SCHOOL BUILDING LEVEL ADMINISTRATORS AND SPECIAL EDUCATION: ROLES, RESPONSIBILITIES, AND EXPECTATIONS

by

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A dissertation submitted to the faculty of
The University of North Carolina at Charlotte
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Education in
Educational Leadership

Charlotte

2021

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ABSTRACT

TRACEY A. CARNEY. School Building Level Administrators and Special Education: Roles, Responsibilities, and Expectations. (Under the direction of DR. LISA R. MERRIWEATHER)

Special education has transformed over the last three decades to ensure the provision of services and instructional practices are provided for students with disabilities. However, there a disconnect remains between special education and the required knowledge an administrator needs in order to be effective for special education. As a result of the lack of knowledge many administrators have about special education, litigation and due process requests have continued to increase at a steady rate. A majority of administrators have reported lacking a fundamental understanding of special education law, instructional practices, and service delivery. This lack of understanding has impacted special education students and instructional practices. Additionally, accountability measures indicated a significant achievement gap between students with disabilities and their peers. Given these concerns, a need for research continues to exist to ascertain the most effective ways to improve administrator's knowledge about special education in order to improve student outcomes.

This qualitative, comparative case study aimed to explore perceptions about the role of an administrator for special education programming in order to identify specific areas of special education programming knowledge administrators need to be effective for special education. Interviews were conducted with three key stakeholder groups: special education teachers, general education teachers, and administrators, in order to ascertain converging and diverging perspectives about the role of an administrator for special education programming.

Findings in this study supported prior work around the lack of knowledge administrators had about special education law and practice. However, the findings expanded on those further exploring the skills required to implement the knowledge administrators need in order to be effective for special education programming. Specifically, this study found that educational philosophy was an influential aspect to overall effectiveness of administrators for special education. Additionally, championing for the betterment of all stakeholders, and growth mindset were identified as areas necessary for an administrator to be effective for special education programming. These findings support the need for additional training that education administrators should receive to not only understand special education law, but also understand how to be an effective administrator for special education programming. Results reflect a need for administrators to have underlying knowledge about special education in addition to the soft skills needed to effectively support and oversee special education programming in their school.

KEY WORDS: Special education, School administrators, Administrator preparation, Systems Thinking Theory, Administrator roles

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

When I think back to how this all began and how much I have learned, I have to thank Dr. Lisa Merriweather for not only being a member of my committee, but also graciously stepping up as my chair during a time of crisis. I am grateful for her ongoing support and encouragement throughout this long and sometimes arduous journey. Whether I needed encouragement or tough love, Dr. Merriweather was there and knew what I needed to keep going. Her unwavering support has allowed me to have the confidence to finish writing and accomplish my dream. Second, I am thankful for my dissertation committee; Dr. Lim, Dr. Abrams, and Dr. Watson; for their guidance, suggestions, and support during this process. I must also give a special thank you to our program director, Dr. Howell who not only provided support throughout the process, but also stepped up and participated in my defense at the last minute. This has been a long journey and I could not have done it without the support and love of my partner, Adam. Whenever I needed a gentle push, Adam was there as my cheerleader, reminding me of what I was about to accomplish. Thank you for your love and support, even though I often grumbled, to get me to the end! I appreciate our daily walks to process my thinking and your willingness to listen to me write out loud. You are my best friend and I appreciate you being there every step of the way. Finally, my family and friends have always been my champions. Thank you to my siblings who have been there for me during all of the challenges faced and always reminded me I was more than capable of accomplishing this goal. I am especially grateful for the unwavering support of my twin, Kevin, who knew how to get me back on track. I would not have been able to accomplish this goal without your humor and perspective. I am humbled by the friendship and love I have experienced from so many people in my life that has helped me

get to this point in my educational career. Thank you to all those who have made this possible and encouraged me to never give up. I am forever grateful to you.

DEDICATION

I would not be where I am today if it were not for my parents, Michael J. and Cathleen P. Carney, who always encouraged me to pursue my dreams. Even when they did not understand why I continued to further my education, they were always there to cheer me on and support my goals. I am forever grateful to my parents for always reminding me that knowledge is the way forward and I should always pursue my passions. As a first generation American and college graduate, I am always aware of how lucky I have been to pursue this dream. Although they have both passed, my commitment to complete and earn my terminal degree is dedicated to them. I am also forever grateful for the guidance, support, and encouragement from my professor and dear friend, Dr. Brenda McMahon. Although Dr. McMahon passed before completion of my dissertation, her fighting spirit remains with me and I dedicate my dissertation to her. While no longer with us, my parents and Dr. McMahon live on in my memories and I use those as motivation to complete this work. I am forever grateful and humbled by the love, support, guidance, and passion shown by each of them.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

EC	Exceptional children or special education
ELCC	Educational leadership constituent council
FAPE	free and appropriate public education
IDEA	Individuals with Disabilities Education Act
IEP	Individualized Education Program
LEA	Local education agency
LRE	Least restrictive environment
NCDPI-EC	North Carolina Department of Instruction- EC Division
OSEP	Office of Special Education Programs
SNA	Special Needs Administrator

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

> The development of a carefully coordinated program of special educational services for the physically and mentally handicapped children requires unusually competent leadership. It is one of the great undeveloped fields in American education (Wilson, 1933, p. 379).

The evolution of public education has seen a dramatic shift from few to access for all. From Massachusetts passing the first law in 1827 requiring schools to provide free public school to all grades to the present day where all students in the United States are entitled to a free public education in grades kindergarten through twelfth grade, there have been numerous policies to reform the educational arena (Thattai, 2017). Although students were entitled to free education in elementary school by the late 19th century, students with disabilities did not receive safeguards to receive the same opportunities as their peers. Safeguards were not provided until the 1970s when laws were provided for students with disabilities the same access to public education as their peers (Lock, 2011). Despite special education students not being readily accepted in public schools during the 19th and early 20th centuries, Wilson (1933) and others recognized a need for administrators to develop further the skills necessary to work with students with disabilities.

Background

The evolution of public education over the last century has been significant for various reasons. The shift from educating specific populations to the inclusion of students with disabilities has significantly shifted instructional practices, funding, roles, and responsibilities of educators. Many students nationally and statewide receive special education services as students with a disability. North Carolina identifies roughly the same percentage of students for special education services nationally reported. The average daily membership for students enrolled in

North Carolina public schools during the 2019-2020 year was 1,526,144 (NCDPI, 2020). Of the 1.5 million students enrolled, 211,012 students were identified as students with a disability according to the annual April child count, thus accounting for 13.83% of all students in North Carolina (NCDPI, 2020). The Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) most recent report for the 2017-2018 school year indicated 6,964,424 students with a disability, accounting for 13.7% of total student enrollment (OSEP, 2020). Administrators need to recognize the increasing number of students with disabilities to provide adequate support and ensure quality instruction to all students. In order to do this, administrators must have adequate command over federal and state mandates governing special education services.

The current state of public education is a complex system with many federal and state mandates (funded and unfunded) and accountability measures that must be adhered to receive funding from federal, state, and local agencies. There are specific requirements or designations on allocating funds within each funding agency. One area with particularly complex requirements for allocation is special education programming. In order to receive funding from federal and state governing bodies, public school districts are required to provide the provision of services for students identified as a student with a disability. At first glance, one might think that meeting those requirements would be relatively simple; however, that is not the case. Special education is an incredibly complex subsection of the education system with federal laws and regulations that states must adopt, developing plans for implementation and technical assistance for local educational agencies (LEA's). There are entire sections within the state department of public instruction to develop and oversee special education programming. However, not all school districts have the capacity or personnel to devote resources to the oversight of special education.

Regardless of the capacity to provide this oversight, districts must provide special education services to receive the allocation of funds. Each school district must designate a person or department responsible for the provision of special education services. Typically, a school district will have a Director of Special Education in charge of budgeting, funding positions, and providing district-level support for special education services. The principal or designee (typically the assistant principal) is responsible for oversight of special education services and programming within their building within each school. The administrator responsible for special education within each school building is expected to appropriately implement these provisions of services by adhering to federal and state laws and regulations. Administrators must be knowledgeable about the complexities of special education. Failure to do so may result in adverse outcomes for students and potential litigation.

Special Education Litigation

One of the most important aspects of a special educator's job is having an in-depth understanding of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004). IDEA is a federal law that provides a comprehensive framework from which special education teachers must develop Individualized Education Plans (IEP's) for students with disabilities (IDEA, 2004). In order to fully implement an IEP, special education teachers rely on the leadership of their school administrative team to make informed decisions. By relying on the administrative team, teachers are putting their ability to create and implement IEPs that provide free and appropriate public education (FAPE) in the hands of the administrators. Given the legality of IEP's and federal requirements of FAPE, administrators must be knowledgeable about these requirements to provide all of the services needed to meet the needs of students with disabilities. Suppose an administrator is not knowledgeable about IDEA and FAPE. In that case, students may not

receive the appropriate services, which may negatively impact student outcomes and potentially result in litigation due to the denial of FAPE (Minor, 1992; Zirkel, 2015).

Changes in federal law and changes in service delivery models, eligibility, and the push for inclusion have resulted in a significant increase in due process hearings across the country (Lukasik, 2016; Shuran & Roblyer, 2012). Administrators are charged with being the LEA representative of their district and, as such, must be knowledgeable of current laws and expectations. Procedural safeguards are in place to provide parents of children with disabilities with established rights and avenues to pursue if they are dissatisfied with the services their child receives (IDEA, 2004). One avenue allows parents to contact their respective state and pursue different paths to resolve their concerns. States must investigate each of these situations and provide a written response or potential solution to parents and the district (IDEA, 2004). Each year, states must compile a report on each path and submit it to the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) for their review (IDEA, 2004).

During the 2017-2018 school year, the total of all due process complaints filed in the United States under IDEA Part B (students identified with having a disability age 3-21) was 19,337 with an additional 5,228 written complaints received, and 11,613 mediation requests (OSEP, 2020). Table 1 highlights the outcomes of complaints received, mediation, and due process findings for students with disabilities in the United States. While due process and medication requests received a low percentage of reports issued, written complaints had more than half resulting in written findings from the OSEP (OSEP, 2020).

Table 1. *Office of Special Education Annual Dispute Resolution Report Findings FY 2017-2018*

Outcome	Written Complains	Mediation Requests*	Due Process Petitions
Total	5,228	11.613	19.337
Reports Issued	65.1%	33.2%	9.9%
Pending	2.9%	9.7%	30.5%
Withdrawn/Dismissed	32.1%	34%	59.5%

Note. * Of the 11,613 received, 2,844 were not related to due process, and mediation was conducted on 24.5% of those.

In North Carolina, the Department of Public Instruction-Exceptional Children's Division (NCDPI-EC) provides an annual report of due process complaints received during the year from any public school. During the 2019-2020 school year, NCDPI-EC reported receiving more than 50 due process hearing petitions and more than 40 mediation meeting requests. In addition to requests, 150 state complaints were filed, with 38% involving failure by the school to implement the IEP (NCDPI, 2020). These data indicate a need for additional support at the district level for special education and IEP implementation.

Student Achievement

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 (NCLB) and the most recent amendment to the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA) have increased student achievement through federal accountability measures. NCLB (2002) was designed to close the achievement gap between subgroups of students through rigorous, quality instruction for all students. States were now required to tie funding with student outcomes on high stakes, standardized testing. With the adoption of ESSA (2015), states and districts are required to ensure equitable access to rigorous instruction to allow all students to be academically successful. With both of these laws, school leaders have felt immense pressure to attain high student achievement levels, resulting in an

emphasis on tested areas. In North Carolina, the standardized testing used to measure outcomes are the End of Grade tests in Math and Reading for 3rd through 8th grade with Science also required in fifth and eighth grade, and End of Course tests for Math I, English II, and Biology (NCDPI, 2015). Students are assessed annually on their grade level Common Core Standards to determine proficiency, with students who earn a level III or higher considered performing at or above grade level (NCDPI, 2015).

Table 2 below reflects the most recent performance of students in District X. Despite the current laws in place to close the achievement gap, the data indicates a persistent gap between students with disabilities and their peers who are considered non-disabled. This is particularly concerning given the focus on decreasing gaps in student outcomes where in this district where students with disabilities are performing on average more than 50% lower in proficiency levels than their non-disabled peers.

Table 2.*2018-2019 EOG Percent Proficiency in School District X*

	Math		Reading	
Grade	SWD	NSWD	SWD	NSWD
3	41.6	81.3	23	72.1
4	29.9	80.7	22.1	78
5	30.9	83.1	19.3	75
6	29.0	82.8	19.5	79.3
7	30.0	83.7	18.5	77.2
8	22.1	76.9	16.5	74.3

Note. SWD=Students with Disabilities; NSWD= Students without Disabilities; EOG=End of Grade Testing. Proficiency-based on earning at or above a Level 3.

Problem Statement

Working as a district-level special education supervisor, special education teacher, and school administrator, I have encountered many situations where the lack of knowledge or

understanding of special education and the associated federal regulations was evident. These situations often could have been avoided if school-based personnel had a better understanding of the purpose of special education and the expectations set forth by both the federal and state legislation. All students with disabilities who are eligible for special education services have an IEP that outlines and explains required support, goals, and needs for each child. An IEP is a legally binding document required to be implemented with fidelity and reviewed at least annually. It is up to each school to ensure compliance, specifically the responsibility falls on the administrators to provide appropriate support to both the general education and special education teachers.

On a few occasions, I have been involved in contentious situations where the administrator was unwilling to adhere to the child's IEP or refused to implement certain pieces because they felt the accommodations or services gave that student an unfair advantage over their peers. One such case involved a student who required a higher level of support than other students. The administrator told the IEP team that the school only provided inclusion classes for students and could not meet the child's needs due to funding issues. IDEA regulations clearly state that an IEP team is required to provide a continuum of services based on the individual needs and that staffing or finances cannot be the determining factor in making educational decisions for students (IDEA, 2004). Failing to provide the needed services for students with a disability is a failure to provide FAPE, leading to litigation which is both costly and time-consuming.

Based on these experiences, the special education department in this district has offered ongoing training for administrators who are responsible for special education. During the initial training, it became apparent to me that a majority of administrators lacked the fundamental

knowledge and understanding of special education needed to act as a local education authority in IEP meetings. While some administrators reported having a knowledge base of special education, they struggled to problem-solve situations and recognize illegal practices when given real scenarios to discuss. Two areas that administrators demonstrated a lack of understanding about were the provision of IEP services and the discipline of students with disabilities. These findings are supported by state complaints filed annually in North Carolina (NCDPI, 2020).

School administrators are referred to as instructional leaders because one of the primary roles of a principal is to support academic achievement. To be an instructional leader, an administrator needs to establish a clear mission and be knowledgeable about quality instructional practices (Lezotte, 1996; MES, 1996). Also, administrators should recognize the importance of teacher empowerment as a critical function of school leadership. Ample research indicates that teachers need to feel empowered and supported within their area of expertise (Leithwood, & Riehl, 2003; Lezotte, 1991). For administrators working with special education teachers, this may pose a challenge because of the limited background and understanding of the complexities within special education. Administrators must know special education law and how to implement special education services within their building. Prior studies indicate that many beginning administrators felt they had minimal understanding of special education and that they did not receive adequate training to address special education in their schools (Aspedon, 1990; Davidson, 1999; Minor, 1992; Valetsky & Hirth, 1992; Wakeman, Browder, Flowers, & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2006). Current federal legislation such as IDEA, NCLB, and the recent reauthorization of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015 continue to have significant implications for administrators. Each of these legislations provides specific mandates for special education students, accountability, and funding. As such, administrators must be knowledgeable

about these mandates to comply with requirements to prevent potential legal and financial ramifications (ESEA, 2010; Williams, 2010).

As stated previously, numerous studies have indicated a lack of formal educational opportunities, training, or minimal support provided to administrators about special education. This lack of education and, in many cases, understanding of special education law, policies, and practices have led to an increase in dissatisfaction among parents of students with disabilities. Administrators and teachers have reported feeling less confident and knowledgeable about special education and shared they lack the skills necessary to provide appropriate leadership and support to students and teachers (Angelle & Bilton, 2009; Cooner et al., 2005; Davidson, 1999; Taylor-Backor & Gordon, 2015; Wakeman et al., 2006). As is evident by the research conducted, administrators are expressing a need for additional training in special education. However, preparation programs continue to exclude it from their programming. However, little has changed to required coursework and understanding of special education policy in states across the country, including North Carolina.

Special education is a complex system with requirements at multiple levels. Federal and state legislation mandates that all public schools provide the appropriate intervention, identification, and implementation strategies to meet the needs of students with disabilities. This legislation is fraught with vague language resulting in varying state and local agencies ' interpretations of the legal requirements. This lack of clarity has led to inconsistencies in interpretation and implementation, varying from locale to across states. Research is needed to better understand the gaps in administrator knowledge and practices that lead to inequitable outcomes for students with special needs.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to explore perceptions about the role of an administrator for special education programming in order to identify specific areas of special education programming knowledge administrators need to be effective for special education.

Research Questions

- What are the perceptions of faculty and administrators regarding the role of an administrator facilitating special education programming for their building?
- What education and training are needed to prepare school administrators for facilitating special education programming in their building?

Theoretical Framework

Systems Thinking Theory (Senge, 1990) is a theoretical framework used to consider how different aspects or pieces of an organization interact to impact the organization. The premise is to understand how something operates; one must also examine the relationships or connections of the parts comprising the whole operation. This theory is relevant to this study because the researcher was able to consider how different groups perceive the role of an administrator for special education programming. Since education is an ever-changing field, Systems Thinking Theory offered an opportunity to gain insight into different perspectives about an administrator's role for special education in relation to their overall role within the educational systems. Having a better understanding of all the pieces will allow for a unique opportunity to grow and continually improve educational practices for special education programming.

Significance

Administrators are instructional leaders, handle day-to-day operations, maintain communication and partnerships within the community, and oversee special education programs

in their building. Overseeing special education in a building includes following IDEA regulations by maintaining paperwork compliance, appropriately developed and implemented IEPs, and providing instructional leadership. According to Horng, Klasik, and Loeb (2010), the amount of time an administrator reportedly spends on special education is roughly 27% of their workday. Considering roughly a quarter of daily work time is focused on special education, administrators need an understanding of special education law and policy and how to provide effective leadership for special education. This study provides needed insights for informing effective leadership for special education by identifying areas for continued improvement such as:

- Help guide university programs to identify gaps and better align programs to the application as an administrator
- alignment of program standards for administrators and licensure requirements
- Determine additional support necessary to provide administrators guidance on working with special education.

Method

This comparative case study sought to describe the perceptions of key stakeholder groups on their perceptions of the role of administrators for special education programming. In-depth individual interviews of administrators, special education teachers, and general education teachers were used to describe and explore converging and diverging perceptions of the role of an administrator for special education. Data gathered was categorized using thematic analysis better to understand an administrator's role for special education. Additional data analysis was used to determine what training and support was needed to be an effective administrator for

special education. By using interviews and field notes, the responses provided by each participant created a constructed reality to help understand how each individual's perceptions and beliefs influenced actions (Creswell, 2013). By interviewing administrators, special education teachers, and general education teachers, data gathered was triangulated, thus developing a detailed description and interpretation of administrators' perceptions.

Limitations

Potential limitations of this study were the participants potentially being a non-representative sample of District X. Given the sensitive nature of the interview protocol; some participants may have been hesitant to discuss specific topics openly. Since this study aims to understand better the role of an administrator for special education programming, participants who were administrators may have been less likely to fully disclose thoughts, beliefs, and perceptions because of appearing incompetent or unaware of how to support special education teachers. Additionally, the small sample size of participants within one school district in North Carolina limits the generalizability of findings to larger groups.

Assumptions

Interviewing current administrators about their perceptions of their role in special education programming can pose some challenges. The researcher assumed that all participants responded truthfully to questions and had a basic understanding of the topic being discussed. This research yielded meaningful and relevant results about their perceptions by interviewing actively employed administrators. Speaking with general education teachers about their perceptions of the role of administrators for special education programming assumed that the general education teacher understood the special education process, expectations, and roles of the administrator for special education.

Definitions

Administrator- is a person who has completed an approved program for school administration, earning either a master's level or add-on licensure, meeting state licensing requirements for North Carolina. Administrators were required to hold a current position as an assistant principal or principal in a K-12 school. For this study, an administrator was the person with the primary responsibility for oversight of special education within their building.

Special Education- students who are found eligible for services under North Carolina regulations must meet three prongs: have an identified area of disability, the disabling condition adversely impacts performance, and requires specially designed instruction (NCDPI, 2016). Students who receive special education services require specially designed instruction to access the general education curriculum. Students can also receive accommodations and modifications or related services such as speech therapy, occupational therapy, physical therapy, orientation and mobility, interpreter services, and counseling (IDEA, 2004).

Individualized Education Program (IEP) - An IEP addresses students' specific and individual needs through the development of annual, measurable goals, modifications, accommodations, and services needed to access the general curriculum. An IEP is a fluid document that must be reviewed and revised at least annually with the IEP team. The IEP team consists of LEA representative, special education teacher, general education teacher, parent, student (required to invite 14 years and older), outside agencies as appropriate, and any other members necessary for the individual students (NCDPI, 2016).

Summary

While the role of an administrator continues to evolve, they continue to be responsible for the oversight of special education programming. Given the current data that documents ongoing areas of concern with the provision of services for students with disabilities and the increased number of students identified with a disability, administrators need to have the knowledge and skills to be effective administrators for special education programming. It is imperative that research with an intentional focus on how different stakeholders perceive the role and view the expectations of an administrator for special education be conducted to ascertain ways to support and improve practice.

CHAPTER II: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This chapter will provide a cursory background of the theoretical framework and history of special education, current legislation, and current data available on student performance. Next, the chapter will provide a brief background of the role of an administrator over the last century, professional standards, as well as qualities researchers have identified as being necessary for effective administrators. Chapter 1 discussed the number of cases sent to the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction Exceptional Children's Division (NCDPI-EC) for mediation, resolution hearings, and due process. This will also be addressed in this chapter to highlight the importance of foundational knowledge needed by administrators about special education law, policies, and procedures. While there is ample research available about perceptions of special education from the perspectives of general education teachers, special education teachers, and administrators, little evidence is available triangulating the three perspectives. This chapter will illustrate the gaps between administrator knowledge of special education and the preparation they received in their administrative programs as it relates to their ability to provide competent guidance for special education programming. Finally, implications of the discrepancy between the need for a foundational knowledge and the actual training received will be addressed.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for any study is the foundation through which the study is framed. Throughout each section, the theoretical framework should be implicitly or explicitly present as it shapes the entire process (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). For this study, Systems Thinking Theory was the most appropriate framework to shape the work. As a researcher, curiosity and trying to understand how things are related to the bigger picture have been the biggest focus for

this study. To best understand how this paper is framed, we will briefly explore the meaning of Systems Thinking Theory and how it applies to this study.

Systems Thinking Theory can be defined as, "a discipline for seeing wholes. It is a framework for seeing interrelationships rather than things, for seeing patterns of change rather than static 'snapshots.'" (Senge 1990, p. 68). Shaked and Schechter (2017) further defined systems thinking as, "a means of seeing the system as an integrated, complex composition of many interconnected components that need to work together for the whole to function successfully" (p. 2). Cabrera, Cabrera, and Powers (2015) developed a more nuanced approach to Systems Thinking Theory that encompasses a cohesive understanding of Senge's original work.

Distinctions, systems, relationships, and perspectives (DSRP) are the four areas that Cabrera, Cabrera, and Powers (2015) believe are inherent in Systems Thinking Theory. They posit that Systems Thinking Theory is more than just looking at the part to whole, but also how relationships and perspectives influence and impact the breakdown of the whole system. The goal of this study is to not only learn more about the different perspectives of participants, but also how those perspectives influence relationships within the school setting.

For administrators, this is a critical concept because of all the responsibilities they are charged with in their school. Take education, it is an area often discussed as a whole unit or system to describe what is a rather complex and intertwined process. Consider all the departments within a school, a district and government. These departments can include finance, human resources, special education, instruction, facilities, etc. Ideally all of these pieces must work in synchronicity to truly be effective and efficient. However, in reality this is often not the case due to varying levels of understanding about different areas of education as well as

identified priorities in a school, a district, or state. For example, school administrators in North Carolina hold a multitude of roles and responsibilities. One such role is the Special Needs Administrator (SNA) who is responsible for acting as the local education authority when making decisions on special education and programming. In addition to this role, SNA's also typically are responsible for overseeing a grade level or subject, staff evaluations, and being instructional leaders. Each responsibility is critical to the overall success of students and the school. Without having appropriate understanding of any one of the roles, the SNA's actions could be detrimental to all of the other areas without realizing the significance of their actions.

Systems Thinking Theory attempts to explore how we need each part to move together as one in order for the system to work (Senge, 1990). This theory is applicable because the intent of the study is to better understand the different perspectives of participants to gain a deeper understanding of those relationships in connection with the role of an administrator for special education programming.

Special Education Overview

The educational arena has changed dramatically over the last century from excluding marginalized groups such as minorities and people with disabilities to more inclusive practices. Special education did not come to the forefront of education until the 1970s, when two landmark court cases resulted in changes to school accessibility (Frost & Kersten, 2011). The *PARC v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* case resulted from the schools excluding students intellectually disabled from public schools. The court ruled in favor of the plaintiff, determining that schools must allow parent participation in decisions and the opportunity to participate in dispute resolution. In the *Mills v. Board of Education* suit, the courts ruled that the district violated the due process clause of the 5th Amendment when disciplining and excluding students with

emotional disabilities from public school. Additional similar cases at that time also ruled in favor of the plaintiff, who were denied educational opportunities based on socio-economic status. Both the *PARC v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* and the *Mills v. Board of Education* cases resulted in students with disabilities having a right to free and appropriate education (FAPE) and due process rights through procedural safeguards. These landmark cases resulted in federal legislation addressing the needs of students with disabilities.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act

Education for All Handicapped Children, Public Law 94-142, was originally developed in 1975 in response to landmark court cases that found children with disabilities had not been provided the same educational opportunities as their peers (IDEA, 2004). The purpose of PL 94-142 was to ensure that all children, regardless of disability, were provided equal access to public education at no additional expense to the student. This is referred to as the provision of free appropriate public education (FAPE) and is defined in PL 94-142 as:

> §300.17 Free appropriate public education.
>
> *Free appropriate public education* or *FAPE* means special education and related services that—
> (a) Are provided at public expense, under public supervision and direction, and without charge;
> (b) Meet the standards of the SEA, including the requirements of this part;
> (c) Include an appropriate preschool, elementary school, or secondary school education in the State involved; and
> (d) Are provided in conformity with an individualized education program (IEP) that meets the requirements of §§300.320 through 300.324.
> (Authority: 20 U.S.C. 1401(9))

Since the initial adoption, multiple revisions of PL 94-142 have occurred and changed to IDEA (IDEA, 2004). Revisions made to the statute now include a more comprehensive scope of safeguards and regulations states must adhere to provide FAPE (IDEA, 2004). The procedural

safeguards have been revised over time, reflecting current research to include the most appropriate expectations of students' academic, behavioral, and functional needs.

IDEA comprises four sections, each addressing a specific area related to special education. Part A provides a general overview, definitions, and the purpose of IDEA; Part B addresses the allocation of funds, the identification process, as well as oversight of services for children ages 3-21; Part C focuses on early interventions and support for children from birth through age two; and Part D addresses personnel qualifications, support, training, and oversight provided (IDEA, 2004). While IDEA is discussed in this paper, the primary focus will be on Part B as it is the most pertinent in the public school setting.

IDEA Part B (2004) has six major components that districts must implement with fidelity to receive funding. The six components that are required include (a) free, and appropriate public education referred to a FAPE; (b) child find, if there is a suspicion a child has a disability, IEP teams are required to convene and determine if evaluations are necessary to determine eligibility; (c) the development of an IEP if the child is determined to have a disability; (d) provision of services in the least restrictive environment (LRE) with their non-disabled peers to the greatest extent possible; (e) parent and student input and participation in the process; and (f) procedural safeguards to address disputes that may arise as a result of the five prior components (IDEA, 2004; Katsiyannis, Yell, & Bradley, 2001; Yell, Rogers, & Rogers, 1998).

Funding is provided based on adherence to the requirements listed above. IDEA Part B (2004) has provisions that specify allocating funds to states who meet the requirements and have developed plans for implementation across districts. Districts receive funding annually from both the federal and state governments to provide services. However, the amount received and designated usage varies not only at the state level but also at the district level. Certain factors

such as students with disabilities deemed high-risk or requiring more support receive additional funding. Federal and state monitoring of student achievement, identification, disproportionality, or a failure to comply with regulations may result in a reduction or forfeiture of funding (IDEA, 2004). Given the scope of special education and requirements, states must adhere to the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) to provide support and technical assistance to state departments of public instruction.

OSEP is a branch within the Department of Public Instruction, a federally funded agency. OSEP was founded in 1979 due to the initial adoption of IDEA to oversee special education programming across the country (OSEP, 2020). This agency is charged with providing leadership and oversight, both financial and technical, to state education agencies (SEA) that provide educational services to students in public schools. OSEP is the body that individual states report to and receive technical assistance regarding implementing IDEA Part B in local education agencies.

Each state is charged with developing and implementing policies and procedures that, at minimum, cover the basic requirements from IDEA. States have flexibility in the interpretation of IDEA; however, there are specific aspects required in all state policies. In North Carolina, the Department of Public Instruction-Exceptional Children's Division (NCDPI-EC) created state policies and forms required for districts to implement to receive special education funding. In addition to the state regulations, NCDPI-EC developed a parent handbook on rights and responsibilities, and procedural safeguards were created directly aligned with IDEA legislation that address all aspects of IDEA Part B for students with disabilities (NCDPI, 2016).

Special Education Process

Once a student is referred to special education to consider services, they are provided safeguards under IDEA (IDEA, 2004). This means that students have the same procedural safeguards in place as those students who are already eligible and receiving special education services, including the same disciplinary safeguards as students already identified as having a disability (2004). To consider eligibility, an IEP team must review current and relevant data and determine whether formal evaluations are required to make decisions regarding the student. If the IEP team decides to evaluate the student, the team will reconvene once testing is complete to determine eligibility. In North Carolina, students must meet the three prongs required for eligibility for special education services. These prongs include: qualify for one of the fourteen categories of disabilities, the qualifying disability has an adverse impact on education, and the student requires specially designed instruction (NCDPI, 2016).

After eligibility is determined, the team must develop an individualized education program for the student based on their current areas of need. Annual measurable goals that address academic, social, and behavioral needs are developed with input from team members (Gibb & Taylor, 2016). Based on the needs identified from the evaluation and other data sources, the team must determine the most appropriate service delivery while ensuring that the student receives instruction in the least restrictive environment as appropriate (Bateman & Bateman, 2001; IDEA, 2004). The process ends when the prior written notice is completed. The prior written notice explains all decisions and considerations from the process with a justification for each decision or rejection. Upon completion of all the paperwork, the parent (or legal guardian) is provided with a document that provides consent for the provision of services. The IEP cannot be implemented until the parent agrees and signs for consent for special education services

(NCDPI, 2016). The IEP process is completed through IEP teams responsible for appropriate identification and implementation of special education services when a student is determined eligible for special education programming.

IEP Teams

IDEA (2004) sets forth specific guidelines on required participants for IEP teams that outline required members and suggested members. Each state also reiterates the required members in their processes and procedures for special education. In North Carolina, the IEP team is comprised of a local education authority representative (LEA), general education teacher, special education teacher, parents, student (if appropriate-required to invite once 14 years old), a person who can interpret evaluation results, and other support service personnel (psychologist, occupational therapist, physical therapist, speech pathologist, etc.) as deemed necessary (NCDPI, 2016). The IEP team must meet at least annually to review and revise the IEP to reflect current progress and need. While required to meet annually, any team member may request a meeting at any time to address concerns about programming, placement, or progress. Every time an IEP meeting is held, the team must include the required members to make informed and appropriate decisions.

LEA representative. The LEA is charged with decision-making authority and acts as the district representative in this role, making them liable for adhering to IDEA statutes and North Carolina governing policies (NCDPI, 2016; Pazey & Cole, 2013). According to NCDPI (2016), in order to serve as the LEA representative in IEP meetings, they must meet the following criteria:

i. Is qualified to provide, or supervise the provision of, specially designed instruction to meet the unique needs of children with disabilities;

ii. Is knowledgeable about the general education curriculum; and

iii. Is knowledgeable about the availability of resources of the public agency. (NCDPI, 2016).

Special education teacher. North Carolina licenses the special education teacher to teach special education. The role of the special education teacher is to provide specially designed instruction to meet the IEP annual goals (Gibb & Taylor, 2016). They are required to provide services based on each student's IEP. Services can range from co-teaching with a general education teacher to serving students in a separate setting. During an IEP meeting, the special education teacher is responsible for overseeing the process by completing compliant state forms and reviewing current data collection to drive instructional decisions.

General education teacher. The general education teacher is a required member of the IEP team unless there are exceptional circumstances that would prohibit participation (students in a separate school may not have access to the general education program); however, this is rare (NCDPI, 2016). The role of the general education teacher is to provide expertise on curriculum and grade-level standards. As the general education teacher, they are responsible for providing input on developing annual goals and accommodations for the student to access the general education curriculum to the greatest extent possible (Diliberto & Brewer, 2012).

Policies for Governing Students with Disabilities

The North Carolina Department of Instruction developed a guide that outlines state regulations and policies regarding special education per IDEA mandates (NCDPI, 2016). The current Policies for Governing Students with Disabilities manual explains the scope and purpose by stating that the goal is:

> (a) To ensure that all children with disabilities, ages three through 21, have available to them a free appropriate public education that emphasizes special education and related services designed to meet their unique needs and prepares them for further education, employment, and independent living;
>
> (b) To ensure that the rights of children with disabilities and their parents are protected;
>
> (c) To assist the local educational agencies, including state-operated programs and charter schools, to provide for the education of children with disabilities; and
>
> (d) To assess and ensure the effectiveness of efforts to educate children with disabilities. (Authority: 20 U.S.C. 1400(d); 34 CFR 300.1)

The Policies for Governing Students with Disabilities (NCDPI, 2016) is a comprehensive document that provides explanations about all aspects of special education, including but not limited to the referral to the placement process, disability eligibility criteria, procedural safeguards, parent rights and responsibilities, accountability measures, allotment and allocation of funding, and preschool requirements.

Procedural Safeguards

A required component of the Policies Governing Services for Students with Disabilities (NCDPI 2016) is the procedural safeguards. This section explains the measures taken to protect the rights of parents and students with disabilities, along with the processes either parents or districts can use to address disputes. Some measures taken to protect the rights of students with disabilities include parent participation in meetings, the ability to examine or dispute records, request an independent evaluation, and prior written notice before any decisions are implemented for a student with disabilities (NCDPI, 2016). Different options parents or school districts can

employ to resolve disputes are located within the Policies Governing Services for Children with Disabilities (NCDPI, 2016). Three paths identified in North Carolina as an avenue to address procedural or instructional issues are mediation requests, resolutions, and due process hearings. NCDPI must investigate each of these situations and provide a written response or potential solution to parents and the district (IDEA, 2004). Each year, states must compile a report on each path and submit it to the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) for their review (IDEA, 2004). The procedural safeguards parents and school districts may use include state complaints, mediation, and due process, defined below.

State complaints. Pursuant to IDEA Part B, North Carolina has established a process for anyone to file a complaint against a district if there is a belief that the district has violated any part of Part B (NCDPI, 2018). A state complaint can be filed on behalf of a specific student with a disability or an identified group who has allegedly had their rights violated under IDEA (NCDPI, 2018). This is different from filing a mediation or due process request, as those pertain to a specific student only and are related to the provision of services or FAPE (NCDPI, 2016).

Mediation. One avenue parents or an LEA have to dispute any portion of the Policies Governing Services for Children with Disabilities (NCDPI, 2016) is mediation. Mediation is offered at no charge to school districts or parents, as the state bears costs associated with securing a mediator for the process. The mediation process requires both parties to determine a mutually agreeable location and time to meet to address disputed issues. During mediation, an impartial mediator will facilitate discussion with the goal of resolving the dispute through a confidential agreement that cannot be used against either party in subsequent due process hearings or civil hearings (NCDPI, 2016, p. 87). The agreement must be signed by the parties

and is considered a legally binding document recognized by the state and is expected to be implemented as written (NCDPI, 2016).

Resolution process. The resolution process is the first step in resolving a dispute associated with a request for a due process hearing. During the resolution process, the IEP must meet and attempt to address disputed items provided in the petition for a due process hearing. The goal is to develop a resolution agreement that addresses the solutions for disputed items signed by all parties present in the IEP meeting (NCDPI, 2016). Both parties can waive the meeting and/or opt to use mediation as a means to address the issues presented. If an agreement is reached, the resolution developed requires all parties to sign and acknowledge that failure to adhere to the resolution could result in a due process hearing where this information is presented to the hearing officer (NCDPI, 2016, p. 90). This is different from mediation, where although the agreement is legally binding, it cannot be used against either party in future proceedings.

Due process hearing. A school district or parent may file a petition for a due process hearing if there is an alleged violation of LRE, FAPE, or discipline for a student with a disability. If either party waives the right to resolution or fails to reach an agreement during the resolution process, a due process hearing is considered. In North Carolina, hearings are conducted by an administrative judge who will decide as to whether or not a violation occurred in the provision of FAPE (NCDPI, 2016, p.91). The main goal of the due process hearing is to ascertain if the LEA had substantive or procedural violations during the provision of services that resulted in a denial of FAPE, parental participation, or student access to education (NCDPI, 2016, p. 91-92). If it is found that the district violated FAPE, the administrative judge will issue findings and corrective actions the district must take (NCDPI, 2016).

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2019) reported that more than 7.1 million students in the United States were identified as students with disabilities under IDEA Part B. This equates to roughly 14% of the total number of students in public education for the 2018-2019 school year (NCES, 2019). During the 2018-2019 school year, the average daily membership in District X was 41,169, with 4,332 of those identified as a student with a disability. This accounts for about 10.5% of the district student enrollment, which is lower than the state average for that time (NCDPI, 2020). While North Carolina and District X reported a lower percentage of students with disabilities than the national average, concern remains for over-identification and disproportionate representation based on race or ethnicity, which may result in the reallocation of up to 15% of funding to provide early intervention services for students who may be considered at risk for academic deficits (IDEA, 2004; NCDPI, 2016).

In North Carolina, 130 state complaints, 83 mediation requests, and 92 due process requests were received during the 2018-2019 school year. Of state complaints received, 56.15% were found to be non-compliant; 57.83% of the requests were for mediation were held; and 41.3% of due process requests were addressed through resolution meetings, with 6.52% due process complaints being fully adjudicated (NCDPI, 2020). This is important because the number and percentage of due process requests resulting in full adjudication significantly increased between the 2015-2016 school year to the most recent data from the 2018-2019 school year (NCDPI, 2020). The data presented at the state and national level indicate that districts can improve their understanding of IDEA, FAPE, and LRE. This supports Zirkel's (2015) findings that the continued increase in due process and mediation requests indicate a need to improve legal literacy. Improved legal literacy would benefit administrators by providing them with the

skills needed to effectively act as the LEA to ensure the implementation of IEPs is done with fidelity and within the confines of IDEA (IDEA, 2004).

Administrators in Education

Over the last century, education and schools have changed in certain aspects but remain the same in other ways. Kafka (2009) completed a review of the historiography of the principal's role since the 1800s. The author shared this view about the role of a principal by saying,

> By the 1920s, the modern school principalship was established and looked markedly similar to today's position: Principals had bureaucratic, managerial, instructional, and community responsibilities. They were expected to lead and instruct teachers, monitor students, communicate with the district, and work with parents and members of the wider community. (Kafka, 2009, p. 324)

Kafka's (2009) historiography found that many aspects of the principal's role have remained the same, including hierarchy within the district (still middle level) and the fundamental role of schools and the focus of principals. Prior studies also discussed this concept, including Campbell, Cunningham, Nystrand, and Usdan (1990), who wrote on this topic discussing the same concern that principals are mid-level personnel who answer district-level personnel. Campbell et al. (1990) referred to this as middle management, where the principal is responsible for people under him but still has to respond to numerous other groups such as district-level personnel and community stakeholders. All of these groups pulling an administrator in different directions can be challenging. Understanding that many view principals or administrators as middle managers have led to numerous studies on the role of an administrator. Sergiovanni (2008), in particular, discussed the stark differences between the ideal and actual roles of administrators. For example, he discussed the amount of time administrators thought should be

spent on managerial work compared to how much time the same administrators reported spending on that work. Campbell et al. (1990) also reported similar findings in their earlier work in roles of administrators and time spent on managerial tasks.

Although there has been a shift in focus from being a manager to an instructional leader, certain qualities continue to be an effective administrator. Lezotte (1991) identified seven standards that need to be in place for an administrator to be effective. Lezotte (1991) posits that a safe and orderly environment, high expectations; instructional leadership; clear and focused mission; opportunity to learn and time on task; frequent progress monitoring; and home-school relations are necessary to create and maintain an effective school. More recent studies have delved deeper to look at administrators more holistically.

One such study by Fullan (2002) identified five themes among effective administrators. First, Fullan discussed administrators having an opportunity and depth of learning to have enough time to refine their craft. Second, policies need to be in place for individual development. Third, providing opportunities to learn in context and system connectedness. Fourth, Fullan suggested having a leadership succession where leaders are at different levels. Finally, Fullan suggested that making any improvements in administrators' quality required first improving the teaching profession to produce high-quality teachers. Fullan emphasized the fifth theme because he argued the administration is cyclical in that they come from teachers. In order to break the cycle of unprepared administrators, we need to step back and look at how teachers are being trained.

Much like Lezotte (1991) and Fullan (2002), Leithwood and Riehl (2003) identified qualities needed to be an effective instructional leader. The abilities to build capacity, communicate effectively, collaborate, embrace cultural differences and uniqueness within the

school, and build relationships were key qualities. Despite different descriptions and viewpoints, all of the current research on effective leaders highlights the importance of relationships, culture, competence, and building capacity.

Professional Standards

Administrators, principals, and assistant principals are held to professional standards set forth by each state. In the past, standards and licensing requirements have been vastly different. The Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) was created to develop better alignment between states for administrators (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003). Since the original development of the standards, multiple revisions have occurred to better meet the needs of both states and preparation programs. Most recently, the ISLLC standards have faded out to make way for a new set of standards that address the multifaceted roles of administrators (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003).

In 2015, The Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (ELCC) was developed to replace the former ISLLC Standards (NPBEA, 2015). The standards were revised to appropriately reflect the complexities within school leadership and be better aligned with student learning (NPBEA, 2015). The new standards comprise ten domains that are interdependent upon each other in order to effect true change and growth. Appendix A lists the standards with a brief description of each ELCC (NPBEA, 2015). Currently, the ELCC standards do not explicitly address special education. However, Pazey and Cole (2013) argue that administrators must know special education law and practices to truly follow the professional standards. Similarly, Cooner, Tochertman, and Garrison-Wake (2005) also found that in their earlier study while ISLLC standards did not explicitly address special education, they did address student performance outcomes. Therefore, regardless of special education being an implicit component of the ELCC

standards, administrators in North Carolina are evaluated on the domains within the standards to assess their leadership and the impact on student growth (Hvidston, Range, & McKim, 2015). Considering special education is a component of an administrator's oversight, having standards that include special education would be beneficial to increase accountability and knowledge.

Administrator Preparation Programs and Special Education

While the ELCC standards were developed to create a cohesive set of expectations for administrators nationally, states still have flexibility in adhering to the standards (NPBEA, 2015). This has resulted in significant variance in university preparation programs that have been given the autonomy to create courses that they deem appropriate as long as they align with the standards. As a result, administrator preparation varies across institutions and states, leading to inconsistent preparation. One area in administrator coursework that continues to be neglected is special education policy and practice.

As administrators' roles have evolved in education, researchers have been studying preparation programs to determine whether or not candidates are adequately prepared for their roles as assistant principal and principal. As mentioned previously, much of that research focused on the shift from managerial to instructional leaders. However, this focus shifted with the establishment of The Regular Education Initiative (REI), which was created based on evidence of the challenges schools and administrators faced having special education students in general education classes (Jenkins, Pious, & Jewell, 1990). REI highlighted the lack of preparation among administrators on designing instruction and providing support for both special education students and teachers. This, in turn, led to numerous studies looking at how administrators were being prepared for special education policy and practice in their formal education programs.

Researchers began to focus on certification and licensure requirements of administrators, including required coursework and experience. Aspedon (1990) found that more than 40% of administrators surveyed had no special education coursework, with more than 75% of those respondents reporting being responsible for supervising and evaluating special education teachers. 85% reported a need for formal training to be effective in special education (Aspedon, 1990). The work by Valesky and Hirth (1992) furthered Aspedon's work by then examining program requirements for administrators with special education as a component.

In their first study, Valesky and Hirth (1991) reported that only 27% of all administrator programs required special education law and that 57% of the programs had no requirements for special education knowledge. In a follow-up study, Valesky and Hirth (1992) reported an increase to 33% of administrator programs requiring special education law. Additionally, they found that 45% of programs have no state requirements for special education knowledge, which decreased from the previous study. While the second study indicated a positive trend toward requiring special education knowledge and law, more than half of administrator preparation programs studied still do not require any special education knowledge for licensure. Monteith (1998) examined the requirements for administrator licensure in South Carolina and surveyed administrators to determine whether or not a need existed for special education coursework. Of those who responded, 75% reported having no formal training in special education, 89% of respondents wanted additional training, and more than 90% of respondents felt that formal training was necessary to be effective (Monteith, 1998). In more recent studies, administrators continue to report a need for more training in special education and that they did not feel adequately prepared to work with special education. Specifically, Angelle and Bilton (2009) found that only 47% of principals surveyed had received any training in special education.

McHatton, Boyer, Shaunessy, and Terry's (2010) study yielded similar results, finding that of 159 respondents, only 49% received any training in special education issues. The research indicates a need for training, and more recent studies have focused on what areas of special education should be included in preparation programs.

In recent years, the focus has shifted from whether special education knowledge was necessary to be an effective administrator to establish specific areas of focus in preparation programs. The research in this area has found mixed results, with some studies concluding special education knowledge was not a predictor of being an effective administrator. For example, Power's (2007) study indicated no statistically significant relationship between the number of law classes taken and knowledge of special education law. However, Power (2007) reported that administrators had low levels of knowledge about Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) and implementation of IEPs. That is important because FAPE is one of the most litigated areas within special education (Zirkel, 2015). More recent studies also indicated that specific coursework in special education did not directly impact responses about special education knowledge (Karanxha & Zirkel, 2014; Powell, 2010; Williams, 2015). Although these findings indicate that coursework does not necessarily impact special education law knowledge, research indicates administrator's perception of their knowledge and their actual understanding of special education law and policies are drastically different, with administrators overestimating their knowledge (Ford, 2016).

For example, Singh (2015) found that although only 9.2% of administrators reported taking a special education course, 93.2% of those same participants self-reported adequate special education knowledge. There was a significant discrepancy between administrator's self-reported knowledge and their actual knowledge when surveyed about special education law and

policies. Likewise, Williams (2015) found that only 9.2% met the threshold of knowledge (knowledge of FAPE and special education programming), with less than 50% scoring proficiency on special education knowledge and 3% proficiency on FAPE. These findings are more in line with litigated areas, where it has been found that a majority of cases presented are due to a denial of FAPE and LRE (Karanxha & Zirkel, 2014; Katsiyannis, Losinski, & Prince, 2012; Zirkel, 2015; Zirkel & Hetrick, 2017).

Zaretsky (2005) found that although principals received formal training in special education, they still reported needing additional training to be better prepared as leaders. Additionally, parent advocates in Zaretsky's (2005) study reported that although principals reported having foundational knowledge of special education, parents did not think that principals were knowledgeable about special education. The conflicting results from recent studies on knowledge and understanding of special education were concerning especially given an ever-increasing number of parents seeking litigation against schools about special education (Cobb, 2015).

Administrator Role in Special Education

The role of an administrator is dynamic and complex. On any given day, administrators wear many different hats requiring them to be knowledgeable and competent in numerous areas. They are responsible for maintaining a safe school environment, handling student discipline, communicating with parents and community stakeholders, providing instructional leadership, paperwork (teacher evaluations, reports, etc.), and transportation (Fullan, 2002). In addition to those responsibilities, administrators also have to handle the murky area of special education by attending meetings, overseeing the implementation of IEPs, supervising special education teachers and maintaining compliance with federal guidelines (IDEA, 2004; NCDPI, 2015). Being

an administrator for special education requires a foundational understanding of special education law and policies. Boscardin (as cited in Schulze, 2014) discussed the role of an administrator for special education by saying,

> The question about what makes the administration of special education special has not been explicitly addressed… there is indeed something special about the way educators trained in the administration of special education deliver services to students who have disabilities and support instructional staff. (2014, p. 23)

Lashley (2007) posited that administrators should have a process they use when working with special education to help guide decision-making. Lashley (2007) suggested that administrators consider three areas to help guide the IEP team when making difficult decisions. First, determining whether or not a law, statute, policy, or mandate currently exists for the question at hand to be applied to the decision. Second, administrators and the IEP team should critically evaluate how potential decisions will impact marginalized groups. Finally, administrators and the IEP team should consider the long-term implications for everyone involved and how the decisions can positively or negatively impact future outcomes (Lashley, 2007). Using a process such as this to guide decision-making can be helpful for all administrators, but more specifically for administrators who lack confidence or experience in special education to reflect on what they do know and what they need to find out to better answer the questions.

Accountability

Administrators must provide appropriate educational opportunities to all students regardless of need which poses some significant challenges given the increased accountability measures for schools, districts, and states to show adequate student growth (NCLB, 2002; ESEA,

2010). Specifically, administrators face the challenge of ensuring that resources are available, instructional materials are provided to all teachers, supports are in place for at-risk or struggling students, and that highly qualified teachers are employed in all content areas (NCDPI, 2016). By ensuring adequate resources and personnel, administrators are promoting equitable outcomes for at-risk or the most vulnerable student population. Since students with disabilities are considered at-risk, receiving equitable services and supports are necessary to meet their individual needs and level the achievement discrepancy with their non-disabled peers. Schools are evaluated on the growth and performance of all students through the use of standardized state tests administered annually.

Each school year, all eligible students participate in the North Carolina End of Grade (EOG) and End of Course (EOC) testing to determine proficiency based on grade-level standards. A student is considered proficient on state tests if a level four or level five is earned. As seen in Table 1, both math and reading test scores drop significantly from 3rd grade until they hit a low in 8th grade (NCDPI, 2020). This is of concern for administrators because they are held accountable for the achievement of all students regardless of the student is identified as a student with a disability (Cooner, et al., 2005; DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; Lashley, 2007). These data are one component in the accountability model in determining whether or not schools and districts are making adequate growth with their students. This is important because these data are then used at the district level in evaluating principal and assistant principal performance as measured on the state evaluation system.

The number of students identified as having a disability continues to grow, despite potential negative ramifications associated with the over-identification of students with disabilities. Under IDEA Part B, there are financial implications and ramifications when a

district and/or a state is over-identifying students with disabilities (IDEA, 2004). Suppose a district is found to be chronically over-identifying students. In that case, they are required to develop and/or revise policies and procedures to identify and implement services for students with disabilities. Depending on improvements or lack thereof by a district, the state has the authority to require up to 15% of Part B funding from IDEA be used to provide early intervention services to students who fall under the categories identified as being disproportionately over-identified (i.e., African American male identified as Intellectually Disabled-Mild) to reduce inappropriate identification (IDEA, 2004; Williams, 2007). For school districts, the potential requirement for fund reallocation would significantly impact services for students with disabilities. Given the trend in due process requests and case law, special needs administrators need the requisite knowledge about Child Find and the referral process to effectively serve as the role of the LEA in IEP meetings (Zirkel, 2015).

The LEA, in this study, also referred to as the SNA, needs to be knowledgeable about how students qualify for special education services and eligibility category requirements because they are one of the key decision-makers when participating in an IEP meeting. Having this knowledge base is one step to reduce the potential over identification of students with disabilities. Lashley's (2007) guiding questions can be a useful resource for special needs administrators to consider when presented with a student referred for a special education evaluation. An administrator needs to understand how the special education process works and the purpose of special education programming to provide guidance to an IEP team and ensure that students are receiving the appropriate support and resources to meet their individual needs (Thompson, 2017). Ultimately, the role of an LEA is to act as the local authority on special education and make decisions when an IEP team is unable to reach a consensus. A lack of

knowledge on the part of the LEA would potentially result in uninformed decisions that could negatively impact a student (Ford, 2016; Thompson, 2017).

Perceptions of Special Education

In their study on principals' understanding of special education and the training they received, Angelle and Bilton (2009) found that administrators who reported having at least one course in special education indicated higher levels of confidence in addressing special education issues. Interestingly, the results from their study suggested that years of experience and amount of time spent on special education during internship did not yield a statistically significant increase in confidence levels about special education. Conversely, Wakeman et al. (2006) reported that based on a national study of principal knowledge of special education, participants responded to a basic understanding of special education despite a lack of coursework in the area. Although participants reported having foundational understandings of special education, they reported a limited knowledge base and understanding of current issues or trends in special education (i.e., universally designed learning), leading to the implication that although an administrator has a basic understanding, they lack the knowledge base on how to implement or monitor special education (Wakeman et al., 2006). Schulze's (2014) study also supported Wakeman et al.'s (2006) findings that a special education background does not directly impact how administrators perceived their role in special education.

Despite the expectation in North Carolina for administrators to represent the school as an LEA, little information has been provided on how those administrators are supported or trained by the state (NCDPI, 2015). Numerous studies have indicated the lack of formal training in administrator preparation programs geared specifically toward special education law and policies (Angelle & Bilton, 2009; Cooner, et al., 2005; Goor, 1997; Stevenson-Jacobson, Jacobson, &

Hilton, 2006). In another study, Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, and Meyerson (2005) reviewed the literature to identify key elements needed in administrator preparation programs to better understand how administrators were prepared for special education. Davis et al. (2005) found that research-based content, method of instruction and experiences, and structure of the program were necessary to adequately prepare administrators. Special education components came up missing from their literature review, concluding that this was not an area of focus (Davis et al., 2005). Based on the current literature about the lack of preparation for special education, researchers focused on the background knowledge administrators have about special education.

Taylor-Backor and Gordon (2015) interviewed various individuals at the university level and public-school level to better understand administrator preparation programs. They found that although most of the programs lacked formal coursework and training in special education, most of the respondents discussed the importance of administrators having a basic knowledge of IDEA and special education (Taylor-Backor & Gordon, 2015). Previous works such as Davidson's (1999) study on principal fellows also found that over half of the respondents reported dissatisfaction with the level of training they received on special education law. In contrast to Taylor-Backor and Gordon's (2015) more recent study, Davidson (1999) found that only one-third of the respondents indicated a need for additional training. It can be surmised that as the number of students identified as having a disability increased and the number of parents becoming more educated on their rights has increased, the need for additional training may have also increased (Zaretsky, 2005). Research on specific areas of need has yielded consistent findings across states.

Cobb's (2015) meta-analysis of administrator's role in special education yielded three broad categories of importance: inclusion, staff collaboration, and parent involvement. Of the studies examined, only 25% mentioned the importance of parent involvement with no focus on potential barriers to involvement (Cobb, 2015). The lack of parental involvement mentioned in the studies examined concerns the number of complaints and due process hearings reported annually. Findings from other studies, such as Hedeen, Moses, Peter, and CADRE (2011), also found that a lack of communication or miscommunication between the school and parent resulted in multiple issues with some districts being required to pay private schooling because of failure to implement IEPs. These data indicate a need for additional support within districts to ensure administrators and teachers understand and know how to implement IEPs as expected.

Summary

A review of the extant literature highlighted administrator perceptions of their knowledge of special education and their confidence or comfort level as an administrator for special education. Current research shows a discrepancy not only in preparation program requirements, but also in professional standards in relation to actual practices and expectations of administrators. Preparation programs are not adequately preparing administrators to handle the complexities within their role. Specifically, administrators are lacking preparation in handling special education within their buildings. This lack of preparation can result in litigation, loss of funding, and additional monitoring from the state. Given these potentially significant financial and legal implications, better understanding the perceptions of administrators of their role working with special education teachers is critical to better supporting administrators. Chapter 3 will address the methods of this study.

CHAPTER III: METHODS

Chapter 2 provided a review of the literature on the history of special education, administrators' understanding and training on special education, and the shift in the role of an administrator. This chapter provides a detailed explanation of the method, participants, design, and analysis of data gathered to answer the research questions about perceptions of the role of an administrator for special education programming.

This study aimed to understand better the perceptions about an administrator's role for special education programming through the lens of three different groups: special education teacher, general education teacher, and administrator. Using interviews and field notes, the constructed realities of these groups became more apparent and helped understand why each participant believes or acts in a specific manner (Creswell, 2013).

Rich and deep insights were gained from three key stakeholders; administrators, special education teachers, and general education teachers on their perceptions of an administrator's role for special education programming. The purpose of this study was to explore perceptions about the role of an administrator for special education programming in order to identify specific areas of special education programming knowledge administrators need to be effective for special education. Specifically, this research explored the following research questions:

- What are the perceptions of faculty and administrators regarding the role of administrators facilitating special education programming for their building?
- What education and training is needed to prepare school administrators for facilitating special education programming in their building?

Research Design

An interpretivist lens was used to frame this exploratory qualitative comparative case study (Creswell, 2013). Case studies are used in qualitative research to understand a case or a unit of study in context (Merriam, 2001). A comparative case study was selected for this study to compare the perspectives of the participating stakeholder groups: administrators, special education teachers, and general education teachers. Each stakeholder group represented a separate case and compared against each other. Using a comparative case study for this study was appropriate because the purpose of the study was to explore perceptions of the role of an administrator from various stakeholder group perspectives to determine how they converged and diverged (Yin, 2003). The nature of this study was not to explain or solve a problem, instead explore and better understand different perceptions of the key stakeholders involved with special education programming in a school. By comparing the findings from each case, commonalities and differences could be highlighted both within and among the groups. Through this exploration of the data gathered, an interpretivist lens was used to analyze and understand the findings.

Gephart (1999) wrote, "Interpretivist constructivism 'brackets' objective reality and seeks to show how variations in human meanings and sense-making generate and reflect differences in reified or objective realities" (p. 5). Creswell (2013) explains the purpose of research using the interpretivism lens as "the intent, then, is to make sense of (or interpret) the meanings others have about the world" (p. 25). In other words, the interpretivism paradigm attempts to explore experiences and make meaning of the different interpretations through the perspectives of individuals. A thematic analysis of the data collected was used to analyze interviews to develop a detailed description of each experience. Those themes which emerged in the analysis were utilized to identify converging and diverging perceptions about the role of the administrator.

An interview protocol was developed using findings from various previous studies on the topic. Instruments such as surveys, interviews, and rating scales were reviewed from previous studies to generate interview questions for the current study. For example, Davidson's (1999) and Wakeman, et al.'s (2006) study on knowledge of special education law was used as a tool to develop questions about principal's perception of their role for special education.

Setting

The district used in this study was a medium-sized district located in a suburban and rural area of North Carolina, referred to as District X. There are 53 schools serving approximately 41,000 students with services for Pre-K through 12th grade. The reported ethnic makeup of the student population in the district was identified as roughly 59% Caucasian, 12% African American, 19% Hispanic, and 9% other students. During the 2019-2020 school year, 11% of the population qualified for special education services, and 28% for free and reduced lunch, with a 93% graduation rate for the prior academic year (UCPS, 2020).

Participants

Purposeful sampling and snowballing methods were used to seek out participants for an interview. Purposeful sampling was used to recruit three stakeholder groups in this study, administrators, special education teachers, and general education teachers who met the eligibility criteria below.

Eligibility Criteria

Administrators.

Current assistant principals or principals currently licensed and employed in public schools in North Carolina were invited to participate in this study. Each state has different structures or systems for special education, and this research is aimed specifically toward

administrators who work with special education teachers in North Carolina. Administrators who are the designated Special Needs Administrator (SNA) were eligible to participate in the study.

Special Education Teachers.

Current special education teachers employed 100% as a special education teacher in the school district with three or more years of teaching experience were eligible to participate. Recruitment of special education teachers with prior experience of at least three years was vital because they are more experienced and have had more interactions with administrators on special education programming.

General Education Teachers.

General education teachers holding a current North Carolina teaching license and working at least 80% as a general education teacher were eligible to participate. To be eligible for the study, the general education teacher must have taught students with disabilities within the last three years and have a minimum of three years of teaching experience. These requirements for general education teachers were necessary because they have prior experience interacting with an administrator specifically about special education programming.

Each group was selected because they provide a different viewpoint on their perceptions of the role of an administrator for special education programming. The researcher contacted personal connections in the school district who met the criteria below via email soliciting participation in an interview. Five administrators, five special education teachers, and five general education teachers representing different areas of expertise within the district were subsequently invited to participate in individual interviews for a total of 15 participants. The snowballing method was used as an additional tool to identify candidates who would be contacted if the initial recruitment efforts did not result in the desired number of participants.

Snowballing was used because of the connections participants had with other educators in their respective areas who could be contacted if needed (Warren, 2001).

The email briefly explained the purpose of the interview, time commitment, and methods employed to maintain confidentiality. Participants were asked to either respond to the researcher via email or phone by a predetermined date. A follow-up email was sent two weeks after the initial email to remind any potential participants to respond. A final reminder email was sent three weeks after the initial email soliciting additional participants still needed for the study. Participants who responded that they were willing to participate in the study were contacted to coordinate an interview. That email thanked them for their willingness to participate in the study and asked for three dates and times and a location for an interview. Once a date, time, and location were finalized, participants received a reminder email the day before confirming their participation.

After the interview, as part of the snowball method, administrator participants were asked for the name of another administrator they thought would be a good candidate for this study (Warren, 2001). In addition, special education and general education teacher participants were also asked for teachers' names they thought would be willing to participate. Those names were reserved until after all the initially selected participants who agreed to an interview were completed. At the end of the initial interviews, there were enough participants, so the researcher did not need to solicit additional participants from the names provided by the other participants.

Sample

Participants were selected from a public district in the southwestern region of North Carolina with representation from seven elementary, five middle, and five high schools (two participants reported working at both the middle and high school level). For purposes of this

study, the district selected was referred to as District X. Participants were asked to complete a demographics questionnaire (see Appendix E), which provided demographic and background information about their education and professional experiences, specifically about licensure, teaching areas, and grade levels, number of schools employed over their career, and types of special education programming they had experience with. This information was important to better understand the varying experiences and education levels among participants. For example, 93.3% of respondents disclosed having a master's degree or higher. Additionally, all participants held current licensure in their respective areas with more than ten years' experience, with an average of 18.67 years' experience as educators. While the same school district currently employed all participants, many reported working in other districts and states during their careers. The participants reported working in at least two schools, with an average of four schools throughout their careers.

Each participant was assigned a pseudonym used throughout the remainder of the study to ensure confidentiality. A brief biographical sketch of each participant was created to understand the context of responses better. The following section highlights critical aspects of each participant as relevant to the research purpose.

Special Education Teacher Demographics

Special education teachers who participated in this study completed the demographic questionnaire, with their responses illustrated in Table 3. The participants in this group were predominantly Caucasian females with an average of 17 years of experience in education. All held a master's degree or higher in special education, with one participant, Linda, also having licensure in general education. Linda, who reported the most experience in education, reported that she taught primarily in special education although licensed in special education and general

education. Participants all reported having experience delivering services, both pushing into general education classes and pulling out to a special education classroom. While they reported that similarity, the modality differed among participants. For example, Adam, Anne, and Jen all reported using a co-teaching model to provide special education services for most of their students. Jen, however, reported that she primarily taught a separate class for students with more significant disabilities and utilized the push-in model to provide access to general education for those students.

Table 3. *Participant Demographics- Special Education Teacher*

Name	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Age Range	Highest Degree	Years' Experience	Current Level
Adam	Male	Caucasian	41-50	MAT	12	MDSK,SECD
Amy	Female	Caucasian	31-40	M.Ed.	15	ELED
Anne	Female	Caucasian	31-40	MAT	14	MDSK
Jen	Female	African American	41-50	Ph.D.	18	ELED
Linda	Female	Caucasian	51-60	M.Ed.	25	ELED

Note. Participant names are pseudonyms. ELED= Elementary; MDSK= Middle; SECD= High School.

General Education Teacher Demographics

The general education teacher participants who consented to participate were Caucasian with a predominantly female representation. Participants in this group averaged 21 years' experience in education. This group had the broadest range of degrees earned with representation from a bachelor's degree to a doctorate degree in education. Additionally, two participants, Kelly and Chris, held principal licensure in North Carolina. Table 4 depicts the demographics

breakdown of the general education teacher participants. This group reported various experiences with special education services as the general education teacher. Julie, in particular, reported having both push-in and pull-out services while working in an elementary school. She also noted that those models differed significantly from one school to another, having the most experience using co-teaching. Both Liz and Ruth shared that they were most experienced with the pull-out model, where students were removed from their classroom to receive special education service in a smaller group. Chris, who has worked with middle and high school students, reported that he mainly used co-teaching to deliver instruction.

Table 4. *Participant Demographics- General Education Teacher*

Name	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Age Range	Highest Degree	Years' Experience	Current Level
Chris	Male	Caucasian	41-50	Ed.S	16	MDSK, SECD
Julie	Female	Caucasian/ Hispanic	51-60	M.Ed.	22	ELED
Liz	Female	Caucasian	41-50	B.A.	20	ELED
Kelly	Female	Caucasian	51-60	Ed.D	28	SECD
Ruth	Female	Caucasian	41-60	M.Ed.	18	SECD

Note. Participant names are pseudonyms. ELED= Elementary; MDSK= Middle; SECD= High School.

Administrator Demographics

Participants from the administrator group who agreed to participate all held a master's degree in education, with principal licensure. Three participants, Brad, Deb, and Jim, also held superintendent licensure, while Brad and Deb also held special education licenses.

Participants in this group were predominantly male, with 60% identifying as male and 60% identified as African American. The average years' experience in education for this group was 18 years. Table 5 provides an overview of the reported demographics from participants in the administrator group for this study. When asked about experience with the delivery of services for students with disabilities, all participants shared having experience with co-teaching and resource services. Brad and Deb reported having experience with separate classes as teachers because that was the type of special education class they previously taught. All but Erin reported having experience as an administrator working with separate classrooms for students with significant disabilities. Interestingly, none of the participants in this group reported having experience with either the push-in or pull-out models; however, they did report experience with co-teaching and resource models in their buildings. It is unclear whether or not this group lacked an understanding of the models presented in the questionnaire.

Table 5. *Participant Demographics-Administrator*

Name	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Age Range	Highest Degree	Years' Experience	Current Level
Brad	Male	African American	41-50	Ed.D	17	SECD
Deb	Female	African American	51-60	Ed.D	25	ELED
Erin	Female	Caucasian	31-40	M.Ed.	13	ELED
Jim	Male	Caucasian	41-50	Ed.D	19	MDSK
Tom	Male	African American	41-50	M.Ed.	18	MDSK

Note. Participant names are pseudonyms. ELED= Elementary; MDSK= Middle; SECD= High School.

Data Collection

To better understand perceptions about an administrator's role for special education programming, in-depth, individual interviews were selected as the data collection method. Before starting the interview, participants were provided verbal and written informed consent to review and sign, acknowledging their understanding and willingness to participate in the study (Fontana & Frey, 2005; Warren, 2001). Those who agreed and signed the informed consent participated in an in-depth, individual interview that lasted 45 minutes to one hour. It was also explained that the interviews would be recorded, and the researcher would be taking notes about the experience as part of the process.

In-depth, individual interviews of administrators, special education teachers, and general education teachers who agreed to participate were used as the primary data collection method. The interviews were semi-structured, digitally audio-recorded, and lasted approximately 45 minutes to one hour. Given that the purpose of this study is to explore perceptions of the role of administrators for special education programming, interviews were the most appropriate source of data gathering (Vagle, 2014). Interviews are an interactive and collaborative process where a story is created based on the personal feelings, thoughts, and experiences participants share with the researcher to develop a detailed description of their experiences with administrators for special education (Fontana & Frey, 2005; Gephart, 1999; Van Manen, 2015; Warren, 2001). Semi-structured interviewing allowed the participant to freely discuss the topic, thereby making it more conversational, generating more profound thoughts (Vagle, 2014). Semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to explore areas of interest that arose during the interview. If the interview began to veer off-topic, the researcher could guide the participant back on topic through the use of pre-established questions.

The interviews all followed a similar outline. Rapport was established, and participants were asked to talk about their educational background, then discussed the role of a special needs administrator in general, and finally explored situations they experienced regarding special education programming. Each group of participants was asked questions in their role as either a teacher or administrator to generate more meaningful conversation (see Appendix D for the interview guide). All three groups were asked to describe a situation regarding special education services and the challenges and benefits gained from their experience. Additionally, the participants were asked to discuss their view of what was required for an administrator to be effective for special education programming.

Data Analysis

Data gathered was analyzed using thematic analysis for this study. Through the data analysis process, each group (administrator and teacher) themes were identified and analyzed separately and collectively. This approach accounted for the connectedness between each group and the overall study (Vagle, 2014; Van Manen, 2015). This approach was most appropriate for this study because there is no final or correct answer to the perceptions of an administrators' role for special education programming; rather, this study aims to understand better how each perspective is intertwined with the more significant perception of the role of an administrator for special education programming (Van Manen, 2015). As educators, understanding how actions are perceived and interpreted is a critical aspect of self-reflection and growth.

Data gathered from interviews were transcribed verbatim from the digital recording for analysis. Audio recordings were destroyed upon transcription to maintain confidentiality. Once the data were transcribed, the researcher read through the transcripts to get an overall feel for the

interviews. An Excel spreadsheet was created to organize data analysis into columns that followed a logical progression for better understanding.

NVivo software was utilized to begin the data analysis process to ensure a thorough and methodical approach to capture the findings (Hilal & Alabri, 2013). NVivo software was selected because the program is designed for qualitative research and offers a multi-faceted approach to analyzing data in a meaningful way that goes further than manually identifying themes and concepts in a study (Halil & Alabri, 2013; Welsh, 2002). Through NVivo, initial open coding was verified through the use of nodes to select words and phrases from the interviews that captured the essence of the question (Creswell, 2013; Ezzy, 2002; Glesne, 2011). Quotes were then selected to support initial open coding as a reference during further analysis. The researcher read through the transcript a second time to review initial open coding. Codes developed from the initial reading were revised by collapsing similar codes into broader categories. The broad categories were analyzed to identify themes prevalent throughout the data that was then used to interpret a deeper meaning that demonstrates the interwoven perceptions of the role of an administrator from the lenses of each participant (Glesne, 2011; Hancock & Algozzine, 2011; Heinonen, 2015; Van Manen, 2015).

Strategies for Quality

A few strategies were implemented to enhance the overall quality of the data gathered and interpretations to address credibility, transferability, confirmability, trustworthiness, and reliability. Member-checking was used to increase the quality of data analysis and interpretation. Sharing the preliminary results from the transcriptions to the participants allowed an opportunity for them to provide clarification and feedback on how the data were captured (Creswell, 2013; Glesne, 2011). Additionally, research subjectivity or clarification was presented in the research

and strategies to account for bias (Glesne, 2011). Finally, a peer reviewer (de-briefer) was used to help complete quality control checks for data collection methods, analysis, and interpretation (Creswell, 2013).

Interviews were digitally audio-recorded and transcribed to address confirmability (Creswell, 2013). Additionally, all audio recordings were destroyed to maintain the confidentiality of participants, and all information was de-identified, with only the researcher having access to the master document. Field notes were used as a supplemental data source with non-verbal cues or observations providing additional rich information captured during the interview.

More than one coder was used to analyze and code transcriptions for reliability checks (Creswell, 2013). Credibility was established by triangulating the data through interviews with an administrator and teacher (Ezzy, 2002). Using the data gathered from all three groups, the findings provide more insight into how different stakeholders perceive the role of an administrator. Through in-depth interviews from different sources, a detailed description of the phenomenon was developed, thus increasing transferability.

Subjectivity Statement

As an educator with a variety of experiences, I have developed a personal belief system of what I think constitutes a great leader and how the quality can be shaped. As a special educator, my personal beliefs about special education and the knowledge base administrators should have strongly influenced my approach to leadership. Since administrators are faced with the task of acting as a legal representative, I think it is critical for those administrators to have at minimum a basic understanding of special education law. Without that knowledge base, I think it

would be challenging for an administrator to make ethical and legally sound decisions in complex situations.

Years of experience and continued education have helped evolve my personal theoretical framework. I tend to lean more toward the interpretivism paradigm. I yearn to gain a deeper understanding of people and their interpretations of life experiences. My concern usually is the "why" rather than the "what" because without understanding the "why" I do not believe we can effectively implement change. Systems Thinking Theory (Senge, 1990) provides a conduit through which exploring why an organization functions in a specific capacity while also exploring how the relationship between systems within organizations positively or negatively impacts the organization's overall success.

My professional and personal interest in perceptions of administrators stems from experiences in my job, leading to wanting a deeper understanding of their roles for special education programming. I went through an administrator training program for the role of a principal. Because of my background in special education, I was able to obtain licensure for the principalship and special education administration. I received extensive support and direction throughout the program, especially from my mentor. This experience was positive for me, but working with fellow administrators, I have been dismayed at how ill-prepared they are for their position.

I have worked as an administrator and currently work at the district level supporting administrators. I currently have access to school compliance data pertaining to special education services. Because of this, I am overly cautious about what information I access and continually check that I am upholding confidentiality and ethical considerations. As such, I needed to

constantly step back and reflect on the purpose of my study and the impact this information could have on special education programming within the district I am currently employed.

Pilot Study

A pilot study was conducted to determine whether the interview protocol generated findings relevant to the research questions. Two current administrators were recruited using the snowball method, provided informed consent, and were interviewed for this pilot study. Data collected from the interviews were transcribed from a digital recording for analysis. Transcription was completed by the researcher verbatim to include all verbal communication during the interviews. Once the data were transcribed, the researcher read through the transcripts to get an overall feel for the interviews.

To begin the data analysis process, open coding was used to develop initial codes based on the responses from the participants (Creswell, 2002). Initial open-coding included: visionary, multi-faceted, communication, expertise, reflection, open-mindedness, discussion, professional development, district training, lack of formal education, and understanding. The researcher read through the transcripts a second time to review the initial coding. Initial coding was revised by collapsing similar codes into more broad categories. For the categories, words that encompassed the more significant meaning were selected to reflect the coding.

Initial open coding yielded eleven codes that were then collapsed into six categories. The six categories were: facilitator of distributed leadership; communication; collaboration; support and training; systemic support; and knowledge base. Although each category was aligned with a focus area, some of the categories were applicable across areas. After reviewing the transcripts a third time, four themes emerged: role as an administrator, effective special education leader, significant challenges, and support. These themes were prevalent across interviews and

questions. The findings from the pilot study support previous studies for administrator's understanding and role of special education.

Summary

This chapter addressed the method, participants, and design used in this study. Data was gathered through interviews with administrators, special education teachers, and general education teachers to explore the perceptions of the role of administrators for special education programming. The findings provided a better understanding of the research questions by triangulating the data; having multiple data sources allowed for a complete picture of how this phenomenon is experienced. Data gathered were interpreted using Systems Thinking Theory to provide one interpretation of how each part connects to the whole experience and how each part is connected to the other. The next chapter will include findings from the interviews conducted for this study.

CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

This study aimed to better understand the perceptions of participants of the role of an administrator for special education programming. To gain these perspectives, in-depth interviews were conducted with three groups, administrators, special education teachers, and general education teachers. Using a semi structured interview format, participants were able to share their beliefs and experiences with special education programming in their respective areas.

The purpose of this study is to explore perceptions about the role of an administrator for special education programming in order to identify specific areas of special education programming knowledge administrators need to be effective for special education. This chapter will describe themes formed based on the interviews to better answer the research questions that guided this study:

1. What are the perceptions of faculty and administrators regarding the role of administrators facilitating special education programming for their building?
2. What education and training is needed to prepare school administrators for facilitating special education programming in their building?

The following themes will be explored in detail: educational philosophy; championing for the betterment of all stakeholders; and growth mindset.

Educational Philosophy

The data analysis process evolved from initial codes such as perception and expectations to an overarching theme from both teachers and administration about the special needs administrator's educational philosophy. For the purposes of this paper, educational philosophy is the personal set of beliefs about education that is based on someone's personal and professional experience, training, and education. An educational philosophy can evolve over time as the

person has more experiences and exposure to other practitioners. While all educators have an individual educational philosophy, a school leader's philosophy influences instructional practices, including special education programming, as well as school culture. Based on the responses from participants, educational philosophy has been broken into two sub-themes, beliefs about special education programming and culture, which will be explored in the next sections.

Beliefs about Special Education Programming

The school leader's educational philosophy shapes their beliefs about special education programming. As a leader, the approach, expectations, and communication about special education programming sets the tone for the school. In this study specifically, participants highlighted the impact and influence their administrators had on priorities around special education programming. Of the fifteen participants, thirteen referred to beliefs and the impact on special education programming during their respective interviews.

When discussing her experiences of the impact beliefs of a special needs administrator have on special education programming, general education teacher Liz stated,

> I feel that the impact can be positive and negative. I feel like the positive piece really comes from their outlook on [what] EC is. If they find that students being EC holds importance, I feel like that is relayed to the entire staff. When it looks like that it falls lower on the totem pole, as far as how they look at things across the board, I feel like the staff as a whole picks that up and that EC is not held in high regard. When a building feels like that in general, then that has an impact on how students are served because it is not deemed as important as other things.

Liz's explanation about whether or not special education is viewed as important or a priority was also echoed by an experience participant Julie had in one of her schools.

Julie, a general education teacher recalled an incident when she was part of the leadership team at her school. She shared that during one of their meetings focused on discussing needs for the upcoming school year, a special education teacher advocated for additional special education teachers due to the high number of students and services provided. The administrator responded and said, "the focus needs to be on getting more real teachers and not more of you." Julie often thinks back to that incident and how in one moment an administrator clearly stated their beliefs about special education programming. Julie recalled being shocked that an administrator would not only think special education programming and staff were not important, but that they also did not view them as real teachers. While Julie's administrator focused directly on special education teachers, Anne's special needs administrator's beliefs impacted not only staff but also students. In both scenarios students with disabilities were negatively impacted and unable to receive the services they were identified as needing.

Anne, a special education teacher, talked about a time where she and her students were negatively impacted by the special needs administrator's beliefs. She shared,

> It was really hard because all of my students were failing and we weren't allowed to offer resource classes because the administration didn't believe in giving select students an unfair advantage. Unfortunately, the administration did not view special education as important and allowed our department to be treated as assistants rather than teachers.

From Anne's perspective, all students should receive the same caliber of instruction regardless of academic need. She discussed the importance of special education not replacing general education learning. In her opinion, Anne felt like the previous administration did not value the

need for special education and focused only on students in general education. Her administration did not treat special education as designed to address specific deficits tailored to the individual student in addition to accessing the general education curriculum. Her current administrator has made it a priority to rely on the expertise of staff in their respective areas and encourages special education teachers to take on leadership roles within the school. The stark contrast between her previous and current administrator's beliefs about special education programming has led to a shift in both staffing and the overall atmosphere in the school.

While the teacher participant groups discussed examples of how the beliefs impacted special education programming and instructional practices, the administrator group focused more on the legal aspects of programming as related to educational beliefs. Three administrator participants discussed the importance of relaying beliefs in a positive manner so that teachers would comply with the legal aspects of special education. For example, Jim talked about how his beliefs impacted his expectations of special education programming in his school. He shared that as a new administrator, he did not recognize the importance of special education or the impact his beliefs had on programming until presented with a due process hearing. Jim shared that as a result of the due process hearing, he really saw that his personal beliefs negatively impacted students and the overall school. As a result, Jim has focused his efforts on shifting the mindset of resistant teachers for providing and implementing the IEP as written. Jim said, "They [teacher] might interpret an IEP in a certain way, and they might want to justify their interpretation because it supports their belief and their background as far as what they believe." Since the legal action occurred, Jim has been educating his staff on special education programming, why an IEP is written the way it is, and the importance of implementing an IEP as written because it is in the best interest of the student. Tom, also shared a similar experience where a parent won a due

process request for a denial of FAPE because the teachers refused to implement the IEP believing the accommodations provided the student an unfair advantage. In Tom's experience, he had to shift the beliefs of teachers to understand that while the IEP needed to be followed because it was a legally binding document, they should also be implementing the IEP because it was what the student needed to be successful. Although the experiences between the teacher groups and the administrator group differed, all groups identified that an administrator's beliefs had an impact on special education programming.

School Culture

Culture is the shared beliefs, attitudes, traditions, values, and expectations formed over time (Fullan, 2007). In a school, culture is shaped and influenced by students, staff, community members, and school leadership. Though all schools have a culture, some schools have a negative or toxic school culture which can hinder all stakeholders from success. A positive school culture is when all stakeholders feel welcomed, feel physically and emotionally safe to be vulnerable enough to take risks and grow. It is an inclusive environment where all stakeholders are valued and made to feel important to the overall success of the school.

The previous section discussed the significance of educational philosophy and the impact an administrator had on special education programming. School culture is often shaped by the educational philosophy of leadership, which in turns influences all aspects of the school. While culture and special education are not typically connected, 80% of participants in this study highlighted the impact school culture had on their experiences with special education programming. During many interviews, participants alluded to school culture either positively or negatively impacting special education in their school. During the interviews, 13 participants

discussed how important it was for administrators to set the tone and vision for their school in order to create a positive learning environment.

While not specifically mentioning special education during the conversation, Jim, a current administrator discussed his perception of how his biggest priority is to drive the vision of the school in order to make sound decisions for all students regardless of need. Likewise, Deb, an administrator shared, "I think it really has to be a culture in your school and it has to be a mindset that all kids are different and we have to do what we have to do to meet the needs of students." Both administrators talked about the importance of school leaders being the motivator and conduit through which a positive culture is maintained in their school.

Brad shared that as an administrator the way in which information is presented often determines how staff perceive priorities with special education. He said that in his role as a special needs administrator, "If I come across where it's not important to me, but it's a you have to do it, blah, blah. Then they take it a different way." Brad further explained that he as the leader sets the tone for students and staff, something he does not take lightly because of the direct impact his beliefs have on the culture within the school.

Interestingly Jen, a special education teacher, also discussed the impact a special needs administrator has on school culture. She shared in her experience that,

> Having an effective building level administrator really can change the culture of your special ed department, how kids are served, how teachers are supported, and just really be the difference between being an ineffective special ed program in a building or an effective one.

Likewise, Adam, also a special education teacher, discussed how important setting the tone as an administrator is to a positive school culture. Adam shared that he has worked with

administrators who have set a tone that disregarded the special education population and that trickled down to students who reported feeling unwelcome in school. On the flip side, Adam also recalled working for an administrator who set a tone of inclusiveness and the special education students thrived under that leadership. While a school culture is shaped over time, the special needs administrator plays a vital role in either continuing the culture as it stands or shifting to a positive culture that is inclusive of all students.

Championing for the betterment of all stakeholders

One of the roles a special needs administrator has is to be a champion for all stakeholders. For this study, championing for the betterment of all stakeholders describes how a special needs administrator uses their position and authority to ensure all stakeholders are supported. Stakeholders include staff, students, parents, and the community. Advocacy for resources, training, and support are all within the scope of championing for the betterment of all stakeholders. This also requires effective communication between stakeholders in order to achieve positive outcomes. In essence, the special needs administrator is the cheerleader for special education programming. This theme encompasses three sub-themes, positional power, supportive practices, and collaborative working relationships, which support the practice of championing for the betterment of all stakeholders.

Positional Power

The role of an administrator is to provide building level leadership for student success. While a multitude of approaches could be examined, one area of focus is positional power. Administrators automatically have positional power to make decisions, enact change, and advocate for their students. Administrators can use their role as the SNA to influence and shape equitable practices for special education programming within their school. This could be done

through advocating the needs of the school, creating an equitable and inclusive learning environment, acting as the instructional leader for special education, or as the LEA in IEP meetings. For the purposes of this study, positional power can best be described as using a person's professional position, title, or role as leverage to accomplish a task. All participants in this study discussed the importance of their special needs administrator to have a basic knowledge of special education programming in order to effectively use their positional power. Throughout the interviews in this study, all participants alluded to the need for their special needs administrator to act in a capacity that advocated for support and personnel, or for IEPs be followed as written. Although many did not directly speak to the power and authority an SNA has, their descriptions and explanations did just that.

As a general education teacher, Ruth participates in numerous IEP meetings every year. Her understanding of the role of the SNA during the meeting was to maintain a respectful and professional relationship with the families as well as to help make decisions. Ruth recalled a meeting she participated in where the parent was unhappy with her explanation about how she modified assignments and started yelling at her. Ruth said she sat there stunned and didn't respond, but looked to her SNA for support. In her mind, the role of the SNA was to step in and use their position as the LEA to address the situation, which did not happen. The SNA did not intervene, nor did he support her as she tried to calm the situation. Likewise, Liz also shared a few experiences as a general education teacher where her administrator had the opportunity to use their position to ensure student needs were met.

In Liz's experience, her SNA never explained what her role was as the general education teacher. She would participate in IEP meetings, but never spoke unless directly questioned. Over the years, she sought out training and learning opportunities to better meet the needs of her

students and comply with IEP's. Although she did receive training, Liz felt that her administrator should have used the role as the SNA to request support and training for staff as a proactive measure to prevent issues. It was not until a parent questioned why teachers were not receiving adequate training and support that the administrator finally acknowledged a need for support from the district level. Based on Liz's interactions with that administrator, she felt that the administrator did not seek out help from the district because of perceived negative impact on their evaluation.

Tom and Linda both discussed how perceived power in the role of an administrator impacted students with disabilities and programming. In Linda's experience as a special education teacher, her administrator bypassed her input and made decisions as the building administrator when the decision was something that needed to go through the IEP team. Linda shared that in this situation, a student was placed on specialized transportation and their special education service time was increased by three hours without holding an IEP meeting. Although the parent did not pursue legal action, the decision of the administrator was a direct violation of parental participation and a denial of FAPE. Linda felt that in her position as a teacher, she was limited to expressing concerns. Ultimately the administrator was her supervisor and she felt obligated to follow their directive. In this case, the administrator abused their positional power and made a decision that could have easily resulted in legal action if the parent pursued that option. The administrator only agreed to listen to Linda after the student refused to ride the specialized transportation and had to wait at the school for four hours waiting on the parent to pick up the student. Linda shared when the administrator was inconvenienced they were willing to listen to her perspective and allowed the IEP team to convene and make appropriate decisions.

Conversely, Tom's experience as an administrator was more proactive and he attempted to use his position to leverage programming and supports needed. Tom shared that he used his role as an administrator to prevent his team from ending up in a legal situation and to improve supportive practices. Tom shared, "If something stupid happens, I'm going to be the one that's going to be called and asked to fix it. So I think it helps me stay a little more on top of what my teachers need and seek out the help or support we need before anything bad happens." He recognized that in his role as the administrator he had the ability to advocate for students and staff to make sure everyone had the necessary supports to be successful.

Supportive Practices

One way a special needs administrator demonstrates their championing for stakeholders is through supportive practices. For the purposes of this study, supportive practices is the administrator being able to provide instructional and professional support, resources, and guidance for special education programming. All participants discussed the importance of their SNA being supportive of special education programming by identifying areas of need through observations, discussions, and feedback in order to provide the most appropriate resources and guidance to improve practice. Interestingly, while each participant group discussed support, their examples and explanations differed depending on their role. For example, administrator participants focused more on compliance and providing support through compliant paperwork, whereas teacher participants (both general education and special education) focused on instructional practices and how to meet the needs of students.

General education teachers, Liz, Kelly, and Chris, all shared that at various points in their careers, they sought out the support and help of their SNA with similar results. Chris explained that although he asked for help on what co-teaching should look like in his classroom, the SNA

responded that he should use his best judgement. While in this case everything worked out and they had a successful co-teaching classroom, Chris felt more support would have helped the team be better prepared to serve in that capacity. Likewise, Liz shared that reflecting back on her beginning years as a general education teacher she wished her SNA had been more supportive.

Liz recalled having to seek out training and support for students in her class because her special needs administrator was not willing to provide the resources. She spoke of a specific situation involving a student receiving special education services who had complex needs. As a newer teacher, Liz was not well versed in how to effectively communicate with a child diagnosed with Autism and felt unsupported by her special needs administrator when she sought help. Similarly, Kelly also disclosed that as a general education teacher she, "asked for a lot of help, because I didn't know. And I don't think they liked me asking questions." Although she asked for help, Kelly still felt unsupported by her special needs administrator and has become more assertive in seeking help and being proactive to get her students the services they need.

Amy, a special education teacher shared that until this interview she had not thought about how her SNA directly supported her in providing special education programming. Upon reflection, Amy shared an experience where she sought out help from her SNA about needing guidance or suggestions on ways to improve a class period to be more instructionally engaging to better serve her students. Amy said that the SNA came and took notes during that time period and after the period ended the only thing the SNA shared was that it was busy in the classroom. While she was appreciative of the SNA coming in and observing, Amy disclosed that she was frustrated by the lack of support and suggestions on ways to improve instruction. Chris best summarized their experiences with receiving support from their SNA by saying, "If you don't feel like you're being supported in whatever you're trying to do, it kind of sucks the wind out of

the endeavor, whatever that it is." Deb, exemplified the concept of providing support to her teachers by recognizing training was needed to address the needs of her student population. Not only did she secure the training for the teachers, but she also attended training as an administrator to learn strategies for working with students with Autism. She said as the administrator, she needed to know what they were taught in order to be supportive and provide meaningful input if a student was experiencing difficulty.

As an administrator, Erin, discussed how supporting special education programming was a challenge in her school. Specifically, the biggest challenge was supporting general education teachers who are responsible for the implementation of IEP's and providing accommodations of their instructional materials. Erin shared that her biggest focus in her first year as the SNA was to coach and support science and social studies teachers because they were responsible for serving all students without the support of a special education teacher in the classroom. Erin recalled the first time she met with that group of teachers, they were shocked an administrator recognized the 'burden' they felt being responsible for everything. Despite recognizing that this group needed support, Erin discussed providing the support because she was afraid of lawsuits and that her non-core teachers were not providing accommodations or following the IEP as written. Her priority was to provide coaching and support on data collection, and providing accommodations.

Brad shared a similar sentiment by saying that as an administrator he supported his teachers by, "understanding those hardships they have to go through. Understanding the expectation is they need to go through them in order for the kid to be successful, but also understanding what they have to go through." Although Brad discussed this as a level of support, further probing revealed that he perceived support through the lens of ensuring compliance with paperwork and prevention of lawsuits. He discussed that he believed an administrator showed

support by understanding the laws, adhering to timelines, and what to do in the meetings. The administrator participants felt that the best support they could provide was ensuring the provision of services was implemented with fidelity, while the general education and special education teachers reported feeling the most supported when they received suggestions and input on quality instructional practices.

Collaborative Working Relationships

Collaborative working relationships is the willingness to work collaboratively and engage in productive discourse to attain a common goal. For purposes of this study, collaborative working relationships also refers to empowering staff to demonstrate and share their areas of expertise in order to learn and grow from each other to achieve positive outcomes for all stakeholders. As an administrator, there is typically a focus on developing collaborative working relationships among staff, however, intentional collaborative efforts are critical for special education and general education teachers to provide the best possible instructional opportunities for students with disabilities.

"A good SNA should be accepting of all the opinions of all the team members who work with that child and to be making decisions that are in the best interests of the child." Linda is a special education teacher who has been fortunate enough to have supportive SNA's. She shared that in her experience, being able to work with staff from other areas helped her grow professionally and allowed others to learn from her as well.

Julie, spoke about a situation where her expertise as the general education teacher was trusted because the SNA and special education teacher believed she knew what was best for the student. In her example, Julie shared that although she had a struggling student who needed more time with the special education teacher, she was hesitant at first to say anything because prior

experiences with other SNA's were poorly received. However, in this situation Julie said that the SNA and special education teacher wanted to work together as a team to develop the best plan for the student using each person's respective strengths. She recalled feeling valued and heard by being included in the decision making process.

Much like the example Julie shared, Linda also discussed the impact of her SNA's willingness to listen and work together to best meet the needs of her students. Linda spoke through the perspective of a special education teacher who had both positive and negative experiences with being included in planning, decision making, as well as collaborating with others for special education programming. In her role, Linda felt the lack of the SNA's collaboration arose from a lack of knowledge about special education. She went on to say that it appeared with a few of her prior SNA's that they were less receptive to her input and ideas when they did not have a previous experience in special education, which she chalked up to them not wanting to look uninformed about a topic.

Amy's experience with her SNA was similar to that of what Linda shared about a lack of collaborative working relationships resulting in a lawsuit against the district. As a special education teacher, Amy tried to work collaboratively with her SNA to ensure her students were receiving services as written on the IEP (as required by law) without success. Her SNA made decisions about programming and delivery of services without input from the IEP team and expected Amy to implement those changes. Despite Amy trying to explain the legality of the situation, the SNA refused to budge and mandated that the changes be implemented. Since the SNA was also her supervisor, Amy felt obligated to adhere to the mandate despite knowing it was wrong. As a result, the parent filed for due process and ultimately the SNA acknowledged that Amy should have been involved as she was the expert in special education.

All of the examples above demonstrate the need for collaborative working relationships in order to provide effective special education programming. Regardless of their role, the participants discussed how they felt more effective when able to work collaboratively to make informed decisions based on information from their respective areas of expertise.

Growth Mindset

A growth mindset is the ability to recognize strengths and areas for growth in order to continually improve practices (Dweck, 2006). Based on the analysis from this study, a growth mindset can be described as being cognizant of areas for growth and seeking out opportunities to further develop their knowledge. Seven out of fifteen participants shared in their interviews the need for a growth mindset. In each of those interviews, participants described the importance of administrators for special education recognizing the importance of knowing their strengths and areas they are less competent in order to further develop their professional practice.

When talking about a positive experience in her role as a special education teacher with an SNA, Jen shared, “They have to be willing to learn and willing to, I think sometimes, not always be the authority and everything, but understand that there are things they can learn from the people underneath them as well.” Jen went on to further explain an instance where her SNA came into her classroom to get ideas on how to help another teacher who was struggling with classroom management. She disclosed that experience helped empower her because the administrator not only recognized an area of weakness they had, but also recognized that was a strength of Jen’s. That particular administrator asked questions and for feedback from Jen on the best practices to be shared with the struggling teacher.

Similarly, Anne shared that as a special education teacher she felt compelled to support her administrators in regards to special education programming. She discussed the importance of

an SNA having a special education knowledge base, but also a willingness to learn more. She went on to talk about the importance of an SNA to be familiar with the needs in their building and continually stay abreast of current research and best practices in those areas. Anne felt that an SNA who was willing to listen and learn would be most effective because they would be able to provide support to both students and staff. She also shared that as administrators transitioned it was imperative that the willingness to learn continue.

Adam, also a special education teacher, works in a school with frequent staff and administration turnover resulting in an ever changing environment. He discussed that in his experience the administrator's willingness to learn more about special education programming has always benefited not only the administrator, but ultimately the students served. Right before his interview, Adam's school had a new administrator appointed who would be over special education programming. He shared that after working together for a little over a week he was hopeful because, "she's very receptive to questions, concerns, issues that may arise. Which is different from the prior SNA. They [the prior SNA] sat in meetings saying things they had no business saying and after the meeting didn't want my input." Adam told the interviewer that the prior administrator's rigidity ultimately led to a parent seeking out an attorney which could have been avoided if the administrator had listened to him and took a step back before making unethical decisions. The rigidity cost the district time and money, destroyed the working relationship with the students and parents, and negatively impacted the student. As a result of litigation, the school was found non-compliant and was required to complete training on how to provide special education services in the least restrictive environment.

Likewise, Tom, an administrator, shared that a SNA needs to have a willingness to learn, ask questions, and work as a team. "you also have to know what you don't know and not speak

to something just to give an answer and be willing to go out and humble yourself and ask questions when you don't know." He expressed the importance of knowing when to listen and acknowledge when you do not have answers, but that it was equally as important to work with teachers to find the answers and work together.

As a new administrator, Erin found herself in the middle of a due process hearing, the result of poor decisions made by the IEP team and other administrators. While admitting she did not understand the process at the time, she has used that experience to learn more about special education programming. Erin stated that she felt as the administrator it was her duty to not only work collaboratively with her staff, but to also recognize what she did not know and seek out ways to improve her practice to be an effective administrator for special education. One specific area she recognized as an area for growth was discipline for students with disabilities. Understanding the code of conduct was one thing, but Erin quickly learned that in order to remain compliant she needed to learn due process and procedural safeguards for discipline with students with disabilities. Her willingness to recognize areas of weakness in order to seek out learning opportunities positively impacted students in the long run.

Training and Practice

Seven of the participants have a background working in special education, two of which are currently administrators. Despite this background, when asked about specific coursework in special education during their administrator preparation program, only two participants recalled taking a class about special education. Both Jim and Deb shared that their respective class did not pertain to special education law or policies, but focused on topics around special education. The three other administrators, Tom, Erin, and Brad recalled having one or two nights covering special education law during their program. None of the general education teachers recalled a

specific course in special education during their preparation program, but one took an elective class on special education. All participants discussed the necessity of administrators receiving adequate training or coursework in special education. During his interview, Adam was shocked when he learned that special education knowledge, specifically law, was not a requirement for an administrator to obtain their license.

Jim shared that although he had a course on special education in his administrator preparation program, he did not feel knowledgeable about IDEA or what service delivery should look like in his building. He disclosed not having a strong understanding about the legalities surrounding special education, only that he knew it was a widely litigated area within education. While Jim recognized that he needed to learn about special education in order to be effective, he worked with other administrators who were resistant and avoided learning more about special education. He shared that their avoidance to learn ultimately led to all stakeholders suffering because decisions were being made that negatively impacted students with disabilities.

Linda also discussed how one SNA she worked with lacked the knowledge to make informed decisions which resulted in unethical and illegal actions. Linda recalled one instance where a new student started with an IEP requiring more intensive support and when she talked to her SNA about the potential challenges for providing the services in a general education classroom, the SNA responded saying, " Well, you just need to change the IEP. We don't do that." As a teacher trained in special education, Linda knew that telling a parent that a school does not offer or provide certain services is not allowed as it is a direct violation of FAPE and would likely result in legal action for procedural violations. She recalled that experience was eye opening to how little her SNA knew about the legalities of special education and the provision of services. Based on that incident, Linda decided she needed to educate her administration of

nuances of special education because they were responsible for making sure that IEPs were being implemented according to regulations. Her focus was on education around the provision of services and the meaning of FAPE in regards to IEP development and implementation. Amy, also a special education teacher, shared a similar experience where her SNA was new and had no background on special education but was actively involved in the development of IEPs. Amy shared that while the SNA was willing to help, he needed to be more knowledgeable about the process and she felt obligated to teach the basics in order for sound decision making.

Summary

Findings from this study were categorized into three major themes that captured the perceptions of general education teachers, special education teachers, and administrators for the role of an administrator for special education programming. Based on the data analysis, the three major themes were: educational philosophy, championing for the betterment of all stakeholders, and growth mindset. Educational philosophy was further explored through the sub themes beliefs about special education and school culture. Educational philosophy was the overarching theme that was found to be reflected in the beliefs and administrator had about special education which in turn influenced school culture. The next major theme, championing for the betterment of all stakeholders was identified as a significant area participants felt necessary for an administrator to be effective for special education programming. Positional power, supportive practices, and collaborative working relationships were identified as the sub themes necessary to provide appropriate advocacy and support for special education programming. The final major theme, growth mindset was selected because participants revealed a need for administrators to have awareness of areas they needed to grow in as it pertained to special education. The sub theme that supported the growth mindset was the training and practice needed to continually grow and

support special education programming as an administrator. Findings from this study indicate that it was evident that participants felt that administrators had the positional power to provide support, and collaborative working relationships for special education programming.

Overall, the interviews yielded interesting perspectives from each participant regarding their view of the role an administrator has for special education programming. While variance existed between participant groups, there were common threads across groups in regard to what they perceived as necessary to be an effective administrator. The next chapter will explore the deeper meaning behind these results as it relates to the research questions, prior studies, and implications for future research.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

This qualitative study aimed to explore the perceptions of the role of an administrator for special education programming by gaining perspectives of participants from three different groups. Special education teachers, general education teachers, and administrators participated in individual interviews designed to learn their perspective about the role of an administrator for special education programming. Interviews were conducted with five participants from each group and then transcribed for analysis. NVivo software was used to complete the data analysis through the initial process of creating nodes, then into developing codes to describe commonalities (Welsh, 2002). Finally, the codes were reviewed to ascertain themes of which the thematic analysis discussed in Chapter 4 were generated (Hilal & Alabrai, 2013). Based on the analysis, three major themes were identified: educational philosophy, championing for the betterment of stakeholders, and growth mindset. Within each of these themes, sub-themes were also identified and discussed in relation to the perception of the role of an administrator for special education programming.

This chapter will first explore the convergence and divergence of themes identified through this study in relation to current research. Next, the chapter will address the implications of findings from this study as well as recommendations for future research and practice. Finally, this chapter will address limitations of this study. The interpretation of findings will be aligned to address the following research questions:

1. What are the perceptions of faculty and administrators regarding the role of administrators facilitating special education programming for their building?

2. What education and training is needed to prepare school administrators for facilitating special education programming in their building?

Interpretation of Findings

In order to gain a better understanding of how three different key stakeholder groups perceived the role of an SNA, interviews with general education teachers, special education teachers, and administrators were conducted. Participants in this study provided rich descriptions of their experiences as well as their perceptions of the role of administrator for special education programming. Previous research did not look at special education programming through the lens of this particular triad, rather focusing on either only perspectives of special needs administrators, special education teachers, or parents; without including general education teachers. It was important to have the voice of general education teachers, special education teachers, and special needs administrators because each group has a role in the provision of special education programming. Since they are actively involved in the IEP process, adding the perspective of the general education teacher provided a unique view of how the role of an administrator is perceived. Providing the views of the special education teacher also allowed for a firsthand account of how they perceive the role of an administrator, while an administrator's perspective provided their understanding of what an administrator should be doing for special education programming.

Research Question 1: What are the perceptions of faculty and administrators regarding the role of administrators facilitating special education programming for their building?

The three groups all identified educational philosophy as the most impactful aspect of how an administrator facilitates special education programming. A common thread across all groups was that an administrator's fundamental beliefs about special education impacts the tone

and expectations for special education programming throughout the entire school. For example, if the administrator did not hold special education in high regard or acknowledge the importance of it, both students with disabilities and teachers would be negatively impacted. If an administrator did not value special education, students would be less likely to receive the support and resources necessary to provide an equitable learning environment to that of their peers. Current findings support earlier research that while having a foundational knowledge base of special education is desired, the attitude of the administrator is more important (Hack, 2014; Mitchell, 2011; Sun & Xin, 2020; Thompson, 2017). Likewise, Hack's (2014) study also found that an administrator's belief about special education influenced their support of inclusive practices. Educational philosophy was the most important aspect because the beliefs about special education directly impact and influence all aspects of leadership. For example, administrators with prior experience in special education were more likely to report a positive attitude about inclusive culture which was also connected to overall perceived positive beliefs about special education (Hack, 2014). Additionally, an administrator's positive attitude about special education was connected to the accessibility of resources, interventions, and advocacy for personnel to best meet the needs of their students.

Prior research highlighted how different stakeholders felt that school culture was an important part in how special education programming was perceived and facilitated (Hack 2014; Hofreiter, 2017; Mitchell 2011). For example, Hofreiter (2017) found that inclusive culture was most important for administrators facilitating special education programming. However, she also found participants differed greatly in their perception of an inclusive culture. Although Hack (2014), Hofreiter (2017), and Mitchell (2011) concluded that school culture was a key part of being an effective administrator for special education programming, none of their studies

explicitly stated educational philosophy as a finding. The current study highlighted the connection between educational philosophy and school culture where participants felt that the underlying beliefs of an administrator were demonstrated through the shaping of school culture.

The findings of this study suggest that educational philosophy is the foundation of how the role of an administrator for special education programming is perceived. The beliefs of an administrator for special education programming trickle down and also influence other key themes identified in this study. School culture and beliefs about special education programming were identified as two conduits through which an administrator's educational philosophy were represented and perceived. These findings suggest that an administrator's educational philosophy, school culture, and beliefs directly influenced how the role of an administrator for special education was perceived. Additionally, these results also support the theme of championing for the betterment of stakeholders as being a necessary part of the role for an administrator for special education programming. For example, in order to champion for the betterment of stakeholders, an administrator needs to have a foundational knowledge from which to start.

The foundation participants felt necessary for the role of an administrator for special education programming included an understanding of instructional practices and special education knowledge. Dating back almost three decades, Minor (1992) found that 78% of participants (administrators) did not feel well prepared to provide instructional leadership for special education. Roberts and Guerra (2017) found that the only area administrators felt inadequately prepared was in providing interventions and curriculum. Interestingly, most of the administrators in this study did not discuss needing a deeper understanding of instructional best practices for special education. This is of importance because previous studies found that

administrators overestimated their knowledge or abilities to provide instructional support (Roberts & Guerra, 2017; Mitchell, 2011; Williams, 2015). While administrators in this study did not discuss the need for additional support on instructional practices in special education, the other participant groups discussed the need for their administrators to receive additional training on instructional practices.

All of the special education teachers and a majority of general education teachers discussed the importance of SNA's having this knowledge in order to be supportive of special education programming. Prior studies also found that an effective administrator demonstrated supportive practices for special education by being an instructional leader who was able to provide guidance and input on special education programming (Bateman & Bateman, 2001; Mitchell, 2011; Roberts & Guerra, 2017). Findings from those studies found that special education teachers felt most supported when their administrator offered opportunities for collaboration among teachers, set clear instructional expectations, and effectively communicated their vision for special education (Bateman & Bateman, 2001; Mitchell, 2011). Results from the current study highlight how disconnected the perceptions special education and general education teachers have in comparison to those an administrator has about supportive practices. This finding was also illustrated in William's (2015) study where administrator participants felt that regardless of special education knowledge they were prepared to provide support for special education programming. While those studies focused on the perspective of administrators and their beliefs about being supportive for special education programming, they did not consider the perspective of the teachers. This study expands on the prior research by determining what teachers felt was needed to be supported by their administrator. This disconnect could be due to a

variety of factors, however the findings imply that either the teachers or administrators have differing beliefs about the role an administrator holds for special education programming.

Research Question 2: What education and training is needed to prepare school administrators for facilitating special education programming in their building?

In order to address this question, we must first consider the beliefs an administrator has about special education programming. Their belief set will influence education and training sought out by them based on their perception of understanding. While all participants discussed the importance of special education training, few reported receiving such education. These results are alarming partially because all of the administrators interviewed were acting as the LEA in their school; but also because despite ample evidence available no requirements exist when seeking administrator licensure.

Valesky and Hirth's (1992) study found that only 45% of state licensing boards required special education knowledge to obtain licensure. Research from McHatton, et al. (2010) also indicated that less than 50% of administrators were trained on special education issues. Sun and Xin's (2020) most recent study indicated that 73.5% of administrators received no formal training in special education, with 74.8% they received on the job training on special education programming. This study, although a small sample size, also found less than half of administrators were trained on topics in special education related to their role as the SNA.

All participants in this study felt that administrators required a minimum amount of formal education and training on the principles of special education, however, the specificity varied among participants. The current findings support prior studies where administrators discussed needing additional training was needed in the areas of law, policy, and practice, in order to be an effective leader (Aspedon, 1990; Cobb, 2015; Cooner, Tochterman, & Garrison-

Wade, 2015; Davidson, 1999; Frost & Kersten, 2011; Pazey & Cole, 2013; Schulze, 2014; Singh, 2015; Sun & Xin, 2020). While previous research focused primarily on the views from administrators, these findings further the belief by providing input from additional stakeholders. Based on this, general education teachers, special education teachers, and administrators all believed a level of training on special education was necessary to effectively serve in the role of SNA. While prior studies tended to focus more on legal and procedural aspects of training, this study contributed to the body of work by incorporating those areas as well as recommending a need for training on how to build an inclusive school culture through supportive practices.

Both special education teachers and general education teachers all described what training they thought administrators needed in order to be effective for special education programming. Since most previous research did not focus on the perspectives of teachers as well as administrators, the findings here are especially important because they provide insight into the support both special education and general education teachers felt was most helpful. In considering the training administrators would benefit from, one needs to consider the differing roles from each stakeholder group, as their needs are different. For example, general education teachers thought the biggest area of training an administrator would benefit from was on how to provide instructional support for special education in the general education classroom. They also felt that training on how to facilitate collaborative efforts would be helpful to better serve students with disabilities. Special education teachers felt that targeted training on the special education process as well as how to provide specialized instruction would be beneficial for administrators to provide effective support. This aligns with other studies that examined case law finding patterns of due process hearings and complaints. Specifically, in the area of the special education process, where it has been found that administrators need to be better prepared on the

special education process in order to effectively serve as the LEA in IEP meetings (Ford, 2016; Katsiyannis, Losinski, & Prince, 2012; Zirkel, 2015).

The findings about growth mindset and collaborative working relationships was especially interesting for this body of research because the soft skills were deemed a critical element for an effective administrator. Although soft skills were not explicitly mentioned, the work by Roberts and Guerra (2017) also determined that administrators needed to not only be knowledgeable about curriculum design for special education, but also to be able to effectively work with teams to implement appropriate instruction (Roberts & Guerra, 2017). They posited that an administrator should receive professional development on managing effective instructional teams, which aligns with the findings from this study where participants disclosed a need for professional development on fostering collaborative working relationships.

Results from this study suggest that administrators need formal education on special education law and policy, ongoing training and coaching in order to be effective administrators for special education programming. All administrator participants felt they would benefit from receiving coaching on special education as it was the most practical approach to learning. Prior studies did not mention this as a recommendation, nor was it discussed at length in prior studies. Limited research is available on the effectiveness of coaching as a training method, however, Monteith's (2000) study yielded encouraging results for the group of administrator participants.

Implications

Based on the findings from this study, administrators who receive the recommended education, training, and experience are better prepared to act in the role of administrator for special education programming. In order to positively impact special education programming, policy needs to first be shifted to explicitly include special education as a required component of

administrator preparation programs as well incorporated into the ELCC licensure standards (NPBEA, 2015). In addition to amending the policies mentioned above, practices need to be addressed to further improve instruction, support, and collaboration between stakeholders for the betterment of students with disabilities.

Findings indicate that without training and education on special education programming, administrators will continue to be less effective as a leader for special education programming. Despite more than thirty years of research indicating a need to align licensure and administrator preparation programs, this study highlighted the gaps that continue to exist (Valesky & Hirth, 1992; Zirkel, 2015). The need for training and education are also evident based on the number of due process hearings and the continued achievement gap between students with disabilities and their peers. Results from this study suggested a need for training not only in special education law but also instructional practices, support, and how to oversee collaborative relationships. Until administrators have the training necessary, they will continue to be less effective for special education programming which ultimately is to the detriment of students with disabilities.

While some administrators in this study reported taking some coursework in special education, they also reported the education they received was not enough to adequately prepare them for this role. Based on findings from special education and general education teachers, the education an administrator received was not robust enough to prepare them for real life situations where an administrator had to make informed decisions that impacted special education. This indicates that education should not be only offered during preparation programs, but also throughout their career as part of their professional development.

All three groups felt that the most effective approach was to provide targeted training and professional learning opportunities for administrators on specific special education topics. The

results from this study support prior studies that target training would be most impactful to positively impact special education programming (Minor, 1992; Singh, 2015; Thompson, 2017). Administrators who receive ongoing and embedded training on the different aspects of special education, will be better equipped to provide not only leadership as the LEA, but also guidance on determining the most appropriate decisions for special education programming. Being able to provide this will allow special education teachers to feel supported by their administrator, which in turn will further develop collaborative working relationships among stakeholders.

The findings from this study indicate that without support from the SNA, stakeholders will not be able to work collaboratively for the betterment of all stakeholders. The evidence from this study suggest that stakeholders perceive educational philosophy as influencing culture, collaboration, and support provided for special education programming. In order to shift educational philosophy, the incorporation of special education into administrator preparation programs would offer the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of special education requirements. Including special education as a required component for licensure would provide future administrators the opportunity to learn more about special education which would lead to more inclusive and equitable practices. Those inclusive and equitable practices would allow for more collaboration between teacher groups to provide better instructional opportunities for students with disabilities, resulting in improved student outcomes. As evident from the findings from this study as well as data available on student achievement, access to equitable instruction would not only benefit students with disabilities but also vulnerable populations who have historically performed lower than their peers.

In order to be supportive, general education teachers and special education teachers in this study felt their administrator needed to be knowledgeable about instructional best practices,

specially designed instruction, delivery of special education services across settings, and how to develop and maintain collaborative working relationships. Currently, participants in this study felt unsupported by their SNA in those areas because of a lack of knowledge. Training would increase understanding about special education and positively impact collaborative efforts between teachers and administrators for special education. Knowing this, it is imperative that additional training is offered to administrators on the provision of special education services in order to positively impact the relationship between teacher and administrators for special education.

Recommendations

Results from this study continue to highlight the need for incorporation of special education into administrator preparation programs and licensure in order to adequately prepare administrators to be an effective leader for special education programming oversight (Aspedon, 1990; Davidson, 1999; Minor, 1992; Singh, 2015; Valesky & Hirth, 1992; Vogel & Weiler, 2014). It is recommended that the ELCC Standards (NPBEA, 2015) be reviewed to ensure inclusion of all pertinent aspects of the role of an administrator. Specifically, it is recommended that Standard Element 2.3 of the ELCC Standards (NPBEA, 2015) be reviewed to ascertain how preparation programs are meeting this requirement through coursework and internships. Standard Element 2.3 states, “Candidates understand and can develop and supervise the instructional and leadership capacity of school staff” (NPBEA, 2015). Based on the standard, the expectation is for administrators to have the skills necessary to provide instructional leadership for all staff, however, based on this study and prior work, there remains a gap between preparation programs not including special education and the standard reflecting an ability to lead any staff as an instructional leader.

One way to rectify this gap is to revise administrator preparation programs to better align with the standards as written. The recommendation from this study is to revise preparation programs to include special education law and practices into the administrator program. For example, a program could make revisions to a methods course to include specially designed instruction as a component. Likewise, including a section dedicated to special education law during a legal class specifically in the areas of FAPE and LRE, would better prepare administrators for their role as the LEA for special education. A revision to leadership coursework to include components of ways to develop supportive learning environments that are inclusive for all learners would benefit collaborative and supportive practices. Finally, adding special education as part of the internship would provide practical application of their knowledge while being supported by an experienced administrator

While it is recommended that preparation programs and ELCC standards are revised to better prepare future administrators, focus also needs to be given to the needs of current administrators. A recommendation for ways to address the needs highlighted in this study would be for states and school districts to review and revise current professional learning available for administrators who serve as the SNA. Based on the continued dispute resolutions received annually, there remains a need for further education around the provision of services, FAPE, and LRE. Additionally, based on the results from this study, more work needs to be offered on collaborative and supportive working relationships, and instructional practices. To best support current administrators, it is recommended that ongoing and embedded educational opportunities be created that address these topics, in addition to topics individual school districts identify as an area of need. In order to identify additional areas of need, the state should complete a “State of Special Education” review where they solicit feedback from stakeholder groups on what is and is

not working in the respective districts. Districts and the state can utilize that data to develop relevant and meaningful professional development to equip administrators to support special education programming.

Using the data collected as part of determining needs, research could be conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of professional development offered through demonstration of an administrator's understanding about special education. Research in this area would further the efforts of this study where key stakeholder groups discussed what they perceived an administrator need to know and do in order to be effective for special education programming.

Limitations

Although this study yielded similar results in respect to the need for increased knowledge about special education policy, programming, and practice; the findings highlighted the importance of educational philosophy and the impact of school culture, collaboration and support. The results from this study are not transferable due to the small sample size of each participant group. A larger sample from a variety of districts would allow for more transferable data to be considered by policymakers.

Given that not all districts utilize this model and employee certified special education personnel to act in the capacity of the LEA, these findings may not be consistent with other studies who use participants with that licensure. Since this district had no requirements for an LEA other than being a licensed administrator, the knowledge based around special education may potentially be lower than in a district where the LEA is required to have special education knowledge or certification.

Conclusion

Going into this study, I had a preconceived idea that the biggest area of concern participants would share was around special education law. However, the findings suggest a broader area of focus is needed to better equip administrators for special education programming. Having an understanding of special education law and policy is only a small part of the bigger picture of what is meant to be a truly effective administrator for special education. The underlying belief system an administrator has about special education is perceived to have a significant impact on how effective an administrator is for special education programming.

Results from this study indicate that an effective administrator for special education accepts and empowers all students regardless of ability to be successful in a positive and safe learning environment. To establish a positive learning environment, the administrator must believe that special education is important and valued. Having an underlying understanding of special education can only help administrators have or further develop their beliefs about the importance of special education. Administrators can demonstrate their beliefs by establishing an inclusive school culture where collaborative working relationships are the expectation and that all stakeholders act as champions for the betterment of all.

This study attempted to shift from the focus on one aspect of special education to considering all the pieces that impact educational practices. This shift, much like Systems Thinking Theory (Senge, 1990), attempts to consider the relationship between all of the moving parts as an administrator for special education programming. In order to truly understand the perceptions of the role of an administrator for special education, one must consider the bigger picture and the overall perception of the role of an administrator for all students. More importantly, if the perception of stakeholders is that the administrator does not feel special

education is important then that will trickle down to all aspects of everything. While knowing special education policy is important, believing in the value of special education and the skills to provide support for stakeholders is more important to be an effective administrator for special education programming. Only then can our students with disabilities thrive and show academic success.

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Appendix A

Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (ELCC)

Standard 1. Mission, Vision, and Core Values

Effective educational leaders develop, advocate, and enact a shared mission, vision, and core values of high-quality education and academic success and well-being of each student.

Standard 2. Ethics and Professional Norms

Effective educational leaders act ethically and according to professional norms to promote each student's academic success and well-being.

Standard 3. Equity and Cultural Responsiveness

Effective educational leaders strive for equity of educational opportunity and culturally responsive practices to promote each student's academic success and well-being.

Standard 4. Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment

Effective educational leaders develop and support intellectually rigorous and coherent systems of curriculum, instruction, and assessment to promote each student's academic success and well-being.

Standard 5. Community of Care and Support for Students

Effective educational leaders cultivate an inclusive, caring, and supportive school community that promotes the academic success and well-being of each student.

Standard 6. Professional Capacity of School Personnel

Effective educational leaders develop the professional capacity and practice of school personnel to promote each student's academic success and well-being.

Standard 7. Professional Community for Teachers and Staff

Effective educational leaders foster a professional community of teachers and other professional staff to promote each student's academic success and well-being.

Standard 8. Meaningful Engagement of Families and Community

Effective educational leaders engage families and the community in meaningful, reciprocal, and mutually beneficial ways to promote each student's academic success and well-being.

Standard 9. Operations and Management

Effective educational leaders manage school operations and resources to promote each student's academic success and well-being.

Standard 10. School Improvement

Effective educational leaders act as agents of continuous improvement to promote each student's academic success and well-being.

Appendix B

Department of Educational Leadership
9201 University City Boulevard, Charlotte, NC 28223-0001

Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Title of the Project: Administrators Understanding of Special Education and Perception of Their Role as an Administrator of Special Education Teachers
Principal Investigator: Tracey Carney, Doctoral Candidate, UNCC
Co-investigator: Dr. Lisa R. Merriweather, Associate Professor Department of Educational Leadership, UNCC

You are invited to participate in a research study. Participation in this research study is voluntary. The information provided is to help you decide whether or not to participate. If you have any questions, please ask.

Important Information You Need to Know
The purpose of this study is to explore perceptions of the role of an administrator for special education.

- We are asking special education teachers, general education teachers, and school administrators to participate in individual interviews discussing their perception of the role of an administrator for special education.
- You may choose to skip a question you do not want to answer.
- Incidental benefits could include increased awareness about special education policy and practices that would lead to improved practices.
- Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before you decide whether to participate in this research study.

Why are we doing this study?
This is study is being conducted to gain a better understanding of the role of building-level school administrators facilitation of special education programming which will inform the preparation, training, and development of future administrators. This information will be used to guide professional development as well as evidence to provide to administrator preparation programs about areas of need for future administrators.

Why are you being asked to be in this research study?
You are being asked to be in this study because you are a current general education teacher, special educator teacher, or school administrator in the district being used for data collection and because you have at least one year of experience in your educator role.

What will happen if I take part in this study?
If you choose to participate you will complete one in-depth interview that will last 45 minutes to one hour and will be asked to review for accuracy the transcript from your interview. Your total time commitment if you participate in this study will be one hour in duration.

What benefits might I experience?

The results from this study will provide recommendations for preparation and support of building level school administration relative to the facilitation of special education programming. This will improve the quality of education received by students identified as special education students.

What risks might I experience?
There is little to no risk involved in participating in this study. A risk is considered "minimal" when the probability and magnitude of harm or discomfort anticipated in the proposed research are not greater, in and of themselves, than those ordinarily encountered in daily life. In the event that you experience emotional and/or psychological discomfort, you may stop the interview at any time as well as skip a question. A mobile crisis hotline number has been provided in the event that you require additional support 800-939-5911.

How will my information be protected?
Your email address that was accessed via the employee directory will be the only contact information we will have as part of this study. To protect your privacy (identity), we'll assign a study ID code to your audio-recorded responses and transcript. Your personally identifiable information will be stored separately from your data and all study related data will be stored on a password protected platform provided by the University. All data, except the transcripts, will be destroyed three after the study has concluded. The only persons who will have access to the data are the primary researcher and the supervising faculty member.

How will my information be used after the study is over?
After this study is complete, study data with identifying information will be destroyed and/or deleted from the system. Any data that may be shared with other researchers for use in other studies or as may be needed as part of publishing our results will NOT include information that could identify you.

Will I be paid for taking part in this study?
You will not receive compensation for taking part in this study.

What are my rights if I take part in this study?
It is up to you to decide to be in this research study. Participating in this study is voluntary. Even if you decide to be part of the study now, you may change your mind and stop at any time. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer.

Who can answer my questions about this study and my rights as a participant?
For questions about this research, you may contact Tracey Carney, tacarney@uncc.edu and Dr. Lisa Merriweather, lmerriwe@uncc.edu If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or wish to obtain information, ask questions, or discuss any concerns about this study with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact the Office of Research Compliance at 704-687-1871 or uncc-irb@uncc.edu.

Consent to Participate

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will receive a copy of this document for your records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I understand what the study is about and my questions so far have been answered. I agree to take part in this study.

_____

Name (PRINT)

_____

Signature Date

_____

Name & Signature of person obtaining consent Date

Appendix C

Recruitment Script Email

Hello, my name is Tracey Carney. I am a doctoral candidate at UNC Charlotte in the Educational Leadership program. I am conducting research on the perceptions of an administrator's role with special education programming. I located your name from your district's employee directory and think you would be an excellent participant for my research.

Participation in this research includes an interview about your perception of an administrator's role with special education programming. The interview will take approximately 45 minutes to one hour. If you participate in the interview, your total time commitment will be between 45 minutes to one hour.

If you have any questions or would like to participate in the research, I can be reached at (704)258-8757 or tacarney@uncc.edu. My faculty advisor, Dr. Lisa Merriweather, Associate Professor, College of Education can also be reached at (704)687-8867 or lmerriwe@uncc.edu. Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Tracey Carney

Recruitment Script Follow Up Email

Hello, my name is Tracey Carney. I am a doctoral candidate at UNC Charlotte in the Educational Leadership program. I reached out to you two weeks ago regarding interest in having you participate in a voluntary research study on perceptions of an administrators' role working with special education. I think you would be an excellent participant for my research.

Participation in this research includes an interview about your perception of an administrator's role with special education programming. The interview will take approximately 45 minutes to one hour. If you participate in the interview, your total time commitment will be between 45 minutes to one hour.

If you have any questions or would like to participate in the research, I can be reached at (704)258-8757 or tacarney@uncc.edu. My faculty advisor, Dr. Lisa Merriweather, Associate Professor, College of Education can also be reached at (704)687-8867 or lmerriwe@uncc.edu. Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Tracey Carney

Appendix D

Teacher Interview Guide

Thank you for allowing me to interview you today, I really appreciate it. This interview should take around 45 minutes or so. I am going to ask you about your views as a teacher about the role of a Special Needs Administrator and special education programming.

1. Tell me about your educational background.
2. Tell me about your professional experience with special education programming.
3. Tell me about your interactions with your SNA and special education programming.
4. What role does the SNA play in special education programming in your school?
5. In what ways does the SNA impact special education programming in your school?
    a) In what ways does the building level administrator impact instruction for special education?
    b) In what ways does the SNA impact support for special education students in your school?
    c) Support you in facilitating special education programming?
6. Think of a time you had to work with the SNA about a student receiving special education services. (consider asking question up to 3 times to get rich details for analysis)
    a) What challenges did you face?
    b) How did it help?
7. What does an effective administrator for special education programming entail?
    a) What is the impact of their knowledge of special education policies on special education programming?

b) On issues?

c) Best practices?

8. What practices in which your SNA engages, do you feel contribute to the success of the special education programs in your school?
9. What practices in which your SNA engages, do you feel hinder the success of the special education programs in your school?
10. Is there anything else you'd like to share?

Administrator Interview Guide

Thank you for allowing me to interview you today, I really appreciate it. This interview should take around 45 minutes or so. I am going to ask you about your views as a building -level administrator and special education programming.

1. Tell me about your educational background.
    a. For your course work, did you have any courses specifically in special education or special education law?
2. Tell me about your professional experience.
3. How do you think those educational and professional experiences have helped you in this current role?
    a) Based on professional experiences and education, what specific areas within special education do you feel confident handling?
    b) What specific areas within special education do you feel less confident handling?

1. Think of a time you had to work with a teacher with students receiving special education services. (ask a few times)
    a) What challenges did you face when working with teachers responsible for IEP implementation?
    b) Tell me about a time you felt effective implementing special education programming.

1. How adequately prepared do you feel like you are to act as the LEA for special education?
2. How do you support special education programming in your building?

3. What does being an effective administrator for special education programming entail?
4. Based on your experiences as the SNA, what support do you need to be an effective administrator?
    a) What are your strengths as SNA?
    b) What do you see as opportunities for improvement?

    Is there anything else you'd like to share?

Appendix E

Demographics Questionnaire

Please complete the following questions. This information will only be used as part of an overview of the district and participant descriptions. All identifying information will remain confidential.

Name

_____

Gender

- ❑ Female
- ❑ Male
- ❑ Prefer not to say
- ❑ Other _____

Race/Ethnicity (Please check all that apply)

- ❑ African American/Black
- ❑ American Indian or Alaska Native
- ❑ Asian
- ❑ Caucasian
- ❑ Hispanic or Latinx
- ❑ Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- ❑ Prefer not to say
- ❑ Other _____

Age Range

- ❑ 21 - 30
- ❑ 31 - 40
- ❑ 41 - 50
- ❑ 51 - 60

- ❑ 61 - 70
- ❑ 71 - 80
- ❑ Prefer not say

Highest Education Degree Earned

- ❑ Associates Degree
- ❑ Bachelor's Degree
- ❑ MAT
- ❑ M.Ed./Masters
- ❑ Ed.S
- ❑ Ed.D
- ❑ Ph.D.
- ❑ Other _____

How many years have you been teaching?

_____

How many schools have you worked at during your career?

_____

Current School Level

- ❑ Elementary K - 5
- ❑ Middle 6 - 8
- ❑ High 9 - 12

Current Role

- ❑ General Education Teacher
- ❑ Special Education Teacher
- ❑ Elective Teacher
- ❑ Itinerant Teacher
- ❑ Administrator
- ❑ Other _____

Not including your current role, indicate previous roles held.

- ❑ General Education Teacher
- ❑ Special Education Teacher
- ❑ Elective Teacher
- ❑ Itinerant Teacher
- ❑ Administrator
- ❑ Other _____

Special education delivery experience. (Please check all that apply)

- ❑ Inclusion
- ❑ Co-teaching
- ❑ Push-in services
- ❑ Pull-out services
- ❑ Resource
- ❑ Separate setting
- ❑ None
- ❑ Other _____