need to know. Other important aspects of special education law that elementary principals need to know include: compliance, time tables, 504 regulations, scheduling as it relates to IEP implementation, service requirements, parent rights, and knowing the IEP. Due to a lack of knowledge regarding special education law, one interviewee could not identify what the most important aspect of special education law is that elementary principals need to know. The majority of respondents in this study did not emphasize the importance of knowing and properly implementing IEPs as a way to avoid costly litigation. Participants in this study avoid litigation by communicating and building relationships with parents. Poor decisions made by school administrators regarding placement and discipline, as well as poor decisions made during CSE meetings can lead to costly settlements by school districts and compromise the education of all students (Protz, 2005). Only one principal, Principal F, understood that avoiding impartial hearings may not be in a child's

best interest. Principal F welcomed an impartial hearing because s/he believed a student was inappropriately placed and the parents disagreed.

Valesky and Hirth (1992) found that the number of due process hearings was not related to certification requirements because regardless of how much knowledge and background an administrator has of special education, and no matter how appropriate a program may be, parents can exercise their rights and request a hearing if they are not satisfied. However, it was noted that administrators must follow procedural requirements because a case may be won by parents when administrators fail to follow procedural safeguards and requirements. This is why the authors believe it is important for all administrators to have knowledge of special education law.

Interviewees in this study described the value of Individualized Education Programs (IEP) and the essential components of these documents. Knowledge and understanding of IEPs varied but the only interviewee who felt adequately prepared to be an instructional leader for students with disabilities thoroughly defined the function and importance of IEPs. All of the interviewees knew the importance of the IEP as a legal document even if they were unable to accurately describe the essential components of an IEP. All novice elementary principals should understand the essential components of an IEP and how they are developed, as IEPs contain instructional implications for students with disabilities.

Interviewees were asked to define Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) as it relates to educating students with disabilities. The majority, eight interviewees, were able to accurately define LRE, demonstrating an understanding that all students must be educated with their nondisabled peers to the maximum extent possible. Less than half, five principals, were not able to accurately define LRE. Understanding LRE is an important aspect of designing, leading, managing, and implementing programs for students with disabilities that elementary principals

should know because not only is it a legal requirement, but it is in the best interest of students with disabilities. Creating inclusive environments for all learners can more easily be realized through strong, inclusive leadership practices from school administrators (Garrison-Wade, Sobel, & Fulmer, 2007).

All 13 interviewees reported that parents of children with disabilities in their school had not initiated an impartial hearing against the school district. The most common response to reducing the likelihood of an impartial hearing from occurring was by openly communicating with parents and the team members who work with the children. The second most common response was to build relationships with parents. Novice elementary principals compensate for their lack of knowledge and understanding of special education law by communicating and building relationships with parents and team members. Although these methods are very important, principals need a greater and deeper understanding of special education law (Protz, 2005).

### District Types Impact Special Education Programming

All interviewees, except for one, indicted that district size impacted their knowledge of special education. Principal A indicated that experience, not district size, had the greatest impact on knowledge of special education. The other interviewees reported that district size did have an impact on their knowledge of special education because they had to learn on their own; there were more opportunities for interactions with people, more diversity of families and students, more resources to pull from, made them more creative, more program options, parents knew their rights, and they were involved in everything in the building.

Interviewees employed in small-school districts reported that because the district was small, they had to learn more about special education on their own; there were fewer special

education experts to rely upon. Interviewees who worked in larger school districts reported that because the district was large, there were fewer opportunities to learn more about special education because they could rely upon the special education experts for information.

Research subjects indicated that district size had an impact on resources available for students with disabilities. When asked if their district had adequate resources to ensure academic success for students with disabilities, the most common response, reported by seven out of 13 interviewees, was "yes." Some, four interviewees, responded both yes and no to the question, while two said "no." Interviewees who stated their district had adequate resources for students with disabilities indicated that their district offered programs to meet the needs of students, there was enough special education administrative support, there was assistance for students with social and emotional problems, and the district regulated the number of students with disabilities within inclusion classes.

Less than half, four interviewees in this study indicated that their district does and does not provide adequate resources for students with disabilities. Those participants stated that there is a lot of administrative support but more classroom support is needed, they wanted more occupational therapy and reading and math support, the district could use more varied programming, more technology, more assistance from outside agencies, and updated buildings.

Only two respondents stated that their district did not provide adequate resources for students with disabilities because their school needed more space for programs, needed more inclusion classes, and a mechanism to ensure that every child can pass state assessments.

Superintendents serve an important role in the development of quality programs for students with disabilities by supporting principals. There was a connection between superintendent support and districts providing adequate resources for students with disabilities.

When interviewees reported their district had adequate special education resources, the superintendent was supportive of the efforts related to special education programming. Whether the superintendent was new to the district or had been in the position for some time, the majority of the interviewees reported that they believe that their superintendent supported their efforts to develop quality programs for students with disabilities. Superintendents supported the efforts of building leaders by being a good listener, maintaining special education programs in the midst of budget reductions, being supportive of new initiatives, supporting inclusion classes, allowing for professional development, providing enough staffing, supporting everything good for students, and supporting RTI.

District type does impact principals' knowledge of special education as it relates to instructional leadership for students with disabilities. Except for one interviewee, all other interviewees reported that district size impacted their knowledge of special education. Many interviewees, seven out of 13, believed their district had adequate resources to ensure academic success for students with disabilities. Superintendent support for elementary principals is important in providing and developing quality programs for students with disabilities.

## Recommendations

This section offers recommendations for addressing the problem of inadequately prepared novice elementary principals. In addition, recommendations were made to colleges and universities offering administrative preparation programs, and for future research.

### Addressing the Problem

Individuals planning on pursuing a career in administration without any background in special education may want to enroll in an administrative preparation program that incorporates special education related coursework and/or an administrative internship that involves special

education. This recommendation was motivated by a review of the experiences of Principal B, the only novice elementary principal who felt adequately prepared to design, lead, manage, and implement programs for students with disabilities. In addition, according to Stevenson-Jacobson et al. (2006), principals with training and experience in special education generally assume more responsibility for special education than principals without such training and experience.

Future administrators need to obtain as much experience as possible working with students with disabilities as a way to better understand the instructional needs of students with disabilities. Working collaboratively with a special education teacher will provide insight into the learning needs of students with learning differences and also provides an opportunity to enhance collaboration skills. However, according to Lasky and Karge (2006), experiences alone do not necessarily adequately prepare novice principals to design, lead, manage, and implement programs for students with disabilities.

Novice principals without any background in special education may want to consider starting their careers working in a larger school district as a way to learn more about special education as there would be many special education experts upon whom to rely for information. Novice principals beginning their careers in smaller school districts will need to be internally motivated to learn about special education on their own because there are fewer special education experts to rely on for information. In addition, those novice principals may want to form or join a professional learning community with other principals as a means to learning more about special education.

Superintendent support is an important aspect of providing and developing quality programs for students with disabilities. Novice elementary principals without any special education background may benefit from beginning their career working in a district where the

superintendent is supportive of special education initiatives. When applying for positions, novice elementary principals may want to research the history of the district and examine the mission and vision of the school district. This study revealed that there was a connection between supportive superintendents and districts providing adequate resources for students with disabilities.

All elementary principals should be actively engaged in the process of ensuring that special education programs are successfully assisting students with disabilities to make progress towards their individualized goals and not leave that responsibility up to others. Principal F did not believe that it was the responsibility of the building principal to ensure that recommended services and programs developed at CSE meetings are helping students make progress and to meet their goals. Due to increased accountability for all students, building principals need to be actively engaged in ensuring that all students are making adequate progress. When novice principals have a better understanding of the CSE process, LRE, instructional best practices, special education law, and functions of IEPs, they will be better equipped to assess the success of the special education programs that exist in their schools. In addition, novice elementary principals would benefit from professional development that focuses on using data such as progress monitoring tools, as a means of evaluating student progress.

Respondents in this study would benefit from professional development in special education law, instructional best practices, and IEP development. School district officials should assess the competency of their building leaders and provide professional development in those targeted special education areas. Novice principals without any background in special education may need to actively seek out professional development and the special education experts to close the gaps as a result of inadequate preparation.

The research subjects indicated discipline of students with disabilities was the most important aspect of special education law that elementary principals need to know. In addition, the most common responses to reducing the likelihood of an impartial hearing from occurring was by communicating with parents and team members and developing relationships with parents. Although both are helpful aspects in avoiding litigation, novice elementary principals need to understand the importance of a legally defensible IEP. Interviewees did not communicate that a deeper understanding of special education law may decrease the likelihood of an impartial hearing. Novice elementary principals would benefit from annual training regarding the updated special education regulations. The more building leaders understand the legalities in educating students with disabilities, the likelihood of litigation decreases.

Principals within this study did not receive any formal training regarding instructional strategies for teaching students with disabilities. It was difficult for at least three interviewees to describe how to differentiate instruction for students with learning differences. Novice principals without any background in special education need to seek out professional development in the area of instructional best practices for students with disabilities. Understanding the different classifications of disabilities can assist building leaders in understanding the instructional needs of students with disabilities. Principals need to develop a repertoire of instructional best practices, broader than differentiated instruction. For example, principals should understand how formative assessment data can be used to individualize instruction and research-based reading interventions.

Novice principals may benefit from having a mentor who is knowledgeable about special education. On-the-job experience was the most common way in which interviewees learned about special education. However, learning from others occurred informally. Establishing a

structure for learning from a special education expert may help close the gap regarding what was missed during preservice training.

**The Role of Colleges and Universities in the Preparation of Future Principals**

The study revealed that college and universities are not adequately preparing educational leaders for instructional leadership for students with disabilities; only one novice elementary principal in this study felt adequately prepared for instructional leadership for students with disabilities. Administrative preparation programs should embed at least one special education course into the requirements of the program. Principals who did have some exposure to special education coursework during their administrative preservice coursework still refer to the information years later. The participants in this study had difficulty expressing and/or defining instructional best practices for any student. Therefore, colleges and universities need to begin embedding coursework that addresses instructional leadership for all students, including those students with disabilities, or at a minimum, include more special education instructional leadership content within existing coursework.

Emphasis on collaboration needs to be embedded into educational leadership preparation programs as collaboration was reported as an essential component of building level leadership. Building leaders often have to collaborate with special education experts to obtain updated information regarding special education. In addition, principals need to model collaboration for coteaching teams. Future administrators should be taught strategies on how to work, share ideas, and problem-solve with others as the definition of collaboration appears to be unique to the individual.

Coursework taught by administrators was identified as an important aspect of learning for at least one respondent. Colleges and universities should consider hiring professors who are

knowledgeable about special education and who are either currently working in the field or retired. Embedding real-life examples and application into coursework combines theory and practice together. Novice elementary principals need to start their careers with the ability to know how to design, lead, manage, and implement programs for students with disabilities.

### Future Research

Principal F was interested in learning about successful special education programs. Successful programs would be defined as students with disabilities making adequate yearly progress as demonstrated by state assessment performance. Future research could include a national study of successful programs designed for students with disabilities, including the background experiences and training of the building leaders in those schools.

This study was limited to the one state in the northeast. It was also limited to novice elementary school principals. A larger sample size and a broader geographic area would allow for a more varied and in-depth examination of programs that are effective for students with disabilities. Study results would produce data regarding essential elements of successful programs, what resources are required to develop successful programs, and the kind of background of the school leaders in those buildings.

Once successful programs have been studied and the data have been analyzed, other school districts may be able to implement recommendations on how to create successful programs for students with disabilities.

## Conclusion

All students deserve the right to be educated in schools where the instructional leader is knowledgeable about how best to educate all students, including students with disabilities. It is alarming that all but one of the interviewees felt inadequately prepared for instructional

leadership for students with disabilities. When administrative preparation programs neglect to provide future educational leaders with the knowledge they need to design, lead, manage, and implement programs for students with disabilities, these programs are doing a disservice to both administrators and students.

Students with disabilities require academic interventions that are unique to their disability. When novice principals are not adequately prepared to help their teachers instruct students with learning differences, students pay the price. Parents are becoming more and more knowledgeable about special education law and have high expectations for their children, regardless of their disability. The principals within this study believed that their relationships and communication with parents and team members would be enough to avoid litigation, but this is a naive notion. Litigation can be avoided by building leaders designing, leading, managing, and implementing quality programs for students with disabilities and being knowledgeable on how best to instruct all students.

In these times of academic accountability for all students, it is unfortunate that none of the interviewees learned any instructional best practices for students with disabilities during their preservice administrative coursework. Interviewees reported differentiated instruction as an effective instructional strategy for students with disabilities; however, only three respondents were able to clearly describe what it means to differentiate instruction. Principals need a broader understanding of instructional best practices so they can serve as a resource for teachers and staff working with students with disabilities.

Hopefully with the implementation of the new teacher and principal evaluation system, there will be a paradigm change, including better preparing instructional leaders to implement quality programs for all students. School districts often embark into long, expensive, impartial

hearings when parents do not believe that their school district is providing their child with a free and appropriate public education. Perhaps if all administrative leaders understood more about the instructional needs of students with disabilities, there would be less time, money, and energy spent in litigation. It is the belief of the American education system that everyone deserves the right to a quality, free, and appropriate education, regardless of whether or not a student is disabled. By better training building leaders, perhaps all students will have access to the services and programs in which they deserve to be productive members of our society.

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*Appendix A*

Institutional Review Board Approval

Sage Graduate Schools
School of Health Sciences --- Office of the Dean
65 1st Street
Troy, NY 12180
http://www.sage.edu/sgs/ --- 518-244-2264

April 13, 2011

Lori A. Mulford
11 Sawood Lane
Woodstock, NY 12498

**IRB PROPOSAL # 10-11-030R**
**Reviewer: Susan C. Cloninger, Chair**

Dear Lori:

The Institutional Review Board has reviewed your application and has approved the revisions of your project entitled "An Investigation of Elementary Principals' Preparation for Instructional Leadership in Special Education." Good luck with your research.

When you have completed collecting your data you will need to submit to the IRB Committee a final report indicating any problems you may have encountered regarding the treatment of human subjects

Please refer to your IRB Proposal number whenever corresponding with us whether by mail or in person.

Please let me know if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Susan C. Cloninger

Susan C. Cloninger, PhD
Chair, IRB

SCC/nan

Cc. Dr. Ray O'Connell

*Appendix B*

Cover Letter to Participants

Dear _____,

My name is Lori A. Mulford and I am a doctoral candidate at Sage College located in Albany, New York. I am also a Pupil Personnel Services Director employed in the Spackenkill Union Free School District located in Poughkeepsie, New York.

I am conducting a phenomenological qualitative research study required for my doctoral dissertation. My study has to do with principals' preparation and experience related to special education instructional leadership. The first phase of my research requires that I determine whether or not your background aligns with the qualifications required for the study and whether or not you would be interested in participating in the study. If you are currently an elementary principal with less than five years experience, with at least one year completed, and you do not have any teaching certifications in the area of special education, your background is aligned with those I am looking to interview for my study.

Given your experience as a principal, I was hoping you would be willing to allow me to interview you. The research involves the completion of a brief personal interview. During the interview, I will be asking you a series of questions regarding your knowledge and experience related to special education instructional leadership. The audio taped interview will last approximately forty-five minutes (no more than one hour) and will be conducted in a location of your convenience. You may elect for a face-to-face, Skype, or phone interview. Skype is an online video chat product that allows people to see each other and speak to each other in real time. Skype's policies for security and privacy can be found at http://www.skype.com/intl/en-us/security/.

If your background matches this description and you are willing to participate, please respond to my e-mail no later than one week from the date you received this e-mail, _____. After one week, I will send you a follow-up e-mail ensuring that you have received the e-mail.

If you agree to participate in the study, I will send you specific information regarding the study. In addition, the Sage Colleges' Institutional Review Board (IRB) requires that I send you a letter of consent to read and sign before we begin the interview. I will send you the consent form via e-mail and by regular mail. Please keep the consent form you receive by e-mail for your records and mail the signed consent form back to me.

The benefit of your participation is that your input for this project will add to the literature regarding principals' preservice and experience related to instructional leadership for students with disabilities. All information gathered will be kept confidential and participants (including your school district) will be given fictitious names.

Again, please contact me at mulfol@sage.edu within one week (  ) if your background matches the requirements of the study and you are willing to participate in the study. I sincerely thank you in advance for your consideration and hope to work with you in my study. If you have any additional questions or concerns, please contact my doctoral chairperson, Dr. Ray O'Connell at oconnr@sage.edu.

Sincerely,

Lori A. Mulford

*Appendix C*

Letter of Informed Consent

To: _____

You are being asked to participate in a research project entitled**: Investigation of elementary principals' preparation for instructional leadership in special education.**

This research is being conducted by**:**
**Student Investigator: Lori A. Mulford, Doctoral Candidate, Sage Graduate Schools**

**Principal Investigator: Dr. Ray O'Connell, Associate Professor and Director of Research, Educational Leadership Committee Chair, Sage Graduate Schools**

**Purpose of the research study**:
This doctoral research study is designed to explore how preservice training and experience has impacted elementary principals' understanding and implementation of instructional leadership for students with disabilities. I, Lori A. Mulford, a doctoral student at Sage Graduate Schools in Albany, New York, am conducting this study to learn more about how principals are prepared to provide instructional leadership to teachers and staff working with students with disabilities.

**The nature and duration of subject's participation and procedures**
Face-to-face, Skype, or phone interviews will be conducted with approximately twelve principals from six different counties to determine their background and their knowledge of special education related to instructional leadership. Skype is an online video chat product that allows people to see each other and speak to each other in real time. Skype's policies for security and privacy can be found at http://www.skype.com/intl/en-us/security/.

Participants in this study will be interviewed by the researcher for approximately one hour answering a series of questions related to their preparation and experience, as well as special education instructional leadership. The interviews will be conducted at an agreed upon location most convenient for the participant. For the purpose of data analysis, the interviews will be audio taped by the researcher and later transcribed by a Sage Graduate School approved professional.

The data gathered from interviews will remain confidential throughout the study. Your name will not be attached to any of the responses; pseudonyms will be assigned to you for the purposes of reporting the results of the study. All electronic information will be stored on password-protected computers and hard copies of data will be kept in a locked filing cabinet. Only the researcher will have access to the study data. There will not be any identifying names on the digital audio recordings. After the completion of the dissertation, the audio files will be destroyed. The results of the research will be published in a typed document and may be published in a professional journal or presented at professional meetings.

It is intended that the information gathered from this study will lead to a better understanding of how elementary principals are prepared for instructional leadership in the area of special education. In addition, depending on the outcome of the study, recommendations may be made to colleges and universities regarding preparing prospective principals for instructional leadership in the area of special education.

**Benefits of participation**

Principals are expected to design, lead, manage, and implement programs for all students, including those with disabilities. Principals who have the knowledge and understanding of the learning needs of all students have the ability to make an impact on the learning outcomes for students with disabilities. Examining how elementary principals are prepared to design, lead, manage, and implement programs for students with disabilities provides important insight into the field of educational leadership. By participating in this study, you are providing information that will benefit all children, specifically, children with disabilities.

**Digital Audio Recording of Interview**

For the purpose of data analysis only, the interviews will be recorded digitally by the researcher and later transcribed by a Sage Graduate School approved professional. The audio file will be played in the home of the researcher and in the office of the transcriber. The interviews will be conducted at a location and setting that is mutually agreed upon by the participant and the researcher.

**I give permission to the researcher to play the audio file of the interview in the places described above. Put your initials here to indicate your permission. _____.**

**Potential risks of participation**

This study is considered a minimal risk study. The study is categorized as such in the event that you feel any stress during the interview. You have the right to stop and/or withdraw from the study at any time, shall you feel uncomfortable. If you decide to withdraw from the study at any time, the data will not be used and will be destroyed.

In the event that I am harmed by participation in this study, I understand that compensation and/or medical treatment is not available from The Sage Colleges. However, compensation and/or medical costs might be recovered by legal action.

**Participation is voluntary, I understand that I may at any time during the course of this study revoke my consent and withdraw from the study without any penalty.**

I have been given an opportunity to read and keep a copy of this Agreement and to ask questions concerning the study. Any such questions have been answered to my full and complete satisfaction.

**I, _____, having full capacity to consent, do hereby volunteer to participate in this research study**

**Signed: _____**
**Research participant**

This research has received the approval of The Sage Colleges Institutional Review Board, which functions to insure the protection of the rights of human participants. If you, as a participant, have any complaints about this study, please contact:

Dr. Esther Haskvitz, Interim Dean
Sage Graduate Schools
School of Health Sciences
65 First Street
Troy, New York 12180
518-244-2264
haskve@sage.edu

*Appendix D*

Permission to Adapt Instrument

Hi Lori,

Thank you so much for your inquiry and request to use our Principal Survey Instrument for your study. Please accept this email as our authorization to do so. I understand you will be adapting the instrument based on the design of your study.

Sincerely,

Patty

Patricia Alvarez McHatton, Ph.D.

Associate Professor

President, Teacher Education Division of the Council for Exceptional Children

University of South Florida

Department of Special Education

4202 E. Fowler Avenue, EDU105

Tampa, FL 33620

813.974.9595 (Office)

813.974.5542 (Fax)

mchatton@usf.edu

*Appendix E*

Interview Protocol

Hello. My name is Lori Mulford and I am a doctoral candidate at Sage Graduate Schools. Thank you for agreeing to take part in an interview to gather data for my doctoral research. My research is investigating how principals with more than one and less than five years of experience are prepared for instructional leadership for students with disabilities.

I will be asking you questions that will help me develop a better understanding of how you acquired the necessary skills required for instructional leadership for students with disabilities. Your interview will be taped on a digital audio recorder and transcribed. I will also take hand-written notes during the interview. The transcriber signed a confidentiality agreement. No real names will be used when data are recorded, transcribed or reported. Any hard copy data will be kept under lock and key in a filing cabinet in my home office. Any hard copies of the data will be shredded once the dissertation has been completed. Any electronic data will be deleted into the electronic trashcan and emptied at the completion of the dissertation. The hand-written notes will also be destroyed at the completion of the dissertation.

Your name and your school district will be kept confidential and pseudonyms will be developed for use in the dissertation. Please know that you do not have to answer all of the questions and that all of your answers will remain confidential. If you decide to withdraw from the study at any time, the data will not be used and will be destroyed.

I will be asking you questions that are grouped into categories. I would like to ask you to please refrain from using any names of students or your school district when responding to the questions. The categories are the **introduction**, **preparation, experience, acquiring knowledge, accountability, regulations, and district type.**

**Demographic Information**

*Tape Number:*_____*Date:*_____*Time:* _____

*District Community Type:* _____
*Years of Elementary Principal Experience:* _____

*Do you have any other administrative experiences? If so, please identify them and for how long you were employed in those positions.* _____

*Total Years of Administrative Experience:* _____

*FTE Total School Enrollment:* _____

*What is the highest educational level you have received?*
*Degrees:*
*BA Major:* _____
*BS Major:* _____
*MA Major:* _____
*MS Major:* _____
*Ed. D. Major:* _____
*Ph. D. Major:* _____

**Introduction**
Are you the building-based administrator who is responsible for the oversight of special education?

When you were first appointed as principal, what special education programs existed in your building? For example, partial or full-day inclusion, self-contained, etc.

At this time, what program models are available for students with disabilities in your school? For example, partial or full-day inclusion, self-contained, etc.

Do you have the power to create, change, or eliminate special education programs in your building?

a. If **yes**, what drives your decision making when creating, changing or eliminating special education programs in your building?

Were any new programs developed under your leadership?

b. If **no**, who does create, change, or eliminate programs?

Are any students attending out of district programs, if so, for what reasons?

_____

**Preparation (Related to Research Question #1)**

How many special education related courses were included in your educational leadership preparation program?

In your educational leadership preparation program, please indicate if any of the following topics were covered in any other of your courses and what you learned about those topics:
* Legal issues of special education
* Characteristics of students with disabilities
* Curricular modifications/accommodations for students with disabilities
* Discipline of students with disabilities

* Instructional best practices for students with disabilities
* Or any categories I did not mention?

Were you ever advised by anyone in your educational leadership preparation program to take courses related to special education?

Do you feel that your educational leadership preparation program adequately prepared you to be an instructional leader for students with disabilities?

---

**Experience (Related to Research Question #2)**

Describe your on the job experiences, either teaching, or previous administrative positions that have prepared you to design, lead, manage, and implement programs for students with disabilities.

In which areas, if any, have you received either formal or informal professional development on the job?
* Legal issues of special education
* Characteristics of students with disabilities
* Curricular modifications/accommodations for students with disabilities
* Discipline of students with disabilities
* Instructional best practices for students with disabilities
* Anything else that I didn't mention?

Describe how was the professional development was delivered.

Do you feel like you need additional training or professional development related to special education? If so, in what areas?

What has had the greatest impact on your understanding of special education; preservice coursework, experience or on-the-job training? Please explain.

---

**Acquiring Knowledge (Related to Research Question #3)**

What do you feel are the **most** effective instructional best practices for teaching students with disabilities and where did you learn about these practices?

What or who is your most valuable resource of information related to special education?

Do you or someone else, provide teachers and staff with ongoing professional development related to teaching students with disabilities?

Where did you learn about the federal mandate, Response to Intervention (RTI), and how does this mandate impact both general and special education instructional practices?

---

**Accountability (Related to Research Question #4)**

How has increased accountability for student achievement impacted your motivation to learn more about special education instructional best practices? Please explain.

How do you ensure that the recommended services and programs developed at the Committee on Special Education (CSE) are helping students make progress and to meet their goals?

In regard to the New York State assessments, how would you describe your expectations for students with disabilities?

How do you communicate these expectations of students with disabilities to teachers and staff?

Do you know what your superintendent's expectations are for student achievement for students with disabilities and has it influenced your instructional leadership for students with disabilities? If yes, how?

---

**Regulations (Related to Research Question #5)**

Please describe the value of an Individualized Education Program (IEP) and what do you feel are the essential components of these documents?

How important is it for you, as the building leader, to know and understand special education laws, both at the state and federal levels? Please explain.

What does it mean to educate students in the least restrictive environment?

Has a parent in your school initiated an impartial hearing against the school district?

What steps, if any, have you taken to reduce the likelihood of an impartial hearing?

What do you feel are the most important aspects of special education law that elementary principals need to know? Please explain.

---

**District Types (Related to Research Question #6)**

Do you feel that working in a (smaller or larger) district has had an impact on your knowledge of special education?

Do you believe that your district has adequate resources to ensure academic success for students with disabilities? Why or why not?

a. If yes, what types of resources are available in your district to ensure academic success for students with disabilities?

b. If no, what types of resources do you wish were available to ensure academic success for students with disabilities?

In what ways has your superintendent supported your efforts to develop quality programs for students with disabilities?

---

**Closing**

Thank you for participating in the interview and my study. The next phase is for the interviews to be transcribed by an individual approved by Sage College. Once transcribed, the data will be sent to me and kept on a password-protected laptop and desktop computer. All information will remain confidential at all times.

Your responses will be returned to you to ensure that the intent of your responses align with the questions. If I do not hear back from you after 10 days, I will call you to confirm that you are in agreement with your transcribed statements.

If you have any follow-up questions, please contact me via email at mulfol@sage.edu or phone at (845) 679-6109.

Thanks again for your time.

*Appendix F*

Transcription Confidentiality Agreement

Agreement and acknowledgement between _____ (Transcription Company/transcriber) and Lori A. Mulford (client/researcher).
The Client has or shall furnish to the Company/transcriber certain confidential information, all on the following conditions:

1. The Company/transcriber agrees to hold all confidential or proprietary information in trust and confidence and agrees that it shall be used only for the contemplated purposes, and shall not be used for any other purpose or disclosed to any third party under any circumstances, whatsoever.

2. No copies may be made or retained of any digital audio or written information supplied.

3. At the conclusion of our discussions, or upon demand by the client, all information, including digital audio or written notes shall be returned to the client. Company/transcriber shall not retain copies or written documentation relating thereto.

4. This information shall not be disclosed to any employee, consultant or third party unless party agrees to execute and be bound by the terms of this agreement, and disclosure by client is first approved.

5. The Company/transcriber acknowledges the information disclosed herein is proprietary and in the event of any breach, the Client shall be entitled to injunction relief as a cumulative and not necessarily successive or exclusive remedy to a claim for monetary damages.

6. This constitutes the entire agreement. Signed this ____day of _____, 2010.

Witnessed:

_____ _____
Witness Company Representative/transcriber

_____ _____
Witness Client (Lori A. Mulford)