

THE BELIEFS OF K-12 PUBLIC SCHOOL PRINCIPALS ABOUT DISABILITIES AND  
HOW THOSE BELIEFS INFORM THEIR LEADERSHIP OF STUDENTS WITH  
DISABILITIES

A Dissertation  
by  
STEPHEN RAY FISHER

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APPROVED BY:

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Jim Killacky, Ed.D.  
Chair, Dissertation Committee  
Director, Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership

---

Precious Mudiwa, Ed.D.  
Member, Dissertation Committee

---

Sharon Richter, Ph.D.  
Member, Dissertation Committee

---

Edelma Huntley, Ph.D.  
Dean, Research and Graduate Studies

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## ABSTRACT

THE BELIEFS OF K-12 PUBLIC SCHOOL PRINCIPALS ABOUT DISABILITIES AND  
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DISABILITIES

Stephen Ray Fisher, B.S., Appalachian State University

M.A., Gardner-Webb University

Ed.S., Appalachian State University

Chairperson: Jim Killacky, Ed.D.

The leadership of the school principal is an integral part of a successful school. A principal's leadership goes beyond hiring teachers, managing building, and balancing budgets. The leadership of principals involves their work with instruction and influence on students. A principals' leadership is shaped by factors that include knowledge, skill, experiences, and beliefs. The beliefs of principals have a direct impact on the leadership of principals.

One of the student groups that are directly influenced by the principals' leadership is students with disabilities. This phenomenological case study investigated what principals' believed about disability and how these beliefs influenced their leadership of students with disabilities. Principles developed by the Council of Exceptional Children were used as the conceptual framework of the study. Through the use of interviews, principals indicated what they believed about disability, leadership of students with disabilities, the relevancy of degree programs, and needs they had in leading students with disabilities. Principals described their

leadership, work involving students with disabilities, and the importance of their experiences with disability.

Three major themes were drawn from the interviews. These themes included leadership, experiences, and knowledge. In addition to the emerging themes, the study provided answers to the original research questions and a revision to the original conceptual framework. Implications for principals, local education agencies, and graduate school programs are included along with suggestions for future research.

**Keywords:** Disability, Students with Disability, Special Education, Principal, Beliefs

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## CHAPTER I

### **Introduction**

The education of students is far from an exact science. Various educational reforms, political initiatives, and philosophical beliefs have influenced the teaching and learning that occur in America's classrooms. Race, gender, and socio-economic status have all been the subject of research studies and program initiatives. Included in discussions concerning educational opportunities for students is the issue of educating students with disabilities.

Throughout history, people with disabilities have experienced very different situations from their non-disabled peers. The reference to and discussion of student with disability implies a thought of limit and inability (Smart, 2009). Fewer opportunities, lowered course offerings, a lack of choice of teachers, and a limited access to resources only scratch the surface of the educational deficiencies seen in public schools for students with disabilities (Hardman & Dawson, 2008; Orfield, Kim, Sunderman, & Greer, 2004; Ysseldyke, Nelson, Christenson, Johnson, Dennison, & Trienzenburg, 2004).

These experiences in the education of students with disabilities can be observed in numerous trends. Historically, students with disabilities tend to have lower rates of graduation from high school, lower participation in post-secondary education, increased discipline incidents and referrals, increased rates of retention, and increased isolation within the school day (Hardman & Dawson, 2008; Orfield et al., 2004; Ysseldyke et al., 2004).

Much has been done to investigate the education of students with disabilities. In the past 50 years, federal and state legislation has changed the educational experiences and

performance of students with disabilities. Legislation beginning in the 1950s and 60s began to shape the landscape for students with disabilities by drawing attention to the discrepancies between students with disabilities and their peers (Clapton & Fitzgerald, 1997). Beginning with the civil rights movements of the 1950s and continuing through the John F. Kennedy administration, the rights of people with disabilities were exposed through the advocacy of special interest groups and pending legislation (Clapton & Fitzgerald, 1997). In 1975, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) was passed by Congress. Otherwise known as PL 94-142, the legislation brought about sweeping changes in the education of students with disabilities (Croser, 2002; Gaddy, McNulty & Water, 2002; Stainback & Stainback, 1995). Subsequent reauthorizations of PL 94-142 in 1990, 1997 and 2004 have continued to define education and access for students with disabilities (Altshuler, 2007; Croser, 2002). General education legislation such as No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 had been passed. This legislation, while not primarily considered a special education landmark, contained important implications for students with disabilities (Reder, 2007).

Legislative mandates have dramatically influenced the education of students with disabilities. The meaning and understanding of disability have changed significantly over the past century. The definition of disability, pre-1970, relates to the idea of without ability or a lack of necessary skills or strength (Clapton & Fitzgerald, 1997; Croser, 2002). These definitions were built from centuries of belief that disability was a result of sin and was a form of punishment (Clapton & Fitzgerald, 1997). This very concept lays the foundation of belief about students that have a disability. Society's belief included the thought that students with disability were too much trouble and created too many problems to educate with their peers.

At the turn of the twentieth century, disability resulted in separation in educational settings (Clapton & Fitzgerald, 1997). A student with a disability was separated from the normal educational setting and treated as a patient rather than a student. The education of students with disabilities has changed over the last 100 years (Clapton & Fitzgerald, 1997; Croser, 2002).

Thoughts, attitudes, and beliefs about special education and students with disabilities are rooted in one's understanding of the models of disability (Smart, 2009). Philosophical and political assumptions about individuals with disabilities and their education comes from a person's understanding and beliefs about disability (Anderson, 2003; Harry & Klinger, 2007; Smith & Erevelles, 2004). As the definition of disability has been modified, so have the thoughts and beliefs of educational leaders (Smart, 2009). This trend of different beliefs about disabilities has created a need to understand the beliefs and comprehend the impacts of these beliefs on the education of students with disabilities.

Research has indicated that educational systems such as school districts can control the curriculum, philosophy, and methodical approach of educating students with disabilities (Cooner Tochtermann, & Garrison-Wade, 2005). Given this controlled environment, differences in the educational opportunities for students with disabilities exist sometimes even between schools in the same district (Cooner et al., 2005; Fullan, 2001; Kouzes & Posner, 2003). The rationale for these differences is the presence of the leadership of the school principal. The leadership of the school principal is an extremely powerful influence in the education of students (Cooner et al., 2005; Fullan, 2001; Kouzes & Posner, 2003). As the leadership of the school principal has been scrutinized, principals' beliefs about disability

must be closely examined to change the culture of educating students with disabilities (Cooner et al., 2005; Sergiovanni, 1984, 1987).

Within the large frame of a principals' leadership at their particular schools, their personal beliefs help to form and shape decisions that impact the schools' instruction, management, climate, and ultimately the work of the staff (Anderson, 2003; Bossert, Dwyer, Rowan, & Lee, 1982; Glickman, Gordon, & Ross-Gordon, 2001; Sergiovanni, 1984, 1987). For example, principals who believe in shared leadership and stakeholder input will create environments in which staff members feel empowered and have more organizational buy-in. As crucial as this role is, many principals feel inadequately prepared in their role as a leader in special education (Cooner et al., 2005). Specifically, lack of training related to special education and supporting students with disabilities is a deficit among principals (Jones, 2006). Because of the potential legal, financial, and staffing implications, principals' leadership in the area of special education will help to define their role as principal (Jones, 2006; Stainback & Stainback, 1995). This study will focus on school principals' leadership in the area of special education, their ability and confidence in enhancing the education of students with disability, and specific training obtained or needed for their successful leadership in special education.

The education of students with disabilities has changed dramatically over the past 50 years. The change began with the federal legislation in the 1970s. Although much improved, results from these improvements are not where they need to be. The study of the beliefs principals have about disability and the relationship their beliefs have in their leadership involving people with disabilities will address a gap in our knowledge and give insight into future improvements needed in the area of special education. The purpose of this study is to

examine the beliefs of school principals about disability and to determine the relationship of these beliefs on the principals' leadership in the area of special education.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The role of the principal is full of unique challenges that range from traditional responsibilities such as maintaining discipline and managing a budget to more specialized skills such as leadership in special education (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003). Over the past 50 years, legislation concerning special education has redefined the role of the school principal and created a atmosphere of access and inclusion for students with disabilities (Croser, 2002). Students with disabilities are guaranteed the right to have access to the general curriculum through recent reauthorizations of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (Croser, 2002; Gaddy et al., 2002). This increased legislation and resulting services provided to students with disabilities has intensified the role of the school principal in these areas (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003).

Conflicting with the increased importance of their role in special education, principals often feel inadequate and underprepared to assume their role as special education leaders. Research conducted by Aspedon (1990), Praisner (2003), and Jones (2006) all indicated that principals do not feel they have had enough or proper training to fulfill their role in leading the education of students with disabilities. Similarly, these same studies point to the importance of the principal's leadership to the successful ability of students with disabilities to access the general curriculum (Cooner et al., 2005; Hirth & Valesky, 1991). Given the importance of the principal's role in the educational experience for a student with disability, it is alarming that a great percentage of principals do not feel prepared to provide the needed leadership in this area (Cooner et al., 2005).

## **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to examine the beliefs of school principals about disability and to determine the relationship of these beliefs on the principals' leadership in the area of special education. This research study will be supported through four strands of literature. The literature review begins by examining the history of special education. In studying students with disabilities, federal legislation unfolding in the early 1970s begins to further define the role of the principal. This definition is especially true as related to students with disabilities and the law. The questions that continue to surface throughout the review include differences in the implementation of and support of special education services.

It becomes evident that the role of the principal and the principal's leadership is even more important when dealing with issues related to special education. To address some of the differences in principal leadership and philosophy, the literature review looks at the different discourses of disability. The discourse of disability is grounded in what a person believes about disability. The belief about disability will be a common theme throughout the research and will bring together the role and leadership of the K-12 public school principal and the various levels of support and enhancement for the education of students with disabilities.

The role of the school principal is examined next in the review. Leadership is not a simple arena that principals navigate. Issues of principal leadership include instructional, organization, and ethical leadership. The principal as a leader also incorporates their role of influence and implementation with special education. Understanding what principals believe about disability gives insight into their leadership. Finally, the literature review examines the experience and training of the school principal and how these experiences may impact what

principals believe about disability and how they exhibit leadership in the area of special education.

This research may have implications for principal professional development, principal licensure programs and current practices involving school administration. To link the principals' belief about disability and their leadership involving students with disabilities would be a significant contribution to the research on principal leadership and special education. This information potentially fulfills a gap of knowledge that links what principals believe to their leadership and experiences. Research clearly articulates the importance of the principals' beliefs and their leadership; however, this research would define what principals actually believe and relate their belief to their practice. (Cooner et al., 2005; Gersten, Keating, Yovanoff, & Harniss, 2001; McLaughlin & Nolet, 2004).

The focus, direction, and beliefs of the school principal greatly influence that of the entire school including staff and students (Cooner et al., 2005). The study will focus on the beliefs of the school principal and how these beliefs support and enhance the education of students with disability. Specifically, this study aims to examine what principals believe about disability. In learning what principals believe, connections will be made between the belief and levels of support and enhancement for students with disabilities.

### **Research Questions**

This research will examine what school principals believe about disability and the impacts these beliefs have on the education of students with disabilities. By completing the study, I hope to better understand and identify the lenses that principals use to view disability and to identify the model of disability they believe in. The following research questions guided the study:

1. What do K-12 public school principals believe about disability?
2. How do K-12 public school principals define disability and how do they define and describe students with disabilities?
3. How do the beliefs of K-12 public school principals support or enhance their leadership in the education of students with disabilities?
4. What factors have impacted the beliefs of the school principal about disability?
5. How do principals relate their prior experiences and trainings to their leadership of students with disabilities?

These questions and subsequent answers interest school leaders and will also spark discussions among advocates for students with disabilities, parents, and stakeholders of the school and students. The influence of students with disabilities and special education is tremendous. Knowing and understanding what the K-12 public school principals believe about disability and examining how these beliefs impact the education of students with disability will allow educational leaders to focus on continuous improvement. Parts of this continuous improvement will include the success and achievement of students with disabilities, the development of leadership in the area of special education, influencing factors on the beliefs of school leaders, and strategies built to affirm the beliefs and work of others.

### **Overview of Methodology**

This study examined the beliefs K – 12 school principals have about the discourse of disability and how these beliefs are manifested in the principal’s leadership at the school level. Although federal and state laws, district policies, and geographical regions influence



practices and procedures for students with disabilities, the leadership of the school principal is a decisive element in the success of schools (Anderson, 2003; Bossert et al., 1982; Glickman et al., 2001; Sergiovanni, 1984, 1987). This element, leadership, has been constructed in part by the principal's beliefs about disability.

A qualitative approach was used in this research because it allowed me to gather information through a variety of ethnographic tools including participant interview and review of documents (Maxwell, 2005). The use of a qualitative case study also supports my methodological and allows me to focus on the particular area of principal beliefs and leadership in regard to students with disabilities (Maxwell, 2005; Patton, 2002; Schram, 2003).

The phenomenological study included twelve K – 12 public school principals. Participants were from school districts of varying size, location, and populations. The participants consisted of both elementary and secondary level principals. These principals were chosen from school districts in western North Carolina and were recommended to participate by the Superintendent of their district. Recommended participants were asked of their willingness to participate and then contacted for interviews.

### **Significance of the Study**

In a review written by Anastasiou and Kauffman (2011), the authors stated that educators have a duty or obligation to seek “public truths about disability” (p. 369). Furthermore, these truths that are researched and discovered should be used to promote and enhance the education of students with disabilities (Anastasiou & Kauffman, 2011). Research focused on the beliefs of principals concerning disabilities and the impact their beliefs have

on the principal's leadership. The results may address a gap in knowledge and therefore impact the education of students with disabilities.

This study is significant because it specifically addresses what principals believe about disability and how these beliefs impact their leadership. From this study, educational leaders may identify specific beliefs, practices, and strategies used by K-12 public school principals in educating students with disabilities. Starting with efforts during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's and spring boarding with landmark court decisions in the 1970's, special education and the education of students with disabilities have dominated the educational law courts. This research seeks to add to the body of knowledge for all stakeholders in this process to examine our efforts of meeting the educational needs of students with disabilities.

Is it the disability, perception of the disability or perception of the student that sets a student with disability apart from his or her peers? This research is intended to study the principals' beliefs about disability. Improvements in the education of students with disability could begin with the analysis of the principals' beliefs about disability. These beliefs and their impact on the leadership of the principals may be found to be the key for increased access and success for students with disabilities. To provide principals with professional development that would influence their beliefs about disabilities may provide special education with new and improved leadership.

### **Definition of Key Terms**

The term of significance in this study is disability. How one defines disability depends on the discourse in which disability is viewed. Common definitions of disability include a lack of physical or mental ability, an unnatural fit in the artificial paradigm of

humanity (Clapton & Fitzgerald, 1997), a consequence of barriers that prevent certain people from full inclusion into society, and a deficiency or abnormality (Kaplan, 2000). The definitions of disability span a rather large range. Inside each of these definitions are beliefs and values that shape the thoughts and actions of educational leaders that lead our schools and students. To better understand the discourse and definitions of disability, other key terms have been defined.

**Student with disability.** Under the Individuals Disability Education Act of 2004 this includes students with ‘mental retardation, hearing impairments, speech or language impairments, visual impairments, emotional disturbance, orthopedic impairments, autism, traumatic brain injury, or other health impairments, or specific learning disabilities’ and need special education and related services (IDEA, 2004)

**Special Education.** Special education is a range of educational and social services provided by the public school system and other educational institutions to students with disabilities between three and 21 years of age (IDEA, 2004)

**Discourse.** A conversation, debate, or form of communication that attempts to analyze, explain, or provide meaning to a particular topic (Lupton, 1992; Woods & Kroger, 2000).

**Phenomenological.** “Studies that investigate the meaning of the lived experience of a small group of people from the standpoint of a concept or phenomenon” (Schram, 2006, p. 98).

## **Chapter Summary**

The prevalence and importance of the work with students with disabilities is growing yearly. School principals are stretched like never before. Legislation mandating student

access to general education curriculum has passed and the importance of the principals' leadership is at an all time high. Unfortunately, in spite of all the efforts to improve special education, principals feel unprepared for their role as instructional leaders in special education (Jones, 2006). The purpose of this study is to address the gap between the knowledge of the importance of the role of the principal and what principals believe about disability. This study examines the beliefs principals have about disability, how these beliefs impact the principals' leadership, and what impact experiences and training has on this process.

Chapter I provided an introduction and rationale for this research study. Chapter II addresses the literature and reviews the important literature concerning disability, special education, and principal leadership. Chapter III describes the methods used in this qualitative study. Chapter IV will present the findings of the study. Chapter V will analyze the findings and present implications and suggestions for further research.

## CHAPTER II

### **Literature Review**

The purpose of this study is to investigate principals' beliefs about disability and the impact of these beliefs on the education of students with disabilities. Within the scope of principals' leadership in schools, their personal beliefs help to form and shape decisions that impact the school's instruction, management, climate, and ultimately the work of the staff (Anderson, 2003; Bossert et al., 1982; Glickman et al., 2001; Sergiovanni, 1984, 1987).

At the turn of the twentieth century, a disability resulted in a student's separation from their same-aged peers without disabilities in educational settings (Clapton & Fitzgerald, 1997). Typically, a student with a disability was separated from the general educational setting and treated as a patient rather than a student. Additionally, many students with disabilities were institutionalized, treated and taught basic functional skills. The goal of institutionalization, treatment and teaching was to limit the burden on society and hopefully produce a person that could exist in society and be economically productive (Croser, 2002; Stainback & Stainback, 1995).

Federal law mandated special education and gave principals the responsibility to implement special education programs (Heward & Lloyd-Smith, 1990). As a result, the education of individuals with disabilities has improved significantly (Heward & Lloyd-Smith, 1990; Indiana University, 2006). In reviewing the literature for this research study, four major strands were identified and will be discussed. First, (a) federal law has mandated the education of all students with disabilities since 1975 resulting in a significant change in

the educational process for students with disabilities. Similarly, changes are apparent in (b) the discourse and beliefs about disability. Consequently, (c) the role of the principal and the importance of the principal's leadership has changed in educating students with disabilities. Finally, because of the responsibility to educate all children including those with disabilities, consideration of (d) the experience and training of school administrators and principals will be examined.

### **The History of Special Education**

The history of special education in the United States took full effect following the national civil rights movement. During the 1950s, individual rights were being explored and access was a central theme. Educators, legislators and child advocates used this momentum to begin examining the rights of students with disabilities. The next 50 years would prove to be instrumental in providing access and educational opportunities to all students including all students with disabilities (Heward & Lloyd-Smith, 1990; Indiana University, 2006).

At the turn of the twentieth century, assumptions among educators were that students with disabilities possessed some sort of 'criminal tendency' derived from their genetic make-up (Davies, 1930). Prejudiced opinions regarding a person with a disability were common, including the belief that students with disabilities did not belong in public school or for that matter, public life (Stainback, & Stainback, 1995). These beliefs and opinions were not unique among educators, but were common throughout society.

Evidence of programs for individuals with disabilities and special schools began to surface in the early 1900s, but the prevailing method of service provision for the early and mid 1900s was residential institutions and asylums for the disabled (Croser, 2002; Stainback & Stainback, 1995). A huge disparity in educational offerings and opportunities between

students with disabilities and their same-aged peers without disabilities existed. For example, federal mandates such as the compulsory attendance law excluded students with disabilities in the early 1900s (Stainback, & Stainback, 1995). Additionally, teachers who worked with students with disabilities were separated and excluded from their colleagues who taught in mainstream education (Stainback, & Stainback, 1995).

Problems in educating students with disabilities were not related to an inability to learn among students with disabilities. Rather, problems existed because children with disabilities were unwanted in regular schools. As a result, students with disabilities were forced into segregated learning environments because of their disabilities (Chaves, 1977). These segregated learning environments did not provide access to the same curriculum as other schools. Furthermore, the goal of these environments was to treat the disability instead of educate the child. Many of these students were determined to be uneducable simply because of the problems schooling and educating them would cause (Sigmon, 1983; Windle & Scully, 1976). Additional costs, extra resources and modified facilities were viewed as an inconvenience. Early in our educational history, these thoughts of disability had a firm grip on educational practices, policies, and beliefs. Disability and its interpretation by society and educators in the early 1900s have created a minority group that was patronized and disempowered from the beginning of time (Sigmon, 1983; Windle & Scully, 1976). Yet, strides have been made from the educational residence halls and asylums for students with disabilities to inclusive classrooms and least restrictive environments (Sigmon, 1983; Windle & Scully, 1976).

**Special education in the 1950s and 1960s.** The movement to ensure education for students with disabilities followed the civil rights movements of the 1950s and 60s (Clapton

& Fitzgerald, 1997). After two World Wars and the Great Depression, there was an increased recognition and respect for human rights (Croser, 2002). Parents were growing frustrated over the lack of community services for children with disabilities. Society was moving from one in which policies silenced the rights of people with disabilities to a society that incorporated specialized services and community based programs (Croser, 2002). This same society over the next half century would pass more than 100 federal laws to improve the quality of life for all people (Croser, 2002).

In 1954, *Brown vs Board of Education*, the United States Supreme Court ruled that separate was not equal for students of different racial backgrounds (347 U.S. 483, 1954). This ruling was an attempt to break down the racial barriers that existed in educating white and black students. The court case decision for *Brown vs Board of Education* was based on a belief that students deserved the opportunity for the same education regardless of their differences. The conclusion from this court case was that these differences should not serve as an avenue for oppression or omission in education (Cozzens, 1995). This court case resulted in schools beginning to integrate classrooms with different types of students and an increased pressure on legal and political groups to end state-supported segregation (Cozzens, 1995).

As a follow up, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Public Law 88-352, was passed. This legislation included Title IV and the principle that all people “regardless of race, color, religion or national origin” had access and were entitled to “the full and equal enjoyment of the goods, services, privileges, advantages and accommodation of any place of public accommodation” (PL 88-352). This refusal to deny services based on race, color, religion, or national origin led to the conversation and later legislation of the idea that one could not deny



services on the basis of disability (Croser, 2002). While this court case was the cannon to abolish segregation in schools, it also gave rise to the special education argument for including students with disabilities into regular schools. This legislation would also give voice to special education activists and parents as they advocated for the rights of students with disabilities.

Strides for people with disabilities were linked to advances in civil rights for minorities and women. In 1955, Congress passed the Mental Health Study Act and as a result, a Congressional Joint Commission was established concerning mental health and mental illness (Croser, 2002). Additionally, mental retardation and related issues of disability were thrust into the national spotlight with the election of President Kennedy in 1960. Specifically, President John F. Kennedy called for the reduction of the confinement of people with mental illness and began to call for programs that would return those that were disabled and mentally ill to their community. Increased community services were demanded and the process of deinstitutionalization increased (Croser, 2002). President Kennedy had a personal interest in the work for people with disabilities because of Rose, his sister with an intellectual disability. The relationship between President Kennedy and his sister led to great gains for all people with disabilities.

Over the next several years, federal laws were passed designed to assist and support people with disabilities (Croser, 2002). In 1963, The Community Mental Health Act (CMHA), Public Law 88-164, was passed to provide federal funding for mental health centers. This legislation stemmed from the work previously done by the 1961 Congressional Joint Commission. That same year, Public Law 88-156 was passed. PL 88-156 was designed to provide financial and educational assistance to low-income mothers whose children were

at risk of mental retardation (Browning, 1997; Croser, 2002). Two years later Public Law 89-313 was passed. This law, known as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act Amendments of 1965, authorized federal aid and funding to governmental agencies such as schools that provided education and assistance to students with disabilities (Croser, 2002). This legislation was followed two years later by the Mental Retardation Amendments of 1967, Public Law 90-170, which created funding and services for community based mental retardation services and facilities (Browning, 1997; Croser, 2002).

**Special Education in the 1970s.** The 1970s saw a dramatic increase in the advocacy of students with disabilities. Although separation and oppression still prevailed in most of society, courts were beginning to pass legislation to include a group of people referred to as to as “the world’s largest (multicultural) minority” (Anderson, 2003, p. 5). Regardless of the thoughts and beliefs of society, students with disabilities gained access to public education (Gaddy et al., 2002). In 1970, Congress modified the CMHA that was passed only seven years earlier. The revised law added language that included, not only mental retardation, but also cerebral palsy and epilepsy. This legislation was renamed the Developmental Disabilities Services and Facilities Construction Amendments, Public Law 91-517. The law commissioned grants for states to use in providing more comprehensive services for people with disabilities.

As the landscape of federal legislation was changing, various states began to consider legislation that included people with disabilities. In 1971, a US District Court in Alabama ruled that individuals in institutions for the disabled must be given opportunities to be treated, rehabilitated, and educated (Friedman, 1977). No longer was the institution simply a facility to detain the disabled; instead, treatment and education became a part of the process

(Friedman, 1977). Just one year later, several US District Courts ruled that public schools could not exclude a student with a disability. These court rulings and legislation sparked various other 'right to education' lawsuits and continued the expansion of disability rights (Croser, 2002; Friedman, 1977). For example, in 1973, a major legislative landmark of disability rights, the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, was passed. Included was Section 504 which directly confronted the discrimination of people with disabilities in public agencies or agencies receiving public funds (Croser, 2002). Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 legislates that students with disabilities have the same opportunities for success as their non-disabled peers. Furthermore, the legislation calls for reasonable adaptations and modifications to be made so that students can access all aspects of the educational program.

Two years later, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) was passed and gave all students, regardless of their disability, an opportunity and a right to participate in the system of public education (PL 94-142). This legislation gave all students the opportunity to be educated in the least restrictive environment possible (Croser, 2002; Gaddy et al., 2002; Stainback & Stainback, 1995). PL 94-142 has been reviewed and revised several times since 1975 and it still stands as an incredibly influential policy. Included in PL 94-142 are the mandates of access to related services, least restrictive environment, right to due process, and parental participation in the process (Croser, 2002; Gaddy et al., 2002). For all the things included, PL 94-142 did not destroy or dispel the models of separation and oppression for the disabled. The impact of this legislation provided great debate, increased scrutiny of disability and continued the need for more legislative action to protect the rights of students with disabilities (Croser, 2002; Gaddy et al., 2002; Smart, 2009; Stainback & Stainback, 1995).

**Special Education in the 1980s.** As legislation opened the doors of access and opportunity during the 1970s for the rights of people with disabilities, 1982 brought questions about the rights of infants with disabilities. In Bloomington, Indiana ‘Baby Doe,’ not given a name, was denied medical care by his parents and doctors as the newborn’s esophagus was left closed because the baby had Down Syndrome. Esophogal atresia, a medical problem often associated with Down Syndrome that makes it impossible to digest food. Instead of a relatively simple surgical procedure to fix the problem, the newborn was allowed to starve to death (Constable, Wallis, & Gribben, 1983). The Reagan administration instituted programs to safeguard the civil rights of newborns but it was not until 1984 when a similar newborn was denied medical care did litigation force the passage of the Child Abuse and Treatment Act Amendments of 1984 (PL 93-247).

During the 1980s, the call for continued improvement was clear. In response to this call, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) was amended two different times. First, in 1983, Public Law 98-199 was passed in order to reauthorize and improve programs included in the original legislation. For example, the improvement of a transition program for students with disabilities was included in the reauthorization. Transition programs were emphasized only through demonstration sites in this reauthorization – it was the 1990 legislation that mandated transition plans for students with disabilities (Croser, 2002). Today, the transition plan is a valuable part of the individualized education program (IEP) of a student with disability (Croser, 2002; Smart 2009).

Next in 1986, Public Law 99-457 was passed. The intent of this law was to provide benefits to infants and toddlers that had a disability. This legislation opened the door for services of many children but included financial assistance for states to provide preschool

programs to students age 3 – 5 with disabilities (Croser, 2002). Non-compliance with the federal legislation continued to be an issue during the 1980s, consequently, parents of students with disabilities were taking legal action against schools and school systems that did not provide adequate and appropriate services to their children (Croser, 2002).

In 1986, Congress passed the Handicapped Children's Protection Act, Public Law 99-372. This legislation gave courts the ability and authority under the law to force school systems to pay legal fees of the parents of students with disabilities in legal actions and due process hearings. This legislation was important because it reversed an earlier court decision that stated schools systems could not be charged with attorney fees and court costs. The 1984 Supreme Court decision, *Smith vs Robinson*, decided that schools were not financially responsible for court costs and attorney fees (Croser, 2002).

**Special Education in the 1990s and 2000s.** In 1990, the federal government renamed PL 94-142, the Education of All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, IDEA (2004). This new name indicated a shift in thinking. An educational paradigm shift occurred as the term handicapped person was replaced with person with disabilities. IDEA led to substantial changes for students with disabilities. Major components of this legislative renaming included mandatory transition plans for students by age 16, funding for infant and toddler programs, and the recognition of autism and traumatic brain injury. This new law, Public Law 101-476, reauthorized special education programs and increased areas of service to include support services and transition programs (Altshuler, 2007; Croser, 2002).

In the mid 1990s, three laws were passed by Congress in an effort to provide continuous improvement to the world of special education. Goals 2000: Educate America Act, Public Law 103-227 and the School-to-Work Opportunities Act, Public Law 103-239,

were passed in essence to help in providing a systematic way of reform to the states special education efforts. These legislative actions were not aimed at just special education. The School to Work Opportunities Act was a K-12 initiative that included work-based, school-based and connecting activities aimed at using applied academics and real work experience to get students ready for the world of work (Croser, 2002). The third law in the mid 1990s was the Improving America's Schools Act, Public Law 103-382. This legislation reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and transferred the power of this past legislation to IDEA. This transfer was done in order to eliminate a duplication of services in these national policies (Croser, 2002).

In 1997, IDEA received substantial amendment through its reauthorization including the mandate that students with disabilities must have access to the general curriculum. This mandate is a huge piece of the 1997 version of IDEA. The reauthorization, Public Law 105-17, provided the extension of the definition of developmentally delayed, and the introduction of a dispute/mediation process and the extension of early intervention programs (Croser, 2002; Gaddy et al., 2002). This reauthorization established some specific disciplinary interventions that were designed to keep students with disabilities in school and mandated they continue to receive services even if suspended (Croser, 2002; Gaddy et al., 2002). However much progress Congressional legislation made in the time from 1975 to 1997, Congress never came close to funding the 40% share of the cost it promised in the original adoption of IDEA in 1975 (Croser, 2002).

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001, a standards-based educational program set to improve the overall achievement of all students, made a large impact for students with disabilities. NCLB, while not a special education law, did have major

implications for students in special education and related services. The NCLB legislation focused on issues of academics, testing, accountability, and research based practices (Reder, 2007). The NCLB legislation created subgroups of traditionally underperforming students. These subgroups include ethnic populations, economically disadvantaged and students with disabilities. Emphasis was placed on schools to make sure all subgroups, including students with disabilities, were making academic progress. While the increased scrutiny created an intense effort to improve the education of students with disabilities, there were many unintended consequences including singling out particular subgroups and improper placement decisions that impacted students (Reder, 2007).

In a progress report submitted to the Office of the President by the National Council on Disability, the level of support for NCLB ranged the full spectrum from advocating for raising expectations for all students to questioning why special education is made to be the central theme of controversy. The compatibility of NCLB to IDEA and the overall effectiveness of NCLB were strongly questioned in the Council's response. The Council had six recommendations to improve the legislation. These improvements included (a) maintaining high expectations for students with disabilities, (b) developing the further capacity of teachers, (c) incentives to attract and retain the best teachers, (d) better alignment of NCLB and IDEA, (e) ensuring students with disabilities were assessed in more than academic skill attainment, and (f) increasing funding for students with disabilities (National Council on Disability, 2008). A report published by the Indiana Institute of Disability and Community notes some of the positive impacts and "improved short-term student outcomes" resulting from NCLB but also examines the effects of the "narrow assessment criteria" and

the resulting pressures which have inverted the inclusion efforts of schools and contributed to higher drop-out rates for students with disabilities” (Indiana University, 2006, p. 4).

In 2004, IDEA was again reauthorized and amended. During this reauthorization, provisions were made to align this version with NCLB. Changes in this reauthorization looked at the length of Individual Education Programs (IEP) including the period of re-evaluation of the IEP, the method of evaluation of students with possible learning disabilities, and the discipline of students with disabilities (PL 108-446, 2004; Reder, 2007). The transition plan for students was also modified and a summary of performance was to be included in the IEP. The inclusion of evidence based practices and the importance these practices played in the education of students with disabilities was emphasized in this legislation (PL 108-446, 2004; Reder, 2007).

The most recent legislation is the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. This new legislation was not a law directed at special education but did bring about a tremendous amount of funding to designated areas of IDEA (American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, 2009). Areas of targeted financial assistance include preschool grants, funding for special programs that serve students with disabilities, and intervention programs for families and children (American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, 2009).

**Summary of History of Special Education.** The legislative items reviewed above were powerful tools in loosening the chains of the disabled and disability. It is in the language of these laws that people began to rethink and reorganize their most basic beliefs about disability. Because this federal legislation gave people with disabilities new opportunities in education, they experienced increased success in the work force, education,



employment, independent living, community participation and all other areas of life and provided an avenue to redefine disability (Smart, 2009).

The past half century has provided much change in the education of students with disabilities (Croser, 2002; Gaddy et al., 2002; Reder, 2007; Smart, 2009; Stainback & Stainback, 1995). While students with disabilities have been removed from the institutions of the early 1900s into more inclusive public education classrooms, educational leaders have had an opportunity to re-examine educational practices and procedures for students with disabilities. Federal legislation and the advocacy for special education have demonstrated a priority for the education of students with disabilities (Croser, 2002; Gaddy et al., 2002). Additionally, recent legislation challenged educators to hold students with disabilities to high standards and to strive to continue to make these students successful (National Council on Disability, 2008). To achieve these standards it is essential that educators know and understand what they and others believe about disability (Gaddy et al., 2002). To better understand the varying beliefs regarding disability, let us now consider the models of disability.

### **Discourse of Disability**

This section reviews models of disability as well as the implications for students with disabilities. Connections for Community Leadership (CCL), a program that supports people with disabilities in becoming leaders of their communities, defines models of disabilities as a set of belief systems that define disability. According to the CCL, models of disabilities are essentially beliefs that people have about one another. These models provide a framework for how society views and interacts with individuals with disabilities. Further thoughts, attitudes, and beliefs about special education and students with disabilities are rooted in one's

understanding of the models of disability (Smart, 2009). The medical, social, and other models of disability are frameworks that are associated with deep philosophical and political assumptions about individuals with disabilities and education (Anderson, 2003; Harry & Klinger, 2007; Smith & Erevelles, 2004). While other models of disability do exist outside the medical and social models, these other models are typically outside the normal continuum of discourse. This research will acknowledge other models of disability but will focus on the medical and social model.

**Medical Model of Disability.** The medical model of disability has its roots in the scientific or biological understanding of disability (Smith & Erevelles, 2004). Proponents of this model view disability as an unchangeable difference from the scientific norm (Longmore, 2003). Those who subscribe or believe in the medical model view disability “as a series of physiological, psychological, and functional pathologies originating with the bodies of individuals” (Longmore, 2003, p. 1). Further, Longmore described disability from the perspective of the medical model as “biological insufficiency” (p. 42). Similarly, Cassandra Loeser describes disability as an abnormal functioning of the body of an individual as cited in Corker and Shakespeare (2002).

Centuries ago, disability was interpreted as a blemish or a sign of uncleanness. (Anderson, 2003). From the beginning of written history, unknown differences in people were thought to be a symbol of sin and uncleanness and created barriers and separation. This separation is exemplified in the writings of the Old Testament. Access to the inner Temple was reserved for unblemished Levites; therefore anyone with a disability was excluded from the religious life and ceremonies of the ancient Hebrews (Anderson, 2003). Although very few if any medical theorists would agree with the stigmatism given to the

disabled by the ancient Hebrews, the medical model of disability does align with their theory that disability inherently separates people with disabilities from the societal norm (Anderson, 2003; Smith & Erevelles, 2004).

Advocates of the medical model argue that the model is a true depiction of reality and the existence of the disability denotes a deviation from the norm. From this perspective, isolated treatment or rehabilitation of the disability will assist the person in fitting more comfortably in the normal world. Medical advocates contend that these individualized and privatized services are extremely beneficial to people with disabilities as their efforts focus on the biological differences that exist between normal and abnormal (Smart, 2009). The medical model focuses on treatment and reducing the effect of the disability or, if possible, its complete elimination (Smart, 2009). Medical theorists are looking for the cure for the disability and ways to prevent the disability from reoccurring. Medical theorists view the disability as an obstacle that needs to be eliminated (Smart, 2009).

Kettle (2005) described advocates of the medical model of disability as people that “see the disability first” and see “people with disabilities as in need of a cure” (2005). Kettle went on to relay that advocates of the medical model look to cure the disability instead of improving or correcting the environment in which the disability exists. These advocates contended that the limitations of a disability must be cured or fixed for that person to experience happiness in their life. Kettle states that the medical model can also be referred to as the individual model because it puts the problem of the disability on the individual and refutes ideas that these limitations and disabilities are societal issues (Kettle, 2005).

In a report written by Clapton and Fitzgerald (1997), medical model advocates determine normal or ‘normality’ by the “ideal of the white, youthful, able, male body” and

consider others that were unlike this ideal to be inferior. In Clapton and Fitzgerald's report, human worth was determined by work value and economic productivity. The economic value of the perceived normal person was much higher than those people with so called limitations (Clapton & Fitzgerald, 1997). As these limitations increased and became an obstacle, people with disabilities were placed in institutions so others could work and be productive. In this manner, the 'limited' person could work to overcome the challenges and become skilled enough to be productive (Clapton & Fitzgerald, 1997).

The focus of the medical model is to reduce the limitations that a person with disabilities encounters (Smart, 2009). This model aims to eliminate, or at the very least reduce, the suffering a person with disabilities deals with on the basis of the biological deviation from the norm (Smith & Erevelles, 2004). Opponents of the medical model are quick to argue that the limitations most often faced by those with disabilities are not natural or concrete and the limitations occur because of prejudice, discrimination, and oppression applied by those considered biologically normal (Longmore, 2003). These limitations and oppression are the true cause of suffering, not a biological disability according to opponents of the medical model (Michalko, 2002).

Researchers that argue against the medical model of disability contend that this model labels people with disabilities as patients. Implying that they are sick or hurting, paints the picture that a person with a disability is sick, undesirable and less than normal (Smith & Erevelles, 2004). Additionally, this perception of sickness is heightened if the disability is easily noticeable and permanent (Michalko, 2002). Clapton and Fitzgerald (1997) contended that the medical model suggests that the individual, not society, has a problem and that interventions or treatments are provided to the person in an attempt to rehabilitate.

Futhermore, the medical model emphasizes the individual as an exclusive cause of the disability and lessens the role society or societal factors play in manifesting disabilities (Anastasiou & Kauffman, 2011; Oliver, 1994).

**Social Model of Disability.** The medical and social models of disability both recognize disability as a “deviation from the biologically natural body” (Michalko, 2002, p. 56). However, according to Michalko, those who agree with the social model accept the biological difference but refer to the difference as an individual impairment. This individual impairment is shaped differently in each person due to various situations, circumstances and experiences (Michalko, 2002).

Many proponents of the social model of disability view the medical model of disabilities as oppressive and demeaning. The social model of disability attempts to decentralize the body as disabled and contends that disability has been socially constructed (Corker & Shakespeare, 2002). The argument is made that disability, rather than separate people, should bind us because disability is a normal part of life (Longmore, 2003). This argument is supported by the sheer number of people in our society with disabilities. In the mid 1990s, there were approximately five million students with disabilities involved in public school education in the United States (Gartner & Lipsky, 1996). Estimates in 2004 told us that approximately 18% of all students had some sort of classified disability though not all were labeled as a student with disability (Smith, 2004).

Advocates of the social model of disability do not believe that the disability itself should be viewed as a problem. However, they recognize that medical model advocates see disability as a problem and consequently people with disabilities are isolated by society’s institutional rules and procedures (Michalko, 2002). Instead, these advocates believe that the

study of disability should be centered on its social construction and the meaning it has to people with disabilities (Longmore, 2003). The medical model focuses on the disability and how to fix, correct, or rehabilitate the disability itself. The social framework of disability centers on the interactions of the person with disabilities and society.

Kettle (2005) stated that advocates of the social model see the person with a disability not, a disabled person. Kettle goes on to suggest there is a large difference between the two phrases. Kettle sees that the disability is either created or enhanced through society's dependence on a 'normal' view. For example, barriers including buildings with staircases and cities with a lack of sidewalks create disabilities. In the explanation of the social model, Kettle states that society has the responsibility to adapt and meet the needs of people regardless of any perceived or unperceived disabilities (2005). The approach to cure under the social model exists to cure society's dependence on 'normal' instead of trying to cure the disability society has pointed out in a person (Kettle, 2005).

One of the key distinctions between the medical and social models of disability is the description of suffering. Suffering, in this discussion, is a collection of physical suffering, frustrations and oppressions that are manifested by or to a disability or a person with a disability. Using the medical model of disability, suffering is the action caused by the disability. Because something is not normal in the disabled mind or body, suffering occurs. The suffering essentially results from the actual separation from the normal (Longmore, 2003; Michalko, 2002; Smith & Erevelles, 2004). On the other hand, social model advocates argue that suffering is not caused directly by the disability. From this perspective, suffering originates not by "what happens to the disabled body but by the meanings we give to what happens to the body" (Michalko, 2002, p. 36).

Opponents of the social model have recently argued that a stark reliance on the social model could damage special education. Creating a powerful movement to the social model has created an overload in the inclusive immersion of those with disabilities. This drastic move to the social model and inclusion of all individuals with disabilities will actually begin to unravel special education by including everyone and lessening the importance of special education (Anastasiou & Kauffman, 2011).

**Other Models of Disability.** There are other models of disability that spark the attention of educators and researchers. Some of these models include the rights-based model, the religious model, the empowering model, the rehabilitation model, the economic model, the professional model, and the tragedy/charity model (Clapton & Fitzgerald, 1997; Kaplan, 2000; Kettle, 2005). These models look at one small part of disability and attempt to rationalize or justify disability. These models also suffer from a lack of support, research, and documentation and are primarily viewed as variations of the social or medical models (Kettle, 2005).

The religious model is actually a forerunner of the medical model. As previously mentioned, disability was viewed from the very conservative religious community as a presence of sin and the disability was a sign that the person was being punished for their sin or the sin of their family (Kaplan, 2000; Kettle, 2005). This religious thinking has adapted over time and more closely aligns with the medical model.

As research on specific models of disability continues, the framework of the postmodern model of disability is emerging. This relatively new model of disability challenges and calls into question the very existence of impairment (Carlson, 2009).

Continued discussion and research in this area will combine the social model of disability with further advancements in postmodern thinking.

**Summary of Discourse of Disability.** As the history of special education unfolded, a shift on the model of disability continuum could be noticed. With legislative mandates forcing their hand, educators began looking at disability differently. Services mandated through the original Education for All-Handicapped Children Act (1975) and subsequent reauthorizations of IDEA (1990;1997;2004) have created a need for educators to examine what they believe about disability.

The belief about disability impacts many aspects of the direction, decisions, and leadership of a school principal (Gaddy et al., 2002). As this review of the literature indicates, a medical view of disability would look different in a school setting from a social model (Longmore, 2003; Michalko, 2002; Smith & Erevelles, 2004). The belief of the school principal might greatly influence the teaching and education of students with disabilities, therefore, the goal of this study was to examine what principals believe about disability and how these beliefs support and encourage the education of students with disabilities (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003).

### **Principals' Role in Leadership, Special Education Influence, and Implementation**

Leadership is an integral component in successful organizations. Public schools and the work of principals are examples of how important leadership is for any organization (Cooner et al., 2005; Fullan, 2001; Kouzes & Posner, 2003). Leadership comes in many different shapes and styles and looks very different depending on the circumstance or setting (Fullan, 2001; Kouzes & Posner, 2003). Principals in charge of leading today's public schools have their knowledge and skills tested daily as they provide safe and orderly



environments, become instructional leaders to a community of students and teachers, and manage the various programs and projects. The school principal is at the center of responsibility of all functions of the school (Cooner et al., 2005; Gersten et al., 2001; Wong & Nicotera, 2007). One of the most challenging and most important leadership areas for school principals is the world of special education (Cooner et al., 2005; Gersten et al., 2001; McLaughlin & Nolet, 2004).

**Principals' Role in Leadership.** The leadership of a school principal is built on many cornerstones. Knowledge and skills, district goals and priorities, school and community make-up, and personal experience are just a few of the factors that influence leadership among school principals (Sergiovanni, 1984, 1987). Additionally, principals' beliefs and attitudes concerning a particular subject greatly influence their leadership in that particular area. Furthermore, these beliefs and attitudes principals portray have a tremendous impact on those that they lead (Cooner et al., 2005; Sergiovanni, 1984, 1987).

In 1996 the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) worked with the Interstate Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) to designate six standards of principal leadership. The CCSSO is a group of non-profit educational leaders that work together to provide quality educational reform. The ISLLC is a program within CCSSO that developed standards of principal leadership. These standards, known as the ISLLC standards, have been used to guide quality school leadership (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1996). The ISLLC standards provide a framework for leadership that aims to improve principal leadership, create best teaching and learning practices, and develop positive learning environments (Wong & Nicotera, 2007).

Each of the six ISLLC standards is broken down into three to nine indicators. Each indicator describes specific leadership targets for principal leadership. (Wong & Nicoteri, 2007). According to CCSSO and ISLLC principals should:

- Set a widely shared vision for learning;
- Develop a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth;
- Ensure collective management of the organization, operation, and resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment;
- Collaborate with faculty and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources;
- Act with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner;
- Understand, respond to, and influence the political, social, legal, and cultural contexts.

**Shared Vision.** According to the ISLLC standard number 1, an administrator is an educational leader that promotes a shared vision that is supported by the school community (CCSSO, 1996). Shared vision by the principal results in staff acceptance and support for the vision of the school and ultimately sustainability for the initiative of the principal (Wong & Nicotera, 2007). Principals have the responsibility to provide a sound basic education for all students, including students with disabilities (Cooner et al., 2005; DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; Goor, Schween & Boyer, 1997). This responsibility according to the IDEA includes the access of students with disabilities to the general education curriculum. Federal law mandates that students have access to the least restrictive environment (Croser, 2002; Gaddy et al., 2002; Stainback & Stainback, 1995). The successful infusion of students with

disabilities into the general education program takes precise skill and knowledge from the principal. The principal needs to have a vision for the school and understand essential elements of leading that vision. The principal must be aware of challenging issues and understand that placing student achievement at the top of his or her efforts is a primary focus (Cooner et al., 2005). The success of any special education initiative relies heavily on the attitude of the principal and his or her ability to empower and build consensus among the school staff (Bossert et al., 1982; Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Stanovich & Jordan, 1998).

**Instructional Leadership.** As laws change and include additional information about appropriate settings for students with disabilities and the push for greater access to regular curriculum is received, the principal's role in instructional leadership will grow exponentially (Sage & Burrello, 1994).

Principals have always been instructional leaders in a particular form or fashion (Glickman et al., 2001). Historically, principals have been responsible for scheduling students, purchasing textbooks and teaching materials, and providing a space for teachers to teach and students to learn. This reflects instructional leadership at its most basic level and at some time in our society's educational history was a sufficient form of leadership (Glickman et al., 2001). Instructional leadership is the cornerstone for the educational decisions made in a school building every day. Instructional leadership by school principals impacts every student in schools every day. From scheduling of classes, implementing goals and objectives, hiring teachers, purchasing supplies, writing plans and setting goals, the instructional leadership of the school principal is unmistakable (Glickman et al., 2001).

As the educational landscape has changed through the reauthorizations of IDEA during the 1980's and 1990's and the implementation of NCLB in 2001, instructional

leadership has taken on a new identity and has become integrated into every decision, program and dollar spent. Instructional leadership is much more than just what is being taught, how it is being taught, and what is used to teach it. Instructional leadership is the foundational strategy on which a school is built (Glickman et al., 2001; Sage & Burrello, 1994). Nowhere is this leadership more evident than in the educational lives of students with disabilities.

The instructional leadership of the school principal can never be underestimated in the role of educating students with disabilities (Burrello, Schrup, & Barnett, 1992). Instructional leaders who empower their teachers, raise expectations for all children, provide high quality professional development, advocate for differentiated instruction; these leaders promote the instruction that changes the educational lives of students with disabilities. Principals who have positive attitudes and outlooks on inclusionary practices for students with disabilities are much more successful than principals with a negative approach (Cooner et al., 2005). The schools where principals had positive attitudes, students with disabilities had greater access, found less resistance in inclusion and experienced a more positive educational experience. In a 1997 study, Goor suggested that a principal's beliefs were connected to his or her attitude. Since his or her attitude is so connected to one's leadership involving students with disabilities, the beliefs of a principal have a great impact on the students with disabilities in these schools. Goor et al. also suggested that further research is needed to address the beliefs of principals (Goor et al., 1997). Research has also shown that schools which lack instructional leadership have classrooms that do not meet the needs of diverse learners and the instruction in those classrooms is of lower quality (Burrello et al., 1992; Cooner et al., 2005; Glickman et al., 2001; Sage & Burrello, 1994).

**Safe, Efficient, and Effective Learning Environment.** According to North Carolina Law 115C, principals are legally responsible to provide safe learning environments for all children (PL 115C - 288). Most every state, if not all, has similar requirements that emphasize the importance of school safety and of creating a school climate that is conducive to learning (Arnette & Walsleben, 1998). School districts have created policies and procedures that help address issues of school safety through student conduct codes and behavior policies. Further, many school districts have adopted no tolerance policies on issues that threaten the safety of students and staff.

When referring to district policies concerning discipline and students with disabilities, the principal is faced with a different set of circumstances (Cooner et al., 2005). Principals must consider individual student circumstances and situations when faced with disciplining students with disabilities. A student's disability and how the disability affects behavior must be taken into account when considering the discipline of a special education student (Cooner et al., 2005). Principals must understand the implications of suspension on a student's special education placement and their ability to receive special education services (Cooner et al., 2005). In the past, courts have placed tremendous responsibility on the schools to determine if the behavior was caused by the disability and to the extent any discipline has on the student's access to educational services (Bartlett, 1989; Cooner et al., 2005). In a study of principals in Texas, Bravenec (1998) reported that over 70% of principals reported spending a quarter of their work week on issues related to special education. Another 20% of the principals estimated this time was about half of their work week (Bravenec, 1998). It is obvious the extreme importance school administrators must place on discipline and safety when special education is involved.

**Collaboration.** In a research study of principals conducted in San Diego, Schnur and Gerson (2005) observed core values that were standard in the vision of principal leadership. Among these values included the importance of the relationship between the principal and teacher. First, both the teacher and principal were identified as playing a significant role in the instruction of students. Additionally, findings indicated that the instructional team of principal and teacher created a climate that was essential to effective leadership and student success (Schnur & Gerson, 2005). This same principle applies to the principal's leadership in special education.

Shrybman and Matsoukas (1978) found in a study of principals, that the attitude, support, collaboration and willingness to work towards integration was shown to greatly increase the successful integration of students with disabilities into the established programs of that time. Similarly, a later study by Drake and Roe (1986) revealed also that the principal was important in setting the tone for integration of students with disabilities. Researchers asked approximately 100 special education teachers to identify what principals needed to know about special education and special education teachers. The number one response was the need and importance of administrative support and how much that administrative support meant to the teachers (Bradley, 2000). The attitude and the role of the principal are critical in the building and acceptance of special education programs and initiatives in schools (Bradley, 2000). Bradley goes on to state that "principals need to realize they set the tone for the entire school . . . what they say, how they act . . . what is allowed in the school is powerful" (2000, p. 172). Actions, presence, words and comments from a principal that show support or lack of support for special education programs, students, and teachers are

powerful indicators of the success and quality of programs and services for students with disabilities (Bradley, 2000).

**Ethical Leadership.** The role of the school principal extends beyond management and instruction, to include the role of the ethical leader. “What people believe about the human spirit and the kinds of values that they have for people” (Keyes, Hanley-Maxwell & Capper, 1998, p. 28) has everything to do with educational leadership. This form of ethical leadership allows or causes educational leaders to center their educational decisions on their personal beliefs and values (Burrello et al., 1992; Keyes et al., 1998; Sage & Burrello, 1994). Ethical leadership is at the core of the role of the school principal and its relationship with special education (Keyes et al., 1998).

Principals that believe in a medical model of disability are ethically inclined to view students as patients and attempt to deliver an educational program that fixes or cures the disability (Michalko, 2002). Conversely, there are school leaders who believe that a medical model of disability violates their ethical beliefs about students and education (Michalko, 2002). These principals view disability as social in origin and understand that disability is a part of life (Michalko, 2002; Anderson, 2003). The ethical decisions of these ‘social minded’ principals will differ from those more ‘medical minded’.

The beliefs and values that guide ethical leadership are formed through personal experiences, life’s successes and struggles, and the value of the learner (Keyes et al., 1998). The issues related to the educational worth of the student are formed within a school leader and seeps out in their organizational and instructional leadership (Keyes et al., 1998). The ethical values of the school leader are evidenced in the day-to-day operation of every part of the school. It is these values that the principal uses to “strengthen teachers’ capacities to

accommodate students with disabilities in general education settings” (Keyes et al., 1998, p. 37), serve as the instructional and organizational leader in the school, and to fulfill the role as school principal.

**Political, Social, Legal and Cultural Leadership.** The role of the principal is forever changing. To be successful, a principal must be able to tackle what some would consider an impossible role. Principals must balance managerial roles with instructional leadership, must improve student achievement while providing a safe school climate (Wong & Nicotera, 2007). This task can be complicated by pressures that occur from outside the classroom and school. Legislative reform, local initiatives and prevailing culture all impact the leadership of the school and student success.

In the 1950s, political pressure began to mount for the inclusion of students with disabilities in regular education schools and classrooms (Cozzens, 1995; Croser, 2002). This political pressure yielded special education laws and policies that govern the education of students with disabilities. Public Law 94-142 was the landmark piece of legislation passed in 1975. Renamed and reauthorized, IDEA provides legislation for the education of students with disabilities (Croser, 2002; Gaddy et al., 2002). It is ultimately the responsibility of the principal to know and comprehend the law.

The legal and political realm of leadership is extremely challenging in light of many of the limitations facing principals. Out of the 50 states in the United States, only 12 require special education coursework for an administrative licensure. Forty-five percent of the states do not even require a single course in special education for degree to be a principal (Nardone, 1999). Consequently, principals consistently report that they feel unprepared. Further they



admit to having problems and issues when it comes to knowledge and implementation of special education laws (Cooner et al., 2005).

**Principals' Role in Special Education Influence.** Sergiovanni described the leadership of the school principal and the importance of relationships between the principal and others in the school. Administrative support is essential for successful implementation of any program within the school. The importance of trust and congruency between what the principal says and does is important (Sergiovanni, 1995).

Special education means many different things to many different people and with that statement alone, the job of the school leader has become very difficult. The leadership and management of special education is an area that school principals have a huge opportunity to showcase their knowledge and skill (McLaughlin & Nolet, 2004). Special education is more than just teaching, learning, and working with children; special education is *multiple processes* of educating students that are categorized by various exceptionalities (McLaughlin & Nolet, 2004).

Federal legislation, lobbying by special education advocacy groups and research conducted in the area of disability has elevated the urgency for leadership in special education by school leaders. Federal law, public and institutional policy, their own experiences and their personal view of the discourse of disability guide school principals in their decision making about disability and special education (Burrello et al., 1992). As an educational leader, the school principal can only mildly influence law and policy, but his or her personal conviction and involvement impacts the education of students with disabilities significantly (Anderson, 2003; Burrello et al., 1992; Oliver, 1994).

Research has clearly demonstrated the impact principals have in schools through their leadership (Agran, Alper & Wehmeyer, 2002; Burrello et al., 1992; Glickman et al., 2001; Semmel, Abernathy, Butera, & Lesar, 1991). Additionally, research has established the leadership of the school principal as an undeniable force in the role of educating students with disabilities. Burrello et al., (1992) suggests that the key ingredient in a principal's behavior toward a student with a disability is the belief or attitude the principal has toward special education. Case studies reported by Burrello and colleagues indicated this as the major finding of their research. Specifically, principals in this research project who displayed a positive acceptance of special education students saw a positive impact within their schools. Their positive attitudes and beliefs were critical factors when advocating for students with disabilities and their acceptance into the general setting (Burrello et al., 1992). Communication of their attitudes and beliefs to students, staff and stakeholders was essential to building consensus about the work to be done with students with disabilities.

Additional research supports the above notion that the principal's attitudes and beliefs influence the success of students with disabilities (Hyatt, 1987). The instructional leadership of the school principal is predicated on his or her beliefs and attitudes. Positive attitudes and beliefs concerning special education empower and support successful experiences for students and staff members (Hyatt, 1987). Michalko (2002) and Longmore (2003) support these assumptions and further link the positive attitudes and beliefs about students with disabilities to the framework in which the principal views disabilities and students with disabilities (Longmore, 2003; Michalko, 2002; Smith & Erevelles, 2004).

In a study conducted in 33 classrooms across 12 Canadian schools, Stanovich and Jordan (1998) attempted to predict behaviors that were associated with the teachers' beliefs

about inclusive education. Their study was based on three predictors including teacher beliefs and attitudes, principal beliefs and attitudes, and teacher efficacy. Researchers determined through surveys and interviews that the principal's leadership directly impacted student achievement. Through their research, the strong connection between the beliefs of the principal, the school climate, and the learning climate is repeated (Bossert et al., 1982; Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Stanovich & Jordan, 1998). "As our study indicates, one of those mediating variables may be set of effective teaching behaviors associated with principal beliefs and the resulting school norm" (Stanovich & Jordan, 1998, p. 231). Stanovich and Jordan (1998) consistently reported that the beliefs of the principal impact the classroom instruction of the student with disabilities. Furthermore, the principal's beliefs affected both teaching behaviors and the school climate.

In a study of 408 elementary school principals, researchers investigated the relationship between the attitudes of the principals and inclusion of students with disabilities among same aged peers without disabilities (Praisner, 2003). The research revealed that "principals with positive experiences towards students with disabilities and exposure to special education associated a more positive attitude towards inclusion" (Praisner, 2003, p. 135). Praisner stated that, while much research has been done to display the importance of the principals' attitudes towards inclusion, little research has been completed regarding actual attitudes (2003). Praisner stated that there is even less research about what "influences develop the attitudes of the principal" (2003, p. 136). Praisner noted in her research that the development and success of an inclusive school depends in great part on the attitudes and beliefs of the principal. Finally, because of their leadership positions, the attitudes of the

principal could positively or negatively impact the opportunities for students to be served in general education settings (Praisner, 2003).

The results of Praisner's surveys and interviews indicated that the success of inclusion greatly depended on the principal's attitude. Furthermore, the degree to which inclusion was successful was directly linked to the specific attitudes and beliefs the principal had (Praisner, 2003). Students were more apt to be placed in least restrictive environments and had more exposure to the general curriculum if the principal was supportive of inclusion and had a positive attitude towards inclusion (Praisner, 2003). An additional finding in Praisner's research was the correlation between the experiences of the principals and their attitude toward inclusion and disability. Principals who reported more positive experiences with special education also reported more positive attitudes toward special education and inclusion (Praisner, 2003). Finally, according to Praisner, the quality of the experience was more important in developing a positive attitude for the principal than was the amount of experiences a principal encountered.

The principal's belief about disability and focus and implementation of access for students is the fundamental difference in these frameworks of disability. A principal must guide teachers, students, and a school community. This leadership will be informed by a framework of disability which will empower or oppress, will include or segregate and promote or discourage.

In summary, the principal will definitely impact the lives of all in the school community. Slight changes in leadership, philosophy about students and approach to teaching and learning can result in enormous differences. At the core of the leadership of the school principal is his or her personal belief and opinion about the discourse of disability.

The power and implications of the principal's philosophy are endless (Burrello et al., 1992; Glickman et al., 2001; Sergiovanni, 1994).

**Principals' Role in Implementation.** Many of the problems in supporting and enhancing the education of students with disabilities are associated with the separation of students who receive special education services from those that receive general school services (Villa & Thousand, 1995). Efforts to merge coexisting general and special education programs, known as inclusion, were led by Susan and William Stainback (1992). The Stainbacks are special education advocates who challenged the thought process and beliefs that rewarded a dual system. In their writings, the Stainbacks urged for a merger of general and special education programs that could meet the needs of all students (Stainback & Stainback, 1992).

This new focus on inclusion signified a change of thought among all educators and required educators to entertain the notion that the same educational setting could serve both regular and disabled students. Through the work of special education advocates and federal legislation, significant changes in the education of students with disabilities were made. These changes that merged general and special education processes included the beginning of inclusive schools, increased access for students with disabilities, and provided greater awareness of disability (Villa & Thousand, 1995).

This push for inclusion contended that effective instruction as practiced by teachers in regular classes can be appropriately implemented for all students and can accommodate the individual differences of regular education students as well as students with disabilities (Gartner & Lipsky, 1987; Semmel et al., 1991; Stainback & Stainback, 1984). The researchers indicated that the dual system of educating students creates a division between

students, teachers, instruction, and programs. Additionally, this work suggested that the separation between regular and special education allows for fragmented instruction and inconsistency in the implementation of educational programs. The divide causes teachers to lose track of their students and minimizes the much needed communication between regular and special education (Semmel et al., 1991). Further, the unification of regular and special education would continue to dispel the notion of a biological view of disability and encourage the inclusion of this oppressed minority (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1994).

Educators continue to research and study the integration of general and special education. Recent state and federal legislation has imbedded in educators the importance of inclusion in general and special education. Schools must reevaluate service and scheduling options for students with disabilities (Sharpe & Hawes, 2003). In 1997, amendments to IDEA required school districts to continue and enhance the participation of students with disabilities in the general curriculum (Agran et al., 2002). This involvement would need to be recorded in the students Individual Education Program (IEP). In research conducted by Agran et al. in a study of Iowa special education teachers, administrative reluctance was listed as the third strongest barrier to inclusion for students with disabilities. With an average of 1.9 on a 5 point Likert scale where 1 was very important barrier and 5 was not a barrier at all, administrative reluctance is seen as a strong deterrent in the access for students with disabilities.

IDEA speaks directly to the inclusion of students in the general education settings. The term used in IDEA legislation is least restrictive environment (LRE). The LRE guarantees students with disabilities the right to have educational services with their non-disabled peers to the greatest extent possible. LRE also requires that additional services and

supplementary materials be provided to give the student with disability every opportunity to all education services (Wright & Wright, 1998).

As with any transition or change, everyone is not in agreement. Many educators and researchers argue that the unification of the regular and special education systems is not the best for students. In fact, some teachers and principals have resisted the increase in mainstream or inclusive education. Researchers who argue against inclusive education cite the need for separate classes that can best serve the needs of each individual student. This research indicates the need for more restrictive and segregated placements (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1994). A reliance on the biological definition and a focus on the disability as an abnormal function of the body gives reason for this argument (Longmore, 2003). Proponents of the biological definition of disability urge people to view the disability as something that needs to be fixed and to best fix the problem, one needs to attend a school that specializes in or is equipped to handle the specific “medical treatment, vocational rehabilitation, and/or special education” (Longmore, 2003, p. 42).

Regardless of the opposition to inclusive education, the momentum and movement to full inclusive education for all students continues. Courts, research, and advocacy movements continue to march to school restructuring and the ideas of a fully inclusive educational system (Stainback & Stainback, 1995). It is clear that schools must consider the education of students with disabilities from a legal, empirical, practical and implementation perspective (Sharpe & Hawes, 2003). These movements to increase access for students with disabilities have continued to gain popularity during the past few decades. However during that process, glaring issues have been identified into the thoughts, attitudes, and beliefs of educators concerning their beliefs about disability. Making the inclusion and education of students of

disabilities work in the public schools is very dependent on the school principal. Little research specifically on principals' beliefs about disability has been identified. This study seeks to address this gap in our knowledge.

**Summary of the Principals' Role.** The role of the school principal is difficult to define and even more elusive to measure. School principal roles range from teacher and head master combinations at small rural schools to corporate executive officers in large urban school districts (Fullan, 2001; Kouzes & Posner, 2003). Regardless of the size or scope of the educational setting, the role of the principal in a school is undeniably important for the prolonged success of the school, its teachers, and ultimately the students, including those with disabilities (Cooner et al., 2005). In summary, the school principal displays leadership in a variety of different ways which impacts the integration and implementation of special education initiatives and programs. Research is clear that the principal's leadership is integral the education of students with disabilities (Cooner et al., 2005; Gersten et al., 2001; McLaughlin & Nolet, 2004).

### **Professional Training for the School Principal**

Principal leadership is a critical element when addressing school improvement and the education of students with disabilities (Cooner et al., 2005). As crucial as this role is, many principals feel inadequately prepared in their role as a leader in special education (Cooner et al., 2005). The work principals accomplish in these areas will continue to define their role as principal (Jones, 2006; Stainback & Stainback, 1995). Specifically, lack of training related to special education and supporting students with disabilities is a deficit among principals (Jones, 2006). Because of the shortage of highly qualified special education teachers, principals feel increased pressure to support and empower their special education



teachers (Jones, 2006). Professional development and training for teachers of students with disabilities is in high demand and principals face the challenge of training not only special education teachers, but all teachers in working with students with disabilities to access all areas of curriculum (Jones, 2006). In a study of 205 principals in southern California, data clearly demonstrated a need for additional preservice and on the job training for principals in the area of special education (Lasky & Karge, 2006). These challenges are only a few of the issues principals must face as they continue to lead schools.

**Teaching Experience.** Federal and state legislative bodies have created laws and policies such as IDEA but without proper training and experience, school principals will be ill-prepared to lead their schools and student learning. In a 2006 study done by Jones, a survey of school principals revealed that the majority of school principals had no experience in dealing with special education or students with disabilities. Furthermore, only 53.1% of principals surveyed had even taken a college level course concerning special education (Jones, 2006). Finally, teacher retention and satisfaction are largely due in part to the support given to teachers by their school principal (Jones, 2006).

Regardless of the level of training principals have in special education, NCLB required 100% of students, including students with disabilities, to be performing at or above grade level by 2014. This requirement makes the role of the school principal gravely important in the success of schools, despite little to no experience in special education or working with students with disabilities (Aspedon, 1992; Minor, 1992; Monteith, 2000; Stevenson, 2002). The role of the principal in relationship to the teaching of students with disabilities cannot be underestimated. School principals have major input on many issues regarding special education. Therefore, much of the responsibility for the success or failure

of the school, and specifically students with disabilities, lies with the role of the principal (Jones, 2006).

Peterson (2002) reports that as current principals leave and retire from their position, many of the prospective principals have little to no experience with special education. Additionally, a lack of special education knowledge is a concern. Many of these future principals surveyed did not know that students not only must meet eligibility requirement for placement but also there must be an indentified need for services (Peterson, 2002).

**Graduate Level Training.** As little training as school principals have had during the undergraduate careers, even more troubling for special education advocates is the lack of special education training school principals have received during their administrative degree programs. In a study of principals by Patterson, Bowling, and Marshall (2000) it was found that principals were not prepared in the area of special education and lacked knowledge and skills in the area of inclusive education. In a study by Jones (2006), over 55% of school principals reported no special education training during their administrative coursework. Over 75% of these same school principals indicated that the university coursework they completed in their administrative degree program prepared them “very little” or “not at all” for the work in special education (Jones, 2006). Studies of various colleges and universities conducted by Hirth and Valesky (1991) confirmed a lack of preparation in special education for school principals. Most universities spent very little if any time truly dedicated to the study of special education (Hirth & Valesky, 1991). When special education was studied in school administration programs, the conversation and topics of the course usually centered on school law and how the law pertains to special education (Jones, 2006).

Aspedon (1990) surveyed 450 Nebraska principals and found that 40% of principals had completed no coursework in special education or involving students with disabilities. In this same study however, over 85% of the principals surveyed felt that special education was “moderately to extremely important”. Rhys (1996) and Nardone (1999) also reported that principals lacked knowledge, skill, and training in several key areas of special education. Basic knowledge of the law, procedures, placement criteria, procedural guidelines, and compliance issues were lacking when principals were surveyed (Cooner et al., 2005).

Praisner (2003) reported that “preparation programs and inservice training programs for principals need to address inclusion as a part of their curriculum” (p. 142). She surveyed 408 elementary school principals. Results indicated that exposure to special education and inclusive concepts improved principals’ attitudes and perceptions about inclusion and special education. Additionally, the improved attitude contributed to more successful inclusive education and ultimately better opportunities for students with disabilities. Praisner’s study emphasized the positive correlation between administrative training in special education and the positive perceptions held by principals (2003). Praisner suggests in light of her findings, principals must be provided with more positive experiences in special education. Too often principals are trained in the area of general education and they rarely get specific training.

**Professional Development.** If school principals play such an important role in the education of students with disabilities, then where do principals receive training and how do they work effectively with their staff in teaching students with disabilities? Much of the knowledge of special education that principals receive is from district level training (Jones, 2006; Sage & Burrello, 1994). While this training is important and valuable, it by no means answers all the questions for principals and administrators as they work through their role as

leaders in teaching students with disabilities. Support given from the district to school principals is typically heavy in curriculum, instructional programs, and legal advice (Jones, 2006; Sergiovanni, 1994; Stainback & Stainback, 1995).

Despite a lack of special education knowledge and skills among principals, over 80% of principals surveyed in the Nebraska survey indicated a desire or interest in receiving additional training in the area of special education (Aspendon, 1990). However, most professional development programs offered do a poor job of training principals even on the most basic skills (Cooner, et al., 2005). This is evidenced by reports given by principals that state they are not prepared for the issues they encounter in special education (Cooner et al., 2005).

In writing an excerpt concerning *What Principals Should Know About Special Education*, Bradley (2000) agrees that principals are ill prepared for their role in special education. Bradley goes on to state that teachers are lacking in their knowledge of special education. Bradley suggests that principals should seek out training opportunities for themselves as leaders in special education. If principals are going to serve as true educational leaders, they must look for avenues to increase their knowledge and skills (Bradley, 2000).

Other sources of training for school principals in their role of school leaders in special education comes from past experience they have in teaching students with disabilities and any knowledge they have of particular people with disabilities. Research has shown that the more knowledge school principals possess and the more time principals spend with students with disabilities, then the better advocate the principal is for special education (Jones, 2006; Sergiovanni, 1994). This information is supported in the Nebraska survey where it was found that the principals that had experience felt much more comfortable in dealing with special

education students (Aspendon, 1990). Principals also indicated that the more they were involved in the special education program, the more comfortable and supportive they had become of students with disabilities (Aspendon, 1990).

**Summary of Professional Training.** The Council for Exceptional Children makes the point that the role of the principal is pivotal in the education of students with disabilities and that, if adequate services are to be expected for these students, principals must be appropriately trained and prepared (Council for Exceptional Children, 2011). Principals are often overwhelmed by their roles and the demands of their job (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003). The lack of preparedness and training in the area of special education creates even more distress for principals (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003). Research states a majority of school leaders are unprepared and lack the necessary knowledge and skills to provide leadership in special education (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; Monteith, 2000). To achieve maximum growth, access to curriculum, inclusive education, and the best education possible for students with disabilities; preparatory programs, school systems and licensing agencies must begin to review the process of training and providing appropriate experiences and knowledge in the area of special education for principals and future administrators (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003).

### **Conceptual Framework**

The literature reviewed in this study provides a background on the history of special education, discourse of disability, the principal's role in special education, and principal training as it relates to special education. Through this review of literature, information was presented to the importance of the role of the principal in the education of students with disabilities. This review pointed to the gap in the knowledge of what principals' believe

about disability and how their beliefs impact their leadership. The purpose of this study was to investigate principals' beliefs about disability and the impact of these beliefs on the education of students with disabilities. In order to provide a framework for the research, the study incorporated practical standards used to guide and advance special education.

The conceptual framework for this study comes from the Special Education Professional Ethical Principles as approved by the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC). The CEC is an international organization that works to improve and enhance the education and lives of individuals with disabilities. The CEC advocates for students and works with educators in order to improve professional standards and practice (CEC, 2011). The CEC has set twelve principles or standards that guide the work of educational professionals that work with individuals with disabilities. These principles or standards identify the diverse characteristics and needs that individuals with disabilities possess and direct appropriate actions and protocols for education professionals (CEC, 2011). In 1983, the CEC adopted a Code of Ethics comprising eight principles (Fielder & Van Haren, 2009). The CEC also included six standards for professional practice. These eight principles and six standards provided guidance and leaderships for educators in reference to students with disabilities (Fielder & Van Haren, 2009). In 2010, the CEC Board of Directors approved an inclusive list of principles and standards that provided guidance to all educators and set a level of commitment for anyone working with students with disabilities (CEC, 2011). The principles and standards from the CEC are listed.

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

- Maintaining a high level of professional competence and integrity and exercising professional judgment to benefit individuals with exceptionalities and their families.
- Promoting meaningful and inclusive participation of individuals with exceptionalities in their schools and communities.
- Practicing collegially with others who are providing services to individuals with exceptionalities.
- Developing relationships with families based on mutual respect and actively involving families and individuals with exceptionalities in educational decision making.
- Using evidence, instructional data, research and professional knowledge to inform practice.
- Protecting and supporting the physical and psychological safety of individuals with exceptionalities.
- Neither engaging in nor tolerating any practice that harms individuals with exceptionalities.
- Practicing within the professional ethics, standards, and policies of CEC; upholding laws, regulations, and policies that influence professional practice; and advocating improvements in laws, regulations, and policies.
- Advocating for professional conditions and resources that will improve learning outcomes of individuals with exceptionalities.
- Engaging in the improvement of the profession through active participation in professional organizations.

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

In special education, guiding principles and professional standards are commonly used to provide guidance, direction and support for professionals (Fieldler & Van Haren, 2009; Goens, 1996; Wesley & Buyesse, 2006). This study used the principles set forth by the CEC as a conceptual framework for the interview questions that were asked during the principal interviews. As educational leaders in the school, the school principal has the responsibility to ensure the educational opportunities and needs for students with disabilities are met. By using the principles set forth by the CEC, the researcher was able to address the gap of knowledge that surrounds the school principal's belief about disability and how these beliefs impact the principal's leadership. In addition to the basis for the interview questions, the twelve principles adopted by the CEC provided a background for the data analysis in the coding process for the interviews and document review.

### **Chapter Summary**

This Chapter examined four major threads of literature that supported the purpose of the study. In reviewing the literature from these strands, it is clear that a gap of knowledge exists in determining what principals actually believe about disability. The impact and information about their beliefs was researched. A conceptual framework based on the Council of Exceptional Children's twelve ethical principles or standards was articulated for use in this study. The methodology for the study is presented in Chapter III.



## CHAPTER III

### **Methodology**

The number of students with disabilities attending public schools has increased since the passing of federal legislation providing and protecting the rights of students with disabilities to a sound and basic education (Croser, 2002). As laws and policies continue to shape the educational landscape of these students, the role of the school principal continues to become instrumental in the meeting of individual student goals (Burrello et al., 1992; Glickman et al., 2001; Sergiovanni, 1994). The primary focus of this study was to examine what school principals believe about disability and students with disability. This study provides an in depth look at what principals believe about disabilities. In examining these beliefs, the study explored how these particular beliefs carry over to students with disabilities and impact the principal's leadership and education of students with disabilities.

This study very closely examined the beliefs K – 12 school principals have about the discourse of disability and how these beliefs were manifested in the principals' leadership at the school level. Although federal and state laws, district policies, and geographical regions influence practices and procedures for students with disabilities, the leadership of the school principal is a decisive element in the success of schools (Anderson, 2003; Bossert et al., 1982; Glickman, et al., 2001; Sergiovanni, 1984, 1987). This element, leadership, has been constructed in part by the principal's beliefs about disability (Sergiovanni, 1984, 1987).

This chapter provides a rationale for using a qualitative research design. A phenomenological perspective was used to further explore the principal's beliefs and the

impact of those beliefs on students with disabilities. Information about the participants, the researcher, plans for interviews, data collection and analysis, and issues of trustworthiness are also discussed.

### **Research Questions**

This research examined what school principals believe about disability and the impacts these beliefs have on the education of students with disabilities. In an effort to better understand and identify the lenses that principals use to view disability and to identify the model of disability they believe in, the following research questions guided the investigation.

1. What do K -12 public school principals believe about disability?
2. How do K-12 public school principals define disability and how do they define and describe students with disabilities?
3. How do the beliefs of K-12 public school principals support or enhance their leadership in the education of students with disabilities?
4. What factors have impacted the beliefs of the school principal about disability?
5. How do principals relate their prior experiences and trainings to their leadership of students with disabilities?

### **Rationale for a Phenomenological Study**

A phenomenological study involves the experiences of a particular person involving a specific situation or phenomenon (Creswell, 2003). From the phenomenologist perspective, I wanted to understand what school principals believe about the discourse of disability and how this constructed perception is manifested in their leadership (Schram, 2006). This phenomenological background will reveal underlying meaning to the leadership of principals and their beliefs surrounding disability discourse.

## **Rationale for a Qualitative Research Approach**

A single person's perception of an idea or concept creates reality to them. This creation or construction of reality is a part of our social interaction and beliefs. The idea that knowledge, beliefs, and reality can be socially constructed directly impacts our ability to measure or quantify information and data (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). By using qualitative research methods, I was able to gather information to study and answer questions concerning principals' beliefs and leadership as outlined in my research questions.

Postmodern movements and theories have provided the basis for social constructivism or the belief that all humans create for themselves a sense of reality, knowledge, and belief system (Anastasiou & Kauffman, 2011). Experiences, situations, and circumstances enhance forces that work to construct who we are as people, educators, and leaders (Anastasiou & Kauffman, 2011). The research questions presented in this study required me to examine and study specific phenomena that occur in an educational setting: in particular, the principals' beliefs about the discourse of disability and how these beliefs impact their leadership in the area of students with disabilities.

In this qualitative study, information was gathered through participant interviews and document analysis. The use of a qualitative study supports my methodological choices and allowed me to focus on the particular area of principal values and beliefs in regards to students with disabilities (Maxwell; 2005; Patton, 2002; Schram, 2003).

I was attempting to gain meaning from the values and beliefs of the school principal about disability and how these values and beliefs are observed in the education of students with disabilities. I subscribe to a constructivist point of view in that knowledge and understanding are constructed by people through their perceptions of the world. This research

is founded on constructivism; the view that the ideas, thoughts, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of school principals have been constructed from their perception of reality, education, and their students (Anastasiou & Kauffman, 2011). It is my contention that these beliefs that have been constructed by the school principal then in turn influence the reality and perceptions of school teachers and other school personnel. Teachers and school staff have constructed a belief of disability and the education of students with disabilities through a combination of the reality presented by the principal and other outside factors. While it is evident that outside factors influence the decisions and actions of all, I intended to study the perceptions that principals have and form due to their values and beliefs.

### **Role of the Researcher**

I view myself as a constructivist researcher who believes that people are constantly in the process of constructing reality from their perceptions of the world around them. It follows that I view students with disabilities as constructing their reality from the information they receive from teachers, principals, and support services at their school. Their reality about education, instruction, and access is constructed by their perceptions of school personnel. Teachers likewise are constructing their reality from the perceptions they receive from a variety of sources including their principal and their students. As mentioned, principals' perceptions about the reality of educating students with disabilities comes from outside community resources, institutional foundations, and their own beliefs and values (Burrello, Schrup, & Barnett, 1988; 1992; Sage & Burrello, 1994). It is these values that as a researcher I am most concerned.

Within the research, my concern for special education and the availability of access for students with disabilities will become apparent. I do not feel comfortable settling for only

getting data about the beliefs and values of principals concerning students with disabilities; instead I want to advocate for these students in that how the attitudes of the principal affect the education and access for these students. It was essential that in doing the research, my role as an advocate for students with disabilities was transparent. My research was not to condemn principals for any particular attitude or belief. It will, ideally, make more clear the importance of the beliefs and values and how these attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors impact education and access.

My role as the researcher also includes who I am. Using my former role as a principal, I have gained valuable insight into the dilemmas that surface in the role of principal. Currently serving as a director of administrative services, I have had the opportunity to oversee school principals and my perceptions of the school principal have been affected. The knowledge and skills gained from my profession enhanced my ability to understand and interpret the data from the perspective of the school principal. This professional subjectivity was made transparent throughout my writing to be sure any data presented is an accurate description of observation and/or interview and not my own personal reflection.

As a constructivist researcher, I believe that one cannot exist outside one's beliefs. While hidden at times, the beliefs are undeniable. They guide our thoughts, actions, and behaviors. School principals' leadership in dealing with students with disabilities is constructed in part by their beliefs. These beliefs journey through the instructional, organizational, and ethical leadership operations of the principal to impact student learning and achievement. Not only do the values and beliefs of the principal construct learning for

students, they also construct a perception and support sent to staff members that again impacts student learning and achievement.

I also tend to migrate towards the constructivist view as a researcher because I do not subscribe to the view with my research that there is a single reality that is true and present in all principals in all schools. A principal's beliefs are not the same in every school. People are different and therefore we get schools in similar communities with the same institutional context but have entirely different instructional climates and organizations. While both scenarios might lead to student success, the differences can be directed to variances in the beliefs and values of the leadership. These leaders have constructed a climate and organizational system that is not objectively consistent from school to school or leader to leader.

### **Ethical Issues**

Ethics, research, and students with disabilities are commonly linked ideas for many different purposes. In my research there were many different ethical considerations to take into account. Ethical dilemmas in my research ranged from my interaction with the participants and personal bias about the role of principals to the legal implementation of public law and issues of best practices and access for students with disabilities. It is important that ethical dilemmas were addressed and the reader understands the position and bias of me as the researcher.

In participating in qualitative research, there is an obvious interaction between the researcher and participants. This relationship ushers in a variety of ethical considerations.

Areas of ethical consideration that must be given attention are the involvement of the participants and the treatment of the data collected from the participants. Special education is

a very sensitive area and the importance of confidentiality cannot be over emphasized. For the participant, I provided ample information for them before beginning the study.

Participants were clearly informed about the goals of the research are and the intended use of the data collected (Informed Consent – Appendix D). Richly detailed data is essential in attempting to construct the relationship between principal's values and beliefs and students with disabilities. Confidentiality and trust from the participant and the researcher will be important for the accuracy of the information.

### **Data Collection**

I used two methods to collect data: interviews and document review. The interview with the school principal was used to gain perspective about the principal and school, assess the principal's beliefs about the discourse of disability, and investigate how these beliefs are manifested in their leadership.

The second piece of data collection was to review school documents and plans that help to showcase the principal's beliefs about disability. Documents that were reviewed included the school's North Carolina Report Card, School Improvement Plans, master schedule, special education service plans or schedules, students with disabilities headcount sheets, student services team plans, Professional Development Plans, and Teacher Working Conditions survey. This list of documents was not all inclusive and each individual principal had additional information they shared to showcase their values, beliefs, and leadership.

The rationale for varied methods of data collection is to get a true sense about the beliefs of disability that exist among principals and how these beliefs manifest in their leadership. By examining multiple layers of data, I was able to gain perspective on the

discourse of disability that the principal has constructed and what phenomenological effects this construction has created within the principal's leadership.

**Conceptual Framework.** This study used the principles set forth by the Council of Exceptional Children (CEC) as a conceptual framework for the interview questions that were asked during the principal interviews. By using the principles set forth by the CEC, the researcher was able to address the gap of knowledge that surrounds the school principal's belief about disability and how these beliefs impact the principal's leadership. The twelve CEC standards that guide special education were used to construct interview questions to ask during the interview process. The interview questions that were used are included in Appendix A. In addition to the basis for the interview questions, the twelve principles adopted by the CEC provided a background for the data analysis in the coding process for the interviews and document review. Table 1 is included below to connect the conceptual framework with the research questions.



Table 1

*Conceptual Framework and Research Questions*

CEC Principle	Interview Question
A - Challenging expectations	1,4,5
B - Professional competence and integrity	2
C - Inclusive participation	2,3
D - Collegiality	1
E - Relationships	1,5,7
F - Information and data	4,6
G - Physical and psychological safety	4,5
H - Protection against bad practice	6
I - Ethics, standards, and policies	6,11
J - Advocating for conditions and resources	1,4,11
K - Improvement of profession	2,8,9,10
L - Growth of knowledge	1,8,9,10,12

**Pilot Study.** A pilot study was conducted in the summer of 2011 using two principals from Cleveland County Schools. The purpose of the pilot study was to test the interview questions and procedures proposed in this study. Two principals were interviewed for approximately 50-60 minutes. The principals were asked all questions on the interview protocol in addition to a few probing questions to further investigate particular responses. The interviews were digitally recorded. The findings of the pilot study were used to refine the interview protocol originally proposed for this study. Adjustments that were made include

clustering the interview topics and the relationship between the questions. The original interview questions caused the principal to move from subject to subject. As a result, the principal constantly referred back to previous answers. For the study interviews, questions focused on beliefs about disability were clustered. Similarly, questions concerning leadership, instruction, professional training/experience were also clustered. The interview questions remained unchanged for study interviews.

**Site Selection.** This study was conducted in public schools located in western North Carolina. Having a significant number of students with disabilities was important to the validity of the study and data received from the interviews with principals. Principals serving schools with less than 40 students with disabilities may have limited experience with issues surrounding disability and students with disabilities.

**Gaining Access.** To begin the search for participants, I used the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction and school report card status to determine eligible schools. This information provided schools that meet the before mentioned criteria. A potential participant letter was then be sent to superintendents of districts that have schools meeting the criteria for participation. Superintendents were asked to respond and recommend schools that would participate in the research study. A letter summarizing the study and intended research was sent to the school principal in each district.

**Selection of Participants.** The participants in this study were principals of K-12 public schools in western North Carolina. This convenience sample was selected due to the proximity to the researcher. Participants from the researcher's county were not selected. This study only included participants serving in the official capacity as principal. Assistant or

interim principals were not included in the study. No students or teachers were involved as participants in the study.

Letters were sent to superintendents in western North Carolina requesting permission to conduct research in their county. In the counties in which the superintendents gave permission for my study, I sent letters to school principals that were eligible. From the group of principals that agreed to participate, 12 principals were chosen. Half of the selected principals were from elementary schools (Grades K-5) while the other half were from secondary schools (Grades 6-12).

Principals were selected from schools with regards to their student populations. Specialty schools were not considered for this study. Specialty schools include International Baccalaureate schools, trade or vocational schools, or schools that are designed to serve only special needs students. All of these schools have more specified programs that influence the access of students.

### **Interview Protocol**

As a part of my research, I conducted interviews with principals. I, as the researcher, needed to be aware of any differences in the responses between such participants and work to ensure that individual comments or practices are unidentifiable to protect the anonymity and reduce the risk of causing tension within the school or district.

All participants were informed of their right to privacy and anonymity. As the researcher, I understand the importance of this in regards to confidential and sensitive information. Again the goal of the research is not to expose wrongs but to provide foundational information for the education and access of students with disabilities. Neither deception nor monetary reciprocity was involved in this study. It was my intention as the

researcher to be as transparent as possible with the participants and while I appreciated the time and energy of the participants, I did not want to compromise the integrity of the study or results with monetary reciprocity. Prior to beginning the study, approval was obtained from the University Institutional Review Board.

**Recording.** Interviews were audio recorded using a digital recording system. In addition to recording the interviews, the researcher also manually record responses through written notes. These notes served as an outline and captured the main points of the interview and were used as a back-up to the digitally recorded notes. The digitally recorded notes were accurately labeled with the date, time and pseudonym so the person interviewed cannot be identified.

**Transcribing.** Each interview was transcribed exactly as recorded. This transcription process served as a written document of the interview dialogue. After transcribing the interview, the researcher checked the transcription for accuracy by listening to the audio tape again and reading the transcribed notes.

**Field Notes.** Field notes were used in the interviews as another source of data. Field notes were used to collect information outside of the interview. Field notes included the mood of the participant, non-verbal communication, and other important factors that are not directly transmitted during the interview. Field notes were used as a point of reference for the researcher to get clarification or follow-up questioning.

**Summary of Interview Protocol.** In summary, data collection included individual interviews with 12 public school principals and a document review from each individual principal. Data was collected from these interviews by using a digital recording device in order to accurately capture the information in the interview. In addition to recording the

interview with the participant, the researcher kept field notes and a written detail of the interview. The interview was transcribed in order to have an accurate written account to be used in the data analysis section.

### **Data Analysis**

Each of the principal interviews was digitally recorded to ensure the accuracy of the information. As the interviewer, I also took notes during the interview. Interview recordings were transcribed into written text. These transcriptions were then be coded thematically. Set themes or codes were established and added to as new or additional themes surface from the interview data. Sub-categories were established under each major heading to properly analyze all data. Once all the interviews were coded, I was able to sort the data into thematic codes in order to draw conclusions about the beliefs of the principal.

A similar approach was taken in analyzing the documents from the school. Using the same major codes and sub-categories, the data was coded and then categorized in the same manner as the interview data. After being analyzed, the information from the document review was used to triangulate the interview data and to add reference to the conclusions found in the interview.

The data and conclusions were then presented as particular values and beliefs of school principals that influence special education. Also included in this analysis were examples of practices of how these values and beliefs are evidenced in the principal's managerial and instructional leadership, access to the general curriculum for students with disabilities, and supports and services given to students and teachers in the area of special education.

## **Trustworthiness**

To complete the study and verify the data are useable and beneficial to the educational world, there must be an issue of trustworthiness linked to the research. Issues of trustworthiness involve studying the interpretations of the research study as well as understanding and noting the limitations of the study (Glesne, 2006).

Holloway and Jefferson (2000) identified four questions in which the researcher can examine the study to hold the study as trustworthy including (a) what was noticed in the study, (b) why you noticed those things, (c) interpretations of what you noticed, and (d) the accuracy of your interpretations. The first question asked by Holloway and Jefferson involves the trustworthiness of the study because it forces the researcher to not only look at what was noticed but what was missing. The absence of a certain attribute can be as revealing in a study as the presence of another attribute. By not only noticing what you observed but identifying what you did not see will add validity to the study (Glesne, 2006). As a former principal, I noticed certain things because of my own subjective lens.

Understanding why certain issues or phenomenon were noticed adds to the trustworthiness of the study (Glesne, 2006). Interpretation of what you noticed may be the most important element in trustworthiness (Glesne, 2006). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985) prolonged engagement and persistent observation are critical in establishing trustworthiness and credibility to a study. Prolonged engagement refers to the amount of time spent observing a particular incident. This engagement adds scope to the study. Trustworthy research contains observations and data gathering that are of appropriate length and depth. The final stage given by Holloway and Jefferson (2000) is to verify that interpretation of the observations is correct. This step is important and maybe gets the most scrutiny because this is the part of the

study that is read. Validating interpretations of the study is essential. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest auditing fieldwork with a variety of checks and balances to promote its trustworthiness.

### **Delimitations**

Delimitations are used in research to focus more directly on the intent of the research study (Creswell, 2003). This qualitative study focused on interviewing K-12 public school principals that served in schools that had at least 40 students with disabilities. These interviews focused on the principal and support documents the principal provides.

This study was delimited to the principals recommended by their superintendent and willing to participate. This study did not include assistant principals, teachers, parents, or students. This study did not incorporate any observations of the principal, teachers, or students.

### **Chapter Summary**

This Chapter presented the qualitative research methodology for exploring the beliefs principals have of disability and students with disability. Also included in this Chapter was a rationale for using qualitative methodology. Information about the participants, the researcher, plans for interviews, data collection and analysis, and issues of trustworthiness were presented. A section on the delimitations of this study was also included. The purpose of this study is to address the gaps in our knowledge about the beliefs principals have about disability and how these beliefs impact their leadership at their school including students with disabilities.

## CHAPTER IV

### **Findings**

This study was conducted to examine the beliefs of school principals about disability and to determine the relationship of these beliefs on the principals' leadership and the area of special education. The research focused on the beliefs of principals concerning disability and the impact those beliefs have on the principals' leadership. This study sought to address a gap in knowledge and therefore impact the education of students with disabilities. Included in this study was an exploration of what principals believed about disability, their view of their leadership within the school, experience with disability, training in the area of disability and students with disability, and a look at their needs as they relate to disability and students with disabilities.

### **Research Questions**

1. What do K -12 public school principals believe about disability?
2. How do K-12 public school principals define disability and how do they define and describe students with disabilities?
3. How do the beliefs of the K-12 public school principal support or enhance their leadership in the education of students with disabilities?
4. What factors have impacted the beliefs of the school principal about disability?
5. How do principals relate their prior experiences and trainings to their leadership of students with disabilities?



Findings from the study are presented in four sections. The first section contains demographic and descriptive information related to the districts, schools, and principals that agreed to participate in this study. The second section describes the interview process and presents the principals' responses to questions regarding disability, leadership, and students with disability. This section also presents the principals' responses related to preparation and training, access of knowledge, and needs related to students with disabilities. The third section identifies the themes and sub-themes that emerged in the process of examining the data collected during the interviews and document review. The fourth section provides particular answers to the original research questions. As noted in the qualitative interview protocol (Yin, 2009), pseudonyms are used for the names of the school systems, schools, and principal participants in order to maintain anonymity.

### **Demographic and Descriptive Information of Selected School Districts**

In this section, demographic and descriptive information is given about each school, school district, and the county in which the school district is in. Demographic information concerning the county was gathered from US Census Bureau (<http://quickfacts.census.gov>). Unemployment data from each county was gathered from US Bureau of Labor Statistics (<http://www.bls.gov/bls/unemployment.htm>). Both sets of data were gathered in January 2012.

Descriptive information concerning the particular schools in the study was gathered from the school's North Carolina School Report Card. School report cards can be found on each school's website and can also be found at [www.ncreportcards.org](http://www.ncreportcards.org). The test data reported in this study are from the 2010-2011 school year. Test data includes the percent proficient or passing the End of Course or End of Grade exams given as a part of North

Carolina's Accountability Plan. High schools use End of Course exams and middle and elementary schools use End of Grade exams.

**Middleton School District Description.** Middle School District (MSD) is located in western North Carolina in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains. This beautiful mountainous county is identified by its ability to bridge the traveler from the foothills into the mountains. The county school district is spread throughout the large geographical county and concentrated near the county's major city. MSD is concentrated in one large city located in the center of the county. MSD has 27 schools; 15 elementary schools (PK-5); five middle schools (6-8); four high schools (9-12); one special needs school; one early college high school; and one alternative school. This county school districts serves approximately 13,600 students.

The community that supports this school district is also home to an historic State Park, popular tourist attractions, has a low crime rate, and has consistently been rated as a great place to live and/or retire. One major interstate runs horizontally through the county. A drive on the interstate reminds the traveler of the rural country by its lack of commercial business. The county has an ethnic breakdown of 84.4% white, 6.6% African-American, and 9% Hispanic/Other. This county has an unemployment rate of 11.7% as compared to a rate of 9.5% for entire state of North Carolina. Five schools within Middleton School District were selected to be a part of this study.

Apple Middle School was the first school that I visited. Apple Middle School (AMS) is a traditional middle school that serves sixth, seventh, and eighth grade students and has an enrollment of approximately 597 students. The school has 33 classroom teachers, supports an average class size of 22 students, and serves 120 students in their exceptional children's

program. AMS had an overall performance proficiency of 85.2% proficient in math and 74.2% proficient in reading. End of grade (EOG) scores ranged in math from a high of 87.4% in eighth grade math to a low of 82.6% in seventh grade math. Reading scores ranged from a high of 77.8% in sixth grade reading a low of 69.1% in seventh grade reading. Thirty-seven percent of students with disabilities passed both the math and reading EOG tests. AMS received the recognition of School of Distinction, High Growth for its overall performance on the North Carolina State Accountability Model.

Border Elementary School (BES) is traditional elementary school that serves Pre-Kindergarten through fifth grade and has an enrollment of approximately 215 students. The school has 18 classroom teachers, supports an average class size of 17 students, and serves 40 students in their exceptional children's program. BES had an overall performance proficiency of greater than 95% proficient in math and 87.1% proficient in reading. EOG scores ranged in math from a high of greater than 95% in third and fourth grade math to a low of 94.7% in fifth grade math. Reading scores ranged from a high of 92.5% in third grade reading a low of 81.6% in fifth grade reading. Forty-five percent of students with disabilities passed both the math and reading EOG tests. BES received the recognition of Honor School of Excellence, High Growth for its overall performance on the North Carolina State Accountability Model.

East Elementary School (EES) is traditional elementary school that serves Pre-Kindergarten through fifth grade and has an enrollment of approximately 230 students. The school has 19 classroom teachers, supports an average class size of 17, and serves 43 students in their exceptional children's program. EES had an overall performance proficiency of greater than 79.2% proficient in math and 68.8% proficient in reading. EOG

scores ranged in math from a high of greater than 86.4% in fourth grade math to a low of 73.6% in fifth grade math. Reading scores ranged from a high of 83.3% in fourth grade reading a low of 60.4% in fifth grade reading. Twenty-four percent of students with disabilities passed both the math and reading EOG tests. EES received the recognition of School of Progress, High Growth for its overall performance on the North Carolina State Accountability Model.

Front Elementary School (FES) is traditional elementary school that serves Pre-Kindergarten through fifth grade and has an enrollment of approximately 390 students. The school has 32 classroom teachers, supports an average class size of 18, and serves 60 students in their exceptional children's program. FES had an overall performance proficiency of 85.1% proficient in math and 79.1% proficient in reading. EOG scores ranged in math from a high of 91.5% in fourth grade math to a low of 77.5% in fifth grade math. Reading scores ranged from a high of 84.5% in fourth grade reading a low of 67.8% in third grade reading. Thirty-three percent of students with disabilities passed both the math and reading EOG tests. FES received the recognition of School of Distinction, High Growth for its overall performance on the North Carolina State Accountability Model.

Jump High School (JHS), a traditional high school, serves ninth through twelfth grade students and has an enrollment of approximately 1,178 students. The school has 77 classroom teachers, supports an average class size of 22 students in core academic classes, and serves 100 students in their exceptional children's program. JHS received the recognition of School of Progress, Expected Growth for its overall performance on the North Carolina State Accountability Model. Performance results ranged from a high of 88.5% proficient on the Algebra II End of Course (EOC) exam to a low of 64.9% proficient on the

Algebra 1 EOC. On the English 1 EOC exam, 83.5% of the students were proficient. Thirty-seven percent of students with disabilities passed their EOC exams in the particular subjects.

**Middleton School District (MSD) Study Participants.** One middle school, one high school and 3 elementary principals for a total of 5 MSD principals were interviewed in this study. Four of the five principals from MSD were males. Educational experience of these principals ranged from 12 to over 30 years. Their experience as principals ranged from three to 13 years.

April has been a school administrator for 13 years. April has been a principal at a special school for students with disabilities, an elementary, and currently is principal at AMS. April has an undergraduate degree in special education and was an Exceptional Children's teacher for nine years. Altogether, April has been in education for 22 years. She holds a Master's degree in School Administration.

Bill, principal at BES, has been in education for 17 years. He has been in administration for 9 years and has served as principal for six years. Before serving as principal at BES, he was principal at another school in MSD. Bill has an undergraduate degree in Economics. He went back to school to get his degree in education and also holds a Master's degree in school administration. He is currently enrolled in an educational specialist degree program.

Evan has been in education for 12 years. Nine out of those years has been in administration with the last three as a principal in MSD. Evan has an undergraduate degree in middle grades education and has experience at several schools within Middleton School District. He holds a Master's degree in school administration and also his educational specialist degree.

Frank, principal at FES, has been in education for 14 years. Frank has been an administrator for 10 years and has served as principal for the last nine years. Before serving as principal at FES, he served as principal at other elementary schools within MSD. Frank, with an undergraduate degree in elementary education, has served his entire educational career in the elementary school. He holds a Master's degree in school administration, an educational specialist degree and is currently enrolled in a doctoral program.

Jimmy, principal of JHS, has been in education for over 30 years. Jimmy spent 30 plus years serving as an English teacher, assistant principal, and principal in the state of Georgia. He has an undergraduate degree in English, Master's degree in school administration, and holds a doctoral degree. Jimmy has been principal for over three and a half years at JHS.

**Urban School District Description.** Urban School District (USD) is located in western North Carolina. The county school district is spread throughout the county with one large city and several smaller cities that all serve as bedroom communities to the largest metropolis in the state. USD is one of the top ten largest school districts in North Carolina. USD has 55 schools; 30 primary or elementary schools (PK-5); two intermediate schools (4-5); 11 middle schools (6-8); nine high schools (9-12); an early college high school; a special needs school; and an alternative school. This urban school district serves 31,619 students and is the ninth largest school district in the state.

The community that supports this school district has a broad range of economic resources as well as challenges. While nestled beside one of the largest banking cities in the country, the diversity and uniqueness of this county bring about many challenges. These challenges include areas of high poverty, unbalanced demographics, and a rapid population

shift to the eastern region of the county. One large interstate runs vertically through the county. Signs of the city are obvious from the interstate through the observation of business and economic development. The county has an ethnic breakdown of 78.2% white, 15.3% African-American, and 6.5% Hispanic/Other. The ethnic breakdown of schools within this county varies widely. This county has an unemployment rate of 10.7% as compared to a rate of 9.5% for entire state of North Carolina.

Four schools within USD were selected to be a part of this study. Coastal Elementary School (CES), a traditional elementary school serves Pre-Kindergarten through fifth grade students and has an enrollment of approximately 661 students. The school has 35 classroom teachers, supports an average class size of 22 students, and serves 48 students in their exceptional children's program. CES had an overall performance proficiency of 94.4% proficient in math and 88.6% proficient in reading. EOG scores ranged in math from a high of greater than 95% in fifth grade math to a low of 92.3% in fourth grade math. Reading scores ranged from a high of 93.5% in fifth grade reading a low of 83.1% in third grade reading. Almost 51% of students with disabilities passed both the math and reading EOG tests. CES received the recognition of Honor School of Excellence, High Growth for its overall performance on the North Carolina State Accountability Model.

Dorsal Elementary School was the second school that I visited in Urban School District. Dorsal Elementary School (DES), a traditional elementary school, serves Pre-Kindergarten through fifth grade students and has an enrollment of approximately 585 students. The school has 39 classroom teachers, supports an average class size of 19 students, and serves 47 students in their exceptional children's program. DES had an overall performance proficiency of 75.2% proficient in math and 68.9% proficient in reading. EOG

scores ranged in math from a high of 84.6% in third grade math to a low of 69.7% in fourth grade math. Reading scores ranged from a high of 74.1% in fifth grade reading a low of 62.6% in third grade reading. Slightly over 21% of students with disabilities passed both the math and reading EOG tests. DES received the recognition of School of Progress, Expected Growth for its overall performance on the North Carolina State Accountability Model.

Iceland Elementary School was the third school that I visited in Urban School District. Iceland Elementary School (IES), a traditional elementary school, serves Pre-Kindergarten through fifth grade students and has an enrollment of approximately 540 students. The school has 39 classroom teachers, supports an average class size of 20 students, and serves 105 students in their exceptional children's program. IES has three cluster Autistic classrooms that serve students throughout the Urban School District. IES had an overall performance proficiency of 77.7% proficient in math and 66.6% proficient in reading. EOG scores ranged in math from a high of 80.4% in fourth grade math to a low of 74.8% in third grade math. Reading scores ranged from a high of 75.0% in fifth grade reading a low of 57.0% in third grade reading. Fifteen percent of students with disabilities passed both the math and reading EOG tests. IES received the recognition of School of Progress, Expected Growth for its overall performance on the North Carolina State Accountability Model.

Lemon Middle School was the fourth school that I visited in Urban School District and the final school visited in the interview process. Lemon Middle School (LMS), a traditional middle school, serves sixth through eighth grade students and has an enrollment of approximately 794 students. The school has 43 classroom teachers, supports an average class size of 27 students, and serves 80 students in their exceptional children's program. LMS had an overall performance proficiency of 81.0% proficient in math and 71.3% proficient in



reading. EOG scores ranged in math from a high of 81.1% in sixth grade math to a low of 79.6% in seventh grade math. Reading scores ranged from a high of 76.5% in sixth grade reading a low of 67.6% in seventh grade reading. Slightly more than 19% of students with disabilities passed both the math and reading EOG tests. LMS received the recognition of School of Progress, High Growth for its overall performance on the North Carolina State Accountability Model.

**Urban School District (USD) Study Participants.** One middle school and three elementary principals for a total of four USD principals were interviewed in this study. Three of these four principals were females. Educational experience of these principals ranged from 13 to 26 years. Their experience as principals ranged from four to 11 years.

Cindy, principal at Coastal Elementary School, has been in education for 26 years. All but three of those years have been spent at the middle school level. Cindy has been in administration for 15 years and has served as principal for 11 years. The last three years at CES were her first three years outside of a middle school. Before serving as principal at Coastal Elementary School, she was principal at another school in USD. Cindy has an undergraduate degree in middle grades education, a Master's degree in school administration, and a Master's degree in curriculum and instruction.

Debra has been in education for 13 years. Nine out of those years has been in administration with the last six as a principal in USD. Debra has an undergraduate degree in elementary education. She has experience at several schools within USD. Debra holds a Master's degree in school administration and is pursuing a doctoral degree.

Ivory, principal at Iceland Elementary School, has been in public education for 20 years. She has spent time teaching in a private school and also spent time at home raising her

children. Ivory has been in administration for 12 years, severing the last 10 years as principal. Ivory has been at Iceland Elementary the last four years. Ivory has an undergraduate degree in Early Childhood, a Master's degree in Curriculum and Instruction, and a Master's degree in School Administration.

Larry, principal at Lemon Middle School, has been in education for 21 years. He has been an administrator for nine years and served as a principal the last four years. He has an undergraduate degree in History and a Master's degree in school administration. Larry has spent his entire career in Urban School District, teaching high school history, serving as a middle school assistant principal, and currently principal at LMS.

**Rural School District Description.** Rural School District (RSD) is located in western North Carolina on the western edge of the Piedmont region. The county school district is spread throughout the medium size geographical county. This county contains several small towns that make up the rural communities. Business and industry are scarce in the county and unemployment at 12.9% is a major concern. RSD has 19 schools; ten elementary schools (PK-5); three middle schools (6-8); three high schools (9-12); an alternative school; an early college high school, and a school for preschool students. This county school district serves approximately 9,000 students.

Backed by lots of community support, Rural School District launched a one to one lap initiative two years ago. The county has no interstate within its borders. The county has an ethnic breakdown of 85.9% white, 10.1% African-American, and 4% Hispanic/Other. This county has an unemployment rate of 12.9% as compared to a rate of 9.5% for entire state of North Carolina.

Three schools from the Rural School District were a part of this study. Giant High School (GHS), a traditional high school, serves ninth through twelfth grade students and has an enrollment of approximately 737 students. The school has 52 classroom teachers, supports an average class size of 20 students in core academic classes, and serves 80 students in their exceptional children's program. GHS received the recognition of School of Progress, Expected Growth for its overall performance on the North Carolina State Accountability Model. Performance results ranged from a high of 81.9% proficient on the US History EOC exam to a low of 60.3% proficient on the Algebra 1 EOC. On the English 1 EOC exam, 77.8% of the students were proficient. Slightly over 35% of students with disabilities passed their EOC exams in the particular subjects.

Hill Middle School (HMS), a traditional middle school, serves sixth, seventh, and eighth grade students and has an enrollment of approximately 741 students. The school has 46 classroom teachers, supports an average class size of 22 students, and serves 118 students in their exceptional children's program. HMS had an overall performance proficiency of 80.2% proficient in math and 71.2% proficient in reading. EOG scores ranged in math from a high of 80.9% in eighth grade math to a low of 79.7% in sixth grade math. Reading scores ranged from a high of 77.6% in sixth grade reading a low of 61.8% in seventh grade reading. Slightly over 26% of students with disabilities passed both the math and reading EOG tests. HMS received No Recognition for its overall performance on the North Carolina State Accountability Model.

Kettle Middle School was the third school that I visited in Rural School District and the next to last school I visited in the interview process. Kettle Middle School (KMS), a traditional middle school, serves sixth through eighth grade students and has an enrollment of

approximately 632 students. The school has 41 classroom teachers, supports an average class size of 22 students, and serves 53 students in their exceptional children's program. KMS had an overall performance proficiency of 81.1% proficient in math and 62.3% proficient in reading. EOG scores ranged in math from a high of 87.7% in eighth grade math to a low of 73.4% in seventh grade math. Reading scores ranged from a high of 75.7% in sixth grade reading a low of 52.0% in seventh grade reading. Slightly over 30.4% of students with disabilities passed both the math and reading EOG tests. KMS received No Recognition for its overall performance on the North Carolina State Accountability Model.

**Rural School District (RSD) Study Participants.** One high school and two middle school principals for a total of three RSD principals were interviewed in this study. All three principals from RSD were males. Educational experience of these principals ranged from 14 to 29 years. Their experience as principals ranged from four to five years.

Grant, principal at Giant High School (GHS), has been in education for 29 years. He has been in administration for 15 years and has served as principal for the last five years. Before serving as principal at GHS, Grant was a Biology teacher and then an assistant principal at the school. He has spent his entire career at GHS and is planning on retiring at the end of the current school year. He has an undergraduate degree in Biology and a Master's degree in school administration.

Henry has been in education for 18 years. Ten of those years have been in administration with the last four as a principal at Hill Middle School. Henry has an undergraduate degree in elementary education and mathematics. He taught for eight years and served as an assistant principal for 10 years in a neighboring county before accepting a principal job in RSD. Henry holds a Master's degree in school administration.

Keith, principal at Kettle Middle School, has been in education for 14 years. He served five years as an exceptional children's teacher although his original degree was in physical education. Keith has been in administration for nine years. The last five years he has served as principal at Kettle Middle School. Prior to his five years at KMS, Keith served at the high school level in RSD. Along with an undergraduate degree in physical education and a special education certification, Keith has a Master's degree in school administration.

### **Research Participant Interviews**

The following section will describe the experiences I had during the interview process with the participants. A narrative of the participant interviews will be presented in chronological order. The narrative includes a description of the specific interview location, the appearance of the school or interview facility, impressions of the principal, and general perceptions gained during the interview process. The interviews in the study were conducted in the following order: April (Apple Middle School – MSD), Bill (Border Elementary School – MSD), Cindy (Coastal Elementary School – USD), Debra (Dorsal Elementary School – USD), Evan (East Elementary School – MSD), Frank (Front Elementary School – MSD), Grant (Giant High School – RSD), Henry (Hill Middle School, RSD), Ivory (Iceland Elementary School, USD) , Jimmy (Jump High School, MSD) , Keith (Kettle Middle School, RSD) , Larry (Lemon Middle School, USD) . The interviews conducted with these principals ranged from approximately 45 min to slightly over an hour.

Table 2

*Interview Participants*

Name	Gender	Total Years	Years in Admin	Years as Principal	Undergraduate Degree	Masters	
						in School Admin	Advanced Degree
April	Female	22	13	13	Special Ed	Yes	No
Bill	Male	17	9	6	Economics	Yes	EdS
Cindy	Female	26	15	11	Middle Grades Elem	Yes	No
Debra	Female	13	9	6	Education	Yes	Enrolled
Evan	Male	12	9	3	Middle Grades Elem	Yes	EdS
Frank	Male	14	10	9	Education	Yes	EdS
Grant	Male	18	10	4	Elementary Ed	Yes	No
Henry	Male	29	15	5	Biology Early	Yes	No
Ivory	Female	20	12	10	Childhood	Yes	No
Jimmy	Male	30+	16	6	English	Yes	EdD
Keith	Male	14	9	5	Physical Ed	Yes	No
Larry	Male	21	9	4	History	Yes	No

**Participant 1 – April.** April, principal at Apple Middle School, has a degree in special education and experience as a special education teacher and former principal at a special needs school. She was very interested in my study focusing on disability and was the first principal to respond to my inquiry. I interviewed April in the principal's office and was immediately impressed with her interest in special education and disability. She obviously had a lot of knowledge about disability and we were able to communicate with ease during the interview process. She was quick to point out that her level of comfort with disability was due in large part to her educational background. She sympathized with principals that did not come from a special education background.

**Participant 2 – Bill.** Bill, principal at Border Elementary School, had a different type of undergraduate experience. He was not originally in education as he was an Economics major. He had experience teaching in the secondary school but declared he really enjoyed the elementary level and wanted to remain there as he felt the impact he could have on young learners was greatest. Bill's undergraduate experience would impact his level of preparedness for his career in education.

Bill focused on the work of his teachers during his interview. Hiring good teachers that worked well with all students was very important to him as an educational leader. Bill talked about the balance between providing a free and appropriate education to all students while also taking into consideration the least restrictive environment for students with disabilities. As the interview continued, Bill continued to emphasize the work and impact good teachers had on students with disabilities.

**Participant 3 – Cindy.** Cindy, principal at Coastal Elementary School, was excited to be a part of study and had a lot of questions about the dissertation process. During the interview with Cindy, the point that stood out the most was her experience in dealing with her niece who had a disability and experienced a lot of problems in middle school. Cindy even admitted that she was concerned her sister was too pushy with the school and with her niece. However, over a period of time and once the niece grew into her abilities, high school was so much better and the child's experiences made the middle school struggles worth it. Cindy exclaimed that seeing the student with disability come out on the other side of the education cycle made her understand why schools, teachers, and administrators continue to work with difficult or challenging students. In the end, all the work pays off and the student greatly benefits. This personal experience for Cindy seemed to inform her perspective and leadership dealing with students with disabilities.

**Participant 4 – Debra.** Debra, principal at Dorsal Elementary School, was very familiar with Special Education and students with disabilities. One of the things that came up in this interview was the role of the "Special Needs Administrator." In the Urban school district, one of the assistant principals at the school is designated as the Special Needs Administrator (SNA). This assistant principal or SNA as Debra called them works as the special education expert in the particular building. Debra commented on how much experience and knowledge of special education that person is exposed to. Commenting on her career, Debra wishes that she'd had that experience and would recommend that before a person becomes a principal they would need that opportunity.

**Participant 5 – Evan.** Evan, principal at East Elementary School, was excited about being a part of the study and he had lots of information to share. He provided all of the



requested information and then gave me samples of student schedules, teacher schedules, talked about their scheduling process, and provided lots of interesting information about the school. One of the things that struck me early in the interview was the reason he chose to begin a career in administration. As a young teacher, Evan had what he referred to as an awful experience with an administrator. He remembers the experience well and knew then that he wanted to go into administration so he could help teachers and support the work of teachers instead of tearing them down. After only three years of teaching, Evan became an assistant principal. He was an assistant principal several years at several different schools before landing as principal. After two years as principal in a neighboring school, he was sent to EES to address some challenges specific to that school.

The second thing that struck me during this interview was Evan's experience of having a child with a hearing loss. He stated that the child was young but they've been to several doctors and worked with several strategies to provide assistance to the child. The child can hear but will need to use a hearing aid for clarity of sound. According to Evan, this experience has definitely influenced his thoughts and work with students and disabilities. As a parent, he has had the opportunity and need to advocate for his child and make sure he got all the needed help and attention. As a principal, he has the same responsibility for his students.

Evan commented extensively on the confidence he had in his exceptional children's teachers and the freedom he gave them to make adjustments throughout the year to provide the most appropriate services for students. He understood the ideas of consistently reviewing the schedule and processes to make sure that all student needs are being met. After the interview, we spoke about his experience in getting his Educational Specialist degree. He is

interested in pursuing his doctorate but not sure about the timing with two small children at home.

**Interview 6 – Frank.** Frank, principal at Front Elementary School, has an unusual circumstance at FES involving students with disability. FES has the Day Treatment program for the western part of the county. Having the Day Treatment program brought about many things for the school. There are many opportunities and challenges but Frank was very excited to have the program and said that even with the challenges, the staff really loved having the students and program on campus. Frank commented that teachers would ask for students to transition from Day Treatment to their classrooms. He noted multiple times about how great the staff at FES was.

Throughout Frank's interview, he stressed how much his experiences have led to his knowledge and work with students with disabilities. He commented how his time at FES has made him a better leader for students with disabilities. After completing the interview, Frank asked if I wanted a tour of the building. We walked around and took about a 20 minute tour.

The building is circular and the grade levels were laid out in a circular section within the building. This was a very different design that I had not seen before. One interesting thing that I learned while touring the building was that FES had a multiple leveled classroom. One of their teachers had Kindergarten, first, and second graders in the same class. This program had been at the school for a while and was designed to reach students with specific needs. Students that struggle with reading and are in need of remedial instruction are placed in the multi-leveled classroom. There was a teacher and an assistant that coordinated the program. Frank, pursuing his doctoral degree, joked and said that he's already told the teacher that this program was going to be his dissertation. Frank and I also spent some time walking through

the Day Treatment program. I was interested in the similarities and differences between Day Treatment at FES and the Day Treatment in my county.

**Interview 7 – Grant.** In my discussion with Grant, principal at Giant High School, I found it very interesting that he had spent his entire educational career at GHS. Starting with student teaching and then continuing as a Biology teacher, coach and athletic director, assistant principal, and finally principal for the last five years, Grant spent 29 years at GHS. After this year, his 30<sup>th</sup>, he is planning on retiring from GHS. Grant spoke about how all that time had really given him the opportunity to get to know the school, staff, students, and community. As an interviewer, I thought about the advantages but could also think of some disadvantages to being in one place for so long.

Grant spoke of the work of his assistant principals. He talked about one assistant principal in particular who was a special education teacher. This assistant principal was actually an EC teacher at GHS and served as the Special Education department chair. Grant spoke highly of this assistant principal and the work she did with school's students with disabilities. He appeared to be uncomfortable with exceptional children issues. While he seemed to desire the best for all students but gave the assistant principal, the leadership reins of the exceptional children's program.

Another interesting aspect of the interview with Grant was the changes in education and the exceptional children's program that have occurred during his educational career. Having started his career less than 10 years from the passing of IDEA in 1975, Grant has witnessed a huge shift in the education of students with disabilities. He talked about teaching during a period of time that all students with disabilities were located on one hall in the building. Grant described a time that when he taught and did not have EC students or IEPs.

He remembers the transition as students with disabilities were integrated into the rest of the building and then began gaining access to different parts of the curriculum. Grant was really conscious about making sure he had the “right” answers. I attribute that to his level of discomfort with exceptional children issues and students with disabilities.

**Interview 8 – Henry.** Henry, principal of Hill Middle School, has a wife who is an exceptional children’s teacher in a neighboring county. He seemed to have a knowledgeable background on special education laws and procedures and was aware of what other schools and districts are doing programmatically. Henry really emphasized the fact that he always tries to do what is right for his students but what is considered right or best practice in one district may be different in the other.

Henry seemed to be very confident in his responses and talked not only about students defined in schools as students with disabilities but as other students that may struggle or have difficulties in school. He wanted to provide avenues for success for all students. He was very complementary of his staff and exceptional children’s teachers and their work at Hill Middle School. After the interview, we spent some time talking about school and districts in general. Henry was very interested in practices of other schools and school districts. Henry asked several questions about special education practices from my home county.

**Interview 9 – Ivory.** Several interesting things surfaced during my interview with Ivory, principal at Iceland Elementary School. First, she has worked in both public and private education. It was actually during a stint with a private Catholic school that Ivory decided she wanted to go into school administration. From there, she was selected for the

North Carolina Principals Fellow Program and received her Master's degree in school administration.

Second, Ivory's school was a cluster location for three Autistic classrooms that served students from multiple areas in Urban School District. The presence of these three classrooms added a tremendous amount of special education attention to IES. Ivory spoke of the added special education presence on her campus and how having these classrooms added to the overall awareness and perception of disability on her campus. Not only was IES the site of the three Autistic classrooms, the school also contained two 'New Comer' elementary classrooms. These classrooms are designed for students that are first time students in the United States. The combination of these different settings provided a diverse atmosphere and school climate at IES.

The third unique part of the conversation with Ivory was the fact that her husband was an amputee. As a Vietnam veteran, Ivory's husband had been an amputee for over 40 years. The presence of a disability in Ivory's immediate family serves as a reminder to her that her students have constitutional rights but "we as educators have a responsibility to do what's right and what is in the best interest of the student in every specific situation." Many students may have a disability but that "educators have the responsibility to give students what they need to be successful."

Ivory was passionate about her role as principal and really seemed to enjoy our conversation. She got frustrated when she discussed the dilemma administrators face when considering the pressure of high stakes testing versus doing what they feel their students really need. She referenced IDEA and other federal legislative acts and commented that "on one hand we need to provide appropriate and differentiated services and on the other they all

have to pass a test”. Ivory stated that “I get frustrated with budget, testing, politics, and legislation that get in the way of doing best for kids.”

Ivory also spent time talking about students that have a disability but are not labeled as a student with a disability. This was referenced by other principals as well, but Ivory mentioned students that had a disability such as poverty, family situation, and cultural bias. She commented that many students have a “disadvantage disability” and she is burdened with a need to help those students as well. “It’s unfortunate because many of these have a disability but can’t qualify for services because they don’t have a school defined disability” said Ivory.

**Participant 10 – Jimmy.** Jimmy, principal at Jump High School, was hanging college banners when I arrived at JHS. He seemed to be in a hurry and asked how long the interview would take. I responded between 45 – 60 minutes and he said “OK, let’s get started, I have a meeting in an hour.” I acknowledged his time table and we began the interview. After probing a little, he seemed to relax and open up.

Jimmy was quick to point out that he felt his role as principal was to be in classrooms and assist teachers with their instruction. He stated that he delegated most of the managerial aspects of the administrative position to assistant principals so he could focus on teaching and instruction. When talking about leadership and special education, Jimmy exclaimed that one of his assistant principals was a former exceptional children’s teacher. He stated that she really was the school leader with special education and students with disabilities. When asked about how valuable that was to have an assistant principal with that experience, he declared “Extremely! We rely on her heavily to make sure Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) are correct, that we are in compliance and things like that”.

Jimmy also noted that he wore hearing aids and spoke about the idea that all people were probably disabled or had a disability in some part of their life. He looked at disability as not being able to do something as well as most people. He spoke about areas that created disabilities for some students including physical conditions, language issues, and social economic status.

When speaking about the priorities of his school and district, Jimmy talked about the problems with legislation and trying to “live up to expectations” with “things such as No Child Left Behind and AYP (Adequate Yearly Progress).” He continued that “all students with disabilities are not the same and to expect the same from a child with severe cognitive disabilities and a child with a physical disability just doesn’t seem right.” I sensed a frustration and a passion from Jimmy concerning standardized testing and the accountability of students with disabilities.

As we completed the interview, Jimmy wanted to make sure I got all the information I needed. Through the interview, he definitely relaxed and opened up. I assured him that I got the information I needed and I thanked him for his willingness to assist and be a part of my study. We walked back to the front office and I asked about the banners he was working on. Jimmy said they were banners of college acceptance letters from seniors at JHS. This was his way of congratulating those seniors and encouraging post-secondary education.

**Participant 11 – Keith.** As I interviewed Keith, principal at Kettle Middle School, three main factors presented themselves to me. First his dedication to the teachers and staff at the school, second the experiences he gained while serving as a special education teacher, and finally the importance he placed on the principal’s role in special education. Keith answered multiple times with the answer of “providing good opportunities for teachers and

students.” He understood the importance of a quality teacher in the classroom. Keith commented, but did not quote, that the research is clear that good teachers are the key. He continued that good teachers are important in all classrooms but especially when teaching students with disabilities. Keith felt that students with disabilities needed “the best teacher with the best practices in that subject area” and later commented that “putting students with disabilities in a classroom with an EC teacher to teach Biology when the EC teacher didn’t know Biology just wasn’t fair.”

When talking about his experiences and leadership, Keith was especially quick to point to the time he served as an EC teacher. “You just don’t know until you’ve been there, you don’t know about the paperwork, the meetings, and all the stuff unless you’ve done it” he declared as he spoke about the positives of his experiences as a special education teacher. Keith graduated with a degree in physical education and because these jobs were hard to come by, he went back to school to get his certification in special education. “I went to school while I did the job and that was a great and learning experience” said Keith. “I was able to apply my experiences to what we were talking about.” As we continued through the interview, it was obvious the impact the time had on Keith as a principal leader.

Finally, Keith stressed the importance of the role principal’s play in leadership and special education. He commented on the need to know and be able to communicate with teachers, parents, and students. His visibility, the level of his involvement, and the relationships he formed with EC students and teachers served as a bond or binder that joined special education and the rest of the school campus. Keith felt that his role allowed for a unified system of education for all students instead of creating a disjointed and separate educational system for different students.



**Participant 12 – Larry.** My interview with Larry, principal of Lemon Middle School, was very insightful and provided an interesting perspective. Larry is the parent of a student with a disability. His son had been in the exceptional children’s program for several years. This experience, dominated the leadership and advocacy of Larry as related to students with disabilities. Under this umbrella of being a parent of a student with disability, Larry’s leadership focused on the relationship between the administrator and the teacher and the importance of experience for a leader.

Larry commented many times during the interview about the importance of the teacher and teacher/student relationship. As a principal, my role is to “provide support and help teachers to help students be successful.” Larry continued to describe his role as one that needed to make sure teachers had everything they needed to help students be successful. He emphasized the importance of this role with exceptional children’s teachers. “Teachers have to have the resources to be able to help students and whatever that is whether it’s a service or program. . . I get what they need.”

Larry thought the experiences of a principal were essential in making him a good leader. “When I started I knew nothing and it took me years to understand and know.” When asked what changed, Larry commented, “experience!” Larry pointed to his experiences as a teacher, coach, administrator, and parent that help him make good decisions for teachers and students. When asked about how significant his experience as a parent with a student with a disability was Larry explained, “very, I can relate and tell parents from my personal experience.” Larry and I spoke about the importance of these experiences as he worked with teachers, parents, and students. He also thought that it helped on the school side of things as well because “I understand the parent and school and how sometimes there are differences.”

He continued, “I can tell parents that the school and school system are good, my own children go here and work with these services. They typically understand.”

**Summary of Research Participants.** Twelve principals were interviewed from across three counties in western North Carolina. Eight of the principals interviewed were male and four female. The educational experience of the principals ranged from 14 to over 30 years in education. Experience as a principal ranged from four to 13 years. As a part of this study, 6 secondary principals (two high school and four middle school) and 6 elementary principals were interviewed. Only two of the principals had experience in being a special education teacher. Eleven of the 12 had taught students with disabilities in some setting. Table 2 is presented below in order to summarize the interview participants.

After completing all the interviews, I reflected on the twelve principals and my conversations with them. While they were all unique and provided a great sampling of leadership, I was already able to see common threads and themes that brought the interviews together. Principals with little or no experience in special education, to principals who served as former exceptional children’s teachers, to principals who were parents to a student with a disability; common threads that united their leadership were evident. In the next section of this chapter, the emerging themes are presented.

### **Major Themes**

After the completion of the interviews and review of related documents, several themes emerged through the multiple levels of information and data. The themes drawn from the interviews of twelve principals and the review of the documents resembled a tapestry made of many threads wound parallel, perpendicular, overlapping, and intersecting in every direction. Responses to the research questions can be seen throughout the presentation of the

themes and sub-themes. In a subsequent section, each research question is addressed in particular. The three major themes and their sub-themes are initially identified in Table 3.

Table 3

*Major Themes*

Theme	Sub Themes
<i>Leadership</i>	Role Impact Students with Disabilities/Disability Priority
<i>Experiences</i>	Personal Professional
<i>Knowledge</i>	Education LEA/District Training Needs

*Leadership* is the first of the emerging themes from the tapestry of information. The principals' leadership is an integral part of a successful school (Cooner et al., 2005; Sergiovanni, 1984, 1987). Subthemes include the role of the principals, the impact the principals have on students with disabilities, their beliefs about disability, and the priority placed on students with disability. *Experience* is the second major theme that emerged from the interviews. Subthemes include both personal and professional experiences that have combined together to form what the principals believe. *Knowledge* is the final theme that emerged from the interviews. Subthemes include the principals' education (undergraduate and graduate), LEA/district training, and needs that the principals have in the area of special

education. Using the words of the principal respondents and combining them with current research literature, the following section provides a more in-depth discussion of the three themes.

**Leadership.** The leadership of a principal is essential for a successful school (Cooner et al., 2005; Fullan, 2001; Kouzes & Posner, 2003). The school principal is at the center of responsibility of all functions of the school (Cooner et al., 2005; Gersten et al., 2001; Wong & Nicotera, 2007). One of the most challenging and most important leadership areas for school principals is the world of special education (Cooner et al., 2005; Gersten et al., 2001; McLaughlin & Nolet, 2004). A principals' leadership impacts the work of teachers and staff, students, and entire school community (Cooner et al., 2005; Sergiovanni, 1984, 1987).

The leadership of the principal is shown in many different ways. Instructional leadership, managerial leadership, personnel leadership, and financial leadership are just samples of the many things principals are responsible for through their leadership. It is important to note that leadership looks different and is received differently depending on the location and personnel involved. In the interviews done as a part of this study, all principals recognized the importance of their leadership in their schools. Principals consistently talked about their leadership and how important it was in the successful running of their school.

**Role of the Leader.** All twelve principals mentioned instructional leadership in their responses. The importance of their instructional leadership was not lost in all the other things principals are responsible for. Bill spoke about the importance of his instructional leadership and how that impacted his scheduling and working with his teachers. He commented "As the instructional leader, it is my job to get the right students in the right class with the right

teacher. I also have to be sure to get those teachers the exact things they need to be successful with those students.”

The knowledge of the curriculum was important for principals as an instructional leader. Cindy spoke about how many days other things would get in the way of her instructional work. She felt it was essential for her to be an instructional leader in her school. She commented, “I have to know the curriculum and understand the curriculum. I have to be able to communicate the curriculum to the teachers. As the instructional leader in my school, I have to work with teachers especially know with the new Common Core curriculum.” The theme of instructional leadership and its importance with students was consistent throughout the interviews.

As principals were interviewed, how their instructional leadership was shown varied somewhat between principals. Principals all felt it was important that their instructional leadership was shown to teachers and students. In Frank’s interview, he discussed that his number one role was an instructional leader in his school. He wanted to establish his role and make sure that the faculty, students, and staff understood the importance he placed on this role.

Frank commented:

As an instructional leader, I set the foundation for the school. I have to make curriculum decisions and work with the teachers. These curriculum designs must be driven by data. The school data and being in teacher’s classrooms is important. I try to be in the teacher’s classrooms and meeting with the teachers 80% of the day.

The idea and role of being an instructional leader has grown and changed over the past several years. No longer can principals rely on their work as managers and let teachers

take care of the instruction. Frank has been in education for over 29 years and has seen a lot of change in his career. He commented that one of the first responsibilities of a principal is “to provide a safe environment for all students”. Frank continued to comment about how his leadership has changed over the past years as an administrator. “The curriculum or instructional part of leadership has really changed over the past few years.” Frank continued that “the principal must understand the role with curriculum and instruction for all students.” Henry added to this thought by saying that the “principals’ role has changed over the past few years.” In his interview, Henry related the ‘new’ idea of leadership to the increased role and presence for the principal in “the role of the educational leader in school improvement, student achievement, and classroom best practices.”

When asked about the principals’ leadership role as it relates to students with disabilities, interviewees were quick to acknowledge the importance of this role within their school. Common answers about this role included knowledge of laws and policies, instructional leadership, placement and scheduling, training for teachers, dealing with problems, and the importance of good personnel.

April emphasized the importance of the principals’ knowledge of the role of special education leader.

The principal has to have knowledge of the system, IEPs, documentation, also knowledge of the laws. You have to be a presence in the situation and know what is going on and what is needed. Sometimes I have to work around certain circumstances and take advantage of things and I have to know all the details. From my background I think I know what is going on. That gets me in confrontation with my EC director sometimes because of my knowledge of things and I’ll fight for my kids.

Keith added that “I have to have a good background knowledge of the student and situation, stuff like knowing the student, teacher, and the EC process. It helps with my situation because I’m pretty familiar with the law from my experience as an EC teacher.” The understanding and knowledge of special education law, procedure, and process was mentioned by many of the principals. “I really use my assistant principal because she is in charge of this area. She knows all the stuff and is really connected to the EC staff at the school and county office” added Grant.

Another key component mentioned in relationship to the role of the principal in special education was the importance of scheduling and matching students and staff. “Working with my EC staff is essential for me in my leadership with EC students” stated Frank. “The communication between the staff, administration, parents, and students is so important at this school and it makes the things we do work.” Evan added that “we really look at the schedule to meet the needs of the students. Our teachers work and adjust the schedule to meet whatever needs that come up.”

Cindy spoke about the importance of training teachers in her role. “I have to set the tone for the teachers and raise expectations in relating to the law, classroom setting and classroom expectations, appropriate modifications, really everything. My actions and words set the expectations.” Debra added the use of Professional Learning Communities (PLC) with her staff. “We have PLCs and talk to teachers about differentiation for students with special needs. Also through these PLCs we work to train and raise the expectations of our teachers.”

As a part of this study, I reviewed several school documents that may support the information gained in the interviews. One of the documents reviewed was the North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey. This survey is done biannually and measures the

perceptions of teachers in several areas. One of the areas captured in this survey is principal leadership. In the survey, teachers are asked whether they agree with certain qualities of leadership presented by the principal. Qualities of leadership include trust, high standards, effectiveness, and consistency, and response to staff needs.

When reviewing the data from the schools I visited as a part of this study, I averaged the score for each principal in the areas of school leadership, response to staff, professional development, and instructional leadership. The data from this review is listed in Table 4.



Table 4

*Teacher Working Conditions Survey Data*

School	Leadership	Response to Staff	Professional	Instructional
			Development	Leadership
Apple	82.86	81.69	92.00	90.69
Border	86.48	91.79	96.20	89.84
Coastal	96.94	99.20	97.60	84.39
Dorsal	88.28	87.39	89.70	89.3
East	73.68	76.69	96.30	83.11
Front	93.80	95.86	94.90	85.4
Giant	83.50	82.60	86.40	84.74
Hill	81.23	78.89	84.00	83.11
Iceland	99.13	97.42	100.00	88.01
Jump	60.66	70.94	79.50	76.08
Kettle	97.76	96.07	100.00	96.59
Lemon	80.69	80.16	86.40	80.05
AVERAGE	85.42	86.56	91.92	85.94

As evidenced in the table, over 85% of teachers were supportive of the school leadership, instructional leadership, and response to staff needs. Over 90% of the teachers were supportive of the professional development efforts of the principals. The fact that an overwhelming majority of teachers recognize and support the principals' role as the school leader is an important component in the schools' success.

**Impact of the Leader.** It was clear through my interviews that principals understand the importance and impact of their leadership. All twelve principals recognized the integral component of a principals' leadership in a successful school. Henry talked about the "importance of his leadership" and how important it was "that he recognized his leadership impacted students." Henry emphasized his "desire to give students a positive edge . . . providing the appropriate scheduling, courses, classroom practices, and access show how important my leadership is."

The impact of a principals' leadership is visible and communicated in different ways. Grant commented that he felt it was so important that the principal "communicate with the kids" and be "visible and form a relationship with the kids." Grant felt that students and staff worked harder and were more productive when they saw the effects of a principals' leadership. "You have to work in the best interest of the school and students and staff appreciate that and want that. Ninety percent of all the people at the school are doing the best they can and they appreciate your leadership."

April felt that the impact of her leadership was felt in her "communication with students at all times." April continued that principals must relay the message of "high expectations! These high expectations are relayed from the principals' office to the classroom teacher. Principals show these expectations through their hard work and leading by example."

Cindy stated that the most impactful thing in her leadership was the support she could give her teachers especially her strong Exceptional Children's teachers. Cindy also brought an interesting aspect into the conversation as she related the impact of her leadership to the opportunities provided to students. Cindy had a nephew with a disability and through her

experiences with his education; she better sees the impact of her leadership with students.

The balance between what is best for the student with disability and what's fair to the other students is part of impact the instructional leader has at a school.

Frank felt that the most impactful part of his leadership was the instructional component and the curriculum leadership that he provides. "I spend a lot of time working with teachers, evaluating programs, making data driven decisions, and working to see student progress." When asked what was meant by student progress, Frank responded with "seeing the whole child progress and grow in all areas – academics, socially, maturity, all aspects of their education and life. My leadership impacts all these things."

**Students with Disabilities/Disability.** As principals stressed their roles as instructional leaders, the leadership of the school principal involving students with disabilities was clear. Principals clearly understood the importance of their role in special education and in particular in leading students with disabilities. All twelve principals interviewed spoke of the important role their exceptional children's staff played in their leadership. As they spoke about their leadership in special education, several different approaches were evident. For example, April took a primary role in the work of the exceptional children's department at Apple Middle School. Due in a large part of her special education background, April was the administrator that monitored IEP's and kept all aspects of the exceptional children's department directly under her thumb. Grant on the other hand, relied heavily on his assistant principal. Grant noted that his assistant principal was a former exceptional children's teacher and was the former head of the department. He understood that leadership in special education was essential for the success of the students and school and he wanted the best available leadership in that area. Debra, an elementary principal at Dorsal

Elementary, took a more blended approach. Having a special needs administrator in her building was important and Debra relied heavily on her; however Debra wanted to be very involved and worked closely with her special needs administrator and EC staff. Regardless of the specific set-up and leadership styles, principals clearly understood the importance of their leadership involving students with disabilities.

When asked to describe their leadership as it related to students with disabilities, seven out of twelve principals mentioned the importance of having the right people working in the right places within their school. According to *Good to Great* a leader must have the right people sitting in the right seat on the right bus (Collins, 2001). Effective leadership for principals is being able to put the right teachers, assistants, and personnel in the appropriate places to best serve and meet the needs of their students.

**Priorities of the Leader.** In the research by Aspedon (1990), over 85% of the principals surveyed felt that special education was “moderately to extremely important.” Principals were asked if they felt that special education and students with disabilities were a priority at their school. All twelve principals (100%) felt that special education was a priority at their school. Several principals cited special programs they had at their school. Frank spoke about the day treatment program that was at Front Elementary School and the impact the program had on his staff. Ivory commented on the three Autistic classrooms that were at Iceland Elementary and how these classrooms offered a perspective and positive motivation for the rest of her staff.

As confident as principals were to state that special education and students with disabilities was a priority at their school, the data suggests a less confident approach. On

average, students with disabilities scored significantly lower when comparing the percent of students in different subgroups passing both the reading and math.

Principals spoke a little differently when asked if they felt that special education and students with disabilities were a priority in their district. While most still responded that they felt this was a district priority, eleven of the twelve interviewed (91.6%), had qualifying remarks that led to some uncertainty in their responses. In general, the principals interviewed felt that special education was important to the district because of issues outside of wanting the very best for every student. Special education was important because of potential problems including lawsuits, litigation, and dollars invested instead of best practices for students with disabilities.

Bill responded that he thought special education was a priority in his district “because of possible legal issues and litigation.” Henry seemingly agreed by saying that “yes but I’d like to think for the right reasons. But we all know the importance of legal issues and the money. I’m afraid that takes precedent over doing what is best for kids.” Henry continued later to say that “cost is a reality and cause a problem because that was considered over the right thing sometimes in the district. We just don’t have the personnel we need to have.” Jimmy from the same district praised the county district but continued citing “positions are needed to help kids more”.

**Experiences.** Federal law, public and institutional policy, their own experiences and their personal view of the discourse of disability guide school principals in their decision making about disability and special education (Burrello et al., 1992). As an educational leader, the school principal can only mildly influence law and policy, but his or her personal conviction and involvement impacts the education of students with disabilities significantly

(Anderson, 2003; Burrello et al., 1992; Oliver, 1994). As principals in this study were interviewed, much discussion was had concerning the experiences of principals. The principals' experience typically fell into personal experience or professional experience with disability or students with disability.

**Personal Experiences.** Of the twelve principals interviewed, six of the principals had a personal experience of a disability that was shared during the interviews. Two principals shared personal stories from their own children, one shared about a nephew, two shared about a spouse, and one principal shared about his own personal dealings with a disability. Larry, principal at Lemon Middle School commented that "having a child with a disability helps me to relate to the parent and situation better. I understand where they come from and it helps me to connect and form a relationship." Actions, presence, words and comments from a principal that show support or lack of support for special education programs, students, and teachers are powerful indicators of the success and quality of programs and services for students with disabilities (Bradley, 2000).

Cindy, principal at Bess Elementary, commented concerning her experiences with a nephew with disabilities, "It definitely impacted my career as an educator. The impact of the relationship between parent or family member and administrator; there were times I wasn't sure that she was doing the right thing. The principal in me would question on my gosh." Cindy continued that "because of the push through the middle school issues, high school has been incredible for him and he's doing great. That is due to the issues and being in a normal middle school setting. It's worked out for him." When asked how this has affected her as a principal, Cindy responded with, "It's important to balance support for the teacher versus the disability versus what's fair to the other children. It's difficult to know but seeing what

happened with him I can encourage teachers from that experience.” Cindy later added, “You have to be fair to the learning of other students too and that’s difficult, when is the distraction too much?” Bradley (2000) stated that “principals need to realize they set the tone for the entire school . . . what they say, how they act . . . what is allowed in the school is powerful” (p. 172).

The beliefs and values that guide leadership are formed through personal experiences, life’s successes and struggles, and the value of the learner (Keyes et al., 1998). The issues related to the educational worth of the student are formed within a school leader and seep out in their organizational and instructional leadership (Keyes et al., 1998). Evan, principal of East Elementary School, relayed these same messages as he spoke about “my experiences that have shaped by leadership and help me with my job now.” Evan explained that, “my youngest son has a hearing loss. This brought the issue of disability to the forefront to me. It keeps it on a personal leave.” Later in the interview, he shared that his personal experiences “shed new light onto it” when asked about the meaning of disability. “Over time seeing students grow and living through the experiences with students and my personal experience gives insight to me about disability. It changes my thoughts and my work.”

Henry, principal at Hill Middle School, and Ivory, principal at Iceland Elementary, both commented briefly in their interviews about their experiences with their spouse and disability. Henry’s spouse is a special education teacher. “Seeing what she deals with and hearing her helps me to understand better” states Henry. Ivory adds that having a husband with a disability helps to “put me in the situation and hopefully understand others a little better.” Ivory went to comment that she wasn’t sure how much that impacted her leadership but she assumed some. “I don’t guess I’ve really thought too much about it that way.”

Burrello et al. (1992) suggest that experiences play a major role in leadership. Their research also suggests that the key ingredient in a principal's behavior toward a student with a disability is the belief or attitude the principal has toward special education. Specifically, principals in this research project who displayed a positive acceptance of special education students saw a positive impact within their schools. These positive attitudes and beliefs are critical factors when advocating for students with disabilities and their acceptance into the general setting (Burrello et al., 1992).

The results of surveys and interviews conducted by Praisner (2003) indicated that the success of inclusion greatly depended on the principals' attitude. Furthermore, the degree to which inclusion was successful was directly linked to the specific attitudes and beliefs the principal had (Praisner, 2003). According to Praisner, the quality of the experience was more important in developing a positive attitude for the principal than was the amount of experiences a principal encountered. Similarly, a study by Drake and Roe (1986) revealed also that the principal was important in setting the tone for integration of students with disabilities. Larry, principal at Lemon Middle School, certainly would advocate for the work done by Burrello and Praisner. "Having a son with a disability and in the exceptional children's program gives me an understanding and greater appreciation for what's going on." Larry continued that this gives him a "chance to relate to the parent and understanding for them but also see the educational side of things from a parent's experience. These experiences have definitely shaped my leadership."

**Professional Experiences.** Research has shown that the more knowledge school principals possess and the more time principals spend with students with disabilities, then the better advocate the principal is for special education (Jones, 2006; Sergiovanni, 1994). As



principal of a school, it would be virtually impossible not to have professional experience in dealing with special education and disabilities. As principals were interviewed, the information they gave offered rich perspectives on their roles in working with students with disabilities. As mentioned earlier, the role of the principal is essential in the success of an exceptional children's program and all of the principals interviewed agreed. The level at which principals were involved and the history of their involvement was very diverse.

Three of the 12 principals interviewed had experience in special education before entering administration. April, principal at Apple Middle, was an exceptional children's teacher. She has an EC degree and comes from an EC background. Keith, principal at Kettle Middle School, went back to school to add on a special education certificate. A physical education major, Keith taught five years in the exceptional children's classroom. Jimmy, principal at Jump High School, stated part of his masters was in special education and he served as Special Education Director for a time in a school district in Georgia. Jimmy commented on his experience as Special Education Director, "I learned a lot during that time. I wasn't there because I had experience it was just because I had the degree."

April and Keith have more traditional professional experiences as an exceptional children's teacher. Keith contributes his experiences as an EC teacher to his level of comfort as a principal. When asked how comfortable he was with his leadership in the area of students with disabilities, Keith explained "I am very comfortable because of my background and teaching experience. I would be terribly frightened without this experience." Keith continued that if "sitting in IEP meetings were the only experience I'd had I'd be very uncomfortable. You hear not to mess up EC because you can get fired. It would be very

scary.” Keith continued and several times relayed the importance of his experience in dealing with special education situations.

April brought another yet similar perspective to the importance of her experiences in her leadership. As the first person in her family to go to college, April got a job working in a group home as a program aide. “That job was so important to me and it was then that I knew I wanted to be a special education teacher. It felt right working with people with disabilities. From there, I went to college and majored in special education.” When asked about her leadership and how it relates to students with disabilities, April relies heavily on those past experiences. “Because of my experience, I know. That gives me a huge advantage because I’ve seen lots of situations good and bad. I know and I am comfortable.” April conveyed that she was extremely confident in her knowledge and experiences in special education. When asked about her level of comfortable in particular areas of students with disabilities, April responded “very comfortable” to all areas. She responded “because of my experiences” when asked the reason for this feeling.

Other experiences from principals have definitely contributed to their leadership with disabilities. All twelve principals commented that their experience has added to their level of comfort in dealing with special education and students with disabilities. Grant, principal at Giant High School, stated that early in his career he was “very anxious in dealing with any situations involving EC students. It has become easier because of the experience. I wasn’t prepared for it but over time and experience of seeing things I have become more comfortable.” As a principal of a high school, Grant relies heavily on the experience of other administrators as well. “My AP was an EC teacher before becoming an AP; in fact she was the department chairperson, so we get a lot from her experience.” Frank, principal at Front

Elementary, commented “ I was in shock at first but slowly I began to understand and learn. Time and experience have helped me a lot in dealing with situations with EC students and parents.”

The experiences of principals without a doubt have contributed to their leadership. As related in every interview and conversation, one’s experience whether personal or professional impacts and influences the work in that particular area. Research is clear that the principals’ experiences provide a springboard to their work in special education and students with disabilities (Burrello et al., 1992; Jones, 2006; Sergiovanni, 1994). Furthermore, positive experiences generally lead to more successful and inclusive practices by schools and administrators (Aspendon, 1990; Praisner, 2003).

**Knowledge, Education, and Training.** Principal leadership is a critical element when addressing school improvement and the education of students with disabilities (Cooner et al., 2005). To best be able to advocate and lead schools, principals must be equipped with appropriate knowledge and skills. Principals must know, understand, and comprehend their role and leadership in the area of students with disabilities. Instructional leaders that empower their teachers, raise expectations for all children, provide high quality professional development, advocate for differentiated instruction; these leaders promote the instruction that changes the educational lives of students with disabilities. (Cooner et al., 2005).

**Undergraduate Degree.** As crucial as this role is, many principals feel inadequately prepared in their role as a leader in special education (Cooner et al., 2005). Keith commented that “with no experience I’d be frightened . . . and would be uncomfortable.” Principal after principal interviewed spoke of beginning their career with a level of discomfort in the area of special education and students with disabilities.

In a Jones (2006) study, a survey of school principals revealed that the majority of school principals had no experience in dealing with special education or students with disabilities. In my study, only 25% had experience in dealing with special education or students with disabilities before their administrative career. Several of the principals had never had a student with disability in their classroom. “I remember when all the EC students were on one wing of the building and never came out of that wing” recalls Grant. “When I was an AP, I remember the first time they started coming to classes in other parts of the building. They still went to the classes with only other EC kids but the classes were spread out. That was a big change back then.”

In my research, 75% of principals felt their undergraduate degree was not relevant at all in their work with students with disabilities. Of the 25% that felt their degree was relevant, one was a special education major and another cited the work he did in adaptive physical education class. Keith cited a 6 week internship done in a special school designed just for students with disabilities as a very positive experience. “That was a very educational experience and one that really opened my eyes. Everyone should have to do something like that” recalled Keith.

Three principals citing that their degree was irrelevant remembered only having one class that dealt anything with disability, special education, or exceptional children. Debra commented “It was not relevant at all. I don’t think we had but one class in it.” Evan commented “I remember sitting in one class. Nothing else. That is an area that is a real disservice to undergraduates.”

**Graduate Degree.** The data collected about principal preparedness and training during administrative degrees mirrors that of undergraduate degrees. In my interviews, 9 of

the 12 principals stated that their administrative degree was not relevant in their work with special education and students with disabilities. Of the principals interviewed, two of the 12 felt that their administrative degree was only somewhat relevant. That leaves only one principal interviewed that said their administrative degree was relevant. If the role of the principal is so important in dealing with students with disabilities, why aren't more principals citing the relevancy of their administrative programs?

Of the principals interviewed in this study, the presence of a school law class where the 'mentioning' of EC and special education law was indicated by three principals. "I graduated with my MSA in 2003 and we had a course on school law but only discussed special education some. It was just a part of that class" commented Debra when asked about the relevancy of her administrative coursework. "Not very, not prepared" were the words of Henry when asked about the relevancy of his administrative degree.

Keith, who responded that his degree was somewhat relevant also responded, "It wasn't to the extent it needed to be. There weren't any clinical experiences provided. Although I was in the EC classroom, a clinical experience would have been good. The other people in the class were always coming up to me because I was an EC teacher."

**District Level Training.** Much of the knowledge of special education that principals receive is from district level training (Jones, 2006; Sage & Burrello, 1994). While this training is important and valuable, it by no means answers all the questions for principals and administrators as they work through their role as leaders for students with disabilities. Support given from the district to school principals is typically heavy in curriculum, instructional programs, and legal advice (Jones, 2006; Sergiovanni, 1994; Stainback & Stainback, 1995). Of the principals interviewed, 100% cited very relevant support for their

district's exceptional children's department or office. Larry commented "Yes, very much so. We get a lot of support from our district office. We have liaison that comes from the DEC to provide information and support" when asked about the relevancy of district support. To follow up, I asked Larry what DEC stood for. "Oh sorry: Department of Exceptional Children – that is what we call our local office."

All twelve principals cited a source of contact or district liaison that worked and provided information to the school. The description and amount varied from school to school and district to district but there was an obvious connection between the school and district special education office. Jimmy commented that "our district support is very relevant especially from a compliance standpoint. They come over and spend days looking at paperwork." Grant added that "our district EC folks do a fantastic job. There is a good chain of command in the district to help solve problems and get information." Evan commented that "our district office is my number one source of relevant information. They have the most up-to-date stuff and resources. That is the most and best place for information for us here." Frank added that his district is "very relevant" and that "I always feel comfortable about discussing anything. As principals we are welcome to ask anything. We are all in this together. We are very supported and for that I am thankful."

**Needs.** Despite a lack of special education knowledge and skills among principals, over 80% of principals surveyed in the Nebraska survey indicated a desire or interest in receiving additional training in the area of special education (Aspendon, 1990). When asked about what needs they had as a principal, almost exclusively the principals that were interviewed noted additional training in the area of special education. Every principal interviewed responded to the need for additional training and information as it relates to

special education and students with disabilities. The need for continued district support, training, and refreshers were mentioned in every interview.

Specifically, lack of training related to special education and supporting students with disabilities is a deficit among principals (Jones, 2006). “Strategies for behavior issues, ideas for modifications and interventions, more information about the different assessments and which students are appropriate for which” were examples of needs that Cindy expressed. Bill mentioned similar specific needs including “staff development on restraint training, writing IEPs specifically measurable goals - our folks seem to have a hard time with that and we need some help.”

April, who is more comfortable in her role in special education, was more general in her needs for district support. She commented:

Principals need for the district to support them in serious situations. To trust the principal and help to avoid trouble but also stand behind them when we are right. I’ve had situations where I’m right and done everything I can for a child. The district will not want to stand behind me. Instead, they will give in to the parents. We also need them to be visible and present in schools.

April continued to advocate for the principals by stating:

An EC Director should have experience in being a principal in a regular school. They need to understand what the full needs are and the balance between all the things going on in schools. Both experiences of special school and regular school are good but I think they need the regular school experience to understand.

**Summary of Themes.** Three themes emerged from the interviews with principals and review of documents from the schools. The three themes included *leadership*, *experience*, and *knowledge*. These themes were identified and discussed.

The principals' *leadership* is an integral part of schools effectiveness. The role of the principal is undeniable and essential for effective schools. A principals' impact on the school and specifically students with disabilities cannot be underestimated. Also included in the leadership of a principal is the priority he or she places on disability and students with disabilities. Previously documented research from this study, clearly demonstrated the importance that is placed on the leadership of a principal. It is this leadership that sets the education tone in areas of special education and students with disabilities.

Principals' *experiences* are so important in establishing their belief and impact on special education. Principals' experiences come from different places but can be categorized as personal or professional experiences. There are also times in which principals' experiences may be both personal and professional. Several of the principals interviewed as a part of this study had experiences that impacted their work in special education and students with disabilities.

The *knowledge* a principal possesses in regards to special education is also important when assessing what principals' believe about special education. Knowledge, education, and training for principals were gained from the principals' work during their undergraduate and graduate degrees and also professional trainings conducted by their local education agency. Information from this study confirmed the research that undergraduate and graduate degree programs are generally irrelevant in terms of educating and training principals in special



education. However, according to this study, the work of the particular school district seems to be very valuable in principals' knowledge, education, and training.

These three themes combine to form a tapestry of information about the principals' beliefs about special education and students with disabilities. This collected information has formed together to create an understanding of principals, their beliefs, and their leadership in special education and for students with disabilities. The following section continues exploring the themes and subthemes as they provide answers to the research questions.

### **Research Questions**

1. What do K -12 public school principals believe about disability?
2. How do K-12 public school principals define disability and how do they define and describe students with disabilities?
3. How do the beliefs of the K-12 public school principal support or enhance their leadership in the education of students with disabilities?
4. What factors have impacted the beliefs of the school principal about disability?
5. How do principals relate their prior experiences and trainings to their leadership of students with disabilities?

**Research Question 1: What do K -12 public school principals believe about disability?** Principals in this study were asked directly what disability meant to them and how they arrived at that belief or definition of disability. The principals generally believed that disability was a part of life, that disability involved some sort of deviation from a societal norm, and that society played a part in disability. When asked about the origins of these beliefs, the experiences principals had been a part of was the dominant answer.

“Viewing disability is the same view as life” said April. “We all have strengths and weaknesses and those weaknesses can be considered disabilities . . . everyone has issues that we try to work through and those can be considered disabilities, it is all how you look at it.” Frank stated that “we all have disabilities; we both have glasses and that can be considered a disability.” Principals from all three districts generally felt that disability was a part of everyday life. April, Frank, and Evan were among other principals that said disability was a part of the world we live in. Principals stated that disability could not be separated from life and recognized that disability came in many different shapes and sizes.

“Something that impedes some life function or ability” stated Cindy. Debra stated that disability was “a factor that differed from a pre-existing norm.” Grant stated that disability was “anything that made students stand out and have special needs.” Principals also stated they believed disability was something outside of the ordinary. However large or small, disability was something that was outside the normal range. Principals seemed somewhat uncomfortable when addressing this portion and seemed to have difficulty putting the exact words to their thoughts. Jimmy related his thoughts to a literal meaning of the word disability saying that disability was “not able” or the fact that someone wasn’t able to do something or not do it as well as most people. Jimmy related his definition to his own experience of wearing a hearing aid.

Principals interviewed also felt that society played a role in the beliefs about disability. Many principals indicated a belief that disability extended beyond identification in the Exceptional Children’s department. According to the principals, factors that led to students being disabled included poverty, family issues, cultural issues, and life experience. Eight of the principals interviewed (66.7%) commented that these areas create disabilities for

students and they have to be addressed along with students having a learning or physical disability. The idea of disability stretched far beyond the exceptional children's classroom for these principals.

There was not a noticeable difference in the responses of male and female participants. The experience of the principal was not a factor in what the principal believed. The beliefs of middle school principals were more social in nature while the beliefs of the high school principals tended to be oriented more to the medical model. Middle school principals indicated the role social issues dictate the perception of disability and students with disabilities. Elementary principals tended to be more focused on the school and educational aspects of disability. The elementary principals tended to follow near the middle of the disability continuum. The 2 high school principals focused more on the disability rather than the student indicating medical model tendencies.

Overwhelmingly, principals attributed their beliefs about disability to their experiences. Although one or two principals also referenced a legal or text book definition of disability, it was the experiences of principals that shaped what they believed about disability. Every principal interviewed mentioned experience in some fashion when describing the origin of their definition of disability. It was evident through the 12 interviews the importance of principals' personal and professional experiences.

**Research Question 2: How do K-12 public school principals define disability and how do they define and describe students with disabilities?** Principals that were interviewed in this study defined disability as a deviation from the normal or expected normal. Principals were consistent yet hesitant with their definition. Several times principals commented "you know what I mean" or "I know that sounds bad" when referring to normal

or expected normal. Keith summed up many of the perceived feelings when he commented that disability sometimes had a bad connotation and that to really define disability we have to remove the bad or negative connotation. Keith commented that “this child that didn’t respond to the original attempt or what would normally work.” He added that students with disabilities needed “something a little different.” In interviewing the principals, I found this thought process to be consistent although many times not so well said.

Principals consistently reported that a disability in a student created a need for additional support and service. Many principals recognized that the additional support or service was needed by lots of students and came in many different forms. Many times, the supports and services students needed were not offered in the traditional exceptional children’s program. Also, many times there were students that were not ‘defined’ as having a disability that needed supports and services.

The view of students with disabilities from the principals was one of responsibility. Principals shared they felt a deep feeling of responsibility to provide for what their students needed. Never in the interviews did principals indicate a response of obligation only towards students with disabilities. Many principals recognized that they had a legal obligation to students with disabilities but overwhelmingly, principals relayed a message of responsibility to provide the best and most appropriate education possible for any student with a disability. In fact, several principals indicated frustration for the ‘system’ that in their eyes created barriers to the success of these students. Cindy captured this feeling when describing some of her memorable experiences as a principal of a special school. “Helping those students achieve happiness and success in their eyes was so rewarding . . . they weren’t worried about

test scores or achievement levels they were happy because they knew they'd accomplished something."

**Research Question 3: How do the beliefs of the K-12 public school principal support or enhance their leadership in the education of students with disabilities?**

Research by Praisner (2003) indicated that exposure to special education and inclusive concepts improved principals' attitudes and perceptions about inclusion and special education. Additionally, the improved attitude contributed to more successful inclusive education and ultimately better opportunities for students with disabilities (Praisner, 2003). The beliefs that principals have concerning disability directly relates to their work involving students with disabilities.

In interviewing principals, it was clear that they understand the important role they play in the education of students with disabilities. Whether it is through their direct leadership as exemplified by April in her hands-on approach with all the functions of the EC department or through the delegated leadership to a more qualified assistant like Grant's work with his assistant principal that formerly was the chairperson of the EC department, the principals recognized the essential functions of leadership in special education.

Principals indicated factors such as relationship building, visibility, interaction, and familiarity with students and staff as additional ways that impacted and enhanced their leadership of students with disabilities. "You have to be involved with student learning especially these students" stated Keith. "I try to have a relationship with these students and get to know them. This really helps when dealing with their parents or discipline issues or other hot buttons that come up with EC students." Knowledge of the students and teachers was a big factor with principals. Putting the right students with the right teachers in the right

area was a concept really stressed by several principals. “Let’s face it” stated Grant “not all teachers can handle EC kids so you might as well deal with it before hand with scheduling than having to deal with problems all year. . . those problems only hurt the child.”

The elementary and middle school principals seemed to have a more direct role in the leadership in the education of students with disabilities. Two reasons pointed to this conclusion. First, the elementary and middle school principals were more focused on the student rather than the disability. As a group, they also saw other social factors that created obstacles for students. The high school principals focused more on the disability rather than the student. This was especially true in Grant’s interview. Second, the elementary and middle school principals gave the impression that they were more involved with the special education program at their school. This may be in part because of the size of the school and the number of activities at the school. The high school principals were more removed from the student and focused on the disability.

The interviews with principals clearly emphasized the principals’ understanding of their role in special education. The beliefs of these principals and leadership they exhibit directly impact students with disabilities through the work of entire school culture and community.

**Research Question 4: What factors have impacted the beliefs of the school principal about disability?** Overwhelmingly, the experience of the principal has directly influenced the principals’ beliefs about disability. Not only has the experience impacted the beliefs of principals, the experience has affected the decisions, expectations, and values they share for the entire school. The experiences of the principals interviewed in this study can be

broken down into personal and professional experiences. Both areas have had a dramatic impact on students with disabilities as well as the entire school community.

In addition to the experiences of the principal, training by the local district was mentioned as impacting the beliefs of the principal. However, this impact was more from a legal or service perspective. Trainings and updates from the school district seemed to be educational and add to the knowledge base for principals. As one principal indicated, “trainings that add to our instructional tool box are needed and appreciated.” The extent to which these trainings add to principals’ beliefs are difficult to capture but according to the principals are important and needed.

A third area that only seemed to have a minimal impact on the beliefs school principals have about disability is their formal education training. As exemplified in the findings, principals felt their undergraduate and graduate degree programs were largely irrelevant in their work in special education and students with disabilities. Only principals whose degree was in the area of special education really affirmed the work of their formal education programs. Instead, the principals interviewed relied heavily on their experiences impacting their beliefs and leadership of students with disabilities.

All principals, regardless of gender, years of experience, or school, indicated similar factors in their responses. The two principals that had experience in teaching special education classes had a great perspective and their experiences dramatically impacted their beliefs. Other principals, that had indicated a personal connection to disability, also made a strong connection between their experiences and their beliefs.

**Research Question 5: How do principals relate their prior experiences and trainings to their leadership of students with disabilities?** There seems to be a strong connection between the experiences of the principals and their leadership of students with disabilities. Principals that were interviewed in this study stated that their leadership in special education was a result of their many experiences. Principals were quick to give credit to their experiences for their definition of disability and the source of much of their relevant information. The experiences of the principals interviewed in this study could be divided into personal and professional experiences. Both of these types of experiences molded the principals into the leadership that they exhibit in their schools.

Over half of the principals interviewed in this study had a personal experience that impacted their leadership of students with disabilities. These experiences added perspective for the principal and made disability a reality in their lives. Whether it was a disabled child that allowed Larry to create better relationships and understand the perspective of the parents of students with disabilities or the fact that Jimmy's disability made him realize that everyone had issues to overcome; the personal experiences of the principal helped to define their leadership.

Not only did the personal experiences impact the leadership of the principal, professional experiences helped to shape principals' beliefs, knowledge, and work with students with disabilities. When asked what contributed to the principals' knowledge of special education, experience was by and far the most popular answer. Principals credited their experiences for their comfort in dealing with special education. Examples include Keith's time spent as an EC teacher and Frank's work with the variety of special education settings at his school.



Principals noted that both their undergraduate and graduate degree programs were largely irrelevant in preparing them for their role as special education leaders. Only April noted the relevancy of her undergraduate degree. When asked what has provided knowledge and relevancy to their leadership, principals answered with their experiences both personal and professional. The experiences principals had with disability or students with disabilities greatly contributed to the principals' leadership in the area of special education.

Next to their experience, principals give credit to training provided by their district for providing much needed and relevant information. While undergraduate and graduate programs tended to be largely irrelevant in preparing principals for their work with exceptional children, principals relied on training and professional development provided by their local school district. Training and professional development for the principals included legal updates, best practices, policy changes, and service options. When asked what principals needed in terms of their leadership, additional training, professional development, and updates were mentioned by almost all those interviewed.

Chapter IV presented the findings, identified common themes, and answered the research questions presented in the study. In Chapter V, an analysis of these findings will be presented. Also in Chapter V, the conceptual framework will be revisited, limitations of the study will be discussed, and suggestions for future research will be presented.

## CHAPTER V

### **Discussion of Findings**

This qualitative study explored what K-12 public school principals believe about disability and students with disabilities and how the principals' beliefs impact their leadership in special education. A multi-case study design was used in an attempt to describe what principals believe about disability, students with disabilities, and special education. In addition to what principals believe, this study was designed to link what principals believed to their leadership involving students with disabilities. Understanding what principals believe, how these beliefs impact students with disabilities, and the role the beliefs play in the principals' leadership benefits the work of schools, students, and special education.

Three themes emerged from the interviews with twelve principals regarding their beliefs and leadership dealing with disability and students with disabilities. The three themes were *Leadership, Experiences, and Knowledge*. This chapter will provide an overview of this study, discussion of the findings, and revised conceptual framework. Following, the implications of this study for principals, LEAs, Undergraduate and Graduate degree programs, and ultimately special education will be discussed and recommendations for further research will be presented.

### **Overview of Study**

The overarching construct informing this study is the multi-case study beliefs, experiences, and knowledge of principals in western North Carolina. These experiences and knowledge have created in principals, beliefs that impact the leadership in special education

and involving students with disabilities. The leadership of the school principal directly impacts the education of all students and specifically students with disabilities. The importance of the principals' leadership, their knowledge and experiences are outlined in the literature review. The research questions that guided my study were:

1. What do K -12 public school principals believe about disability?
2. How do K-12 public school principals define disability and how do they define and describe students with disabilities?
3. How do the beliefs of the K-12 public school principal support or enhance their leadership in the education of students with disabilities?
4. What factors have impacted the beliefs of the school principal about disability?
5. How do principals relate their prior experiences and trainings to their leadership of students with disabilities?

### **Discussion of Study Findings**

The leadership that principals provide to students and schools has a great impact on the success of these students and schools. The principals' leadership is impacted by several factors including what principals believe about a particular facet of education. This study focused on what principals' believe about disability and the resulting impact these beliefs had on the principals' leadership. The findings of this study will begin to explain the differences in what principals believe about disability and students with disabilities and why these differences exist. Further findings of this study will describe the impact of the principals' educational background and past experiences, both personal and professional, on their leadership in the area of special education.

This study is original and unique because it focuses on the varied functions of the school principal and incorporates what principals' believe, their experiences, and the impact of their leadership on special education. In addition, this research study examined the experiences principals had and the impact these experiences had on both the beliefs of the principal and their leadership. The conceptual framework for this study was a set of principles established by the Council of Exceptional Children to define what special education administrators should know and understand.

The research results adds new knowledge to the body of literature as well as firmly supporting other current literature by linking findings into a systems theory approach, identifying three themes that impact and influence the principals leadership, and reexamining the conceptual framework. In this section, each finding is separately addressed and then woven back together in the Summary of Findings. These results highlight the importance of the role of the school principal and how many factors work in harmony to mold a school principal. In addition, this study will illustrate the importance of various structures in the principals' make-up and identify areas that need further study and developing. In an effort to organize the findings of this research study, I have included Table 5 to serve as a guide to the study findings.

Table 5

*Summary of Findings*

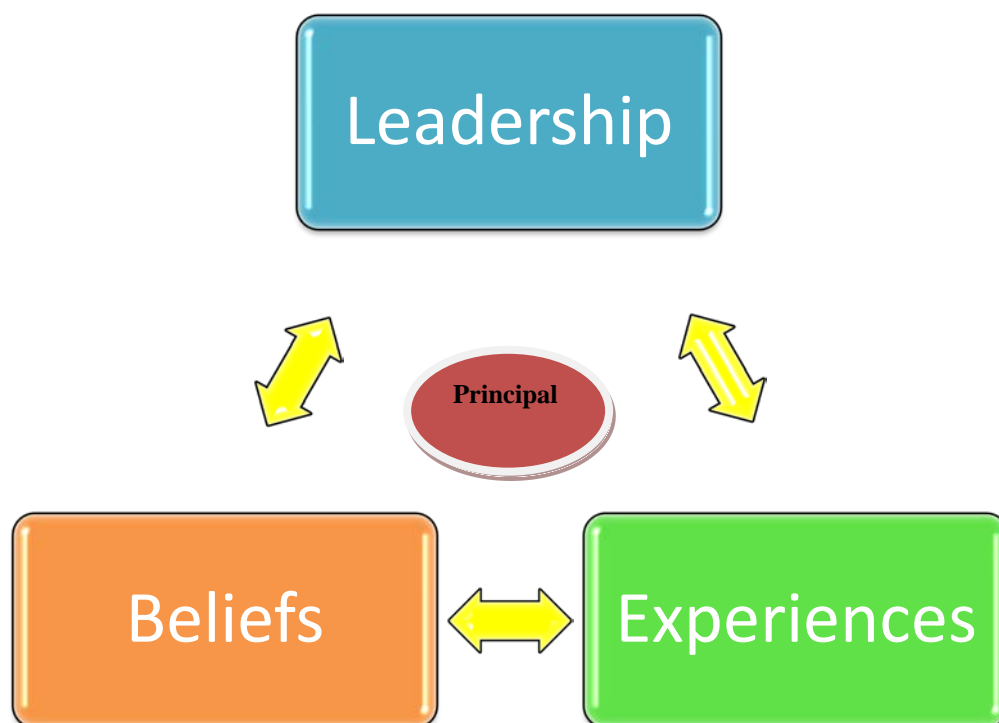
Concepts and Themes	Findings
I. Systems Theory	<p>Systems theory is used to describe an organization being an integrated system of interdependent structures and functions.</p> <p>Findings show the importance of the relationship between what principals' believe and their experiences, their knowledge, their leadership, and school and student success.</p>
II. Emergent Themes	<p>This research study identified three themes which emerged from the principal interviews regarding what principals believe about disability and how their beliefs impact their leadership.</p>
A. Leadership	<p>The principals' leadership is essential in the success of students with disabilities. As leaders, the principals must understand their role especially as it relates to special education.</p>
B. Experiences	<p>The experiences of principals are instrumental in establishing what principals believe about disability. These professional and personal experiences are the key component in understanding what principals believe about disability and their role in special education.</p>
C. Knowledge	<p>Rather than accessing knowledge through degree programs; principals lean on their experiences, trainings of local LEAs, and work of their peers for knowledge of special education.</p>

## **Systems Theory**

Systems theory focuses on the arrangement and relationship of different parts that combine to create a whole. The system is the organization that is created and formed from the collection of the different parts. Each part has its own properties but when intertwined with the other parts, a holistic unified system is created (Heylighen & Joslyn, 1992).

Bertalanffy reports that systems are used to define and qualify relationships between various subjects. The relationship between separate parts creates a general theory of organization or a system (Bertalanffy, 1968). The system that is created is independent of the individual parts and takes on qualities of its own. The system's parts are all interdependent ingredients meshing together and creating a system that takes a new identity and function (Wade, 2005).

The primary research focus of this study was to examine what principals believe about special education and how these beliefs impact the principals' leadership with special education and students with disabilities. When reviewing the answers from the principals interviewed, I began to recognize a relationship between the principals' beliefs, their leadership, and their experience. As I learned more about the principals' beliefs, I was able to learn about their leadership and experiences. The same can be said about the principals' leadership and experiences. As I learned more about them, then the other two components began to come into focus. Neither of three; beliefs, experiences or leadership; seemed to be dependent of the other. In fact, the combination of the three parts seemed to create a system that worked together to identify the principal. These factors were dependent on the two in creating the initial factor. Using the principals' experiences, I was able to identify what he/she believed about disability and understand things about their leadership. I have created Figure 1 to illustrate this system of interdependency.



*Figure 1. Relationship between Leadership, Beliefs, and Experiences*

This figure is an example of the systems theory at work. Systems theory is a perspective in which parts of the structure work interdependently with one another. What happens with one portion of the structure impacts the other parts. Any change or influence that impacts any of the structures, will eventually impact all the structures. An example from the study is the impact that the disability of Evan’s child had on him as a principal. This personal experience changed his belief about disability and his leadership of students with disabilities. “My personal experiences have really shed new light on my definition of disability and my dealings with students” stated Evan. Similarly, Cindy’s beliefs about disability and students with disability allowed her to keep in perspective the situations with her nephew. “I knew there had to be a balance between what was best for the school and what was also best for my nephew . . . in the end I really see now both sides” stated Cindy.

Cindy's experiences and leadership were shaped by her beliefs. Over time, the experiences changed and restructured her beliefs and leadership.

This evidence of a systems theory was present throughout the interviews. The principal interviewed continually referred back to each part of the structure when describing the other. When asked what they believed about disability and where they got their beliefs, principals automatically referred back to their experiences and role as leaders in the school. "Experience!" stated Jimmy, principal at Jump High School. Larry, principal at Lemon Middle School said "Years of experience." The interdependence of the principals' beliefs, experience, and leadership was a significant finding of this research. The importance of this finding is in the understanding that principals cannot separate the factors of the structure. Educational leaders should understand the significance of each part and the importance that each part plays in the role of the principal. Knowing, understanding, and seeing value to the fact that a principals' beliefs, leadership and experiences are interconnected, will allow educational systems to better train, mentor, and develop school principals.

### **Emergent Themes**

After the completion of the interviews and review of related documents, several themes emerged through the multiple levels of information and data. The themes drawn from the interviews of twelve principals and the review of the documents are analyzed in this section. The emerging themes gained from the intense review of information set a course for identifying, reviewing, and reporting findings. They are: *leadership, experiences, and knowledge.*

**Leadership.** The importance of the principals' leadership in schools was evident when interviewing the principals during this study. Principals were quick to emphasize their



leadership as it related to instruction, management, and students with disabilities. Principals were comfortable and spoke freely about difference aspects of their leadership. Instructional leadership was emphasized by the principals. They all recognized the importance of their instructional leadership and spoke about being the instructional leader in their school. Furthermore, principals spoke about their instructional role in scheduling, setting expectations for teachers, and professional development for their staffs.

Principals in charge of leading today's public schools have their knowledge and skills tested daily as they provide safe and orderly environments, become instructional leaders to a community of students and teachers, and manage the various programs and projects. The school principal is at the center of responsibility of all functions of the school (Cooner et al., 2005; Gersten et al., 2001; Wong & Nicotera, 2007). One of the most challenging and most important leadership areas for school principals is the world of special education (Cooner et al., 2005; Gersten et al., 2001; McLaughlin & Nolet, 2004).

The belief about disability impacts many aspects of the direction, decisions, and leadership of a school principal (Gaddy et al., 2002). Thoughts, attitudes, and beliefs about special education and students with disabilities are rooted in one's understanding of the models of disability (Smart, 2009). The medical, social, and other models of disability are frameworks that are associated with deep philosophical and political assumptions about individuals with disabilities and education (Anderson, 2003; Harry & Klinger, 2007; Smith & Erevelles, 2004).

During the interviews conducted as a part of this study, evidences of the medical and social models of disability were apparent. The evidences of the models of disability were included in the principals responses to interview questions and the terminology used to frame

their answers. While most of the principals interviewed would fall somewhere near the middle of the discourse continuum, there were two principals that seemed to more identify with a certain discourse.

Proponents of medical model view disability as an unchangeable difference from the scientific norm (Longmore, 2003). The medical model focuses on treatment and reducing the effect of the disability or, if possible, its complete elimination (Smart, 2009). Medical theorists are looking for the cure for the disability and ways to prevent the disability from reoccurring. Medical theorists view the disability as an obstacle that needs to be eliminated (Smart, 2009). As a result of the interviews, Grant seemed to identify himself as a proponent of the medical model. As the principal of Giant High School, Grant referred to students with disabilities from a distance. His answers focused on helping students to become normal and focused on the disability rather than the student. In identifying the changes he seen in education over the past several years, Grant focused almost entirely on the disability and how the disability made students different. When commenting about the inclusion of students with disabilities into the general curriculum, he stated, “You cannot even tell some of them have a problem or disability.”

According to Michalko (2002), those who agree with the social model accept the biological difference but refer to the difference as an individual impairment. This individual impairment is shaped differently in each person due to various situations, circumstances and experiences (Michalko, 2002). As a result of the interviews, April’s responses were indicative of the social model. April, principal at Apple Middle School, focused on the role society and the schools played in establishing disability. She concentrated her answers on the

student and rarely acknowledged the role of the disability. Contributing to her answers was April's experiences with special education and students with disabilities.

Other principals that were interviewed had responses that incorporated some of the medical model philosophies but they also included answers that were more social in nature. Principals really struggled while answering the question of where does disability come from. Their answers were grounded in medical model theory but the implementation of their leadership was more social in nature. As the principals' experiences were more elaborate, their beliefs about disability were more social in nature. This finding and relationship between beliefs and experiences will be addressed later in this chapter. This assessment of the principals' view of disability is also important as it shows where they are as leaders and enables appropriate training and professional development to be designed.

As cited in the literature, instructional leadership is an integral component of successful school leadership (Wong & Nicotera, 2007). The principals interviewed in this study were fully aware of its importance. April, principal from Apple Middle School, noted that "I have to be a source for teachers, for curriculum knowledge, to set expectations . . . I have to work hard and lead by example in every way." Frank, principal at Front Middle School added "There is a huge instructional component. I spend a lot of time working with teachers and being involved in curriculum leadership". The belief of the school principal will greatly influence the teaching and education of students with disabilities.

**Experiences.** Research by Praisner (2003) indicated that exposure to special education and inclusive concepts improved principals' attitudes and perceptions about inclusion and special education. Additionally, the improved attitude contributed to more successful inclusive education and ultimately better opportunities for students with

disabilities (Praisner, 2003). After completing this study, I not only agree with Praisner's assumptions but would add that the experiences of the principals are an undeniable force in shaping their beliefs about disability and their leadership of students with disabilities. The interviews conducted during this study referenced two types of experiences, personal and professional. Both the personal and professional experiences shaped the role of the principal in reference to special education and students with disabilities.

Principals' beliefs and attitudes concerning a particular subject greatly influence their leadership in that particular area. Furthermore, these beliefs and attitudes principals portray have a tremendous impact on those that they lead (Cooner et al., 2005; Sergiovanni, 1984, 1987). As a result of the interviews conducted in this study, the link between the principals' beliefs and experiences were established. As the principals' experiences increased, their beliefs moved from the medical model to the social model. Grant is represented by having the least experience in dealing with students with disabilities relates to the medical model. April, whose experiences with special education are extensive, adheres to the social model of disability.

There seemed to be an awareness of disability presented by principals that had an experience with disability. Six of the principals interviewed noted a personal relationship with disability. This relationship was a close relative, child, spouse or even the principal themselves. This personal relationship positioned the principal to speak from their own perspective. This was extremely powerful in the interviews. As noted by all six of these principals, their personal experiences allowed them to understand and relate to the student or family. They felt their experiences helped to create a bond with the student and situation. It was important how these principals were able to draw from and use their experiences in their

role as principal. Many times, the attempt is to separate the private side of your life from the role of principal, as a result of this research, I believe that principals should welcome their experiences into their leadership and use these experiences as lessons for themselves as others. Our experiences work to make us the person we are, allowing these experiences to shine through and work for the principal is a sign of effective leadership.

In addition to personal experiences, professional experiences were a key component in the principals' role at the school. As evidenced by Grant, principal of Giant High School, a principal that hasn't had many experiences with disability must really rely on others. Without experiences, the principals' leadership and effectiveness in this area really suffer. Grant admitted that he is really dependent on the leadership of his assistant through this role. This dependence is because of his lack of experience. Teaching during a period of time before inclusion and entering education shortly after IDEA, Grant's experiences have been few and his leadership suffers.

Contrast Grant's role and leadership in special education to Keith, principal at Kettle Middle School, who taught special education for several years. Keith plays a direct role in the special education department of his school. He is able to lead students, parents, and staff because of his experiences. Other principals like Frank, principal at Front Elementary School, have taken the responsibility to create their own experiences, learn from those experiences, and improve their leadership in special education. Frank admitted that he knows much more about special education and disability now than when he started in administration. This improvement in knowledge and leadership is not because he got a degree or taught special education, in his words it is through "experience."

Praisner (2003) suggests that principals must be provided with more positive experiences in special education. Adding to Praisner's work, this study suggests that principals must work to increase their experiences and allow these experiences to shine in their leadership. Principals cannot create a personal experience with disability however many times if observant principals may see disability in areas they weren't expecting. In addition, principals cannot hide from something they do not understand or feel completely prepared for. Instead, principals must engage themselves in experiences that increase their understanding and awareness of disability. This increased awareness and understanding will allow principals to grasp their belief about disability and will enhance their leadership of special education and students with disabilities.

**Knowledge.** In a study of principals by Patterson, Bowling, and Marshall, (2000) it was found that principals were not prepared in the area of special education and lacked knowledge and skills in the area of inclusive education. In interviewing the principals for this study, I found the work by Patterson, Bowling, and Marshall to be extremely accurate. Principals indicated that they felt unprepared for the role as the special education leader in their school. Principals commented throughout the interviews that their level of preparedness has increased over time through their experiences. Principals also cited trainings, updates, and coaching from their LEA as contributing to their increased preparedness. Cindy, principal at Coastal Elementary School, stated "I was so unprepared, I never served as the special needs administrator at my school but I wish I would have. I would have been so much better prepared if I'd done that." In clarifying with Cindy, the special needs administrator is usually an assistant principal that works closely with the special education department. According to Cindy, this person would gain tremendous experience with special education.

Overall, the principals interviewed felt unprepared in the area of special education. Increased experiences have helped to increase preparedness, but all principals stated they were in need for more.

In a Nebraska study of 450 principals, Aspedon (1990), found that 40% of principals had completed no coursework in special education or involving students with disabilities. In a study by Jones (2006), she found that only 53.1% of principals surveyed had even taken a college level course concerning special education. In the principals interviewed as a part of this study, 75% (nine out of the 12) of principals felt their undergraduate degree was not relevant at all in their work with students with disabilities. Of the 25% (3 out of 12) that felt their degree was relevant, one was a special education major and another cited the work he did in adaptive physical education class.

Jones (2006) found that over 55% of school principals reported no special education training during their administrative coursework. Over 75% of these same school principals indicated that the university coursework they completed in their administrative degree program prepared them “very little” or “not at all” for the work in special education (Jones, 2006). In my interviews, nine of the 12 principals stated that their administrative degree was not relevant in their work with special education and students with disabilities. Of the principals interviewed, two of the 12 felt that their administrative degree was only somewhat relevant. That leaves only one principal interviewed that said her administrative degree was relevant. This data supports the information cited by Jones and creates questions and concerns about the preparedness of school personnel. School administrators are not prepared when they finish with their administrative degree. Recognizing the importance of the role of

the principal in special education, the findings of this study create and support great concern about the leadership of principals in special education.

Information provided in these interviews supports the idea given by Rhys (1996) and Nardone (1999). Both reported that principals lacked knowledge, skill, and training in several key areas of special education. In work by Cooner et al. (2005), basic knowledge of the law, procedures, placement criteria, procedural guidelines, and compliance issues were lacking when principals were surveyed. Principals interviewed as a part of this study consistently expressed their concern about their lack of preparedness for their role in special education. When asked where they access their knowledge and information concerning disability and special education, the availability of the LEA was overwhelmingly mentioned. Principals expressed their concerns over knowledge of the law, discipline, and services that could be provided for students. Principals noted that the only way they felt comfortable was through years of experience and assistance from the LEA. April, principal at Apple Middle School, has a degree in special education and a strong background in working disability. "I can't imagine how principals without an EC background make it. I rely so much on my experiences but can't imagine principals without an EC background go through." Other principals interviewed admitted the struggles early in their careers with managing the demands of special education and students with disabilities.

In a study of 205 principals in southern California, data clearly demonstrated a need for additional pre-service and on the job training for principals in the area of special education (Lasky & Karge, 2006). All the principals interviewed in this study indicated a need for continued support and training in the area of special education. There was never an indication that anyone knew it all. Areas of needs consisted of legal updates, service options,



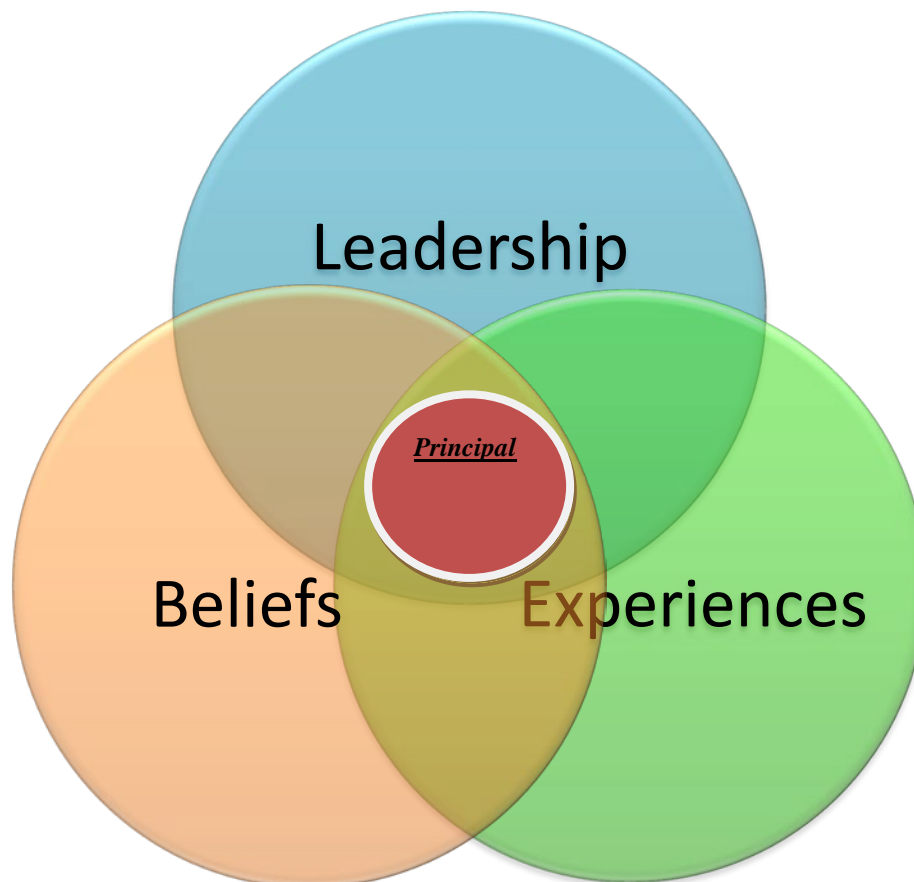
discipline procedures, and scheduling options. While recognizing the fact that principals' already have a tremendous workload, the need for continued professional development and training for principals was evident. Several other suggestions included: from Cindy, that all principals should have to be a special needs administrator before becoming a principal; from Keith, that internships have a component that deals with special education; and from Henry, time for principals to learn more about special education and see what others are doing. The information from this study indicates not only a need but a desire for continued training in the area of special education.

### **Summary of Research Findings**

This study focused on what principals' believe about disability and the resulting impact these beliefs had on the principals' leadership. The findings of this study will begin to explain the differences in what principals believe about disability and students with disabilities and why these differences exist. This section provides an outline summary of the research findings.

**Systems Theory.** The role of the principal is a system of interdependent parts. These parts intertwine to create the identity of the principal. As one of the parts of the systems is impacted this entire system is impacted. The system is comprised of the principals' leadership, beliefs, and experiences. In Figure 1 above, the parts of the system are drawn impacting one another. In review of the data collected in these interviews, Figure 2 below seems to be a better representation. As each part of the system is impacted, it bleeds into the other, combines and forms a new or redefined leader. The optimal principal role is one that has indefinitely increased their leadership skill, belief system, and experiences. A perfect

balance would find the principal in the center of Figure 2. As the system parts improve and grow, the principal reaches an optimum role.



*Figure 2.* Interdependence among Leadership, Beliefs, and Experiences

**Leadership.** Leadership was an emergent theme drawn from the interviews of the principals in this study. Instructional leadership, the role leadership plays in the school and student success, and the principals' beliefs were all included in this emergent theme. The importance of a principals' leadership is well documented in the literature review and findings of this study. The findings of this study concurred with the literature.

**Experiences.** The experiences of the school principals dramatically impact the principals' beliefs about disability and leadership in special education. Experiences of the

principal include both personal and professional experiences. The information presented in the findings surrounding the principals' experiences potentially adds to the knowledge about disability and principals' leadership. Principals' experiences have a direct impact on their leadership in special education and the beliefs about disability.

**Knowledge.** Principals feel unprepared by the degree programs for their leadership with special education. Principals contend that as their experiences have increased, their levels of comfort and ability to lead have also increased. Principals stated that were in need of continued professional development and training in the area of special education.

### **Revisiting the Conceptual Framework**

This study used the principles set forth by the CEC as a conceptual framework for the interview questions that were asked during the principal interviews. By using the principles set forth by the CEC, the researcher was able to address the gap of knowledge that surrounds the school principals' belief about disability and how these beliefs impact the principals' leadership. The 12 CEC standards that guide special education were used to construct interview questions to ask during the interview process. The interview questions that were used are included in Appendix A. Table 1, shown in Chapter III, illustrates the linkage between the CEC standards and the interview questions. In addition to the basis for the interview questions, the twelve principles adopted by the CEC have been re-evaluated as a part of the research findings.

In reviewing the data from the interviews, the CEC standards turned out to be an appropriate conceptual framework for this study. While functioning as the guide for interview questions, the conceptual framework worked well in addressing the study's research questions. The 12 principles that are listed by the CEC for Special Education

Professionals proved to be accurate in relationship to the data gathered in this study. An emphasis on areas such as high expectations, quality learning environments, communication with others, and the improvement of practices were reinforced through the results of the interviews with principals. The interview questions were an appropriate avenue in assessing the appropriateness of these principles and the use of the conceptual framework.

In addition to the 12 principles listed in CEC standards, a review of the research pointed to the significance of the role experiences play in the leadership of the principal. In answering many of the interview questions, principals answered with their experiences. Every principal that was interviewed had a story or experience that they shared to answer interview questions. The stories shared by principals varied but they all a story or experience to share.

Larry, principal at Lemon Middle School, responded to the question about what has made the difference in his leadership of students with disabilities with “Experience!” Larry’s comment was repeated throughout the interviews. Experiences were a part of every interview. Principals mentioned experiences that they had in their professional role as well as experiences in their personal role. Every principal mentioned personal experiences and over half of the principals related a personal experience.

Due to emphasis placed on the principals’ experiences, the conceptual framework was revised to incorporate an additional principle. The revised conceptual framework will provide a more in-depth and complete list of principles needed for school administrators. This new principle focuses on the experiences of the principal. The initial 12 principles provided by the CEC are more academic in nature and focused on the student. This new principle will be

more hands on, will add a practical implication to the established principles, and will be focused on the special education leader (the principal).

The findings of this research stressed the importance of the experiences of the principal. As a result of these findings, the importance of a principals' experience should be added to this body of knowledge. The findings suggest a new principle such as actively seeking out and participating in experiences with individuals with disabilities, either personal or professional, that will enhance their ability to lead others in the area of disability.

This additional principle would set a framework that principals and educational leaders set forth a level of importance of experiences. The findings from this study clearly demonstrate the importance of the principals' experiences; therefore, educational leaders must work to incorporate experiences in the learning process. Since we recognize the importance of experiences, future leaders need to encounter experiences before beginning their work as principals.

In addition to the additional standard added to the CEC's initial 12 principles, the addition of systems theory enhances the conceptual framework used in this study. The revised conceptual framework consisting of the added principle and systems theory provides the study with additional perspective and may usefully inform additional studies with a similar focus.

### **Limitations**

In every research study, there are potential limitations (Creswell, 2003). The observation and acknowledgement of these limitations allows the researcher to better frame the context of the study, assess the methodology of the study, and determine the practicality of the findings (Creswell, 2003). One of the limitations of this study is the comparison of

principals at different sizes and levels of schools. Although the relationship between what a principal believes, their leadership, and their experiences is evident regardless of the school, comparing high school principals to a wide range of high school principals would provide additional insight to beliefs and leadership among those principals.

A second limitation to the study was the fact that principals were interviewed in a self-assessment type of format. Although school documents were reviewed as a part of the data collection, the principal answered questions about their leadership from their perspective. It is important to understand information that the principal provided from their interview is from their perspective. Some of the information could be qualified through the other documents or school setting but the principals' words were important. If teachers or district office personnel were interviewed, a different perspective may have been gained concerning the principals' leadership.

A third limitation to the study was the contrast in the principals' view of their leadership and the results of the standardized testing for students with disabilities. In every school participating in this study, far fewer students with disabilities passed or were proficient on state exams as compared to the whole school. This discrepancy in testing data creates concern when compared to the principals' answers in terms of their instructional leadership. The question begs that if principals are really focusing on the instructional leadership of students with disabilities, why are these students performing at such a lower rate than the non-disabled peers at the same school? This limitation creates implications for principals and LEAs and also suggests the need for future study.

## **Implications for Practice**

**Principals.** The results of this study can be especially beneficial for principals and anyone aspiring to be a principal. The first implication for principals is the notion that a person's beliefs about disability impact their leadership in special education and with students with disabilities. When asked the questions: Where does disability come from? Or how does a person become disabled? several of the principals paused and had to really think about their answers. Principals need to understand and know what they believe about certain subjects. When principals understand what they believe and why they believe certain things, they are better able to create a vision, communicate that vision, and lead others with that vision. As a result of this study, I feel that many times principals lead blindly in the area of special education or at best lead through the beliefs of others. Principals need to know and understand what they believe about disability.

A second implication for principals is the understanding that their experiences will play a tremendous role in their leadership in special education. Both the personal and professional experiences of principals will shape their leadership and beliefs. Understanding this, principals should take advantage of experiences they have as teachers, assistant principals, parents, friends, neighbors, etc. Principals will draw on all experiences as they lead a school. Without experiences that involve disability and students with disabilities, principals' leadership and beliefs will be impacted. The eventual impact is the school and student. Principals should understand they need these experiences and they must allow their experiences to provide a context and perspective for the beliefs and leadership.

Third, principals should always be seeking knowledge in the area of special education. From the principal who majored in special education to the principal who knew

very little about disability, all the principals interviewed agreed about a need for more training and updates. The principals' knowledge level can never be saturated when it comes to disability and students with disabilities. From this study, it is obvious that principals do not get what they have to know from undergraduate and graduate programs, instead the principal must commit to lifelong learning specifically about disability and special education to best serve students with disabilities.

Finally, principals need to honestly evaluate their instructional leadership in terms of student success as defined on EOG and EOC exams. Obviously, there is much more to a student's success than standardized test scores. While principals' talk about their instructional leadership in special education, students with disabilities are passing the EOG and EOC exams at a much lower rate than their non-disabled peers. Questions that surround why students with disabilities score lower than other students need to be discussed and answered in the principals' instructional leadership. There is a need for principals to evaluate their instructional leadership as it specifically relates to students with disabilities and the performance of these students as compared to their non-disabled peers. A more in-depth discussion of this implication will be discussed as an area of future research.

Given the information from this study, three recommendations can be made for principals: 1) Take advantage of the opportunities that are presented for personal learning, growth, and leadership. Be sure to be involved in every aspect of the school including special education; 2) Commit to being a life-long learner and make sure that special education is one of the subjects; and 3) Use all of life's experiences and relate them to leadership. These recommendations will not completely prepare the principal for the leadership of students with disabilities but they will begin to provide a background of experiences and a baseline of



knowledge. Given these three recommendations, principals will be more prepared entering their role as leaders in the area of special education.

**Local Education Agency (LEA).** The results of this study showcased three major areas for LEAs to consider; the experiences or lack of experiences by the principal, the need for additional knowledge for the principal, and the rate of students with disabilities passing standardized assessments. LEAs must be concerned about the lack of experiences that new principals bring into their role. Principals widely reported being underprepared to deal with the issues of special education. This is very disturbing for an LEA because the principal provides leadership and direction for the special education program. It is very likely that LEAs have principals making decisions about special education issues such as IEP services, student placement, and teacher schedules with little to no experience. This creates great concern for the LEA because of potential legal and financial responsibilities.

To counter the lack of experiences principals have in special education, LEAs would be well advised to create leadership opportunities and experiences for future administrators. In Urban School District, some assistant principals are designated as ‘special needs administrators’. These assistant principals have more responsibilities and opportunities in the area of special education. This distinction would allow aspiring principals the opportunity to learn and grow in the area of special education. Before becoming a principal, an aspiring leader would need to have spent some time as a special needs administrator. This would create opportunities and experiences for principals and hopefully create principals that are more prepared for their role as the special education leader for their school.

The second area for LEA consideration is the trainings and updates they provide to principals. In this study, principals clearly demonstrated their reliance on the LEA for

training and updates in the area of special education. LEA must understand the importance of their trainings and tailor these trainings and updates to meet the specific needs of their principals. Principals recognized their already busy schedules but also were starved for more information and knowledge about disability and special education. Each LEA needs to examine their entire plan for professional development and focus on essential areas such as special education. A strategic professional development plan that meets the needs of the district's principals should be standard practice. Included in this plan should be a priority on special education training and updates on issues for students with disabilities.

The final implication for LEAs is the rate at which students with disabilities pass standardized assessments. The percentage of students with disabilities that passed the End of Grade or End of Course exams was lower compared to their non-disabled peers. While student success cannot be completely defined by passing standardized assessments, LEAs must review the instructional leadership in the area of special education to address a gap in achievement data.

Given the information from this study, two recommendations can be made for LEAs:

- 1) Ensure principals have encountered experiences in special education by creating internal training programs for future administrators and designate a "Special Needs Administrator" at each school to make sure principals have experienced needs in the area of special education;
- and 2) Provide a minimum of monthly updates to administrators in the area of special education. In addition to the monthly updates, focused efforts should consist of yearly trainings for all principals in the area of special education. These trainings would be a minimum requirement but would guarantee principals some access to special education

information. Given these two recommendations, LEAs can be more confident that their principals are prepared and knowledgeable in the area of special education.

**Graduate Degree Programs.** The results of this study showcased two major areas for Graduate Degree programs to consider; the experiences or lack of experiences by the principal and the lack of preparedness in the area of special education. The two areas are essentially bound together for the purpose of recommendations for degree programs. Principals interviewed in this study repeatedly stated they felt unprepared and lacked experience in dealing with disability and students with disabilities. Principals stated their undergraduate and principal licensure programs were largely irrelevant in preparing them for their role in special education. The only principals that noted any sort of relevancy were those that specialized in special education. One of the principals even suggested spending internship time directly involved with special education.

With the information learned in this study, graduate degree programs should examine the relevancy of their program in relation to the overall role of the principal. Yes, courses prepare students for issues on budget and personnel; students spend time logging hours during internships; but how much of this relates to special education and students with disabilities. Principals often spend between 25-40% of their time dealing with special education issues (Brevance, 1998). Yet, when asked in this study how relevant their coursework was to their role as principal; over 75% stated that it was irrelevant. The data in this study supports other research about the relevancy of degree programs.

Given the information from this study, three recommendations can be made for graduate degree programs: 1) Evaluate the relevancy of the program especially in the area of special education; 2) Dedicate at least one course to special education that is outside of the

traditional school law class. This course could be simply Special Education Issues; and 3) require 25% of the administrative internship hours to be spent directly involved with special education. This would be a minimum requirement but would guarantee students would spend internship hours in areas other than bus and cafeteria duty. Given these three recommendations, principals will be more prepared entering their role as leaders in the area of special education.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

As a result of this study, five suggestions for future research are highlighted. One suggestion is to review the professional development plans for LEAs. The first part of that would be to establish if the LEA has a professional development plan. If the plan exists, how was it created? How is it implemented? What specific areas does the plan support? How does special education fit into the plan? Considering the knowledge gained from this study that principals are unprepared in the area of special education and the high level of dependence they have on their LEA for trainings; a study to examine the extent to which LEAs formally approach the training of their principals would be valuable.

A second suggestion for future research is to study the role of the 'special needs administrator.' Evidence could be gathered on how many of these special needs administrators are placed in principal roles, the level of preparedness they feel as compared to those that hadn't served as special needs administrators. This study could also include the perceptions and preparedness of principals in districts that have a special needs administrator distinction versus those that did not designate a special needs administrator. An examination of the impact of being a special needs administrator, the influence this role had in one's

chances of being placed as a principal, and the preparedness and ability to provide special education leadership would be a valuable study.

A third suggestion for future research is to study the quality, content, and usefulness of internships. Almost all degree programs require some sort of internship. Usually these internships require a certain number of hours to be logged in order to successfully complete. In the implications section, a suggestion was made to incorporate a minimum percentage of time to be spent in special education. A study in this area could discover if internships are primarily made up of future administrators logging time as hall monitors or cafeteria supervisors. Do these future leaders simply log hours or are they involved in the meaningful leadership opportunities that the school has to offer? A study and recommendations on the impact and quality of internships would seemingly be of assistance to multiple levels of the educational system and would hopefully provide the student a more meaningful and productive experience.

A fourth suggestion is to examine the relationship between leadership, beliefs, and experiences from a systems theory perspective. By using systems theory as an element of a conceptual framework, the research can examine the existence of bonds between these significant components of the school and its special education functions.

A final suggestion for future research is to study the instructional leadership of principals and examine the discrepancy in the percent of students with disabilities that are proficient or passing End of Grade exams as compared to their non-disabled peers. This suggestion includes linking the principals' instructional leadership to the actual testing outcomes of students with disabilities. This research could address questions such as why are students with disabilities not achieving proficient scores. Is the instructional leadership

provided by principals effective for students with disabilities? A study on this subject could be beneficial to principals and schools and could provide the student a more meaningful and productive education.

### **Conclusion**

School principals are continually faced with increasing challenges in every aspect in their leadership role. The work of the school principal is consuming and impactful. The role of the school principal reaches far beyond the walls of the office; students, staff, community, and educational stakeholders are all impacted by the important role of the school principal. Given this phenomenon, a healthy and robust research market exists in the role of a principals' leadership. This study focused on the beliefs the school principal had about disability and how their beliefs impacted their leadership. Specifically, the study examined how their belief impacted the principals' leadership of students with disabilities.

As a part of this study, I interviewed principals in western North Carolina in an effort to understand what they believed about disability, their role in leadership involving students with disabilities, their level of preparedness for leadership of students with disabilities, the relevancy of their degree programs, and needs that principals had in the area of special education. Findings were grouped in the following three thematic categories: *Leadership*, *Experiences*, and *Knowledge*. A summary of each theme is listed below:

- Leadership – Leadership was an emergent theme drawn from the interviews of the principals in this study. Instructional leadership, the role leadership plays in the school and student success, and the principals' beliefs were all included in this emergent theme. The importance of a principals' leadership is well documented in the

literature review and findings of this study. The findings of this study concurred with the literature.

- Experiences – The experiences of the school principals dramatically impact the principals' beliefs about disability and leadership in special education. Experiences of the principal include both personal and professional experiences. The information presented in the findings surrounding the principals' experiences adds to the knowledge about disability and principals' leadership. Principals' experiences have a direct impact on their leadership in special education and the beliefs about disability.
- Knowledge – Principals feel unprepared by the degree programs for their leadership with special education. Principals contend that as their experiences have increased, their levels of comfort and ability to lead have also increased. Principals stated that were in need of continued professional development and training in the area of special education.

In addition to the thematic categories, the study revealed three additional important findings. A systems theory approach to the relationship between principals' beliefs, experiences, and leadership was observed in this study. With this approach, any incident that impacted the beliefs of principals also impacted their experiences and leadership. The three parts of this system were interdependent on one another.

Second, the study revealed that principals had varied beliefs about disability. In examining these beliefs, it was found that the principals in this study generally ranked somewhere in between the medical and social model of belief on disability. Of the 12 principals interviewed, one principal would be considered a follower of the medical model, one a follower of the social model, and the others range in between.

The final finding was the implication the study had on the conceptual framework. The Council of Exceptional Children has published 12 principles of special education administrators. These principles were served as the conceptual framework for this study. After reviewing the findings from the study, an additional principle was added to address the importance experiences play in defining the role of a special education leader. The additional principle was added as: Actively seeking out and participating in experiences, either personnel or professional, that will develop the leader's beliefs about disability and enhance their ability to lead others in this area.

This study both supports the literature and findings on the role of the principal and adds to the body of knowledge in the relationship that principals' beliefs, experiences, and leadership are inseparable and intertwined. The system presented defines the role of the principal and creates a need to review the conceptual framework with the addition of the importance of experiences and the role experiences play in the leadership of the school principal.



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## Appendix A

### Interview Questions

- 1) As principal of ----- School, describe your role as an educational leader.
- 2) Describe for me your experiences, both educational and personal, that led to your current position.
- 3) What experiences, if any, have you had that involved disability or students with disability?
- 4) What areas of your leadership are most impactful for students?
- 5) Describe your leadership as it relates to students with disabilities.
- 6) How comfortable are you with your leadership in the area of students with disabilities?
  - a. Legal issues concerning students with disabilities?
  - b. Identification and placement issues concerning students with disabilities?
  - c. Services provided for students with disabilities?
- 7) In your own words, what does disability mean to you?
  - a. Where or how did you arrive at that definition?
- 8) Where does disability come from or how do students become 'disabled'?
- 9) Are there needs that you have involving your leadership and students with disabilities?
- 10) Where do you access or where have you accessed knowledge concerning students with disabilities?
  - a. How relevant was your undergraduate degree?
  - b. Administrative degree?
  - c. LEA Special Education office?
- 11) Is special education a priority at your school? District?

12) What, if any, services and resources are provided by your district? What are you in need of in the area of students with disabilities?

## Appendix B



**Appalachian State University**  
**Reich College of Education – Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership**

September 9, 2011

Dr. Superintendent  
 County Schools  
 1000 District Street  
 City, NC 28000

Dear Dr. Superintendent,

My name is Stephen Fisher and I am a doctoral student at Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina. My dissertation focus is on the school principal and the beliefs he/she has about disability. My goal is to interview the principal and focus on the beliefs they have about disability and how these beliefs impact their leadership in regards to students with disabilities. As you are aware, the school principal is an instrumental factor in successful schools. Research has shown that the principal impacts the entire climate and culture of a school. I hope to gauge what principals believe about disability and how their beliefs impact their leadership. In this study, I also want to examine factors that lead to particular beliefs such as experiences, education, and training. By interviewing principals within your district, I hope to understand more fully the role that each plays in contributing to the success of students of disabilities.

I am writing you to ask if you would assist me in identifying principals with have at least three years experience at their current school and that have at least 40 students that are identified as students with disabilities. I will contact the employees through email and phone to request their participation. Principal interviews will last around 45-60 minutes and will be scheduled at a convenient time and location for the participant. Employee participation in the study is strictly voluntary and there are no employment consequences as a result of an employee's decision to participate or not participate in the study. No other school employees will be informed of who chooses to participate in the study so that there can be no employment consequences. Superintendents will not know which principals agree to participate. Principal participation will be kept confidential.

Your assistance would facilitate selection of the participants for this study. This study is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Jim Killacky. Dr. Killacky can be reached either by email [killackycj@appstate.edu](mailto:killackycj@appstate.edu) or by phone 828-262-3168. I can be reached with by email, [srfisher@clevelandcountyschools.org](mailto:srfisher@clevelandcountyschools.org) or by phone 704-476-8026. Please contact me to discuss this request more fully.



Thank you for your consideration in this matter.

Stephen Fisher, Ed.S.  
Doctoral Student

## Appendix C



**Appalachian State University**  
**Reich College of Education – Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership**

September 15, 2011

Dear Principal,

My name is Stephen Fisher and I am a doctoral student at Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina. Your name was recommended by your Superintendent because your school met particular criteria including the number of students with disabilities and the experience of principal. Superintendents will not know which principals agree to participate. Principal participation will be kept confidential.

I am writing to ask if you would consider participating in a study on the beliefs of principals have about disability and how these beliefs impact the principal's role in regards to students with disabilities. This research will explore the principal's beliefs about disability and students with disability. Furthermore, I hope to examine factors that lead to particular beliefs such as experiences, education, and training.

I anticipate the interview will take no more than 45-60 minutes of your time. The interview will take place at a private location convenient to you. I assure you that your identity will be protected during this study and a pseudonym will be used to protect your confidentiality. Interviews will be recorded to assist in analyzing the data. In addition to an interview, I request the opportunity to review school documents and plans that help to showcase the your beliefs about disability. Documents to be reviewed will be the school's North Carolina Report Card, School Improvement Plans, master schedule, special education service plans or schedules, students with disabilities headcount sheets, student services team plans, Professional Development Plans, and Teacher Working Conditions survey.

In exchange for your participation, I will provide you with a summary of my findings at the completion of this study. Your participation in the study is strictly voluntary and there are no employment consequences as a result of your decision to participate or not participate in the study. No other school system employees will be informed of who chooses to participate in the study so that there can be no employment consequences. Superintendents will not know which principals agree to participate.

This study is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Jim Killacky . Dr. Killacky can be reached either by email [killackycj@appstate.edu](mailto:killackycj@appstate.edu) or by phone 828-262-3168.

Please let me know by return email ([srfisher@clevelandcountyschools.org](mailto:srfisher@clevelandcountyschools.org)) if you are willing to participate and I will then contact you to schedule a time for the interview. I appreciate your consideration of this request and look forward to hearing from you soon.

Stephen Fisher, Ed.S.  
Doctoral Student  
Appalachian State University

## Appendix D



**Appalachian State University**  
**Reich College of Education – Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership**

INFORMED CONSENT

Study Title: A Study of the Beliefs of K-12 Public School Principals and how their Beliefs Impact their Leadership Concerning Student with Disabilities.

1. Stephen Fisher, Ed.S. (704-476-8026; [srfisher@clevelandcountyschools.org](mailto:srfisher@clevelandcountyschools.org)) doctoral student under the supervision of Dr. Jim Killacky (828-262-3168; [killackycj@appstate.edu](mailto:killackycj@appstate.edu)) faculty at Appalachian State University, is requesting your participation in a research study entitled *The Beliefs of K-12 School Principals have about Disability and how these Beliefs Impact their Leadership in regards to Students with Disabilities*. The purpose of this research study is to examine the beliefs principals have about disability and how these beliefs impact the principal's role in regards to students with disabilities. This research will explore the principal's beliefs of disability and students with disability. Furthermore, I hope to examine factors that lead to particular beliefs such as experiences, education, and training.
2. Your participation will involve an interview of about 45-60 minutes during which you will be asked questions about your beliefs, experiences, and understanding of disability and students with disabilities. These interviews will be conducted at a location of the principal's choice. The second piece of data collection will be to view school documents and plans that help to showcase the principal's beliefs about disability. Documents to be reviewed will be the school's North Carolina Report Card, School Improvement Plans, master schedule, special education service plans or schedules, students with disabilities headcount sheets, student services team plans, Professional Development Plans, and Teacher Working Conditions survey. Principals will be provided with a summary of my findings at the completion of this study.
3. This study is designed to minimize any risk to you; however, if you are uncomfortable answering any questions you are free to decline to respond. The interview will be audio taped for transcribing purposes.
4. Your participation in the study is strictly voluntary and there are no employment consequences as a result of your decision to participate or not participate in the study. No other school employees will be informed of who chooses to participate in the study so that there can be no employment consequences.
5. The benefits of participating in this study for you personally are minimal; however, you will be contributing to the scholarly research about beliefs of principals.
6. There are no feasible alternatives to the interview for this study. Your confidentiality will be protected under the full extent of State and Federal law.
7. The results of this study will be published in my dissertation however; your name, identity, or institution will not be revealed. You and your institution will be assigned pseudonyms that will be used in any reporting of your comments. Your name and the name of your institution will only be known to the researchers and any transcriptions of this interview will be kept in a locked file cabinet accessible only to the researchers in number 1 above. Data will be stored for 5 years after the completion of the study. At that time all paper documents will be shredded and electronic files will be permanently deleted.

8. Participants may become tired or have some discomfort talking about your experiences. You are free to request a break as needed or decline to respond to any question.
9. Any questions you have about the study should be addressed to the researchers in number 1 above.
10. Your participation in this research study is voluntary and will not be compensated. Refusal to participate will involve no penalty. You may discontinue participation at any time.
11. Questions regarding the protection of human participants may be addressed to the IRB Administrator, Research and Sponsored Programs, Appalachian State University, Boone, NC 28608 (828) 262-2130, [irb@appstate.edu](mailto:irb@appstate.edu)

Participant:

Researcher:

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Date

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Stephen Fisher Date

## VITA

Stephen Ray Fisher was born in Fredericksburg, Virginia on December 8, 1974. He moved to North Carolina when he was two and attended grade school in Kings Mountain, North Carolina. Stephen graduated from Kings Mountain High School in 1993 and attended Appalachian State University. In December of 1997, he graduated from Appalachian State with a Bachelor of Science degree in Physical Education. In 2001, he entered Gardner-Webb University in the School Administration Program and graduated in August of 2003. In June of 2004, Stephen entered the Educational Specialist program at Appalachian State University and graduated with an Ed.S. in May of 2006. In August of 2006, Stephen began work toward his Ed.D. in Educational Leadership at Appalachian State University, completing the degree in 2012.

Stephen Fisher taught high school math and coached at Kings Mountain High School for five years. He was assistant principal at Kings Mountain Middle for two years and then served as principal for three years. He also served as interim principal at Crest High School. Stephen currently serves as the Director of Administrative Services in Cleveland County Schools.

Stephen serves in several community organizations and is a member of First Baptist Church in Kings Mountain. His wife is Monica Hebb Fisher and his three children are Bryce, Peyton, and Ashtyn. His parents are Mr. and Mrs. Ray Fisher.